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| Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828-1906) |
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| Henrik Ibsen is Norway’s most important writer and one of the most influential dramatists of the second half of the 19th century. His dramatic production has left a deep mark on Western culture, and his plays have revolutionized the European theatre, inspiring generations of playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Luigi Pirandello, Anton Chekhov and Eugene O’Neill. Together with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, August Strindberg, and Jens Peter Jacobsen, Ibsen is considered one of the major exponents of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, as well as one of the early voices of European Modernism. His early dramatic production mainly consists of historical plays, verse drama, and poetry; in the late 1870s, Ibsen started a cycle of twelve prose plays in a contemporary bourgeois setting, which combine a marked taste for realism with a turn to symbolism, especially in his later years. His discussion of “the woman question” and of the moral double standard of the European bourgeoisie, but also the psychological study of his characters and the search for identity they undertake, first made Ibsen a controversial figure, later a famous, praised, and rich author. In the 20th century, Ibsen has become a classic of world literature and drama, and he is widely read, staged, and researched all over the globe. In particular, the social appeal of his plays is still dramatically felt in developing countries and in different post-colonial contexts. |
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His discussion of “the woman question” and of the moral double standard of the European bourgeoisie, but also the psychological study of his characters and the search for identity they undertake, first made Ibsen a controversial figure, later a famous, praised, and rich author. In the 20th century, Ibsen has become a classic of world literature and drama, and he is widely read, staged, and researched all over the globe. In particular, the social appeal of his plays is still dramatically felt in developing countries and in different post-colonial contexts.  File: HenrikIbsenByGustavBorgen.jpg  Figure 1 Henrik Ibsen, by Gustav Borgen  Source:<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henrik_Ibsen_by_Gustav_Borgen_NFB-19778.jpg>  Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 in Skien in southern Norway. In 1850 he published his first play, *Catilina*, which was followed by a series of historical plays of Norse setting that combine the stylization of late Romanticism with a certain attention to the present world. From 1864 to 1891, while he lived between Italy and Germany, his writing took a decisive turn towards modernity: first with the verse plays *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867), and later with a cycle of twelve contemporary prose dramas, written under the influence of the emerging Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough. The four plays published between 1877 and 1882 have a marked realist inclination and are enriched by a peculiar retrospective technique inherited from Greek tragedy, which Ibsen would continue to deploy throughout his production. By means of this technique, the wickedness of the characters, their psychological crisis, and the fall of bourgeois morality they represent are unveiled through excruciating dialogues and confessions, often taking place in the setting of a bourgeois home. In *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll’s House*, 1879) the young wife Nora is treated like a doll by her husband Torvald Helmer, who ignores that she falsified her father’s signature in order to obtain a loan to pay for a trip needed to save his life. When Helmer discovers the fraud, he is terrified at the possibility of a scandal that would ruin his career, and threatens his wife with a prohibition against raising her children, although he insists that they must maintain a public mask as happy couple. This triggers Nora’s decision, greatly controversial for Ibsen’s time, to leave her home and family. A revolutionary work for the entire history of Western literature, naturally linked to the feminist cause, *A Doll’s House* is also a paradigm of a search for identity Ibsen explored in most of his characters and plays. The *succès de scandale* of *A Doll’s House* was radicalized by *Gengangere* (*Ghosts*, 1881), where Ibsen gave a merciless and lapidary description of the bourgeoisie. The apparently incorruptible family environment of the unlucky painter Osvald is permeated by incest, infidelity, prostitution and blasphemy, something that brought the play to be banned by censorship in England and Germany – but also to great appreciation in avant-garde circles.  In 1884, Ibsen’s production took a turn towards symbolism, a current which increasingly permeated his writings. In *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*, 1884), the setting and social oppositions between characters are still indebted to social realism, but the action digs deeper into the characters’ minds. The bankrupt Ekdal family, tormented by the idealist Gregers who wants to unveil the illegitimate birth of their daughter Hedvig, keeps a wounded wild duck in the loft of their shabby attic, a symbolic space where the forces of the psyche reign. The duck, a symbol of the Ekdals’ happy and unconscious life, becomes the element around which the whole play turns. Such psychological introspection is evident in many of the following plays. In *Hedda Gabler* (1890), the title character is the persistently bored daughter of a general who brings herself and her admirer Løvborg to commit suicide. Ibsen’s moulding of her sinister power, where he balances between realism (the tiredness of bourgeois life) and symbolism (the unveiling of subterranean forces that lead her to destruction), has challenged literary critics for over a century. Throughout the 1890s, when Ibsen again moved to Kristiania (today’s Oslo) as a wealthy and renowned author, he continued his evolution towards symbolism, exploring theatrical spaces which gradually abandon realist settings. The bourgeois home of the bankrupt entrepreneur in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) is turned into a mental prison and a battlefield between contrasting psychological forces: Borkman on the one side and his wife and sister-in-law on the other. In his last play, *Når vi døde vågner* (*When We Dead Awaken*, 1899), the sculptor Rubek is divided between two women in a desperate search for artistic inspiration and for a lost happiness. His days end tragically in an avalanche, in an outdoor setting that is clearly permeated by symbolism and by the aesthetics of the avant-garde in general. Although Ibsen had laid plans for further playwriting, his health gradually worsened until his death in 1906. Chronology of worksCollected works *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter* (2005-2010), Oslo: Aschehoug. 17 vols. Plays *Catilina* (1850)  *Brand* (1866)  *Peer Gynt* (1867)  *Samfundets Støtter* (1877)  *Et Dukkehjem* (1879)  *Gengangere* (1881)  *En Folkefiende* (1882)  *Vildanden* (1884)  *Rosmersholm* (1886)  *Fruen fra Havet* (1888)  *Hedda Gabler* (1890)  *Bygmester Solness* (1892)  *Lille Eyolf* (1894)  *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896)  *Når vi Døde Vågner* (1899) English translations *The Oxford Ibsen* (1960-1977). Trans. James Walter McFarlane. London: Oxford University Press. 8 vols. Timeline 1828 Ibsen is born in Skien  1850 Moves to Kristiania to study and publishes *Catilina*, his first historical play  1851 Moves to Bergen to work as a scene instructor at the *Norske Theater*  1857 Moves back to Kristiania to work at the *Kristiania Norske Theater* and later at the *Christiania Theater*  1864 Moves to Rome for the first time  1866 Publishes *Brand,* his first philosophical play  1868 Moves to Dresden  1871 Publishes his first and only collection of poems, *Digte*  1875 Moves to München  1877 Publishes *Pillars of Society*, his first bourgeois play  1878 Moves back to Rome  1879 Publishes *A Doll’s House*, his most performed play of all times  1884 Publishes *The Wild Duck*, his first symbolist play  1885 Moves back to München  1887 Makes a breakthrough on the German scene  1889-1891Makes breakthroughs in England, France and Italy, followed by great controversies  1891 Moves back to Kristiania  1898 Great festivities at home and abroad mark his 70th birthday and consecrate his fame  1900 Has his first stroke  1906 Dies in Kristiania |
| Further reading:  (Meyer)  (Northam)  (Templeton)  (Moi)  (Fischer-Lichte and al.) |