The Form that "Can No Longer Paint": *Ghosts* and Osvald

Bert Cardullo

Osvald Alving can be seen as a symbol of paralysis of the mind at the end of *Ghosts* (1881). His literal paralysis of the brain symbolizes the paralysis of mind that affects the society of Ibsen's time, the society in which Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders, and the other characters of the play live, and from which Osvald has been absent since he was sent to live in Paris at the age of seven. Osvald is "dumb" at the end of the play, his mind paralyzed: suddenly, he is stripped of any psychological life of his own. He is pure, in a manner of speaking. He was "pure" in a similar way while abroad: "dumb" in that, for the most part, he was not communicating with his mother (he wrote occasionally and visited even less often); and without a full psychological life of his own, that is, one known to his mother, since she sent him away when he was seven years old and was never really in charge of his upbringing from that point on. Osvald is not so "impure" during the play, either. He obviously has a full-formed psychological life of his own, but it is largely *his own*, and it is largely in reserve, since he is in a place and around people he does not know well. He complains about the weather a lot, and he criticizes the citizens of his hometown with a vengeance. To emphasize his foreignness to his "hometown," Ibsen even has him stand onstage through his entire first scene in hat and coat! William Archer has said of Osvald: "We cannot be said to know him, individually and intimately, as we know Helmer or Stockmann, Hialmar Ekdal or Gregers Werle."[1] This is precisely so, as befits a realistic play, because no one onstage could truly be said to know him in this way. Osvald is, then, the perfect figure to serve as symbol: he is almost "pure," and therefore all the more effective as pure symbol, as opposed to symbol sullied by character.

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Osvald has in fact been gradually assuming his symbolic role throughout the play as his own paralysis of the brain has been growing, or getting ready to strike, and his function as symbol at the end of *Ghosts* is the key to a fuller, richer interpretation of the play. Ibsen identifies his play with Osvald; that Osvald is an artist who can no longer paint should have tipped critics off to this long ago. Osvald's paralysis does not simply destroy Mrs. Alving's son, some virtual nonentity from abroad, but, Ibsen leads us to believe, *an artist* of great promise. I do not believe that the play is intended primarily as Mrs. Alving's tragedy, and I think that Ibsen made this clear by ending the play the way he did--without having Mrs. Alving poison, or not poison Osvald with morphine and then depicting the aftermath. To my knowledge, no critic has ever asked why specifically Ibsen ended *Ghosts* precisely at Mrs. Alving's moment of decision and did not show what that decision was. Most critics, of course, take the play, for better or for worse, as Helene Alving's tragedy, or as a simple drama of social protest and reform. They ignore, or are simply unaffected by the "formal" meaning of *Ghosts'* ending and concentrate instead on what has led up to it or what, they believe, will, or should have come after it.

Francis Fergusson serves as a salient example, since so many later critics use his discussion as a starting point. He writes in *The Idea of a Theater* that

> the tragic rhythm of Mrs. Alving's quest is not so much completed as brutally truncated, in obedience to the requirements of the thesis and the thriller. Osvald's collapse, before our eyes, with his mother's screaming, makes the intrigue end with a bang, and hammers home the thesis. But from the point of view of Mrs. Alving's tragic quest as we have seen it develop through the rest of the play, this conclusion concludes nothing: it is merely sensational. . . .[2]

I do not deny for a moment that *Ghosts* resembles a well-made-play. I am also aware that "in accordance with the principles of the thesis play, *Ghosts* is plotted as a series of debates on conventional morality, between Mrs. Alving and the Pastor, the Pastor and Osvald, and Osvald and his mother."[3] But something Fergusson says earlier in his essay comes back to haunt him here, and to lead the way beyond Mrs. Alving's "truncated tragedy." "One may see, in *Ghosts*, behind the surfaces of the savage story, a partially realized tragic form of really poetic scope, the result of Ibsen's more serious and disinterested brooding upon the human condition in general."[4] *Ghosts* resembles a well-made thriller, but in its shadow poetry is constantly lurking, and

that poetry, that symbol, finally surfaces at the end. *Ghosts* is plotted as a series of debates on conventional morality, but it hardly hammers home a thesis at the end, a single-minded condemnation of the society that spawned the Alvings and their dilemmas. The play is, in reality, a latter-day tragedy on "the human condition in general"--not so much through Helene Alving, as *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy on the human condition through the example of Oedipus, as along with her. *Oedipus Rex* is the tragedy of man, of self, of how the self conceives of its relationship to the Ideal or the Absolute, whereas *Ghosts* is a tragedy of two or more men, of the effect of men's actions on other men though the generations. Mrs. Alving is a part of the whole, but she does not stand for the whole, and she cannot be made to stand for it.

Let me illustrate this through the example of the very last moments in the play. Had the play continued, emphasis would have fallen on Mrs. Alving's state after the poisoning, or avoidance of it. By ending *Ghosts* at Mrs. Alving's moment of decision and by not showing what that decision is, Ibsen places emphasis on the object or symbol to be or not to be poisoned, and on *whether* it will be poisoned, not on the subject who will or will not do the poisoning. This is one of the reasons he has Mrs. Alving "paralyzed with fear" and "in speechless terror"[5] at the end: he nearly equates her condition here with Osvald's, so that, again, emphasis will fall on whether the paralysis is destroyed or lives on. To Mrs. Alving, whether Osvald lives or dies, whether she poisons him with morphine or not, is a matter of real, of real-life importance. It is of such importance to no one else in the play: Pastor Manders, Engstrand, and Regine have all gone to look out for themselves. But to Ibsen, to us, and to the form of the play, whether Osvald lives or dies is a matter of symbolic, of extra importance, since he is already both alive *and* "dead" in his present vegetable state, and since we clearly cannot feel for him as his mother does, however little she could be said to know him. Ibsen is not so much interested here in Mrs. Alving's reaction to Osvald as in our own reaction to his play as form.

The real focus of the play from an aesthetic point of view, then, is Osvald, not Mrs. Alving. She is the "interest" in the play, along with, to a lesser degree, the other characters. At her most neutral, arousing curiosity about herself, it is her job to deflect attention away from Osvald, to absorb our interest, until it is time for her son--literally kept in the shadows for much of the play--to take over as almost pure symbol, as container of the play. Bert O. States would call her part of the verisimilitude or "environment" of the play. His comments on dramatic form in general and verisimilitude's place in it are of special relevance here:

> One might define a good drama . . . as one which produces a maximum reversal with minimum improbability. Thus, in the dynamics of drama, the function of verisimilitude, or (if you will) environment, is to act as a viscous medium which impedes the runaway energies of the reversal mechanism. Reversal is under much the same environmental restraint as the mainspring of a watch: without the escapement mechanism, which forces it to unwind in an orderly way, the spring would spend its energy in a single discharge. Put simply, the principle of escapement is inherent in the total environment of a play (including supporting characters, social structures, accidents, etc.), and what I mean by minimum improbability is simply the resistance which this environment, behaving "according to nature," offers to the reflexive drive aesthetically imposed on the play's world.[6]

Now some would say that, indeed, a maximum reversal does occur in *Ghosts*, and that it occurs through the character of Mrs. Alving, the main character. But this ignores the fact that Ibsen never completes Mrs. Alving's reversal; he does not show her finally at rest with the knowledge of herself and her past that she has attained in the course of the play. Indeed, it is never clear that she accepts this knowledge: she is beside herself with fear and disbelief from the moment Osvald reveals to her that his illness is hereditary and without cure, until the end of the play. Francis Fergusson thinks that this is *Ghosts'* flaw; I think that it is the play's strategy. Ibsen cuts short Mrs. Alving's reversal at the very moment *Osvald's* reversal is complete, and he has been waiting on Osvald's reversal throughout the play. Following the model of the well-made-play, Ibsen thus makes Mrs. Alving's reversal really a reversal in her fortunes as opposed to a reversal in her recognition or perception of her situation, since we never see this recognition or perception. Osvald's reversal is that of the nightmare or dream, and Osvald's last moments onstage are as a poem to the well-made-play that has preceded them. They give us the image of a paralyzed Osvald, and it is on this image that the play closes, in a state of lyric rest as opposed to dramatic unwinding, one could say.

Osvald's reversal--"the reflexive drive aesthetically imposed on the play's world"--is from entrance into the play as the symbol of freedom and enlightened thinking to exit from it as the symbol of paralysis of thought and action. Because this is an extreme reversal, Ibsen keeps Mrs. Alving's reversal in step with Osvald's throughout the play, only to arrest hers at the moment of truth. This is a dramatic strategy, designed to reinforce the function of Osvald and

lend it credibility. Mrs. Alving's attainment or falling short of nobility at the end of the play is less important to Ibsen than the point, made through the now symbolic presence of Osvald, that what happened to the Alvings may, or may not happen again to others. Mrs. Alving may poison Osvald, or she may not. Osvald, now the symbol of the kind of paralysis of the mind--narrowmindedness, stubbornness, plain stupidity in society--that drove his mother to marry Captain Alving (for wealth and position) instead of Pastor Manders in the first place, may live, or he may die. The paralysis may live on in men, or it may die. Ibsen's ambivalence is tantalizing and suggests that it is not entirely up to him, nor entirely up to us. This is not didacticism, not reform, nor is it either pessimism or optimism. It bespeaks the intermingling of fate, chance, environment, and free will, of forces both beyond our control and within our control, in the determination of all our lives. The ending of *Ghosts* contains a very delicate balance, but a balance nonetheless.

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In order to understand the full power of *Ghosts'* poetic structure, let us see exactly how Ibsen gets Osvald to the position he is in by the end of the play. I said above that Osvald's reversal was of the nightmare or dream, whereas Mrs. Alving's was of the well-made-play. By this I meant that his reversal from lucidity to imbecility has about it the quality of a dream; it occurs with the suddenness and unpredictability with which images or symbols are produced in dreams. This is so despite all the preparing for this moment Ibsen has done: we simply are never prepared to watch someone go instantly from the normal human state to complete helplessness. If we do witness such an occurrence, we feel as if we are dreaming; we feel suddenly removed from reality. As Osvald is having his final, paralyzing attack, Mrs. Alving says, "This has all been a nightmare, Osvald--just something you've imagined" (152). Day is breaking as she speaks: the nightmare is over. But what is suggested is that Osvald's attack is a nightmare, or dream, that he has been having throughout the play and from which he now "awakens," his brain paralyzed. It is as if the deteriorating Osvald has been having a dream, that is, since everything is so unbelievable to him--the way people live in his hometown, the revelations about his father. I hope it is clear that I am not trying to make a case here for *Ghosts* as a "dream play." Obviously, it is not one. Osvald does not dream the play; rather, the realistic action of the well-made-play strikes him with the unreality of a dream.

And it is precisely the well-made-play that Ibsen, through Osvald, is trying to transcend in *Ghosts*. Ibsen the artist, the poet,

transcends the well-made form, the form that "can no longer paint," if you will, the form that is a reflection of the traditional, "well-made"--"paralyzed"--society he himself inhabited. This is the selfsame society whose attitudes and beliefs paved the way for the destruction of Osvald, and with him of an artist. Ibsen gets the well-made form to participate in its own calling to account, even trumping, through the controlling presence of Osvald and the at once innovative and disingenuous devices of Realism. Thus we get the break between well-made form and what I would call the life of poetry and symbol at the end of the play, between Osvald's line, "Thank you, Mother" (152), and the breaking of day. The well-made form deteriorates once Osvald's mind deteriorates. It is the well-made form, society, that originally produced Osvald, and it is he who lays that form to rest. *This* is the overriding action of the play, what Osvald "does," what Ibsen does for Osvald, how he "loves" him, to borrow Robert B. Heilman's usage of the word.[7] Osvald's release is into complete mental paralysis, and the suggestion is that this is preferable to complete mental alertness (or what passes for it) in a "paralyzed" society. The play's release is into mockery of the well-made form's "paralysis": the frozen moment, the tableau ripe with possibility. Osvald, who can no longer paint, becomes a figure in the "painting" that would make way for the "joy of life" (136) he was always talking about. The sunshine is there. And the "glowing happy faces" (136) might at least be our own, just beyond the "frame," if not the figures' themselves.

There is strong evidence that Ibsen places a well-made-play inside a dream structure--or a structure that keeps Osvald "in mind," that has him as its focus or concern--in order to subvert the well-made-play structure even as he uses it and thereby stresses Osvald's poetic importance as symbol. Although all the action before the final moments is not seen from Osvald's point of view, as it would be in a dream play, he does provide a kind of frame for the action. It is his presence in the Alving home that motivates all the action and supplies Ibsen's reason for beginning the play when he does. *Ghosts* opens with Osvald asleep upstairs, controlling the volume of Regine and Engstrand's conversation and lending to its incredibility, since none of the three is aware that Regine is actually Osvald's half sister and that Captain Alving is Regine's real father. *Ghosts* closes with the "death" of Osvald's mind.

Then there is Osvald's presence right outside or around scenes when he is thought to be outside and away, taking a walk or attending the fire at the Orphanage. The characters onstage are unaware of his presence; like a figure in a dream, he may appear to be in two places at once, or he may suddenly appear in one place when he was thought to be in another. It is noteworthy that no one "discovers"

Osvald, that no one comes upon him; this is one of the ways in which Ibsen makes him the poetic focus or force of the play. Osvald has four entrances in *Ghosts*, each one *onto* a scene. One time Regine does come upon him and his mother (Act II, 132), but only because Mrs. Alving has rung for her, and Ibsen gives Regine four more quick entrances after this in order to play down the significance of her first entrance. So too does Pastor Manders come upon Osvald, his mother, and Regine, but, significantly, Osvald hears him coming: he is waiting for him. And when Mrs. Alving herself has the chance to come upon Osvald right after he has returned from a supposed walk, she does not do so. Structurally, the play cannot let her. She hears Regine resisting Osvald's advances in the dining room at the end of Act I, and she could go in and break them up (just by her presence) without revealing their true relationship to each other, but her emotional state, and the state of the play, prevent her.

During his supposed walk in Act I, Osvald may be right outside or around the scene between his mother and Pastor Manders. Whereas he had his coat on and his hat in his hand for the entirety of his first scene onstage (right before he leaves for his walk), he returns from his walk without his hat and coat! This may not appear very remarkable on the surface--he could have left a wet hat and coat in another room--but it becomes so when one considers that his entrance with the information that "dinner's nearly ready" (112) is followed immediately by Regine's with the same information and with the parcel of songs for the Orphanage dedication ceremony. Has Osvald been right outside the garden room all along, perhaps with Regine the whole time, and has he decided to break in on Manders and Mrs. Alving because it is nearly dinnertime and he is hungry (Ibsen makes much of Osvald's appetite for his mother's food)? Has he been without hat and coat, inside the house, for as long as he was *with* hat and coat during his first scene, with Manders and his mother? His immediately intimate responses to Regine when she comes in to announce dinner, and his quick advances on her once they are behind a closed door again for a moment, strongly suggest that they are continuing something begun just previously, right outside the garden room. Regine's line, "Osvald!--Are you mad?--Let me go!" (113), especially suggests this. Regine is not resisting Osvald here; she is not expressing a lack of interest in him (only to be ready to go to Paris with him as his wife in Act II). She is telling him that he is crazy to be embracing her now, with his mother and the pastor close by and about to come in to dinner--not so unusual a reaction for a woman of any era.

At the beginning of Act II, Osvald says that he is going out for a walk again. In a brilliant theatrical stroke, Ibsen has him say this

from offstage, in the dining room, where, we will learn later, he remains for all of the subsequent conversation between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving, and after that between Manders and Engstrand. Regine then answers Mrs. Alving from the same dining room that she will go down to the laundry and help with the wreaths. We do not learn if she does this, but we can guess that, even if she does, she comes back to the dining room to be with Osvald (her next entrance is from the dining room), thus connecting this "walk" of Osvald's with his first one. In other words, during both "walks," he spends at least some of his time offstage, in the house, with Regine. One other factor connects these two "walks" with each other. When Mrs. Alving discovers, after Manders and Engstrand have left, that Osvald has been in the dining room all along, she asks him why he did not go out for his walk. He replies, "In this kind of weather?" (127). The implication is that if he would not go out "in this kind of weather" after dinner, he would not have gone out in it right before dinner (or he would have gone out only for a moment; he would have gotten just past the door before returning).

Mrs. Alving carries on a conversation of thirteen lines at this point with an Osvald who is offstage. There is a realistic reason for this: Osvald is smoking a cigar, which is not allowed in the garden room. But the conversation goes on for so long--we got our first taste of it at the beginning of the act, remember--that we are left with this haunting image of Osvald just beyond the "frame," overseeing the action. Mrs. Alving senses Osvald's presence in the dining room once she is alone, but, again, she does not come upon him: she does not go into the dining room to see if he is there. She calls out, and he replies. She senses his presence in this way two other times. She hears him coming upon his first entrance in the play (he has been asleep), and he enters, without comment from her, looking exactly like his father--as one might *be* oneself but look like someone or something else in a dream. Mrs. Alving goes to meet Osvald when he returns from the fire at the Orphanage, and, to judge from Ibsen's stage direction, it is as if she were going to meet him before she had evidence he was coming; it is as if she knew instinctively, as the figures in a dream are wont to do, that he would appear when he did, when the "dream" produced him. Even though Osvald has been at the fire, Mrs. Alving's going to meet him in the way she does thus makes it appear that he has been right outside the garden room, in the garden, all along. When, toward the end of the play, Osvald goes into the offstage hallway outside the garden room in order to lock the door of the Alving home, it is as if he is sealing himself into the nightmare that his life has become, the nightmare from which his only "escape," very shortly, will be complete paralysis of the mind.

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Perhaps the most startling evidence for Ibsen's subversion of a well-made-play structure through a dream structure is to be found at moments in the play that other critics have faulted for their unbelievability. I am thinking particularly of Pastor Manders' failure early in Act III to ask Engstrand why, if he saw the beginnings of a fire at the Orphanage, he did not do something immediately, and of Osvald's and Regine's instantaneous assimilation of the fact that they who might have married are half brother and half sister, also in Act III.

Many have faulted *Ghosts* for letting Engstrand, Regine, and Pastor Manders "get away," for not including these characters more in *Mrs. Alving's* tragedy. It is said that they are disposed of too quickly and easily as excess baggage in this well-made-play's headlong drive to completion. But a close reading of the text shows that the three of them are very much included in the poetic structure that makes *Ghosts* a tragedy of "two or more men." Just as Osvald is the symbol of paralysis that Mrs. Alving will destroy or not destroy, so too is "Captain Alving's Haven" (142)--Engstrand's proposed "home for poor seamen" (142) that will be nothing more than a brothel--the symbol of the same kind of paralysis infecting the society of the time, and likewise a symbol that Engstrand, Regine, and Manders will destroy or not destroy. Ibsen has planted the clues, and they fairly leap out at us once the grand strategy of the play is discerned.

Osvald is linked with Captain Alving's Haven as symbol on three counts. First, Osvald has come home in time for the ceremony celebrating the completion of the Orphanage to Captain Alving's memory,[8] and the Haven is Engstrand's answer to the Orphanage that he himself burns down. Second, it was Captain Alving's whoring--"the sins of the father"--that led in the first place to Osvald's contracting of paresis,[9] and in Captain Alving's memory, appropriately, a brothel is going to be erected, where future Captain Alvings will become diseased, to produce their own diseased Osvalds. Third, Regine is the offspring of the Captain's sexual relations with Johanna, his servant and Engstrand's future wife. That is, Regine is as much the product of the Captain's whoring, she is as much associated in our minds with the disease, as she is Osvald's true half sister. In fact, she has some of the whore in her, too, as she herself says: "I take after my mother, I suppose" (146); and she may be taking up work in Engstrand's brothel soon.

It is easy to assume that "after" *Ghosts*, Engstrand gets his brothel, Manders keeps his reputation untarnished, and Regine begins her descent into a life of prostitution. In a word, that Ibsen loses control over their fates, which then run wild toward their most negative capability. But this assumption is based almost entirely on one piece of evidence and virtually ignores Regine's place in the

dealings of Engstrand and Manders. Early in Act III, Engstrand blames the fire at the Orphanage on Manders, saying, "I saw you snuff one of the candles and throw the bit of wick right into a pile of shavings!" (140). Manders takes Engstrand at his word for the moment, even though he swears he "never went *near* the lights" (140) and claims he is "not in the habit of snuffing candles with [his] fingers" (140) anyway. Engstrand has Manders where he wants him: he offers to take the blame for Manders so that the newspapers won't attack the pastor, and in return Manders will see that Engstrand gets the funds for his "Seamen's Home" (89).

As far as I know, no one has ever disputed that this is exactly what happens. I say above that Manders takes Engstrand at his word *for the moment*, however, because if Manders is in the least questioning and analytical--and he has these traits where his own interests are concerned; he is an intelligent man for all his narrowmindedness--then he is soon going to be asking Engstrand why he didn't say something if he saw the pastor throwing a piece of candlewick into a pile of shavings, or why Engstrand didn't make sure that the shavings would not catch fire. This seems rather obvious to me, yet critics have persisted over the years in pointing to Manders' quick capitulation to Engstrand as a striking flaw in the play.[10] I prefer to see the capitulation as a mistake (made in the heat of the moment: nothing so improbable) that Manders may, or may not rectify. (Engstrand, sly dog that he is, may have a very good explanation ready for Manders.) Once again, a symbol of paralysis, here Captain Alving's Haven, may, or may not be destroyed, that is, lose the funds Manders had promised for its construction.

Even if Manders never thinks to question why Engstrand didn't do anything about the piece of candlewick in the pile of shavings, Regine will be along at any moment to do a bit of questioning and answering herself. She knows now that Captain Alving was her real father, and so does Manders. Engstrand does not know about her real paternity, and Manders does not know that Regine knows about it. Regine has probably figured out by the end of the play that Engstrand himself set the fire at the Orphanage. (Engstrand's aside to her, "We've hooked the old fool now, my girl!", at the start of Act III [139] should have set her to thinking.) Manders doesn't know that Engstrand is the real arsonist. Regine wants some of the money that Manders has said he will find for the construction of Captain Alving's Haven (the money will come from the interest on the capital Mrs. Alving had laid aside for the building and administration of the Orphanage); she wants to lead the kind of life "suited to a gentleman's daughter" (146). What she will do to get that money is play Engstrand against Manders with the knowledge she has that each man

does not have. Regine reveals this in the following exchange with Mrs. Alving just before she leaves the Alving household for good:

> REGINE . . . --May I ask, Mrs. Alving, if Mr. Manders knows this? [that Regine is really the daughter of Captain Alving and Johanna Engstrand].
> MRS. ALVING. Mr. Manders knows everything.
> REGINE. (*Rapidly putting on her shawl*) Then I'd better try and catch that boat. Mr. Manders is such a kind man, he's sure to help me. It seems to me I have a right to some of that money too--a better right than that filthy old carpenter. (146)

Regine can do a lot to embarrass Pastor Manders if she makes public her true father's name and Manders' knowledge of the illicit relationship between the Captain and Johanna Engstrand (when the pastor received this knowledge will have become beside the point). Regine can, of course, ruin Engstrand if she tells Manders that it was really Engstrand who started the fire at the Orphanage. She can blackmail either man (or both at the same time) to get something of what she wants, and Captain Alving's Haven can still see the light of day. But if she decides to pursue her "better right" to the money--and her line, "What do I care?" (147), in response to Mrs. Alving's warning to be careful, tells us she might go this far--if she decides to expose Engstrand completely at the same time that she holds the truth about her paternity over Manders' head, she may undo herself, Engstrand, and Manders. The reason for this is that even if the money is there to be handed over in full to her, she won't have it for long before the newspapers have her (and Manders). Captain Alving's Haven will never see the light of day in this case. Our symbol of paralysis will have been put to rest. Or it will have been allowed to live. The decision is Regine's. Or it is Pastor Manders'. *Ghosts* is indeed a tragedy of "two or more men," and that tragedy is completed. No one escapes, yet no one has simply been disposed of. Everything hangs in the balance, forever waiting for them, forever waiting for us. This is the charity, and hope, of the play.

All of *Ghosts* can be seen, then, as an attempt by Ibsen to elaborate the right image or symbol for the tragic paralysis of mind in Norwegian society. Captain Alving's Haven and Osvald are highlighted, finally, as twin symbols for that paralysis through Ibsen's subversion of the well-made form by means of a dream structure and through his arresting of the actions before Mrs. Alving, Manders, Regine, and Engstrand experience any reversal in their perception of their situation. Thus Manders' failure to ask Engstrand why he did not take

action immediately if he saw the beginnings of a fire at the Orphanage, and Osvald's and Regine's, instantaneous assimilation of the fact that they are half brother and half sister, can be viewed as examples of Ibsen's dream structure at work. Manders', Osvald's, and Regine's actions could occur in a dream and not be thought of by the dreamer as unrealistic or unbelievable, for dreams are not preoccupied with realism or believability. But the well-made-play is so preoccupied, and it would be concerned with making the actions of Manders, Osvald, and Regine credible. Although a case can be made for Manders' behavior on realistic grounds, it could also be argued that Ibsen's lack of concern with making Manders', and Osvald's and Regine's actions believable was intentional: he wanted to subvert the well-made-play; to call attention to his departures from it and thus give its action even more of the quality of unreality that it has for its primary "dreamer," Osvald; and in this way to direct the spectator to the imminent ascent of poetic symbol in *Ghosts*. Like Manders, Osvald, and Regine, Mrs. Alving herself is included in the dream structure of *Ghosts*: what happens, happens so suddenly and irreversibly that it seems like a dream to her. But we leave Mrs. Alving on the verge of her "awakening." Osvald is "asleep" forever; the woman "sleeping" next to him, who has been "asleep" for most of her life, is about to "wake up" and do something. At the end of *Ghosts* Mrs. Alving's life, and the true life of the play, begin.

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Ghosts owes its permanence less to Realism as a dramatic movement and the analytical method of characterization than to Ibsen's permanent concerns, expressed most cogently through his manipulation of structure to create poetic symbol.[11] The play has tended to be interpreted along the paths of least resistance: the narrowest path of social drama, or the unchallenging one of failed tragedy. But Ibsen put a lot into *Ghosts*, and it is on the broader, or more abstract grounds that the play points in so many directions while leading in only one, that it is so highly imaginative while yet so simple, that I am making my case for it as great dramatic art.

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Notes

1. William Archer, Intro., *The Works of Henrik Ibsen* (New York: Scribner's, 1917), VII 203; rpt. in *Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Richard Levin (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960) 201.

2. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1949) 151-152.

3. Fergusson 150.

4. 150.

5. Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, trans. Eva Le Gallienne, in *Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen* (New York: Modern Library, 1957) 153 (both quotations). All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses after each quotation.

6. Bert O. States, "The Art of Dreaming," *The Hudson Review*, 31, No. 4 (Winter 1978-1979) 576.

7. Robert B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1968) 26.

8. Significantly, Osvald has come home to Norway in the first place to suffer the attack that will result in the paralysis of his brain. He tells his mother late in Act III,

> I had one attack while I was abroad [in Paris]--it didn't last long. But when I realized the condition I'd been in, I was filled with unspeakable terror--and I could think of nothing but getting home to you. . . . I recovered from that attack abroad--but the doctor said that the next time--and there's bound to be a "next time"--it would be hopeless. (150-151)

9. Paresis is a disease of the brain caused by syphilis of the central nervous system and characterized by inflammation of the meninges, dementia, paralytic attacks, etc.

10. See most recently Ronald Gray, *Ibsen: A Dissenting View* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) 65-66, and John Northam, *Ibsen: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) 112.

11. What I am saying about *Ghosts* could also be said about *Hedda Gabler*, for example. Osvald must live and Osvald must die at the end of *Ghosts*, the possibility that he may or may not be poisoned must be left open, for the same reason that Hedda must die and Løvborg's manuscript must live at the end of *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda's ideal (to live beautifully, free from the constraints of her socialization) dies with her, but Løvborg's ideal (a book on the future of civilization, in which he frees himself, and potentially others, from the poisonous constraints of society by writing a prescription for that society's health or liberation) lives--it is reconstructed from notes by Tesman and Thea. Hedda kills herself with child; Løvborg and Thea speak of the manuscript as *their* "child." Hedda dies to achieve the ideal she could not achieve in life; Løvborg kills himself (or is killed in a mistaken attempt to retrieve his manuscript from "Mademoiselle Diana's boudoir") because he felt he had achieved, or helped to make possible, the ideal through his book and then senselessly lost the manuscript.

In the same way as Osvald's paralysis of mind could be said to be growing throughout *Ghosts*, to turn him at the end into a symbol of paralysis of mind in Norwegian society, so too could the notes for Løvborg's book that Thea produces in *Hedda Gabler* be said to have been "growing" throughout the play, to be given birth at the end as a symbol of hope for the future of civilization. Thea and Løvborg had spoken of the manuscript as their "child," as I mention above, and thus it is no accident that Thea "nurtures" these notes in the pocket of her dress throughout the play (she says at one point, "Yes. I took them with me when I left home--they're here in my pocket--" [*Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen*, trans. Le

Gallienne 422]), to produce them at the right moment for reassembly by herself and Tesman.

In the same way that Ibsen leads us to believe that in Osvald an artist of great promise is ultimately destroyed by the paralysis of mind of his society, so too does the playwright lead us to believe that in Hedda a person of potential creativity is destroyed by her upbringing as the daughter of the aristocratic General Gabler. Martin Esslin writes that

> [Hedda's] sense of social superiority prevents her from realizing her genuine superiority as a potential creative personality. If the standards prescribed by the laws of noblesse oblige had not prevented her from breaking out into the freedom of moral and social emancipation, she might have been able to turn her passionate desire for beauty (which is the hallmark of real, spiritual, as distinct from social, aristocracy) to the creation of beauty, living beauty rather than merely a beautiful death. It is the creative energy, frustrated and damned up, that is finally converted into the malice and envy, the destructive rage, the intellectual dishonesty that lead to Hedda Gabler's downfall. ("Ibsen," in Esslin's *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969] 39.)

Like Osvald, Hedda is a potential artist. Like Mrs. Alving, she has no true moment of recognition or perception: Ibsen is interested at the end more in whether Løvborg's ideal will be promulgated, to the benefit of future Heddas.