

Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828, in Skien, Norway, a small town about seventy miles south-west of Oslo on the west coast of the Oslo Fjord. His mother, Marichen Altenburg Ibsen, a painter and devotee of the theater, encouraged her son in his early artistic endeavors. His father, Knud Ibsen, was a prosperous merchant, but his risky speculations brought about his financial ruin when Ibsen was seven, his mother turned to religion for solace, while his father declined into a severe depression and had to sell most of the property that his wife had brought into the marriage and move his family to the only place they still owned, a neglected farmhouse near Skien called Venstøp, whose attic would become the inspiration for the attic of *The Wild Duck*. The characters in Ibsen's plays often mirror his parents, and his themes often deal with issues of financial difficulty as well as moral conflicts stemming from dark private secrets hidden from society. The Ibsens' life had become one of grim poverty and the bad family dynamics that often accompany it. Ibsen's schooling probably suffered since the Ibsens could not afford the school attended by the children of the town's successful families, and his formal schooling ended altogether shortly after his fifteenth birthday in 1843 when, having no other recourse, he had to go to work to support himself.

On December 27 of that year he left Skien for Grimstad, another small town about seventy miles further down the coast, where he was to live for more than six years, first as apprentice to a pharmacist and then, from 1846 on, as an assistant pharmacist. The first three or so years were characterized by extreme poverty, long grueling hours on the job, lack of sleep, and great loneliness. On October 9, 1846, a house servant, Else Jensdatter, gave birth to his illegitimate son, whom she named Hans Jacob Henriksen. Ibsen had to support the son until he was fourteen, but apparently never made an attempt to see him. Legend has it that he did see him once—more than four decades later, when Hans Jacob paid him a visit in Oslo (then Christiania). Other than Sundays and the hours in which he should have been sleeping, Ibsen had little time for his own pursuits in his early years in Grimstad. He stole time from sleep for reading, and by 1847, if not sooner, he was studying to pass the matriculation exam for the University of Christiania with the hope of eventually becoming a physician.

He also stole time for artistic pursuits. While still at Venstøp, he had entertained his siblings, including a sister named Hedvig, as well as the neighbor children and others with magic tricks, puppet shows, caricatures, and satirical poems. He continued producing caricatures and satires in Grimstad but also advanced to more mature paintings, mainly landscapes—for a while he seriously considered becoming a professional painter—and to more serious poems, more than thirty of which survive, the earliest from 1847.

Ibsen's loneliness lessened considerably about this time as he made close friendships with two young men of his own age, Christopher Due and Ole Schulerud, and, through them, began to interact with a larger group of acquaintances of both sexes. Ibsen read his poems to Due and Schulerud, discussed Kierkegaard and other writers with them, and, inspired by the revolutions of 1848, developed jointly with them a loathing for monarchs (whom they called “tyrants”) and for nations that deny freedom to other countries and/or their own suppressed minorities. At this time, in preparation for his Latin exam, he was reading Sallust's account of the conspiracy of Catiline and

Cicero's orations against *Catiline*, and during the winter of 1848-49 this reading and his radical attitudes prompted him to write the first version of his first play, *Catiline*. It is very uneven, especially in this version, but many of its characteristics—such as siding with the rebel against society, associating him with the conventions of tragedy, and flanking him with two symbolic women, one fair, ostensibly good, and weak, the other dark, ostensibly threatening, and strong—anticipate Ibsen's mature work. Fittingly, the play is heavily echoed in Ibsen's final drama, *When We Dead Awaken*. Schulerud took the manuscript of *Catiline* to Christiania, tried unsuccessfully to get it accepted by the theater or a publisher, and finally paid to have it published out of his own pocket (April 12, 1850). The play received some good reviews, but few copies were bought, and Ibsen and Schulerud eventually sold many of the remaining copies for scrap paper in order to have money for food.

Ibsen had arrived in Christiania a couple of weeks after the publication of *Catiline*, perhaps to cash in on the success he anticipated but also to finish preparation for his matriculation exam at a cram school. In May he completed his second play, *The Burial Mound*, a pleasant but shallow one-act verse melodrama on the confrontation between the Vikings and Christianity. It was accepted by the Christiania Theater and given one performance there in September, but Ibsen realized little compensation for it. Also in September he did poorly on his matriculation exam, failing in Greek and math and doing little better than average in the other parts, and so, though he audited some classes and could refer to himself as "Student Ibsen," he never became formally enrolled in the university.

Ibsen spent the next thirteen months in a variety of activities, none of them providing him with much in the way of income, and for the most part he lived off Schulerud's allowance. He greatly expanded his education through his associations with the many new friends he acquired after moving to Christiania. Most of them were politically radical, like himself, and he began to take part in radical activities, including demonstrations and co-editing and contributing to a radical publication, in connection with which he came very close to being arrested and incarcerated. He wrote articles of various kinds, satires, and reviews. He also wrote poems and began but did not finish a new play. Many of the poems were written for special occasions and through them Ibsen began to develop a reputation as a writer of promise.

In October 1851 the internationally famous Norwegian violinist Ole Bull came to Christiania seeking financial support for a theater he had founded in Bergen, the first theater in Norway to use Norwegian rather than Danish. He met Ibsen and was impressed by him, both for his writing and for his enthusiasm for the new theater, and hired him to join the theater company as its "dramatic author." Ibsen assumed his new post in late October and remained in it for nearly six years. He earned a steady salary but it scarcely freed him from poverty, and in general his stay in Bergen gave him more disappointments than satisfactions. As dramatic author, he was required to provide, beginning in 1853, one new play a year. Most of his time was taken up with other work for the theater, including designing sets and transferring the theater's productions to the stage after they had been rehearsed elsewhere by the artistic director. The plays he had to work with were uniformly mediocre, being bad adaptations of Scribe and other popular French writers of melodrama or examples of various unserious genres then in favor in provincial Europe. Ibsen probably had previously not had the opportunity to

see a good play well staged, but he must have been aware of the nature of what he had to work with, especially after the theater sent him on an extended study tour of major theaters in Hamburg, Copenhagen, and Dresden in the spring and summer of 1852.

On this trip he was able to see genuinely professional theater, including a number of plays by Shakespeare, who was to have a profound influence on his work. He also came across a new book, *Das moderne Drama*, by Hermann Hettner, a German literary and art historian, which had more to teach him about drama—especially dramatic structure and form, complex characterization in the Shakespearean mode, and the nature of tragedy—than anything he had yet had the opportunity to read. These influences were not strong enough to help him suddenly emerge from the mediocrity surrounding him, nor would the Bergen company have been able to rise to the occasion if Ibsen had written better plays.

His apprenticeship in writing drama had to continue for a much longer time than would have been the case under better circumstances, certainly throughout his time in Bergen. *St. John's Night*, the play he wrote for January 2, 1853, is an example of a popular dramatic type at that time in Scandinavia, fairy-tale comedy. The play's exposition, an early use of the retrospective method that Ibsen would eventually make his basic dramatic form, is rather clumsy, but otherwise the play is as good as many others of the same type, and the strong element of satire makes it more interesting than most. However, it failed and Ibsen subsequently disowned it. For January 2, 1854 he presented a much improved version of *The Burial Mound*, with a more effective action and fuller and richer characterizations; it also failed. For January 2, 1855 he presented the most very serious effort of his time in Bergen, *Lady Inger of Østråt*, a work in which a very promising tragedy is ultimately swamped by the often confusing Scribean intrigue. Because of his earlier failures, he claimed it was written by someone else; the ruse did not work, for it too failed. His next play, *The Feast at Solhaug* (1856) was his first success, and the play he wrote for the following year, *Olaf Liljekrans*, was also a success, though a lesser one. Both of them belong to another dramatic type then popular in Scandinavia, the ballad drama. *The Feast at Solhaug*, which to some extent continues Ibsen's experimenting with tragedy, is the more interesting of the two. Even if the work Ibsen produced in Bergen had been much better, it would still be true to say that his most important accomplishment in Bergen was meeting, wooing, and winning Suzannah Daae Thoresen, whom he married on June 18, 1858 and who remained his lifelong companion, his staunchest supporter, and a principal source of the energy that fueled his work.

By the time of his marriage Ibsen was back in Christiania, where he had gone in 1857 to become artistic director of the new Norwegian Theater. His connection with the theater began well, with the probable high point being his production in November of a new play he had just finished, *The Vikings at Helgeland*, which, with its magnificent structure and superb protagonist (Hjørdis, a first version of Hedda Gabler), was Ibsen's first artistic success. Things soon soured, however. Because of the unenlightened taste of the audience and the common practice of European provincial theaters to emphasize light entertainment, for the most part all Ibsen could offer was the usual mediocre fare—and for the most part without success. By 1860 he was under constant attack by the theater's board and by the press, which called for his being replaced for incompetence. In June 1862 the theater went bankrupt, leaving Ibsen for the next two

years without a regular income to support himself, his wife, and their son Sigurd, who was born December 23, 1859, the only issue of their marriage. The period from 1860 to 1864 was probably the worst of Ibsen's life. He drank heavily, he considered suicide, and he had difficulty writing. His next play was not completed until 1862, five years after *The Vikings at Helgeland*. This was *Love's Comedy*, a witty satire on marriage set in contemporary times and written in rhymed verse of a Byronic brilliance. When it was published the reviewers vociferously attacked it as inartistic and immoral, and in consequence the Christiania Theater declined to present it. Ibsen's next play, *The Pretenders*, a tragedy based on Norwegian history and featuring three great acting roles, is, in form and scope, his most Shakespearean play. It is also his first unequivocal masterpiece and easily his best play not widely known outside of Norway. It was published in 1863 and performed at the Christiania Theater in January 1864, but this belated success was not enough to keep him in a place that he had come to passionately loathe.

On April 5, 1864, using a governmental travel grant that he had applied for in 1863 so that he could spend a year abroad immersing himself in European culture, Ibsen left Christiania and Norway for Rome. He arrived there in the middle of June and was joined by Suzannah and Sigurd in September. He may have intended to return after the year abroad, but he had no real prospects in Norway, and it is more likely that his application was spurred by a desire simply to get away because of the way he had been treated since 1860. By the time he left, moreover, he had another good reason for fleeing, the failure of the Swedes and Norwegians (Sweden and Norway were then joined under the Swedish king) to go to the aid of their Danish brothers as they tried to defend themselves against Prussia. At any rate, except for a two-month visit in the summer of 1874 and a three-month visit in the summer of 1885, he was not to return to Norway for twenty-seven years.

During his self-chosen exile Ibsen lived in Italy, mostly in Rome, and in Germany, first in Dresden, then in Munich (in Italy 1864 to 1868 and 1878 to 1885; in Germany 1868 to 1878 and 1885 to 1891). Ibsen made a third visit to Norway in July 1891, decided to take up residence in Christiania in August, and spent the remaining fifteen years of his life there.

Ibsen was scarcely better off financially in Italy in 1864 than he had been in Norway, for the travel grant was small (less than half of what he had requested) and his only other income consisted of whatever hand-outs his friends in Norway could scrape together, but he was in a much better mood and eager to write. After considering several projects, he began a long narrative poem set in contemporary times about a Norwegian clergyman, but it did not come easily until, as he wrote to a Norwegian friend, he happened to go into St. Peter's sometime in the summer of 1865 and "suddenly there dawned on me a strong and clear form for what I had to say." He abandoned the poem and, using some of its material, within a few months he had completed *Brand*, his great five-act epic tragedy in rhymed verse about an idealist whose "all-or-nothing" extremism causes him to destroy everything he holds most dear. *Brand* is Ibsen's most Kierkegaardian work. It was also his break-through effort. When it was published the following year, it made him famous throughout Scandinavia, and it changed his life in more ways than one. His previous writings, published by whatever means he could manage, earned neither him nor those publishing them much

compensation. *Brand*, in contrast, was published by the prestigious Copenhagen publishing house of Gyldendal, to the financial benefit of both author and firm, and Gyldendal remained Ibsen's publisher for the rest of his life, even issuing second editions of many of the plays written before *Brand*. The success of *Brand* also brought Ibsen an annual author's pension from the Norwegian government, something he had previously sought in vain. Ibsen was not rich but he had become financially secure for the first time since his father's ruin, and he even had enough money to deck himself out as an obviously proper citizen deserving of respect and honor. All of this helped to make his life more stable, more orderly. Little needs to be said about matters not related to his work for the last forty years of his life. He was fond of receiving medals and other honors, and crowned heads of state were frequently pleased to indulge him. In October through December, 1869, he was Sweden-Norway's representative at the opening of the Suez Canal. In 1898 he attended numerous celebrations of his seventieth birthday, and his collected works were published both in Denmark and, translated into German, in Germany. In the 1890s he was one of Christiania's major tourist attractions.

Beginning in 1889 he developed several relationships with young women. The most notorious of these, made so by the woman's efforts to publicize their relationship, was with Emilie Bardach, a young Austrian woman he met while on vacation in Gossensass, Austria, in 1889 and corresponded with for some time. By far the most important of them, in terms of what the woman meant to him and to his work, was with Hildur Andersen, a well-known concert pianist and one of Norway's first female professional musicians, with whom he spent a good deal of time after his return to Christiania. Most of Ibsen's life after the success of *Brand* was spent in two activities. One was his daily interaction with Suzannah and Sigurd. The other activity was a much lonelier one: his writing, through which he held Judgment Day over himself almost daily in his study. In the brief poem paraphrased in the preceding sentence, Ibsen also writes "To live – is to war with trolls in the holds of the heart and mind." But through his writing Ibsen courageously waged war not just with his inner trolls. He also took on the philistines who resented his commitment to tell the truth about what he learned from holding Judgment Day over himself.

Source: <http://www.ibsensociety.liu.edu/life2.htm>

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