

## Research Paper

## Ibsen's Development As a Dramatist

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## ABSTRACT

*Ibsen's career as a dramatist spans a period of fifty years. His first play 'Catilina' was published in 1850 and his last play 'When We Dead Awaken' in 1899. His creative period, thus covers the second half of the 19th century. During this long period, he wrote twenty five plays, producing one play almost every alternate years.*

## Introduction

Ibsen's journey from 'Catilina' to 'When we Dead Awaken' is a long one. It is characterized by various phases or stages of his artistic development. These changes are clearly reflected in his plays which may roughly be divided into the following categories.

- Nationalistic plays
- Poetic plays
- Modern, Realistic plays or The Drama of Ideas
- Psychological or humanistic plays
- Metaphysical, Spiritual or Visionary plays

The first phase of Ibsen's writing, which comprises nine plays from 'Catilina to The Pretenders.' All these plays, excepting 'Catilina and Loves Comedy' are based on national, history, folklore, legends or sagas. In fact, these plays mark off Ibsen's period of apprentice and experiment. Ibsen's intrinsic work as a dramatist begins only after he left 'Norway.' As C.M. Bradbrook remarks "Ibsen did not become a great dramatist until he wrote away from the stage." The first fruit of this new found freedom were the two plays 'Brand and 'Peer Gynt,' which stand in a class by them, for want of a better name, we may call them 'Poetic drama.'

It was, however, the third phase of Ibsen's writing which made him famous and earned him the title of the 'Father of the Modern Drama.' It was during this period, which extends from "The League of Youth, The Pillars of Society, A Doll's House, Ghost and An Enemy of the People." That he wrote the plays that are variously described as 'Social, 'Realistic plays.' They proved the most influential of Ibsen's plays and established him as a great social reformer and moral teacher. His uniqueness among dramatists as a contributor to the social debate has also to be noted. It is well known that a man may more easily be converted in a crowd than when he is alone, and it is not the least of Ibsen's numerous contribution to the theatre that he turned it from a place of entertainment and occasional catharsis into a place from which men emerged with a

compulsive feeling to reconsider basic principles which they had never before seriously questioned.

Euripides had done this, but no dramatist since or in any case, not on the same scale Shakespeare never questioned the established tenets and beliefs of his time as Ibsen did. There were more social abuses in Shakespeare never challenged one of them. Nobody ever came out of a theatre after the performance of a play by Shakespeare feeling compelled to reconsider his basic concept of life. Yet that was the effect of Ibsen's social plays on his contemporaries reading a play by him or witnessing a performance of it in the theatre was like reading Darwin or Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud. Ibsen's superior quality was his understanding of the human mind and his ability to portray its depths and nuances and because he did this as surely in the social plays as in everything else. Ibsen's theatre is the theatre of the soul, writes Erik Bentley that scandalized Europe, the Ibsen that chimed with the Zolaist temper of the younger generation, the Ibsen of the Avant-garde theatres of the nineties, the Ibsen in a word, of Ibsenism, Championed by Bernard Shaw for its positive value in 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism.'

The plays follow the outward form of the well-made play that had been pioneered by Eugene Scribe, but depart from their model in offering credible original characters and a series view of society. In this respect Ibsen was, to some extent influenced by the Danish Scholar, George Brandes who had exhorted him to take up the questions affecting the lives of ordinary men and women and submit them to debate. As John Gassner, points out "the main interest of Dramas, Augier and other Pre-Ibsenite playwrights was to defend middle-class interest and morals. If 'Ideas' functions in their plays at all, they were conventional one."

The third stage of the plays are characterized as 'Realistic plays' but here, too, one has to remember that his 'Realism' is of a special kind. It is vitally different from the realism of the naturalistic writers like, Emile

Zola. As "P.F.D. Tennant points out, Ibsen's realism, which gave the great impulse to realist drama of modern times, always remained only an approximation to contemporary life, and never descended to the unpoetic drabness of naturalistic school;" In plot construction Ibsen remains the master of the later 19th century English dramatists, especially in the prose plays. However, Ibsen's plays are fundamentally different from the well-made play of Scribe and his followers. Unlike the latter, which simply aimed at amusement and recreation, his plays were intended to arouse and awaken the audience. They appeal to the intellect rather than emotions, and lay their emphasis more on characterization than plot. As a well known critic points out, they give 'the illusion of undistorted reality.' In fact, Ibsen raised the drama from the level of pure entertainment to that of an effective means of self-discovery and enlightenment. Henceforth says John Gassner, "a playwright was not to expect honor for merely cooking up a stew of a plot; and although many a practitioner has continued to acquire riches and a pretty reputation by no other means, a new standard of excellence was established." As H. Granville-Barker suggests his play may be called, 'a drama rather of being than doing.'

He presents first of all an idyllic picture of a household living its everyday life. Another feature of Ibsen's plays, towards which Bernard Shaw has drawn our attention is 'their realism' or commonness; his subjects, characters, situation and settings all are familiar to his audience. This was also the practice of the Greek play writers who invariably drew on familiar myths and legends. Ibsen departs from them in so far as he chooses his subjects from the world around him, here too, he abstains from employing those characters and situations which are exceptional or uncommon. Instead of dwelling on the fortunes of a Hamlet or King Lear, he prefers to deal with the problems of a Nora or Mrs Alving. His plays represent average humanity and reality and its concerns. As R. Ellis Roberts points out, "Ibsen's brought us all back to right view of dramatist life; he made his audiences part of his plays. We live in, not look at, a play by Ibsen." There are also some technical factors which contribute to the apparent realism of his plays they include directions, employment of everyday prose and elimination of soliloquies and asides. His stress on the visual concreteness of his settings and characters helps him greatly in making his plays look life-like.

Dialogue in Ibsen's plays is simple and realistic. Ibsen expressed his opinion on his aspect of dramatic art, prologue, epilogue and all such things ought to be unconditionally banished from the stage. The two significant features of Ibsen's plays are the retrospective technique and realistic setting greatly influenced contemporary British dramatist Shaw. As we have seen in the analysis of a few important prose plays and discussion of a few points. As Leo Lowenthal has remarked with "Ibsen feels that a man shares the responsibility and guilt of the society to which he

belongs and that to write is to summon one's self and play the judge's part."

Conclusion

Ibsen's dramas display a virtual catalogue of failure in daily life in the profession, in the arts, in marriage, in friendship and in communication between the generations. Like all social dramatists marriage and family interested him a great deal; but unlike Shakespeare or Moliere. Ibsen's outstanding success as an artist or realistic lies in the way he invests his plays with telling 'realism' without sacrificing any of the advantages that a poetic dramatist like Aeschylus or Shakespeare enjoys.

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