

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

Henrik Ibsen

Overview

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright—he wrote in Danish, the culture language of Norway at the time—who spent most of his adult life living in Germany and Italy. He is widely considered the modern world's finest social dramatist, after Shakespeare; his courageous look at the social world of his time, in the 'new Europe,' woke consciences, and continues to do so, having won him, in his time, the title of the 'Founder of Modernism.' His ground breaking plays—'A Doll's House,' 'Peer Gynt,' 'Hedda Gabler,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'An Enemy of the People,' 'The Master-BUILDER,' 'Pillars of Society'—a dozen in all—exercised an intense influence on European cultural consciousness, and, though dealing in social and familial 'scandals' which might seem dated today, continue to raise global theatrical consciousness. 'An Enemy of the People' concerns the conflict of the honest and unbending individual with the self-interested group will of society.

Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), like many of his plays, was written against the current of the culture around him. Later 19th century middle class existence, in Scandinavia as well as in Victorian Britain, was morally straightlaced, opprobrious, and stiff, and Ibsen was driven to speak out for freer lifestyles, as well as simply for open minds. *Ghosts*, accordingly, addresses various issues—adultery, abortion, venereal disease—which were frequently out of bounds for discussion, and whose victims became the marginalized of their society. (Both *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) ploughed through socially critical issues—in both cases issues of the liberation of women.) In *An Enemy of the People* (1882), Ibsen tackles, a bit ironically, the very issue of the staunchly independent, and totally honest, social critic; the H. L. Menckens of the time.

Story

An Enemy of the People opens onto an historical moment when an ambitious small town, on the southern coast of Norway, has installed some therapeutic public Baths, for which they have high hopes, and expect a return in tourists and tourist dollars. The first sign of a problem arises when Dr. Stockman, who has promoted the Baths and the town, realizes that the waters of the Baths are teeming with bacteria, which could easily spread disease among potential swimmers.

From the start, several of the town's leading luminaries—the editor of the paper, the head of the Householders' Association—support the Doctor in his decision to publicize the dangers of the Baths, and protect the public against disease. However, the Mayor of the town, who is Doctor Stockman's brother, is opposed to the Doctor's desire to publicize the bacterial danger; too much, he insists, has been invested in the Baths' project, as it is; to make the needed modifications, for purifying the waters, will cost too much for the town, and furthermore make a fool out of the Mayor himself. Before long the Mayor has turned the town's opinion against his brother, and 'rescued' the town's Bath project.

Infuriated by the behavior of his brother, Dr. Stockman convenes a town meeting, in which he can bring the truth about the Baths to light. At the last minute, though, the Mayor contrives to keep Dr. Stockman from reading his report. Dr. Stockman assembles all his powers to spread the news of his new discovery, that the voice of his town lies entirely in its complacent power structure, and that the ordinary citizen is helpless and ignorant. Unfortunately, though, the Doctor's impassioned assault on the entrenched majority only leads his fellow citizens further to turn against him.

The townspeople take revenge against Dr. Stockman, smashing his windows with rocks. He loses his job, and finally loses his house. Ultimately, he receives a visit from several fellow townspeople, who try to convince him to retract his earlier criticisms of the Baths project. These efforts only reinforce the Doctor in

his own opinions, his unwavering fidelity to 'the truth,' and his refusal to put personal interest before respect for the general public—in this case the people who would be sickened by exposure to the bacteria in the Baths. Nor does Stockman retire from activism. He decides to start a school, which will be a step toward dispelling ignorance, and he becomes more satisfied with his own company, and with time to be alone. If there is a happy man in his play, in the end it is Dr. Stockman.

Themes

Deception. Dr. Stockman's brother, the Mayor, is determined to hide the truth about the dangers of the Baths, and uninterested in the wellbeing of the townspeople. He deceives those people into distrusting his brother.

Honesty. Dr. Stockman refuses to lie to the townspeople about the dangers posed by the bacteria in the Baths. His brother urges him to suppress the truth, but Doctor Stockman refuses.

Responsibility. Dr. Stockman feels responsibility for the future users of the town Baths, and refuses to suppress the truth about the dangers of the bacteria. He is deeply conscious of his responsibility to the wider world.

Characters

Dr. Stockman Dr. Stockman is an incorruptibly honest scientist, who feels a deep responsibility to tell the truth. In the end, perhaps, we feel that Dr Stockman is something—a wee bit, that's all—of a caricature of the scientist of integrity. He lacks, for instance, any sense of the irony inherent to the truth, that the truth does not always set us free.

The Mayor. The mayor is a deceptive and self-interested politician, who puts his (and his group's) own advantage before the welfare of other people. Unlike his brother, he is totally true to life, no irony.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Dr. Stockmann (open)

Character Dr. Thomas Stockmann is Medical Officer of the Municipal Baths in 'a coast town in southern Norway.' He is a family man in midlife, a staunch defender of the scientific truth, and a boisterously honest man, who will not allow the truth to be hidden. This trait of mind brings him into sharp conflict, as it turns out, with his brother, who is the Mayor of the town where they live, as well as being the Chief Constable directing the town's Baths' project. As the prosperity of the town seems to be about to depend on a flow of medical tourists, eager to take the healing waters which are now being promoted in the local baths, it is essential to generate good propaganda around the value of this cure. Unfortunately for the town, Dr. Thomas Stockmann discovers, in these waters, a dangerous parasite which renders them dangerous to health. He refuses to keep this information from the public! He is destroying prosperity, for truth. That is his character, and that the nucleus and problem of the play.

Parallels The contention that honesty is a value at any price is well known in world culture. The great religions prioritize honesty, as a step toward keeping the soul clean. (One can think of the case of Christian sects like Jehovah's Witnesses, or Quakers, for whom it is of highest importance to tell the truth, and especially to 'speak truth to power.')

On the other hand, as with Dr. Stockman's brother, there are many for whom expediency takes priority over truth. One of those was Homer's Odysseus, for whom artful deception, as he learned it from his mentor, Athena, was useful and 'no problem, man.'

Illustrative moments

Jubilant The default position in life, for Dr. Stockmann, is jubilant. He loves his family, his wife and daughter especially, and he loves humanity, for which he has only good wishes; forever saluting the younger generation as our hope and salvation. He constantly presses this optimism on his rather grumpy brother, the town mayor, and is usually rebuffed. 'I think it is such an extraordinary piece of good fortune,' he tells his brother, 'to be in the middle of all this growing, germinating life.' His reference is to his new appointment, from a provincial backwater, to the town where his brother is mayor; but the attitude is

authentic Stockmann, happy and full of life.

Generous Dr. Stockmann is by nature in conflict with his brother the mayor, who is a politician concerned with the town's commercial—and his own careerist—success. The doctor feels that the good of the people, rather than the commercial success of the people, is the highest value, and he forever throws this judgment in his brother's face. The doctor says to his wife: 'Peter is so confoundedly afraid of anyone's doing service to the town except himself.' He charges his brother even with doing good for the sake of personal advantage. Note: we are aware that there is an excess in the doctor's ebullient man-of-science joviality, and that it is at best on the path to complexity and conflict.

Truthful A headlong collision is inevitable between the two brothers, for the doctor will not yield, in his determination to declare the medical truth—publically, and in the town newspaper—while his brother insists on hiding the truth so the town will prosper. Doctor Stockmann plows headlong into his brother: 'Just think—water that is poisonous, whether you drink it or bathe in it! And this we offer to the poor sick folk who come to us trustfully, and pay us at an exorbitant rate to be made well again.' When his brother replies, with a complex temporizing compromise, the doctor repeats his accusation even more uncompromisingly.

Angry As the play unfolds, Dr. Stockmann must consider the consequences of his uncompromising honesty. The town elders, led by his brother, are bringing their power against the doctor, to make him shut up or face virtual banishment. (Attacks on his property have already begun.) Ultimately the doctor has had enough, and blows up: 'I ought to have flown out at him long ago!—shown my teeth—bitten! To have him call me an enemy to our community. Me! I shall not take that lying down, upon my soul!' The next step, in the pressure against the doctor, is the discovery that, in virtual community exile, he will barely be able to feed his family.

Discussion Questions

Where are Ibsen's sympathies in this play? Does he simply respect Dr. Stockmann's honesty, or does he think the man is too uncompromising?

What is the role of the doctor's daughter, Petra, in bringing our sympathies to her father's side?

How does Ibsen evaluate the argument—strongly presented in the play—that the little guy will prosper if the town prospers, and that commercial success is thus more important than the truth?