Ghosts

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HENRIK IBSEN

Henrik Ibsen was born into into a wealthy family in Skien, Norway in 1828. After failing his university entrance exams, he decided he'd rather focus on writing than pursuing higher education. When he first began to write, though, he was quite unsuccessful, rendering himself and his wife extremely poor. In 1864 he left his wife and his 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 his most famous play, *A Doll's House*. After his initial unsuccessful years, Ibsen became more popular as a writer, although his plays were often thought of as scandalous and inappropriate. He returned to Norway in 1891 and died in Oslo in 1906 after suffering several strokes. He is now one of the world's most famous playwrights, and his work is performed more often than that of any other playwright except Shakespeare. He is often considered to be "the father of realism" in drama, and is also thought of as a pioneer of Modernism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Syphilis, the disease that overcomes Oswald in *Ghosts*, first emerged in Europe the 15th century. For hundreds of years, people argued about the disease and its origins, often using it to spread xenophobic messages by giving it names like the French Disease, the Italian Disease, and the Spanish Disease, depending upon where the speaker was from. The xenophobia surrounding the sickness had to do with the fact that syphilis is spread through sexual contact, meaning that many traveling sailors would both catch and transmit the disease when sleeping with prostitutes in various foreign ports, thereby fueling a distrust of people from other countries. In addition, people often saw syphilis as evidence of a person's immorality because the disease is sexually transmitted. This dynamic shows up in *Ghosts*, since the play examines how people in 19th-century society judge one another based on whether or not they live up to the time period's moral standards. On another note, it's worth recognizing that, although that the play suggests that a son can inherit syphilis biologicially from his father, the medical science at the time had already debunked this notion.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ibsen's most famous play, *A Doll's House*, is similar to *Ghosts* in that it examines the institution of marriage in the late 19th century and reveals the period's unjust gender dynamics. However, *Ghosts* is unique because it addresses 19th-century social taboos by telling a story about syphilis and sexual promiscuity. In fact, Ibsen was publicly criticized for taking on these controversial topics, which is why he wrote *An Enemy of the People*, a play that he used to respond to the outcry against *Ghosts*. In *An Enemy of the People*, a man reveals an uncomfortable truth about the society he lives in and is subsequently ostracized for doing so—a clear reaction to the fact that the playwright himself was skewered for writing *Ghosts*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Ghosts
- **When Written:** 1881
- **When Published:** Premiered in 1882
- **Literary Period:** Realism, Modernism
- **Genre:** Drama, Family Drama, Realism
- **Setting:** The Alving estate in western Norway
- **Climax:** Just as Mrs. Alving is about to tell Oswald the truth about his father's immoral ways, Regine notices that the orphanage is engulfed in flames.
- **Antagonist:** Captain Alving

EXTRA CREDIT

19th-century Subscription Services. To avoid censorship in London, a group called The Independent Theatre Society created a subscription-based model of staging plays. Because audience members had subscribed to the organization, the performances were considered private instead of public, meaning that productions didn't need to be approved by London authorities. Ibsen's *Ghosts* was The Independent Theatre Society's first play.

Lost in Translation. Ibsen disapproved of his English translator's decision to interpret the play's original title—*Genganere*—as the English word "ghosts." The playwright felt that this translation failed to capture the sense of recurrence and repetition that the word *genganere* communicates.

PLOT SUMMARY

A carpenter and heavy drinker named Jacob Engstrand pays his daughter Regine a visit one morning while she's working as a maid for the wealthy Mrs. Alving. Engstrand has almost finished his work on the nearby orphanage, which Mrs. Alving has

commissioned to commemorate the tenth anniversary of her husband's death. The orphanage's grand opening is the next day, and since his work is finished, Engstrand plans to return to his home in the nearby town. As he approaches the Alving household, Regine tells him to leave, not wanting anyone to see her speaking to him. Knowing that he's an alcoholic, Regine doesn't want to be associated with Engstrand, instead hoping to cultivate a sophisticated image. Ignoring her, Engstrand implores Regine to come home with him. He wants to open a **hotel** for sailors, he explains, and though he knows this sounds like a disreputable establishment, he claims that it will only accommodate captains and other distinguished guests. However, he also says that he wants Regine to give the hotel a womanly presence, adding that the sailors will want to have fun in the evenings. Appalled by the idea of leaving her life with the Alvings, Regine tells Engstrand to leave, and he chastises her for not being a dutiful daughter.

As Engstrand leaves, Pastor Manders comes to the Alving household to speak with Mrs. Alving about the orphanage. Pastor Manders is in charge of managing the orphanage's finances, and he tells her that he doesn't think they should purchase insurance for the building. This, he explains, is because buying insurance might make people think that they don't trust God to protect the orphanage, and though he admits it's a risky decision to make, he believes there's simply no other option. Mrs. Alving agrees to forgo all insurance, though she mentions that there was a small fire in the orphanage just the day before, when a pile of wood shavings went up into flames where Engstrand was working. This troubles Manders, but he doesn't dwell any longer on the topic of insurance, instead saying that Engstrand is a good man at heart even if he drinks too much and is careless.

Mrs. Alving's son Oswald has recently come home for the first time in a long while, returning from Paris because he has become exhausted and unable to paint. As Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving continue their conversation, Oswald enters and greets them both. Upon seeing the young man, Pastor Manders can't believe his eyes because he hasn't crossed paths with Oswald in many years, since Oswald left home at a young age. Despite the pastor's friendliness, Oswald is hesitant to show good will toward Manders. Mrs. Alving explains that Oswald is still bitter about the fact that Manders judged him when he left home to become an artist. Quickly explaining himself, Manders insists that he no longer thinks all young artists are immoral, though he does have reservations about the unconventional lifestyles that many of them lead. Hearing this, Oswald tells him that he has never encountered any kind of immorality amongst his artist friends, saying that many of his close acquaintances have very loving homes and families despite the fact that they don't have enough money to get married. This appalls Manders, who thinks that anyone who lives together should be married. Nevertheless, Oswald doesn't take back what he has said, though he politely leaves Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders to finish their conversation.

Once Oswald has left the room, Pastor Manders tells Mrs. Alving that he has something to say to her. He reproaches her for leaving her husband in the early stages of their marriage. Apparently, Mrs. Alving left Captain Alving shortly after their wedding because he was behaving like an alcoholic and an adulterer. Consequently, she went to Pastor Manders, but Manders insisted that she return home, believing that it's a wife's duty to remain by her husband regardless of the circumstances. Now, Pastor Manders praises himself for convincing her to go back to Captain Alving, since the man eventually dropped his wicked ways. Furthermore, he accuses Mrs. Alving of being a bad mother for sending Oswald away from home as a child, arguing that children should remain with their parents. Calling her selfish, he says that Mrs. Alving sent Oswald away because she couldn't handle the pressures of motherhood. After listening to the pastor speak, Mrs. Alving informs him that he's talking about things about which he knows very little. To illustrate this point, she reminds him that he stopped paying her and her husband visits shortly after she returned to Captain Alving, meaning that all of his opinions about their marriage are based on nothing but Captain Alving's reputation. And this reputation, she reveals, doesn't accurately represent who Captain Alving really was. The truth, she tells Manders, is that Captain Alving never reformed himself. In reality, he continued to drink heavily and sleep with other women, but Mrs. Alving helped him present himself as a respectable member of society.

Manders is beside himself when he hears that Captain Alving led a life of debauchery, but Mrs. Alving hasn't even gotten to the worst part of her story. One day, she explains, she heard Captain Alving approach the maid, Johanna. Mrs. Alving was in the very room in which she and Manders now sit, and she heard Captain Alving make a sexual advance on Johanna. This astounds Manders, who can't fathom the idea that Captain Alving would dare to do such things within the walls of his own home. Continuing her story, Mrs. Alving says that this was when she decided to send young Oswald away from home, fearing that Captain Alving would negatively influence the boy. From that point on, she didn't let Oswald come home until after his father had died. Shortly after Mrs. Alving explains this, both she and Pastor Manders hear Oswald make a sexual advance on Regine in the adjacent room. Rattled, Mrs. Alving says that hearing this makes her feel like she's confronting the ghosts of her past, and she reveals to Pastor Manders one final detail: Regine is the daughter of Johanna and Captain Alving.

After a tense dinner, Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders return to the living room and resume their conversation. Mrs. Alving tells him that Captain Alving gave Johanna a large amount of money to lie about who impregnated her. Setting off to town, Johanna told Engstrand that a wealthy foreign sailor impregnated her

and gave her money to keep quiet about it, and she ultimately convinced Engstrand to marry her and pretend to be Regine's true father. In light of this, Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders talk about the fact that Oswald has apparently taken a liking to his half-sister. To remedy this, Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders brainstorm ways to send Regine out of the house, but can't think of anywhere she can go, since Engstrand isn't her true father. As they discuss this, Engstrand returns to the house and tells them that the orphanage is completely finished. Turning to Manders, he asks if the pastor would come stage a blessing ceremony in the new building, but Manders can't contain his anger about the fact that Engstrand kept the truth about Regine from him for so long. Furious, he tells Engstrand that their friendship is over, but Engstrand manages to convince Manders that what he did wasn't wrong, framing himself as a beneficent man who only wanted to help an unlucky woman. Suddenly feeling bad for saying such harsh things about Engstrand, Father Manders apologizes and agrees to bless the orphanage, and the two set off to organize the ceremony.

When Engstrand and Manders go to bless the orphanage, Mrs. Alving spends time with Oswald, who admits that he finds it incredibly difficult to be happy when he's home. Part of this, he says, has to do with the fact that the sun never shines in this part of the world, which makes him feel incapable of painting. But this isn't the only thing bothering him, he says. In fact, he tells his mother that he is quite ill, explaining that he finally went to a doctor in Paris who told him that he has been "worm-eaten since birth." This, the doctor said, was something he inherited from his father, implying that Oswald has syphilis. Worse, Oswald has already had an episode during which the illness completely overtook him. The next time this happens, Oswald tells his mother, he will likely lose complete control of his body and mind and go catatonic for the rest of his life. He also tells Mrs. Alving that he blames himself for this miserable condition, even though he has more or less avoided living a reckless life. Mrs. Alving is beside herself, though she promises to take care of him here at home. Hearing this, Oswald asks her if she would do anything for him, and she says that she would. As they continue this conversation, they ask Regine to bring them champagne, since Mrs. Alving is trying to help Oswald feel happy despite his illness. Deciding to tell both Oswald and Regine that they're half-siblings, Mrs. Alving instructs Regine to get herself a glass, too, but Pastor Manders enters before she can say anything more.

Manders says that he has blessed the orphanage, but changes the subject when he sees Regine with a drink in her hand. Mrs. Alving then informs him that she's about to tell Regine and Oswald the truth about Captain Alving, but Manders tries to stop her because he thinks Oswald should maintain a positive image of his father. Just then, Regine looks out the window and sees that the orphanage is engulfed in flames.

After the orphanage has burned to the ground, Engstrand insists that Pastor Manders is the one responsible for the fire, claiming that he saw the pastor toss a snuffed candle into a pile of wood shavings. Going on at length about how bad this will look for the pastor, Engstrand works Manders into a fit of anxiety, at which point he offers to take the blame for the fire as long as Manders funds his hotel with the money he'll get from selling the orphanage's plot of land. Manders agrees to this deal and leaves with Engstrand. Once they're gone, Regine learns about Oswald's illness, at which point Mrs. Alving tells them that Captain Alving was Regine's true father. Upon hearing this, Regine immediately leaves, saying that she won't waste her time taking care of her half-brother when she could be working in Engstrand's hotel, which Engstrand has decided to call the Captain Alving Home.

When Regine is gone, Oswald tells his mother that she will need to euthanize him whenever his sickness overcomes him. Taking out a small box, he shows her the 12 **morphine** pills he has saved for this very purpose, and though Mrs. Alving initially refuses, she eventually tells him that she'll give him the pills if he it becomes necessary, though she insists that this won't ever actually happen. Shortly after this exchange, though, Oswald stares at the rising sun and says, "Mother, give me the sun." He then goes limp, and Mrs. Alving screams. Fumbling for the pills, she holds them in her hand and stares at her paralyzed son, unable to decide whether or not to kill him.

CHARACTERS

Mrs. Helene Alving – Mrs. Alving is a wealthy widow whose husband, Captain Alving, died 10 years ago. A proper but surprisingly free-thinking woman, Mrs. Alving has decided to build an orphanage in her husband's name. The day before it is set to open, Pastor Manders pays Mrs. Alving a visit to discuss the institution's finances. Despite Mrs. Alving's apparently romantic interest in him, Manders criticizes Mrs. Alving for briefly leaving her husband when they were first married. He also suggests that Mrs. Alving is a bad mother because she sent her son, Oswald, away from home at such a young age. However, Mrs. Alving reveals that Captain Alving was a wretched man who led an immoral life. Manders knows this was the case when Captain Alving was young, but Mrs. Alving says that her husband never actually reformed himself. Nevertheless, Mrs. Alving devoted herself to him and helped him create a sterling reputation. One day, though, she discovered that Captain Alving had gotten their maid, Johanna, pregnant. This, she tells Manders, was the final straw, and she sent Oswald to live abroad so that his father wouldn't be a bad influence on him. Unfortunately, though, soon after this conversation she discovers that Captain Alving did influence Oswald, since Oswald inherited syphilis from him. Trying to convince her son that he should stay home with her, Mrs. Alving promises to care for him, but he says that Regine (the Alvings'

current maid, for whom he has romantic feelings) will be the one to help him. Hearing this, Mrs. Alving tells both him and Regine that they are half-siblings, since Captain Alving impregnated Johanna, Regine's mother. This information drives Regine away from the Alving household, at which point Oswald asks his mother to euthanize him if his condition overtakes him. And though she hesitantly agrees, she doesn't think this will ever actually happen. Shortly after this conversation, though, she has to decide whether or not she's going to honor her word, since Oswald suddenly goes catatonic. Unable to make a decision, she stands in a fit of terror before her motionless son, clutching the vile of **morphine** pills he gave her for the purpose of euthanizing him.

Oswald Alving – Oswald Alving is a young man in his twenties who has enjoyed success as a painter living in Paris. When the play begins, Oswald comes home to Norway for the first time in a long while, since his mother, Mrs. Alving, sent him away as a child. Oswald has returned because he's exhausted and unable to paint, though he eventually tells his mother that the real reason he can't paint is because he's gravely ill with syphilis. He tells her that his doctor informed him that he must have inherited the disease from his father, Captain Alving, but Oswald thinks that this is impossible because he believes that his father was a morally irreproachable man. This, Mrs. Alving knows, isn't actually the case, since Captain Alving was actually a debauched and immoral man. While he's home, Oswald takes a romantic interest in Mrs. Alving's maid, Regine, not knowing that she is his half-sister (Captain Alving secretly impregnated Regine's mother, Johanna, when she used to work as the Alvings' maid). It isn't until the end of the play that his mother tells both Oswald and Regine the truth about their shared father, at which point Regine leaves the Alving household. When she's gone, Oswald realizes that he can't rely on her to euthanize him if his illness overtakes him, so he asks his mother to do it. At first, Mrs. Alving refuses, but she eventually relents, telling herself that it won't actually be necessary for her to give Oswald the **morphine** pills he has saved up to put him out of his misery if he succumbs to his disease. However, he soon slips into a catatonic state, and his mother is forced to decide whether or not to kill him—a decision she's unable to make.

Pastor Manders – Pastor Manders is a deeply principled and judgmental man of God who has agreed to manage the financial aspects of the orphanage that Mrs. Alving is opening to honor her late husband, Captain Alving. Believing that wives have a duty to respect and support their husbands, Pastor Manders told Mrs. Alving to return to Captain Alving when she ran away from him many years ago. He knew that Captain Alving was at that time leading an immoral life, but he insisted that Mrs. Alving should return home nonetheless. This decision also had to do with his fear that people might pick up on the romantic feelings running between him and Mrs. Alving, which could have ruined his reputation as a pastor. Now, on the eve of the orphanage's grand opening, Mrs. Alving tells Manders that her husband never changed his wretched ways, despite the fact that he eventually gained a good reputation in society. Pastor Manders also learns that Captain Alving impregnated the Alvings' maid, Johanna, who gave birth to Regine, the young woman who currently works for the Alvings. This troubles Manders, partially because he realizes that Engstrand—whom he has always liked—lied to him when he claimed to be Regine's father. When he brings this up with Engstrand, though, Engstrand convinces him not to be angry with him, proving his ability to manipulate Manders's emotions. This dynamic comes up again later in the play, when Engstrand (presumably) sets fire to the orphanage and blames it on Manders, claiming that the pastor threw a candle into a pile of wood shavings. Afraid that his reputation will be ruined, Manders agrees to give Engstrand money to start a **hotel** for sailors in exchange for Engstrand taking responsibility for the fire, but Manders fails to realize that this hotel will be little more than a glorified brothel.

Jacob Engstrand – Jacob Engstrand is the carpenter Mrs. Alving hires to build an orphanage commemorating her late husband, Captain Alving. Engstrand's daughter, Regine, also works for the Alvings as a maid, and though Engstrand wants her to come home with him after he finishes the orphanage, she refuses because she thinks that staying with the Alvings will give her a better chance at upward mobility. An alcoholic who always has a new scheme to get rich, Engstrand tells Regine that he has a plan to build a **hotel** in town that will serve sailors while they're ashore. It's clear that this establishment would function like a brothel, though he tries to appeal to Regine's desire to become a well-respected woman by making the hotel sound like a classy place. Later, it emerges that Engstrand isn't Regine's real father. In fact, Captain Alving impregnated Regine's mother, Johanna, but then gave her a large sum of money to keep quiet about the entire ordeal. Consequently, Johanna offered this money to Engstrand, who agreed to marry her and pretend to be Regine's father. In keeping with this obsession with money, Engstrand eventually tricks Pastor Manders into funding his hotel. He does this by blaming Pastor Manders for burning down the orphanage, something for which Engstrand himself is most likely responsible. Nevertheless, Engstrand manages to manipulate Manders by claiming that he saw the pastor toss a recently snuffed candle into a pile of wood shavings. He then talks about how this accident will ruin the pastor's reputation, knowing that Manders cares about his public image more than anything. In this way, Engstrand gets Manders to fund his hotel and decides to call it the Captain Alving Home.

Regine – Regine is a maid who works in Mrs. Alving's home. With grand aspirations to become a well-respected woman in society, Regine looks down on her father Engstrand because he is an alcoholic carpenter with barely any money or social status. With this attitude, she commits herself to working in Mrs.

Alving's house, believing that her association with the Alving family will give her a chance to attain upward mobility. She even takes an interest in Oswald Alving, hoping that he will someday whisk her away to Paris. However, when she learns that her mother, Johanna, was impregnated by Captain Alving, she realizes that she and Oswald are half-siblings and, as such, can never get married. Immediately upon hearing this, she decides to leave Mrs. Alving's home, setting out to work at Engstrand's new **hotel** for sailors—an establishment she originally scoffed at but now realizes is her only chance to meet an eligible husband and rise through the ranks of society.

Captain Alving – Captain Alving never actually appears in *Ghosts* because he has been dead for 10 years when the play begins. Nevertheless, his presence hovers over the Alving household, especially when Mrs. Alving reveals that—despite his sterling reputation in the surrounding community—he was actually a fiercely immoral man, the type of person who led a wild life of drinking, infidelity, and reckless sexual behavior. In fact, his son Oswald even learns that he inherited syphilis from Captain Alving—a surprising discovery, since the young man has always thought of his father as the quintessential image of a morally upstanding and respectable man. To the contrary, Captain Alving was debauched for his entire life, though Mrs. Alving worked hard to keep this hidden from the public. She did such a good job doing this that people like Pastor Manders still believe in Captain Alving's good name. However, even after Mrs. Alving finally tells her son the truth about his father, she finds herself unable to escape Captain Alving's influence, since she now has to face the fact that her son is doomed to misery because he inherited his father's syphilis. Furthermore, Oswald himself fights with the memory of his father when he learns that Captain Alving impregnated Johanna (the Alvings' former maid) and fathered Regine, with whom Oswald has fallen in love.

Johanna – Johanna never actually appears onstage in *Ghosts*. However, she was the Alvings' maid when Captain Alving was still alive. Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders that she discovered many years ago that Captain Alving impregnated Johanna. She also reveals that Johanna is Regine's mother, and that Captain Alving gave her a large amount of money to keep this a secret. With this money, Johanna went to Engstrand and convinced him to marry her and pretend to be Regine's true father.

THEMES

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REPUTATION, JUDGEMENT, AND MORALITY

In *Ghosts*, a play about how people present themselves, Henrik Ibsen demonstrates that people leading immoral lives often still have untarnished reputations. In particular, the late Captain Alving is deeply revered by his community, despite the fact that he was a philandering alcoholic whose only accomplishments should be attributed to his wife, Mrs. Alving. Mrs. Alving has always wanted to confess that her husband was morally corrupt, but has refrained from doing so because she wants to maintain the family's image. On the eve of opening an orphanage dedicated to the memory of her husband, though, she confides in Pastor Manders—a close family friend—that Captain Alving was "debauched." Manders is beside himself when he hears this, but his initial reaction to the news suggests that he cares more about how people *present* themselves than how they actually behave. To that end, he takes issue not only with Captain Alving's wretched behavior, but with his indiscretion, implying that the man's biggest mistake was that he failed to fully hide his bad behavior from his wife. Throughout the play, Ibsen underlines the extent to which people invest themselves in keeping up appearances and the destruction to interpersonal relationships this can cause, highlighting the harmful obsession with reputation that was characteristic of 19th-century society.

Pastor Manders isn't completely unaware of Captain Alving's immoral ways, but he thinks Alving only misbehaved as a young man. Pastor Manders once talked Mrs. Alving out of running away from Captain Alving, insisting that Alving would surely turn over a new leaf and leave behind his unseemly ways. Now, years after Captain Alving's death, Manders is quite proud of his advice, believing that Alving completely reformed himself. What he doesn't know, though, is that Captain Alving continued to live an immoral life as a heavy drinker and unfaithful husband. This disconnect between Manders's rosy view of Captain Alving and the actual way Alving lived his life underscores that a person's public image can be misleading. Without knowing this, though, Manders reproaches Mrs. Alving for doubting her husband. The fact that he so easily condemns her decisions illustrates just how confident he is passing judgment from afar. In turn, Ibsen implies that reputations and appearances can be quite deceiving, giving people like Pastor Manders the false impression that they know their peers better than they actually do.

Rather ironically, Pastor Manders insists that Mrs. Alving did her husband a "great wrong" by trying to leave him. Furthermore, he says that she also wronged her son, Oswald, by sending him away from home at such a young age (something that, in reality, she only did to ensure that the boy wouldn't be negatively influenced by his father). As Manders levels these claims against her, Mrs. Alving waits patiently to point out that he has no idea what he's talking about. "None of

these things you have been saying about my husband and me and our life together after you had led me back to the path of duty, as you put it—absolutely none of these things do you know from first-hand," she says, implying that he shouldn't pass judgment without digging beyond her family's surface-level reputation. After all, he doesn't actually know anything about her relationship with her husband, instead forming inaccurate ideas based on nothing but Captain Alving's status in the community, which Mrs. Alving herself helped him sustain. In turn, Manders's assumptions about Mrs. Alving's married life make it even harder for her to finally stand up for herself by revealing her husband's wretched ways. As she finally explains that she fought an "endless battle" to hold her life and family together, Manders is astonished and disturbed, responding, "Am I to believe that your entire married life…all those years together with your husband…were nothing but a façade." In this moment, he begins to understand why it's so foolish to judge people based on their outward appearances, finally recognizing that it's possible for people to construct "façades" that keep their vices hidden.

To show Pastor Manders the extent of Captain Alving's misbehavior, Mrs. Alving tells him that she heard her husband make a sexual advance on the family maid. This, she explains, took place while she was sitting in an adjacent room. This story thoroughly appalls Manders, but the nature of his outrage is rather strange, as he focuses not on Captain Alving's infidelity, but on his failure to properly hide his urges. Reacting to this news, he calls Alving's behavior "unseemly" and "indiscreet." Instead of fixating on Captain Alving's actual misdeed, then, Manders responds negatively to the man's indiscretion, inadvertently indicating that Captain Alving's real transgression was his inability to maintain his appearance as an upstanding man. In other words, Manders focuses not on the moral implications of Captain Alving's infidelity, but on the related social dynamics, finding it unacceptable that he would present himself in such a socially unacceptable manner. This reaction helps Ibsen highlight the obsession with decorum that runs throughout Mrs. Alving's community—an obsession that apparently overshadows more significant ethical concerns.

Pastor Manders's obsession with appearances is the exact mindset that long discouraged Mrs. Alving from publicizing her husband's wretched ways in the first place. What's interesting, though, is that her attempt to "fight tooth and nail to prevent anybody from knowing" Captain Alving's true nature is, in the end, what ultimately kept her from happiness. After all, if everyone had known about Captain Alving's debauchery, it would have been easier for Mrs. Alving to leave him. By helping him maintain his public image, though, she ensured her own misery. Outlining this dynamic, Ibsen warns audiences against the dangers of overvaluing reputation, which not only keeps people from addressing immorality, but also diminishes their happiness.

DUTY AND SELF-SACRIFICE

In *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen invites audiences to contemplate the expectations that individuals place upon one another. The playwright asks how much, exactly, people can depend on their loved ones to help them through difficult times, ultimately suggesting that certain requests can become unfair burdens. For instance, Captain Alving depends on his wife, Mrs. Alving, to maintain his public image, putting an enormous strain on her as she struggles to hide his debauchery. Unfortunately for her, the burdens of familial duty and dependency don't end when her husband dies, since her son, Oswald, later asks her to euthanize him. As a result, Mrs. Alving has to confront the idea of killing her own son, wrestling with whether it's her responsibility to keep him alive or to do what he asks of her. Her inability to make this decision at the end of the play illustrates just how difficult it is to bear the weight of responsibility, especially when people feel a sense of duty to protect their loved ones. By spotlighting the sacrifices Mrs. Alving makes for her family members, then, Ibsen implies that certain things are too much to ask of a person.

As a young woman, Mrs. Alving tries to respect her own agency and autonomy by leaving her husband, Captain Alving. This very decision suggests that she doesn't want to put up with her husband's infidelity and is unwilling to devote herself to a man who won't even bother to hide his debauchery. In turn, it becomes clear that Mrs. Alving recognizes that she would be sacrificing her happiness if she stayed with Captain Alving, and that this is something she doesn't want to do. However, Pastor Manders guilts her into returning by saying that her decision to leave proves that she is thinking only of herself. Rather than considering the fact that Mrs. Alving deserves to be happy, Manders upholds the patriarchal idea that women owe something to their husbands, regardless of how the men behave. He even frames it as a woman's duty to stay with her husband, an outlook that casts Mrs. Alving as an ungrateful person who has shirked her responsibility. "[…I]t is not a wife's place to sit in judgment on her husband," he says. "Your duty should have been to bear with humility that cross which a higher power had judged proper for you." In this moment, Manders brings even more of the crushing weight of societal norms and beliefs to bear on Mrs. Alving, arguing that her obedience to her husband is something demanded by religion and by God. By saying this, he makes it even harder for Mrs. Alving to advocate for herself, implying that she is irresponsible and petulant when, in reality, she has simply recognized that, regardless of whether or not she owes her husband, she owes it to *herself* to be happy.

Considering that Pastor Manders, as a servant of God, has organized his entire life around the concept of duty, it's unsurprising that he clings so tightly to such ideas. After all, he believes that it's his job to serve God, which means protecting

the institution of marriage under any and all circumstances. "Yes, you should thank God I possessed the necessary strength of mind," he tells Mrs. Alving, referring to the fact that he urged her to return to Captain Alving when she initially ran away. Going on, he says that she should be thankful he was able to convince her to ignore what he refers to as her "hysterical intentions," a phrase that condescendingly frames her desire to be happy as trivial, unreasonable, and inherently feminine. As he speaks to her in this self-righteous way, it becomes clear that he truly believes it was his obligation to steer Mrs. Alving back to her husband. Interestingly enough, this is complicated by the fact that Mrs. Alving has romantic feelings for Manders, and suspects that he has feelings for her in return. Rather than allowing himself to act on these feelings, though, Manders invests himself in the idea that he has a duty to uphold his religious station. In this sense, then, both he and Mrs. Alving sacrifice their happiness in the name of obligation.

Mrs. Alving's sense of owing something to the people in her life continues when Oswald tells her that she needs to euthanize him if he succumbs to syphilis. She finds this impossible to bear, saying that she could never bring herself to kill her own son, to whom she gave life in the first place. "If you love me, Mother…how can you let me suffer all this unspeakable terror!" Oswald says, intimating that Mrs. Alving will be the one responsible for his suffering if she refuses to euthanize him. In this difficult scene, Ibsen urges readers to consider what, exactly, family members owe to one another. Although it's true that Oswald will be happier if his mother kills him, it's also the case that Mrs. Alving will be haunted by this decision for the rest of her life. As a mother, she feels she has a duty to help her son avoid suffering, but she also recognizes that she deserves to make her own decisions—this, after all, is what she learned after being miserable for years in her marriage to Captain Alving. In keeping with just how difficult this decision is, Mrs. Alving finds herself unable to do *anything* when Oswald's syphilis overtakes him at the very end of the play. As he lies there in a nearly catatonic state, she stares at him in "speechless horror," an embodiment of tortured indecision. That the curtain closes before she decides what to do helps Ibsen emphasize the extent to which it's unfair to place overly burdensome expectations on loved ones, especially since an undue sense of duty can lead a person to sense of paralyzing helplessness as they experience deep emotional turmoil.

THE PAST, INHERITANCE, AND MOVING ON

Ghosts is a play about how the past influences the present. The play's Norwegian title, *Gengangere*, is the Danish word for *ghosts*, but it also has connotations of repetition, suggesting that Ibsen is interested in examining how the past repeats itself. This is evident in many ways throughout the play, as Oswald Alving's life begins to resemble his late father's, despite the fact that he has supposedly led a much different existence. This, at least, is what Mrs. Alving thinks, believing that Oswald is nothing like his debauched father because he spent his formative years far away from the man. Now, though, she learns that Oswald is entering the late stages of syphilis, which is what killed her husband. The implication in the play is that he inherited this from his father, despite the fact that this is biologically impossible. Nevertheless, Ibsen uses Oswald's syphilis to outline the idea that certain painful histories don't simply disappear, but instead resurface in generations to come. According to this line of thought, Oswald is just another "ghost" in Mrs. Alving's life, evidence of her husband's immoral ways. Because she doesn't want her son to die, though, she struggles to fully banish the ghost of her husband from her life. In this regard, Ibsen shows the audience that repeating the past is inevitable, and that moving on from troubling chapters of life is a complicated and difficult process.

Mrs. Alving believes that she protected Oswald from his father by sending the boy away from home when he was a child. Confident that she shielded him from Captain Alving's immoral ways, she thinks of this matter as a thing of the past, something she settled long ago. Since then, she hasn't even allowed Oswald to come home while his father was still alive, fearing that Captain Alving would "poison" the young man by ruining his innocence. It's worth noting her use of the word "poison" in this moment, since the word implies a sense of contamination, as if Oswald could somehow catch his father's immorality. This reveals Mrs. Alving's belief that exposing her son to her husband's undesirable disposition might perpetuate that very disposition, turning Captain Alving's bad behavior into something that refuses to die.

Now that Captain Alving himself has died, Mrs. Alving thinks she and her son are completely free from his influence, but she begins to worry that this isn't the case when she hears Oswald make a sexual advance on the maid, Regine. This is something that Captain Alving did when he was alive, coming onto a different maid (Johanna) while Mrs. Alving was sitting in the adjacent room. The recurrence of such behavior in Oswald shocks Mrs. Alving, who tells Pastor Manders that she can't seem to flee the "ghosts" of her past. By saying this, she suggests that Oswald has become an embodiment of his father's wicked ways despite her previous belief that Captain Alving's negative influence was a thing of the past. In this sense, she suggests that it's effectively impossible to move on from certain things in life, as people are unavoidably impacted by what has come before them. Meditating on the influence that relatives (especially parents) have on their family members, she says, "It's not that they *live* on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them." According to this theory, there's nothing Oswald can do to avoid replicating his father's misguided ways, since he's doomed to follow in Captain Alving's footsteps regardless of how hard he or his mother try to

change this.

The idea of inheritance factors into the ways in which Captain Alving has passed his legacy to his son. Although it's biologically impossible for a father to genetically pass syphilis to a son, it's generally accepted that this is what happens in *Ghosts*, as Oswald's doctor tells him that "the sins of the fathers are inherited upon the children." By saying this, the doctor indicates that Oswald's illness is somehow the result of his father's reckless sexual behavior. There are also other hints that Captain Alving passed the sickness to his son, as Oswald himself at one point refers to his condition by saying, "The disease I have inherited." In this way, Ibsen presents yet another reason that it's so difficult for Oswald and Mrs. Alving to move on from the past, since Captain Alving's decisions—his promiscuity and wild sex life—continue to affect them even after he himself has died. Furthermore, even if audience members don't believe that Oswald literally inherited syphilis from his father, it's clear that the young man has at the very least inherited some of Captain Alving's deviant ways, as evidenced by the fact that he has an illicit sexual relationship with Regine, effectively mirroring the inappropriate relationship his father had with *his* maid.

Although it's worth noting the ways in which Oswald has either literally or figuratively inherited his father's sins, the play's focal point is ultimately on Mrs. Alving and her attempt to escape her husband's influence. That Oswald has become an embodiment of his father confirms her previous belief that it's impossible for a person to outrun the ghosts of his or her past. The only way to do this, it seems, would be to euthanize Oswald when—at the end of the play—he asks her to do so. However, this would mean killing her only son, to whom she is quite attached. In other words, Mrs. Alving is emotionally invested in the very person who reminds her of Captain Alving, the bane of her existence. This predicament demonstrates why it's not always so easy to move on from painful pasts, since such memories are often very much wrapped up in the things that a person still values in life.

WEALTH AND MANIPULATION

In *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen criticizes society's fixation on economic success. More specifically, the playwright condemns the fact that people often prioritize wealth and other superficial indicators of success over actual happiness, or even morality. This is especially true for Jacob Engstrand, who thinks almost exclusively about his chances of making money and attaining some form of upward mobility. Similarly, Regine tries to leverage her job as a maid in the Alving household so that she can make a better name for herself in society, focusing only on endeavors or relationships she thinks will lead to success. But although Engstrand and Regine share a desire to attain wealth, Engstrand isn't particularly interested in working hard to gain success. Instead, he'd rather manipulate the people around him, hoping to trick them into helping him pursue his various aspirations. When he succeeds in putting Pastor Manders in a vulnerable position, for instance, he doesn't hesitate to benefit from the man's sense of insecurity, ultimately convincing him to fund a **hotel** for sailors that—unbeknownst to Manders—will essentially function as a brothel. The fact that this kind of manipulation actually works for Engstrand illustrates Ibsen's belief that society often allows people to lead greedy lives.

Early in the play's first act, Ibsen spotlights the subtle ways in which an individual can manipulate another person. In a conversation with Engstrand, Regine finds herself having to fend off his attempts to trick her into leaving her job as a maid at Mrs. Alving's house. Before he even tells her why, exactly, she should leave the Alvings, he tries to make her feel guilty. Indeed, when she asks what he wants from her, he says, "How can you ask what a father wants with his only child? I'm a lonely, deserted widower, aren't I?" Not only does Engstrand remind Regine that he's her father (which she later learns isn't true), he also tries to make her feel bad by calling himself a widower, emphasizing his loneliness so that she'll take pity on him. Furthermore, he points out that Regine is his only child so that she will feel a sense of obligation to make him happy. In doing so, he clearly hopes that she'll feel as if she owes him something, and it is only at this point that he reveals his plan to open a hotel for sailors and his wish that she will work in the establishment. That he unveils this plan after trying to make Regine feel sorry for him is a clear sign that he is attempting to manipulate her, using her emotions against her in order to get what he wants—namely, wealth. In addition, the fact that he's willing to manipulate his own daughter suggests that he lives in a community that condones or at the very least tolerates this kind of behavior, which prioritizes money and upward mobility over all else.

Despite Engstrand's efforts, Regine isn't easy to manipulate. She even tells him not to come to her with "fiddle-faddle" when he tries to make her feel bad for him, an indication that she knows exactly what he's doing and wants to stop him from weaponizing this false display of sentimentality. Furthermore, Regine has her own plans for upward mobility, since she hopes that working with Mrs. Alving will lead to a prosperous future. To that end, she hopes to marry Oswald, thus wedding herself to the Alving fortune. This decision, however, has nothing to do with love, as made evident when Regine quickly abandons Oswald after learning that he has syphilis and is her half-brother. Of course, nobody would expect her to marry him after learning that they're related, but the fact that she quits her job and leaves the Alving household *immediately* after learning this news suggests that she only ever cared about gaining Oswald's money. Now that she can't marry him, she says she won't spend the rest of her life "looking after invalids." It's understandable that she would have a strong reaction to

what she has just discovered, but she most likely wouldn't say such a callous thing about Oswald if she had ever actually loved him. What's more, she makes it clear that her primary goal is to attain wealth when she adds that "a poor girl's got to make the most of things while she's young," implying that she's eager to find financial gains through marriage before her youthful good looks fade. In this regard, she is similar to her father insofar as she's willing to cast aside emotion in favor of gaining wealth or economic opportunities. Once again, then, Ibsen suggests that these characters live in a world that prioritizes wealth, upward mobility, and status over relationships or sentimentality.

Regine's subtle manipulation of Oswald and Mrs. Alving pales in comparison to Engstrand's successful attempt to blackmail Pastor Manders into giving him money. He does this by asking Manders to bless the orphanage, which Engstrand himself was in charge of building. Shortly after the blessing (which involves candles), the orphanage goes up in flames, and Engstrand claims that he saw Manders throw a partially lit candle into a pile of wood shavings. Furthermore, he says that the newspapers are going to harshly condemn the pastor for setting fire to a charitable institution. By blaming Manders for the fire while simultaneously making him feel guilty, Engstrand works the pastor into a panic. This, of course, is a calculated move, since he wants the priest to feel as if the news of his mistake—a mistake he didn't actually make—will ruin his entire life. At this point, Engstrand says that he will publicly take the blame for the fire, prompting Manders to agree to fund his hotel. That this transparent scheme to profit off of the pastor actually works is a testament to how easy it is for conniving individuals like Engstrand to take advantage of others. In fact, Engstrand likely acts this way because he knows that he lives in a society that economically incentivizes this kind of behavior, since he once accepted a large amount of money from Captain Alving to pretend that Regine was his daughter. Accordingly, Ibsen urges the audience to recognize the ways in which undeserving people often profit off of society's corrupt norms.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

OSWALD'S MORPHINE

Oswald's stash of morphine pills represents the burden people place on their loved ones when they make requests that require intense emotional sacrifices. Knowing that he will someday slip into a catatonic state because of his advanced illness, Oswald has saved up 12 morphine pills, which he hopes his mother will give to him when the time comes so that he can die peacefully. On the one hand, Mrs. Alving wants to do whatever she can to make her son happy and comfortable, not wanting him to feel pain or misery. On the other hand, he is the only thing in life that truly makes her happy anymore, so killing him would mean plunging *herself* into misery. This dynamic mirrors the way that Mrs. Alving ceaselessly sacrificed her own happiness while Captain Alving was alive, devoting herself completely to bearing the burden of hiding his debauchery. Because of the high stakes of Oswald's advanced illness, the pills themselves take on a grave significance, embodying the turmoil Mrs. Alving feels as she tries to deal with the unprecedented burden Oswald has put on her. As she clutches the pills at the end of the play, the audience sees that she has been put in an impossible position, one that illustrates just how torturous it is to have so much responsibility over another person's life.

ENGSTRAND'S HOTEL

The hotel that Engstrand wants to open for sailors is an embodiment of the play's theme that things aren't always what they appear to be. Although Engstrand claims that his hotel would be a place for respectable captains and other lauded sailors to stay when they're ashore, he nonetheless implies that the establishment would function as a brothel, as evidenced by his remark that there should be female employees at the hotel because the guests will want to have "fun" in the evenings. Despite Engstrand's unseemly vision for the hotel, he still manages to convince Pastor Manders—a man who vehemently condemns all kinds of illicit behavior—to fund the endeavor. In fact, Manders even accepts that the hotel could someday be a "benefit to the town." Manders's naïve opinion of this morally questionable establishment represents the ways in which people (especially those who live in a society that values superficial appearances) often fail to see things for what they are, as Manders takes it for granted that Engstrand's hotel will be an innocent and even helpful place. In turn, the hotel symbolizes how easy it is for people to dupe others simply by pretending to be one thing while behaving like something else altogether.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Four Major Plays* published in 2008.

Act One Quotes

REGINE *[after a short silence]*. And what did you want with me in town?

ENGSTRAND. How can you ask what a father wants with his only child? I'm a lonely, deserted widower, aren't I?

REGINE. Oh, don't come that fiddle-faddle with me. What do you want me there for?

ENGSTRAND. Well, the thing is I've been thinking of going in for something new.

REGINE *[sneers]*. How many times haven't I heard *that* one before! But you always made a mess of it.

Related Characters: Jacob Engstrand, Regine (speaker), Mrs. Helene Alving

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Regine and Engstrand in the play's first scene, in which Regine tries to convince Engstrand to leave Mrs. Alving's house. She does this because she doesn't want Mrs. Alving to see her speaking with her own father because she's embarrassed of his low social standing and alcoholism. With this dynamic at play, Engstrand tells Regine that he wants her to return to town with him. When she asks why, exactly, he wants her to do this, he pretends to be deeply hurt, saying that he has every right to request this of her because she's his daughter. "I'm a lonely, deserted widower, aren't I?" he asks, forcing her to think about the fact that he's a sad old man with nobody to support him. In doing so, he tries to manipulate her emotions. This is because he's preparing to ask her to work in a hotel he wants to open, so he's trying to make her feel as if she owes him something just because he's her father. However, this doesn't work on Regine, who calls his flimsy attempt to influence her emotions "fiddle-faddle"—a sign that she is accustomed to Engstrand's tendency to manipulate others. Through this exchange, Ibsen illustrates what it looks like when a person uses emotionally deceptive tactics to trick others into doing something, a dynamic that will become increasingly important as the play goes on.

There has to be some women about the place, that's clear. Because we'd want a bit of fun in the evenings, singing and dancing and that sort of thing. These are seafaring men, you've got to remember, roaming the high seas. *[Comes closer.]* Now don't be such a fool as to stand in your own way, Regine. What can you do with yourself out here? Is it going to be any use to you, all this education the lady's lavished on you? You'll be looking after the children in the new Orphanage, they tell me. What sort of thing is that for a girl like you, eh? Are you all that keen on working yourself to death for the sake of a lot of dirty little brats?

Related Characters: Jacob Engstrand (speaker), Mrs. Helene Alving, Regine

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Engstrand says this to Regine while trying to convince her to leave Mrs. Alving's employment. Wanting her to come work in the hotel he's going to open for sailors, he insists that the establishment will need a womanly presence, and even though he has already promised her that the hotel will be a respectable place full of upstanding captains, he undermines this idea by saying, "Because we'd want a bit of fun in the evenings." The fact that he equates "fun in the evenings" with having a womanly presence at the hotel suggests that he's not just thinking of "singing and dancing." In this moment, Ibsen insinuates that Engstrand's hotel will function like a brothel, despite the fact that the establishment will present itself as a respectable place. This is important to remember as the play advances, since Engstrand eventually convinces Pastor Manders to fund the hotel, thereby proving once again that Manders is incapable of seeing beyond surface-level impressions.

Furthermore, Engstrand also tries to convince Regine to work for him by disparaging the value of her time as Mrs. Alving's employee. Although Regine is proud to associate herself with the Alvings, Engstrand frames her time as a maid as effectively worthless, challenging her idea that what she's doing will eventually lead to upward mobility. As he says this, it becomes clear that he knows exactly how to appeal to Regine, who is obsessed with the idea of rising through the ranks of society. Once again, then, the audience sees how skillful Engstrand is at emotional manipulation.

MRS. ALVING. Well, I find it seems to explain and confirm a lot of the things I had been thinking myself. That's the strange thing. Pastor Manders...there's really nothing new in these books; there's nothing there but what most people think and believe already. It's just that most people either haven't really considered these things, or won't admit them.

MANDERS. Good God! Do you seriously believe that most people . . . ?

MRS. ALVING. Yes, I do.

[...]

MRS. ALVING. Anyway, what is it in fact you've got against these books?

MANDERS. Got against them? You don't think I waste my time examining publications of that kind, surely?

MRS. ALVING. Which means you know absolutely nothing about what you are condemning?

Related Characters: Pastor Manders, Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

During this exchange, Mrs. Alving tries to justify to Pastor Manders why she reads certain books and publications that he thinks are immoral. Ibsen never clarifies what, exactly, this literature is, but it's clear enough that whatever Mrs. Alving is reading goes against Pastor Manders's worldview. When he asks how she can read such material, she suggests that the writing merely articulates what many people already believe. This is what she means when she says that there's nothing new in the books, implying that the traditional values Pastor Manders thinks are so ubiquitous throughout society aren't quite as widely accepted as he might think. In fact, Mrs. Alving suggests that most people gravitate toward more progressive strains of thought even if they don't voice these feelings aloud. More importantly, she points out that he has never actually read these books himself, meaning that he doesn't even know what he's so vehemently rejecting. As Mrs. Alving says this, she urges Manders to consider the fact that it's all too easy to judge something from afar—a message he unfortunately fails to absorb, considering that he later scolds her for how she has behaved as a wife and mother, two matters he actually knows nothing about.

MANDERS. [...] It would be so terribly easy to interpret things as meaning that neither you nor I had a proper faith in Divine Providence.

MRS. ALVING. But as far as you are concerned, my dear Pastor, you know perfectly well yourself. . . .

MANDERS. Yes, I know, I know . . . my conscience is clear, that's true enough. But all the same, we might not be able to stop people from seriously misrepresenting us. And that in turn might well have an inhibiting effect on the activities of the Orphanage.

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving, Pastor Manders (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

When Pastor Manders visits Mrs. Alving to discuss the orphanage's finances, he tells her that he doesn't think it would be a good idea for them to purchase insurance for the building. Although he admits that this is a risk, he's worried that people in the community will judge them if they don't put their trust in God to protect the institution. If they purchase insurance, he says, people might think they aren't completely faithful in a religious sense. When Mrs. Alving says, "But as far as you are concerned, my dear Pastor, you know perfectly well yourself...," she tries to get him to stop caring so much about what other people think. According to her outlook, a person should only care about the truth, not what other people say about him. Unfortunately for him, though, Pastor Manders is unwilling or unable to let go of his desire to have a good reputation. As a result, he decides to go against his better judgment by urging Mrs. Alving to forgo insurance for the orphanage. The fact that the orphanage catches fire later that same day only emphasizes the extent to which it's foolish to place so much importance on reputation and outward appearances.

> OSWALD. […] never have I heard one word that could give offence, let alone seen anything that could be called immoral. No, do you know where and when I *have* encountered immorality in artistic circles?
>
> MANDERS. No, thank God!
>
> OSWALD. Well then, permit me to tell you. When some of our model husbands and fathers took themselves a trip to Paris to have a look round on the loose…and condescended to drop in on the artists in their modest haunts, that's when I've met it. Then we got to know what was what. These gentlemen were able to tell us about places and things we'd never dreamt of.

Related Characters: Pastor Manders, Oswald Alving (speaker), Mrs. Helene Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Oswald talks to Pastor Manders and his mother about what it's like to live amongst artists. This is the first time he has seen Pastor Manders in many years, and he refuses to forget that Manders judged him when he originally decided to become an artist. When Mrs. Alving reminds Manders of this dynamic, Manders quickly suggests that he only disapproves of certain kinds of young artists, saying that many of them live immoral lives. In response, Oswald explains that he has lived with many artists who—although they don't conform to societal norms regarding marriage and family life—are good people. To make his point even clearer, Oswald says that the only time he has encountered immorality is when men who present themselves as respectable gentlemen have visited the artist colonies, suggesting that these men are the ones to perpetuate wickedness in society. By saying this, Oswald intimates that the traditional lifestyle Pastor Manders champions actually allows for hypocrisy, since maintaining a reputation as an upstanding citizen is an unreliable indicator of a person's actual moral character. In turn, Oswald tries to get Manders to see that it's pointless to judge a person based on superficial appearances—a lesson Oswald himself will also learn when he discovers that his father (of whom he has always thought so highly) lived a life of debauchery and vice.

> I know quite well the rumours that were going about. And I would be the last person to condone his conduct as a young man, assuming these rumours told the truth. But it is not a wife's place to sit in judgement on her husband. Your duty should have been to bear with humility that cross which a higher power had judged proper for you. But instead you have the effrontery to cast away the cross, you abandon the man whose stumbling steps you should have guided, you go and risk your own good name, and . . . very nearly jeopardize other people's reputations into the bargain.

Related Characters: Pastor Manders (speaker), Captain Alving, Mrs. Helene Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Pastor Manders says this to Mrs. Alving after she reminds him that the only reason she left Captain Alving at the beginning of their marriage was because he was leading an immoral and reckless life. In response, Manders not only condescendingly suggests that Mrs. Alving isn't telling the truth (something he implies when he refers to the stories surrounding Captain Alving as rumors), but also criticizes her for trying to address her own unhappiness. In this sense, he tells her that she should have stayed with Captain Alving regardless of his behavior, framing it as her duty to serve her husband no matter what. Even if Captain Alving was a debauched man, he says, Mrs. Alving had no right to judge him.

By saying this, Manders demonstrates just how invested he is in the patriarchal idea that women are inferior to their husbands. He also suggests that this position of submission and docility is something set upon women by God, thereby making it even harder for Mrs. Alving to assume any kind of personal agency. In addition, Manders points out that she endangered other people's reputations by running away from Captain Alving. Since he is the one she went to when she left her husband, it's clear that Pastor Manders is scolding her for putting his own reputation at risk by making it seem like they had a romantic connection—which Ibsen strongly implies that they did, though they never acted on their feelings. In this moment, then, Manders not only judges Mrs. Alving for shirking her so-called "duty" to her husband, but reproaches her for threatening the thing he himself cares about more than anything: his reputation.

That was the endless battle I fought, day after day. When we had Oswald, I rather thought Alving improved a little. But it didn't last long. And then I had to battle twice as hard, fight tooth and nail to prevent anybody from knowing what sort of person my child's father was. And you know, of course, how charming Alving could be. Nobody could believe anything but good of him. He was one of those people whose reputation is proof against anything they may do.

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker), Oswald Alving, Captain Alving, Pastor Manders

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Alving says this to Pastor Manders shortly after telling him that Captain Alving remained an immoral man until the day he died. Pastor Manders is shocked to hear this, saying that he never would have guessed that Mrs. Alving's husband failed to reform himself after his days of youthful recklessness. In response, Mrs. Alving tells him that this is exactly what was so hard about her predicament. After all, she was responsible for helping her husband maintain his reputation, fighting a seemingly never-ending "battle" to keep society from knowing about Captain Alving's true nature. What's most interesting about this is the fact that Mrs. Alving's effort to protect her husband from public scrutiny is exactly what ensured her own unhappiness. After all, she helped Captain Alving cultivate an image as an upstanding citizen who was morally irreproachable. Working hard to make sure that nobody would ever think bad things about him, she sealed her own fate. After all, if people had known that Captain Alving was actually an immoral man, it most likely would have been easier for Mrs. Alving to leave him. Because she helped him maintain his image as a respectable person, though, she made it impossible for herself to strike out on her own without ruining her *own* reputation. In turn, the audience sees the ways in which an obsession with public image can hold a person from happiness.

MRS. ALVING. Shortly afterwards I heard my husband come in, too. I heard him say something to her in a low voice. And then I heard. . . . *[With a short laugh.]* Oh, I can still hear it, so devastating and yet at the time so ludicrous…I heard my own maid whisper: 'Let me go, Mr. Alving! Leave me alone!'

MANDERS. How unseemly! How indiscreet of him!

Related Characters: Pastor Manders, Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker), Regine, Johanna, Captain Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders the worst thing that Captain Alving did while he was alive. Although she tried to put up with his behavior for many years, it eventually became too much to bear when she heard him make a sexual advance on the family maid, Johanna. This, she explains, took place when she was just one room away so that she was able to hear the entire interaction. What's most noteworthy about this passage, though, isn't necessarily what Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders about Captain Alving's wretched ways. Rather, what's most important about this exchange is the way Manders responds. Instead of focusing on Captain Alving's transgressive sexual practices, Manders takes issue with the fact that he dared to do such a thing in the house. What bothers the pastor most of all, it seems, is that Captain Alving went about his immoral behavior in an "indiscreet" manner, failing to thoroughly hide it. This, Manders believes, is deeply "unseemly," a word that perfectly encapsulates the pastor's obsession with outward appearances, making it clear that Manders is offended first and foremost by Captain Alving's inability to *pretend* to be a gentleman. Once again, then, Manders reveals his tendency to prioritize superficial matters like reputation and appearance over actual moral concerns.

That was the time Oswald was sent away. He was getting on for seven, and beginning to notice things and ask questions, as children do. That was something I couldn't bear. I felt the child would somehow be poisoned simply by breathing the foul air of this polluted house. That was why I sent him away. And now you understand why he was never allowed to set foot in this place as long as his father was alive. Nobody knows what that cost me.

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker), Johanna, Captain Alving, Pastor Manders, Oswald Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Alving speaks these words to Pastor Manders, explaining that the reason she sent Oswald away from home as a child was because she wanted to protect him from Captain Alving and his wicked ways. It's worth noting that she uses the word "poisoned" when referring to her fear that Captain Alving might have a negative influence on Oswald. This word implies that Mrs. Alving sees immorality as something that can spread from one person to another, as if her husband might infect her son just by being around him. Interestingly enough, she doesn't yet know that Oswald has inherited syphilis from his father, but her word choice in this moment foreshadows this discovery. When Oswald later reveals that he has inherited syphilis from Captain Alving, it becomes clear that Mrs. Alving was right to fear that her husband would poison the boy, though nothing she did could ever have stopped this. In this regard, the audience sees that sometimes it's impossible to escape the mistakes of one's forebears, which often infect—or, to put it less dramatically, influence—a person regardless of what he or she does.

Act Two Quotes

❝ MANDERS. Nobody can be held responsible for the way things have turned out. But nevertheless one thing is clear: your marriage was arranged in strict accord with law and order.

MRS. ALVING. Oh, all this law and order! I often think *that's* the cause of all the trouble in the world.

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving, Pastor Manders (speaker), Captain Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Pastor Manders tries once more to justify why he urged Mrs. Alving to return to Captain Alving when she left him at the beginning of their marriage. To do so, he reminds her that her marriage was lawfully arranged, thereby framing her relationship with Captain Alving as something she had a legal obligation to maintain. Once again, then, he places marriage into a context of duty and sacrifice, implying that it was Mrs. Alving's responsibility to remain true to her husband despite the fact that the relationship itself was toxic and loveless. In response, Mrs. Alving criticizes the very idea of "law and order," suggesting that Manders's obsession with various societal norms and rules is exactly what keeps people from being happy in the first place. In this way, she sets herself at odds with Pastor Manders, making it clear that she no longer buys into his traditional beliefs and that perhaps no one else should, either.

❝ Ghosts. When I heard Regine and Oswald in there, it was just like seeing ghosts. But then I'm inclined to think that we are all ghosts, Pastor Manders, every one of us. It's not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It's all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs, and things like that. It's not that they actually *live* on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. Over the whole country there must be ghosts, as numerous as the sands of the sea.

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker), Johanna, Captain Alving, Oswald Alving, Regine, Pastor Manders

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Alving says this to Pastor Manders after hearing Oswald make a sexual advance on Regine in the adjacent room. This reminds her of hearing Captain Alving do the same thing to Johanna many years ago, and the experience makes Mrs. Alving feel as if the ghosts of her past are revisiting her. As she sets forth this metaphor about ghosts, she suggests that people are often haunted by their personal histories. However, she also expands the idea so that it encompasses the ways in which societal customs refuse to die, as old belief systems bring themselves to bear on the present. When she says that such ideas are "lodged" in people, she implies that it's impossible to rid oneself of them. This sense of the past being embedded into a person is worth keeping in mind as the play progresses, especially when Oswald asks his mother to euthanize him. On the one hand, Oswald is the final remaining ghost of Captain Alving in Mrs. Alving's life. On the other hand, though, she loves her son and doesn't want to kill him. In turn, she doesn't know whether or not she should euthanize Oswald, and her indecision comes to represent the fact that Captain Alving's influence is still shaping her life, even though he's been dead for ten years. Consequently, the audience sees just how difficult it can be to escape the various ghosts of the past.

OSWALD. At last he said: there's been something worm-eaten about you since birth. He used that very word: 'vermoulu'.

MRS. ALVING *[tense]*. What did he mean by that?

OSWALD. I couldn't understand it either, and I asked him for a more detailed explanation. And then he said, the old cynic…*[Clenches his fist.]* Oh…!

MRS. ALVING. What did he say?

OSWALD. He said: the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving, Oswald Alving (speaker), Captain Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Oswald reveals the nature of his illness to Mrs. Alving. Although Ibsen never specifically names the disease Oswald is suffering from, audiences at the time would have recognized the symptoms and identified the illness as syphilis. It's worth noting that, though Ibsen implies that Oswald has inherited syphilis from his father, this is not biologically possible. However, it *is* possible for a man to pass syphilis to a woman through sexual intercourse. It's also possible for a woman to then become a carrier of the disease without exhibiting any symptoms. Accordingly, it's plausible that Oswald inherited syphilis from his father after all, and that Mrs. Alving has been unknowingly carrying the disease. This is an interesting concept, since it suggests that Captain Alving's "sins" have not only brought themselves to bear on Oswald, but also on Mrs. Alving. Under this interpretation, his decision to live a promiscuous sexual life has affected his entire family, despite the fact that Mrs. Alving and Oswald have done nothing to deserve such misery. In this regard, then, Ibsen underlines the fact that it's sometimes impossible to escape the suffering that comes as a result of someone else's unfortunate past. Indeed, since Oswald has apparently been infected since birth, there's nothing he can do to outrun the legacy of his father's infidelity, a fact that underscores his helplessness when it comes to changing his fate. Even if Oswald didn't really inherit syphilis directly from his father and instead contracted it through sexual activity (as some alternate readings of the play suggest), it could still be argued that Captain Alving was the cause of the disease, since Oswald's sexual inclinations sometimes seem to mirror his father's.

OSWALD *[smiling sadly]*. Yes, what do you think? Of course, I assured him that was quite out of the question. But do you think he would give way? No, he wouldn't budge. And it wasn't until I'd produced your letters and translated for him all those bits about Father. . . .

MRS. ALVING. What then. . . ?

OSWALD. Well, then he naturally had to admit that he'd been on the wrong track. Then I learnt the truth. The incredible truth! This blissfully happy life I'd been living with my friends, I should never have indulged in it. It had been too much for my strength. So it was my own fault, you see!

Related Characters: Mrs. Helene Alving, Oswald Alving (speaker), Captain Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

After Oswald's doctor informs him that he has inherited syphilis from Captain Alving, he insists that this couldn't possibly be true. To convince the doctor, he shows him letters from his mother, in which Mrs. Alving writes about Captain Alving's supposedly respectable and moral nature. Of course, the audience knows that none of this is true, but Oswald hasn't yet learned that his father was an alcoholic and an adulterer. As a result, he decides to blame himself for having contracted syphilis. This is a rather difficult moment to understand, because it's unclear whether or not Oswald blames himself for getting syphilis because he has *actually* lived a sexually promiscuous life, or simply because he thinks the disease descended upon him because he has shirked convention by deciding to live amongst artists. In other words, it's not clear if Oswald truly understands how a person contracts syphilis, which is a sexually transmitted disease. In turn, he is either admitting to having engaged in sexual intercourse outside marriage or revealing his lack of understanding of the disease. Either way, what's worth noting is that he has indeed inherited something from his father, regardless of whether or not his syphilis came directly from Captain Alving. After all, even if he contracted syphilis by having unprotected sex with others, this would mean that he effectively inherited his father's promiscuous ways.

Act Three Quotes

ENGSTRAND. Fancy a thing like that happening to a charitable institution, something that was going to be such a boon to the whole district, as you might say. I don't suppose the papers are going to let *you* off very lightly, Pastor.

MANDERS. No, that's just what I'm thinking. That's just about the worst part of the whole affair. All these spiteful accusations and insinuations. . . ! Oh, it's terrible to think about!

Related Characters: Pastor Manders, Jacob Engstrand (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place shortly after the orphanage burns down. When Engstrand and Manders return to Mrs. Alving's house and discuss what has happened, Engstrand cunningly frames the pastor by suggesting that he burned down the building. Once Manders accepts that he was the one to do this (which, it's worth noting, he most likely was not), Engstrand tries to make him feel nervous about how the general public will view his role in the tragedy. He does this because he wants to trick Pastor Manders into giving him money to open a hotel. In the aftermath of the fire, then, he manipulates Pastor Manders by playing on the man's obsession with reputation. Forcing Manders to think about the terrible things everyone will say about him, Engstrand puts the pastor in a position of vulnerability, which he then capitalizes on by saying that he will take the fall if Manders agrees to fund his hotel. The fact that this tactic works shows the audience that Manders's preoccupation with his own reputation ultimately allows others to take advantage of him. Once again, Manders also shows that he cares about appearances more than anything else—he says that the potential damage is the "worst part" about the fire, implying that he cares more about his own disgrace than the fact that children in need will no longer benefit from the orphanage.

MRS. ALVING. Your father could never find any outlet for this tremendous exuberance of his. And I didn't exactly bring very much gaiety into his home, either.

OSWALD. Didn't you?

MRS. ALVING. They'd taught me various things about duty and such like, and I'd simply gone on believing them. Everything seemed to come down to duty in the end—*my* duty and *his* duty and . . . I'm afraid I must have made the house unbearable for your poor father, Oswald.

Related Characters: Oswald Alving, Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker), Captain Alving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Alving has just informed Oswald that his father wasn't the morally upstanding man everyone thought he was. Going on, she suggests that she had something to do with his wicked ways, saying that she failed to bring a sense of joy to the household. This, she believes, is perhaps what drove him to seek all kinds of reckless pleasures. By saying this, she effectively blames herself for her husband's behavior, but she soon displaces this blame by saying that she'd been taught that it was her job to uphold certain societal norms. This, she claims, is why she was unable to help create an atmosphere of joy and pleasure in the Alving household. In turn, she indicates that society's overly modest and traditional ways make people unhappy, forcing them to search for pleasure in all the wrong places. And though she unfortunately still seems to place a certain amount of responsibility on herself for Captain Alving's immoral ways, she at least recognizes the restrictive influence that societal customs have had on both her and her family.

MRS. ALVING. What a terrible thought! Surely a child ought to love its father in spite of all?

OSWALD. What if a child has nothing to thank its father for? Never knew him? You don't really believe in this old superstition still, do you? And you so enlightened in other ways?

MRS. ALVING. You call that mere superstition. . . !

OSWALD. Yes, surely you realize that, Mother. It's simply one of those ideas that get around and . . .

MRS. ALVING *[shaken]*. Ghosts!

Related Characters: Oswald Alving, Mrs. Helene Alving (speaker), Pastor Manders, Captain Alving

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ibsen clarifies the meaning behind the play's title. When Mrs. Alving calls the old ideas that continue to circulate throughout her life "ghosts," her words demonstrate Ibsen's desire to present outdated customs and belief systems as specters capable of haunting people long into the future. Mrs. Alving, for her part, is a somewhat progressive thinker who reads modern literature and disagrees with many of the ideas that people like Pastor Manders set forth about duty, obligation, and what is considered proper. However, even she sometimes finds herself perpetuating such notions, which is what happens when she is appalled to hear that Oswald doesn't particularly care that his father was a wretched and unhappy man. Impulsively, she suggests that children should love their parents no matter what, a reaction that demonstrates just how thoroughly she has internalized ideas that she doesn't even fully believe. Oswald points this out to her, making it clear that such notions are relics from the past. When she sees that he's right about this, she calls these ideas "ghosts," a term that helps her articulate the fact that these outmoded customs continue to haunt her even after she has actively decided to leave them behind.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE

As Regine goes about her duties one morning as a maid in Mrs. Helene Alving's home, her father, Jacob Engstrand, comes in from the rain to speak with her. Upon seeing him, she tells him to stay outside because he's wet, and he chastises her for trying to turn away her own father. Still, she insists that the noise of his wood-soled shoes will wake Oswald Alving, who has recently come home for the first time in a long while. Engstrand, for his part, is appalled to hear that Oswald is still sleeping, saying that he himself was out late drinking but still managed to wake up early to work on finishing the nearby orphanage, a memorial to Mrs. Alving's late husband, Captain Alving. The orphanage will open the following day, so Engstrand—the carpenter—has spent the morning putting the final touches on the structure.

Regine's unwillingness to welcome her father into Mrs. Alving's house reveals her desire to transform herself and distance herself from Engstrand. The fact that Mrs. Alving has a maid and has ordered the construction of an orphanage in her husband's name shows the audience that she is a rich woman—the kind of person Regine likely wants to become. Because of this desire to be like Mrs. Alving, then, Regine doesn't want to be seen with her father, whose reputation she clearly wants nothing to do with. In this regard, Ibsen spotlights the ways in which people covet wealth and outward appearances, even at the expense of family relationships.

Regine tries again to send her father away, but he refuses to leave, insisting that he deserves to speak to his own daughter. Going on, he explains that he wants to leave for the nearby town before people arrive for the orphanage's grand opening. Hoping to catch a boat back to town, Engstrand says that there will be too many temptations for him if he stays for the orphanage's opening, since people will be drinking and celebrating. As he tries to present himself as a man capable of resisting temptation, Regine scoffs at him, indicating that she doesn't care what he does as long as he gets out of Mrs. Alving's house. Throughout their conversation, she uses various French phrases that confuse Engstrand, though she never explains what she has said.

As Regine and Engstrand continue their conversation, it becomes even clearer that Regine is eager to distance herself from her father. This, it seems, might have to do with the fact that Engstrand is a heavy drinker who doesn't even trust himself to be around alcohol. When Regine ridicules his wish to avoid temptation, she implies that Engstrand has tried and failed many times before to keep his vices at bay. She, on the other hand, is devoted to cultivating a refined image of herself, as evidenced by her haughty use of French even when such phrases add nothing but a sense of superiority to her interaction with her father.

Engstrand notes that Pastor Manders will be coming from town to oversee the orphanage's opening, and Regine picks up on her father's apparent desire to convince the pastor to do something for him. When she asks him what he's going to try to persuade Manders to do, though, Engstrand refutes the idea that he wants anything at all. Changing the subject, he tells Regine that he'd like her to come back to town with him that night. Regine rejects this idea, saying she'll never return to Engstrand's home and claiming that Mrs. Alving has essentially raised her as one of her own family members. This, she believes, gives her a chance to become a true lady, which is why she would never dream of leaving the Alving household to live with her father.

Once again, Regine is unwilling to associate with her father. In fact, she completely dismisses the mere idea of returning to town with him, since this would interfere with her plans to build a reputation as a distinguished woman in Mrs. Alving's wealthy circles. In this moment, the audience sees just how committed she is to using her relationship with Mrs. Alving to her own benefit, a practice she seems to have inherited from her father, who she suspects wants to manipulate Pastor Manders into doing something.

Engstrand calls Regine a "little bitch" and scolds her for disrespecting her own father. In response, Regine points out that Engstrand has often said he doesn't truly care about her and has called her terrible things. Engstrand, for his part, claims that he would never say such things, though he admits that he may have used careless language when he was drunk. Continuing, he complains about Regine's mother, saying that she used to constantly bother him. He claims that she was snobby and conceited because Captain Alving was made a chamberlain while she worked for him. Hearing this, Regine suggests that Engstrand drove her mother to death.

Engstrand's sudden anger unearths his belief that children have no right to go against their parents. When he calls Regine a "little bitch" for disrespecting him, he implies that she is obligated to do whatever he wants. Nevertheless, Regine is too focused on gaining upward mobility to care what Engstrand expects of her, though she can't help but become angry when he disparages her mother. After all, by calling Regine's mother a snob, Engstrand simultaneously criticizes Regine herself, who clearly shares her mother's desire to benefit from her associations with rich people like the Alvings.

Regine asks Engstrand why he wants her to come back to town, and he says, "How can you ask what a father wants with his only child? I'm a lonely, deserted widower, aren't I?" Going on, he tells her that he's decided to open a **hotel** for sailors, but she quickly writes this idea off as yet another one of his unsuccessful schemes.

It's worth paying attention to what Engstrand says to Regine in this moment, since it's clear that he's trying to manipulate her into feeling sorry for him. First, he suggests that a father has a right to be with his child, implying that children are more or less obligated to do what their parents want. Moving on, he reminds her that he's a lonely widower, quite obviously trying to make her feel bad for him. By saying this, he hopes to capitalize on her sympathy, prefacing what he's about to tell her about his new idea with this emotionally calculated attempt to control her.

Engstrand insists that he has saved money to open a **hotel** for sailors, claiming that it would be an establishment with great class. He says that it would be exclusively for captains and other high-ranking officials, and when Regine asks what she would do at this hotel, he says that she would simply help run the place. He also says that her responsibilities wouldn't be all that difficult and that she'd practically be able to do whatever she wants. The main thing is that he wants to have a woman at the hotel. "Because we'd want a bit of fun in the evenings," he says.

It's clear that Engstrand knows what Regine wants to hear, as he tries to appeal to her desire to associate with well-respected society members. To convince her to do what he wants, he frames his hotel for sailors as a classy establishment that would only accommodate respectable people. And though this might seem like an attractive option to Regine, it quickly becomes clear that the hotel Engstrand really has in mind will be little more than a brothel, as made evident when he says that he and the patrons will want to have "a bit of fun in the evenings," something he says in relation to the prospect of having a woman work at the hotel. In this way, he tries to convince his daughter to do what he wants by manipulatively preying on her aspirations while simultaneously having no intention of actually fulfilling his promises.

Engstrand tries to convince Regine to come with him by saying that she's gaining nothing from her time with the Alvings. Pointing out that she'll be overworked if she stays and spends her time toiling in the orphanage, he says the education she has received from Mrs. Alving won't do her any good. In response, Regine claims that she has plans to rise above her station, but she also asks how much money her father has saved for the **hotel**. When he tells her, she asks if he ever thought about giving the money to her, and he says that he'd never do such a thing. Still, he promises to buy her whatever she wants if she comes to work in the hotel. He also suggests that she would probably meet a sailor to marry, but she says that she's uninterested in sailors.

As Engstrand tries to persuade Regine to help him found his hotel for sailors, he disparages her efforts to become a civilized and refined young woman. To do this, he underlines just how futile it is for her to stay with Mrs. Alving, since her time working for the woman has resulted in nothing tangible. Although she has gained an education from her time with the Alvings, she is still destined to do little more than work in an orphanage as a maid. And though Regine remains steadfast in her decision to stay, it's worth noting that she seems to soften a bit to the idea of leaving when Engstrand intimates that coming with him will actually help her climb the social ladder—a fact that once again proves her determination to rise through society.

Seeing Pastor Manders approaching the house, Regine sends Engstrand away. As he goes, Engstrand tells her to ask Manders about what children owe to their fathers, going out of his way to add that he is her father and that he can prove it by showing her the Parish Register. When he leaves, Pastor Manders enters through another door and talks to Regine about his voyage from town, saying that the boat ride was wet and wretched. They then talk about the orphanage and the fact that Oswald Alving has finally come home.

Engstrand's parting words once again suggest that children are somehow indebted to their parents. Furthermore, his strange insistence that he is her father (and his willingness to prove this) indicates that he's worried for some reason that she'll doubt his parental authority. Given that Ghosts *is a play about family history and what family members owe one another, this is an important moment, since Engstrand is apparently unsure if Regine will respect the terms of their father-daughter relationship.*

Before Regine goes to get Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders talks to her about Engstrand, saying that he's the kind of person who needs guidance. All the same, Manders believes Engstrand has good intentions. As he says this, he hints at the idea of Regine going to live with and work for Engstrand, something Engstrand has clearly discussed with him already. However, Regine once again rejects the idea, saying that Mrs. Alving wouldn't want her to go. In response, Manders admits that Regine would need Mrs. Alving's permission, but adds that it's a daughter's duty to look after her father. Still, Regine remains unwilling to help Engstrand, though she says she would leave Mrs. Alving's house if she were to find a suitable husband who could provide for her. To that end, she asks Manders to keep her in mind if he meets any good suitors.

Right away, Pastor Manders makes it clear that he believes in the notion of familial duty, saying that daughters have to meet certain expectations and fulfill various responsibilities when it comes to their relationships with their fathers. Unsurprisingly, Regine doesn't like the sound of this, but she admits that she would leave Mrs. Alving's employment if she were to find a good husband—yet another indication that she is interested first and foremost in securing upward mobility. How exactly this happens doesn't matter to her, as long as she manages to rise through the ranks of society; it seems that her relationships with both Engstrand and Mrs. Alving pale in comparison to this goal.

Regine fetches Mrs. Alving, who enters and greets Pastor Manders. When Regine leaves, Mrs. Alving insists that Manders should stay in her house while he's visiting from town, but he declines. Turning their attention to Oswald's return, Mrs. Alving delightedly informs the pastor that her son has agreed to stay for the entire winter. They then get down to business, discussing the orphanage's various finances, since Manders is in charge of managing the institution's money. Just as they begin to talk about money, though, Manders notices a stack of books that catches him off guard. Apparently, what Mrs. Alving has been reading offends the pastor, who disapproves of such books. Beside himself, he asks how Mrs. Alving could possibly find any truth in what she's been reading, but she points out that—since he's never read these books himself—he has no idea what he's even denouncing.

Although Ibsen doesn't specify what Mrs. Alving has been reading, what's important is that Pastor Manders disapproves of her books because they espouse ideas that apparently go against his beliefs. Considering that he's a pastor, it's likely that the books are actively against religion or, at the very least, set forth worldviews that have nothing to do with God or piety. When Manders criticizes Mrs. Alving for reading this material, his commitment to traditional belief systems comes to the forefront of the play. However, Mrs. Alving stands up for herself by pointing out that Manders has no experience outside of his own narrow perspective, ultimately suggesting that it's foolish to write something off simply because it doesn't perfectly align with one's own way of seeing the world. By saying this, she reveals her desire to explore new viewpoints that don't necessarily fit into her surrounding community.

Pastor Manders says he doesn't blame Mrs. Alving for wanting to understand new ideas that have recently surfaced in society, but he urges her to hide this curiosity, insisting that these are matters that people shouldn't discuss. He also implies that Mrs. Alving has exposed Oswald to these unsavory ideas simply by sending him away from home for so many years.

Pastor Manders has a very sheltered view of the world, believing that new ways of thinking do nothing but threaten the previously established structures of thought to which he has already committed himself. As a pastor, he dislikes anything that might contradict the life he's built in the church. Here he also reveals his dedication to keeping up appearances, since it's not really Mrs. Irving's reading that upsets him; it's the fact that she doesn't do a better job of hiding it.

Returning to the topic of the orphanage's finances, Pastor Manders shows Mrs. Alving the various documents he's brought along with him and explains that he has decided to list the orphanage as the Captain Alving Memorial Home. He also advises Mrs. Alving to not purchase insurance, since the orphanage is tied to the church. Although he admits that this is a risk, he says she shouldn't have to worry because of the institution's affiliation with a religious organization. After all, God should protect against disaster. What's more, Manders worries what people would think about his own faith if they heard that he and Mrs. Alving hadn't trusted God to protect the orphanage. Mrs. Alving, for her part, agrees that they shouldn't insure the building.

During this exchange, audience members see just how concerned Pastor Manders is about his reputation. As a pastor, he thinks people will judge him if he advises Mrs. Alving to purchase insurance. What's interesting, though, is that he seems aware of the fact that it's a risky decision to leave the building uninsured—the thing that convinces him to go forth with this plan isn't his belief that God will protect the orphanage (though he does mention this), but rather his fear that people will think poorly of him if he doesn't appear to have this belief. By spotlighting this dynamic, Ibsen shows the audience that Manders is a man who cares primarily about how he appears to others.

Although Mrs. Alving decides not to insure the orphanage, Pastor Manders asks if she would be able to cover the expenses if something were to happen to the building. She tells him that she wouldn't be able to, and though this concerns him, they both conclude that they still can't risk ruining their reputations by purchasing insurance. Just as they decide this, Mrs. Alving says it's a funny coincidence that Manders brought the matter up, since there was a small fire in the orphanage just the day before. This deeply alarms Manders, but Mrs. Alving explains that it was quickly resolved, saying that a pile of wood shavings caught fire in Engstrand's workshop.

When Pastor Manders asks Mrs. Alving if she would be able to pay for damages should something happen to the orphanage, he once again reveals that he's aware of how unwise it is to leave the building uninsured. Although he wants to maintain his public image as a man who unconditionally trusts God to protect charitable institutions, he can't help but worry that he's steering Mrs. Alving in the wrong direction. He clearly hopes that she will ease his worries by saying that she has plenty of money to put toward the orphanage in the event of an accident. However, she's unable to put his mind at ease in this regard. In fact, she makes him even more *worried by telling him that Engstrand accidentally started a fire in the orphanage just one day earlier. The fact that Manders still sticks to his original plan despite all this worry illustrates just how much he cares about maintaining his reputation.*

Pastor Manders tells Mrs. Alving that Engstrand wants Regine to come live with him, but she refuses to let the young woman go. In turn, Manders reminds her that Engstrand is Regine's father, though this does nothing to persuade Mrs. Alving, who notes that she has cared for Regine for quite a long time now and intends to continue doing so.

Pastor Manders's attempt to convince Mrs. Alving to release Regine from her duties once again underlines his belief that children have a duty to care for their parents. According to him, Mrs. Alving is interfering in Engstrand and Regine's relationship.

Interrupting Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving's conversation, Oswald finally enters the room. Manders hardly recognizes the young man, whom he hasn't seen for many years, and though Manders is overjoyed to see him, Oswald is somewhat bitter toward the pastor. This is because Manders didn't approve of the fact that Oswald left home to become an artist. Nevertheless, Manders assures Oswald that he doesn't disapprove of all artists, only those who lead immoral lives. He then praises Oswald for having found so much success as a painter, though he also remarks that he hasn't seen anything in the newspaper about Oswald's work for quite some time. This, Oswald explains, is because he hasn't been painting recently, and his mother quickly adds that even artists need to rest sometimes.

The fact that Oswald thinks that Pastor Manders disapproves of his lifestyle is further evidence that Manders is a judgmental person. A man devoted to the traditional ways of the church, he sees young artists as a representation of all the ways that the world is changing. And though Manders insists that he doesn't condemn Oswald in particular, it seems likely that he does have reservations about the way Oswald leads his life.

While talking to Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving, Oswald smokes his father's pipe, which he found in a room upstairs. Seeing him with the pipe, Manders is convinced that Oswald looks just like Captain Alving, though Mrs. Alving disagrees, saying that her son looks more like a clergyman. This conversation inspires Oswald to relate one of the only memories he has of his father, which took place when he was a little boy. He remembers entering his father's room and sitting in his lap, at which point Captain Alving gave him the tobacco pipe and told him to smoke. Oswald sucked in so much smoke that he immediately felt ill, causing his father to erupt in laughter. Mrs. Alving, for her part, insists that this memory is inaccurate, but Manders affectionately points out that Captain Alving was indeed "full of the joys of living" in those days.

Mrs. Alving's insistence that Oswald looks like a clergyman indicates that she shares some of Manders's views regarding respectability and reputation. Wanting her son to seem like a distinguished and well-regarded member of society, she tries to frame him as a pious man of God. This is worth noting, since so far everyone seems to respect the memory of Captain Alving, making it rather odd that Mrs. Alving wouldn't take delight in the idea of her son looking like her husband. In this way, Ibsen prepares the audience to examine the true nature of Mrs. Alving's relationship with her late husband.

Oswald marvels for a moment that his father was such a trickster while still managing to accomplish so much in life. At this point, Pastor Manders comments that Oswald left home at a very young age, and when Mrs. Alving suggests that it's good for children to leave, the pastor disagrees, saying that children belong in their parents' house. He even suggests that Oswald has never learned what it's like to live in a real home, but Oswald takes issue with this idea, saying that he has lived with other artists and established a sense of belonging and domesticity with them. Manders is surprised to hear this, saying that he was under the impression that most artists couldn't afford to buy houses and start families, and Oswald says that this is true, noting that many artists can't even afford to marry.

Again, Pastor Manders's strong and traditional beliefs come to the forefront of the play, as he underhandedly criticizes Mrs. Alving for letting Oswald leave home as a child. Ibsen has already shown the audience that Manders has strong feelings about familial relationships, as evidenced by his insistence that Regine should return home to live with her father. Now, though, Oswald challenges the pastor's conventional views, suggesting that it's possible to have a good upbringing without living in a standard domestic setting.

Although most artists can't afford to get married, Oswald tells Pastor Manders, many still decide to live together, setting up a home regardless of whether or not they are husband and wife. Manders finds this inexcusable, saying that such relationships lead to nothing but immorality. Disagreeing, Oswald says that the only kind of immorality he's ever seen in such situations has come from well-respected men who visit artist colonies, where they behave terribly and do the exact things they later condemn in conversations with people like Pastor Manders. Having said this, Oswald excuses himself before dinner, apologizing for upsetting Manders but insisting that he had to say what he said.

During this exchange, Oswald tries to help Pastor Manders see the hypocrisy that runs rampant throughout society. Although Manders judges young artists for living unconventional lives, Oswald insists that breaking from tradition doesn't necessarily mean leaving behind morality. In fact, he upholds that the most unethical people he's met are men who subscribe to the very same values as Pastor Manders. In turn, he maintains that people aren't always what they seem, urging Manders to refrain from judging others based on surface-level appearances.

After Oswald leaves, Mrs. Alving admits that she agrees with everything her son has said. Consequently, Pastor Manders sees this as a good time to tell her something that has been on his mind for a long time, which is that he still disapproves of the fact that she tried to run away from her husband in the early years of their marriage. She reminds him that she was extremely unhappy, but he scoffs at her need to be happy in the first place, bemoaning the fact that people think they have a right to be happy. Instead, he thinks people should focus on their duties, saying that Mrs. Alving's responsibility was to stick with her husband, since they were "bound by sacred ties."

Despite Oswald's suggestion that Pastor Manders stop judging others, Manders criticizes Mrs. Alving for shirking what he sees as her duty. Reaching back to before Oswald was born, he chastises her for prioritizing her own happiness over her marriage. In doing so, he once again demonstrates his belief that there is nothing more important than rising to meet expectations, even if this means sacrificing one's own wellbeing. Of course, it's worth noting that Manders only talks about duty and responsibility in the context of convincing women to submit to men, whether this means urging Regine to serve her father or persuading Mrs. Alving to stay in an unhappy marriage for the sake of her husband.

Mrs. Alving reminds Pastor Manders that Captain Alving was an immoral man in the early years of their marriage, but this does nothing to keep Manders's reproach at bay. He says he's well aware of the rumors that surrounded Captain Alving in those days, but he also says that a wife has no right to judge her husband. "Your duty should have been to bear with humility that cross which a higher power had judged proper for you," he says. He also says that Mrs. Alving was lucky that he—Manders himself—was able to lead her back to her husband by reminding her of her duty. This, he claims, was the smart thing to do, since Captain Alving eventually matured and stopped living the life of an adulterous alcoholic.

When Pastor Manders says that Mrs. Alving should have respected her duty to her husband, he claims that this responsibility was set upon her by God. In making this claim, he subjects her to both societal and religious pressures to submit to Captain Alving, framing her role as a wife as something bigger than herself—something that renders her own needs and feelings superfluous. In turn, he makes it nearly impossible for her to advocate for herself, implying that it's a woman's job to sacrifice her needs in order to fit into the role of a submissive wife.

Continuing his criticism of Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders says that she has also shirked her responsibilities as a mother. This, he says, is made obvious by the fact that Mrs. Alving sent Oswald away from home at such a young age because she felt overburdened by the duties of motherhood. He then accuses Mrs. Alving of being aware of her wrongdoings, saying that her decision to build an orphanage in her husband's memory proves that she feels guilty for all of the wrongs she has done to her own family.

By this point in Ghosts, *it's clear that Pastor Manders has no qualms passing judgment on other people. In this moment, he attacks Mrs. Alving's life from seemingly all angles, claiming that she was not only a bad wife, but also a bad mother. To make these claims, he invests himself in the idea that people—and especially women—have certain duties and obligations that they must fulfill in their relationships with their loved ones. It is this framework of familial dependence and womanly responsibility that enables him to so mercilessly critique Mrs. Alving.*

Having listened patiently to Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving finally tells him that he's passing judgment on matters about which he knows very little. She reminds him that he stopped visiting her after he urged her to return to Captain Alving, meaning that he's basing his opinions on nothing but what he has surmised from afar. Going on, she tells him that Captain Alving never actually improved his ways. This stuns Manders, who can't believe that Mrs. Alving's entire married life was a "nothing but a façade." When he asks how she could possibly have kept this hidden from the public, she says that it was a constant struggle to hide Captain Alving's wicked ways. Still, she knew she had to do this for Oswald's sake.

In this moment, the audience sees how unfair it was for Pastor Manders to suggest that Mrs. Alving is a bad mother, considering that she suffered for many years to keep her family together despite Captain Alving's wretched behavior. After all, she endured her husband's unsavory lifestyle simply for Oswald's sake. In turn, it becomes clear that Pastor Manders's audacity in judging her from afar is especially unjust. Overall, the truth about Captain Alving proves that even people with fantastic reputations can be quite immoral.

The worst part of this entire story, Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders, is that one day she heard Captain Alving make a sexually inappropriate advance on their maid, Johanna. Mrs. Alving was in the next room, and she heard Johanna say, "Let me go, Mr. Alving! Leave me alone!" When she tells this story to Manders, the pastor is beside himself. "How unseemly!" he says. "How indiscreet of him!" He then suggests that this instance must have been a minor accident, but Mrs. Alving refutes this by telling him that Captain Alving impregnated Johanna.

It's worth paying attention to the way Pastor Manders reacts to the story Mrs. Manders tells him about Captain Alving's infidelity. Instead of focusing on Captain Alving's actual behavior, the pastor fixates on the fact that Mrs. Alving's husband failed to hide his wicked ways from his wife. Indeed, he calls Captain Alving's actions "unseemly" and, most importantly, "indiscreet," as if the man's primary transgression was his inability to keep his sexual deviance a secret. In this way, he once again obsesses over outward appearances, ultimately failing to think about the actual moral implications of Captain Alving's infidelity (and, it seems, his nonconsensual sexual aggression).

Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders that she had to put up with Captain Alving's misbehavior for Oswald's sake. However, when her husband impregnated Johanna, Mrs. Alving finally decided to do something. It was at this point that she sent Oswald away from the home. The boy was only seven at the time, but Mrs. Alving was afraid that he would be "poisoned" by Captain Alving if he stayed in the house. This, she explains, is why she never let Oswald come home until after his father died. When Pastor Manders takes pity on her, Mrs. Alving admits that she wouldn't have been able to endure such misery if it hadn't been for her work, saying that she had quite a lot to distract her because she was the one who was responsible for all of Captain Alving's accomplishments.

Mrs. Alving's use of the word "poison" is interesting, since it suggests that she believes immorality and depravity can be passed along through exposure. This makes sense, considering that Oswald would have seen and absorbed his father's bad behavior if he had spent the entirety of his childhood and adolescence around the man. However, this word also foreshadows her later ideas about how people can inherit shameful pasts from their forebears. On another note, the fact that Mrs. Alving is responsible for Captain Alving's accomplishments suggests that although she may not be quite as obsessed with reputation as Pastor Manders, she still cares enough about her family's public image to help maintain her husband's persona as a successful and beneficent man.

Pastor Manders marvels at the fact that Mrs. Alving is constructing a memorial to Captain Alving even after the terrible way he treated her, but she says she's only doing so to ensure that people will continue to think favorably of him. She wants this, she indicates, because she thinks it's necessary to preserve the family's image. In addition, she wanted to use all of Captain Alving's money to start the orphanage—this way, she explains, Oswald will not inherit anything from his father.

This exchange confirms the idea that Mrs. Alving is worried about what Oswald inherits from his father, both in a literal sense and a figurative one. Not wanting him to become like Captain Alving, she makes sure that he won't receive any of the man's money, since it would be a real-life representation of how his existence continues to influence Oswald's life.

When Oswald returns from his walk, Regine enters and asks what he'd like to drink with dinner. Saying he'd like both red and white wine, he decides to go help her open the bottles. When he leaves the room, Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving resume their conversation, but they're interrupted by Regine's voice, which reaches them from the adjacent room, saying, "Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!" In the ensuing silence, Mrs. Alving stares at the door. When Manders asks what just happened, Mrs. Alving suggests that they heard the ghosts of her past, and Pastor Manders realizes that Regine is the child that Captain Alving had with Johanna. Before he can say anything else, Mrs. Alving takes his arm and pulls him to the dining room, telling him to say nothing more.

The sexual advance Oswald makes on Regine is a representation of the ways in which the past repeats itself. In this moment, it seems as if Oswald has inherited something from his father after all: his inappropriate sexual behavior. In fact, he also appears to have inherited the man's craving for alcohol, since he wants to drink both red and white wine with dinner. When Mrs. Alving says that she has just heard the ghosts of her past, Ibsen suggests that certain painful histories don't simply go away. Rather, they can haunt a person for the rest of her life.

ACT TWO

After dinner, Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders return to the living room to continue their conversation. Mrs. Alving says that they have to find a way to remove Regine from the house to keep Oswald from pursuing a romantic relationship with his half-sister. However, neither she nor Manders can think of where to send her, since Engstrand isn't really her father. Mrs. Alving explains that Johanna left after learning she was pregnant, though Captain Alving gave her a large sum of money to keep quiet about the entire ordeal. When she got back to town, she convinced Engstrand to marry her and say that he was the one who got her pregnant, telling him that a rich foreign sailor was the real father and that this sailor had paid her to cover up the truth.

Now that Oswald's romantic feelings for Regine have come to Mrs. Alving's attention, she has to deal once again with the repercussions of Captain Alving's behavior. In this way, then, Ibsen demonstrates the ways in which the past keeps rearing its head in Mrs. Alving's life. In addition, Engstrand's willingness to take the blame for impregnating Johanna aligns with his opportunistic nature, supporting the idea that he is constantly looking for ways to get ahead—even (or perhaps especially) in unfortunate situations.

Pastor Manders is furious to hear that Engstrand has lied to him for so many years about Regine. He finds it detestable that Engstrand would agree to marry a "fallen woman" for the price of 300 dollars, prompting Mrs. Alving to point out that she herself married a disreputable man and inherited a lot more. When Manders argues that this isn't all that similar, Mrs. Alving tells him that she never truly loved Captain Alving. In fact, she implies that she loved Pastor Manders and that she wanted to be with him when she ran away from Captain Alving, but Manders pretends not to know what she's talking about. Regardless, he says, the fact of the matter is that Mrs. Alving was lawfully married to Captain Alving—a statement that causes Mrs. Alving to suggest that society's obsession with rules is the root cause of unhappiness.

Ibsen complicates Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders's dynamic by introducing the idea that Mrs. Alving once loved the pastor. Of course, Manders claims that he never picked up on this when she ran away from Captain Alving, but it's unclear whether or not this is true, since this is most likely what he'd say even if he did recognize that Mrs. Alving had feelings for him. After all, if he knew that she loved him, he would certainly feel even more compelled to uphold his priestly duty to tell her to return to her husband, since he wouldn't want anyone to think that he had failed to do so based on her fondness of him. In contrast, Mrs. Alving disparages society's obsession with duty and obligation, perhaps believing that this is exactly what kept Pastor Manders from responding to her affection.

Animatedly, Mrs. Alving declares that she's tired of living her life according to a set of rules. In alignment with this, she says she should never have kept the truth about Captain Alving from Oswald, calling herself a coward for refusing to tell him that his father was a wretched man. Pastor Manders, for his part, tells her that this isn't the case, since she was only doing her duty as a wife and mother. After all, he claims, children are supposed to respect their parents. What's more, he suggests that Oswald has idealized his father, so to tell him the truth about Captain Alving would be to ruin his image of what it means to be an upstanding, respectable man.

Yet again, Pastor Manders shows his dedication to traditional ideas about familial relationships, this time saying that Oswald should continue to look up to the memory of this father even though that image of Captain Alving is inaccurate. Whereas he chastised Mrs. Alving earlier for being a bad mother, now he reassures her by saying that she was right not to tell her son about Captain Alving's wicked ways. However, Mrs. Alving has decided that she wants to tell Oswald because she thinks it's the right thing to do. In turn, audience members see that Mrs. Alving's ideas about right and wrong have to do with real-life circumstances, whereas Pastor Manders's morals are based on abstract ideas regarding what's proper.

Mrs. Alving reiterates her feeling that hearing Oswald and Regine in the next room was like hearing the ghosts of her past. In response, Pastor Manders says that her ideas about ghosts are products of the literature she's been reading, but she tells him that *he* is actually the one who encouraged her to think this way. When he told her to return to her duties as a wife, she explains, she decided to more closely examine the ideas and theories that fuel the norms set forth by the church and society in general. Upon looking more closely at such customs, Mrs. Alving came to feel that the beliefs Pastor Manders has devoted his life to are feeble and unfounded.

Although Mrs. Alving's ideas about ghosts and the past are largely about the ways in which the things her husband did continue to haunt her, she also uses the metaphor to address the fact that old belief systems often encroach upon her life—as evidenced by Pastor Manders's overbearing manner of judging her. When Pastor Manders turned her away and urged her to return to her husband, he emphasized the importance of adhering to society's customs surrounding marital loyalty. Consequently, Mrs. Alving decided to reexamine the very framework that gave birth to these customs, which is ultimately what led her to take such a dim view of Pastor Manders's system of belief and the way it shapes society.

Pastor Manders says that his fight to remain true to his faith has been a profound triumph, but Mrs. Alving insists that it was nothing but a tragedy for both of them. Hearing this, Pastor Manders claims that he has never had any romantic feelings for Mrs. Alving—something she refuses to believe, suggesting that he has simply chosen to forget the past. She, on the other hand, is constantly fighting the ghosts of history.

Pastor Manders is capable of willfully forgetting his past because he can turn to his faith, using it as a way to reassure himself that he was right to deny his love for Mrs. Alving. She, on the other hand, doesn't believe in the outdated ideas that keep Manders from following his heart, which is why these ideas haunt her. In other words, she believes that Manders's reasons for denying her are trivial, and this makes it even harder for her to cope with the fact that she endured a miserable life with Captain Alving simply because Manders told her to.

Just as Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders begin to talk once more about what they should do with Regine, Engstrand enters and asks Manders to come bless the orphanage, which has just been completed. However, Manders asks if Engstrand is truly in the right state of mind to attend a religious ceremony, asking him if he has anything he'd like to get off his chest. When Engstrand sidesteps this question, Manders reveals that he knows the truth about Regine and scolds Engstrand for keeping the truth from him for all these years. Having said this, he informs Engstrand that their friendship is over, but Engstrand makes a case for himself by getting the pastor to admit that a man should never go against his word. Since he promised Johanna that he'd never say anything, he couldn't possibly have told Manders the truth about Regine.

In this exchange between Engstrand and Manders, the audience sees how skillful Engstrand is at getting people to side with him. Although Manders is angry at him for lying, Engstrand manages to frame himself as a selfless and morally upstanding man, thereby exhibiting his talent for presenting himself in a flattering light regardless of the circumstances.

Engstrand emphasizes the fact that he was only trying to help a woman in need when he agreed to keep Johanna's secret about Regine. As he tries to convince Pastor Manders that he did the right thing, it becomes clear that Engstrand still has no idea that Regine's real father is Captain Alving, rather than an anonymous foreign sailor. He also suggests that he was especially willing to help Johanna because he knew that nobody else would want to marry him, since he has a bad leg. This, he reminds Manders, is because he tried to convince a group of drunken sailors to morally improve their lives, so they threw him down the stairs. Although Mrs. Alving grunts at this story, clearly seeing through Engstrand's insincerity, Manders believes Engstrand.

Once again, Engstrand attempts to manipulate another person into feeling sorry for him, this time using his injured leg to gain sympathy from Pastor Manders. As he delivers an unlikely story about how he got this injury, he convinces Pastor Manders that he's a good man who took in Johanna and Regine out of the kindness of his heart.

Still trying to defend himself, Engstrand tells Pastor Manders that he never spent any of the money that Johanna received to keep quiet about her pregnancy. Instead, he claims, he put the savings toward Regine's education. Believing Engstrand, Manders shakes his hand and apologizes for doubting him, saying that he wishes there was some way he could express the positive feelings he has about him. In response, Engstrand tells Manders about his idea to create a **hotel** for sailors, insisting that the establishment could help otherwise wayward men avoid temptation when they come ashore. Manders likes the sound of this idea, but says they'll discuss it later, since he has decided that it would, in fact, be a good idea to bless the orphanage. Accordingly, he tells Engstrand to light candles in the building and to meet him there soon.

It's hard to believe that Engstrand really put all of the money he received for marrying Johanna toward Regine's education, considering that Regine's only education has been in Mrs. Alving's house—an experience that clearly hasn't cost her any money, since it's not actually a formal education. On another note, Manders demonstrates his naivety when he says that he'll consider funding Engstrand's hotel, since it's rather obvious that the hotel will be nothing but a glorified brothel. Nonetheless, his failure to recognize this aligns with his tendency to judge people from afar, never bothering to look beyond the surface to examine a person's true character.

After Pastor Manders and Engstrand go to the orphanage, Mrs. Alving finds Oswald drinking and smoking a cigar. Frowning at the decanter of liquor, Mrs. Alving warns her son against drinking too much, but he ignores her. He then tells her that he's sick, saying that his illness is unique because there's something wrong with his mind. This, he believes, means he'll never be able to work again. When she asks how this happened, he admits that he has no idea. He tells her that he has never been one to live dangerously, so he doesn't know how he became so sick. When he went to a physician, he says, the doctor told him that he has been "worm-eaten" since birth.

The notion that Oswald has been "worm-eaten" since birth suggests that his illness is out of his control, something that would have come upon him no matter what he did. This, in turn, aligns with Mrs. Alving's ideas about ghosts and inheritance, since she believes that there are certain things a person simply cannot outrun. In this sense, then, Oswald's sickness can be seen as something he inherited, though Ibsen doesn't yet reveal what the illness is or why, exactly, it has doomed Oswald since the very moment he entered the world.

Oswald tells Mrs. Alving that he asked his doctor what, exactly, that diagnosis meant. His doctor, he explains regretfully, replied by saying that "the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children." Upon hearing this, Oswald nearly punched the doctor and insisted that his father was an irreproachable man. To convince his doctor of this, Oswald showed him a slew of letters from Mrs. Alving that praised Captain Alving and spoke about his good deeds. Seeing this, the doctor agreed that Oswald's sickness couldn't have come from his father, leading Oswald to believe that he has fallen ill because of the life he's led with his fellow artists.

Nobody in Ghosts *ever directly states it, but audiences during Ibsen's time would have recognized that Oswald is suffering from syphilis. Most scholars note that although a son cannot biologically inherit syphilis from a father, this is nevertheless what seems to happen in the play. However, Oswald still believes that his father was a good and morally upstanding man, so he doesn't understand how he could have possibly inherited his disease. Left with no other explanation, then, he blames himself, believing that his lifestyle—which he previously told Pastor Manders is quite pure and innocent—has led to his illness. In turn, the audience sees how Captain Alving's behavior continues to affect his loved ones, as Oswald not only suffers from syphilis because of him, but also tears himself apart for having contracted the disease.*

Talking about his illness with Mrs. Alving, Oswald wishes that it were something he had inherited, since at least he wouldn't have to feel ashamed. Falling into despair, he laments the fact that he never sees the sun when he's home. Miserable, he asks his mother to get him something to drink, so she calls Regine and tells her to fetch champagne. As they open the bottle, Oswald asks if his mother would really do anything for him, and when she asks why he wants to know, he says that he'll tell her after they have a drink. Changing the subject, he talks about how beautiful Regine is, but his mother tries to discourage him from thinking so fondly of her. Still, though, he says, "Mother, Regine is my only hope!" By way of explanation, he wishes aloud that Regine might help him cope with his misery.

Mrs. Alving has to face her husband's ghost once again when she realizes that her son has inherited his syphilis. It remains unclear whether the disease was actually passed on biologically, but even if it wasn't, it could still be that Oswald contracted it through risky sexual behavior of the same kind his father once indulged in. Furthermore, she also has to face the consequences of her husband's decisions when she considers Oswald's newfound fondness for Regine, Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter (and Oswald's half-sister). Consequently, the audience sees how utterly incapable Mrs. Alving is of escaping her wretched husband's influence, which becomes increasingly impossible to ignore.

Oswald tells Regine to have a drink with him and Mrs. Alving. When she goes to get a glass, he voices his theory that nobody from his hometown understands how to enjoy life. Just then, Mrs. Alving decides to tell Oswald and Regine that they are half-siblings, but she's interrupted by Pastor Manders, who returns from the orphanage and says that he has successfully blessed the building. He also says that he will help Engstrand with his **hotel**, adding that Regine should move in with her father to help with the business. Speaking up for herself, Regine says she won't go with Engstrand, at which point Oswald declares that he will make Regine his wife, adding that they can either stay or leave. However, Mrs. Alving interjects to say that this will not happen because she can finally tell her son the truth without ruining his "ideals."

Oswald's belief that nobody in his hometown knows how to be happy shows his mother that he has never coveted the way she or her husband lived. This, in turn, gives her the freedom to tell him the truth about Captain Alving, finally seeing that she won't hurt the boy too much by telling him how wretched his father was—after all, it's clear that Oswald doesn't want to follow in Captain Alving's footsteps anyway. For a moment, then, she feels for the first time that she might be able to help Oswald from inevitably going down the same path as his father, thereby stopping the past from repeating itself.

Before Mrs. Alving can say anything more, Regine notices that a fire has broken out at the orphanage. The entire building is in flames. Rushing out of the house, Oswald runs in the direction of the disaster while Pastor Manders tells Mrs. Alving that the fire is a sign of God's judgment on the way she runs her household.

Yet again, Pastor Manders emerges as a critical, judgmental, and emotionally insensitive voice. Rather than taking pity on Mrs. Alving, his first reaction to the orphanage going up in flames is to blame her, once more trying to argue that her failure to lead a conventional and religious life is the source of all her troubles.

ACT THREE

Mrs. Alving and Regine stand by the window looking at the orphanage, which has burned down. Mrs. Alving wonders why Oswald is still at the fire, since it's clear nothing can be done to save the building. Shortly after Mrs. Alving ventures into the garden, Pastor Manders enters the house, followed by Engstrand, who complains about what happened. As he laments the terrible disaster, he implies that Manders is the one to blame for the entire fire. Manders objects, but Engstrand points out that the pastor was the only person to handle the candles during the blessing ceremony. Manders says he doesn't remember holding a candle, but Engstrand insists that he saw the pastor extinguish a candle with his fingers and toss it into a pile of wood shavings. Manders, for his part, says he never extinguishes candles this way, but he also doesn't refute Engstrand's claim.

Aside from the fact that Engstrand has already revealed himself to be a conniving and manipulative man, audience members should be suspicious of him in this scene because of his claim that Manders threw a candle into a pile of wood shavings. This, the audience might remember, is exactly what Engstrand himself did the previous day, when he accidentally started a small fire in the orphanage. Consequently, it's reasonable to assume that Engstrand is the one who started this fire as well. Now, though, he uses his powers of manipulation to pin the act on Manders.

Having suggested—and, in fact, insisted—that Manders was the one to start the fire at the orphanage, Engstrand pontificates about how bad this will look for the pastor. He mentions that the newspapers will lampoon Manders for ruining a charitable institution, which plunges Manders into a state of panic and fear. Entering from the garden, Mrs. Alving tries to make him feel better by saying that the orphanage wouldn't have done anyone any good in the first place, and when this doesn't soothe the pastor, she tells him that she wants to conclude the matter, asking him to take the paperwork with him when he goes. Collecting himself somewhat, Manders formulates a plan to sell the land the orphanage was built on and use the money in a charitable way.

Again, Engstrand puts his manipulative skills to use. As he tries to frame Pastor Manders for the fire, it becomes all the more obvious that he was the one responsible for the disaster. Nevertheless, Manders fails to recognize this, most likely because he takes things at face value, always judging people by how they present themselves. Consequently, he can't see that Manders is actually a devious and immoral man.


Overhearing Pastor Manders's plan to put money toward something that would benefit the community, Engstrand asks the pastor to consider helping him start his **hotel** for sailors. At first, Manders hesitates, saying that he will have to think about the proposal, but then Engstrand says he will take the blame for the fire if Manders funds his hotel. When Manders says that he couldn't possibly let Engstrand take the fall, Engstrand reminds him that it's not the first time he's taken the blame for something he didn't do. Realizing that this is indeed the case, Manders thanks Engstrand and agrees to fund the hotel.

During this exchange, it becomes undeniably clear that Engstrand is not only tricking Pastor Manders into thinking that he was the one to start the fire, but also that Engstrand most likely manufactured this situation so that he could secure funding for his hotel. Indeed, it's quite possible that Engstrand purposefully set the orphanage on fire in order to put Pastor Manders in a difficult position, one that he can now leverage to get his way.

Engstrand tells Regine to come with him to work in the **hotel** for sailors, but Regine refuses once again. Engstrand then declares that the hotel will be called the Captain Alving Home. With this, he and Pastor Manders take their leave.

It's quite apt that Engstrand's brothel-inspired hotel will bear the legacy of Captain Alving. After all, Captain Alving was a sexually promiscuous man who managed to maintain a good reputation in the eyes of people like Pastor Manders. Similarly, Engstrand's hotel will be an immoral and promiscuous place even though Pastor Manders will almost certainly continue to think of it as a morally upstanding and respectable institution.

When Engstrand and Pastor Manders leave, Oswald enters and suggests that the Captain Alving Home will inevitably burn down, pessimistically stating that there will never be anything to commemorate his father. As she tries to soothe him, Mrs. Alving mentions that Oswald is ill. This alarms Regine, who asks what Mrs. Alving is talking about. Before she can answer, though, Oswald asks Regine to shut all the doors, saying that he's experiencing a "deadly feeling of dread." Once the doors are shut, he asks his mother and Regine to come close to him, saying that he wants Regine to be near him at all times, since he wants her to give him help when he needs it, though he doesn't specify what kind of help he's referring to and Regine doesn't seem to know what he's talking about.

It's worth keeping in mind that Oswald still doesn't know about his father's wicked ways. This is why he is upset that the orphanage burned down, complaining that there will never be anything to memorialize his father. Ironically, his very own sickness is a tribute of sorts to Captain Alving, since Oswald wouldn't be sick if it weren't for his father. Unaware of this, though, he continues to believe that his syphilitic condition is the result of his own behavior.

Oswald asks Regine to relax around him, asking why she doesn't call him by his first name. In response, she says that Mrs. Alving wouldn't like it if she addressed him so casually, but Mrs. Alving says this isn't the case anymore. Turning to Oswald, she says she's going to relieve him of his worries about inheritance, saying that his father—like him—was never able to find any joy while living in this house, so he sought comfort and happiness in other ways. She admits that she couldn't manage to bring any happiness into the household because she'd been taught to uphold various standards regarding her duty—notions that only drove Captain Alving further from her. Getting to her point, she tells Oswald that his father was a debauched man.

Finally, Mrs. Alving tells Oswald the truth about his father. In doing so, she partially blames herself for failing to make Captain Alving happy, an outlook that is no doubt informed by the patriarchal ideas about a wife's duty that people like Pastor Manders have spread throughout society. At the same time, though, she subverts this sexist expectation by saying that such outdated and restrictive customs are the exact reason she was unable to bring happiness into her home. In turn, she suggests that society's obsession with duty is part of what's responsible for Captain Alving's downfall.

Mrs. Alving also tells Oswald and Regine that Captain Alving is Regine's true father. Upon hearing this, Regine immediately decides to leave, realizing that she can't marry Oswald because he's her half-brother. When Oswald tries to convince her to stay, she tells him she would never have planned to marry him if she'd known he was sick. Now that she knows the truth, she explains, she's going to leave the Alvings in search of a husband, believing that she has to find a suitable partner before her good looks fade. Before taking her leave, she criticizes Mrs. Alving for not having the decency to raise her in a respectable fashion, since she is just as much Captain Alving's daughter as Oswald is his son. Having said this, she sets off to find Pastor Manders, saying that if no other options present themselves, she'll simply live at the Captain Alving Home.

For seemingly her entire life, Regine has been biding her time in the Alving household and waiting to benefit from her proximity to the family. At the beginning of the play, this meant denying Engstrand's offer for her to work in his hotel, since she thought that such a position would be beneath her. Now that she sees that she won't find any kind of upward mobility by remaining with the Alvings, though, she decides to go to the Captain Alving Home. That she's able to make this decision so quickly indicates that she never actually had feelings for Oswald. Instead, she simply wanted to benefit from her relationship with him. And though she deserves to be upset, her immediate decision to chase other opportunities signals that she—like Engstrand—is interested first and foremost in gaining wealth and moving up through the ranks of society.

After Regine leaves, Mrs. Alving asks Oswald if he's devastated by the news that his father was a wretched man. In response, he tells her that it doesn't really matter to him, since he hardly knew the man. This shocks Mrs. Alving, who thinks that a son should love his father no matter what, but Oswald points out that he has absolutely nothing to be thankful for when it comes to his relationship Captain Alving. He says that his mother's idea that children should love their parents unconditionally is just an outdated belief. "Ghosts!" Mrs. Alving says, and Oswald agrees that this is an apt word.

Although Mrs. Alving is eager to abandon the various rules and beliefs that have kept her from leading a happy life, she sometimes can't help but perpetuate such ideas. In this moment, she voices a version of Pastor Manders's notion that children owe something to their parents, though she quickly realizes that this isn't really the case once Oswald takes issue with the claim.


Oswald tells his mother that if he's going to stay at home, she has to learn how to be happy around him so he can escape the fearful and foreboding feeling he constantly experiences. He then reminds her that she promised earlier that she would do anything for him. Continuing, he points to his head, saying, "The disease I have inherited…has its seat here." He then tells her that he has already been overcome by the disease once, but that this episode passed. However, his doctor assured him that the next time the illness overtakes him, he will likely never return, becoming catatonic and unable to do anything. This, Oswald says, is why he will need help addressing the situation when it inevitably comes to pass.

At this point, Ibsen reveals that Oswald is in the late stages of syphilis, meaning that he could lose control of his body and mind at seemingly any moment. It's worth noting that Oswald refers to the disease as something that he has inherited, finally understanding that his illness has nothing to do with the way he lived his life. At the same time, it's worth noting an alternative reading of the play—because syphilis cannot be inherited from a father, it's possible to argue that Oswald's "inheritance" is more figurative than literal. Because it's clear that he has taken after his father insofar as he likes to drink and has a strong sexual appetite, it's plausible that he actually has *led the same kind of sexually promiscuous life as Captain Alving, contracting syphilis through sexual activity instead of genetically. Either way, Oswald has inherited* something *from his father, either literally receiving Captain Alving's disease or simply taking after his reckless ways.*

Now that Regine has left, Oswald says, he has to depend upon Mrs. Alving. Producing a small box from his pocket, he tells his mother that he has made plans for what to do when his illness overcomes him once and for all. He has saved twelve **morphine pills**, he explains, and will need Mrs. Alving to give them to him once he's entered a catatonic state. His mother screams when she hears this, saying that she couldn't possibly kill her own son, reminding him that she's the very person who brought him into this life. "I never asked you for life," Oswald says. "And what sort of a life is this you've given me? I don't want it! Take it back!"

When Oswald asks his mother to euthanize him if he becomes catatonic, Ibsen invites audience members to consider what, exactly, people owe to their loved ones. Throughout the play, Ibsen has explored the various ways in which Mrs. Alving feels indebted to her family members, ultimately suggesting that the sacrifices she made for Captain Alving weren't worth the cost of her personal happiness. Now, though, Mrs. Alving faces an even harder decision, since she cares so deeply about Oswald. Although she would seemingly do anything for him, she doesn't want to kill him, since this would mean plunging herself into endless misery.

Mrs. Alving tries to run from the house to fetch a doctor, but Oswald keeps her from leaving, telling her that she would give him the **morphine** if she really loved him. After a moment of thought, she finally agrees to euthanize him if it comes to it, insisting that it won't be necessary. Thankful, Oswald sits in an armchair as Mrs. Alving lowers herself onto the nearby sofa. As he stares out the window into the darkness of early morning, his mother goes on about how he will be happy and healthy while he lives with her.

Mrs. Alving agrees to kill Oswald, but she tries to convince herself that this won't be necessary. This, it seems, is a feeble compromise she makes with herself, as she tries to keep Oswald happy by promising to do what he wants while simultaneously putting herself at ease. In this moment, then, she tries to negotiate the disconnect between what she wants and what her son wants.

While Mrs. Alving talks and talks, the sun begins to rise, showing itself through the windows. "Mother," Oswald says, "give me the sun." Unnerved, Mrs. Alving asks what he said, and he slowly—catatonically—chants, "The sun. The sun." Just when Mrs. Alving asks what's wrong, Oswald's body goes slack and his empty eyes stare forward. Mrs. Alving shakes him and screams his name, but he only intones his mindless incantation, saying, "The sun…The sun." Frantic, Mrs. Alving searches for the **morphine** pills, but when she finds them, she can only scream, saying, "No, no, no!...Yes!...No, no!" as she stands in utter indecision before her inert son.

That Oswald asks his mother to "give [him] the sun" suggests that he sees death as a release from his dreary life. He has mentioned at various moments throughout the play how he longs to see the sun when he comes home, claiming that he can't paint when it's so grey and dismal outside. When he finally catches a glimpse of the sun, he conflates it with the morphine, asking his mother to give it to him so that he can slip into a happier existence. This, however, puts her in an impossible position because she wants to make him happy but doesn't want to kill her own son. After all, this would mean once more sacrificing her own happiness in life, as she's done so many times before. As she stands in front of him, she is completely unable to decide what to do—an indication that Oswald's request is simply too great a burden for her to bear.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Ghosts*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Aug 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Ghosts*." LitCharts LLC, August 27, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/ghosts.

To cite any of the quotes from *Ghosts* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Ibsen, Henrik. Ghosts. Oxford University Press. 2008.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ibsen, Henrik. Ghosts. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008.