The Individualism in Henrik Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a detailed study of Henrik Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People in the light of individualism. Ibsen was one of the world’s greatest dramatists who is considered as the father of modern drama, the leading figure of an artistic renaissance that took place in Norway by the end of the nineteenth century. The significance of the intellectuals’ role and individualism in different stages of history has been the subject of different critical studies. The individuals' freedom of thought, reasoning, expression and action have been disregarded in different ways by the prevailing “majority” in every society, particularly in Norway in the nineteenth century. The objective in this paper is to trace the struggles of the free individuals and the visionaries against tyranny of the majority through contextual analytical study of Dr. Thomas Stockmann, the individualist rebel hero in An Enemy of the People. This character fought against tyranny of the majority in his own way and his attempts for seeking democracy was eventually condemned to failure. Even though individualism is a notion of the intellectuality, in a democratic society the intellectuals have to conform to the interests of the mass or majority. Ibsen pays great attention to the importance of individuality in modern society and attempts to demonstrate it in his works.

Key Words: Democracy, Freedom, Individualist Rebel, Intellectuality, Modern Society, Majority, Mass

INTRODUCTION

Both the intellectuals’ role and individualist rebels have been the subjects of different critical studies in different stages of history. It was first Socrates (469 BC-399 BC) who talked about the idea of individualism. In Socrates’ view, individual reasoning is profoundly and uniquely valuable. Plato (427 BC-347 BC) has also mentioned the pitfall of majority’s rules. Although Plato was not an individualist, he was against majority’s rules. In The Republic (380 BC), Plato declared that the ideal society would be run by a council of philosopher-kings, since those best at philosophy are best able to realize the good of the state and the people.

Individualism is a Romantic product; indeed, it reached its zenith during the Romantic period, as a notion of the outsider. The concept of outsider does not connect with the normal ordinary world. In contrast, the insiders relinquish a certain amount of independence and unbridled freedom in exchange for the security and support that life in community affords. The insiders covenant themselves into the community. In a democratic society the insiders have to conform to the interests of the majority. When community is forced to choose between the public and private interests, sacrificing the insiders will be actually unavoidable. But in romanticism, the individuals represent the supreme value. The outsider, as the individualist rebel, has no security and support from mass, majority, and society. Independent individuals are in opposition to them. Their vulnerability might make them more in touch with the reality that reason could not reach. They will be more in touch with themselves that release more creative powers.

The body of literature for any period of history reflects, in part, the fears, conflicts, and ethical concerns inherent in the culture which produces its novelists, poets and dramatists. Certain thematic patterns or motifs continue to appear in literature throughout time, patterns that may be traced from the earliest literary works to the popular contemporary literature. Certain works of literature written by diverse dramatists, who may or may not have known about similar works preceded their own, may be grouped together based on their themes such as the plays of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). Ibsen is a dramatist under the influence of the philosophy of individualism. An Enemy of the People (1882, EP) is the play by this playwright that explores the theme of individualism.
MATERIALS AND METHODS: MILL’S INDIVIDUALISM

John Stuart Mill’s philosophy of individualism, non-conformity, his rejection of traditional authority and warning about society’s conspiracy against individuals seem to have had a great impact on Ibsen’s way of thinking. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is a British philosopher who explores the theory of liberty. In his treatise, On Liberty (1859), Mill holds that, in a democratic government, the majority denies liberty to individuals, whether through laws or morals and social mores. Mill’s conception of liberty justifies the freedom of the individual in opposition to unlimited state control. He says that social liberty was “the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual” (Mill 12). Mill, as an important figure in liberal political philosophy, asserts that “the opinion of a similar majority, imposed as a law on the minority,” based on his view, tyranny of the majority is worse than tyranny of government; it is indeed “tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling” (ibid 13).

For Mill, “society is an unelected power that can do horrific things” (ibid). He believes in freedom of thought and expression and makes this point by saying that, “[i]f all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (Mill 31). Mill points out that people cannot know whether an idea is true or not until they have to criticize all the alternatives. Furthermore, they cannot completely understand their own ideas until they have to defend them. Arguing for freedom of action, Mill holds that only an individual can know what is for his or her own good, and that the highest development of one’s human abilities results from making choices.

He mentions that “[h]e, who lets the world […] choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He, who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee […] discrimination to decide” (Mill 99). Mill sees human beings as individuals who want to be free and who will use their freedom to develop their best human capabilities. Therefore, he asserts that society should be dedicated to develop individuality and independence of thought in each person.

Ibsen and Individualism

In Ibsen’s eyes, modern man is losing his individuality in this novel age of technology and mass communication. He becomes passive like pawn and receives everything via mass media. This man loses his mental and intellectual independence and individuality. In other words, in this age of technology when society is losing interest in the individuality of people and is concerning itself only with their social function, bringing individualism to focus is a very important endeavor. Ibsen pays great attention to the importance of individuality in modern society and attempt to demonstrate it in his works. The prevailing tragedy of the nineteenth century Europe, however, was the downfall of individualism and of the individual’s soul and freedom. By considering the crisis facing individualism, this paper shows Ibsen’s individualistic principles. Social context vilipended, ignored, dissolved and condemned individuals by majority’ rules. Ibsen’s aims in the plays always go beyond to record sympathetically the condemnation of individual heroes.

Ibsen is universally considered as the greatest master of modern drama, the leading figure of an artistic renaissance that took place in Norway by people and doomed to live alone. During this time his dramas were in verse, social and historical. In the second period, he wrote more realistic dramas about the conflict between men versus society. Ibsen became the only single-minded seeker of truth who opposed the society and its morals and conventions. He believed that nonconformity to hostile society is the great duty of the individuals. Ibsen wrote, for instance, about social diseases and described conflict between rebellious, independent and free-thinker individuals versus society in his plays. Based on his beliefs, people were not prepared to confront with social diseases and these subjects were shocking for them. Like free individuals of his plays, Ibsen was kicked out of Norway by people and doomed to live alone.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS: INDIVIDUALISM IN IBSEN’S AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

Ibsen is conscious of the effect of society on individuals, for this reason the social rules exist within his literary works. The authors reflect different social aspects according to their evaluation of the environment by presenting actual facts and evidences in a challenging manner. In social exploration some factors have essential roles, such as culture, education, religious background, economics, politics, justice, superstition, and conventions. These elements are the social conditions and they have a direct relation with individual’s
consciousness. Having briefly examined the tension between sociality and individuality in the nineteenth century, this paper goes on to consider the conflicts between the individual versus society by analyzing the selected play of Ibsen in its cultural context to show how this play reflects the conflicting ideas of that particular time.

Ibsen's play is the tragedy of the nineteenth century Europe and European mass community. For Ibsen the essential tragedy of the human situation is when human beings are trapped and unable to go forward or backward. He challenges Sophocles' notion of defeat of the heroes in the hands of mythological gods, and assigns modern man's defeat to the inhumanity of generation after generation. Ibsen has an anti-authority stance and defends of individualistic principles. The major problem facing individuals is the social conventions and majority interests which mislead men in distinguishing the differences between reality and appearance that limit individuals' potentiality and souls. Human beings are depicted as the victims of outside forces as social conventions and majority's rules. The individual is seen as an irrational and dangerous creature in the society that, at any moment, may get out of hand and bring about destruction to the community unless kept under strict surveillance. Therefore, majority forces are trying to impose conformity on individuals and bring them into submission.

An Enemy of the People was first staged at the Comedie Francaise. In his essay, “Ibsen and the Theatre,” Simon Williams asserted “[n]evertheless, by the turn of the century Ibsen was widely recognized as a playwright who had returned to the theatre a sense of truth and had first explored the potential of the medium as a means to diagnose the peculiar quality of modern life” (179). An Enemy of the People is Ibsen’s savage criticism against the stupid compact majority and the corruptible press. Ibsen, in this play, rebels against the conventions, morals, and values of the social organizations. Dr. Thomas Stockmann, the play's individualist rebel hero, is from the middle class. He is familiar with the social laws like the other people, and when his discovery is condemned by compact majority, he feels doubtful about social laws and modern human beings. He, as an individual hero, because of this discovery, is converted from a naïve person to a revolutionary man, superior to all confining social, political, or moral imperatives, who finds his purpose in the pursuit of his own personal truth. He wants to expose the diseased roots of modern life to reveal the clashes of the rebellious character with the democratic community.

In this social revolt drama, the rebellious character, Dr. Stockmann, suppresses his will to power in order to examine and protest against the institutionalized life of man. In his essay, “Ibsen and Comedy,” Robin Young noted that “much of the energy of this play derives from the confrontation between Dr. Stockmann—really a larger-than-life comic character—and a social situation which is and remains to the end of the play unregenerately serious and potentially tragic in its implications. It is a conflict of character and world outlook” (65). Dr. Stockmann believes that in this kind of society, there is no freedom of thought, action and expression for individual, and he cannot decide for his own rights. Ibsen mentions, “[t]he majority of those in control do not permit the individual either freedom of faith or freedom of expression” (Garton 108). He believes that in a modern public life, the government and the press need nobility, because without this there is no real freedom. Dr. Stockmann has the firm will and undeviating conscientiousness. He illustrates “the unselfish man of science who seeks to be a friend to the community and is howled at as a foe” (Egan 301).

Dr. Stockmann is also somewhat naïve in thinking that the community will be proud of him for discovering that the baths are poisonous. He fails to realize that as important as the discovery is, it is one which will cause an immense amount of expense and inconvenience. Furthermore, there seems to be some ambiguity in his motivations. He was annoyed at the Burgomaster for refusing to lay the pipes where Dr. Stockmann wanted them. The act ends on a note of irony. Dr. Stockmann thinks that he is going to be honored as a hero and feels good that he serves his town and fellow citizen well. It will be only a short time before he will be declared “an enemy of the people”;

"Thank you, thank you, my dear fellows! I feel tremendously happy! It is a splendid thing for a man to be able to feel that he has done a service to his native town and to his fellow citizens" (EP I.21).

Act II begins to develop the problem with more implications. The play is going to handle the broad subject of private versus public morality as the problem will later be developed, the conflict between individual versus society. The first hint is returning of manuscript by Burgomaster: “I return here with the manuscript you sent me” (EP II.32). This act presents the first keys of the public’s refusal to believe Stockmann. After the letter of Doctor’s brother, which lights the bases of doubts in Dr. Stockmann’s heart about reception of his discovery by his brother, his father-in-law's words make him aware that “a nice upset in the town” ironically will be true.

Dr. Stockmann is shocked to find out that his proposal will cost so much and will take so long to have an effect. Burgomaster’s view is that the individual’s freedom should be subjected to the demand of the authorities and says: “As an officer under the committee, you have no right to any individual opinion ... I forbid it—I forbid it—I, your chief; and I forbid it, you have to obey” (EP II.36). But also if the news of the baths is made public, the town will suffer tremendous losses and will be virtually destroyed; thus, Dr. Stockmann’s duty as the chief magistrate of the town is to try to save the town. Thus Dr. Stockmann’s discovery is tainted by his desire to avenge himself against the authorities.
At the end of Act four, it is found that perhaps the town will consider Dr. Stockmann as “an enemy of the people or society” (EP IV.82). This is, indeed, ironic because Dr. Stockmann thinks that he is doing a great service to the community. Unlike the Burgomaster who believes that the people are like a herd and not worthy of consideration. Dr. Stockmann here believes in potential capabilities of all the people and counts strongly on the general public to see his point of view.

Act IV is the most important act in this drama, since the whole theme is revealed in this act. This act puts the idealist against the common herd of people whom the doctor wants to save. He obtains a hall in order to give a lecture, apparently about the baths. But the democratic principles elect a chairman for the committee and then entertain a motion as to whether Dr. Stockmann should change the nature of the speech. He therefore delivers a tirade against the democratic majority and attempts to prove that the common man has no rights for having a voice in the government. He sees that his rightness is defeated by every person he wants to help; thus he attacked the masses and the officials elected by the government and fights against the oppressive majority.

The reader can realize that Stockmann’s speech is offensive, but he remains a sympathetic character because the purpose of this speech is noble. He is striving to realize his truth without compromising his principles. He has openly advocated that the people are not capable of voting correctly. He has insulted the common people and has referred to them “like a lot of goats in a young forest” (EP IV.75). Thus by this speech alone he is “an enemy of the people” (EP IV.82). But actually, his attack is motivated by more noble reasons and only in his disillusionment he makes such heavy charges and rebellious actions against the every people he wants to help.

Dr. Stockmann expects his fellow townsmen to accept the truth; however, they may be affected by it. He finds out that people refuse to accept a truth if it interferes with their interests and the liberal opposition goes along with the interested minority, hence the masses soon follow suit. He therefore decides—in Act four—that he acts against the majority’s rule.

This is straightforward, if not profound. It is in the fifth Act that Ibsen proves himself a muddleheaded. Vehement as Stockmann is in rejecting common folk as “mongrels,” (EP V.103) he firmly intends to educate them into the leading men of society who will then drive out all the bureaucrats and to become intellectuals and revolutionary individuals to act based on the truth. He will begin by educating his own boys and a handful of street urchins and train the “mongrels” to the point where they can drive out the wolves: “you shan’t learn a blessed thing … but I will make liberal-minded and high-minded men out of you” (EP V.103). That is to say, “[t]he voice of the people is not the voice of God till the people has been educated by me” (Bentley 263).

Dr. Stockmann is confronted with the great personal losses if he continues to assert his views. Before he faces this confrontation, he first learns that his views have caused Captain Horster to lose his ship and Petra her position in the school. Furthermore he has faced his own dism, the loss of his factory and the loss of his children’s school. The reader realizes then that the fortune or the wealth of any individual is in controlling by the majority. Unlike the Burgermaster who believes that the people are like a herd and not worthy of consideration. Dr. Stockmann here believes in potential capabilities of all the people and counts strongly on the general public to see his point of view.

In the fourth act, Dr. Stockmann utters many of the opinions Ibsen himself had been expressing in Rome: “I can’t stand politicians! I’ve had all I can take of them! They’re like goats in a plantation of young trees! They destroy everything! The most dangerous enemies of truth and freedom are the majority! Yes, the social, liberal, bloody majority, in the name of God it can’t be right that the fools should rule the wise! Yes, yes, you can think me down. But you can’t say I’m wrong! The majority has the power, unfortunately but the majority is not right! The ones who are right are a few isolated individuals like me. The minority is always right! (Meyer 456)

In fact, Ibsen is a playwright who has returned to the theatre a sense of truth and had explored the potential of the medium as a means to diagnose the peculiar quality of modern life. In fact, his “selection of an unpleasant theme is justified by its evident purpose, which is to show to what depths of meanness people will descend when they allow themselves to be influenced exclusively by reasons of self-interest”; another aspect of his play “is a scathing satire on the limitations of the parochial mind” (McFarlane 298).

To present this problem, Ibsen creates a rebel hero in the person of Dr. Stockmann who diametrically is opposed by his own brother, the man of extreme practicality. Ibsen in his letter to George Brandes on 12 June 1883 wrote:

The intellectual avant-garde is never able to collect a majority in spreading his opinions. In ten years, the majority might possibly have reached the point where Dr. Stockmann stood at the meeting. But during these ten years, the Doctor has not been standing still; he continues to be at least ten years further on than the majority; the majority, the masses, the public never catch him up; he can never collect a majority. (Ibsen 1883:102)

The problem that Ibsen strives to convey is the position and situation of the modern man in the modern society. In this society the present and future life of a person is under the control of ruling class or the majority. In a word, the fate of a person is controlled by the majority.

Though at the end of the play the individual is at war with society, he feels he is the strongest man in the society despite of the fact that he is alone. He denounces the worm-eaten conventions, limited aspirations and
corrupted institutions of the society. Dr. Stockmann strives to make the social order better, but everybody condemns him and he is rejected by all. But this experience helps him to feel stronger. Because he has freedom beyond himself, as Ibsen says: “For me freedom is the first condition of the life, and the highest” (Meyer 420). Because of this, the minority is always right, for, they have reached a point which majority has not yet reached.

CONCLUSION

In the society represented in this play, the majority of the people do not respect individual dignity and freedom. They want to abolish him to put their faults out of sight, in fact they are ignorant mass. For majority the individual freedom has the least chance of being respected and they just use public opinion to prove their own opinion. In fact, there is the underlying struggle for individual who fights against majority and attempts to gain his rightful position in the society and he should be ready to sacrifice everything that he has to achieve this purpose. Every social movements or changes have some effects on people who live in that society, especially those who are at the center of the movements. In this play Dr. Stockmann, as the protagonist, is surrounded with events which have great effects on him. One of them is isolation or loneliness so that he has to live as an outcast.

Dr. Stockmann lives in the society in which the freedom and identity of individuals is ignored. He seeks to be an individual in a society that has little room for individuality, and the concept of individual is degenerating. Convinced of the need for freedom, he does not know how to take advantage of it and the ways he chooses often lead to loneliness and despair. Dr. Stockmann is unable to find any meaning in the society in which all the values and measures of a meaningful life are lost and the individual and his freedom have no meaning. Although society has rejected him and he is alone and isolated, he fights against the society. He believes that “the strongest man is the one who is alone” (EP V.106) and this proves the superiority of the individual in the society.

He depicts the individual’s struggle versus society to prove himself as opposed to majority. In his play Ibsen shows how the powerful local democratic people; the town’s politicians, sold-out journalists, short-sighted economists, and a benighted citizenry prevent Dr. Stockmann from getting his information about the contaminated water supply to the citizens. Dr. Stockmann represents the noble individual who refuses to give in to public lies and dishonesty.

REFERENCES