

Classic Poetry Series

Henrik Johan Ibsen
- poems -

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Henrik Johan Ibsen(20 March 1828 – 23 May 1906)

Henrik Ibsen was a major 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is often referred to as "the father of prose drama" and is one of the founders of Modernism in the theatre. His major works include *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Emperor and Galilean*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder*.

Several of his plays were considered scandalous to many of his era, when European theater was required to model strict mores of family life and propriety. Ibsen's work examined the realities that lay behind many façades, revealing much that was disquieting to many contemporaries. It utilized a critical eye and free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality. The poetic and cinematic play *Peer Gynt*, however, has strong surreal elements.

Ibsen is often ranked as one of the truly great playwrights in the European tradition. Richard Hornby describes him as "a profound poetic dramatist—the best since Shakespeare". He influenced other playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Eugene O'Neill. Many critics consider him the greatest playwright since Shakespeare.

Ibsen wrote his plays in Danish and they were published by the Danish publisher Gyldendal. Although most of his plays are set in Norway—often in places reminiscent of Skien, the port town where he grew up—Ibsen lived for 27 years in Italy and Germany, and rarely visited Norway during his most productive years. Born into a merchant family connected to the patriciate of Skien, his dramas were shaped by his family background. He was the father of Prime Minister Sigurd Ibsen.

Family and youth

Ibsen was born to Knud Ibsen (1797–1877) and Marichen Altenburg (1799–1869), a well-to-do merchant family, in the small port town of Skien in Telemark county, a city which was noted for shipping timber. As he wrote in an 1882 letter to critic and scholar Georg Brandes, "my parents were members on both sides of the most respected families in Skien", explaining that he was closely related with "just about all the patrician families who then dominated the place and its surroundings", mentioning the families Paus, Plesner, von der Lippe, Cappelen and Blom. Ibsen's grandfather, ship's captain Henrich Ibsen (1765–1797), had died at sea in 1797, and Knud Ibsen was raised on the estate of ship-owner Ole Paus (1776–1855), after his mother Johanne, née Plesner

(1770–1847), remarried. Knud Ibsen's half brothers included lawyer and politician Christian Cornelius Paus, banker and ship-owner Christopher Blom Paus, and lawyer Henrik Johan Paus, who grew up with Ibsen's mother in the Altenburg home and after whom Henrik (Johan) Ibsen was named.

Knud Ibsen's paternal ancestors were ship's captains of Danish origin, but he decided to become a merchant, having initial success. His marriage to Marichen Altenburg, a daughter of ship-owner Johan Andreas Altenburg (1763–1824) and Hedevig Christine Paus (1763–1848), was "an excellent family arrangement. Marichen's mother and Knud's step-father were sister and brother, and the bride and groom, who had grown up together, were practically regarded as sister and brother themselves. Marichen Altenburg was a fine catch, the daughter of one of the wealthiest merchants in the prosperous lumber town of Skien." Theodore Jorgenson points out that "Henrik's ancestry reached back into the important Telemark family of Paus both on the father's and on the mother's side. Hedvig Paus must have been well known to the young dramatist, for she lived until 1848." Henrik Ibsen was fascinated by his parents' "strange, almost incestuous marriage," and would treat the subject of incestuous relationships in several plays, notably his masterpiece *Rosmersholm*.

When Henrik Ibsen was around seven years old, however, his father's fortunes took a significant turn for the worse, and the family was eventually forced to sell the major Altenburg building in central Skien and move permanently to their small summer house, *Venstøp*, outside of the city. His bankruptcy made Knud Ibsen a moody and embittered man who turned to alcoholism, who visited "his bitterness and resentment on his wife and children." Henrik's sister Hedvig would write about their mother: "She was a quiet, lovable woman, the soul of the house, everything to her husband and children. She sacrificed herself time and again. There was no bitterness or reproach in her." Marichen Altenburg was "small, brunette, and dark-complexioned, and the only existing likeness of her, a silhouette, bears out the tradition that she was beautiful". The Ibsen family eventually moved to a city house, *Snipetorp*, owned by Knud Ibsen's half-brother, wealthy banker and ship-owner Christopher Blom Paus.

His father's financial ruin would have a strong influence on Ibsen's later work; the characters in his plays often mirror his parents, and his themes often deal with issues of financial difficulty as well as moral conflicts stemming from dark secrets hidden from society. Ibsen would both model and name characters in his plays after his own family. A central theme in Ibsen's plays is the "unremitting portrayals of suffering women," echoing his mother Marichen Altenburg; "Ibsen's sympathy with women came from his understanding of their powerlessness, and his education began at home."

At fifteen, Ibsen was forced to leave school. He moved to the small town of Grimstad to become an apprentice pharmacist and began writing plays. In 1846, when Ibsen was age 18, a liaison with a servant produced an illegitimate child, whose upbringing Ibsen had to pay for until the boy was in his teens, though Ibsen never saw the boy. Ibsen went to Christiania (later renamed Oslo) intending to matriculate at the university. He soon rejected the idea (his earlier attempts at entering university were blocked as he did not pass all his entrance exams), preferring to commit himself to writing. His first play, the tragedy *Catiline* (1850), was published under the pseudonym "Brynjolf Bjarme", when he was only 20, but it was not performed. His first play to be staged, *The Burial Mound* (1850), received little attention. Still, Ibsen was determined to be a playwright, although the numerous plays he wrote in the following years remained unsuccessful. Ibsen's main inspiration in the early period, right up to *Peer Gynt*, was apparently Norwegian author Henrik Wergeland and the Norwegian folk tales as collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe. In Ibsen's youth, Wergeland was the most acclaimed, and by far the most read, Norwegian poet and playwright.

Life and writings

He spent the next several years employed at Det norske Theater (Bergen), where he was involved in the production of more than 145 plays as a writer, director, and producer. During this period, he published five new, though largely unremarkable, plays. Despite Ibsen's failure to achieve success as a playwright, he gained a great deal of practical experience at the Norwegian Theater, experience that was to prove valuable when he continued writing.

Ibsen returned to Christiania in 1858 to become the creative director of the Christiania Theatre. He married Suzannah Thoresen on 18 June 1858 and she gave birth to their only child Sigurd on 23 December 1859. The couple lived in very poor financial circumstances and Ibsen became very disenchanted with life in Norway. In 1864, he left Christiania and went to Sorrento in Italy in self-imposed exile. He didn't return to his native land for the next 27 years, and when he returned it was as a noted, but controversial, playwright.

His next play, *Brand* (1865), brought him the critical acclaim he sought, along with a measure of financial success, as did the following play, *Peer Gynt* (1867), to which Edvard Grieg famously composed incidental music and songs. Although Ibsen read excerpts of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and traces of the latter's influence are evident in *Brand*, it was not until after *Brand* that Ibsen came to take Kierkegaard seriously. Initially annoyed with his friend Georg

Brandes for comparing Brand to Kierkegaard, Ibsen nevertheless read *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*. Ibsen's next play *Peer Gynt* was consciously informed by Kierkegaard.

With success, Ibsen became more confident and began to introduce more and more of his own beliefs and judgments into the drama, exploring what he termed the "drama of ideas". His next series of plays are often considered his Golden Age, when he entered the height of his power and influence, becoming the center of dramatic controversy across Europe.

Ibsen moved from Italy to Dresden, Germany in 1868, where he spent years writing the play he regarded as his main work, *Emperor and Galilean* (1873), dramatizing the life and times of the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate. Although Ibsen himself always looked back on this play as the cornerstone of his entire works, very few shared his opinion, and his next works would be much more acclaimed. Ibsen moved to Munich in 1875 and published *A Doll's House* in 1879. The play is a scathing criticism of the marital roles accepted by men and women which characterized Ibsen's society.

Ghosts followed in 1881, another scathing commentary on the morality of Ibsen's society, in which a widow reveals to her pastor that she had hidden the evils of her marriage for its duration. The pastor had advised her to marry her fiancé despite his philandering, and she did so in the belief that her love would reform him. But his philandering continued right up until his death, and his vices are passed on to their son in the form of syphilis. The mention of venereal disease alone was scandalous, but to show how it could poison a respectable family was considered intolerable.

In *An Enemy of the People* (1882), Ibsen went even further. In earlier plays, controversial elements were important and even pivotal components of the action, but they were on the small scale of individual households. In *An Enemy*, controversy became the primary focus, and the antagonist was the entire community. One primary message of the play is that the individual, who stands alone, is more often "right" than the mass of people, who are portrayed as ignorant and sheeplike. Contemporary society's belief was that the community was a noble institution that could be trusted, a notion Ibsen challenged. In *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen chastised not only the conservatism of society, but also the liberalism of the time. He illustrated how people on both sides of the social spectrum could be equally self-serving. *An Enemy of the People* was written as a response to the people who had rejected his previous work, *Ghosts*. The plot of the play is a veiled look at the way people reacted to the plot of *Ghosts*. The protagonist is a physician in a vacation spot whose primary draw is a

public bath. The doctor discovers that the water is contaminated by the local tannery. He expects to be acclaimed for saving the town from the nightmare of infecting visitors with disease, but instead he is declared an 'enemy of the people' by the locals, who band against him and even throw stones through his windows. The play ends with his complete ostracism. It is obvious to the reader that disaster is in store for the town as well as for the doctor.

As audiences by now expected of him, his next play again attacked entrenched beliefs and assumptions; but this time, his attack was not against society's mores, but against overeager reformers and their idealism. Always an iconoclast, Ibsen was equally willing to tear down the ideologies of any part of the political spectrum, including his own.

The Wild Duck (1884) is by many considered Ibsen's finest work, and it is certainly the most complex. It tells the story of Gregers Werle, a young man who returns to his hometown after an extended exile and is reunited with his boyhood friend Hjalmar Ekdal. Over the course of the play, the many secrets that lie behind the Ekdals' apparently happy home are revealed to Gregers, who insists on pursuing the absolute truth, or the "Summons of the Ideal". Among these truths: Gregers' father impregnated his servant Gina, then married her off to Hjalmar to legitimize the child. Another man has been disgraced and imprisoned for a crime the elder Werle committed. Furthermore, while Hjalmar spends his days working on a wholly imaginary "invention", his wife is earning the household income.

Ibsen displays masterful use of irony: despite his dogmatic insistence on truth, Gregers never says what he thinks but only insinuates, and is never understood until the play reaches its climax. Gregers hammers away at Hjalmar through innuendo and coded phrases until he realizes the truth; Gina's daughter, Hedvig, is not his child. Blinded by Gregers' insistence on absolute truth, he disavows the child. Seeing the damage he has wrought, Gregers determines to repair things, and suggests to Hedvig that she sacrifice the wild duck, her wounded pet, to prove her love for Hjalmar. Hedvig, alone among the characters, recognizes that Gregers always speaks in code, and looking for the deeper meaning in the first important statement Gregers makes which does not contain one, kills herself rather than the duck in order to prove her love for him in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Only too late do Hjalmar and Gregers realize that the absolute truth of the "ideal" is sometimes too much for the human heart to bear.

Letter from Ibsen to his English reviewer and translator Edmund Gosse:
"30.8.99. Dear Mr. Edmund Gosse! It was to me a hearty joy to receive your letter. So I will finally personally meet you and your wife. I am at home every

day in the morning until 1 o'clock. I am happy and surprised at your excellent Norwegian! Your amicably obliged Henrik Ibsen."

Late in his career, Ibsen turned to a more introspective drama that had much less to do with denunciations of society's moral values. In such later plays as *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *The Master Builder* (1892), Ibsen explored psychological conflicts that transcended a simple rejection of current conventions. Many modern readers, who might regard anti-Victorian didacticism as dated, simplistic or hackneyed, have found these later works to be of absorbing interest for their hard-edged, objective consideration of interpersonal confrontation. *Hedda Gabler* is probably Ibsen's most performed play, with the title role regarded as one of the most challenging and rewarding for an actress even in the present day. *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House* center on female protagonists whose almost demonic energy proves both attractive and destructive for those around them, and while *Hedda* has a few similarities with the character of *Nora* in *A Doll's House*, many of today's audiences and theater critics feel that *Hedda's* intensity and drive are much more complex and much less comfortably explained than what they view as rather routine feminism on the part of *Nora*.

Ibsen had completely rewritten the rules of drama with a realism which was to be adopted by Chekhov and others and which we see in the theater to this day. From Ibsen forward, challenging assumptions and directly speaking about issues has been considered one of the factors that makes a play art rather than entertainment. He had a profound influence on the young James Joyce who venerates him in his early autobiographical novel "Stephen Hero". Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891, but it was in many ways not the Norway he had left. Indeed, he had played a major role in the changes that had happened across society. The Victorian Age was on its last legs, to be replaced by the rise of Modernism not only in the theater, but across public life.

Death

On 23 May 1906, Ibsen died in his home at Arbins gade 1 in Christiania (now Oslo) after a series of strokes in March 1900. When, on 22 May, his nurse assured a visitor that he was a little better, Ibsen spluttered his last words "On the contrary" ("Tvertimod!"). He died the following day at 2:30 P.M.

Ibsen was buried in Vår Frelses gravlund ("The Graveyard of Our Savior") in central Oslo.

Centenary

The 100th anniversary of Ibsen's death in 2006 was commemorated with an "Ibsen year" in Norway and other countries. This year the homebuilding company Selvaag also opened Peer Gynt Sculpture Park in Oslo, Norway, in Henrik Ibsen's honour, making it possible to follow the dramatic play Peer Gynt scene by scene.

On 23 May 2006, The Ibsen Museum (Oslo) reopened to the public the house where Ibsen had spent his last eleven years, completely restored with the original interior, colors, and decor.

Ancestry

The oldest documented Ibsen was ship's captain Rasmus Ibsen (1632–1703) from Stege, Denmark. His son, ship's captain Peder Ibsen became a burgher of Bergen in Norway in 1726. Henrik Ibsen has Danish, German, Norwegian and some distant Scottish ancestry. Most of his ancestors belonged to the merchant class of original Danish/German extraction, and many of his ancestors were ship's captains. His biographer Henrik Jæger famously wrote in 1888 that Ibsen did not have a drop of Norse blood in his veins, stating that "the ancestral Ibsen was a Dane". This, however, is not completely accurate; notably through his grandmother Hedevig Paus, Ibsen was descended from one of the very few families of the patrician class of original Norwegian extraction, known since the 15th century. Ibsen's ancestors had mostly lived in Norway for several generations, even though many had foreign ancestry.

The name Ibsen is originally a patronymic, meaning "son of Ib" (Ib is a Danish variant of Jacob). The patronymic became "frozen", i.e. it became a permanent family name, already in the 17th century. The phenomenon of patronymics becoming frozen started in the 17th century in bourgeois families in Denmark, and the practice was only widely adopted in Norway from around 1900.

Descendants

From his marriage with Suzannah Thoresen, Ibsen had one son, lawyer and government minister Sigurd Ibsen. Sigurd Ibsen married Bergljot Bjørnson, the daughter of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Their only son was Tancred Ibsen, who became a film director and who was married to Lillebil Ibsen. Their only child was diplomat Tancred Ibsen, Jr. Sigurd Ibsen's daughter, Irene Ibsen, married Josias Bille, a member of the Danish ancient noble Bille family. Their son was Danish actor Joen Bille.

A Brother In Need

NOW, rallying once if ne'er again,
With flag at half-mast flown,
A people in dire need and strain
Mans Tyra's bastion.

Betrayed in danger's hour, betrayed
Before the stress of strife!
Was this the meaning that it had--
That clasp of hands at Axelstad
Which gave the North new life?

The words that seemed as if they rushed
From deepest heart-springs out
Were phrases, then! -- the freshet gushed,
And now is fall'n the drought.
The tree, that promised rich in bloom
Mid festal sun and shower,
Stands wind-stript in the louring gloom,
A cross to mark young Norway's tomb,
The first dark testing-hour.

They were but Judas kisses, lies
In fatal wreaths enwound,
The cheers of Norway's sons, and cries
Towards the beach of Sound.
What passed that time we watched them meet,
'Twixt Norse and Danish lord?
Oh! nothing! only to repeat
King Gustav's play at Stockholm's seat
With the Twelfth Charles' sword.

'A people doomed, whose knell is rung,
Betrayed by every friend!' --
Is the book closed and the song sung?
Is this our Denmark's end?
Who set the craven colophon,
While Germans seized the hold,
And o'er the last Dane lying prone
Old Denmark's tattered flag was thrown

With doubly crimsoned fold?

But thou, my brother Norsemen, set
Beyond the war-storm's power
Because thou knewest to forget
Fair words in danger's hour:
Flee from thy homes of ancient fame--
Go chase a new sunrise--
Pursue oblivion, and for shame
Disguise thee in a stranger's name
To hide from thine own eyes!

Each wind that sighs from Danish waves
Through Norway's woods of pine,
Of thy pale lips an answer craves:
Where wast thou, brother mine?
I fought for both a deadly fight;
In vain to spy thy prow
O'er belt and fiord I strained my sight:
My fatherland with graves grew white:
My brother, where wast thou?

It was a dream! Arise, awake
To do a nation's deed!
Each to his post, swift counsel take;
A brother is in need!
A nobler song may yet be sung--
Danes, Danes, keep Tyra's hold--
And o'er a Northern era, young
And rich in hope, be proudly flung
The red flag's tattered fold.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

Burnt Ships

TO skies that were brighter
Turned he his prows;
To gods that were lighter
Made he his vows.

The snow-land's mountains
Sank in the deep;
Sunnier fountains
Lulled him to sleep.

He burns his vessels,
The smoke flung forth
On blue cloud-trestles
A bridge to the north.

From the sun-warmed lowland
Each night that betides,
To the huts of the snow-land
A horseman rides.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

Gone

THE last, late guest
To the gate we followed;
Goodbye -- and the rest
The night-wind swallowed.

House, garden, street,
Lay tenfold gloomy,
Where accents sweet
Had made music to me.

It was but a feast
With the dark coming on;
She was but a guest --
And now, she is gone.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

In The Picture Gallery

With palette laden
She sat, as I passed her,
A dainty maiden
Before an Old Master.

What mountain-top is
She bent upon? Ah,
She neatly copies
Murillo's Madonna.

But rapt and brimming
The eyes' full chalice says
The heart builds dreaming
Its fairy-palaces.

* * *

The eighteenth year rolled
By, ere returning,
I greeted the dear old
Scenes with yearning.

With palette laden
She sat, as I passed her,
A faded maiden
Before an Old Master.

But what is she doing?
The same thing still--lo,
Hotly pursuing
That very Murillo!

Her wrist never falters;
It keeps her, that poor wrist,
With panels for altars
And daubs for the tourist.

And so she has painted
Through years unbrightened,

Till hopes have fainted
And hair has whitened.

But rapt and brimming
The eyes' full chalice says
The heart builds dreaming
Its fairy-palaces.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

Mountain Life

IN summer dusk the valley lies
With far-flung shadow veil;
A cloud-sea laps the precipice
Before the evening gale:
The welter of the cloud-waves grey
Cuts off from keenest sight
The glacier, looking out by day
O'er all the district, far away,
And crowned with golden light.

But o'er the smouldering cloud-wrack's flow,
Where gold and amber kiss,
Stands up the archipelago,
A home of shining peace.
The mountain eagle seems to sail
A ship far seen at even;
And over all a serried pale
Of peaks, like giants ranked in mail,
Fronts westward threatening heaven.

But look, a steading nestles, close
Beneath the ice-fields bound,
Where purple cliffs and glittering snows
The quiet home surround.
Here place and people seem to be
A world apart, alone; --
Cut off from men by spate and scree
It has a heaven more broad, more free,
A sunshine all its own.

Look: mute the saeter-maiden stays,
Half shadow, half aflame;
The deep, still vision of her gaze
Was never word to name.
She names it not herself, nor knows
What goal may be its will;
While cow-bells chime and alp-horn blows
It bears her where the sunset glows,
Or, maybe, further still.

Too brief, thy life on highland wolds
Where close the glaciers jut;
Too soon the snowstorm's cloak enfolds
Stone byre and pine-log hut.
Then wilt thou ply with hearth ablaze
The winter's well-worn tasks; --
But spin thy wool with cheerful face:
One sunset in the mountain pays
For all their winter asks.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

Thanks

HER griefs were the hours
When my struggle was sore,--
Her joys were the powers
That the climber upbore.

Her home is the boundless
Free ocean that seems
To rock, calm and soundless,
My galleon of dreams.

Half hers are the glancing
Creations that throng
With pageant and dancing
The ways of my song.

My fires when they dwindle
Are lit from her brand;
Men see them rekindle
Nor guess by whose hand.

Of thanks to requite her
No least thought is hers,--
And therefore I write her,
Once, thanks in a verse.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

The Miner

Beetling rock, with roar and smoke
Break before my hammer-stroke!
Deeper I must thrust and lower
Till I hear the ring of ore.

From the mountain's unplumbed night,
Deep amid the gold-veins bright,
Diamonds lure me, rubies beckon,
Treasure-hoard that none may reckon.

There is peace within the deep--
Peace and immemorial sleep;
Heavy hammer, burst as bidden,
To the heart-nook of the hidden!

Once I, too, a careless lad,
Under starry heavens was glad,
Trode the primrose paths of summer,
Child-like knew not care nor cummer.

But I lost the sense of light
In the poring womb of night;
Woodland songs, when earth rejoiced her,
Breathed not down my hollow cloister.

Fondly did I cry, when first
Into the dark place I burst:
"Answer spirits of the middle
Earth, my life's unending riddle!--"

Still the spirits of the deep
Unrevealed their answer keep;
Still no beam from out the gloomy
Cavern rises to illumine me.

Have I erred? Does this way lead
Not to clarity indeed?
If above I seek to find it,
By the glare my eyes are blinded.

Downward, then! the depths are best;
There is immemorial rest.
Heavy hammer burst as bidden
To the heart-nook of the hidden!--

Hammer-blow on hammer-blow
Till the lamp of life is low.
Not a ray of hope's fore-warning;
Not a glimmer of the morning.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

To The Survivors

NOW they sing the hero loud; --
But they sing him in his shroud.

Torch he kindled for his land;
On his brow ye set its brand.

Taught by him to wield a glaive;
Through his heart the steel ye drove.

Trolls he smote in hard-fought fields;
Ye bore him down 'twixt traitor shields.

But the shining spoils he won,
These ye treasure as your own.--

Dim them not, that so the dead
Rest appeased his thorn-crowned head.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

Wildflowers And Hot-House Plants

'GOOD Heavens, man, what a freak of taste!
What blindness to form and feature!
The girl's no beauty, and might be placed
As a hoydenish kind of creature.'

No doubt it were more in the current tone
And the tide today we move in,
If I could but choose me to make my own
A type of our average woman.

Like winter blossoms they all unfold
Their primly maturing glory;
Like pot-grown plants in the tepid mould
Of a window conservatory.

They sleep by rule and by rule they wake,
Each tendril is taught its duties;
Were I worldly-wise, yes, my choice I'd make
From our stock of average beauties.

For worldly wisdom what do I care?
I am sick of its prating mummers;
She breathes of the field and the open air,
And the fragrance of sixteen summers.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

With A Water-Lily

SEE, dear, what thy lover brings;
'Tis the flower with the white wings.
Buoyed upon the quiet stream
In the spring it lay adream.

Homelike to bestow this guest,
Lodge it, dear one, in thy breast;
There its leaves the secret keep
Of a wave both still and deep.

Child, beware the tarn-fed stream;
Danger, danger, there to dream!
Though the sprite pretends to sleep,
And above the lilies peep.

Child, thy bosom is the stream;
Danger, danger, there to dream!
Though above the lilies peep,
And the sprite pretends to sleep.

Henrik Johan Ibsen