



“On the Contrary!”

Henrik Ibsen: the Guilt-Ridden Contrarian

By Jerry James

“For [Ibsen’s past], though it hath no tongue, will speak, with most mysterious organ...”

— [Not Quite] William Shakespeare



Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)

Photography helped Ibsen cultivate his famous Look.

On May 22, 1906, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen lay dying at his home in Kristiania. (It would not become Oslo until 1925.) His nurse told a visitor he seemed a little better. Ibsen then spoke his last word—“*Tvertimot!*”—“On the contrary!” He died the next day.

It was perfectly in character for the Great Contrarian to make such an exit. For 50 years he had written plays largely concerned, as Robert Ferguson wrote, with “guilt, shame and nemesis.” His work had ripped apart the facade of Norwegian bourgeois respectability. But very few knew the secret Ibsen hid behind his own carefully constructed, strongly defended facade.

Impeccably dressed, the 5’2” author made his way to the Grand Café at precisely the same hour each day. In his buttonhole, he displayed Crown honors. And, as a final touch to his long dark coat and tall silk hat, he always carried a tightly rolled umbrella. To those who knew Ibsen’s secret, the unused umbrella might have seemed a symbol a little too on-the-nose.

The secret infused his writing with personal guilt, shame and a constant dread of inevitable nemesis. And yet, he could not keep himself from scattering hints—giveaways—throughout his plays, as if he one day hoped to be found out. What was this secret? Let’s begin at the beginning.

Early Years



Ibsen at 16; Artist's Rendering

Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien, Norway, on March 20, 1828. Norway had been ruled by Sweden only since 1814. Previously, it had been ruled by Denmark for almost 300 years. Danish was Norway's de facto official language.

Young Henrik's family was among the merchant elite of Skien, a major port. As a child, he seems to have been an arrogant jerk. "Really nasty. Spiteful and cruel. He used to beat us up," a neighbor remembered.

But by the time Henrik was 10, his father's failed business dealings had led to financial disaster. Beyond the money, the family had lost its respectability. The seeds of Ibsen's passion for securing and maintaining his own respectability were planted early.

His formal education over at 15, Henrik was sent off to Grimstad as apprentice to a pharmacist. He had vague ideas about becoming a doctor, becoming a painter. But somehow, during his apprenticeship, he would become a playwright—and a father.

Apprenticeship

Else Sophie Birkedalen was the maid in the pharmacist's house. She was 10 years older than Henrik. On October 9, 1846, she gave birth to a son, whom she named Hans Jacob Henriksen. On December 7, the 18-year-old Henrik formally admitted paternity and

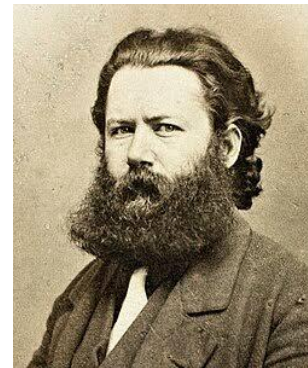
promised to pay support until Hans Jacob reached the age of 15. He would have trouble doing so.

Ibsen never spoke of this, never wrote of it. It was as if Else Sophie and Hans Jacob had never existed. It's not even certain that his parents knew. But Ibsen knew. And remembered. Perhaps he was waiting for nemesis—for the knock on the door that would say he had finally been found out, that Hans Jacob had come at last.

By the time his apprenticeship moved to Østregata in 1847, Ibsen had already grown the beard which, with minor alterations, would become The Look for the rest of his life. There, he became the center of a group of young men, renowned for his sarcasm, his humorous poems and his drunken anger. Few knew he also wrote serious verse.

Ibsen's verse became a play, *Cataline*. A friend took it to Kristiania, the capital, to submit to the only theatre in town. It was rejected, but the friend paid for it to be published, at a time when fewer than 20 books a year were published in Norway.

Kristiania



Ibsen in his early 30s

Ibsen was thus inspired to light out for Kristiania, study and get into the university. But his exam scores were too low. So, he wrote a play instead. *The Warrior's Barrow* was even produced.

However, nemesis still lurked, unforgotten. When Ibsen was late with his child support payments in 1851, he was sentenced to forced labor for 68 days. Fortunately, a job came his way.



The Former Det Norske Theatre, Bergen

The job came from Ole Bull, the great Norwegian violinist, who wanted to establish a Norwegian language theatre in Bergen. Danish and Norwegian are very similar, but at the time, Danish was the language spoken in the theatre, usually by touring German actors, who spoke it poorly.

So it was that at 24, Henrik Ibsen, author of precisely 2 plays, somehow became dramatist-in-residence at Det Norske Theatre, which would produce everything he wrote for the next 6 years.

The Secret

Nemesis had been dodged, but guilt and shame still stalked Ibsen. In *Lady Inger of Østråt*, which he wrote for Det Norske, the lady in question has an illegitimate son.

And yet, Ibsen prospered. He moved back to Kristiania, married and had a (legitimate) son. He was awarded a yearly government writing grant. Then he wrote *Peer Gynt*, the folk tale of Norway's primeval scamp.

Midway through the play, Peer meets the Green Girl, who wants to marry him. It's off to meet her father, the Mountain King.

Once there, Peer realizes they're trolls! When he tries to back out, the Mountain King stops him. His daughter's pregnant. For once, Peer's telling the truth when he says that can't be. Aha, says the Mountain King, trolls can get pregnant just by thinking! Peer promptly runs away.

A few years later, as Peer is finally about to marry his long-suffering sweetheart, the Green Girl, now an aging troll, returns, with an ill-mannered brat in hand.

She says, "You'll never get rid of me. When you tickle her, Peer, and nibble her ear, I'll be there, beside you, claiming my share." Peer promptly runs away again.

Curiously enough, Peer's creator had already run away to Europe a few years earlier. Ibsen would remain in self-exile for 27 years, never again seeing his parents. But then, he didn't have to worry about a visit from Else Sophie or Hans Jacob, either.



In the Hall of the Mountain King

Once Ibsen turned to writing "problem plays," whose principal concern was social issues, the giveaways began to pile up:

In *The Pillars of Society*, a scandalous affair from years ago haunts the protagonist.

In *A Doll's House*, the nanny has an illegitimate child.

In *Ghosts*, the illegitimate child and the legitimate child might commit incest.

In *The Wild Duck*, a young girl kills herself when her true paternity is revealed.

In *Rosmersholm*, the female lead, born illegitimate, persuades the title character's wife to kill herself, then joins him in suicide.

Hedda Gabler put a stop to all this. Before her marriage, Hedda was the muse of a brilliant scholar, who has just written the book she always knew he could. But he wrote it using another woman as muse—it's illegitimate! Hedda burns the manuscript, saying, "I am burning your child!"

The Old Man



Ibsen, in his Habit as He Lived

Else Sophie died in 1892. She had worked as a housekeeper, but by then, she was an old, blind woman, living on welfare with her son. Her only known mention of the affair was, "Well, you know, that Henrik, it wasn't easy to stop him."

Hans Jacob became a blacksmith and struggled with alcoholism all his life. He would take his birth certificate into a bar and flash it to cadge drinks. The story goes that after Else Sophie's death he appeared at

Ibsen's door to ask for money. Ibsen handed him a small sum—5 crowns—and said, "Here. That's what I gave your mother," and slammed the door in his face.

Nemesis had finally come, and Ibsen, like Nora in *A Doll's House*, had slammed the door in its face. Hans Jacob died in 1916.

Coda



James M. Barrie

And so, it would seem that Ibsen had beaten nemesis, that his secret was safe during his lifetime. But there remains the curious incident of James M. Barrie.

Barrie was a champion of Ibsen, lovingly parodying him in *Ibsen's Ghost* (1891); joining other British authors in saluting him on his 70th birthday (1898); and finally writing his own homage, *The Wedding Guest* (1900), a "problem play."

The play tells the story of a painter—something Ibsen once aspired to be, you'll recall—who is confronted on his wedding day by his former lover and their child.

It makes one wonder just how secret Ibsen's secret was. The Great Contrarian might have enjoyed that semi-revelation. Or—just perhaps—"On the contrary!"

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for more than sixty years. During forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.