



Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* as a 'modern' tragedy

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Abstract— This paper examines *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen as a modern tragedy that redefines, rather than fails to attain, the classical tragic form. The objective of the paper is to engage critically with George Steiner's claim, in his work *The Death of Tragedy*, that tragedy becomes impossible in a world of reason and secularism. Following Raymond Williams' counterarguments on evolving notions of tragedy, the paper argues that Ibsen constructs a new tragic paradigm embedded in the late nineteenth century's social, psychological, and ideological realities. Unlike classical tragedies such as *Oedipus the King* or *Phaedra*, *Ghosts* replaces divine fate with scientific and social systems—such as heredity, social convention, and internalized beliefs—represented metaphorically as “ghosts.” Through Mrs. Alving, the play highlights the tension between progressive thought and bourgeois morality that constraints the individual. The paper further interprets Oswald's degeneration as a naturalistic counterpart of tragic fate, where scientific determinism replaces mythic destiny. The study demonstrates that modern tragedy can persist without a heroic downfall in the form of the inescapable conflicts of ordinary life. Conclusively, the lack of a moral resolution and catharsis distinguishes the modern tragic vision of Ibsen rooted in a world defined by naturalism, bourgeois sensibility, and a disillusionment with religion.



Keywords— *bourgeois society, naturalism, new tragedy, nineteenth century drama, problem play*

“The ghosts that scar the secular mind do not fear electric light.”— (Steiner, 1961)

A psychically and physically degenerating son begging for the ‘sun’ from his helpless mother was one of the most tragic scenes in modern drama. Henrik Ibsen succeeded in breaking the old ‘bottle of wine’ and fermenting a new tragedy without aligning it to the conventions of Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Racine. Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) was not a downfall of a ‘larger than life’ Aristotelian hero picked out from the Greek myths, but was informed by the immediate context of socio-political, religious, scientific, and literary conditions of his time. To call it an imitation of the form of *Oedipus the King* or *Phedre* will be a simplification of its complexities just as calling it a non-tragedy will be a negation of its impact.

To begin with, *Ghosts* is a realistic social-problem play governed by the notions of naturalism, modern psychological dilemmas, bourgeois family ideals, and religious rigidity. This paper is going to deal with

what is ‘modern’ and what is ‘tragic’ in this play by utilizing or opposing the views of George Steiner and Raymond Williams along with other critics.

When George Steiner lamented in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) the impossibility of a tragedy after the Age of Reason, he was doing the same thing he was accusing the torch bearers of modern drama of—grave robbing. The wholeness of his argument depends on the absence of a prevalent mythology—“some context of belief and convention which the artist shares with his audience” as a backdrop of any modern tragedy (Steiner, 1961, p.318).

Retrospectively, it becomes significant to look at the modern tragedy *Ghosts* (1881) beyond the measurements of the ancient, classical or neo-classical tragic dramas. In a poststructuralist understanding, the binaries of the mythical and the scientific must be left in the past. The assumption that there can be no tragedy in modernity because of the existence of reason echoes the optimism of a utopia awaiting mankind at the end of this

perpetual 'progress'. In "*The Birth of Tragedy*", Nietzsche reveals that 'the Greeks knew and felt the horrors of existence' to assert the relevance of ancient tragedy. However, to say that the modern subject constantly grappling with existential crisis is ignorant to the tragedy of human life is a false claim.

Mrs. Alving, the protagonist of Ibsen's play aspires to be a modern intellectual female but she is a tragic heroine. She is not driven by the gods of heaven but the 'ghosts' that reside in her. Unlike Phaedra's passions of love and Oedipus' ambition to seek justice, Mrs. Alving has sacrificed her life to conceal 'Truth' and maintain 'Ideals'. She is not the Racinian heroine subjected to the supernatural play of gods, neither the Sophoclean hero trying to defy his predestination. She is a product of a *new world* with which emerges "new conceptions of destiny and responsibility" (Williams, 2015, p.178). Against Steiner's (1961) claim of the tiredness of words, Ibsen manages to give the word 'ghosts' a new meaning utilizing the "power of revelation" to explain the suffering of the modern subject.

"God is dead" and is replaced by an unknown oppressive force, that Mrs. Alving articulates as 'ghosts', "old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs" (Ibsen, 2015, p.40). Unlike the infamous witches of *Macbeth* (1606), these modern ghosts fear no light and fear no gods, and they are so prevalent that to assert that they are the common ground for readers of this tragedy will not be an exaggeration. Ephemeral, Ibsen escapes the limitations and conventions pre-existing him and creates a new paradigm with which to perceive the conflicts of modern life. The title of the play gives its "full yield of meaning" and the audience gives Mrs. Alving's speech "a careful hearing" (Steiner, 1961, p.315).

The Naturalist leanings of the play also give a biological connotation of 'inheritance' to the title. In a parallel reading, Oswald becomes a tragic hero, a "youthful victim of Greek tragedy" not resulting from a curse or fate in a mythical sense but 'fate' in a scientific sense (Cascetta, 2014, p.21). The reasoning of science is as incredible as that of a woven myth justifying "the sins of the father visiting on the son" and he can do nothing but accept it. Oswald is denied even an illusion of freewill in his life (and death), as the patriarch *is* the new god: the authority and control of the monarch is redistributed among units of family to give rise to an inescapable dictatorship of norms and conventions set up by the 'Father'. This closeness with the father pushes Oswald in an ambiguous "inner conflict between an impulse that drives him to seek to break down the barriers that enclose

him and an impulse-defect that drags him back and defeats him" (Cascetta, 2014, p.20).

The context of a tragedy does not limit its relevance to the readers belonging to a different time and place. Human nature remains the same as the vibrancy of Macbeth's ambition and Phaedra's love was once accepted by the spectators in the literal sense. With the shift in perspective these 'passions' became more symbolic, and Steiner (1961) himself claims that Ibsen is "the great creator of myth and symbolic form" (p.305). Jean Racine managed to utilize myths because of their symbolism; similarly, Ibsen managed to write a symbolic realistic tragedy by inventing symbols of his own age.

The major shifts that catalyzed the formation of a 'modern' tragedy were the shift from the Divine to science, feudal society to industrialization/capitalism, and from public to private. With no intervention of destiny and gods, what makes life tragic? I would argue it is knowledge, the urge of the human mind to retain more even if it destabilizes their existing understanding of the world. Mrs. Alving's ambition to be enlightened and *act* liberal drags her into the realm of tragic. Her knowledge of the truth and her internal psyche holding on to patriarchal ideals form the basis of her tragedy. Her failure to recognize her fault, i.e., to give in to an oppressive marriage and give birth to Oswald as a "moral" duty and "religious" effort to sustain the auspicious institution of matrimony is the beginning of the tragic (Templeton, 2015, p.194). Truth becomes the harbinger of tragedy. Oedipus brings it upon himself, but Mrs. Alving has no choice other than revealing it to give final answers to the fatal sufferings of her son, Oswald.

The mirage of 'choice' is unattainable, and just as "freewill" functions within several engrained belief systems and norms. She cannot escape the ghosts that haunt her as throughout her life, as being a mother, her aim was to "think one life and live another" (Templeton, 2015, p.193). Mrs. Alving agrees to Manders' suggestion about not insuring the orphanage as the Divine will protect it. She cannot accept Regina as Mr. Alving's ("illegitimate") daughter because she is worried about the public gaze, not to mention the extent to which she let the obligations of the church govern her life. While she seems inclined to the 'new' in her words, her actions perpetuate the 'old' and the 'accepted'. Her dilemma is no less tragic or intelligible; "she [only] differs from her predecessors in kind and not degree" (Corrigan, 1959, p.180). Her presumption that the truth about Mr. Alving, if it had been revealed earlier, would have changed things is a negative realization out of her guilt for concealing it. This modern heroine is unable to recognize what her 'returning to the marriage' has led

to, even when faced with her 'ghost-son'. As a dutiful wife and mother she takes responsibility for the tragedy that was not a result of her cowardice but her belief in the myth of a happy family.

So, elaborating on the idea of a mythology, what surrounds Mrs. Alving as well as the immediate readers of *Ghosts* is the myth of the bourgeois sensibility. Contemporary life is governed by "the repressive attitude of the bourgeois society"; the fall of this mythically perfect class of people and how future generations are walking away from it (Hemmer, 1994, p.70). Bourgeois family as the "micro-society" mirrors the "macro-society" and its ideal set up that is falling apart due to its rigidity. In the same ruins lies the (unintentional) individual defender of this façade of the family: Mrs. Alving.

Another unique layer of 'modern' tragedy is represented in "Ibsen's rejection of the conventional moral ending" (Williams, 2015, p.179). Some critics assume that the dilemmas of modern life emerge along with their solutions that can be arrived at over time. The last scene of *Ghosts* is dreadful enough to make one hope for the 'sun' to arise and wipe out the impending sense of doom that dictates the play. The absurdity of life is that the sun will never reach Oswald or Mrs. Alving because the internal 'ghosts' keep the light of enlightenment away from them. What Ibsen is trying to suggest is that "the way 'through darkness to light' is a false way" (Williams, 2015, p.181), it is evident now that there is no light at the end of (post)modernity.

CONCLUSION

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* redefines tragedy for the modern age by shifting its focus from divinity to society, individual psychology, and heredity. He challenges George Steiner's claim that tragedy cannot exist without shared mythology, the play proves how bourgeois ideals and internalized beliefs had become a modern myth that governs people.

Through Mrs. Alving and Oswald, Ibsen presents a tragedy rooted in ordinary existence, where truth brings suffering and no resolution is offered. As Raymond Williams suggests, modern tragedy lies in unresolved conflict rather than cathartic closure. The relevance of *Ghosts* lies in its relatable yet controversial nature, which provoked uproar in modern theatre by exposing the fragility of bourgeois ideals.

The flag-bearers of bourgeois ideals are intolerant to the exposure of the fragile character of these principles of faith. The suffering of the tragic protagonist does not lead them to the heavenly place and the catharsis of the

audience does not lead to an ideal society but the formation of submissive subjects. Ibsen, therefore, is focused on provoking his viewers to take action for social change.

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