

# Personalities in Perspective

## Henrik Ibsen

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The most dangerous enemies of truth and freedom are the majority! Yes, the solid, liberal, bloody majority-they're the ones we have to fear! Who forms the majority in any country? The wise or the fools? In the name of God it can't be right that the fools should rule the wise. So wrote Henrik Ibsen in his drama, *Enemy of the People*, as he struck out against small-minded citizens intent only on advancing their fortunes. Similarly, he criticized politicians who lacked both courage and principle. Dr. Stockman, the town physician in *Enemy of the People*, speaks for Ibsen when he says, "I can't stand politicians! I've had all I can take of them! They're like goats in a plantation of young trees! They destroy everything!..."

Ibsen, however, was a friend of the people, no matter who they were. He could not be accused of being either liberal or conservative and never pleaded the cause of any particular social class, political party, or religious faith. His genius was to hold a mirror before the people in order that all could see their own foolish ways.

As one of the world's greatest writers, Ibsen used the theatre like a preacher uses a pulpit. To him, the theatre was not simply for entertainment, but rather a place where basic principles of life could be re-thought and old customs and tenets questioned.

He was not only a critic of society in his dramas, *The Wild Duck*, *Enemy of the People*, and *Ghosts*; he also explored the unconscious and its effect upon one's behavior. In *Peer Gynt* the play for which Edvard Grieg composed his memorable suite, Ibsen depicted the struggle between the divine purpose of our lives and human egocentricity. *Peer Gynt* is the story of "a compromiser who thinks only of himself, shuns work and suffering." In a book Ibsen presented to a friend he wrote, "To live is to war with trolls in heart and soul."

All through life Ibsen experienced such struggles. Born in 1828 in Norway into the home of a well-to-do merchant, he was the beneficiary of family wealth and social position. But his father soon went bankrupt and the family was stricken with poverty. Young Ibsen faced the ostracism of the aristocracy and was forced to attend a middle class school. He left home before he was sixteen, worked long hours in an apothecary, failed entrance examinations to the University, and was constantly the brunt of criticism

for his strange and idealistic views. Using every spare moment to read the works of literary giants, he soon began to write, "courage I have and strength for something better."

His poems were published in the capital city newspaper and his literary career began. His dramas were not well received at first though he was appointed stage manager and theatre poet at the Norwegian National Theatre. Here was the opportunity for him to select plays for production, assign roles, oversee rehearsals, and determine the scenery. He not only worked through 145 plays by French, Danish and Norwegian playwrights, he also wrote one play annually as part of his contract.

After marriage at the age of 30, he once again fell into poverty. His plays were called senseless, immoral and un-poetic. But such comments reflected more upon the critic than upon Ibsen. He was a man ahead of his generation as he spoke out for national liberty, a proper acceptance of females, truth and human idealism.

He became recognized as a literary giant because of his unusual ability to create life-like appearances in his characters. He broke down the social barriers by being the first to write tragedies about ordinary people, not only kings and queens. And he developed the literary technique of allowing the characters themselves to unfold the meaning of the action rather than using overheard conversations or intercepted letters to tell the story.

When in 1906 he died, the Norwegian government gave him a state funeral before 12,000 mourners. Over his grave stands a monument bearing the simple and appropriate symbol of a hammer. The famed Nobel Prize novelist Luigi Pirandello wrote "AFTER SHAKERSPEARE, I UNHESITATINGLY PLACE ISBEN FIRST."