
The Sun Always Rises: Ibsen's "Ghosts" as Tragedy?

Author(s): Robert W. Corrigan

Source: *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Oct., 1959), pp. 171-180

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3204799>

Accessed: 01-04-2020 15:26 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Educational Theatre Journal*

THE SUN ALWAYS RISES: IBSEN'S GHOSTS AS TRAGEDY?

ROBERT W. CORRIGAN

"What profit has man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever. . . . The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose."

. . . *Ecclesiastes*

Ghosts created the biggest stir in Europe of all of Ibsen's plays. It was the hallmark of the Free Theatre movement. Antoine at the Théâtre Libre, Brahm at the Freie Buehne, and Grein at the Independent Theatre in London all produced this play as a symbol and a harbinger of their freedom. But the play was violently received. It shocked respectable middle-class audiences everywhere; it was condemned and banned; for the young turks of liberalism it was a banner to be waved on high. From the beginning the play had a notoriety that Ibsen only partially intended.

Fortunately, *Ghosts* is now seen in clearer perspective and we tend to be amused by the critical reaction of the Nineties. But *Ghosts* is still a controversial play. The number of respectable interpretations currently making the rounds is large and when you get on the subject of *Ghosts* as tragedy—well, it is one of those plays, like *Death of a Salesman*, it just won't stay settled and is always good for an argument. The four major interpretations of the play usually advanced are: First, Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* as an answer to the objections raised by Nora's flight from her hus-

band and children in *A Doll's House*. Tied to a worse husband than Helmar, Mrs. Alving, instead of leaving him, had decided to stay, and to cover up the "corpse" of her married life with respectable trappings.¹ Second: Mrs. Alving and Oswald are the victims of a two-fisted fate which takes the form of the laws of heredity in a mechanistic world and the stultifying and debilitating conventions of respectability. Third: Hereditary disease was for Ibsen the symbol of all the determinist forces that crush humanity, and, therefore, he sought to put in opposition to these forces the strongest of all instincts—maternal passion. And, finally, there is a fourth group of critics who dismiss the play as irrelevant except as an historical landmark. They argue that although the play may have been revolutionary in its day, today any dramatic conflict which presents suffering and a shot of penicillin as its alternatives is not very convincing. All of these interpretations—and they have been persuasively argued by responsible critics—seem to me to be either misreadings of the play or beside the point. They are comments about the play, but they are ancillary and fail to recognize the underlying conflict of the play. For this reason most modern commentaries on *Ghosts* fail to describe and interpret the central action which Ibsen is imitating, and this has resulted in many limited or erroneous discussions of the play as a tragedy. It

Robert W. Corrigan is a member of the staff of Tulane University, and the editor of the Tulane Drama Review.

¹ Janko Lavrin, *Ibsen*, London, 1950, p. 81.

is this central action and its tragic implications which I wish to discuss, and this can best be done by first turning to Ibsen the man and the artist.

I

Ibsen's biography is a study in conflict and contradiction. The gadfly of bourgeoisie morality was helplessly bourgeois; the enemy of pietism was a guilt-ridden possessor of the worst kind of "Lutheran" conscience; the champion of the "love-life of the soul" was incapable of loving; the militant spokesman against hypocrisy and respectability was pompous and outraged at any breach of decorum. Ibsen's life is the contradiction of those values affirmed in his plays. This should not confuse us, however, if we will look even briefly at some of the significant events in a life that was really quite dull.

Ibsen was born into an atmosphere of fairly prosperous parochial respectability. His father was a small-time shipping tycoon in the little town of Skien. In 1836, when Ibsen was eight years old, his father went bankrupt and was accused of embezzlement and forgery. The charges were never proved, but the family was ostracized and reduced to a grubbing kind of poverty. When Ibsen was sixteen he left his family, amidst bitter renunciations on both sides, never to see or correspond with them again. Even when his parents died he failed to return or write. He wrote to a friend on the occasion of his father's death that he was "unable to offer assistance of any kind." So at sixteen Ibsen went to the dismal town of Grimstead as an apprentice in pharmacy. Here he had an illegitimate son, Hans Jakob, and once again was "run out of town." He left Grimstead, leaving mother and child stranded, and never took the slightest interest in them. He went to Christiana

(now Oslo) to begin his career as a writer and failed. In 1851 he was hired as director and dramaturg of the new Bergen National Theatre. Again, Ibsen was a failure. Letters and memoirs of actors in his company show him to have been incompetent as both a director and as a manager; and the plays written expressly for the theatre in his role as dramaturg were all miserable flops. Furthermore, he must have felt failure in his personal life. He fell in love three times in Bergen, and in each instance the girl's father broke off the affair because Ibsen was not suitable as a son-in-law. By 1857 he was on the verge of being fired; friends stepped in and got him a job as director of the newly organized Norwegian Theatre in Christiana. But failure followed him and by 1862 the National Theatre was bankrupt both artistically and financially and Ibsen was bitterly denounced by the press. Once again, friends came to his aid and he was given a small dole in the form of a literary scholarship to study abroad.

The story of Ibsen's success as an international playwright is well-known and in 1891 he returned to Norway as a celebrity. In Christiana, where he settled for good, he became something of a national institution and was far from disliking such a status. All the frustration, humiliation, and rejection he had endured in youth and early manhood were now amply compensated for. He was wealthy and internationally famous. As if anxious to do full justice to his literary and social position, Ibsen increased his air of excessively dignified respectability. So much so that in all his external habits he was even more strict and methodical than those philistines whom he had ridiculed so aggressively in his plays. Immaculately dressed in his frock-coat and silk top-hat, he took his daily walks along the

same streets, sat at the same table in the same cafe (where the customers all respectfully rose whenever he entered), and went home at the same time—with the regularity of clockwork. He was also fond of displaying his numerous decorations and medals, which he used to collect and covet with the relish of a *nouveau riche* enjoying all the external insignia of his own importance.

In short, Ibsen became a “pillar of society” in his last days; he was a regular speaker at the Norwegian equivalents of the Rotary Club, the AAUW, Labor Unions, and the Better Business Bureau. In his speeches he praised all of these groups and gratefully accepted their adulation and honors. His study walls were covered with plaques and certificates from civic organizations and only a bust of Strindberg—a bust that captured the penetrating and demonic quality of Strindberg’s gaze—acted as an antidote to this display of middle-class self-righteousness. On March 15th, 1900 Ibsen had a stroke, and another in the following year. These paralytic strokes were followed by amnesia and for six years he lay helplessly senile. He died on May 23rd, 1906, at the age of seventy-eight.

The clue to the meaning of all Ibsen’s plays lies in this strange biography. Ibsen’s plays are a continuous act of expiation. Certainly, it is significant that bankruptcy and the resultant rejection by society appears in four of his plays; the desire to restore the family honor is central to two more; and there are illegitimate children in eight plays. Thematically, the plays are, almost without exception, patterned in a similar way: a hidden moral guilt and the fear of impending retribution. Structurally, the plays are epilogues of retribution. All of the plays after *Peer Gynt*, begin on a happy note late in the action. In

each case the central figure has a secret guilt which is soon discovered. As the play progresses, by series of expository scenes (scenes which delve into the past and are then related to the present condition of the characters), a sense of the foreboding doom of impending retribution envelops the action and each of the plays ends with justice, in the form of moral fate having its way. And finally, beginning with *Ghosts*, Ibsen introduces the theme of expiation. In every play following *Ghosts*, at least one of the central characters feels the need to exorcise his guilt, doubt, or fear by some form of renunciation.

Perhaps more important is the fact, that as Ibsen’s art developed these themes and attitudes changed in tone and form. The guilt, which had been specific in the early days—Bernick’s lie, Nora’s forgery, Mrs. Alving’s return—becomes more and more abstract, nebulous, and ominous as best evidenced in the nameless guilt of Solness and Rosmer. The fear, which in the early plays had been the fear of discovery, becomes a gnawing anxiety. Self-realization, which in *Brand* is presented in terms of the Kierkegaardian imperative of either/or is realized in the later plays in an ambiguous kind of self-destruction. And finally, significant action on the part of the characters has tendencies towards becoming a frozen stasis of meaningless activity and contemplation.

Ibsen’s life and his work are closely interwoven. Ibsen, rejected from society as a young man, had good reason to see the blindness of bourgeois respectability in his exile. And yet his sharp criticism of society is always balanced by his desire to be a part of that very society he saw and knew to be false. Over and over again in his plays and letters he condemns the hypocrisy, the intellectual shallowness, and the grim bleakness of

his Scandinavian homeland. But he returned to it in pomp and circumstance. Herein lies the crux to an understanding of Ibsen's art in general and *Ghosts* in particular. More and more we see that both in Ibsen the man and in the characters of his plays the basic struggle is within.

Ibsen lived in a time of revolution; he was a maker of part of that revolution; and he knew full well that all the things he said about bourgeois society were true. But despite his rational understanding, his intellectual comprehension of this fact, he was driven by deeper forces within him not only to justify himself to that false society, but to become a part of it. It is this struggle within himself between his rational powers and the Trolls of the Boyg that best explains his life and work. Ibsen's plays are his attempts to quell the guilt he felt for desiring values which he knew to be false. In support of this point, I call attention to two important bits of evidence: the first is a letter written by Ibsen to Peter Hanson in 1870:

"While writing *Brand*, I had on my desk a glass with a scorpion in it. From time to time the little animal was ill. Then I used to give it a piece of soft fruit, upon which it fell furiously and emptied its poison into it—after which it was well again. Does not something similar happen to us poets? The laws of nature regulate the spiritual world also. . . ."

The second is a short poem entitled "Fear of Light" (presently, I shall relate the significance of that title to *Ghosts*):

What is life? a fighting
In heart and brain with Trolls.
Poetry? that means writing
Doomsday-accounts of our souls.

I contend that Ibsen's plays were attempts—attempts that were bound to fail, just as Mrs. Alving's attempts were

bound to fail—to relieve Ibsen of his guilt and at the same time were judgments of his failure to overcome the Trolls (which first appear as Gerd in *Brand*), those irrational forces and powers within man over which he has no control.

Keeping these facts in mind, let us now turn to *Ghosts*. One does not have to be a very perceptive student of the theatre to realize that the "ghosts" Ibsen is talking about are those ghosts of the past that haunt us in the present. In fact, Ibsen has often been criticized for using his ghost symbolism with such obviousness, such lack of subtlety, and so repetitiously. Certainly, when reading the play we feel this criticism is justified. Oswald's looking like Captain Alving; his interest in sex and liquor; his feelings toward Regina; his syphilitic inheritance; Paster Mander's influence over Mrs. Alving, the orphanage, and the fire are only a few of the "ghosts" that Ibsen uses as analogues to his theme. Alrik Gustafson puts it this way:

"Symbols are, of course, a commonplace in Ibsen's dramas, but in his early plays before *The Wild Duck* he uses symbolistic devices somewhat too obviously, almost exclusively to clarify his themes. Any college sophomore can tell you after a single reading of *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, or *Ghosts* what the symbols expressed in these titles mean. The symbols convey *ideas*—and little else. They have few emotional overtones, are invested with little of the impressive mystery of life, the tragic poetry of existence. They tend to leave us in consequence cold, uncommitted, like after a debate whose heavy-handed dialectic has ignored the very pulse-beat of a life form which it is supposed to have championed."²

But *Ghosts* is concerned with more than the external manifestations of an evil heritage. In those oft-quoted lines that serve as a rationale for the play,

² Alrik Gustafson, "Some Notes on Theme, Character, and Symbol in *Rosmersholm*," *The Carleton Drama Review*, Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 9-10.

Mrs. Alving says:

"I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind. They are not actually alive in us; but there they are dormant, all the same, and we can never be rid of them. . . . There must be ghosts all over the world. . . . And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us . . . and I am here, fighting with ghosts both without and within me."

The ghosts of plot and symbol are the manifestations of Mrs. Alving's struggle with the ghosts within. It is this internal conflict, a conflict similar to Ibsen's personal struggle, that is the play's central action.

To define this action more explicitly, I would say that Ibsen is imitating an action in which a woman of ability and stature finds her ideals and her intellectual attitudes and beliefs in conflict with an inherited emotional life determined by the habitual responses of respectability and convention. As the play's form evolves it becomes apparent that the values Mrs. Alving affirms in intellectual terms are doomed to defeat because she has no control over her emotional inheritance—an inheritance of ghosts which exists, but which cannot be confined to or controlled by any schematization of the intelligence.

Every significant choice that Mrs. Alving has ever made and the resultant action of such a decision is determined by these ghosts of the past rather than by intellectual deliberation. To mention but a few instances: Her marriage to Captain Alving in conformity to the wishes of her mother and aunts; her return to her husband; her reaction to the Oswald-Regina relationship; her acceptance of Manders after she has seen and commented upon the hypocrisy of the scene with Engstrand; her failure

to tell Oswald the "straight" truth about his father; the horror of her reaction when Oswald is indifferent to his father's life; and finally, the question mark with which the play ends. All of these scenes are evidence that Mrs. Alving's ideals of freedom and her rhetorical flights into intellectual honesty are of no use to her when it comes to action. Perhaps, I can make my point more clear by briefly developing two of the above mentioned episodes.

As the second act opens, Mrs. Alving comes to a quick decision about Oswald's relationship with Regina: "Out of the house she shall go—and at once. That part of it is clear as daylight." I will return to the relationship of light to enlightenment, but for the moment we see that Mrs. Alving's decision is based upon an emotional response determined by her inheritance of respectability. Then, Mrs. Alving and the pastor begin to talk; and Mrs. Alving always talks a good game. After better than four pages of dialogue, Mrs. Alving is finally able to exclaim: "If I were not such a miserable coward, I would say to him: 'Marry her, or make any arrangement you like with her—only let there be no deceit in the matter.'" The pastor is properly shocked when Mrs. Alving gives him the "face the facts of life" routine; but her liberation, which is only verbal, is short lived! Manders asks how "you, a mother, can be willing to allow your . . ." This is Mrs. Alving's reply: "But I am not willing to allow it. I would not allow it for anything in the world; that is just what I was saying."

Or to take another situation. In Act I, Mrs. Alving tells Manders what her husband was really like: "The truth is this, that my husband died just as great a profligate as he had been all his life." In Act II, she is telling Manders of all

the things she *ought* to have done and she says: "If I had been the woman I ought, I would have taken Oswald into my confidence and said to him: 'Listen, my son, your father was a dissolute man.'" In the third act circumstances have forced Mrs. Alving to tell Oswald the truth about his father: "Your poor father never found any outlet for the overmastering joy of life that was in him. And I brought no holiday spirit into his house, either; I am afraid I made your poor father's home unbearable to him, Oswald."

When we come to see the big scenes in this way, we then recall the numerous small events that create the network of the action and give the play its texture. Such things come to mind as Mrs. Alving's need of books to make her feel secure in her stand, and the neat little bit in the first act where Mrs. Alving reprimands Oswald for smoking in the parlor, which Ibsen then underscores by making it an issue in the second act.

Ibsen's plays are filled with such incidents; those little events that tell so much. I am of the persuasion that Ibsen is not very good at making big events happen; as appealing as they may be to a director, they tend to be theatrically inflated; they are melodramatic in the sense that the action of the plot is in itself larger than the characters or the situation in the play which create such events. Ibsen is the master of creating the small shocking event, or as Mary McCarthy puts it: "the psychopathology of everyday life." Nora's pushing off the sewing on the widow Christine; Hjalmer letting Hedwig do the retouching with her half-blind eyes as he goes off hunting in the attic; his cutting of his father at Werle's party and the moment when Hedda intentionally mistakes Aunt Julia's new hat for the servant's, are all examples of this talent. These are the

things we know we are capable of! This is the success (and the limitation) of the naturalistic convention "which implies a norm of behavior on the part of its guilty citizens within their box-like living rooms."

But to return to the main business at hand: the conflict for Mrs. Alving, then, is not how to act. She just acts; there is no decision, nor can there be, for she has no rational control over her actions. Herein lies the conflict. Just because Mrs. Alving has no control over her actions, does not mean she escapes the feelings of guilt for what she does and her inability to do otherwise. Her continual rhetoricizing about emancipation and her many acts of renunciation are attempts to satisfy these feelings of guilt. For example, and I am indebted to Wiegand here,³ the explicit reasons she gives for building the orphanage do not account sufficiently for her use of the expression, "the power of an uneasy conscience." There is a big difference between fear that an ugly secret will become known and an evil conscience. Mrs. Alving's sense of guilt is the result of an intellectual emancipation from the habits of a lifetime; it is an emancipation from those values which she emotionally still accepts. It is precisely for this reason that her attempts at expiation are never satisfactory—they are not central to and part of her guilt.

To put it another way, Mrs. Alving's image of herself as liberated from outworn ideas is at odds with what in fact she is, a middle-aged woman bound by the chains of respectability and convention. It is for this reason, in a way similar to Sartre's characters in the hell of *No Exit*, that she suffers. She is aware of the disparity between image and fact: "I

³ Hermann Weigand, *The Modern Ibsen*, New York, 1925, p. 82.

ought" is a choric refrain that runs through her conversation; and she constantly looks for ways to affirm her image and assuage her guilt. And yet, the very fact that she accepts the image of herself as free, when experience has proven otherwise time and time again, explains why she is defeated in every attempt at atonement.

The sun finally rises. Ibsen has been preparing for this from the beginning. As the past is gradually revealed in the play and as the issues of the action come into sharper focus, "light" becomes more and more important in Ibsen's design. The play opens in the gloom of evening and rain; Mrs. Alving, at least according to Ibsen's stage directions, plays most of her important revelation scenes at the window, the source of light; as Mrs. Alving decides to quell Oswald's "gnawing doubts," she calls for a light; Oswald's big speech about the "joy and openness of life" uses the sun as its central metaphor; the light that reveals—tells the truth—how impossible it is for Mrs. Alving to atone for her guilt has its source in the flames of the burning orphanage; and, finally, it is the sun, the source of all light, that reveals the meaning of the play's completed action. Mr. Alving is still trapped within the net of her own inheritance. She, as she has already told us and as Ibsen tells us in his poem, "Fear of Light," is afraid to face the real truth about herself. This fear is something over which she has no control.

If we can empathize with Mrs. Alving, and I think we can, we have been lead to feel, as she believes, that as the light comes out of darkness, as the pressures of reality impinge upon her with unrelenting force, she will be capable of an act of freedom. We want to believe that she will affirm the image that she has of

herself as a liberated human being by an action that is expressive of that freedom, even if that action is the murder of her own son. We want to feel that the light and heat of the sun will have the power to cauterize the ghosts of her soul. But if we have been attentive to the developing action, if we but recall what events followed the "lesser lights;" then we realize that there can be no resolution. Mrs. Alving can give only one answer, "No!"

Mrs. Alving, like Oswald, who is the most important visible symbol of the ghosts, is a victim of something over which she has no control. We are reminded of Oswald's famous speech in the second act: "My whole life incurably ruined—just because of my own imprudence. . . . Oh! if only I could live my life over again—if only I could undo what I have done! If only it had been something I had inherited—something I could not help." We have known all along that Oswald is a victim, so Ibsen is telling us for a purpose. The reason, as a study of his other plays will attest, is that for Ibsen the external is always the mirrored reflection of what's within. Mrs. Alving is also a victim! Like Oswald, she is doomed just by being born. And since she never comes to understand herself; since she never realizes and accepts the disparity of her image of herself and the truth about herself, she can never—in a way that Oedipus, a similar kind of victim, can—resolve the conflict.

For Mrs. Alving the sun has risen and just as she cannot give Oswald the sun, so the light of the sun has not been able to enlighten her. This, I believe is the conflict in the play and the developed meanings of this conflict form the play's central action.

II

But is this action tragic? How, if at all, is *Ghosts* a tragedy? It seems to me that there are two possible answers to these questions and the answer will depend largely on which interpretation of the play one accepts. The prevalent interpretation is the one which claims that this is a play of social protest and reform. The adherents of such a view can gather together a great deal of evidence in support of their case: all of Ibsen's plays from *League of Youth* to *The Wild Duck*; passages from the play themselves, like Oswald's speech on the freedom of Europe; numerous of Ibsen's public speeches, and several of his letters. With this interpretation the play is saying that if man would only see how hypocritical and outmoded his values were then the disasters that occur in the play need never have taken place. This view has as its fundamental premise that social evils can be cured and that when they are man is capable of living with a "joy of life." But if this is true, if all you have to do is be honest with yourself—and such a view assumes this is possible—and if men would see the falseness of social conventions and change them, then it seems to me the eternal elements of tragedy are dissolved in the possibility of social reform. Tragedy is concerned with showing those destructive conflicts within man that exist because man is a man no matter what age he may happen to be a part of, and no matter what kind of a society he may live in. John Gassner puts it this way:

"Tragedy requires an awareness of "life's impossibilities," of limitations imposed upon man by the nature of things and by the nature of man, which cannot be poetically dissolved by sentiment or "reformed" out of existence."⁴

⁴ John Gassner, *The Theatre In Our Times*, New York, 1954, p. 67.

In some ways, I think Ibsen did intend *Ghosts* to be a play of social reform, but if this is the case, he created more than he planned. In all of his early plays, the plays we think of as the social reform plays, Ibsen is much like Mrs. Alving; he believed intellectually in freedom and wrote and talked a good deal about it, but is this the whole story? The disassociation of the ideals men live by and the facts of their living is a central theme in Ibsen's work, but it is interesting to note that even in *Ghosts* the possibility of the "happy illusion" is presented. It is a hint that Ibsen is coming to feel that the conflict between truth and ideals can never be reconciled. By the time of *Rosmersholm*, even the free souls are tainted, the reformers are corrupt, and the man trying to redeem himself is shown to be capable only of realizing that he cannot be redeemed. Rosmer's death is an act of expiation, but suicide is decided upon only after Rosmer discovers the impossibility of redemption within society by means of freer and more honest views and relations.

Thus, while it is true that Ibsen, both in his public pronouncements and in his plays prior to *Ghosts*, gives us evidence that he believes optimistically in the possibility of social reform; that he believes that finally the sun will rise and continue to shine if man works long and diligently at facing the truth, I wonder if Ibsen is in fact whistling as he walks in the night through a graveyard. I wonder if Ibsen, even as early as *Ghosts*, isn't being a Mrs. Alving. Certainly this passage from a letter written during the composition of *Ghosts* permits us to wonder:

"The work of writing this play has been to me like a bath which I have felt to leave cleaner, healthier, and freer. Who is the man among us who has not now and then felt and acknowl-

edged within himself a contradiction between word and action, between will and task, between life and teaching on the whole? Or who is there among us who has not selfishly been sufficient unto himself, and half unconsciously, half in good faith, has extenuated this conduct both to others and to himself?"

The alternative interpretation of *Ghosts* is the one which I have outlined in this essay. Mrs. Alving is a victim in a conflict over which she has no control. What are the implications of such a view to tragedy?

In 1869 Ibsen wrote a significant letter to the critic George Brandes. In this letter he says:

"There is without doubt a great chasm opened between yesterday and today. We must continually fight a war to the knife between these epochs."

What Ibsen meant in this letter was that to live in the modern world is to be, in many important ways, different from anyone who ever lived before. Now this doesn't mean that man has changed; human nature is still the same, but Ibsen felt that the modern way of looking at man had changed in a way that was significantly new.

Joseph Wood Krutch pursues this problem in his recent book, "*Modernism*" in the *Modern Drama*. Krutch develops his argument by pointing out that since Greek times the Aristotelian dictum that "man is a reasoning animal" had been pretty universally accepted. This view did not deny man's irrationality, but it did assert that reason is the most significant human characteristic. Man is not viewed as pre-eminently a creature of instincts, passions, habits, or conditioned reflexes; rather, man is a creature who differs from the other animals precisely in the fact that rationality is his dominant mode.

The modern view assumes the opposite premise. In this view men are not sane or insane. Psychology has dissolved

such sharp distinctions; we know that normal people aren't as rational as they seem and that abnormal people don't act in a random and unintelligible way. In short, the dramatist of our age has had to face the assumption that the rational is relatively unimportant; that the irrational is the dominant mode of life; and that the artist must realize, therefore, that the richest and most significant aspects of human experience are to be found in the hidden depths of the irrational. "Man tends to become less a creature of reason than the victim of obsessions, fixations, delusions, and perversions."⁵

It is this premise that all of the great dramatists at the end of the 19th century, beginning with Ibsen, had to face. How is one to live in an irrational world! How is one to give meaning to life in a world where you don't know the rules? How are human relationships to be meaningfully maintained when you can't be sure of your feelings and when your feelings can change without your knowing it? Ibsen's plays, beginning with *Ghosts*, dramatize man destroyed by trying to live rationally in such a world. But to accept irreconcilable conflict as the central fact of all life; to make dissonance rather than the harmony of reconciliation the condition of the universe is to accept as a premise a view of life which leads in drama, as in life, to a world in which men and women, heroes and heroines, become victims in a disordered world which they have not created and which they have no moral obligation to correct.

It is this process, which began in the drama when Ibsen came to see man as a victim of irrational powers, of the Trolls, over which he has no control, that leads to the sense of futility that so

⁵ J. W. Krutch, "*Modernism*" in *Modern Drama*, Ithaca, N. Y., 1953, p. 22.

completely dominates a great deal of modern drama. This is the kind of futility that is expressed in our text from Ecclesiastes (as it is in Hemingway's novel); but is this sense of futility generative of what we traditionally associate with tragedy?

The traditional forms of tragedy have been affirming in the sense that they celebrated man's ability to achieve wisdom through suffering. Such tragedy saw man as a victim, to be sure, but it also saw man as having those heroic qualities and potentialities which permitted him to endure his suffering and be significantly enlightened by them in such a way that victory was realized even in defeat.

The central conflict of *Ghosts* is not peculiar to the modern world. The disassociation of fact and value is a common theme in all tragedy. But there is a significant difference when this theme is used before Ibsen. Traditional tragedy celebrates the fact that, although most of us are incapable of it, the values men wish to live by can, if only for a moment, be realized through the actions of the tragic hero. It celebrates the fact that man's capacity for greatness is often expressed in the committing of an action

which is horrifying and ought not to happen and yet which must happen. In this way the possibility that man's actions and his values can be in harmony is realized. This is the affirmation of tragedy; this is the meaning of the sun that resolves so many traditional tragedies. In this kind of tragedy the hero goes through the "dark night of the soul" with all its pain, suffering, doubt, and despair; but man is viewed as one responsible for and capable of action, even if that action is a grasping for the sun. Because of this fundamental difference in view, in traditional tragedy the dark night passes away and the sun also rises on the rebirth and affirmation of a new day.

This sunrise of traditional tragedy, which celebrates the "joy and meaning of life," is not the sunrise of futility. It is not the sunrise which sheds its rays as an ironic and bitter joke on a demented boy asking his equally helpless mother: "Mother, give me the sun, The sun—the sun!"

Perhaps Mrs. Alving is more tragic than Oedipus, Hamlet, or Lear; but if she is, her tragedy must be evaluated by new canons of judgment; for she differs from her predecessors in kind and not degree.