

# A Critical Evaluation of Henrik Ibsen's play 'An Enemy of the People'

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**Abstract-** For an 'Individual' in a society it is very difficult to rebel against the norm of the society or the people in authority. The individual has suffered by either leading an isolated life or has been ostracized by the society.

'An Enemy of The People' by Henrik Ibsen has always been one of Ibsen's most popular plays, perhaps because it is essentially conventional in form and treatment. It is set in a provincial town of Norway. It depicts the life of Scandinavian people in the remote northeast of Europe. In the play, Ibsen portrays small-town politics in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The story revolves around the two major concepts "Responsibility" and "manipulation". Sense of responsibility is portrayed in Dr. Stockmann's character and the ability to manipulate the truth is vivid in the Mayor's character. The whole play is like a combat between the concepts. In the play, the medical officer of a small spa town, Dr. Stockmann discovers that the baths on which the livelihood of the place depends are contaminated. At first the citizens adore him as a 'public benefactor' but when they realize that the baths will have to be closed for several years and their source of income will be affected heavily Dr. Stockmann's most reliable people turn against him.

The characters try by every available means to achieve the success and happiness that liberalism has promised them. The outcome of the trial is clear and firm: the sentence is to be found in the social meanings of the defeats the protagonists suffer.' This indictment and trial were intentional. The stage becomes a tribunal in which society is defended by its ideology and prosecuted by its reality.

**Index Terms:** Ostracized, politics, authority, responsibility, manipulation, indictment

## INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian poet and dramatist and is generally recognized as the most influential man of the theatre in the nineteenth century. He has

been a great influence in the twentieth century as well, notably through Shaw. Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828 at Skien in south-east Norway. His ancestors were sea captains and businessmen, while his father was well-to-do merchant who suffered financial setbacks during Ibsen's childhood. Thus he experienced the destructive effects of narrow provincial values early in life and throughout his career he was critical against the conventions and favoured to champion the rebellious spirit.

Ibsen's development as a dramatist was intimately connected with his practical association with the stage. His years of apprenticeship were spent first as salaried dramatist and instructor at Bergen National Theater and then as "artistic director" of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre. There lay the natural field of his own genius, and Shakespeare helped him find it. From Shakespeare he certainly obtained a sense of man's inherent greatness, together with an incentive to express this in events and actions chosen for their grandeur and in language that was manifestly and unashamedly colourful, rhetorical, figurative and artificial. But Shakespeare could give Ibsen no model of modernity; nor could Ibsen derive from him any help toward the neat construction of a modern play. Ibsen's dramas display a virtual catalogue of failure-in daily life, in the professions, in the arts, in marriage, in friendship and in communication between the generations.

The fact that Dr. Stockmann is portrayed as a comedy-character part, "muddle-headed" as Ibsen says, take the curse off his violent attacks on the "mob and the masses". People are more willing to accept such things from a man at whose personal foibles and eccentricities they are invited to laugh; and certainly in this play the humour is broad and inescapable enough. The action is straight forward and the characters are drawn with bold and simple strokes there is nothing oblique or devious about

them. Ibsen has been disgusted and disappointed by the attacks the so-called Liberal Press had hurled against 'Ghosts' ; he had expected abuse from the conservatives, but he had confidently looked to the Liberals for support.

In 'An enemy of the people', he retaliates, and heaps contempt and ridicule upon the liberal newspapers of the time through his hilarious caricatures of the editor, reporter and printer of The People's Monitor. These portraits are as vivid and as full of sardonic rage as Daumier's drawings of the law courts. The dart of Ibsen's vitriolic pen must have drawn from blood from many a contemporary journalist .It was a good many years before anyone dared to present 'Ghosts' on the stage ,but 'An enemy of the people' was immediately produced not only in Scandinavia and Germany, but in England, where it was among Beerbohm Tree's most popular success. 'An enemy of the people' is almost completely dominated by Dr. Stockmann. In all such ways Ibsen endeavoured to enlarge and to enrich the psychological drama which he received as the heritage from Shakespeare.

The characters try by every available means to achieve the success and happiness that liberalism has promised them. The outcome of the trial is clear and firm: the sentence is to be found in the social meanings of the defeats the protagonists suffer.' This indictment and trial were intentional. Ibsen wrote in one of his letters-"...a man shares the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which he belongs...to write is to summon one's self, and play the judge's part."

#### 'RESPONSIBILITY' AND 'MANIPULATION AS CENTRAL THEMES

Dr. Thomas Stockmann is a popular citizen of a small coastal town in Norway. The town has recently invested a large amount of public and private money towards the development of baths, a project led by Dr. Stockmann and his brother, Peter Stockmann, the Mayor. The town is expecting a surge in tourism and prosperity from the new baths, said to be of great medicinal value, and as such, the baths are a source of great local pride. However, just as the baths are proving successful, Dr. Stockmann discovers that waste products from the town's tannery are contaminating the waters, causing serious illness amongst the tourists. He expects this important

discovery to be his greatest achievement, and promptly sends a detailed report to the Mayor, which includes a proposed solution which would come at a considerable cost to the town.

To his surprise, Dr. Stockmann finds it difficult to get through to the authorities. They seem unable to appreciate the seriousness of the issue and unwilling to publicly acknowledge and address the problem because it could mean financial ruin for the town. As the conflict develops, the Mayor warns his brother that he should "acquiesce in subordinating himself to the community." Dr. Stockmann refuses to accept this, and holds a town meeting at Captain Horster's house in order to persuade people that the baths must be closed.

The townspeople — eagerly anticipating the prosperity that the baths will bring refuse to accept Dr. Stockmann's claims and his friends and allies, who had explicitly given support for his campaign, turn against him .He is taunted and denounced as a lunatic, 'An enemy of the people'." In a scathing rebuttal of both the Victorian notion of community and the principles of democracy, Dr. Stockmann proclaims that in matters of right and wrong, the individual is superior to the multitude, which is easily led by self-advancing demagogues. Dr. Stockmann sums up Ibsen's denunciation of the masses, with the memorable quote "...the strongest man in the world is the man who stands most alone." He also says: "A minority may be right; a majority is always wrong.

Dr. Stockmann is saved as a character because he puts his principles above his own desires and gains. He is not tempted by financial rewards enough to deny the truth of the condition of the baths. He is thoroughly disgusted by the petty and dishonest interpretations placed on his actions. And as a man of great personal integrity, he spurns a large inheritance in order to maintain an ethical and moral responsibility to himself and to his community

In this play Ibsen shows that government "of the people, by the people, for the people" can also lead to evil in the society when petty self-interest gets to work .The play explores what is the role of a doctor in a society? Should he only care about the physical health of his patients? Or is he also responsible to criticize the political decisions which have direct effects on people's mental and physical health? Doctors, both as individual and as members of a profession, have always had an influence on society

Many scholars have tried to define a doctor's responsibility in a society. Being a Doctor is a very demanding job; it needs hard work and sacrifice. Doctors also have a "teaching role" in society. They help people how to live to remain healthy. Therefore, they always have a tendency to keep people abreast of the dangers to their physical and mental health. Indeed one of the responsibilities as doctors is to return to their ancient role; for 'doctor' means 'teacher', and it means to teach their patients how better to carry this responsibility for their own health. In the play 'An enemy of the people' we see when Dr. Stockmann calls a meeting to explain his views they brand him as an enemy of the people. His patients abandon him, his daughter is sacked from her teaching job and his first reaction is to take his wife and children away. But, as the mob breaks his windows, he decides to stay and try to re-educate the townspeople with his newfound "Strength" –for, as he explains to his wife, "The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone"

Ibsen's 'An enemy of the People' was written in 1882 following the uproar over the supposed indecency of 'Ghosts'. It represents his reaction to mob verdicts, when the mob has been played upon by frightened, foolish "leaders of opinion", who are in fact only followers of convention, "their creed a mummy, stuffed and dead". It is in a way, an attack on democracy, because democracy is often guilty of the idealism that Ibsen despised. The voice of the people is very far from being the Voice of God in Ibsen's reckoning. In 'An Enemy of The People' he rakes with his sarcastic indignation that kind of sentimental liberalism which attacks the cult of the 'Individual' dictator only to substitute a groveling worship of the mass. True clear-minded liberalism is not open to his charge.

Aslaksen, with his continual clichés about the wisdom of the compact majority and the need for moderation when only immoderate and drastic measures can preserve the health as well as the honour of the community and this is Ibsen's notion of the democrat as the social pest. Dr. Stockmann, the reformer with courage to stand alone and find his strength in his solitude, is not crudely idealized as a model; he is subtly drawn as being, at least until he had his terrible lesson, over-confident and foolishly hearty, as well as splendidly courageous. 'An enemy of the People/ is a superb piece of social landscape

whose lessons reach out from the Norway of Seventy years ago to every community and every age in which democracy is given lip-service.

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Stockmann never loses hope of informing the common people about the dangers of the “polluted baths”. Dr. Stockman believes that everybody is responsible to share any new ideas that he/she has with people. That is contrary to what Peter believes regarding the issue. From the very beginning of the play Dr. Stockmann shows his passion to do his responsibilities as a doctor in a society where the people are not able to distinguish the truth. He thinks that, as a doctor, it is his duty to persuade the authorities of the dangers of the “polluted baths”. On the other hand, the mayor of the city, Peter, always manipulates the truth and never wants to accept his brother’s ideas because they are against his financial policies. Dr. Stockmann only thinks about his responsibilities and wants nothing for his “discovery”.

Politicians and their ability to manipulate almost everything are reflected in some of the characters in ‘An enemy of the people’. Peter Stockmann, Hovstad and Aslaksen are experts in manipulation. ‘An Enemy of the People’ Ibsen portrays a society where people are over-influenced by the politicians. The authorities are very powerful, and under the shelter of their power and authority, they “manipulate” the facts in the society. In such a society people are not able to decide who tells the truth. Consequently, they prefer to listen to the authorities because they claim to do their best for people but, unfortunately, it is finally the people who suffer the aftermath.

Dr. Stockmann believed his duty as a battle between the responsibility of a doctor and the manipulations of the politicians. This battle goes on, but eventually ‘Right’ overcomes ‘Might’. The highest responsibility of an individual in each and every society is to stand against any sorts of aggression and infringement towards the universally accepted human values, which are nowadays easily compromised. It is inhumane to give in to defeat when we are fighting for the truth, which is our innate right, and this right cannot be attained easily, we may need to walk on a thorny and tortuous path to make the political superpowers kneel down.

Through critical examination of Dr. Stockmann’s character as a protagonist one notices he does not give up on his intent to manifest the truth to the common man and as a result he was tagged as “enemy” of the people by “manipulation” of those in power. Thus, in ‘An Enemy of the people’ we see

that the political supremacy is responsible for the plight of the society as well as responsible for silencing the individual who wanted to reveal the truth in the ‘eyes’ of the common man. Dr. Stockmann displays compassion for the people whose lives are affected by powerful rulers. His firm conviction in the intelligence of human beings lends his character warmth; yet he displays human frailty as he fails to recognize the danger to himself posed by his ideas.

#### CONCLUSION

Ibsen’s play deals with the people in authority suppressing the voice of an individual, as seen through the character of Dr. Stockmann who had been evicted from the society as ‘an enemy of the people’ though he had a very clear motive of working for the welfare of the society and his brother the Mayor manipulates everything and proves him ‘wrong’ and the authorities barred his autonomy so that they may enjoy their position in society as highly esteemed people.

‘An enemy of the people’ is about an “individual” being a threat to a particular society (apparently) leading to the idea of Ibsen exploring how the ‘voice’ of an individual is suppressed in society whereas in the play ‘The life of Dr. Stockmann’s character symbolizes of how the world is governed by authoritative people who wear the mask of the welfare of mankind and who actually are the real cause for misery of the common man..

For a man of Ibsen’s generation the great opponent of man was seen to be “society”-not just society in its “problem play” aspect, the source of definable, limitable, and often remediable misery, but society as a force working through a myriad of obscure agencies and trivial occasions, but working with a power and a mystery comparable to that displayed by the Greek gods or the Elizabethan universe. Or perhaps should say that Ibsen had the wit to see society in this light: but having seen it, there remained for him the problem of presenting this vision in the theatre.

Ibsen’s problem as a dramatist was therefore a double one; to present a convincing portrait of a modern individual and still make a hero out of him; and to present a portrait of modern society that is accurate and lifelike but which shows it as operating as an inexorably powerful force upon the tragic hero.

Liberalism conceives of society as a more or less elastic system whose function is to make possible the individual's pursuit of happiness. Ibsen appears to share this attitude. He does not write "social drama". Specific social, political or economic questions are touched upon only occasionally, as in 'An enemy of the People' Or 'Pillars of Society'. Hardly ever does a soldier, policeman, soldier or other public official appear. The state seems to be reduced to the role of a night watchman. The scenes of Ibsen's plays are usually laid in the home, and the dialogue tends to be the problems of the private person.

The theatre of the early 20th Century (realism) dealt with issues in the first person: like seen in Ibsen's 'An enemy of the people' (a well-known piece of realist theatre). Early 20th Century theatre also relied heavily on presenting the audience with situations that were familiar to them: either from real life or other theatre experiences.

Ibsen's play shows the value of an "individual" in a corrupt society where 'truth' lies in the hands of people in power and the common man is a mere 'puppet' to the authoritarians. Ibsen's work stands as a 'voice' against such kind of tyranny and motivates for the welfare of mankind.

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