Henrik Ibsen- Ghosts- Swagata Chatterjee

**Summary:**

Helen Alving is about to dedicate an orphanage she has built in memory of her late husband, Captain Alving. She reveals to Pastor Manders that her marriage was secretly miserable because her husband was unfaithful. She has built the orphanage to deplete her husband's wealth so that their son Oswald will not inherit anything from him. Pastor Manders once advised her to return to her husband despite his philandering, and she followed his advice in the hope that she could reform him. But her husband continued his affairs until his death, and Mrs. Alving stayed with him to protect her son from the taint of scandal and for fear of being shunned by the community.

In the course of the play, she discovers that her son Oswald (whom she had sent away to avoid his being corrupted by his father) is suffering from [syphilis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syphilis) that she believes he inherited from his father.[[a]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghosts_%28play%29#cite_note-8) She also discovers that Oswald has fallen in love with her maid Regina Engstrand, who is revealed to be the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving and is therefore Oswald's half-sister.

A sub-plot involves a carpenter, Jacob Engstrand, who married Regina's mother when she was already pregnant. He regards Regina as his own daughter. He is unaware, or pretends to be, that Captain Alving was Regina's father. Having recently completed his work building Mrs. Alving's orphanage, Engstrand announces his ambition to open a hostel for seafarers. He tries to persuade Regina to leave Mrs. Alving and help him run the hostel, but she refuses. The night before the orphanage is due to open, Engstrand asks Pastor Manders to hold a prayer-meeting there. Later that night, the orphanage burns down. Earlier, Manders had persuaded Mrs. Alving not to insure the orphanage, as to do so would imply a lack of faith in divine providence. Engstrand says the blaze was caused by Manders' carelessness with a candle and offers to take the blame, which Manders readily accepts. Manders in turn offers to support Engstrand's hostel.

When Regina and Oswald's sibling relationship is exposed, Regina departs, leaving Oswald in anguish. He asks his mother to help him avoid the late stages of syphilis with a fatal morphine overdose. She agrees, but only if it becomes necessary. The play concludes with Mrs. Alving having to confront the decision of whether or not to [euthanize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia) her son in accordance with his wishes

Summary and Analysis Act I

Summary

Regina Engstrand, a young girl in service for Mrs. Alving, appears in the garden. She tries to prevent her father, Jacob Engstrand, from entering. The rain makes the old man even more disreputable looking than usual, and Regina makes it clear she is ashamed of his coarseness and vulgar appearance. Engstrand has come to ask Regina to live with him and work for him in his planned "seamen's home." He says he has saved enough money from doing carpentry work on the new orphanage to begin this enterprise and now that she has grown into "such a fine wench" she would be a valuable asset. He clearly implies that this seamen's home will be a high class brothel. Regina says she has her own plans for the future, especially since Oswald Alving has just returned from his studies in Paris.

Pastor Manders enters after Engstrand has left. He talks with Regina about her father. Since Engstrand requires a strong influence to keep him from drinking, Manders suggests that Regina, out of filial duty, return to live with him and be "the guiding hand" in her father's life. Regina says she would rather seek a place in town as a governess.

While the girl goes to fetch Mrs. Alving, Manders peruses some books on the table. He gives a start after reading the title page of one, and with increasing disapproval looks at some others. Cordially and affectionately, Mrs. Alving comes in to greet him. Politely inquiring after Oswald, Manders then asks who reads these books. Shocked to find they are hers, he wonders how such readings could contribute to her feeling of self-reliance, as she puts it, or how they can confirm her own impressions. What is objectionable about the books, she asks. "I have read quite enough about them to disapprove of them," he answers. "But your own opinion — " she pursues. He talks as if to a child:

My dear Mrs. Alving, there are many occasions in life when one has to rely on the opinions of others. That is the way in the world, and it is quite right that it should be so. What would become of society otherwise?

He now wishes to discuss their mutual business — the Captain Alving Orphanage — built by Mrs. Alving in honor of her late husband. Although she has left all the arrangements to Manders, he wants to ask whether they should insure the buildings. To her prompt "of course," he raises objections since the orphanage is dedicated to "higher causes." He points out that his fellow clergymen and their congregations might interpret the insurance to mean "that neither you nor I had a proper reliance on Divine protection." As Mrs. Alving's advisor he himself would be the first attacked by "spiteful persons" who would publicly slander him. She assures him that under these conditions she would not wish the buildings insured.

Speaking of insurance, Mrs. Alving mentions that the building nearly caught fire yesterday from some burning shavings in the carpenter's shop. She says she has heard that Engstrand is often careless with matches. Manders makes excuses because the "poor fellow" has so many anxieties. "Heaven be thanked," he says, "I am told he is really making an effort to live a blameless life. Why he assured me so himself." Manders thinks it would be best for Engstrand if Regina returned to live with him, but Mrs. Alving's firm "No!" is definitive.

Oswald appears, bearing so much likeness to his dead father that Manders is startled; Mrs. Alving quickly insists that her son takes after her. During their conversation, Oswald shocks the pastor by depicting the fidelity and beauty of family life among the common-law marriages of his fellow painters in Paris. Disapproving of artists in the first place, Manders sputters indignantly at such circles "where open immorality is rampant." He cannot understand how "the authorities would tolerate such things" and is even more dismayed when Mrs. Alving later declares that Oswald "was right in every single word he said." In her loneliness, she continues, she has come to the same conclusions as her son, that the married men of good social standing are capable of the greatest acts of immorality.

It is his duty to speak now, but not just as a friend, Manders says, "it is your priest that stands before you just as he once did at the most critical moment of your life." He reminds her how she came to him after the first year of marriage, refusing to return to her husband. She softly reminds him that the first year was "unspeakably unhappy." To crave for happiness is simply to be "possessed by a spirit of revolt," he answers. Bound in marriage by a "sacred bond" her duty was "to cleave to the man you had chosen"; though a husband be profligate, a wife's duty is to bear the cross laid upon her shoulders by "a higher will," Manders continues. It was imprudent for her to have sought refuge with him at the time, and he is proud to have had the strength of character to lead her back "to the path of duty" and back to her husband.

Having defaulted in her wifely duty, she also neglected her duty as a mother, Manders goes on. Because she sent Oswald to boarding schools all his life rather than educating him at home, the child has become a thorough profligate. "In very truth, Mrs. Alving, you are a guilty mother!" Manders exhorts.

These conclusions are unjust, Mrs. Alving answers, for Manders knew nothing of her life from that moment on. He must know now "that my husband died just as great a profligate as he had been all his life." In fact, she tells him, a disease he contracted from his lifelong excesses caused his death. Manders gropes for a chair. To think that all the years of her wedded life were nothing but "a hidden abyss of misery" makes his brain reel. She says that her husband's scandalous conduct invaded the walls of this very house for she witnessed Alving's approaches to the servant Joanna. "My husband had his will of that girl," Mrs. Alving continues, "and that intimacy had consequences." Only later on does Manders discover that the "consequences" are Regina.

Mrs. Alving goes on to describe how she sat up with her husband during his drinking bouts, being his companion so he would not leave the house to seek others. She had to listen to his ribald talk and then, with brute force, bring him to bed. She endured all this for Oswald's sake, sending him to boarding schools when he was old enough to ask questions. As long as his father was alive, Oswald never set foot in his home.

Besides thoughts of her son, she also had her work to sustain her, Mrs. Alving tells Manders. Too besotted to be useful, her husband depended on her to keep him in touch with his work during his lucid intervals. She improved and arranged all his properties, and she is converting his share of the estate into the "Captain Alving Orphanage." By this gesture Mrs. Alving hopes to "silence all rumors and clear away all doubt" as to the truth of her husband's life. None of his father's estate shall pass on to Oswald; "my son shall have everything from me," she states.

Grumbling at "this everlasting rain," Oswald returns from his walk. When Regina announces that dinner is ready, Oswald follows her into the dining room to uncork the wines. Meanwhile Manders and Mrs. Alving discuss the dedication ceremony for the opening of the orphanage tomorrow. She regards the occasion as the end of "this long dreadful comedy." After tomorrow she shall feel as if the dead husband had never lived here. Then "there will be no one else here but my boy and his mother," she declares. They hear a quiet scuffle from the next room, then Regina's whisper, "Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!"

Horror-struck, Mrs. Alving hoarsely whispers to Manders, "Ghosts. The couple in the conservatory — over again." He is bewildered. Then knowledge dawns. "What are you saying! Regina — ? Is she — ?" His hostess nods helplessly. The curtain comes down.

**Analysis:**

As the first act functions to introduce the characters, the central problem of the play, as well as the essential story line, the playwright carefully forewarns his audience of the themes he will develop in subsequent acts. In fact, the first scene of a well written drama often presents a complete analogy of the whole play. With this in mind, the author imparts special significance to the order of appearance of his characters.

Regina is the first to appear, showing by dress and demeanor that she is a properly reared servant maid. As she talks with her father, the audience recognizes that, though she is of vulgar stock, she has aspirations to gentility. This is shown as she uses her little knowledge of French.

Engstrand's appearance keynotes the theme of a depraved parent who ensnares his child in his own dissolution, especially as the carpenter asks Regina to join him in his planned enterprise. Implying that she is not his true-born daughter, Ibsen also introduces the theme that children, although unaware of their origins, inherit qualities from their parents. As Regina accuses her father of being able to "humbug" the reverend, and later on showing how Manders accepts Engstrand's hypocrisy for fact, Ibsen introduces the idea that society recognizes phrase-mongering rather than integrity of thought and action as a standard of moral respectability.

Pastor Manders appears next; suggesting that Regina return to live with her father shows how he allies himself with Jacob Engstrand. The respectability and social orthodoxy which he expresses in phrases like "daughter's duty" rather than defining his principles through thoughtful investigations, show that Manders supports anyone whose cant agrees with his own.

After Manders peruses the books, Mrs. Alving enters. The audience senses that she is separated from the pastor by an abyss created by her intellect and experience, as symbolized by the books. Arranged on the table which stands between them, these volumes are in fact their first subject of dissension. One does not have to read them to denounce them, Manders states. He is content to accept the opinions of others. By her answers, Mrs. Alving shows she is no longer satisfied by dogma; she must learn truth through her own experience.

Since Manders indicates no ability to learn anything not expressed in pious formulas, we cannot expect his character to change during the drama. Mrs. Alving, on the other hand, welcoming controversy and opposing the results of her experience to what she has always been taught, is fully prepared to face the full impact of events forthcoming in the rest of the play. This quality marks Mrs. Alving as the protagonist of the drama. Having established these intellectual qualities of the mother, Ibsen now brings forth Oswald. As the entire product of Mrs. Alving's life, he presents the greatest problem she will confront.

This arrangement of character introduction suggests the opposing tensions of the play. Regina, her dead mother, and Engstrand parallel Oswald, his mother, and the dead Mr. Alving. One side represents that part of society whose members have loose morals, aspirations to gentility, and who grab at whatever opportunity for self-betterment they can; the other side represents the best in society, a group whose members are cultured, propertied, and have strong ethics. In the middle, as if he were a fulcrum balancing the extremes, stands Pastor Manders. Already appearing as a moralizing but empty-headed standard of society, denouncing Mrs. Alving's intellectual inquiry and supporting Engstrand's hypocrisy, the character of Manders allows the audience to foresee the thesis of the drama: that a society which unwittingly destroys individuality and encourages deceit perpetrates disease — physical as well as emotional — upon its youthful members.

## 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.

## CHARACTER

## 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.

MRS. ALVING:

Mrs. Alving, raised as a dutiful girl to become a dutiful wife and mother, would easily fall in love with the virtuous Manders. Certainly a man with Alving's exuberance and vitality would not be a suitable husband for her. However, desperate circumstances forced Mrs. Alving to reassess the values she was brought up to maintain. Suffering her hard life with Alving, taking over his business, reading and thinking for herself revitalized her static intellect. By the end of the play she is able to recognize that her sanctimoniousness contributed to perverting Alving's joy of life into lechery and drunkenness. This final awakening comes too late: The ghosts of her past education have already destroyed the children in her care, Regina and Oswald.

What makes Mrs. Alving such an interesting character is her inability to take a stand between keeping up appearances and acting out of personal integrity. At the same time she reads controversial literature and regrets the deceit in her past life, she dedicates a town orphanage to preserve the reputation of her dead husband. Although encouraging Oswald to study art and educating Regina to be a gentlewoman, she raises her son to idealize his father and never tells Regina the facts of her origins. No longer deceiving herself as to the truth of Manders' pious generalizations, Mrs. Alving instills these same "ghosts" into the beliefs of her children.

In another sense, the personal tension in Mrs. Alving is based on her imposed feminine weaknesses in a society where only men expect to express themselves aggressively and self-confidently. In this way, Ibsen recalls the feminist sympathy he expressed in *A Doll's House*, and depicts another tragedy where a woman finally asserts her own individuality and intellect after catastrophe.

Oswald Alving:

 although important in the play, is merely a minor character and represents the doomed product of a diseased society. Artistically gifted by having inherited his father's "joy of life" he finds he cannot work at home where the "sun" of self-expression is obscured by the "fog" of duty and social appearances. Fearing that his exuberance and creativity would dissipate, like that of his father, under these circumstances, he wants to leave home with Regina. However Oswald is doomed by a more drastic form of hereditary dissipation; he ends his life in hopeless lunacy, crying vainly for the sun — the symbolic sun of truth, love, and self-expression that he never found among his own people.

**THEME:**

As if to answer the hosts of critics who denounced the "vulgar untruths" they discovered in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen developed another facet of the same idea when he published *Ghosts*two years later.

According to Halvdan Koht, one of his biographers, "Mrs. Alving is in reality nothing but a Nora who has tried life and her inherited teachings and who has now taken a stand." Having sacrificed love for conformity, Mrs. Alving must face the tragic consequences of denying her personal needs.

In essence, the problems Ibsen probes in *A Doll's House*are the same as those of *Ghosts:*the relation between past and future, and the relationship between the race and community on one hand, and the individual on the other. Society perpetuates itself by handing down from one generation to another a set of beliefs and customs so that new individuals can take part in the culture and contribute to its perpetuation. Ibsen, however, shows how these principles may degenerate until they actually destroy the very individuals that the social system is created to protect and nurture. He insists that these "ghosts" of old beliefs and outdated piety must be reexamined in the light of each individual's experience; if not, the most gifted of society's children will face destruction.

Having himself suffered all his life under the conservatism of Norwegian provincialism, Ibsen personally found how such a society destroys the "joy of life" in its creative intellects leaving bitterness and frustration.

**STRUCTURE:**

As in most of Ibsen's problem plays, *Ghosts*begins at the collective climax in the lives of its characters. The play deals only with the consequences of these past lives and does not need to take place in more than one twenty-four hour vigil. Although the relationships among the characters are close and lifelong, only the crowding of emotions and events within these three acts forces each one to face the truth about himself and about his society.

Unlike *A Doll's House,*where there are servants and a sub-plot between Krogstad and Mrs. Linde, only five characters appear in *Ghosts.*No one is included who has not a place in the main action itself. In this way, an atmosphere of austere grandeur is given to the whole drama providing it with an intensity suggestive of classical plays. Professor Koht describes the play's further relationship to ancient drama for Greek tragedy, often called the fate, or family drama, shows a tragic flaw inherited through the generations. *Ghosts*is also a "family tragedy," he writes, "but it is also a social drama — the ancient tragedy resurrected on modern soil."

Captain Alving's character bears this out. The source of the hereditary flaw which destroys his children, his presence pervades each scene of *Ghosts.*As each living character illuminates the nature of the diseased profligate, he finally stands as clearly and as well-drawn to the audience as if he were constantly active on stage. Almost as a "secondary" protagonist, Alving undergoes a change of character until he is presented to the spectator as an individual whom society has wronged. Finally, when Mrs. Alving recognizes how she destroyed his "joy of life," the dead husband is no longer a ghost, but a humanized victim of the social convention.

**MAJOR SYMBOLISMS**:

1. WEATHER:

In the opening stage directions, Ibsen establishes a big wall of glass through which a "gloomy fjord landscape" is visible. The rain never stops. It particularly oppresses Oswald, who complains that it keeps him from thinking and walking. He drinks in order to deal with it.

What's all this rain about? Of course it adds theatrically to the grim atmosphere of the play and gives a lighting designer something fun to play with. But it also could be interpreted as a symbolic expression of the oppressive atmosphere Mrs. Alving has created. In her iron willed determination to bury her husband's memory, she doesn't want truth – traditionally represented by the sun – anywhere near this house. And isn't it interesting that once she accepts and acknowledges the truth of her life with her husband and her son, the sun breaks into the room.

1. THE TABLE:

The round table in the living room becomes a field of slaughter littered with evidence of all the battles in the play. It holds the books that symbolize Mrs. Alving's new ideas, the Orphanage papers that represent the enormous lie of Captain Alving, and the champagne that Oswald requests (a symbol of the joy of life). It is also the resting place of the lamp, the artificial light Mrs. Alving gives Oswald when he complains of the dark. What Oswald really needs is the sun (i.e., the truth). He gets it. This happens just as he slips into delirium and Mrs. Alving turns off the lamp.

3.SYPHILIS:

When Oswald confesses to his mom that he has syphilis, he echoes the doctor's biblical diagnosis that "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children" (2.270). While you can't get syphilis from your father (unless you sleep with him), the symbol is what's important here. Syphilis does represent what Oswald inherited from his father, but it's not really "sin."

Oswald inherited his father's buoyant, joyful nature, a nature suffocated and defiled by the puritanical Norwegian society. In this play, syphilis is a symbol of what happens when an important, natural life force (i.e., sex) is driven out of "respectable homes" and into dark corners like the brothel Engstrand wants to start. Mrs. Alving is a main player in forcing her husband into a twisted expression of his passion. His infection comes back to haunt her, as she faces the decision of whether or not to kill her diseased son.

1. FIRE

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.

1. GHOSTS:

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.

ORPHANAGE:

The orphanage is the most significant symbol in this play. The opening of the orphanage which is mentioned by Engstrand in Act I of the play conveys that the orphanage is the centre of all events. It is constantly discussed by the characters throughout the play. The past plays a major role in this play; it is also a major theme which is conveyed to the audience through the presence of the orphanage. The past of the Alving family is shrouded by the existence of the orphanage this becomes evident when Mrs. Alving says; “the Orphanage is to exist, to silence all rumours and clear away all doubt” [[2](https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/orphanage-as-key-symbol-in-ghosts-english-literature-essay.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22ftn2)] . It can be looked at as a symbol of purgation for all the sins committed by Mr. Alving in the past.