

Henrick Ibsen's *Ghosts* – The Interminable Dominance of the Dead Over The Living

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Abstract

Henrick Ibsen's play *Ghosts* is a realistic play that deals with the moral aberrations of his contemporary Norwegian bourgeois. This paper talks about two characters infected with syphilis one dead and another about to die. An analysis is made to show how past exerts an influence over the present; the dead over the living; invisible dominates the visible - from the point of view of Ibsen, taking into account all the established doctrines. The paper also states how Ibsen asserts that the blind devotion to outdated standards of behaviour called 'ghosts' make life a tragedy and unliveable.

Keywords

Ghosts, Syphilis, marriage, incest, profligacy, heredity, orphanage

Henrick Ibsen was the Norwegian playwright and an iconoclast. He is the father of modern drama who introduced realism into the dramatic form. Dramatists like Shaw, and novelists like Joyce have been imbibed with his ideas of realism. Lyons calls him "the realist, iconoclast, the successful or failed idealist, the poet, the psychologist, the romantic and the antiromantic." (Suleiman, 2011:5)

Henrick Ibsen's *Ghosts* shocks its audience with the subject it discusses; moral aberration children-out-of- marriage, venereal disease, infidelity, incest, euthanasia, dementia etc. *Ghosts* is a realistic play that reflects the rottenness of his contemporary hypocritical bourgeois society. So the play had been banned for a decade for a possible negative influence it could make on its audience. In addition to those taboo concepts it portrays, it deals with the dominance of the past over the present; dead-old -entities over the living.

Every moment that passes by is a dead moment. But the dead old moments leave behind them some invisible marks in the world. Likewise, every deed leaves behind it its own results. The dead entities, though not perceived by the senses or by the human intellect, are always there.

They influence both the present and the living. They move, haunt and pursue like ghost everywhere. Ibsen symbolically refers to them as ghosts.

The present always expresses itself with the help of the past. The present cannot be defined or understood in isolation, without a reference to the past. The word 'ghost' connotes many things – the worn tradition; worn ideals and principles of law and order; the impressions left behind by the parents and the consequence of their deeds; the recurrence of the past etc. The once-existed, non-existing entities are extant in the form of tradition, beliefs, clichés, culture, karmas, and heredity. The symbolical ghosts that haunt and influence the living and the present are individual, societal, religious and cultural.

Mrs. Helena Alving is the widow of the chamberlain and sailor Captain Alving. She lives a life of sham and deception, hiding the truth of her husband's profligacy and his suffering from syphilis. When Mrs. Alving comes to know the debauchery of her husband at the prime of their marriage, she flees from him and seeks refuge of Pastor Manders. Mrs. Helena Alving, bred well to live a moral life, was unable to cope up with the dissolute Alving and his philandering. So, it is natural for a woman like Helena to hate men like her husband. But she is gravitated towards the pious and austere Pastor Manders. She falls in love with Manders. She runs away to Manders whom she loves and who loves her. But he sends her back home moralizing that it is the duty of a wife to remain with her husband.

Persuaded by the very words of Manders, she returned to her husband, thinking that bearing a child will make the inconstant sailor a responsible husband. When Oswald is born, Captain Alving begins his amorous flirtations with the servant-maid Johanna. Helena is terrified that her little boy would see what his father is. She sends her son Oswald to school. The liaison between Alving and Johanna brings forth a daughter, Regina. Then Johanna is married to Engstrand, a carpenter, when Regina is still in the womb. Engstrand is provided with a great sum to marry Johanna, the fallen woman. He maintains himself as the father to Regina. To prevent her son Oswald Alving picking up the qualities of his father, she sends him to Paris to bring him up a gentleman and to learn painting, and grows up Regina, as her maid, not disclosing her father's identity.

It is the dramatic genius of Ibsen to narrate the story of the past, happened offstage, in this exposition. Mrs. Alving while making a conversation with Manders discloses the past both to the pastor and to the audience. Like a classical play, the very story unfolds itself through the

dialogues of its characters. The past discloses itself, begins to ravage the present and continues to haunt the future.

Oswald has returned from Paris for the dedication of Captain Alving Memorial Orphanage, He has been brought up to believe that his father was a model of morality. But the orphanage is the very entity which she employs to cover up the squalid past and the truth from the eyes of the world for ever. Truth is symbolically a ghost here. Mrs. Alving thinks that covering up the dirty past of her husband would not come alive. But the truth has to be revealed to Regina and Oswald to prevent an incestuous relationship between them, at last. Truth reveals itself and does not permit a noble memorial for a dissolute man - the proposed Memorial is in full blaze.

On his return from Paris to dedicate the orphanage, it is found that Oswald carries the disease that his father had suffered in the past. He has inherited not only the disease but everything. He not only carries the phenotypical features of his father but also his psychotypical characteristics. Pastor Manders was very much surprised to see Oswald resembling his father Captain Alving. He is shocked to see the dead man walking. Manders says, "The way Oswald had the pipe in his mouth represented the ghost of his father." Captain Alving is not dead, but he is still alive passing all his phenotypical and psychotypical features to his son Oswald. The ghost is the father in his son. The son Oswald and his father's ghost are inseparable. His father's ghost continues to haunt him and expresses itself through him.

The events that occurred to the characters long ago continue to linger in the present. The people and the events that are long gone continue to resonate. They stay alive from one generation to the next. The apparent ghosts are the ghosts of Johanna the servant maid and Captain Alving. They are dead and no more. Their children, Regina and Oswald Alving, do not know of their parentage. Their ghosts found expressed in their children. Their deeds resonate the past. Some thirty years back, Mrs. Alving could see Captain Alving making some sexual advances to Johanna the Servant maid in the dining room. Now Mrs. Alving sees the recurrence of past events in the same dining hall – her son Oswald making sexual advances to her servant maid Regina expressing the very words of the dead two.

Only at the sight of such a recurrence, Mrs. Helena Alving utters the pervasiveness of ghosts so impulsively,

"Ghosts! When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was as though ghosts rose up before me. But I almost think we are all of us ghosts, Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that "walks" in us. It is all sorts of

dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we cannot shake them off. Whenever I take up a newspaper, I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. There must be ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light.” (29)

Mrs. Alving does not want her son to simulate his father. That is why she sends her son Oswald to Paris. Long after, when he grows up to be a painter, he is tired constantly, and the lack of sunshine prevents him from painting. Back home, when his mother wants to talk to him for a while, she comes to know that he suffers from a strange disease. He reveals to his mother that he had consulted a doctor in Paris, who made him aware of his disease. Though the doctor never employs the term ‘congenital syphilis,’ he clearly diagnoses that he has inherited the disease. The doctor tells Oswald, ‘Right from your birth, your whole system has been more or less worm-eaten’ and speaks of “the sins of the fathers’ (37). The disease is an expression of the ghosts. The father is dead and buried, his ghosts pursue his son. ‘The sins of the father shall visit on their children’ is axiomatic. Ibsen tries to drive home the idea that it is impossible to erase the trace of the dead and prevent the consequences of their deeds over the living.

The ghosts of Johanna and Alving pursue and haunt their illegitimate daughter as well. When Regina learns that she is Captain Alving’s daughter by his former maidservant, she resolves to leave for the home for sailors her adoptive father, Engstrand, plans to open. On discovering her origins, she claims an inheritance of sexual licence. She tells Mrs. Alving, “If Oswald takes after his father, then I take after my mother, I dare say.” (47) With such a future in mind, Regina may eventually acquire syphilis, too, a further inheritance – another character vulnerable to the expression of ghosts.

It is the custom on the part of a woman to secure the dignity of her household, and so Mrs. Alving hushes up all those dirty sides and deeds of her husband. She projects a positive image about her husband Captain Alving, and she maintains it to her son, her husband’s illegitimate daughter, and to the society. When she becomes feeble during her encounter with the religious duty as imposed by religion and insisted by Manders, she yields to the dominance of ghosts cowardly – to thwart an incestuous union, she discloses the truth about Alving’s illicit association with Regina’s mother. The imposition of custom on a female is irresistible and impossible to shirk.

Mrs. Alving is fatally overwhelmed by the ghosts – the religious custom. Her reading makes her think practically and rebelliously. She wishes to find a post for Regina before Oswald

gets her in trouble. She should rather encourage the marriage or any other arrangement between them. She is unable to break the shackles called custom imposed upon her by religion. She regrets her cowardice. She is not able to go beyond the established convention, to materialize her idea of a relationship based on incest. She tells Oswald of his father and Regina of his mother. Being a coward, Mrs. Alving explains, she succumbs to ghosts: "I am frightened and timid because I am obsessed by the presence of ghosts that I never can get rid of . . ." (30)

The person who wars with ghosts is Mrs Alving herself. According to Ibsen Mrs. Alving is the woman who has the tragic flaw. The tragic flaw is her moral continence. A great number of "ghosts" haunt Mrs. Alving. Neither the disease nor his transgressions destroy Alving's family, but Mrs. Alving's moral continence. She was misled to believe that she should desire Captain Alving's wealth and position. She did not have the courage to flee the "old dead doctrine" that was her marriage or to resist that marriage. Ibsen presents Oswald's syphilis as the result, not of Captain Alving's transgressions, but of Mrs. Alving's obedience. If she had left the marriage, she would never have borne Oswald or exposed him to his father's affliction.

The character who protects ghosts is Manders himself. When Mrs. Alving sought refuge of Manders, he orders her to return to her husband. She was "unspeakably unhappy." According to Manders, "to crave for happiness is simply to be "possessed by a spirit of revolt,". Bound in marriage by a "sacred bond" her duty was "to cleave to the man she had chosen;" though a husband be profligate, a wife's duty is to bear the cross laid upon her shoulders by "a higher will,". Being anxious for his own reputation and haunted by his own ghosts, Pastor Manders rejects her love. He claims it, later on, as strength of character to lead her back "to the path of duty." When Oswald depicts the fidelity and beauty of family life among the common-law marriages of his fellow painters in Paris, Manders disapproves of artists and sputters indignantly at such circles "where open immorality is rampant." He is more dismayed when Mrs. Alving later declares that Oswald "was right in every single word he said." When she approves of the marriage between Oswald and Regina, he despises it.

Instead of characterizing syphilis as the physical marker of an errant soul, Ibsen comes to suggest the opposite. The particular social and ethical processes concerning Ibsen here are the problem of devotion to outdated standards of behaviour called ghosts what Shaw calls 'slavery to the ideals of goodness'. "Old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs" cannot necessarily be seen, but the corporeal scourges they result in are all too evident. It is in trying to live up to outmoded

ideals – what a wife should be, what a mother should be” (Shaw 147) – that Mrs. Alving has doomed her son.

Toril Moi describes Ibsen as “idealism’s greatest critic” and *Ghosts* as “his most intensely idealistic play” (Moi 319). Contrary to contemporary attitudes, Ibsen’s attack on marriage is not entirely uncompromising. He overdetermines the source of Oswald’s illness, offering multiple explanations for how it was acquired. At least one of these theories of causation is a conservative one, suggesting that Oswald has acquired syphilis, not because his mother remained in a ruinous marriage, but because he is heir to his father’s taste for misbehaviour.

Ghosts reveals that the world must be cured of its devotion to repressive codes, which are complicit in disease’s spread. According to Ibsen, “ghosts” and the fog of “old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs” have to be replaced with light and the “joy of life”. Moreover, Ibsen uses syphilis to assault, not sexual immorality, but its opposite – continent marriage. Shaw argues *Ghosts* launches an “uncompromising and outspoken attack on marriage as a useless sacrifice of human beings to an ideal” (Shaw 86).

Ghosts is a realistic play with symbolic elements. The interminable ghosts represent not only the past, the memories of the dead but also the worn customs that become meaningless when they are not compatible to lead a happy life. Ibsen insists upon a revision of old traditions, dead beliefs, and superstitions that dominate every society. He removes his disguise to present his iconoclastic view that blind adherence to outmoded ideals will make life miserable. The ghosts are interminable, but they must be kept under control to live life sensibly.

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