

Chasing the Ghosts of Past: A Re- Reading of Ibsen's Ghosts

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Abstract: Past never passes. It can follow like a dream or haunt like ghosts. Henrik Ibsen jostled the world with his publication of *Ghosts* in 1881 where he talked about the issues of extramarital affair, illegitimate child, euthanasia, incest and the inevitability of past. His play created uproar in the times of strict moral standards and unmovable familial responsibilities. The paper centres on the false notions of duty and reputation of typical Norwegian bourgeois society as represented in the play, and the disasters it leads to. It reiterates how difficult it is to evade one's past and its multifaceted impact on future generations. It discusses the theories surrounding hereditary and genetics and discusses *Ghosts* as a typical naturalist play. It delineates the term ghosts on various levels and also represents Mrs. Alving as what Sarah Grand calls a 'New Woman'. Published after *A Doll's House* where the protagonist was criticized for leaving her toxic husband, Ibsen in the play sketches a woman who is stuck in a worse marriage and still chooses to stay, leaving it for the readers to decide what is better: to live in a bad marriage covering up for the husband and letting the ghosts of guilt chase, or leaving it for once and for all?

Keywords: Ghosts, heredity, genetics, Naturalism, New Woman

INTRODUCTION

"The past is not a receding horizon. Rather, it advances one moment at a time, marching steadily forward until it has claimed everything and we become again who we were; we become ghosts when the past catches us. I can't live as long as my past does. It's one or the other." (Taylor 56)

Henrik Ibsen jostled the world with his publication of *A Doll's House* in 1879 where Nora Helmer leaves her toxic husband for a better, independent life. The play created uproar in the times when women had meager rights and was a commodity belonging to the husband. In his next experiment *Ghosts* (1881), Ibsen portrayed another woman who was stuck in a worse marriage and chooses to stay, leaving the audience to decide what is better: to live

in a bad marriage covering up for the husband and letting the ghosts of guilt chase, or leaving it for once and for all?

DISCUSSION

The present play of discussion narrates the story of Mrs. Alving who has left no stone unturned in being a good wife and a good mother. Married to a man who was always a flirt, and had even impregnated his house-help, she chooses to stay and keep up Mr. Alving's image as a gentleman. The narration begins with Mrs. Alving's final touches to the plan of inaugurating an orphanage in the memory of her dead husband, Mr. Alving. While this seems as an act of love and respect by a wife towards her deceased husband at the surface level, it is actually an attempt to eliminate his wealth earned through wrong means so that none of the black, dirty money goes to her son, Oswald. She is a loving, protective mother who prefers to keep her child away from herself if it keeps him away from his father's shadow and hence influence. But does she succeed? The play explores the answer to this question slowly and meaningfully. Blurb in the Penguin publication of the play calls it "Ibsen's most provocative drama, it strips away the surface of a middle class family to expose layers of hypocrisy and immorality." (241)

Ibsen in the play continuously tries to show how difficult it is to evade one's past. Oswald when makes his first appearance in the play is seen smoking a cigar when Pastor Manders sees a glimpse of Mr. Alving (Oswald's father) in him. But this comparison does not go well with Mrs. Alving and she strongly denies any similarity between the father and son. While she takes pride in raising up a son much unlike his father, her world comes crashing down when she hears voices from inside the kitchen that suggests of a love affair between Oswald and the house maid Regina. This brings up all the memories of her cheating husband who had an affair with Regina's mother and she at this point

realizes that she cannot keep her son away from what he had inherited from his father in spite of the physical or emotional distance that had been between them. Here Mrs. Alving emerges as a “woman who cannot overcome her past even though she makes every reasonable effort to redeem her errors and to start afresh” (Sprinchorn 355).

The story of the play brings to the forefront the theory of Naturalism that began in the late 19th century and was introduced to America by American novelist Frank Norris. The Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language defines it as “...effect of heredity and environment on human nature and action” (667); hence Naturalism works on the principle of determinism which specifies how human condition is pre determined by fate or forces that is beyond human control. This implies that the heredity, which according to Professor Castle is “organic resemblance based on descent” (qtd. in Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts: A Critical Study of Hereditary Genetics*, 1), becomes the deciding factor of the course of an individual’s life and one’s attempts are practically useless when put against what the nature has decided for an individual. Mrs. Alving’s lifelong attempt to keep her child away from any influence of his father fails miserably when she sees the history repeating itself in front of her eyes. Reminded of her failure she exclaims, “But I 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.” (Ibsen 65)

David Baguley identifies naturalistic novels as those “that treat sociological or scientific subjects, often to expose individual or cultural pathologies, through a combination of dysphoric plots of decline and minutely detailed settings.” (5) Hence, the decline of characters in such narratives seems inevitable. The beginning of the end is visible when Oswald is seen replicating his father’s mannerisms and Ibsen minutely describes the cloudy, gloomy weather that befits the setting. The damp, dark atmosphere that Ibsen creates suggests the clouded conscience of all the characters as none of them is devoid of guilt. Pastor Manders shielding himself from the rainy weather by wearing an overcoat and carrying an umbrella signifies his inability to recognize truth, justice, and practicality being blinded by societal

rules regarding propriety. Ibsen pictures Oswald as a foil to Pastor on account of being an artist. He enters the scene wearing a light overcoat thus accepting the gloominess around. He is free spirited, independent, and practical. He recognizes how repressive societal rules can be and chooses self over community. But going against the society, the artist suffers and the helplessness of Oswald is visible in many of his statements with his mother though he doesn’t seem to understand what and why things are happening to him the way it is happening. Though he blames his nomadic lifestyle for his health condition, his doctor had suggested his past finding its course through the ailment of Oswald. Oswald, in the play, says:

“I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts...it is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kinds. They are not actually alive in us; but there they are dormant all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts all over the world. They must be as countless as the grains of the sands, it seems to me. And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us.” (Ibsen 50)

Mrs. Alving is the only one who understands the reason behind the happenings and when she does muster up the courage to disclose to Oswald about his father, the revelation comes as realization. His all questions are answered and he understands himself as the chosen one to follow the legacy of the sins of his dead father. It is a typical naturalist play with a heightened realism- with frank treatment of sexuality and violence associated with it. And this violence is not physical; it is hereditary.

Syphilis as a sexual disease finds an important place in the play as a direct consequence to immoral sexual intimacies and hereditary guilt. The ailment is caused by a bacterium called ‘*Treponema Pallidum*’ (“Syphilis” n.p) and has been a stigmatized disease since its inception. It affects almost all the parts of body gradually and is often life threatening. It was initially believed to be a result of sexual relationship with prostitutes or having multiple partners. Mr. Alving in the play dies quite young on account of being infected with syphilis rooting to his promiscuous behavior. Congenital syphilis, as is often believed, gets

transferred from father to the child through sperm and hence can be hereditary. Oswald paying for the sins of his father is actually suffering from syphilis, a case of history repeating itself. However, Ibsen makes it quite clear that he is the mere receiver of the sins of his father. It is a story not only of hereditary disease but of hereditary guilt- the guilt of having a relationship with half sister, the guilt of turning a blind eye towards a husband having multiple sexual partners, guilt of choosing upkeep of social status over what is right. It is a story of guilt and punishment, of revelations and realizations, of darkness and death, of duty and free will. Brownstein says that the play is about “penetrating beneath the surface of things and overcoming the effect of deception.” (qtd in “Ghosts: A Critical Study” 45)

Mrs. Alving as an upper class woman is a ghost of society. She is fierce, brutal yet she fails to choose right over wrong. Her concept of duty seems flawed and has severe repercussions. It starts with the ‘silencing’ towards her husband’s extramarital affairs, silencing of Johanna pregnant with Alving’s child, silencing of her son’s doubts by creating a physical distance and the onset of a silent disease shattering her world into pieces. The sense of duty was so rampant in the Norwegian bourgeois society that the dialogues seem stifling. Regarding this, Mrs. Alving says in the play, “Oh, that perpetual law and order! I often think that is what does all the mischief in this world of ours.” (Ibsen 61) Both Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving represent different aspects of duty- each based on the silent laws of typical bourgeois society where appearance matter more than the reality. The interplay of conscience and duty exists throughout at various junctures. Mrs. Alving is seen as a failed wife when she tried to step out of marriage and a failed mother when she chose to keep her son away from what she felt would be a bad impact. Pastor misses no opportunity to remind her of the sin she had done by being self-willed rather than being a dutiful wife and complains thus, “You have been all your life under the dominion of a pestilent spirit of self-will... Everything that has weighed upon you in life you have cast away without care or conscience, like a burden you were free to throw off at will.” (Ibsen 49). These false duties for the sake of propriety seem bogus and Mrs Alving proclaims, “And then I had to struggle twice as hard, fighting as though for life or death, so that

nobody should know what sort of man my child’s father was.” (Ibsen 52)

CONCLUSION

Social reform has been a goal of Ibsen’s plays and *Ghosts* is not only a story of chasing past but of decaying system and its repercussions. It is a tale of false moral standards; of an individual caught in a web of deceit and lies, and endless suffering. Ibsen ends the play with the sun shining, and bringing the characters face to face with their realities. However the sun fails to bring warmth and Ibsen leaves the play open ended leaving it to the authors to decide whether Mrs. Alving could dare to give the deadly dose to her son after he suffers an attack and hence start a new series of guilt, or let him suffer incessantly in front of her eyes. It is a play of remorse and rectifications, darkness and deceit, duty and honour, and everlasting guilt. The play was not well received for its depiction of extramarital affairs, illegitimate child, incest, euthanasia and promoting a woman as independent as Mrs Alving. Gradually the play has gained momentum and readers have appreciated the subtle handling of such major issues. Maurice Valney (1963) comments, “From the standpoint of modern tragedy *Ghosts* strikes off in new direction... Regular tragedy dealt mainly with the unhappy consequence of breaking the moral code. *Ghosts*, on the contrary, deals with the consequences of not breaking it.” (qtd in “Exposition Ghosts”, np)

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