

THE IDEA OF MORALITY IN HENRIK IBSEN'S PLAY "AN ENEMY OF PEOPLE"

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ABSTRACT

Morals are the established principles of behaviour that facilitate people to reside agreeably in Society; Morals and Society are interconnected. They refer to what is deemed by societies as permissible and acceptable. The majority have a propensity to act morally and follow societal guiding principles. Morality time and again requires that people give up their likings for the benefit of society. The ones who are unconcerned towards right and wrong are amoral. An enemy of the people discusses autonomy, morality, and autocracy in a small, poor Norwegian village. A man dares to unveil a sickening truth to the public and a society's response to the corruption. The play is concerned with Dr. Stockmann and the community, the role of the influential, and the power of the majority. Ibsen's previous play *ghosts* drew backlash and a chorus of disapproval; this response gave him the idea to write 'An Enemy of the People', a play about the truthful protagonist and subsequent punishment for it.

KEYWORDS: Morality, Society, Corruption, Principles, and Tyrann

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INTRODUCTION

The Nineteenth Century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's, *An Enemy of the People* (1882), is situated in a Norwegian coastal town. A kind of baths, health resorts, have been recently opened in the town to attract visitors, the townspeople are told that the baths will bring great economic benefits and prosperity.

In act 1 of the play, we are introduced to Thomas Stockmann, a medical officer, and Peter Stockmann, the chairman of the town. The two are siblings and share intense sibling rivalry. They indulge in a tussle over whose idea it was to construct the baths, to improve the current conditions of the town. The townspeople exhibit enthusiasm and hope for a better standard of living with the economic gains from the baths. Dr. Stockmann uncovers a flaw in the baths as some of the previous visitors had fallen sick. He requested a lab to check on the quality of water. The results come back, and he reveals "The whole Bath establishment is a whited, poisoned sepulchre, I tell you--the gravest possible danger to the public health! All the nastiness up at Molledal, all that stinking filth, is infecting the water in the conduit-pipes leading to the reservoir; and the same cursed, filthy poison oozes out on the shore too--" (Act1, pg17). The wells are contaminated and in urgent need of care. The pipes need to be re-laid, and water must be treated. Dr. Stockmann expected that this problem would be immediately taken care of but he turns out to be naïve.

The play discusses and openly criticized the Norwegian society and its hypocritical ideas.

IDEA OF MORALITY

An Enemy of the People examines a specific scenario, the fault with the baths, and uses it to make a harsh critique about humanity. Ibsen's contemporary society was losing its long-held values and morals. In the play, Dr. Stockmann's concern with the new health baths' faulty water pipes raises problems for people and the town committee. The question then becomes one of bath cleansing. It's a problem of public health and hygiene.

Ibsen then moves on to the more complex issue of private versus public morality from this specific situation. To put it another way, Ibsen looks into the relationship between moral and ethical responsibility and practical necessity.

Thomas Stockmann argues that exposing customers to the Baths will hurt them and that this is unacceptable. He is a physician dedicated to improving people's health. As a result, even if he is not the cause of the harm, he is likely to feel a tremendous commitment to the customers. Thomas also serves on the Baths' governing board, so he fairly believes that luring individuals into a position that will damage them makes him doubly liable. There is no doubt that all moral agents have a general commitment not to injure others.

However, it's easy to see why Thomas Stockmann feels a strong sense of responsibility to anyone who may become ill as a result of visiting the Baths. Indeed, the town is attempting to persuade sick people to use these services. Peter Stockmann, as mayor, has a responsibility to do what is best for the municipality. Even if all people of the town are bound by this commitment, Peter has a moral obligation that is distinct from the rest. It's not surprising, then, that Peter demands that Thomas and all others submit themselves "to the authorities charged with the welfare of that community" even before he knows about the exact nature of the problem (Act I, p. 10). This immediately shifts the issue in Peter's favour; the criterion to be applied is the town's well-being.

Peter received the report documenting the pollution at the Baths from Thomas Stockmann. Peter presents various arguments against shutting down the Baths and re-laying the pipes after reading the report. His first argument is based on the economic interests of the citizens. The town is currently thriving, and there are many reasons to believe it will continue to do so in the future. If the Baths are closed, the town's main source of revenue will be cut off. And if the pipes need to be re-laid, it will be expensive. Later, the Mayor adds to this argument by reminding Hovstad and Aslaksen that the costs of re-laying the pipes will be passed on to the citizens in the form of higher taxes. As a result, if Dr. Stockmann's plan is implemented, both the community as a whole and individual people would suffer.

In order to win, the Mayor needs others to perceive the problem in the same light. As a result, he informs Thomas that this is not merely a scientific issue, instead, "it is a combination of technical and economic factors" (Act II, p. 39). The goal is to disarm Dr. Stockmann by taking the subject out of his domain of expertise. This method does not have to be viewed as completely deceptive. Hovstad had already cautioned Thomas that things could be trickier than he thought, "it probably hasn't struck you that it's tied up with a lot of other things" (Act II, p. 25).

It is undeniable that the closure of the Baths will have an influence on the town's well-being. Peter's second argument could be deceptive. "I am not totally convinced that the status of the Baths is as severe as you make out," he replies (Act II, p. 35). This effectively denies the existence of a problem or at the very least a major one.

There are two grounds to accuse Peter of being a liar in this situation. To begin with, whether the Baths are poisoned is a scientific question, and Peter is neither a specialist nor has he quoted expert reports. Peter appears to be doing nothing more than denying an inconvenient truth for him. Second, the Mayor proposes his own idea later on. However, until there is a genuine problem, a solution is not required. Peter makes a third argument, based on Thomas's responsibilities as a member of the Baths' governing board. Because the mayor is the head of the board, he has final power for anything he says, "But as a subordinate member of the staff of the Baths, you have no right to express any opinion that conflicts with that of your superiors" (Act II, p. 39). Peter had previously stated the same notion, even before he was aware of the nature of the problem: 'The individual must be willing to submit himself... to the authority charged with the wellbeing of that community' (Act I, p. 10). If true, this argument does not establish what should be done with the Baths in terms of substance; rather, it establishes who should make the decision. Peter mentions a fourth point, but it isn't completely developed. In this occasion, he invokes Thomas's responsibilities to his own family.

This might be interpreted as either a threat or a moral argument. Assuming the former, the Mayor is just warning Thomas that if he informs the public about the claimed problem, he will lose his job. In this interpretation, Peter is telling his brother that he has responsibilities as a spouse and parent, and that his ability to fulfil those responsibilities will be jeopardised if he goes ahead with his plan. If Mayor Stockmann is a true moral warrior, he feels he should do whatever it takes to protect the community's interests. It is therefore vital to persuade Thomas not to inform the public that the Baths are polluted. The problem is both technological and economic. When all of the numbers are added together, the Mayor's proposal will be the greatest option for everyone. Dr. Stockmann has no right to talk publicly about this matter, according to the third argument, which is procedural rather than substantive. The fourth argument encourages Thomas to concentrate on his other obligations as a spouse and father.

CONCLUSIONS

An Enemy of the People is a play that highlights all issues Ibsen criticized and deemed to be hypocritical. It's pleasing to see a play based on conviction and moral certainty thrive in the face of conspiracies and cover-ups. Even a tiny community can suffer from red tape and political squabbles, both of which can wreak havoc on the environment. It's difficult to understand how some of the characters move from believing in doing the right thing to then revealing that they have ulterior goals or other factors that must take precedence over their consciences. It's also astonishing how quickly the mayor can persuade people to follow his rules.

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