

Heredity a Revisited Theme in Henrik Ibsen's 'A Doll House' & 'Ghosts'

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Abstract- The aim of this paper is mainly focused through the quotation 'sins of the father are visited upon the son' the researchers used the critical analytical method to highlight the theme of heredity in Ibsen selected plays. The analysis of the theme showed that the heredity is not only portrayed in the plays but it has traces from his personal life. The fear of becoming like his father very much influences the theme of heredity in the plays.

The paper also attempts to link the inheritance theme to the Ibsen's life. The researchers focused on the Naturalism movement as ground for the reading of the influence it had on the author and its clear significance into the following events of the plays. Light is shed upon the saying 'sins of the father's' for its clear relation to Oswald state.

Keywords- Heredity; Ibsen; Naturalism; Sins of the father's

1. INTRODUCTION

The infatuation with this 'saying' was how this paper came to be conceptualized. The search on the theme's ramification led to Ibsen's 'Ghosts'. Through reading it other discoveries were made. The first one was that the play itself is a second part of a sequence. The second and most important was that theme of inheritance or heredity was a recurrent one in his authorship.

Henrik Ibsen, [born March 20, 1828, Skien, —died May 23, 1906, Oslo], is a major Norwegian playwright of the late 19th century. "Ibsen's influential career is full of enigmas and contradictions. He began with historical dramas, looking to the past, and yet he would become the herald of modern drama." (N A, V2, unit 1)

Ibsen developing from the historical romantic playwright became one of the founders of modern drama. Through his strict meticulous thought he introduced to the European stage a new order of moral analysis. Ibsen naturalistic method of presentation shocked the spectator/reader. He was relentlessly scathingly blatantly targeting the bourgeois society with his work. His problem plays and unique character creation made him versatile and popular. Ibsen's genius worked in a strange manner. Rejected and violently resented, upon introduction, Ibsen's work stood the test of time. One hundred fifty years later its performance is still running. He ranks second only to Shakespeare.

2. AIM OF THE PAPER

This paper proclaims that Ibsen was fleeing from his own inherited 'ghosts'. Through the analysis we will look at the recurrent theme of heredity in Ibsen's writings and try to link with his life. The researcher looks at his early years to configure the reason behind such obsession.

Bearing in mind the Poet's own admission that everything he wrote about he had lived through.

3. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The paper will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of Ibsen paternal relationship on the theme?
- How did Ibsen portray the theme of heredity in his plays?
- What are the connotations of the saying 'sins of the fathers'?

4. METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopted a close-reading method to achieve a complete comprehension of the texts to further enable a good analytical disclosure. The focus is on the saying 'sins of the fathers are visited on the sons' and its place on the social map at the times of Ibsen's 'A Doll House' and 'Ghosts'.

The researcher started with a search on the origin of the saying and usage to ground for a comprehensive analysis. Then a thorough reading of the two plays plus the author's comprehensive life and works. Plus a reading through on the literary criticism theories venturing for a linkage; Naturalism approach fitted perfectly.

Hence, it's a qualitative research with an analytical descriptive approach. The subjects of the study are Ibsen's characters from "A Doll House" and "Ghosts".

5. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

In spite the Norwegian's place in the literary world and his achievements as a great playwright he seems to lack recognition in Sudan. Which means a noticeable absence of studies about him is detected. Although that acted as encouragement for the researcher it foreshadowed

deficiency in resources. Two factors aided in the progress of the study; an opportunity to spent significant amount of time at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) library and Google Books.

6. BACKGROUND

To understand the theme of heredity at the time those plays were written it is important to have an understanding of the literary ambiance and ideology furbishing simultaneously specifically Naturalism.

Naturalism is a movement in European drama and theatre that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it also maintain the Darwinian belief that a human character is formed by what they have inherited from their ancestors and their actual environment. It refers to theatre that attempts to create an illusion of reality through a range of dramatic and theatrical strategies. Interest in naturalism especially flourished in France. The French novelist Émile Zola was a pioneer; naturalism was first advocated explicitly by Zola in his 1880 essay entitled 'Naturalism on the Stage'. (BBC.com)

Naturalistic writers were influenced by the theory of evolution of Charles Darwin. They believed that one's heredity and social environment determine one's character. Naturalism also attempts to determine 'scientifically' the underlying forces, i.e. the environment or heredity influencing the actions of its subjects.

Zola's term for naturalism is 'la nouvelle formule'. The three primary principles of naturalism [faire vrai, faire grand and faire simple are first: that the play should be realistic, and the result of a careful study of human behavior and psychology. The characters should be flesh and blood, their motivations and actions should be grounded in their heredity and environment. The presentation of a naturalistic play, in terms of the setting and performances, should be realistic and not flamboyant or theatrical, i.e. the single setting of Ghosts as the Alving state reception. Second, the conflicts in the play should be issues of meaningful, life-altering significance — not small or petty. And third, the play should be simple — not cluttered with complicated sub-plots or lengthy expositions. (Wikipedia)

Naturalistic works are opposed to romanticism, in which subjects may receive highly symbolic, idealistic, or even supernatural treatment. They often include uncouth or sordid subject matter; for example, Émile Zola's works had an overly frankness about sexuality along with a pervasive pessimism. Naturalistic works exposed the dark harshness of life, including poverty, racism, sex, prejudice, disease, prostitution, and filth. As a result, Naturalistic writers were frequently criticized for being too blunt.

Naturalistic school of writing had a formula of its own. It emphasizes everyday speech forms with plausibility in the writing, no ghosts, spirits or gods intervening in the human action. Its choice of subjects is contemporary and reasonable; no exotic, otherworldly or fantastic locales, nor historical or mythic time-periods. An extension of the

social range of characters portrayed, not only the aristocrats of classical drama, to include bourgeois and working-class protagonists and social conflicts. The style of acting attempts to recreate the impression of reality. Naturalistic works often include uncouth or sordid subject matter; exposed the harshness of life, including poverty, racism, sex, prejudice, disease, prostitution and filth. As a result, Naturalistic writers were frequently criticized for being too blunt.

Those stipulations fit the texts at hand to the letter, so the study conducted on the plays has them as it is basic tool. Moreover, underlining the analysis is the Darwinian ideology which pervades the naturalistic thought; especially in the determining role of the environment on character, and as motivation for behavior.

Understanding the term heredity is important for understanding the themes of the plays. Heredity is the process by which characteristics are given from a parent to their child through the genes. In biology it is the natural process by which parents pass on to their children through their genes the characteristics that make them related. (Cambridge Dictionary)

In literary terms heredity is the inheritance of the sum of the characteristics and potentialities genetically derived from one's ancestors; the transmission of such qualities from ancestor to descendant through the genes. (Merriam-Webster)

Heredity has special historical undertone. It is in the human nature when they come across unfathomable notion to fantasize and weave mythical tales about it. Since heredity was for a long time one of the mysterious phenomena of nature. Until the invention of the microscope early in the 17th century and the subsequent discovery of the sex cells could the essentials of heredity be grasped. The ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle (4th century BC) speculated that the relative contributions of the female and the male parents were very unequal; the female was thought to supply what he called the "matter" and the male the "motion."

Contrary to Aristotle conjecture, The Institutes of Manu, composed in India between 100 and 300 AD, regarded the female role like that of the field and the male like that of the seed; new bodies are formed "by the united operation of the seed and the field." Hence, in reality both parents transmit the heredity pattern equally, and, on average, children resemble their mothers as much as they do their fathers. (Robinson, Dobzhansky, Griffiths, 2018)

There is a strong connection between heredity and environment. All traits depend both on genetic and environmental factors. Heredity and environment interact to produce their effects. This means that the way genes act depends on the environment in which they act. 'The concept of heredity encompasses two seemingly paradoxical observations about organisms: the constancy of a species from generation to generation and the variation among individuals within a species.' (Encyclopædia Britannica)

Both aspects (variation and constancy) of heredity can be explained by genes- the functional units of heritable material that are found within all living cells. Scientist established that every member of a species has a set of genes specific to that species. It is this set of genes that provides the constancy of the species. Among individuals within a species, however, variations can occur in the form each gene takes, providing the genetic basis for the fact that no two individuals (except identical twins though debatable) have exactly the same traits.

7. HENRIK IBSEN

Henrik Ibsen, born March 20, 1828, at Skien, a small lumbering town of southern Norway —died May 23, 1906, Kristiania; a major Norwegian playwright of the late 19th century who introduced to the European stage a new order of moral analysis that was placed against a severely realistic middle-class background and developed with economy of action, penetrating dialogue, and rigorous thought.

His father was a respected general merchant in the community until 1836, when he suffered the permanent disgrace of going bankrupt. As a result, he sank into a querulous penury, which his wife's withdrawn and sombre religiosity did nothing to mitigate. There was no redeeming the family misfortunes. Aged 15, Henrik was sent to Grimstad- a coast town. There he supported himself meagerly as an apothecary's apprentice while studying nights for admission to the university. During this period he used his few leisure moments to write a play.

Ibsen was in the forefront of those early modern authors whom one could refer to as the great disturbers; he belongs with Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, and William Blake. Ibsen wrote plays about mostly prosaic and commonplace persons. But from them he elicited insights of devastating directness, great subtlety, and occasional flashes of rare beauty. His plots are not cleverly contrived games but deliberate acts of cognition, in which persons are stripped of their accumulated disguises and forced to acknowledge their true selves, for better or worse. Thus, he made his audiences reexamine with painful earnestness the moral foundation of their being. During the last half of the 19th century he turned the European stage back from what it had become—a plaything and a distraction for the bored—to make it what it had been long ago among the ancient Greeks, an instrument for passing doom-judgment on the soul. (Adams. 2018)

8. DISCUSSION

'Sins of the Father' or 'Sins of the Fathers' derives from Biblical references to the iniquities of one generation passing to another. The idea has been conveyed paraphrastically into popular culture. (Wikipedia) So it has a Biblical reference, after all.

However, its meaning was intended as retributive; this is wrong you have to stop it, for if you keep on, it will pass on as a tradition to your offspring and then you will bear their guilt as well as theirs. In this sense it is very much true. But this not what read in Ibsen's or else in Shakespeare:

"The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children."

— William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

'A Doll House'

In this play Ibsen is hinting at the inherited false traditions of the bourgeois society. The false sterile ancient order of things portrayed through the Helmer's marriage. We have one obvious case of un-favored state of heredity in Dr. Rank. Another passing one is found in Helmer's repudiation to Nora.

The first we know of the Dr.'s case through Nora and Mrs. Linde as the latter thanked her about the Christmas party. She asked whether Rank was always this depressing creature, but Nora refuted that and how he and her husband know how to make the gathering delightful. But something must be up because the good Dr. is suffering from tuberculosis as a souvenir from his late father:

Nora: *No; yesterday it was very noticeable. I must tell you that he suffers from a very dangerous disease. He has consumption of the spine, poor creature. His father was a horrible man who committed all sorts of excesses; and that is why his son was sickly from childhood, do you understand? (D H, Act II)*

Dr. Rank understood the defect in his health as a doctor; "I am the most wretched of all my patients, Mrs. Helmer". Although he knew that there is no cure for what he had, he made amendments and was living with it. But he did not think the end would be so close. To be punished for something you had no hand in its doing is enraging. What is more infuriating is in all the pleasure one was absent and upon arrival he was saddled with wrath of the aftermath. Not arguing with fate, Dr. Rank made do with the left-overs. He was satisfied thinking he still had some time but:

Rank: *With death stalking beside me?-- To have to pay this penalty for another man's sin? Is there any justice in that? And in every single family, in one way or another, some such inexorable retribution is being exacted--*

Nora *[putting her hands over her ears]: Rubbish! Do talk of something cheerful.*

Rank: *Oh, it's a mere laughing matter, the whole thing. My poor innocent spine has to suffer for my father's youthful amusements. '...'*

Nora: *And heaps of port and champagne. It is sad that all these nice*

things should take their revenge on our bones.

Rank: *Especially that they should revenge themselves on the unlucky bones of those who have not had the satisfaction of enjoying them.*

Nora: *Yes, that's the saddest part of it all. (D H, Act ii)*

Ibsen portrayed Dr. Rank's character as the most balanced down to earth person in the play. As a doctor he was a worthy member of the society. He was at ease with himself, satisfied with who he is and most importantly he did not place any importance of what others thought of him. Still, he had an unfinished life due to the wrongful deed of others.

Helmer acting as the provider of the household has to know where every krone goes. As he was looking through her shopping spree fruits in a flippant way he threw the remark that she is just like her father. Then again, Helmer concedes one has to accept with all your inherited traits:

Helmer: *You are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora.*

Nora: *Ah, I wish I had inherited many of papa's qualities. (D H, Act I)*

That was the 'sweet, adoring' husband. But now the self-absorbed, hypocrite of a man is out. He would not stop to hear what she has to say in her defense. He just kept on hurling incredulous accusation. The most prominent one being that she is a criminal just like father. Immorality runs through her veins and he should have known better:

Helmer: *... I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it. All your father's want of principle--be silent!--all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty--. How I am punished for having winked at what he did! I did it for your sake, and this is how you repay me. (D H, Act III)*

Once more, Ibsen is saddling one of his characters with some past happenings she/he has no hand in what so ever. This Ibsen's theme is a mixture of a religious adherence and the accepted philosophical thought of the time of Darwin's 'biological determinism'. More of the same will be seen in Ghosts.

'Ghosts'

'Those-Who-Walk-Again' this is the meaningful translation for the Norwegian name 'Gengenere'

In this play Ibsen is covering nothing. No hints. He wrote it in bold letters for all to see their world as it is. Pulling

the masks aggressively for all to see what is hidden beneath. Hell broke loose upon the appearance of the play:

Ibsen's positively abominable play called Ghosts... an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publically; a lazar house with all its windows open... candid foulness... offensive cynicism... Ibsen's melancholy and malodorous world... absolutely loathsome and fetid... gross almost putrid indecorum... literary carrion ... crapulous stuff. (Cited in Singh, 2013, p.2)

The above quote is an excerpt from a leading article written by Clement Scott (1891) in The Daily Telegraph. Ibsen anticipated such a reception. In 1881, he wrote a letter to his publisher Jacob Hegel in which he stated "Ghosts will probably cause alarm in some circles; but that can't be helped. If it didn't, there would have been no necessity for me to have written it." (ibid) The subject of the play was duty and freedom but it also touched on all the forbidden topics- syphilis, adultery, free love, incest and euthanasia. As a naturalistic writer Ibsen was defying all social conventions.

'Ghosts' displays the tragic story of a woman who has stayed in a horrific marriage. Abiding society's 'law and order' she has made some poor choices in her life. Choices she made but, regretfully, have caused her dearly. Only she came to that realization too late. Ibsen's contemporaries saw Ghosts as a play about a morbid and disgraceful physical illness and other 'taboo' subjects. They turned a 'blind eye' or perhaps they failed to see what it is really about. The play is truly about the devitalizing effect of a dumb acceptance of decayed convention and ancient traditions.

Ten years after the Chamberlain passing till the opportunity presented itself. She has vowed Mrs. Alving told the Pastor that one day he shall know the kind of life he had thrown her into. Pastor Manders was blown away he had thought that she was living in bliss: "It almost makes me dizzy. Your whole married life, the seeming union of all these years, was nothing more than a hidden abyss!" (Ghosts, Act First)

Mrs. Alving tragedy was neither in a life that has passed nor the phantoms haunting her. But upon the discovery of a planned future evaporating into thin air in front of her eyes. Mrs. Alving's character left the spectator/reader apprehended by wonder. Ibsen summed up the plays plot in Mrs. Alving's statement:

Mrs. Alving: *Ghosts! When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was as though ghosts rose up before me. But I almost think we are all of us ghosts, Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that "walks" in us. It is all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but*

they cling to us all the same, and we cannot shake them off. Whenever I take up a newspaper, I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. There must be ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light. (Ghosts, Act Second)

Raymond Williams (1968), in his book *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, writes that the essential experience of *Ghosts* is not disease but inheritance which comes before us as hereditary syphilis. In his opinion Williams finds recurrence of themes as presented by Ibsen in his plays *Brand* and *Emperor and Galilean*:

The theme in Ghosts is not a new one in Ibsen. The reduction of Oswald to a state of death-in-life, calling for the sun, is closely related to the last cry of Brand - Blood of children must be spilt, to atone for parent's guilt and the last cry of Julian: oh, Helios, Helios, why has thou betrayed me? (p.48)

What is more, Williams, asserts is the element of protest against subscription to dead beliefs, and the cry for light. But it is not simply a banner of the enlightenment, in the manner of the declaration of Lona in the first act of *Pillars of Society*: 'I'm going to let in some fresh air.' For it is recognized that: "We can never rid ourselves of them." (p.49) throughout our lives they are there lurking at the shadows there breathings mingle with ours. We open the doors hoping for a fresh breath of air; pull the curtains in an invitation for the light to banish them. But can we?

Ibsen insists, that we are the creatures of our past. From the moment of our birth we are inevitably haunted by every inherited debt. In 'Brand' Ibsen had written:

Born to be tenant of the deep,
Born to be exiles from the sun ...
Crying to heaven, in vain we pray
For air and the glad flames of day.

The *Wild Duck* is also naturalistic in its emphasis on the importance of heredity and environment as dominant forces in shaping men's destinies. Little Hedvig, cursed by her inheritance from old Werle with weak eyes, straining them unduly in touching up negatives for the lazy Hjalmar, for whose sake she mistakenly lays down her life.

9. CONCLUSION

It is established that like 'individualism' the notion of heredity has been following Ibsen as his shadow. A question poses itself, why?

Ibsen's youth experiences were painful. According to the biographers he had a rough childhood. His ties with the family were broken at the age of 15/16 when he left. Ibsen was close to his mother he used to go the drawing sessions with her. The family's fortune which his father failed to keep originally belonged to his mother.

Due to this background then his exposure to the developing theories of Darwin, Freud plus Zola's naturalistic influence; the assumption that Ibsen feared heredity proposes itself. He saw how society dejected his family after his father's bankruptcy. He did not wish to be a replica of such failure. This quote from Edmund Gosse (2005) biography on the Poet shows how adamant he was to make something out of himself:

... the preface to the second (1876) edition of Catilina, he has described what the influences were which roused him out of the wretchedness of Grimstad ... And here he began his first drama, the opening lines of which,
*"I must, I must; a voice is crying to me
From my soul's depth, and I
will follow it,"*
might be taken as the epigraph of Ibsen's whole life's work.

Ibsen's concern with the influence of heredity has more to do with the deeply inherited ideas and moral guilt from previous generations. Human beings may try to liberate themselves, but are bound by the 'ghosts' of the past. Ibsen direct message of 'Ghosts' is aimed at the socially accepted ideas of what is proper more than the inheritance of genetic traits [diseases] and the environment in which a child is raised.

Through his dramaturgical display Ibsen illustrated how society invades personal lives. In dramaturgical sociology it is argued that the elements of human interactions are dependent upon time, place and audience. A dramaturgical action is a social action that is designed to be seen by others and to improve one's public self-image. This play is above all is about that, and the tragic consequences of such a fact.

It is clear from the above discussion that the main thought stream of the enlightened elite conspired with Ibsen's subconscious fears to instill in him a morbid resentment from reincarnating his father. The illustration came through in Dr. Rank and Oswald both paying for a debt they did not collect. Ibsen's repetition of the Biblical saying; 'sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons' falls in line with his repudiation of the forgotten traditions and old ideals.

We are, Ibsen insists, creatures of our past, till today the society seems to agree-anonymously- that 'what goes around comes around'. Also, one reaps what he planted, is a preconceived notion amongst people, and there are many more which carry the same sentiment. Ibsen's beginnings did not foreshadow such greatness. So did his escapade act mute the weak side of his hereditary genes? Could it be the change of the environmental factors altered some active variation in his cells? Perhaps The Gods admired his tenacious will and relentless stubbornness and changed his stars.

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