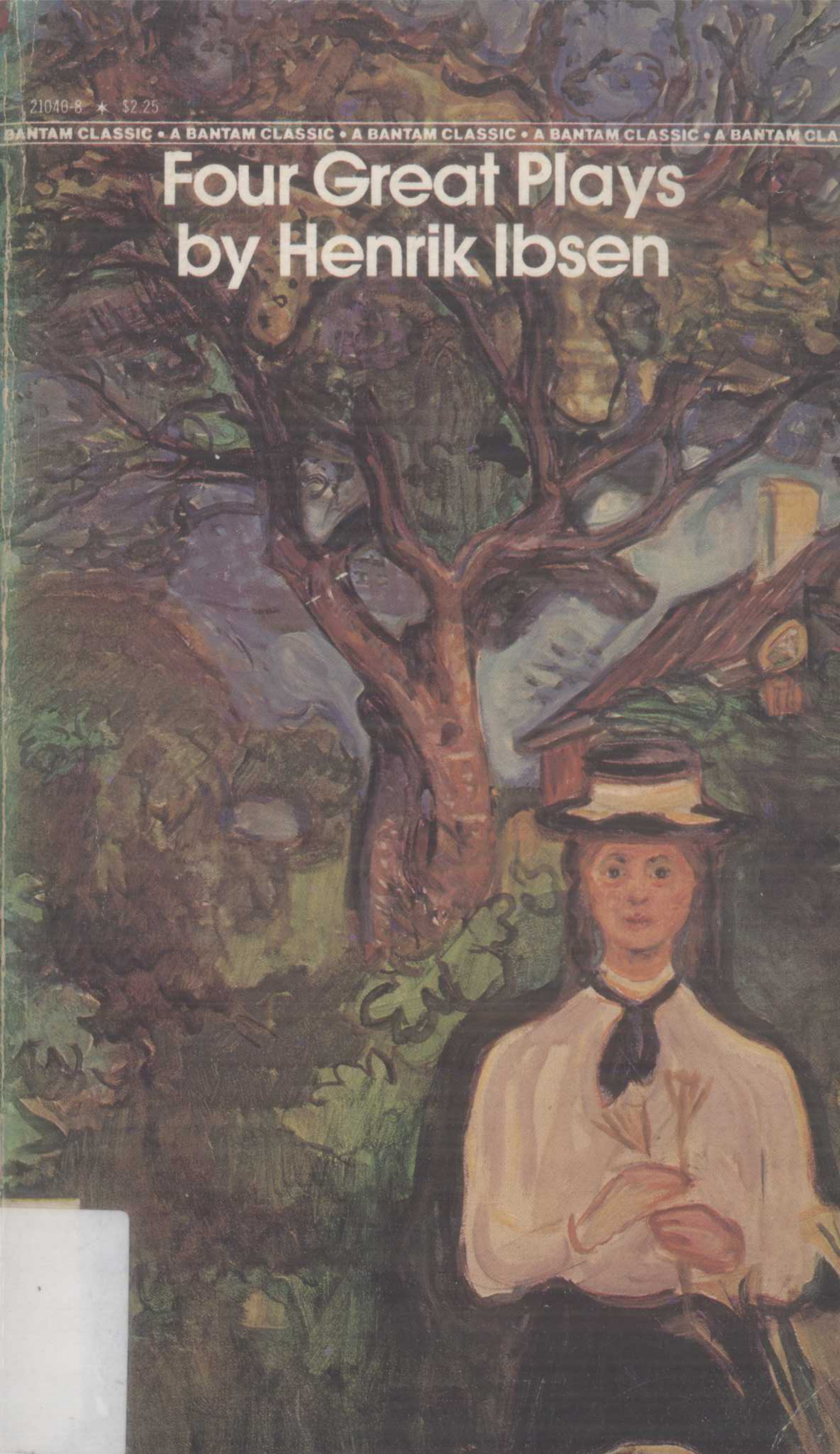


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# Four Great Plays by Henrik Ibsen





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# Four Great Plays by Henrik Ibsen

Translated by R. Farquharson Sharp

With an Introduction and Prefaces to each Play  
by John Gassner



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Henrik Johan Ibsen was the pioneer who opened new frontiers of modern drama and violated all the unwritten taboos of the nineteenth-century theater.

He was born in Skien, a small Norwegian timber port, in 1828, into a prosperous family which in a few years lost almost all of its resources. Ibsen's father, overwhelmed by the disaster, lived in a state of skulking despair, while his mother drove herself into the devotions of an impersonal pietism. These scenes of despondency from his childhood recur in Ibsen's dramas, his parents serving as models of human wreckage. At fifteen Ibsen left Skien and found work as a druggist's apprentice, and, soon after, began to write poems that ridiculed important local citizens. In 1848 *Catiline*, his first play, was published; *The Burial Mound*, 1850, was the first of his plays to be performed. Neither attracted much public attention.

In 1851 Ibsen was hired by the Norwegian Theater in Bergen as a director, writer, and producer. He disliked the work and left, but not before involving himself in over 145 productions. Returning to Oslo in 1857, he married in 1859 and spent the next few years in great financial difficulty. Having received little recognition as a playwright, he left Norway for Italy in 1864, beginning what became a twenty-seven year expatriation.

When his play *Brand* (1865) was published in Copenhagen in 1866, it was judged both a commercial and artistic success, and this, along with his next work *Peer Gynt* (1867), gave him some of the prominence he sought. With each succeeding play he moved from social satire into a more experimental realm, the "drama of ideas." *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) aroused much public outcry for their iconoclasm. In *An Enemy of the People* (1882) Ibsen made controversy the very core of the action. With *The Wild Duck* (1884) he was on the threshold of a new naturalistic style of playwriting for which Chekhov became celebrated many years later.

In spite of his lifelong rebelliousness and frequent clashes with public opinion, Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891. He died in Oslo in 1906.

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## Introduction

BY JOHN GASSNER

### *Henrik Ibsen: A Sceptic in a China-Shop*

Henrik Ibsen, who was born in Norway in 1828, has long held the unofficial title of "father of the modern drama," and for sufficiently good reasons. Historians have certainly discovered no earlier dramatist for whom they could advance rival claims. Great reputations, it is true, have to be paid for as well as merited, and Ibsen paid for his fame *twice*. He was granted only notoriety by conservative contemporaries, who accused him of immorality and subversion, and he began to be patronized by sophisticated individuals within a decade after his death in 1906 as a worthy but rather humdrum and old-fashioned playwright. It would seem that Ibsen was fated to be misunderstood in two centuries; he was too radical for the nineteenth and too conservative for the twentieth. Whether or not he is still somewhat misunderstood, however, his importance to the modern theatre has long been accepted. He impressed so many important contemporaries with the power of his writing that even conventional nineteenth-century playwrights began to pay him the compliment of imitation. And continuing to affect the course of the theatre after 1900, he won the allegiance of many of its leaders from Galsworthy to Arthur Miller.

The plays in this volume represent the middle and most influential period of Ibsen's career, which started in 1877 with his attack on pseudo-respectability *The Pillars of Society* and ended in 1884 with *The Wild Duck*. He was in his fifties then and had a long career in the theatre as a stage manager, director, and playwright behind him. He had suffered many deprivations and disappointments, but had also enjoyed some triumphs, especially with the publication of two plays in verse, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, in 1865 and 1867 respectively. He had also been at odds with the Norwegian middle-class for many years, preferred to live abroad, in Italy and Germany, and was already known as an intransigent social critic.

With *The Pillars of Society* and *The Wild Duck*, but especially with the three plays that came between them—*A Doll's House* in 1879, *Ghosts* in 1881, and *An Enemy of the People* in 1882—Ibsen established realism as the ruling principle of modern drama. Problems of the day had been aired on the stage for some decades before he began presenting them, but nobody before Ibsen had treated them without equivocation or without stressing secondary matters while ignoring primary ones. Ibsen's social dramas supplanted the contrived, often melodramatic, construction of earlier European problem plays with a dramatic technique that was at once natural and penetrative. "Drama of ideas" was largely Ibsen's creation because the idea was made flesh in his work and sympathy was, at the same time, secured against deterioration into sentimentality by an acutely critical mind.

Stupidity or cowardice often moved Ibsen to anger, yet it was, above all, his sceptical and sardonic spirit that made plays such as *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of the People* original, that really made them distinguishable from the ordinary thesis-drama or tract. No pretence or delusion was safe from his quizzical scrutiny, not even liberalism or reform itself, and no institution or cherished notion was exempt from his scorn in this "destructive" phase of his career. To overawed friends and irritated foes Ibsen was either a heroic image-breaker or an iconoclast gone berserk. In view of the fragility of the objects of his rampage, the bric-a-brac of conventional beliefs, it might have been more correct to describe him as a sceptic in a china-shop.

Still, his rebelliousness was no trivial matter in an age that cherished the bric-a-brac, and even his least weighty protests had far-reaching consequences. With the plays of his middle period, as well as with a few pieces written before and after, Ibsen enabled the stage to recover much of the prestige it had lost to the modern novel in the nineteenth century. After *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* it became increasingly difficult for a playwright to make an impression unless he directed his attention to the realities of modern life and brought to bear upon them at least some semblance of intelligence.

Today it seems incredible that *A Doll's House* should have created the furor it did. In exploding Victorian ideals of feminine dependency the play seemed revolutionary in 1879. When its heroine Nora left her home in search of self-development it seemed as if the sanctity of marriage had been flouted by a playwright treading the stage with cloven-feet. That Nora's marriage might be reestablished on sounder foundations than those she had repudiated, that Ibsen's aims



were essentially reconstructive rather than destructive, eluded Ibsen's critics not so much because his plea for feminine emancipation was new (others had made it before him), but because he was not content with pleading. He took the offensive instead, stripping masculine egotism to the bone and depriving a conventional "doll's house" type of marriage of all its romantic and sentimental frippery. And he climaxed the awakening of his heroine not with the expected reconciliations of domestic drama, but with Nora's closing the door on her husband, home, and marriage. An anarchist's pistol shot could not have reverberated more frighteningly in the Victorian world than the closing of that door.

In the plays of the middle period Ibsen's *manner* was mainly destructive. His methods of exposing a situation were those of a strategist calculated to disturb the playgoer and startle him into thought. Ibsen used the stratagem of starting innocently with a convincing introduction to commonplace life and then dealing it a shattering blow. The very prosiness of the writing (he had deliberately made prose his medium after having gained distinction as a poet) contributed to the efficacy of his tactics. The spectator was apt to be caught napping when respectability was invalidated by mounting disclosures of inconsistency, error, and evil in its fabric. For all his seriousness, moreover, Ibsen also employed humor as a means for unsettling a settled opinion or discrediting a public oracle. Ibsen never tired of treating the proponents of vested interest and convention with irony.

The classic example of Ibsen's method is *Ghosts*. Although the play is somber enough in substance to be regarded as a tragedy, it devastates Pastor Manders, the representative of conventional morality, with humor and irony. Ibsen shows him to be such a fool at times that one cannot even hate him; he is so gullible and so ignorant of life that we can only agree with Mrs. Alving in the play when she calls him a big baby. Yet the results of his conventionality are so dreadful as to make his moral thinking immoral. In adhering to his rigid code, Pastor Manders forced Mrs. Alving to return to an incurably unfaithful husband. The good man thinks he saved a home when he actually preserved a façade behind which her life was a mockery of marriage and a travesty of love. Appearances were preserved at the cost of happiness, and the ultimate reward of "virtue," of Mrs. Alving's return to her husband, is her son's collapse into feeble-mindedness as a result of inherited venereal disease. It was as if Ibsen the devilishly sharp ironist had inverted the axiom that the wages of sin are death in a dramatic statement to the effect that the wages of virtue were paresis and imbecility. Having been

condemned for letting Nora leave her husband in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen seemed to be saying "I'll give you a woman who did *not* leave her husband." It is no wonder that *Ghosts* raised an outcry against its author second to none in the history of the theatre, that public productions of the play were forbidden or long delayed, and that it became mandatory for advanced theatrical groups to stage the play early in their career.

It remains to be said that Ibsen made an innovation in dramatic technique that also served him well in his assault on conventional minds. It might be called the method of frontal attack, and it consisted of direct statements by characters involved in the action of the play. Direct statements were hardly new in the European theatre, but Ibsen used them in a new and singularly effective way. He developed them in the form of a dramatic discussion. Ibsen made controversy an important element in the drama, and incorporated it in the central situations. It was the nimble mind of Shaw that first detected the transformation of dramatic structure that accompanied Ibsen's transvaluation of values. In the little book *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, originally given as a lecture for the Fabian Society in 1890, Shaw pointed out that "Up to a certain point in the last act, *A Doll's House* is a play that might be turned into a very ordinary French drama," if a few lines were excised and a sentimental reconciliation were substituted for the conclusion. But "at just that point," Nora unexpectedly stopped reacting emotionally and sat down to discuss the meaning of her marriage with her husband. This discussion scene, which Ibsen had in mind from the beginning, carried the full charge of a climax in the play and was also the resolution of its action. Discussion, in brief, superseded the familiar unravelling of the plot or the "denouement" in the conventional type of "plotty" drama that had come to be known as "the well-made play." It was with the addition of this technical feature, which is vastly more important than the realism of detail that abounds even in meretricious movies, that the distinctly modern drama was born.

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen extended the element of discussion, introducing it early and allowing it to permeate the play. And in the comedy *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen made controversy the very core of the action once he pitted his idealistic hero Dr. Stockmann against an entire community determined to defend its vested interests. The conflict was by its very nature a debate between Stockmann and his opponents on the issue of conscience and integrity *versus* opportunism. Written with broad, slashing strokes of satire and supplied with a vigorous plot, *An Enemy of the People* was also an effective piece of



standard theatre. In this scornful work, in which some of the characterization is so subordinated as to verge on caricature, the controversy was no less an action than the action was a controversy.

*An Enemy of the People* apparently purged its irritated author of his resentments, for he reversed his aim completely in his next work. In *The Wild Duck*, he directed his fire against a would-be reformer. But it would have been an error to assume that Ibsen had renounced "discussion" in a work that actually discussed and demonstrated the fallacy of inflexible idealism. And it would have been equally wrong to assume that Ibsen had made his peace with convention simply because he discredited Gregers Werle, the neurotic truth-seeker of the play. Ibsen, in short, remained the same individualist, the same enemy of dogmatism and proponent of moral relativism, he had been in *Ghosts*.

Essentially, it was not his matter but his manner that had changed by 1884. But it was enough to reveal him in *The Wild Duck* as a compassionate observer of humanity as well as the sceptic now engaged in scattering the chinaware of idealism rather than the common porcelain of conservatism. Ibsen revealed the most attractive side of his personality in wishing to temper the keen wind of truth to those who could subsist only on benign illusion. And, above all, he brought to the foreground of his work his considerable understanding of people, his talent for character-creation. That talent had been sufficiently apparent in his portraits of Nora and Mrs. Alving and in the minor characterizations of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, as well as in the comic delineation of Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*. But "character-drama" had been necessarily overshadowed by argument in these plays. In *The Wild Duck*, instead, the characters drew attention to themselves as living persons, and they dictated Ibsen's argument with their lives. The accent naturally fell on psychological reality the moment Ibsen rejected moral absolutes in favor of the view that the "truth" is relative to the realities of the individual situation—that is, to the character and emotional needs of the person. The concentrated logic of development so effective in *Ghosts* had to give way to a more fluid type of dramatic movement than Ibsen had used in earlier realistic plays. With *The Wild Duck*, in 1884, Ibsen was on the threshold of the new naturalistic style of playwriting for which Chekhov became celebrated nearly a score of years later.

An important concomitant of the altered technique of *The Wild Duck* was the heightened poetic texture of the work. In this masterpiece of the realistic drama, Ibsen concluded his middle period with a characteristic departure from



humdrum journalism and flat problem-play dramaturgy. When Ibsen abandoned verse-drama in the 1870's it was clearly not his intention to deprive the theatre of all poetry. He remained an imaginative writer and a poet of the theatre, although an unobtrusive one in whose work poetic atmosphere blended with common reality, as it does in the last, "sunrise," scene of *Ghosts*. And Ibsen began to give new scope to his poetic imagination through symbolism, actually using it to sharpen, rather than to soften, his argument in *Ghosts*, where the burning of the orphanage erected by Mrs. Alving in memory of her husband symbolized the end of deception and the idea of "ghosts" served as a symbol for the dead beliefs that continue to haunt the living. Nor was an educated playgoer likely to miss the parallel between that play and a classic tragedy of Fate, the main difference being that for the modern realist Fate lay in the environment that tied Mrs. Alving to her dismal marriage as well as in the genes that gave her a syphilitic son. In *The Wild Duck* the symbolism of the bird in the Ekdal garret was especially well marked. (Ibsen was soon to move into his so-called Symbolist phase with such plays as *The Lady from the Sea* and *The Master Builder*.) The compulsive reformer Gregers, who suffers, we are told, from "an acute attack of integrity," talks about "marsh vapors" when he means family secrets. Aroused by the possible illegitimacy of little Hedvig, he says he would like to be "an amazingly clever dog" that "goes to the bottom after wild ducks when they dive and bite themselves fast in tangle and sea-weed, down among the ooze." And Hedvig herself may be likened to her strange pet, the captive wild duck with the broken wing: "Nobody knows her, and nobody knows where she came from either." But the most compelling poetry of *The Wild Duck* will be found not so much in the symbolism as in the movement of life itself in the play, in the mingled comedy and pathos and in the moods and day-dreaming of the characters.

All things considered, it becomes evident, then, that this small collection of plays represents various facets of a complex talent. We see Ibsen, in the four masterpieces of his middle period, as a realist who went beyond realism of detail to establish a realism of character analysis and social criticism. We encounter in the plays an early master of disputation (Shaw was his great successor) who, nevertheless, did not stint on dramatic action and character drawing. We discover a severely honest playwright who was relentless in exposing error and falsehood, but who could dissolve severity with humor and substitute irony for denunciation without losing his quarry. Ibsen's talent had a comic as well as tragic bent,—

a fact not often enough stressed by his critics. And he was characteristically modern in blending elements of comedy and tragedy in such plays as *A Doll's House* and *The Wild Duck* to form an intermediate type of play serious in action but uninflated with the grandeur or grandiloquence of past ages. (The French term *drame* is perhaps the most suitable for this largely modern type of play.) Ibsen was, besides, both prosaic and poetic, both specific and universal, just as he was clear in argument yet complex, even enigmatic, in his dealings with human nature. And he made no rigid commitment to a single philosophy or even to a single dramatic style even in the closely related work of his middle period. In these and other respects, he was plainly independent and followed his own course as an observer and judge of reality. He made his character Dr. Stockmann declare that "the strong stand alone." Whether or not this is always true, there can be no doubt that Ibsen was "strong" and that he stood alone.

Ibsen continued to compose realistic and symbolic plays until 1899 when he published his last work, the poetic drama *When We Dead Awaken*. Although he lived on until the spring of 1906, he produced nothing after 1899; by chronology he belonged entirely to the nineteenth century. Several of the late plays—the somber tragedy *Rosmersholm* (1886), the incisive character-portrait *Hedda Gabler* (1892), and two bitter studies of spiritual failure, *The Master Builder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896)—became justly celebrated. After *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen's work was largely *reprise*, and even before his creative fires were completely banked he had begun to share his domination of the modern stage with younger men such as Strindberg in Sweden, Maeterlinck in France, Shaw in England, and Chekhov in Russia. As long as he was able to write, however, Ibsen remained a formidable figure in literature and the theatre, a man for whom the creative life was a passionate inquiry into truth and falsehood, right and wrong. It is entirely fitting that as he lay dying his last statement should have been "*On the contrary.*"

## A Doll's House

*A Doll's House* was not the first of Ibsen's plays to make enemies for him; but it was the first to spread his reputation as a subversive playwright abroad, and arouse enmity toward him in foreign lands. Ibsen's subject was no longer local politics, as in the earlier *Love's Comedy*, but the miseducation and subjugation of the European middle-class woman. It is difficult to overestimate the significance, and, indeed, the novelty of such a theme for Victorian readers and audiences.

Although *A Doll's House* no longer arouses such burning topical interest, it remains a vital drama of character. Ibsen's strong-willed heroine, Nora, is no mere case history in a suffragette bill of particulars. Far from being a typical victim of male domination, Nora is master of the domestic world she calls her doll's house. She has the initiative to nurse her husband through a long illness, the courage to forge his name to a promissory note in order to get the money for his convalescence, and she is even able, in the face of enormous difficulties, to meet the payments on her loan. Only when a disgruntled employee of her husband's bank tries to blackmail Nora's husband into restoring him to the job from which he has been fired is Nora's deception revealed.

The play's turning point is based far less on Nora's supposed innocence of the realities of the world than on her husband's understandable fear of scandal in their provincial bourgeois world. Because her notion that marriage could protect her from all eventualities is shattered, and because she had romantically expected heroic sacrifices from him, Nora resolves to find some basis for her marriage other than bourgeois convention and girlish romanticism: she decides to leave her "doll's house" to seek independence in the "outside world." Although her example might be cited as an object lesson by feminists, Ibsen took great pains to make her disenchantment and climactic decision the result of her unique personal character and experience.

At the very end of the play Ibsen is forced to push his argument very hard to convince us that Nora really believes she can leave her young children behind when she deserts her husband. But precisely this drastic conclusion, no matter how it stretches credibility, has secured polemical importance for the play. As George Bernard Shaw concluded in *The*



*Quintessence of Ibsenism*, the most original part of the play was the discussion Nora initiated once the threat of prosecution for forgery was completely removed by the blackmailer's repentance. In a conventional "well-made" drama, Torvald's eagerness to forget the entire unpleasant crisis would have been followed by a quick reconciliation and an unclouded dénouement. In rejecting such a conventional climax, Ibsen was transcending Scribe and the nineteenth-century commercial theatre. At the same time, he was trying to ground his play in the psychological realities of human character, in the tradition of such great masters of nineteenth-century realism as Balzac, Flaubert and Turgenev, rather than in mere theatrical contrivance. Finally, Ibsen wanted to advance the cause of "the drama of ideas," which he had already begun to promote in such early, more romantic, plays as *Brand*, *Peer Gynt* and *Emperor and Galilean*, and to root it firmly in the everyday social and domestic middle-class world of Europe. That Ibsen himself seems to have been uncertain about the validity of his unconventional climax was revealed when he permitted a German production of *A Doll's House* to revise the ending and to show Nora remaining with her husband.

*A Doll's House* was completed and published late in 1879. It was so successful that it had to be reprinted twice within three months of publication. Translations followed in German, Finnish, English, Polish, Russian and Italian. The play was successfully presented in Copenhagen in the same year of publication, and then in Stockholm and Christiania (Oslo). In March of the same year the play had its German premiere in Munich. The first public production in England was entitled *Breaking a Butterfly*, and was presented in London in March 1884. According to Ibsen's early advocate and translator, William Archer, this severely mangled adaptation presented the husband as "an ideal hero, instead of the sensual, self-righteous weakling of Ibsen." The first acceptable British production, which starred Janet Achurch, came much later, in June 1889. It was repeated by the same actress in 1892. The first American production was presented at Milwaukee in 1882 in an adaptation entitled *The Child Wife*. Not until 1889 did Americans see an unadulterated version of the play. Ultimately, with the exception of *Ghosts*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* became the most frequently performed of his plays in England and the United States.

## DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Torvald Helmer.

Nora, his wife.

Doctor Rank.

Mrs. Linde.

Nils Krogstad.

Helmer's three young children.

Anne, their nurse.

A Housemaid.

A Porter.

*(The action takes place in Helmer's house.)*

## ACT I

(SCENE.—A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right leads to the entrance-hall, another to the left leads to Helmer's study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a window. Near the window are a round table, arm-chairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small book-case with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter.)

A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open. Enter NORA, humming a tune and in high spirits. She is in out-door dress and carries a number of parcels; these she lays on the table to the right. She leaves the outer door open after her, and through it is seen a PORTER who is carrying a Christmas Tree and a basket, which he gives to the MAID who has opened the door.)

NORA. Hide the Christmas Tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it till this evening, when it is dressed. (To the PORTER, taking out her purse.) How much?

PORTER. Sixpence.

NORA. There is a shilling. No, keep the change. (The PORTER thanks her, and goes out. NORA shuts the door. She is laughing to herself, as she takes off her hat and coat. She takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket and eats one or two; then goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens.) Yes, he is in. (Still humming, she goes to the table on the right.)

HELMER (calls out from his room). Is that my little lark twittering out there?