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Hereditary Guilt and Social Hypocrisy in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*

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Abstract

Ghosts (1881) is one of the most controversial plays of modern European drama. It exposes the hidden corruption beneath respectable bourgeois society and challenges conventional morality, religion, and family structures. This paper examines the themes of hereditary guilt, hypocrisy, repression, and moral decay in *Ghosts*, analysing how Ibsen critiques nineteenth-century social institutions. The study also explores the symbolic significance of “ghosts” as lingering past influences that shape present realities. Through the tragic experiences of the Alving family, Ibsen highlights how inherited guilt and suppressed realities shape individual destinies. The character of Oswald embodies the physical and psychological burden of heredity, while Mrs. Alving represents the conflict between societal duty and personal truth. The role of Pastor Manders further illustrates institutional hypocrisy and the dangers of blind adherence to tradition. Ultimately, *Ghosts* underscores the necessity of confronting uncomfortable truths and questions the sustainability of a society built on repression and deceit. The play remains relevant in contemporary discourse for its bold engagement with issues of morality, freedom, and social responsibility.

Keywords: Heredity, Moral decay, Social hypocrisy, Bourgeois society, Patriarchy, Gender roles, Repression

Introduction

Ghosts (1881), written by Henrik Ibsen, stands as one of the most powerful and controversial works in the history of modern drama. The Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen is widely regarded as the father of modern drama. His play *Ghosts* marks a significant phase in his social realist period, where he addressed taboo subjects such as venereal disease, incest, and moral hypocrisy. The play was initially condemned and even banned due to its shocking themes and critique of traditional values. Set in the household of Mrs. Alving, *Ghosts* dramatizes how the

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past continues to haunt the present. The title itself symbolizes not supernatural beings but the persistence of outdated beliefs, social conventions, and hidden sins.

Emerging during the late nineteenth century—a period dominated by rigid moral codes and strong adherence to social conventions—the play boldly challenges the foundations of bourgeois respectability, religious authority, and family values. At a time when topics such as venereal disease, illegitimacy, and moral corruption were considered taboo, Ibsen broke theatrical conventions by bringing these hidden realities to the stage. As a pioneer of realism, Ibsen sought to move away from romanticized portrayals of life and instead present society as it truly was—flawed, hypocritical, and often oppressive. In *Ghosts*, he exposes the dark undercurrents beneath seemingly respectable households, revealing how societal pressures force individuals to suppress truth and maintain false appearances. The play is set within the domestic space of Mrs. Alving's home, yet its implications extend far beyond, serving as a critique of the broader social and moral structures of nineteenth-century Europe.

The title *Ghosts* is deeply symbolic, referring not to supernatural beings but to the lingering presence of the past—outdated beliefs, inherited sins, and repressed truths that continue to haunt the present. Through the tragic story of the Alving family, Ibsen explores the consequences of living a life dictated by societal expectations rather than personal truth. The characters are trapped by invisible forces—traditions, moral obligations, and inherited guilt—that shape their identities and destinies. This research paper aims to examine the central themes of heredity, social hypocrisy, repression, and moral conflict in *Ghosts*. It also analyzes Ibsen's critique of institutions such as marriage, religion, and family, highlighting how these structures contribute to individual suffering. Ultimately, the play underscores the necessity of confronting truth, however painful, and questions whether true freedom is possible within a society bound by convention.

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*: Plot Overview

Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen is a three-act play set in the home of Mrs. Helene Alving, where the entire action unfolds over the course of a single day. The plot gradually reveals hidden truths and long-suppressed secrets, creating a powerful dramatic tension. The play begins with Mrs. Alving preparing for the opening of an orphanage built in memory of her late husband, Captain Alving. The institution is meant to preserve his reputation as a respectable and honorable man. Pastor Manders, a family friend and moral authority figure, arrives to oversee the final arrangements. At the same time, Oswald Alving, Mrs. Alving's son, has recently returned from Paris after many years abroad. His presence introduces an undercurrent of unease, as he appears physically weak and emotionally troubled. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Captain Alving was not the virtuous man society believed him to be. Mrs. Alving gradually reveals to Pastor Manders that her husband led a life of moral corruption and debauchery. To protect the family's social standing, she had concealed the truth and endured a life of silent suffering. The orphanage, therefore, is not merely a charitable institution but an attempt to bury the past and prevent Oswald from inheriting his father's wealth and moral legacy. Parallel to this revelation is the subplot involving Regina Engstrand, the maid in Mrs.

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Alving's household, and her supposed father, Engstrand. Regina dreams of escaping her current life and seeks opportunities for upward mobility, while Engstrand attempts to manipulate her for his own benefit. Eventually, it is revealed that Regina is actually Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter, making her and Oswald half-siblings.

The dramatic tension intensifies when Oswald confesses to his mother that he is suffering from a debilitating illness inherited from his father—implied to be syphilis. His condition symbolizes the inescapable consequences of the past. In a moment of desperation, Oswald asks his mother to assist him in ending his life if his suffering becomes unbearable. The climax occurs when the orphanage burns down due to Pastor Manders' negligence, symbolizing the collapse of false ideals and moral pretenses. This destruction mirrors the unraveling of the Alving family's carefully constructed facade. In the final scene, Oswald's condition worsens, and he descends into mental and physical deterioration. As he pleads for "the sun," a symbol of clarity and release, Mrs. Alving is left facing an unbearable moral dilemma—whether to honor her son's request for euthanasia or adhere to societal and religious principles. Thus, the plot of *Ghosts* moves from apparent order to complete disintegration, exposing how hidden truths and inherited sins inevitably resurface, destroying the illusion of respectability and leaving the characters trapped in tragic circumstances.

Hereditary Guilt and Social Hypocrisy in *Ghosts*

Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen is a powerful exploration of social, moral, and psychological conflicts. The play's themes reveal Ibsen's critique of nineteenth-century society and remain relevant even today. The play is a profound critique of nineteenth-century society, centering on the interconnected themes of hereditary guilt and social hypocrisy. Through the tragic experiences of the Alving family, Ibsen demonstrates how the sins of the past—both biological and moral—are transmitted across generations, while societal norms compel individuals to conceal truth in favor of respectability.

Hereditary Guilt: The Legacy of the Past

The concept of hereditary guilt is central to the structure and meaning of *Ghosts*. Ibsen presents heredity not merely as a biological phenomenon but as a moral and psychological inheritance. Oswald Alving's illness, implied to be inherited from his father, Captain Alving, symbolizes the inescapable transmission of past sins. This illness is not only physical but also emblematic of the moral corruption embedded within the family. Mrs. Alving's attempt to shield her son from his father's legacy ultimately proves futile. Despite sending Oswald away and constructing a narrative of respectability around Captain Alving, the truth resurfaces with devastating consequences. Ibsen thus suggests that the past cannot be erased; it continues to live on in the present, shaping individual destinies. The idea of hereditary guilt extends beyond the family to society at large. The "ghosts" in the play represent inherited beliefs, outdated conventions, and moral failures that persist across generations. These intangible forces govern behavior and limit the possibility of change, trapping individuals in cycles of suffering.

Social Hypocrisy: The Illusion of Respectability

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Parallel to hereditary guilt is Ibsen's scathing critique of social hypocrisy. The society depicted in *Ghosts* values outward respectability over inner truth, forcing individuals to maintain appearances at any cost. Mrs. Alving's life is shaped by this pressure; she remains in a destructive marriage and conceals her husband's immoral behavior to preserve her social standing. Pastor Manders embodies institutional hypocrisy. As a representative of religious and moral authority, he upholds conventional values without questioning their consequences. His advice to Mrs. Alving—to remain with her husband and fulfill her "duty"—reflects a rigid adherence to societal norms rather than genuine ethical concern. His refusal to insure the orphanage, based on fear of public opinion, further exposes his superficial morality. The orphanage itself becomes a powerful symbol of hypocrisy. Built to honor Captain Alving's reputation, it serves as a façade that hides the truth of his debauched life. Its eventual destruction by fire signifies the collapse of these false ideals and the exposure of underlying realities.

Interconnection of Heredity and Hypocrisy

Ibsen intricately links hereditary guilt and social hypocrisy, showing how one reinforces the other. The suppression of truth—driven by societal expectations—allows moral corruption to persist and be passed on to future generations. Mrs. Alving's silence about her husband's behavior, dictated by social norms, indirectly contributes to Oswald's tragic fate. Thus, hypocrisy becomes the mechanism through which hereditary guilt operates. By refusing to confront uncomfortable truths, society ensures the continuation of suffering. The "ghosts" are not only inherited sins but also the lies and illusions that sustain them.

Tragic Consequences

The culmination of these themes is seen in the play's tragic ending. Oswald's physical and mental deterioration represents the ultimate consequence of inherited guilt, while Mrs. Alving's moral dilemma highlights the cost of living within a hypocritical society. Her inability to reconcile truth with societal expectations leaves her in a state of profound anguish. Ibsen offers no easy resolution, emphasizing instead the inevitability of tragedy when truth is suppressed and the past is denied.

Conclusion

Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen remains a landmark work in modern drama for its fearless exploration of hereditary guilt and social hypocrisy. Through the tragic fate of the Alving family, Ibsen demonstrates how the past—whether in the form of inherited disease, moral corruption, or entrenched social beliefs—continues to shape and often destroy the present. The play reveals that individuals are not entirely free but are deeply influenced by forces beyond their control, particularly when truth is suppressed. At the same time, Ibsen delivers a sharp critique of a society that values outward respectability over inner integrity. The insistence on maintaining appearances compels characters like Mrs. Alving to conceal reality, ultimately leading to greater suffering. Social hypocrisy, as depicted in the play, becomes a powerful mechanism that sustains injustice, reinforces harmful traditions, and perpetuates cycles of guilt and repression. By intertwining these themes, Ibsen emphasizes the necessity of confronting

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uncomfortable truths. The destruction of illusions—symbolized by the burning of the orphanage and Oswald’s tragic condition—serves as a warning against the dangers of denial and moral compromise. The “ghosts” that haunt the characters are not supernatural entities but the lingering effects of past actions and unchallenged conventions. Ultimately, *Ghosts* calls for a transformation in both individual and societal consciousness. It urges the rejection of blind adherence to tradition and advocates for honesty, moral courage, and personal responsibility. The play’s enduring relevance lies in its universal message: only by acknowledging and addressing the shadows of the past can individuals and societies hope to achieve genuine freedom and ethical progress.

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