

## GHOSTS

### Summary and Analysis Act II

#### Summary

The scene is unchanged, but now it has stopped raining and a mist obscures the outside landscape. With dinner finished, Oswald out for a walk, and Regina busy with the laundry, Mrs. Alving and Manders continue their conversation. She tells how she managed to hush up the scandal of Alving's conduct by providing Joanna with a handsome dowry and having her respectably married off to Jacob Engstrand. Manders is shocked that the carpenter lied to him by confessing of his "light behavior" with Joanna and so deceived the pastor to perform the ceremony. How could a man, "for a paltry seventy pounds" allow himself to be bound in marriage "to a fallen woman." Mrs. Alving points out that she was married to a "fallen man," but Manders says the two cases are as different as night and day. Yes, his hostess agrees, there was a great difference in the price paid, "between a paltry seventy pounds and a whole fortune"; besides, her family arranged the marriage, for she was in love with someone else at the time. To answer her meaningful glance, Manders weakly concludes that at least the match was made "in complete conformity with law and order." I often think that law and order are "at the bottom of all the misery in the world," retorts Mrs. Alving. She regrets her lifelong cowardice. Were she not such a coward in the name of law and order, she says, "I would have told Oswald all I have told you, from beginning to end."

Manders points out that she taught her son to idealize his father and as a mother she must feel forbidden to shatter his illusions. "And what about the truth?" asks Mrs. Alving. "What about his ideals?" responds Manders, underlining Ibsen's basic equation that "ideals" equal "lies".

Although Mrs. Alving wishes to quickly find a post for Regina before Oswald gets her in trouble, she regrets her cowardice. To prevent further deceit she should rather encourage the marriage or any other arrangement, she tells the pastor. Manders is shocked that she can suggest a relationship based on incest; as to her so-called cowardice, he denies there was any better way to tell Oswald of his father. By being a coward, Mrs. Alving explains, she succumbs to ghosts:

I am frightened and timid because I am obsessed by the presence of ghosts that I never can get rid of . . . When I heard Regina and Oswald in there it was just like seeing ghosts before my eyes. I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind. They are not actually alive in us, but there they are dormant all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts all over the world. They must be countless as the grains of the sands, it seems to me. And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us.

Manders blames these strange ideas on her reading — this "subversive, free-thinking literature" — but she says her ideas come from suffering what Manders himself praised "as right and just what my whole soul revolted against as it would against something abominable." You think it was wrong for me to entreat you as a wife to return to your lawful husband "when you came to me half distracted and crying, "Here I am, take me!" asks the pastor. "I think it was," she answers.

Manders declares he can no longer allow a young girl to remain in her house and Regina must go home to her father's care. At this moment there is a knock at the door. Engstrand enters, respectfully requesting the reverend to lead "all of us who have worked so honestly together" on the orphanage building in some concluding prayers. Closely questioning Engstrand about his marriage and other matters, Manders offers the carpenter a chance to explain what must "lie so heavy" on his conscience. The old man makes a fine show of piousness and sensitive feelings as he tells his story. Manders, with tears in his eyes at his flawless life, offers Engstrand a strong handshake of faith and friendship. The pastor, turning to his hostess, asks if she doesn't think that we must be "exceedingly careful" before "condemning our fellow men." "What I think is that you are, and always will remain, a big baby, Mr. Manders," she answers, and thinks that "I should like to give you a big hug!" Hurriedly, the pastor goes out to conduct the prayer meeting.

Discovering Oswald in the dining room, Mrs. Alving sits down with him for a chat. Her son complains that, besides being constantly tired, the lack of sunshine prevents him from painting. This is no ordinary fatigue, he tells his mother, but it is part of a sickness a Paris doctor diagnosed for him. He was told he had this "canker of disease" since his birth. Oswald continues that "the old cynic said, 'The sins of the fathers are visited on the children.'" To prove that his father lived a dutiful, virtuous life, the boy read some of his mother's letters to the doctor. As Mrs. Alving softly repeats, "The sins of the fathers!" Oswald confesses of a single instance of "imprudence" that must have infected him. He despairs that he threw his life away for a brief pleasure and asks his mother for something to drink to drown "these gnawing thoughts." Regina brings in a lamp and fetches champagne.

"I can't go on bearing this agony of mind alone," Oswald tells his mother. He would like to take Regina with him and leave home. Because she has "the joy of life in her" Regina will be his salvation. "The joy of life?" asks Mrs. Alving with a start, "Is there salvation in that?" Regina brings more wine and Oswald asks her to fetch a glass for herself. At her mistress' nod, the girl obeys and takes a seat at the table. Mrs. Alving wants to know more about the "joy of life." People here at home are taught to consider work as a curse and punishment for sin and that life is a state of wretchedness, Oswald explains. No one believes that in Paris, where "the mere fact of being alive is thought to be a matter for exultant happiness. There is light there and sunshine and a holiday feeling," he says. Oswald says he must leave home. If not, "all these feelings that are so strong in me would degenerate into something ugly here," he tells his mother. She regards him steadily for a moment. Now, for the first time, she murmurs, "I see clearly how it all happened. And now I can speak." She is about to tell Oswald and Regina the truth when Manders suddenly enters, cheerful from having spent an "edifying time" at the prayer meeting. He says he has decided that Engstrand needs help with the sailors' home and Regina must go and live with him.

"Regina is going away with me," Oswald states, and Manders turns to Mrs. Alving in bewilderment. "That will not happen either," she declares, and despite the pastor's pleading is about to speak openly. At this moment they hear shouting outside and through the conservatory windows they see a red glare. The orphanage is ablaze. "Mrs. Alving, that fire is a judgment on this house of sin!" cries Manders. As they all rush out to the orphanage, he is left wringing his hands. "And no insurance," he moans, and then follows them.

Analysis

Formally developing the drama, the second act brings out details and enlarges the action, characterizations and motives which were introduced in the first act. Moreover, the acceleration of events taking place in this scene, their effects heightened by the rich symbolism in Mrs. Alving's "ghosts" speech, leads the audience to await the final nemesis or judgment that will occur in Act III. More specifically, the purpose of this second part is to focus attention on Oswald and complete the characterizations of the secondary characters. By so doing, the playwright can fully disclose the consequences when individuals live by old beliefs and traditional dogma and then assess the guilt for this crime.

Exposing the history of their previous relationship, the conversation between Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders provides the audience with a completed portrait of the clergyman. First showing Manders' hypocrisy and self-centeredness, Ibsen sums him up as a "big baby." The dramatist, by allowing Engstrand to recite the humbug story of his virtuous life, fully depicts the moral irresponsibility of the carpenter. With these two characters completely developed, Ibsen may now investigate the problem of Mrs. Alving and dwell on the fruits of her cowardice, Regina and Oswald.

Having in common their "joy of life" inherited through their father, Regina and Oswald show their youthful innocence by being unaware of their near-incest relationship. When Mrs. Alving discovers that Oswald, like his father before him, feels that this exuberance of life will degenerate in the sanctimonious home atmosphere, she suddenly understands why her husband became a dissipated drunkard. To prevent further deceit, she prepares Oswald and Regina to comprehend the truth of their origins and the nature of their heritage. As she begins to say the words that will raze these old lies of her past life, they discover the orphanage is ablaze. The symbol of hypocrisy and deceit — a worthy institution to serve society — is destroyed in the moment of truth.

### Summary and Analysis Act III

#### Summary

The scene still takes place in Mrs. Alving's home, but it is night time. By now the fire is out, the entire orphanage burned to the ground. While Mrs. Alving has gone to fetch Oswald, Regina and Manders receive Engstrand. "God help us all," he says piously and clucking sympathetically says that the prayer meeting caused the fire. Whispering that "Now we've got the old fool, my girl," he tells Manders, the only one carrying a candle, that he saw the pastor snuff the light and toss the burning wick among the shavings. The distraught reverend is beside himself. The worst aspect of this matter, he says, will be the attacks and slanderous accusations of the newspapers. By this time Mrs. Alving has returned. She considers the fire merely as a business loss; as to the property and the remaining capital in the bank, Manders may use it as he likes. He thinks he may still turn the estate into "some useful community enterprise" and Engstrand is hopeful for his support of the seamen's home. Gloomily, Manders answers that he must first await the published results of the inquiry into the cause of the fire. Offering himself as "an angel of salvation," Engstrand says he will himself answer to the charge. Relieved and breathless, Manders eagerly grasps his hand. "You are one in a thousand," he declares. "You shall have assistance in the matter of your sailors' home, you may rely upon that."

United in friendship, Engstrand and Manders prepare to leave together. Announcing to Mrs. Alving that his enterprise shall be called "The Alving Home," the carpenter concludes, "And

if I can carry my own ideas about it, I shall make it worthy of bearing the late Mr. Alving's name." The double entendre is unmistakable to everyone except Manders.

Oswald returns so depressed that Regina is suspicious he may be ill. Mrs. Alving now prepares to tell them both what she started to divulge in the previous scene. What Oswald told her about the joy of life suddenly sheds new light upon everything in her own life, she tells them, for his father, so full of "irrepressible energy and exuberant spirits" in his young days "gave me a holiday feeling just to look at him." Then this boy had to settle in a second-rate town which had none of the joy of life to offer him but only dissipations:

He had to come out here and live an aimless life; he had only an official post. He had no work worth devoting his whole mind to; he had nothing more than official routine to attend to. He had not one single companion capable of appreciating what the joy of life meant; nothing but idlers and tipplers — and so the inevitable happened.

What was the inevitable, asks Oswald, and his mother answers that he had himself described how he would degenerate at home. "Do you mean by that Father — ?" and she nods:

Your poor father never found any outlet for the overmastering joy of life that was in him. And I brought no holiday spirit into his home either. I had been taught about duty and that sort of thing that I believed in so long here. Everything seemed to turn upon duty — my duty or his duty — and I am afraid that I made your poor father's home unbearable to him, Oswald.

Then why did she not write him the truth in her letters, demands the son, and she can only say she never regarded it as something a child should know about. "Your father was a lost man before ever you were born," says Mrs. Alving, and all these years she has kept in mind that Regina "had as good a right in this house — as my own boy had." To their bewilderment she answers quietly, "Yes, now you both know."

"So Mother was one of that sort too," Regina muses. Then she announces her desire to leave them to make good use of her youth before it is wasted. With Oswald sick, she does not wish to spend her life looking after an invalid for "I have the joy of life in me too, Mrs. Alving." From now on she shall make her home in the "Alving Home." Mother and son are alone onstage.

"Let us have a little chat," says Oswald beckoning her to sit beside him. Before he divulges the truth about his fatigue and inability to work he warns her she mustn't scream. The illness itself is hereditary, he continues, and "it lies here (touching his forehead) waiting. At any moment, it may break out." She stifles a cry. At the time he had a serious attack in Paris, Oswald goes on, the doctor told him he would never recover from another one. The disease is a lingering one — the doctor likened it to a "softening of the brain" — and it will leave him hopeless as a vegetable.

Showing his mother a dozen morphia tablets, Oswald says he needed Regina's strength and courage to administer "this last helping hand." Now that Regina is gone, however, his mother must swear that she will give him them herself when it is necessary. Mrs. Alving screams and tries to dash out for the doctor, but Oswald reaches the door first and locks it. "Have you a mother's heart and can bear to see me suffering this unspeakable terror?" he cries out. Trying to control herself, Mrs. Alving trembles violently. "Here is my hand on it," she says.

Outside day is breaking. Oswald is seated quietly in an armchair near the lamp. Cautiously bending over him, Mrs. Alving straightens up, relieved:

It has only been a dreadful fancy of yours, Oswald [she chatters] . . . But now you will get some rest, at home with your own mother, my darling boy . . . There now, the attack is over. You see how easily it passed off . . . And look, Oswald, what a lovely day we are going to have. Now you will be able to see your home properly.

She rises and puts out the lamp. In the sunrise the glaciers and peaks in the distance are bathed in bright morning light. Oswald, with his back toward the window, suddenly speaks. "Mother give me the sun." Regarding him with amazement she quavers, "What did you say?" Dully, Oswald repeats, "The sun — the sun." She screams his name. As before, he only says, "The sun — the sun." She beats her head with her hands. "I can't bear it! Never!" she screams. Then, passing her hands over his coat, she searches for the packet of pills. "Where has he got it? Here!" Then she cries, "No, no no! — Yes! — No, no!" Mrs. Alving stares at her son in speechless terror. Oswald remains motionless. "The sun — the sun," he repeats monotonously, and the curtain falls.

### Analysis

As in a Greek tragedy, the protagonist's "tragic flaw" involves not only himself, but his children, in the consequences of guilt. In this act Mrs. Alving receives the full penalty for her guilt of substituting a sense of duty for the "joy of life." Her submission to ancient social standards destroys the creative mind of her artist son and similarly destroys Regina's blooming womanhood. The "ghosts" of heredity reappear as Oswald succumbs to syphilitic paresis and as Regina goes to find her future in a brothel. Mrs. Alving can only administer the final stroke — the mortal dose of morphia — to complete the destruction of Oswald she had so unwittingly begun.

With a dramatic flourish, Ibsen uses the environment as an ironic "objective correlative" to underscore the tragedy. As the dawn breaks over a spectacular mountain landscape, Oswald is thrust into the unending darkness of his lingering doom. The long awaited sunshine, so badly needed by Oswald to continue his painting, arrives only to illuminate catastrophe. By the same token, the light of truth has come too late for Mrs. Alving to avoid the consequences of her lifelong deceit.

### Symbols in *Ghosts*

Ibsen's poetic ability enables him to enrich the prose plays with symbols that have broad as well as narrow meanings. Especially allusive is Ibsen's concept of light and darkness. Oswald's last plea for the sun, for instance, sums up his need for the "joy of life" in himself as well as in his work. He needs sunlight in which to paint and he needs illumination on the nature of his father. A pall hangs over the entire landscape of the play; if there is no rain at the moment, the scene outside the window is obscured by mist. The weather finally clears when Mrs. Alving faces the truth, but it is too late. Thrust into darkness, Oswald weakly cries out for the sun. His last monosyllabic plea has a twofold significance: not only symbolizing the "light of truth," it might stand for the morphia powders which would dispel the lingering darkness that enshrouds Oswald's diseased mind.

The fire that destroys the orphanage is another symbol of truth. Purifying the institution of deceit, the flames allow Engstrand to receive support for his planned Alving Home. With characteristic irony, Ibsen implies that there is no deceit in raising a brothel to the memory of the late Captain Alving.

The most pervasive symbol, of course, is that of ghosts. The ghosts are worn ideals and principles of law and order so misapplied that they have no actual significance. All the untested maxims and abstract dogma that Manders maintains are ghosts; all the sources of personal cowardice in Mrs. Alving are ghosts. Ghosts are also the lies about the past, perpetrated to the present, which will haunt the future. Finally, ghosts are the actual and symbolic diseases of heredity which destroy the joy of life in the younger, freer generations.

#### Character of Pastor Manders

Pastor Manders, simple-minded and self-involved like Torvald Helmer, exists in an imaginary world where people and events conform to his stereotypes. Depositions such as "It is not a wife's part to be her husband's judge" and "We have no right to do anything that will scandalize the community" show how he accepts all the verbal expressions of social principles but is unable to deal with instances where doctrine does not apply. When he states, for instance, "A child should love and honor his father and mother," Mrs. Alving tartly replies, "Don't let us talk in such general terms. Suppose we say: ought Oswald to love and honor Mr. Alving?" To this conflict of principle and reality which she suggests, the reverend has no response. Hypocritical and prideful, Manders' only reaction to the story of Joanna's scandalous marriage to Engstrand is indignation that he was fooled.

Because of the power that his clerical status accords him, Manders is the most destructive creature in the drama. Incapable of spontaneity, devoid of any intellect, he readily sacrifices individual integrity and freedom of expression to maintain empty social standards. The major incident in a life devoted to hypocrisy occurred when Manders persuaded Mrs. Alving to return to her husband. Delighted to show the world his victory over temptation, he neglected Mrs. Alving's plight. His indifference to the needs of the individual sacrificed the love of a sensitive young woman and doomed her to lifelong despair. Although he is a believable figure in the present play, Manders is too much a stereotype. He speaks for all of society and represents its evils.