

Truth and Illusion

A Theme in the Plays of Ibsen

“Tell truth and shame the Devil.” – Hotspur in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part 1*

“‘What is truth?’ cried jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.”
– Francis Bacon, *On Truth*

“The truth shall set you free.” – *King James Bible*, John VIII, v. 32

“The truth shall make you free, but first it will piss you off.”
– Attributed to Gloria Steinem

Gwyneth Evans

In many – probably most – areas of human life, the concept of truth is an important ideal and aim. While uncertainty may be understandable in some situations, scientific, legal and most public discourse can only go ahead successfully if the participants are determined to make every effort to be truthful. In personal relationships, however, complete truth-telling may be more difficult, more ambiguous, and perhaps not always such a good idea. There are obviously some situations where deliberate deception is the only sensible course of action, as when one is confronted by a crazed person with a gun demanding to know the whereabouts of someone he considers an enemy. In less extreme examples, “telling the truth” does seem important to social interaction, and to establishing and maintaining good relationships with family members and friends, but the exact nature of the truth of any given situation may not always be clear. Furthermore, insisting on absolute truthfulness could even prove destructive of something ultimately more humane and valuable.

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906) was particularly interested in the concealments and compromises involved in family and professional life, and many of his plays depict people forced to face uncomfortable facts about their own past, and that of their families and loved ones. Concealing a secret – about paternity, adultery, fraudulent business dealings, or forgery may be the means by which his characters have managed to make their way in the conservative, somewhat isolated mid-nineteenth century Norwegian towns where they are set. Public, or private, recognition or admission of a concealed truth affects the lives of his characters in many different ways, and the consequences of their response are at the heart of some of his best-known plays, including *Pillars of the Community* (1877), *A Doll House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881) and *The Wild Duck* (1884). Characters struggle not only with learning or revealing the factual truth about something, usually something that happened in the past, but also with its effect on the human reality of their present situation. As the story

unfolds, the audience and at least some of the characters realize how events and situations in the past have been concealed, and present lives and relationships built on false assumptions. A prosperous businessman has made his brother-in-law, who had gone off to America, the scapegoat for his own shady doings earlier in life, and we see him skillfully manipulate his employees and the public to cover up his dishonest and dangerous business practices (*Pillars of the Community*). Nora's husband believes the winter in Italy that restored his health was funded by a gift from Nora's father, whereas Nora reveals to her friend Christine that her married life has not been as privileged and easy as it seems – that she had forged a signature and worked secretly to repay a loan that funded the trip (*A Doll House*). In both *The Wild Duck* and *Ghosts*, it emerges that a household servant had become pregnant by her employer and hastily married to another man who assumed, or was willing to pretend, that the child was his. The pride of fatherhood, or the desire to marry a sympathetic and available girl, are lost by the revelation of the girl's actual parentage.

Ibsen shows how 19th-century European attitudes to women and marriage have created some of these false situations, but his plays continue to engage audiences in the 21st-century partly because of their complex understanding of human needs: how we readily create or accept stories about who we really are and the nature of our relations with the people around us. Puncturing someone's illusions by revealing a factual truth is not, however, necessarily helpful or restorative; sometimes, learning "the truth" about something in the past can damage, or destroy, the delicate fabric of a relationship whose emotional truth of human warmth and caring has life-enhancing value in itself.

Audiences and critics have generally responded to Nora's leaving of her home, husband and children at the end of *A Doll House* (with the slam of a door "which echoed across Europe") as a triumph of women's liberation: after all, when her husband declares that "Before all else, you are a wife and a mother," she retorts "I don't believe that anymore. I believe that before

all else I am a human being – or at least I want to become one." At this point, modern audiences occasionally cheer!

Nonetheless, Ibsen has made a point of bringing Nora's three young children on stage (always a risky undertaking) in the merry Christmas preparations of the opening scene, to help us recognize how their lives will be affected by her decision to leave. And what of the uncomplaining servant who had raised Nora, after the death of her mother, and will bear the burden of her departure? This is not to say that Nora's decision was wrong, but to point out that Ibsen shows how her self-fulfillment will come at a cost, not just to her rather pompous and self-satisfied husband, but to other people as well. While Nora is being blackmailed, her friend Christine believes that when the truth about Nora's forgery to save her husband's health comes out, the couple will be able to have a more honest, adult relationship:

Helmer must know the whole story. This wretched secret must be brought into the open so that there's

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complete understanding between them. That'd be impossible while there's so much concealment and subterfuge.

Nora convinces herself that her husband will take the blame for the forgery on himself, and prepares to commit suicide to prevent this. When he learns of the forgery, however, he proves far less self-sacrificing than she imagined, and is astonished that she had thought he might take the blame. His illusion of her childish dependence on him, and her illusion of his noble nature, are both dispelled in the final act where they sit down at the table together and have a serious, adult talk – but to say that they have arrived at the “complete understanding between them” that Christine had expected would be too optimistic. Nora has the courage to recognize and admit that “you weren't the man I'd always thought you,” but he can only grasp at straws, hoping to salvage the relationship but never really recognizing the depth of her disillusionment.

In the play which immediately preceded *A Doll House* (1879), *Pillars of the Community* (1877), we gradually learn that the central character, a “pillar of the community” in a Norwegian coastal town, had blackened the reputation of a young man who had emigrated to America, by attributing to him both a sexual and a financial scandal for which he himself was actually responsible. At the end of this play, the guilty man bravely makes a public acknowledgement of what he had done, and in this new atmosphere of truth-telling is able to find new, better relationships with both family members and his employees. Even then, he never openly acknowledges the details or depth of his dishonesty which has been revealed to the theatre audience. Nonetheless, the play has a happy ending (rare enough in Ibsen!), brought about by his truth-telling.

Depending somewhat on the production, however, it can't really be said that *A Doll House* has exactly a happy ending: the truth about the forgery has been told and Torvald has been forced to recognize that his wife is not the frivolous doll that he had liked to imagine her, but the children

have lost their mother, and Nora's future is uncertain, and perhaps bleak.

The layers of deception and illusion in *The Wild Duck* (1884) are more enveloping than those of *A Doll House*, involving all the main characters and ultimately smothering them. While Nora's departure at the end of the earlier play does leave some hope that her new understanding will enable her, at least, to live a more genuine life, the ending of *The Wild Duck* offers no such hope. It is a devastating portrait of a would-be truth teller, Gregers Werle, who wants to dispel the illusions under which his old friend, the photographer Hjalmar Ekdal, has lived.

Greger's confidence in Hjalmar, however, is as misplaced as Nora's confidence in her husband's “real self” which will reveal itself in the crisis: Hjalmar is shallow, self-centred, self-satisfied, and incapable of the insight and courage needed to make the changes in his life which Gregers expects will result from his revelations. Even his profession as a photographer and inventor is a fiction, a life-illusion deliberately fostered by the realistic doctor, while we see that Gina, Hjalmar's wife, does most of the actual work. In a brief flash of truth-telling, merged with his self-pity after he's realized that he isn't the real father of Hedwig, he breaks out with: “Oh, don't talk about the invention. That may be a long way off yet... Oh, good Lord! What exactly do you expect me to invent? Other people have invented nearly everything already. It gets more difficult every day – .” Gregers, an idealist who creates his own stories about the people around him, is reproached by the cynical Dr. Relling: “...don't use that exotic word ‘ideals.’ We have a good enough native word: ‘lies’.”

Gregers: Do you mean that the two things are related?

Relling: Yes. Like typhus and typhoid fever.

Gregers: Dr. Relling, I shan't give up until I have rescued Hjalmar from your clutches.

Relling: All the worse for him. Take the saving lie from the average man and you take his happiness away, too.

Hjalmar is a weak man who has been bolstered in his life and profession by his wife, Gina, a former servant of Werle's father. Thinking that learning the truth about Gina's relationship with the elder Werle (by whom she was probably pregnant with Hedwig before their marriage) will free Hjalmar from the bonds which prevent his full development, Gregers leads him to grasp how his marriage, family life and profession have all been dependent on aid from the elder Werle.

The result is not what Gregers expected, although having seen Hjalmar in action, posturing as a loving father and hard-working professional, we the audience are not surprised that in his fury at learning the truth he rages and cruelly rejects both wife and child. Hedwig, a sensitive young teenager whose love and belief were not put on for show, is so devastated by this rejection that she shoots herself. Their reactions to her death reveal much about the characters. Hjalmar, of course, sees it as being all about himself:

Hjalmar: And I drove her from me like a hunted animal! And she crept into the loft in terror and died, for love of me. [*Sobbing*] Never able to put it right now! Never able to tell her! [*Clenching his hands and shrieking to heaven*] Ah, Thou above! If Thou art there! Why has Thou done this thing to me!

Gina: Hush, hush; you mustn't say dreadful things like that. We didn't deserve to keep her, I expect.

Molvik: The child is not dead, but sleepeth.

Relling: Nonsense.

Gregers, whose insistence on revealing "the truth" has brought on this tragedy, is determined that even this death will be ultimately for the good, and bring out the nobility of Hjalmar. Dr. Relling, however, is undecieved. "Before

the year is out our little Hedvig will be nothing more to him than a fine subject to declaim on."

Gregers: And you dare to say that of Hjalmar Ekdal!

Relling: We will talk about it again when the first grass is showing on her grave. Then you'll hear him delivering himself of fine phrases about 'the child torn untimely from her father's heart,' and see him wallowing in emotion and self-pity.

Gregers: If you are right and I am wrong, then life is not worth living.

Relling: Oh, life would be tolerable enough, even so, if we could only be rid of these infernal duns who come to us poor people's doors with their claim of the ideal.

Why should Gregers press his claims of the ideal, his insistence on his truth-telling, to such appalling effect? With deep irony, Ibsen shows that Gregers is subject to his own life-illusions, and fails to recognize the truths behind his own behaviour. We come to realize that his motivation in outing Gina's background and Hedwig's true parentage stems from his hostility to his father and resentment, in youth, at his father's relationship with the young servant girl. Destroying the Ekdals' family life is revenge – on his father, particularly, and on Gina, though he cloaks it in idealistic terms, deluding himself with claims that "I can free Hjalmar from all the lies and deceptions he's sinking under." Many lies and deceptions are revealed in the course of *The Wild Duck*, but this is perhaps the saddest of all.

The truth-teller, not always as destructive as Gregers, is a figure who appears in different guises in many – if not most – of Ibsen's major plays. Sometimes the truth-telling is admirable, like the businessman Bernik's confessions at the end of *Pillars of Society*, though even then they may be partially motivated by the chance to look good, to sway public opinion by a frank admission of vulnerability. Bernik does get away with a lot, and the happy ending comes about largely

through good luck rather than his conscientious intervention, but the wise friend who comes back from America to guide him has the final lines: “My dear: the spirit of truth and the spirit of freedom, they are the pillars of the community.” (The association in this play of America with “truth and freedom” does perhaps add a further level of irony for a modern audience.)

In contrast to these stirring and hopeful words, the closing line of *Ghosts* is one of the most devastating in all of theatre. Oswald Alving has left his art studies in Paris because of ill health, and his return to his mother in the Norwegian town of his childhood fills her with a joy and hope she had lost during her marriage to another hollow pillar of the community, who was dishonest and unfaithful. Oswald wants to marry the attractive servant girl Regina. By the end of the play, however, we realize that Oswald’s illness is hereditary, untreatable syphilis, the legacy of his dissolute father, which attacks his brain and will render him helpless. He hopes that, as well as giving him pleasure, Regina will help him to die. It emerges, however, that she is his half-sister – so his only hope is that when he has another attack his mother will give him the saved-up morphia pills to end the threatened life of mindless dependency which he dreads. The play ends with her desperate search for the pills, as her son, slumped in his chair with vacant eyes, says, dully and without expression, “Mother, give me the sun. The sun... the sun...”

While there is no climactic scene of truth-telling in *Hedda Gabler*, the play is a tangled web of deception, indirection and illusion, all of which are gradually disentangled to lead to an ending almost – though not quite – as dark as that of *Ghosts*. Hedda herself enjoys worming the truth out of other people, getting them to admit to her the truths they do recognize but don’t publicly admit. Thea, a girl Hedda had bullied at school, reappears in town and reluctantly acknowledges, under Hedda’s probing, that she has left her husband to follow a brilliant alcoholic writer, whom she has helped to sober up and complete the manuscript of a masterwork. Tessiman, Hedda’s plodding, kindly husband, is

in the end content to undertake with Thea an attempt to restore the lost manuscript; although he had achieved academic credentials, he in the end admits happily, “And this – getting another man’s papers in order – it’s just the job for me.” Seeing through only to his mediocrity, Hedda is blind to the truth of his generous spirit.

Lovborg, under Thea’s influence, has successfully published one book and completed the manuscript of an even finer one. Hedda deliberately goads him into taking a glass of punch by lightly assuring Thea that she need not have felt such “deadly anxiety” about Lovborg’s weakness for alcohol. Under Hedda’s taunts, given in the guise of reassuring Thea, the resentful writer decides after all to attend the men’s drinking party, where indeed he slides into drunken despair, mislays the manuscript, and gives up. “I don’t want to start again, any more, now.” (Whereupon Hedda gives him a pistol.)

What Hedda herself refuses to acknowledge to anyone else is that she is pregnant. She does not welcome this change in her life and the prospect of taking on the care of a child. She secretly throws into the fire the missing manuscript, which Thea and Lovborg had described as their child. In her boredom and irritation with husband, home, associates and life in general, Hedda idealizes Lovborg as a man who has the courage to act, and to end it all. Her vision of his dying beautifully, however, is also an illusion; Judge Brack reveals to Hedda that Lovborg died sordidly, in a skirmish with a woman of ill repute – and, what’s more, that Brack recognized the pistol that killed him as belonging to Hedda. As Brack revels in his new-found power over her and her reputation, Hedda shoots herself with the matching pistol. This tragic ending is, however, undercut by the sight of Thea and Hedda’s husband eagerly working together on recreating the lost manuscript, through Thea’s notes and Tessiman’s scholarship. Incapable of love, or even kindness, Hedda cannot find her way in life, despite her intelligence and beauty, and while attempting to mock or destroy the illusions of other characters she ultimately traps and destroys herself. As she admits to Thea, “If you could only realize how poor I am.”

Doctors, as often the best-educated men in the community, are also the ones in Ibsen's plays who tend to see through the complacent half-truths of the respectable citizens and – while they may be unable to express their insights frankly – do have the courage to admit them to themselves, and perhaps a friend or two. Pastors, like the timid and gullible Manders in *Ghosts*, and religious teachers, like the similarly fatuous Rorlund in *Pillars of the Community*, fare less well: they tend to spout platitudes and see only the observance of conventions, ignoring the deeper realities of human behaviour and motivation of which Ibsen makes his audience aware. What's more, they try to force other characters into resisting their own deepest impulses in order to conform and put on a good front to society.

Nora and Dr. Rank in *A Doll House* have an intimate conversation during which she is hoping to ask him for a loan to enable her to pay her threatening creditor, while Rank, who would undoubtedly have given her the loan, tries gently to tell her he loves her, and also that he is dying. Nora, however, despite the courage shown in living her secret life trying to repay the loan, is still too wedded to conventional values and appearances to listen to him, and give him the sympathy and acknowledgement he longs for. It is a wonderful scene of two characters speaking frankly and intimately to each other, each with an underlying desire to communicate, but unable to overcome social boundaries to make their meanings understood and accepted.


Truth in Ibsen's plays is a vital, central issue – but almost never a simple matter of facts. Ibsen often leaves the factual truth of some critical situations something of a mystery to us. Gina may not have been pregnant with Hedwig when she married Hjalmar; she is unsure about it, yet when her husband thinks he sees the truth that Hedwig is not really his child, he denounces her, and causes her suicide. The sly scoundrel Engstrand assures Pastor Manders that he has seen the Pastor carelessly ignite the fire that destroys the newly built orphanage, but throughout the play we have been shown every reason to doubt the testimony of Engstrand, now in an

even better position to manipulate the credulous Manders. Is Dr. Relling correct in holding that everyone, especially the weak-minded idealist, needs a “life illusion”? Certainly, from what we see in Ibsen's plays a life illusion like Hjalmer's which does not harm other people is probably less dangerous than what happens when a destructive would-be truth-teller like Werle sets about to destroy someone else's illusions. Some strong characters, both men and women, in Ibsen's plays, do face up to the truth about their own life and the nature and deeds of people they love; others, however, dramatically demonstrate the truth of T.S. Eliot's line in *Burnt Norton*, “Humankind cannot bear too much reality.”•

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