Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien, Norway, into a wealthy merchant family. While Ibsen was very young, his father suffered financial losses, and the family verged on poverty, no longer able to afford Ibsen's education. Young Ibsen developed a deep distrust for society and engaged in drunkenness and gambling. He also fathered an illegitimate child at the age of 18. To evade the social repercussions of his relationship with a servant girl, he was forced to support the child financially.

In 1850, Ibsen moved to Oslo to prepare for entrance into the university, but he failed to pass the entrance examinations. Becoming involved in radical politics, he joined a revolutionary group, but after the group was broken up by the government, Ibsen disengaged himself from politics for the rest of his life. During these years in Oslo, Ibsen began to write articles for various journals. He also wrote poetry and a play, neither of which was successful.

In 1851, Ibsen was appointed "stage poet" for a small provincial theater in Bergen. Ibsen wrote several early plays based on the history and folklore of Norway. Although these works were by no means Ibsen's greatest efforts, the theater management soon recognized Ibsen's talent as a playwright. In 1852, the theater sent Ibsen on a study tour to Denmark and Germany.

Returning to Norway in 1857, Ibsen was appointed director of the newly formed Norwegian Theater in Oslo. After several unsuccessful productions, the theater went bankrupt. Ibsen was reappointed to the Oslo Theater, where he attempted to establish his reputation as a playwright with a series of historical dramas. They were poorly received, and Ibsen was often publicly humiliated by their criticism.

The Norwegian government provided Ibsen with a grant to study in Italy and Germany. He left in 1863 and lived abroad until 1891. Ibsen's reputation as a playwright was established in the late 1860s with production of several successful pieces, including Brand (1866), in which a minister takes his calling too seriously, and Peer Gynt (1867), in which a man lacking in character finds redemption in the love of a woman. In 1866, Ibsen was granted an annual pension from the Norwegian government. When Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891, he was known as one of the world's greatest dramatists.

**Critical Analysis**

Henrik Ibsen's drama often focused on the realistic psychological complexities of the individual, and his work was much more focused on character than on plot. One of the central conflicts in Ibsen's drama is between characters who seek to realize themselves emotionally and spiritually and the barriers that have been created by outdated conventions of bourgeois society. Ibsen was often seen as a progressive, liberal thinker by younger generations outside Norway; in Norway, however, Ibsen was generally viewed as a conservative playwright, writing against the tide of increasing pressures of modern times. The themes of Ibsen's work are still debated by contemporary audiences and scholars.

Peer Gynt (1867) tells the story of a young man raised on the traditional fairy tales of Norway. Peer leads an irresponsible life, drinking, lying, and ruining young women's reputations. The epic play describes Peer's fantastical journey through the world. Peer becomes a slave dealer and a prophet and finally finds himself alone, wandering through the desert. When Peer returns home, he finds himself spiritually ruined because of the immoral life that he led in the past. In the end, Peer is saved by the love of Salvig, one of the women he abandoned. The play is a combination of psychological realism and folklore. This popular play was set to music by the famous Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg (1843–1907).

Ibsen's most famous work of realism, A Doll's House (1879), presents a tragic conflict in a middle-class family. Nora, the mother of three children, is treated like a doll by her husband. Faced with a familial conflict, Nora suddenly matures, realizing that she needs to leave her family to fulfill herself spiritually. The play created much controversy throughout Europe: Ibsen's representation of a woman who leaves her family in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment was seen as disturbing and unconventional. The realistic portrayal of the middle-class household also hurt bourgeois sentimentality. Despite the criticism, the play caused quite a sensation, and it toured Europe and America. The play remains Ibsen's most widely read and produced work.
Hedda Gabler (1890), the story of a woman who cannot resolve a conflict between her inner self and what society demands of her, was roundly condemned by many when it was first produced. A contemporary critic, Hjalmer Boyeson, called her “a complete perversion of womanhood.” But Hedda is a character of tremendous complexity who continues to intrigue audiences.

Ibsen's most controversial play, however, was Ghosts (1881), which tells the story of the wife of a terrible drunk who sacrifices herself to the undesirable marriage because of social conventions. Their son is unknowingly engaged in a love affair with his half-sister, an illegitimate child of the father and a servant woman. The mother sends her son away, hoping that he will change. The son returns years later, the very picture of his father. He begins to suffer from syphilis, which he inherited from his father. The mother is faced with the difficult choice of administering poison to her son at his request or watching him go through complete psychological and physical degeneration. The subject of venereal disease was not seen as appropriate for theater. The play was bitterly criticized by the conservative segments of the public. Ghosts attacks the accepted social conventions of marriage and presents them as destructive to individual happiness.

Although Henrik Ibsen’s talent was recognized during his lifetime, today his works enjoy the unanimous acclaim of the critics. Some of Ibsen’s topics are still seen as controversial by many audiences. Ibsen is probably among the most influential playwrights in the development of modern drama. He anticipates the modern themes of alienation and the smothering pressure to conform that society exerts on individuals.

Further Information

Other Works by Henrik Ibsen


Works about Henrik Ibsen


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