

2. Ibsen: A Biographical Summary

Ibsen was born of middle-class parents at Skein, a small timber town in Norway, in 1828.

A few years later his father's bankruptcy brought poverty and social ostracism on the family.

Henrik was a lonely boy, who enjoyed making toy theatres and puppets and comic drawings. He left school at 15 to become apprentice to a chemist in a small coastal town on the Oslo fjord.

At 17 he fathered an illegitimate son on his employer's maid.

At 20 he wrote his first play *Catiline*, which was rejected by the Christiania Theatre.

The following year he published his first poems.

In 1850 Ibsen entered Christiania University with the intention of becoming a doctor, but his second play *The Burial Mound* was accepted by the Christiania Theatre that same year, and the following year he became resident dramatist at the Bergen Theatre, a post he held for six years, during which several of his plays were performed there. The only real success was *The Feast at Solhaug*.

In 1857 he became resident dramatist at the Norwegian Theatre, Christiania.

In 1858, at the age of thirty, he married Suzanna Thoreson, who was a most selfless and devoted wife for the rest of his life. The following year their only child Sigurd was born.

Apart from poetry and drama, Ibsen's main interests were political, and he was active in the nationalist cause, though he supported Scandinavian unity, and would not ally himself to left or right.

In 1861 he came under attack for inefficiency. The following year the Norwegian Theatre went bankrupt. Ibsen immediately obtained a university grant to enable him to collect folktales in Western Norway, but once that was spent he fell into debt.

It was at this point that he decided to leave Norway. In 1864 he settled in Rome for four years, where he wrote *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. He then lived in Dresden for eight years, and wrote *The League of Youth* and *Emperor and Galilean*.

In 1875 Ibsen moved to Munich and began the series of social-realist prose plays for which he is best known with *Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House*. The latter attracted much opposition, being seen as an attack on the values of family life. Back in Rome he wrote *Ghosts* to illustrate the moral corruption which could result from the attempt to preserve appearances and family life at all costs. Ibsen wrote to his publisher:

Ghosts will probably cause some disquiet in certain quarters, but if it weren't to do so, I shouldn't have needed to write it.

He could not, however, have anticipated the storm of abuse against the play. No Scandinavian theatre would stage it. The hypocrisy and moral obtuseness against which Ibsen wrote was, if anything, even worse in England. When the play received its first London production in 1891, *The Daily Telegraph* was typical of the reaction of the English press in calling the play (which deals, among other things, with inherited syphilis) 'an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly ...Gross, almost putrid indecorum'. Ibsen defended himself in his next play *An Enemy of the People*.

By this time Ibsen had a large following, particularly among the young. But they oversimplified his position, and in his next play, *The Wild Duck*, he tried to dissociate himself from the Ibsenites by showing how much harm could be caused in certain circumstances by an idealist insisting that everyone should face the truth.

In 1885 Ibsen returned to Munich where he wrote *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *Hedda Gabler*, which was immediately translated into English by Edmund Gosse, and was given its first

performance in England the following year. It has been frequently revived here ever since, with many of our leading actresses attracted to the part of Hedda.

In 1891 Ibsen returned to Norway for good. He wrote *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. He lived a life, outside his plays, of absolute conventionality, respectability, formality and rectitude. His neighbours would set their watches by him, and crowds of tourists follow him as he made his stately progress, twice-daily, in top-hat and frock-coat, in all weathers, to the Grand Hotel where he would sit alone at the same table for the same length of time sipping the same drink, every day. He was said to take the same number of steps, 287, from the university clock to the hotel every time.

Ibsen received many honours and decorations for his seventieth birthday. The following year he wrote his last play *When We Dead Awaken*. In 1900 he suffered the first of a series of strokes which left him unable to work. He lived, an invalid, for a further six years. One of his favourite phrases had always been "on the contrary". One day his nurse drew the bedroom curtains and said: "The Herr Doctor is looking better this morning". "On the contrary", Ibsen replied, turned over, and died.

In a letter of 1880 Ibsen wrote:

Everything that I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through, even if it has not been my own personal experience; in every new poem or play I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and purification – for a man shares the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which he belongs. Hence I once wrote the following dedicatory lines in a copy of one of my books:

To *live* – is to war with fiends
That infest the brain and the heart;
To *write* – is to summon one's self,
And play the judge's part.