

English A Literature HL
Written Assignment

Reflective Statement on *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen

Question: How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral discussion?

Discussing Ibsen's *Ghosts* allowed me not only to place the novel within its contemporary context but also to provide me with a deepened insight into the minds of the play's characters.

For instance, discovering the negative way in which artists were perceived at the time led me to understand both Pastor Manders' disdain at Oscar's career choice and the ease with which Oscar assumes that soliciting artists is what caused his *Vermoulu*.

Furthermore, the discussion led me to fully appreciate the chilling effect of the play. This is because I learned that this effect was completely intentional and calculated down to the minutest detail by Ibsen himself.

That *Ghosts* was written to be more than simply entertaining is evident by the precision with which the playwright chose to stage it. Indeed, it is often through details such as stage directions that Ibsen communicated important messages. Among these include criticisms of issues such as the over-importance attributed to duty and the hypocrisy of the clergy. With *Ghosts* Ibsen hoped to open the eyes of the Norwegian and the worldwide audience to these issues.

The discussion also permitted me to see why the play, which a modern audience would hardly describe as shocking, inspired such negative reactions when it was first published. Though some of the problems featured in *Ghosts*, such as incest, are as taboo today as they were in 1881 when the play was first published, a contemporary audience would be more able to discuss them openly than a 19th century audience, who tended to ignore the issues. This allowed me to truly grasp how revolutionary the play was at the time of its publication.

Finally, the interactive oral led me to understand the extent to which realism is the essential element without which the play may not have been so effective or upsetting to the audience. The public's horrified rejection of the piece was largely because the secret-ridden and faulted characters of *Ghosts* were not an exotic people but (seemingly) ordinary Norwegians. Indeed, the Alving family seemed, on the outside, so mundane that they could have been any spectator's next-door neighbours. It was, importantly, only once the secrets behind closed doors were revealed that the family became repulsive.

It is this idea which horrified Ibsen's contemporaries: they were not ready to face the possibility that their reality, a civilised society, could, in fact, just be an illusion.

Words: 398

What is the function of doors in the stage directions in Ibsen's *Ghosts*?

Word Count: 1337

English A Literature HL

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Session: May 2013

When Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* was first published in 1881, it was considered scandalous. Challenging many of the accepted values of the time, *Ghosts* "aroused a hostility beyond anything Ibsen had envisaged" (Meyer 12). One aspect of the play that contributed to this effect was Ibsen's use of staging. A central part of the staging in *Ghosts* is the four doors, which are frequently specified in his detailed stage directions. In order to fully appreciate the play, it is essential to examine the symbolism and use of doors within it. To do so, the reader must note where the doors in the play are located, what they each signify, how doors are used as places of transition, and finally what the significance of doors being open or closed is.

The four doors in the play are clearly differentiated and each has its own uses and implications. Within the main room, called the "garden-room" (Ibsen 27), are three doors, two to the right of the room and one to the left. The first door on the right-hand side of the garden room leads to the dining room, and the one beside it to the hall. This door leads to the formal entrance to the house and is the only door that Pastor Manders and Regina, who both care enormously about appearances, use. The door on the left leads into the more personal area of the house, upstairs and the bedrooms, which is only accessed by Mrs. Alving, Oswald and their trusted servant, Regina. Attached to the garden room is a conservatory containing another door leading into the garden.

This garden door is especially significant and reveals much about each character's personality and social status. It is not a respectable door and is primarily used by lower-class characters. For instance, Engstrand, a vulgar character in the play both in his position in society and in his manner (he is a carpenter planning to open what seems to be a brothel), first appears "*standing*

at the garden door" (Ibsen 27). His daughter Regina, on the other hand, never uses the garden door. This is because her character is that of a social climber, keen to separate herself from her lower-class background. Further evidence to support this includes the way she speaks French in order to snub her unrefined father, using words such as "rendezvous" (Ibsen 28) and "mon Dieu" (Ibsen 29) because she knows that he will not understand them.

However, Mrs. Alving and Oswald do occasionally use the garden door, though only in times of absolute crisis. For Oswald, this is when the orphanage burns down. Panicked, the young man, "*Runs out through the garden door*" (Ibsen 82) whilst all the other characters "*hurry out through the hall*" (Ibsen 82) to get to the fire. This reaction suggests that Oswald genuinely cares more about the orphanage than the other characters. Because the orphanage is his father's legacy, Oswald's dismay at its destruction reminds the audience of the child's ideal he still has of the captain. When Mrs. Alving uses the garden door it is also in times of distress, concerning something she truly cares about. However, it is vital to note that when the orphanage burns down she goes to it through the front door, signifying that its loss did not devastate her to the extent that she would lose her composure. Indeed, what the door shows Mrs. Alving to truly care about is her son, as she only rushes out "*through the garden door*" (Ibsen 83) when she becomes excessively distressed that Oswald has not returned from the fire.

Doors are also widely used to symbolise moments of transition. For instance, through the dining room door occurs the vital turning point in the story, where Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving and the audience discover Regina and Oswald's budding romance. Regina's "Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!" is only

partly concealed by the “*half-open door*” (Ibsen 56). Not only does this turn of events change the whole course of the play, but the carelessness of Oswald’s having left the door open (“*the door swings half open behind him*”, Ibsen 55) also reveals the indifference that he feels toward being found out. This somewhat forewarns his marriage proposal that follows, as his carelessness about being discovered indicates that Oswald may indeed be serious about Regina.

Doors also symbolise the transition between past and present and how these two can bleed into one another. Oswald’s bold advances on Regina is heard when “*From the dining room is heard the crash of the chair being knocked over*”, followed by Regina’s sharp “Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!” (Ibsen 56). The door mentioned here, the dining room door, is the same door that Mrs. Alving previously pointed toward when telling Pastor Manders about how her husband seduced their servant, Joanna (“*Points to the first door on the right ‘It was in the dining room that I first found out about it’*”, Ibsen 53). Thus, her vision of Oswald as the “ghost” (Ibsen 56) of his father is amplified by having the two parallel situations occurring in the same exact doorway.

Standing in the doorway represents another kind of transition: the transition from one situation to the next, a place in between past occurrences and future action. When Mrs Alving stands “*in the doorway*” (Ibsen 57) before taking up her interrupted conversation with Pastor Manders about the Oswald-Regina situation, the parallel between being halfway through a doorway and halfway to a solution or resolution cannot be ignored.

The significance of doors being open or shut in the play is equally crucial to the understanding of its dramatic effect. After the orphanage has burned down, all the doors on the set are left “*standing open*” (Ibsen 82). This symbolises

shared and open thoughts, as everyone, the whole town, is involved in the tragedy and the Alving household is not alone in grieving the orphanage's loss. Thus, with all the doors open, there is nothing, physically or mentally, separating them.

Leaving a door semi-open has different connotations altogether. It establishes an invitation for people to enter the room and shows how those in the room may desire a connection with those out of it. This can be observed when Mrs. Alving replies "leave the door open" (Ibsen 70) to Oswald's offer to close it, suggesting the hope that her son, in the dining room, will come and talk to her in the garden room.

Closed doors, however, indicate an altogether different mind frame. When Oswald has an anxiety attack, he enters the garden room and exclaims, "Shut all the doors!" (Ibsen 88). By closing all the doors he seeks safety, sealing himself inside and locking the rest of the world out. This paranoid attitude shows a mind closed to others, as opposed to the way things were after the fire, when all the doors and minds onstage were open. When a character enters the room and then closes the door, an atmosphere of secrecy is established and a cocoon is created around those within the room. An example of this is when Oswald enters the living room and "*closes the door behind him*" (Ibsen 70), just before he confesses to his *Vermoulu*. The closed doors serve to make his discourse more secretive and focused. The closed doors allow the audience to understand that the subject about to be discussed is sensitive, intensifying the discourse as our focus rests solely on the characters.

There is no doubt that doors play an important role in *Ghosts*. However, though they help to refine the way the message is communicated, it is the play's

characters that demonstrate what the message is. The characters, especially Mrs. Alving, show how people can and must free themselves from suffocating social conventions. Nonetheless, *Ghosts*' ambiguous ending leads the reader to understand that unless serious action takes place, any real change is impossible. In the context of the play, which explores this idea, the door, that can both entrap and liberate, is a very powerful dramatic and symbolic tool.

Works Cited

Ibsen, Henrik. *Plays: One*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd. 1994. Print

Meyer, Michael. "Introduction." *Plays: One*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd. 1994.
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