UNIT 8: HENRIK IBSEN: *A DOLL'S HOUSE* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives
8.2 Introduction
8.3 Henrik Ibsen: His Life and Works
8.4 Background of the Play
8.5 Let us sum up
8.6 Further Reading
8.7 Answers to Check Your Progress
8.8 Model Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the biography of the famous playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen
- gain an insight into the works of Henrik Ibsen
- get an idea as to what shaped his literary career
- get an idea on the kind of society at large when Ibsen wrote

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This Unit is intended to familiarise you to the writings of popular Norwegian poet and dramatist. Henrik Johan Ibsen. In the next unit,we shall discuss his important play *A Doll's House* in details. Henrik Ibsen was a major nineteenth century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is often referred to as "the father of realism" and is one of the founders of Modernism in theatre. Realism in the later half of the nineteenth century began as an experiment to make theater more useful to society.His plays attacked social values and he refused to follow the conventions of his time. He sincerely portrays ordinary life as it is, not as one would like to be.Ibsen's concern for women's rights, and for human rights in general is very much



Forged : produce or imitate a work of art

Frivolous : lighthearted

Intelligentsia : intellectuals or highly educated people as a group, especially when regarded as possessing culture and political influence.

Spectacular : beautiful in a dramatic and eye-catching way

Waning : declining/vanishing

Extravagant : exceeding what is reasonable or appropriate

Explorations : thorough examination of a subject

prominent in his plays. The mainstream theatre from 1859 to 1900 was still bound up in melodramas, spectacle plays (disasters, etc.), comic operas, and vaudevilles. His **forged** his own style of drama which seems to coincide with a rising demand by the new intellectual section for a serious "thinking" theatre, contrary to the **frivolous** entertainment on mainstream stages. Ibsen's realist plays, such as A Doll's House, Ghosts, and An Enemy of the People, were immensely supported by the **intelligentsia** upon their publication He was one of the new wave of writers to experiment with dramatic form. He is often ranked as one of the most distinguished playwrights in the European tradition.He is widely regarded as the most important playwright since Shakespeare. He has also been a major influential figure to the playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw,James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill Arthur Miller ,Oscar Wilde and many more. This speaks volume regarding the quality of works he produced.Ibsen turned his eye toward societal issues rejecting the **spectacular**, sentimental and **extravagant** plays that marked the nineteenth-century stage. Ibsen's focus was more towards societal issues that marked the **waning** years of the Victorian era. In spite of all sorts of criticism that Ibsen had to face for his works,nevertheless, he laid the foundation for even more radical **explorations** in the following century. Ibsen wanted to make his plays uncompromisingly realistic, he wrote the dialogue in simple, everyday, middle-class language.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a short note on Henrik Johan Ibsen.

Q2. Why is Ibsen often regarded as 'the father of realism'?

Q3. What purpose did the Realistic theatres serve during that period?

Q4. List a few writers who were influenced by him.

Q5. What was Ibsen's major focus in his writings?



ACTIVITY 8.1

Make a list of Henrik Ibsen's contemporary writers and then compare and contrast the major concerns in their writings along with Ibsen.

8.3 HENRIK IBSEN: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Ibsen was born on March 20th,1828 in Skien, a town in the south of Norway. His father ,Knud Ibsen, was a well-to-do merchant and was financially quite sound. Three brothers and a sister were born after him, but Henrik **outshined** amongst his siblings. When he was just eight years old,his father's business felt a setback, thereby, leading them to live a life of **penury**. At the difficult hours of financial crisis,their family and friends too, showed their true colours.The family was,therefore,forced to move to a small farm house.To make matters worse, Ibsen's mother grew distant and dissatisfied with her marriage.Ibsen had a very difficult childhood in the midst of so much of chaos in the family. It is therefore no coincidence that the themes of debt, marriage, society, and independence play a prominent role in many of Henrik's plays.

Ibsen began writing poetry at the age of nineteen; and completed his first play *Catiline*,a blank verse tragedy ,when he was only twenty- two. He held an official position in a theatre company a year later,and wrote several plays for it. He also directed plays,kept the accounts and designed the costumes too.

Ibsen (1828 – 1906) in his lifetime created twenty-six plays and a volume of poetry.He did not pass the entrance exams to university, but decided he would rather focus on writing anyway.His has to his credit major works like Brand, Peer Gynt which are both poetic plays.Soon after Brand appeared in print,Ibsen obtained a 'poet's pension' from the Norwegian government which had refused it him earlier. A few important works by him are: A*n Enemy of the People, Emperor and Galilean, A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, Ghosts, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder*. Ibsen was also nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902, 1903 and 1904.

Despite the fact that Ibsen is considered the father of 'Realism',yet his career has often been divided by scholars into three distinct phases. His early plays, such as *Peer Gynt*, were poetic epics whereas the middle phase consisted of realistic classics like *A Doll's House* and *An Enemy of the People*. His realistic drama earned him international acclaim. Many of his works were published in translation and performed throughout Europe. He eventually turned to a new style of writing, abandoning his interest in realism. His later phase was marked towards symbolism, as exemplified by his play *When We Dead Awaken*.

Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* is also sometimes referred to as a *problem play* because it basically deals with social problems and controversial issues prevalent in society. Examples of other problem plays by Ibsen are *The Wild Duck*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *Ghosts.*

In 1858 he married Suzannah Thoresen with whom he fathered a child named Sigurd Ibsen.He was at first a very unsuccessful playwright, and he and his wife Suzannah Thoresen were extremely poor. In 1864 he left Thoresen and their five-year-old son, Sigurd (who grew up to become the Prime Minister of Norway, and moved to Sorrento, Italy. He later moved to Dresden, Germany (where he wrote *A Doll's House*), not returning to Norway until 1891.At the age of eighteen,he had fathered an illegimate son with a servant girl.During his ripen years,he was also unable to write . There was no literary output during last five years of his life due to his failing health. After suffering a series of strokes, Ibsen died in 1906 at the age of seventy-eight.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. What were the major difficulties that Ibsen faced during his childhood days?

Q7. What are the major themes that we see in Ibsen's plays?

Q8. List a few works by Ibsen.

Q9. When and how did Ibsen die?

8.4 BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

A Doll's House was published in Norway in 1879. The first stage production was in Stockholm, in 1880.It became the world's most performed play by the early 20th century. Ibsen is considered to be the greatest of Norwegian authors as well as one of the most important playwrights of all time. He is also celebrated as a national symbol by Norwegians. His translated works made him more popular in the world of mainstream literature.

By the age of twelve, Ibsen had seen six plays by Eugène Scribe and had read Friedrich Schiller, who was a German poet, historian, and playwright. As a child, Ibsen amused himself by staging puppet shows, magic acts, and ventriloquist's routines. In 1843, Ibsen moved away to Grimstead, where he absorbed himself in the realism of Charles Dickens, the biting satire of Voltaire, the explosive dramas of William Shakespeare, and the Romantic tragedies of Schiller. He also began to develop his skill as a social critic by writing **lampoons** and **satires**. This perhaps, helped him shaping his literary career.

His father's financial difficulties probably had a strong influence on Ibsen's later works.The characters in his plays seems to mirror his parents at times, and his themes often deal with issues of financial difficulty as well as moral conflicts. A vital theme in Ibsen's plays is his depiction of suffering women, echoing his mother Marichen Altenburg.Ibsen's sympathy with women in dramas could be seen in his portrayal of female characters in his works such as *A Doll's House* and *Rosmersholm*.

In keeping with his realistic plots and dialogue, Ibsen's stage sets attempt to capture the atmosphere of the everyday life of his characters. They become ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. *A Doll's House* deals with Nora Helmer is a doll trapped in her house, a condition underscored by the fact that all the play's action takes place in her own living room. Repressed by a husband who expects her to fulfill her wifely and motherly roles under strict guidelines of morality and appearance, Nora discovers she has a will of her own. Ultimately, Nora realises there is only one path that leads to her true identity, and that path begins outside the doll house.



lampoons : publicly criticise (someone or something) by using ridicule, irony, or sarcasm **satires :** the use of wit, especially irony, sarcasm, and ridicule, to criticise faults **patriarchal :** a social system in which males hold primary power **masterpiece :** a work of outstanding artistry, skill

The play caused an immediate sensation as soon as it was published, The end of the play where Nora's finally slams the door and abandons her husband and children sparked debate and controversy, and brought Ibsen an international fame. Had the play been published today, the ending would have been less shocking. It was primarily because of the time it belonged that made the work more controversial in nature. The society, then was **patriarchal** wherein women were economically, socially, and psychologically dependent on men, especially on the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Along with its shocking and controversial conclusion, it marks a historic shift in the role of theater. Yet Ibsen's **masterpiece** remains a celebration of the art of theater.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q10. Who were the major influences which helped Ibsen in shaping his literary career?

Q11. What was the reason behind the controversy as soon as the play *A Doll's House* was published?

Q12. What was the kind of society during Ibsen's time?



ACTIVITY 8.1

Research on the 19th century women's roles in the West. Now that you have a fair idea on the playwright Henrik Ibsen, compare him with the other writers of his time. Explain Ibsen's vision of nineteenth century society.



8.5 LET US SUM UP

You are now quite familiar with the Norwegian poet and dramatist,Henrik Johan Ibsen. He holds an important position in the world of

theatre and his contribution is immense.In this unit, you have come to know about his contribution in the evolution of Realistic drama. He landed into controversy for his progressive writings but again the acceptance by the scholars enabled him to gain instant popularity. Apart from that, you must have had a fair idea about his obstacles during his young age and the hardships he saw both inside his house and outside. You can now very well draw a parallel between his life and his works. Also,he was an avid reader since a young age and that somewhere contributed to his writings.

You also get a fair idea as to how his works influenced a few of the substantial writers.You are now familiar with the society when Ibsen wrote. He also had to face severe criticism as his works broke all stereotypes and came up with a new kind of unspoken truth hidden in every family.Although he himself does not consider himself as a feminist,yet his works championed the cause of women.



8.6 FURTHER READING

1) Goldman, Michael*, Ibsen: The Dramaturgy of Fear*, Columbia University Press, 1998

2) Ferguson, Robert (2001). *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*. New York: Dorset Press

3) Johnston, Brian: *The Ibsen Cycle*, Pennsylvania State University Press 1992

4) Johnston, Brian, *To the Third Empire: Ibsen's Early Plays*, University of Minnesota Press (1980)

5) Johnston, Brian, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, Pennsylvania State Press (1988).

6) Koht, Halvdan. *The Life of Ibsen* translated by Ruth Lima McMahon and Hanna Astrup Larsen. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 19317.

7) Shaw, George Bernard*. The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). The classic introduction, setting the playwright in his time and place

8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Henrik Ibsen was a major nineteenth century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is often referred to as "the father of realism" and is one of the founders of Modernism in theatre. *He was one of the new wave of writers to experiment with dramatic form.*He is often ranked as one of the most distinguished playwrights in the European tradition. He is widely regarded as the most important playwright since Shakespeare.

Ans to Q2: He is often referred to as "the father of realism" because his plays attacked social values and he refused to follow the conventions of his time. Realism in the later half of the nineteenth century began as an experiment to make theater more useful to society. His works were realistic portrayal of the society and,therefore,realistic. It depicts ordinary life as it is,not as one would like to be.

Ans to Q3: His plays attacked social values and he refused to follow the conventions of his time. The mainstream theatre from 1859 to 1900 was still bound up in melodramas, spectacle plays (disasters, etc.), comic operas, and vaudevilles. His forged his own style of drama which seems to coincide with a rising demand by the new intellectual section for a serious "thinking" theatre, contrary to the frivolous entertainment on mainstream stages.

Ans to Q4: He has also been a major influential figure to the playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller ,Oscar Wilde and many more.

Ans to Q5: Ibsen's focus was more toward societal issues that marked the waning years of the Victorian era. In spite of all sorts of criticism that Ibsen had to face for his works, nevertheless, he laid the foundation for even more radical explorations in the following century

Ans to Q6: When he was just eight years old, his father's business felt a setback, thereby, leading them to live a life of penury. At the difficult hours of financial crisis, their family and friends too, showed their

true colours. The family was, therefore, forced to move to a small farm house. To make matters worse, Ibsen's mother grew distant and dissatisfied with her marriage. Ibsen had a very difficult childhood in the midst of so much of chaos in the family.

Ans to Q7: The themes of debt, marriage, society, and independence play a prominent role in many of Henrik's plays.

Ans to Q8: A few important works by Ibsen are : *An Enemy of the People, Emperor and Galilean, A Doll's House, HeddaGabler, Ghosts, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder*.

Ans to Q9: After suffering a series of strokes, Ibsen died in 1906 at the age of seventy-eight.

Ans to Q10: By the age of twelve, Ibsen had seen six plays by Eugène Scribe and had read Friedrich Schiller, who was a German poet, historian, and playwright.In 1843, Ibsen moved away to Grimstead, where he absorbed himself in the realism of Charles Dickens, the biting satire of Voltaire, the explosive dramas of William Shakespeare, and the Romantic tragedies of Schiller.They overall, helped in shaping his literary career.

Ans to Q11: The play caused an immediate sensation as soon as it was published, The end of the play where Nora's finally slams the door and abandons her husband and children sparked debate and controversy, and brought Ibsen an international fame. Had the play been published today, the ending would have been less shocking. It was primarily because of the time it belonged that made the work more controversial in nature. The society then was patriarchal wherein women were economically, socially, and psychologically dependent on men, especially on the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

Ans to Q12: The society then was patriarchal in nature,wherein,men were the supreme head both in the family and outside.Women were considered to be inferior to men both at home and outside.



8.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Make a list of Ibsen's contemporary writers and try to compare and contrast the themes that they dealt with.

Q2. Discuss the life and works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen.

Q3. Write a short note on Realistic Theatre.

****