

Deceit, Family, and Justice in Ibsen's Ghosts

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to focus on Henrik Ibsen's famous play, *Ghosts*. I would say that Henrik Ibsen is one of the most powerful authors of the modern drama and his plays are the most interesting and incredible ones as far as the modern drama is concerned. But the important question is what the play can show us about contemporary individuals, morality, and social reality. This article has variety answers to this question and many other questions about the play. I try to consider the major themes which are related with the intrinsic elements of the play and tackle them through a discussion of the general aspects of the era. The major themes that the play deals with are Lies and deceit, family, and justice. I think it is plain and clear that we cannot dissociate any of the themes from the majority of the plays written throughout the history of drama.

Keywords: *Family, Deceit, Justice, Ghosts, Henrik Ibsen.*

Ghosts

Ghosts is full of living *Ghosts*. The events start with Engstrand. He wants to open a house for sailors. He needs his girl to serve the men who come to the house. For Engstrand it is very important to convince Manders to support him religiously. Although, Manders seems to be deceived by Engstrand, he may know that Engstrand does not have a good intention, because he intends to open a brothel, rather than a house for sailors. Moreover, he has to convince her to serve the sailors.

Manders enters the house of Mrs. Alving. Regina welcomes him warmly. It is clear that she needs him. She says that she would like Manders to find her a husband or a partner to leave with as the other ladies of the town. He does agree on the idea. Suddenly, Manders notices some books on the table. He gets surprised and says why Mrs. Alving reads what he calls free thinking books. Manders is the priest of the town,

he wants her to abide by religion and do not read the books that may lead her think about the anti-religion movements of the time.

Mrs. Alving has sent her son abroad to go and see the new differences which came to being. She sends him for two years. Now he is back home. He comes and greets Manders. Manders disapproves his visit. He calls him the prodigal son. This word is a biblical allusion that Manders uses to describe Oswald. Prodigal son means the extravagant son. Manders means to criticize Oswald for his visit.

Oswald is in love with Regina. He admires her for her beauty and healthiness. He thinks that she is strong. While Mrs. Alving talks about the scandals of her husband, Manders gets upset. She says to Manders that her husband was used to have illegal sexual intercourse with his maid. She unveils this to purgate herself from the psychological pains she got from her husband. Manders is numb. He cannot say anything. During their discussion Oswald goes to the kitchen to help Regina. Suddenly, they hear a sound of a chair which is knocked over. She hears Regina saying to Oswald to let her go. Her sound appears as an echo of a similar sound. It is a parallel of Mr. Alving's maid. The maid, Johanna, is the mother of Regina. She was conceived by Mr. Alving. So, Regina's mother is Johanna and her father is Oswald's father. It means that Regina and Oswald are brother and sisters of each other.

When, Mrs. Alving hears Regina saying to let her go. She calls Oswald and Regina *Ghosts*. She thinks and recalls the same events in past. It reminds her the times that Johanna was saying to Mrs. Alving to let her go. She thinks that they are the *Ghosts* of their father and mother, because they are doing the same as their father and mothers. Engstrand comes in and says that the orphanage which was intended to be a charitable memorial for Mr. Alving is on fire. They do not know who the cause of the fire was. Manders argues with Engstrand each one of them blames the other. Then, Engstrand says that he saw Manders extinguishing a candle in the orphanage. He doubts if Manders was able to extinguish the fire. After that, Manders is afraid of his witness, but Engstrand keeps it as a secret, because he wants Manders to officially let him open the brothel, what he calls a house for sailors. Also, Manders seems to be lenient enough to let him open the brothel.

After Manders and Mrs. Alving knew that Regina and Oswald are brothers and sisters, Manders disapproved their marriage and considered it as incestuous. But, still Mrs.

Alving does not have a big problem with that, because she says that we are told in the bible that the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve were married to each other. The Past affects the present. Oswald gets an agonizing headache. He says that he visited the doctors and they say it is a disease called sexually transmitted diseases. Oswald says that he is not the reason of the disease, but he inherited it from his father. He calls for champagnes to alleviate her pain. Regina goes out, and Oswald cries and his mind loses balance.

Deceit

The theme of deceit is very important in *Ghosts*. It greases the wheel of the imaginary machine on which the social communication between the characters stand. That's what's happening in *Ghosts*. The heroine, Mrs. Alving, thinks she can cover her past mistakes so as to be hidden. She does not want to let anyone to know about her agonizing pains of her husband. If she plays nice, pretends to be an obedient believer, although sometimes she wants to stand against the regulation and duties of which Manders talk about so. She sets the orphanage up and runs it. It is because of the orphanage, she is able to conceal all the shames of her husband, the play's hypocritical character who pretends to speak on the behalf of God, Pastor Manders, incites her to keep everything to her grave.

On the other side, another lair is Mr. Engstrand. He lies to convince Manders that he is going to establish a home for sailors, as if he is a good guy and wants to benefit the sailors. On the other side when Mrs. Alving's son comes home, she is unmasked. She is not able flee from her unwelcome past. Her past comes up as if it is a Ghost of her husband and made. Mrs. Alving is not comfortable, because there is something which triggers her psychological state of mind. So, she has to tell the truth.

There are uncountable cases of lies by the characters. Each one of them does it to get a benefit or to avoid a danger. For example, let us observe this following discussion between Mrs. Alving and Mr. Manders. Ibsen in *Ghosts* says:

“MRS. ALVING. The girl left our service at once, and got a good sum of Money to hold her tongue for the time. The rest she managed for herself when she got to town. She renewed her old acquaintance with Engstrand, no doubt let him see that she had money in her purse, and told him some tale about a foreigner who put in here with a yacht that summer. So she

and Engstrand got married in hot haste. Why, you married them yourself.

MANDERS. But then how to account for--? I recollect distinctly Engstrand coming to give notice of the marriage. He was quite overwhelmed with contrition, and bitterly reproached himself for the misbehaviour he and his sweetheart had been guilty of.

MRS. ALVING. Yes; of course he had to take the blame upon himself.

MANDERS. But such a piece of duplicity on his part! And towards me too!

I never could have believed it of Jacob Engstrand. I shall not fail to take him seriously to task; he may be sure of that.--And then the immorality of such a connection! For money--! How much did the girl receive?" (Ibsen. Act Two, 1995. p34)

So, what is obvious in the quote is the deception and lie of Engstrand. He was able to deceive all the people of the town. The mastermind of the deception is Mr. Alving. He was a fallen man as they call him. He had an illegal relationship with Johanna. They made sexual intercourse which led to a child. They wanted to hide their socially not allowed relations. This reminds us of the theme of reality versus appearance.

Hypocritically, Alving wants to conceal the reality. So as to do so they set up a marriage. Alving wants Engstrand to marry Johanna and show people that the baby is their baby not Alving's one. Alving gives a large amount of money to Johanna. She managed all the money to herself. She gets engaged with Engstrand. So, he marries her as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Alving responds to his accusations referring to something to attack Manders. She says why she married them? He answers he was not aware of the hidden part of the story. Actually, Engstrand went to him as a good Christian. He made his confession of his mistakes, to deceive Manders so as to never let him know about the reality of her marriage. But, now Manders agrees that he should have been aware of the bottom of the lake, because there was a kind of disagreement and discrepancy in his way of expressing himself.

Manders considers this as a very unforgivable crime. Their connection was illegal. It was made to hide reality and the facts about their disgusting sexual relationship. But in reality Engstrand did so for the sake of fifty pounds, given to him by Mr. Alving. On the other side Johanna received three hundred dollars for getting married to Engstrand and keeping Mr. Alving's reputations in the town.

Although one of the major reasons seem to be money which urged Engstrand to marry her, it is clear that he has a strong relationship with the house of captain Alving. Now, we can see that Alving is not alive, but still he has a strong social connection with his wife. Although, she does not like him, the relation is a kind of de facto. So, we could say one of the other reasons behind the marriage is a strong loyal relation between Alving and Engstrand. Engstrand did his job as a close friend to Mr. Alving. So, he married Johanna to hide the real face of his friend. The third possible reasons can be related to Engstrand's love relation with Johanna. Although it is difficult to prove the idea of having love with a fallen in to intercourse, it can be real in some cases.

The critics of Ibsen have said many things about the tragedy of Ibsen and his powerful language of conveying all of the tragic themes in English literature. One of the themes is deceit. The lie and the deceit is not necessarily a quick lie. It can be a long lie. It can be a lie which expands all of the aspects of the character's life. The lie affects their way of thinking and regretting about the past. This is very controversial argument in naturalism. Heredity affects present. Humans suffer from their everlasting past. Oswald and Mrs. Alving are two examples who represent the theme of naturalism.

One of the critics is Anne-Marie Victoria Stanton-Ife. He refers to this idea of what he calls life-lie in his doctorate thesis named as *Ibsen and Tragedy: A Study in Lykke* He says; "This is not an anti-idealist gesture to rid Oswald of the very life-lie that she cultivated in him and for which Pastor Manders applauds her as the only positive thing she ever achieved in her dismal career as failed mother and wife. No, she is not on an anti-idealist mission. Rather she is in open combat with the truth, the truth of Regina's paternity, which she feels she has to disclose so that Oswald can choose whether he wants to pursue his happiness with Regina nevertheless."(Stanton-Ife. 2003. P. 172)

As the matter of fact, Ife means that Mrs. Alving is on the crossroads of two contradictory ways. She does not want to satisfy Pastor Manders for he has considered hiding the real face of her husband as one and only positive thing she has ever done to her husband as a wife and as someone who is conscientious about her religious duties. Manders gratifies her for doing so, but actually she does not care about that. On the other side she is indifferent to correct the life lie of Oswald. The lie he has never been aware of it.

That is why Mrs. Alving does not carry the motto of an idealistic mission which Manders urge her to do. What she is obsessed by is the truth, the true side of the case which prevents Oswald to marry Regina. The fact that Regina is the daughter of Mr. Alving takes over her mind. As is obvious that Oswald is the son of Mr. Alving. This means that they are brother and sisters together. Mrs. Alving does not care whether Oswald marries her or not. What she cares about is to say what is real and purgare her mind from that agonizing secret. She wants to obtain a psychological relaxation through telling the truth.

Another critic discusses the theme of lies and deceit as far as the Ibsenian way of life and philosophy is concerned. John Howard Lawson mirrors this issue “Ibsen’s social philosophy never went beyond the limits of early nineteenth-century romanticism; he searched for the right to happiness and for the triumph of the individual will; this led him to a devastating analysis of social decay. But there is not a socially constructive idea in the vast range of his work. He attacked conventions and narrow moral standards; but as a substitute he offered time-worn generalities: we must be true to ourselves, we must expose lies, and we must fight hypocrisy and sentimentality and stupidity.”(Lawson, 2014. P. 95)

Ibsen has strived for the idea of will power of the individuals. His social philosophy is to give the individuals a ways to express what they want subjectively and without any kind of shame of the eyes of the others. Actually, he abides by the rules of the romanticism. Ibsen is keen to pave the way to the individuals. Moreover, he shuffles this idea through the analysis of tragic fall of the social commination among the family members. His criticism of the society is to attack the conformity and passiveness of the social members of the society.

Ibsen wants to tell the people to be themselves, and do what they want to do, and neglect what others want them to be. For Ibsen lie and deceit do not have the traditional and dictionary meaning, but rather they have a far deeper meaning than that. So, when we have hypocritical humans who hide what is in their mind and heart for the sake of being like society, and not being rebuked; that is the root and the essence of deceiving ourselves.

Family in *Ghosts*

The theme of family is the most prominent theme in *Ghosts*. It deals with the problems that face the families. To be known, the theme of family is a verily

discussed theme in world literature. It tackles all of the aspects of families. In *Ghosts* we have some disorganized families. For instance, Mr. Alving's family, and Engstrand's one. With his accurate portrayal of a dysfunctional family, Ibsen paves the way to understand the nature of families and family relations. He shows what is real, regardless of it is reality, and without coloring. He isn't afraid to display families as they are, because in reality, sometimes we have ugly and rude families. Ibsen does not support the hypocrite societies. He is not interested in hiding reality and wearing masks.

In *Ghosts* he encourages everyone that the addresses that we chose to the humans is a just a reference as Mom, Dad, and Son or Daughter. There are some addresses to relate to each other as human beings. So, the most important reference that we all as family members carry is being human. This is an existentialistic and humanistic way of understanding the social connection in society.

In *Ghosts*, it appears the higher your social position is, the more depressed you are. You can only keep that position by appearing to be perfect and happy. But the question is whether we are able to be happy, in that case? No, because if we have hypocrisy somewhere then, there is no happiness. Even if the humans are able to show off that they are happy, if they don't have the inner happiness, they cannot reach that position. What is firstly important is the essence. For example, Mrs. Alving shows to the people that she lives in a zero-problem family, but actually, she does not.

In *Ghosts* we have a parallel of the character's behaviors. Mrs. Alving and Regina depend on men. Mrs. Alving depends on her husband. Later, she realizes that her husband is not satisfactory, due to his immoral acts towards his servant. She would to depend on Manders, but then she realizes that he is not interested in her and he does not have an emotional feeling towards her. When she is disappointed by the action of both of them, her last hope is her son Oswald. The other lady who is a servant of Mrs. Alving's house, depends on Manders to solve her problems with her father and also, to find a new family for her. Manders does not seem to be able to do so. That is why; Regina's final hope is Oswald to get married to him. But finally, we realize that the only hope of Regina is going to face a fatal disease.

Nevertheless, Ibsen mirrors many problems of the Norwegian society throughout the play. The first family is the one of Mr. Alving. The second one is Engstrand's one. The

familial relationship between Mrs. Alving and Captain Alving is unhealthy. The basis of their marriage is corrupted, because it is based on money. Although at first Mrs. Alving was not obliged to get married to Captain Alving, but she got married to him for the sake of money. On the other hand, Engstrand's family was based on money as well, when he was married to Johanna. The only difference between Captain Alving and Engstrand's marriage was that Mrs. Alving got married to Mr. Alving optionally, while Johanna obligatorily got married to Engstrand.

Regarding Manders, he is considered to be a religious man. For him there is a big religious and moral difference between Alving and Engstrand's marriage. Why? Because he thinks that is a huge mistake when Engstrand was ready to get married with a fallen lady like Johanna, although Engstrand knew that Johanna had illegal sexual intercourse with her. Manders does not regard another mistake which is when Mrs. Alving got married for the sake of money. Another issue is that for Manders disagrees with is that Oswald wants to get married to Regina. He thinks it is incestuous. So, they should not get married to each other, because now we come to know that they are brother and sisters to each other. But Mrs. Alving says that he does not have any problem with that, because we are told in the bible that the origin of the humans is that they come from Adam and Eve. So, their son and daughters have had been married to each other.

Justice in *Ghosts*

In *Ghosts* the theme of justice is not known for the characters. Each character thinks what they do is just and fair. Nevertheless, it is not clear for the readers as well, because it is very controversial and arguable matter. Ibsen does this intentionally. The aim of this is to have some codes or hidden ideas, so as to lead the reader think and have their own critical understanding of the conflicts of the society. Ibsen's tradition is to pave the way to the reader to have their own view points on the social, religious, political, and psychological phenomenon. So, he does not invade the readers' mind.

One more point which is necessary to be mentioned is that we the discussion about justice in Ibsen's play, *Ghosts* is very different in comparison to the argumentation of justice in Miller's play. For example in *Crucible* the injustice is the matter of killing many innocent man based on some fraud evidences under the hand on the religious people who are allegorically portrayed to stand for American lawyers during the time

of cold war between Russia and America, while in *Ghosts* the idea of justice is concerned about the social and religious injustice in a family through which Ibsen portrays the Norwegian society. Also, when it comes to the discussion of justice in *All My Sons*, it is all about the jurisdictional and social injustice linked with the betrayal of a man called Joe Keller.

In *Ghosts*, For instance, when Manders comes to Mrs. Alving's house, he comes in and faces Regina. Here is one of the cases in which Ibsen portrays the theme of justice as he states:

“REGINA. Shall I tell Mrs. Alving you are here?

MANDERS. Thanks, thanks, there is no hurry, my dear child.--By-the-bye, Regina, my good girl, tell me: how is your father getting on out here?

REGINA. Oh, thank you, sir, he's getting on well enough.

MANDERS. He called upon me last time he was in town.

REGINA. Did he, indeed? He's always so glad of a chance of talking to you, sir.

MANDERS. And you often look in upon him at his work, I dare say?

REGINA. I? Oh, of course, when I have time, I--

MANDERS. Your father is not a man of strong character, Miss Engstrand. He stands terribly in need of a guiding hand.

REGINA. Oh, yes; I daresay he does.

MANDERS. He requires some one near him whom he cares for, and whose judgment he respects. He frankly admitted as much when he last came to see me.

REGINA. Yes, he mentioned something of the sort to me.” (Ibsen, Act One, Page, 12-13).

As it is shown in the quote, when Manders comes to Mrs. Alving's house, Regina wants to call Mrs. Alving, but Manders has kind of passion for her, saying that Regina does not need to bother herself hurrying up to call Mrs. Alving. What is relevant to my discussion is that Manders wants to open a matter with her, about her so called father Engstrand, which is why he wants to talk to Regina, before Mrs. Alving's arrival.

Firstly, Manders asks after her. Then, Manders says that Engstrand called on him. Although Regina does not seem to agree, Manders starts judging her father. Manders' unjust judging is that he blames Engstrand for being a weak character. Manders states that Engstrand is extremely in need of a guiding hand. These words have a religious

connotation. He says this, because he considers himself to be a religious man. The words “guiding hand” are the parallel a statement which Engstrand uses to advise Regina, saying that Regina needs a “guiding hand” to protect her.

The idea is that Ibsen criticizes the religious figures of his contemporary age. He shows their common mistakes. Manders thinks of himself as if he is a just man. But actually, does not know that he is proud of his knowledge of religion. He is judgmental, because of his little knowledge about religion. Manders’ judgmentality leads him to taint everyone except for himself. So, when someone judges and looks down everyone, they will find themselves in the top of pride and they forget criticizing themselves. Moreover, it is a fact that the more somebody criticizes and reproaches themselves, the lesser they care vulnerable to be criticized by others. Thus Ibsen criticizes the religious people for unjustly criticizing others. He considers them to be unjust.

Amir refers to the idea of justice. He states that “Even though Captain Alving is condemned from the social and moral perspective, but I think, Mrs. Alving is no less responsible for the sexual relationship between Captain Alving and Johanna. In accordance with the balance of Justice, both husband and wife may be equally punished.” (Amir, 2014, 4). So, as it is clear in the quote that according to Amir, Mrs. Alving is not free of scruple. She is responsible for her husband’s illegal relation with Johanna. Maybe she lacks her familial and affectionate relationship as a wife of Captain Alving. It is as a result of this that Mrs. Alving suffers. Amir thinks that Captain Alving and Mrs. Alving are equally responsible for the breakdown of their family.

Manders is one of the main characters in *Ghosts*. He accuses her for many mistakes. As it is shown in *Ghosts* (Act One, p. 26), He thinks that Mrs. Alving has ignored her duties as a wife, because she has decided to leave her husband. Although she had a feeling of love for Manders and wanted him to marry her, but he rejected her and send her back to her husband. According to Manders she has done another mistake which is that she does not abide by the religious discipline, duty and rules, Also, The event that she send her son as Manders says to live among the strangers. So, she has disowned her son as well. It means that she is not successful as a mother.

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