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# Marxist Social Realism in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*: A Critical Exploration

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**Abstract:** This study explores Marxist social realism and its application to Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), highlighting how the play criticizes the bourgeois oppressive ideologies, class struggle, and social mobility illusion. Through the Marxist perspective, the play shows the corruption and hypocrisy of the capital system and the manipulation of moral and religious institutions to achieve personal corrupt goals. The study examines how the main characters, like Mrs. Alving, Oswald, Engstrand, Regina, and Pastor Manders, represent the ideological conflicts in a society based on class hierarchy. Relying on the theories of Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci, the current study shows how Ibsen criticizes the bourgeois system and its manipulating moralities and the oppression of the working class through tools like economic determination. The play's tragic end demonstrates the limitations of people's actions under the ideologically repressive system, aligned with the Marxist argument that individual revolt is insufficient for total social reform. Finally, the study demonstrates how the play is a pivotal criticism of capitalist ideology and its impact on human existence by examining Ibsen's play within the Marxist social realism approach.

**Keywords:** Marxist Social Realism, *Ghosts*, Bourgeois Ideology, Class Struggle, False Consciousness, Capitalist Oppression, Ideological State Appar

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## 1. Introduction

Marxist social realism is an aesthetic approach rooted deeply in Marxist philosophy and is considered an outstanding approach to understanding literature and, necessarily, society. The method emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the corruption of capitalism, particularly in the Soviet Union. This method was expressed with the goals of communism and socialism. Marxist Social Realism seeks reality not isolated, but as socioeconomic conditions and class struggle shape it. Moreover, it also approaches the importance of collective experiences over individualism; it assures that social action is achieved through communal progress rather than individualism or heroism. Interestingly, the movement had been characterized by its commitment to express the harsh realities of the ordinary people while praising revolutionary ideals. Class struggle is a fundamental characteristic of Marxist social realism in its concentration on the class struggle as the driving power of social changes; moreover, this approach admits that the conflict between different social classes drives the history of all societies (Fryer, 1980, p. 8). Expanding on this, Marxist social realism highlights that resolving class conflicts through revolutionary transformation is an inevitable outcome and a prerequisite for society's advancement.

Accordingly, the bourgeoisie's domination is challenged by the proletariat, who operate as the system's transformational agent (Mouzelis, 1980,173).

## 2. Materials and Methods

Some theoretical concepts declared by Friedrich Engels and later developed by Karl Marx will later help elaborate the study. Such a concept as 'false consciousness' is a fundamental approach where working-class members try to embrace bourgeois values to secure their lives but fail to realize their oppression (Marx& Engels, 1848, p. 58). Interestingly, this ideology prevents the proletariat from liberation as they adopt the same ideological principles of the same system that exploits them. Connectedly, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence' is a crucial concept that expresses how the dominant class reinforces its values on the subordinate classes, which create hierarchical structures without any consideration of direct force (Bourdieu, 1984, p.292). Moreover, Luis Althusser's concept of 'ideological state apparatuses (ISA)' serves as a core idea to examine how such institutions as religion, family, and education function as means of the ruling class to impose their ideological reinforcements (Althusser, 2014, p. 89).

Marxist social realism seeks to portray the realities of the working class's life, including their experiences, struggles, and social conditions. It also concentrates on the role of art as a representation of reality rather than reshaping it through the portrayal of real life. Hence, literature was the center of portraying this method, which can be traced through the works of prominent authors. Celebrated figures such as George Lukacs, Diego Rivera, and Bertolt Brecht influenced this movement and have pushed for art that addresses sociopolitical concerns and captures the hardships of underrepresented communities.

## 3. Results

The well-known Norwegian dramatist and social commentator Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) bravely advocated for human rights, particularly women's rights. He is credited with founding contemporary theatre and bringing realism to the literary world; indeed, individualism and individual rights were essential to him. He is called "the realist, the iconoclast, the successful or failed idealist, the poet, the psychologist, the romantic, the antiromantic" (Suleiman, 2011, p. 5). Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) presents a profound analysis of Norwegian society by portraying some characters who represent the essence of the society. The play delves into the issue of critiquing conventional morality; it challenges the social norms and the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie system, particularly issues concerning sexual promiscuity and moral deterioration. Ibsen portrays the dark realities concealed within the façade of honourable family life by providing the character of Mrs. Alving. The play also shows the reader how hiding the truth will lead to catastrophic events that cannot be undone. Regretfully, concealing and distorting the truth are frequently employed as scapegoats in daily life to appear "respectable" to others.

Ghosts are essential entities in every society that cannot be abandoned or neglected in any respect; they can hardly be removed from oneself once they have needed hard work and sacrifice to be so. Mrs. Alving admits that ghosts are "what we have inherited from our father and mother" (Ibsen,2011, p. 44). Henceforth, the corruption of the old generation can be inherited by the new generation, mainly if the new generation covers the old ones' mistakes and evil deeds.

Ibsen emphasizes the deterministic forces of the social class, a pivotal element in Marxist social realism, by presenting characters like Mrs. Alving, who longs to benefit from her past corrupted husband. Her son, Oswald, is devastated by the inheritance of social degradation and his fatal life, which was condemned by his father's past. Additionally, the hypocrisy of the bourgeois system is well portrayed with the depiction of the taboo practices of the system, which can be coined with the Marxist concentration on shedding light on the inconsistencies in the social structure. Furthermore, in criticizing his period's

social, moral, and economic conditions, Ibsen foreshadows Marxist social realism's seeking to make literature highlighting the numerous social conditions and the backdrop of society.

#### 4. Discussion

##### Class Struggle

Class struggle describes the thematic examination of socioeconomic class dynamics and tensions in Henrik Ibsen's contentious play *Ghosts*. Through its nuanced characters, Ibsen explores how societal expectations impact individual decisions and family legacies, making it an essential work of realist drama. It caused a great uproar when it was first published, stunning modern readers with its frank discussion of taboo topics and other moral issues in Norwegian society. The play's alleged ethical violations led critics to denounce it as "noisome" and "blasphemous," sparking discussions about the function of the theatre in addressing social concerns (Eriksen, 2014, p. 15). Hence, the exploration of the class struggle in the play is represented through the protagonists of the play, Mr. Alving, Oswald, Regina, and Engstrand, who navigate their identities in a strict social hierarchy.

Ibsen's *Ghosts* portrays Mrs. Alving as the primary representative of the bourgeois class, who is torn between her ideals of living and societal expectations. Mrs. Alving admits that she decided to fund the orphanage for one reason: "The sums I have spent upon the Orphanage, year by year, make up the amount—I have reckoned it up precisely—the amount which made Lieutenant Alving "a good match" in his day." (Ibsen, 2011, p. 27). To get a respectful reputation in her society for her husband and to dispel all the unacceptable rumours about him, Mrs. Alving decided to build the orphanage to make that happen. It is what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls "symbolic violence," which is how the bourgeois classes give legitimacy to their actions by the disguise of the law (292). Mrs. Alving then reveals that "... I almost think we are all of us ghosts, Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that "walks" in us. It is all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we, cannot shake them off" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 35). She shows her awareness and fears of inheriting the ideologies of the ancestors, which are transformed into sons and are hence represented by the beliefs and the drawn class hierarchy. With this view, the Marxist approach is that the bourgeoisie confirms antiquated conventions to gain broader societal dominance.

Mrs. Alving's progressive thoughts include her tendency to be intellectually and physically emancipated through her rejection of the rigid manly role, rejecting the patriarchal and religious dogma represented by Pastor Manders. Antonio Gramsci's approach to cultural dominance, where the dominant class's thoughts are seen as "common sense," is strongly represented by the personality of Pastor Manders. Mrs. Alving decides to be financially self-dependent and rejects the advice of the Pastor to make insurance for the orphanage an essential protest against the controlling classes.

Friedrich Engels (1884) states that the function of the bourgeois family as dominant in maintaining fortune and social conventions is rooted in the character of Mrs. Alving as she struggles to strike a balance between her personal convictions and her societal responsibilities. This struggle seems evident in her pursuit to protect her son, Oswald, from his father's inheritance, a useless pursuit to be free from the ethical and ideologically corrupted inheritances. Interestingly, her unsuccessful attempts to prevent these ideologies serve the idea of the difficulty of escaping from the dominant system structure. Moreover, the building of the orphanage shows the hypocritical system of the bourgeois, for it serves as a façade method of hiding the real intentions of the project, including giving legitimacy to their wrong deeds.

Eventually, Mrs. Alving's inconsistencies expose the central fractures inside the bourgeois community. Through her unstable personality, she represents the system's

fragile structure. This personal duality shows the illusory respect that she falsely has and the untrue relief that the bourgeois society possesses, as she is trapped within the ideological structure of this system.

Another portrayal of class struggle in *Ghosts* is represented by the character of Pastor Manders, who acts as a pivotal representation of the ideological enforcement in the play. His endeavour to sustain the class hierarchy and suppress whatever ideas appear to be revolutionary against society's norms. Manders says, "You've been reading books again, haven't you? Dangerous books!" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 126) as he directs this to Mrs. Alving, as he understands his role as the determiner of others' freedom. Connectedly, it aligns with Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses, which make ruling class ideologies through controlling institutions like religion, family, education, and politics (Althusser, 2014, p. 89). Manders' rejection of the new ideologies stems from upholding social values rather than from a strong religious belief.

Manders' hesitation in insuring the newly built orphanage, which he cites as a result of the public insistence, worries, and demonstrates his hypocrisy: "What will people say?" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 130). His choice demonstrates the relationship between religion and capitalist ethics; hence, any action is determined by social opinion rather than real moral reasons, suggesting his preference for appearance over ethical obligation. Karl Marx suggests that "religion is the opium of the masses" (Marx, 1978, p. 57), which pacifies people while they manipulate and exploit society. Interestingly, this was noticed in Manders' pursuit to tame Mrs. Alving's rebellious spirit by applying the religious role to suppress her intentions of emancipation. Moreover, Manders hides his evil morals under the guise of his religious position as a solid, untouchable cover. His retroactive stance on morality and ethical behavior extensively criticizes Victorian society and its willingness towards reputation and dominance, which can be fulfilled by religion and social control. Althusser's principle is that such systems operate less through compulsion and more through tender obligations of standards that acquiescence shows how Ibsen portrays Manders' character to criticize the hypocrisy of the dominant bourgeois society and the fabric ideologies of the system (Althusser, 2014, p. 113).

Henceforth, *Ghosts* presents a very complicated and controversial character represented by Engstrand, who captivates a crucial representation of social struggle. He shows the moral compromises and survival character of the working class under the rule of the capitalist bourgeoisie system. He adopts unsympathetic characteristics and a manipulative personality, yet his actions portray a reaction to the oppressive system and a survival spirit in a tense economic system. His plan to construct the "sailors' home" is justified by being a place for "saving erring souls" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 96), showing his intentions to fabricate reality and put a veil over his moral intentions. Furthermore, this shows the extent to which one is motivated to secure their financial situation regardless of social morality. Ibsen's complex depiction of the proletariat is reflected in the dichotomy, which shows how people are forced into morally dubious situations by the exploitation and manipulation of the bourgeoisie system.

An example of Engstrand's exploitation is his relationship with his daughter, Regina, whom he encourages to join him in his endeavor to establish the sailors' home. This exemplifies how the working class exploits each other to achieve financial stability. According to Einar Haugen (1979), such characters as Engstrand are a crucial example of the social and economic limitations of the working class, forcing them to use survival tactics that frequently go against accepted morals (138). The reader is prompted to think about the structural injustices that oblige people to negotiate survival within corrupted and exploitative systems, which is represented by Engstrand's duality of representing both victim and conspirator.

With the character of Engstrand, Ibsen portrays how the corruption of the bourgeoisie system forces people to act aggressively and use manipulation to fulfill their needs and, necessarily, survive their conditions. Echoing Ibsen's more extensive view of the

dehumanizing impacts of socioeconomic disparity, this multilayered depiction humanizes the working class. It emphasizes the reality of the ruling system humiliating people by putting profits over morality.

Moreover, Ibsen presents the character of Regina, Engstrand's daughter, as a clear representation of ambition and dissatisfaction with her reality, refusing her father's offer to be his assistant in the sailors' home. She declares, "I'm not going to be a common person. I've got ambition" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 94), which reveals a rejection of the social norms and hence to transcend her lower-class situation. With this declaration, she seems to adopt the bourgeois beliefs, which present social mobility as achievable and desirable, even in the face of the capital system and the social structure, which seem to be obstacles. Her intention to marry Oswald Alving shows a determined attempt to align with the upper-class system, supporting the idea that any social and financial advancement is attained by affiliation rather than worthiness (Moi, 2006, p. 89). Nevertheless, when her common ancestry with Oswald is revealed, this intention tragically vanishes; she insists: "Alving? Then I'm not going to stay here and be made a fool of!" (156). Her reaction demonstrates how rigid and inflexible social stratification is; even individual aspirations fail to overcome deeply ingrained moral class norms.

Regina's predicament might be seen according to what Marx and Engels (1884) interpret as the appearance of class mobility serving as a means to appease the typical working class while upholding the capitalist system (58). This deceit is crucially depicted by Regina's struggle to transcend her social hierarchy within the capitalist system as her aims, while apparently achievable, are eventually suppressed by the system's impediments (Eagleton, 2011, p. 45). Furthermore, her character is consistent with the false consciousness issue, with members of the working class adopting bourgeois values and erroneously thinking that individual initiative is sufficient to transcend limitations imposed by class (Althusser, 2014, p. 77). Therefore, Regina's life acts as a powerful paradigm of the structural impediments to true class freedom, shedding light on the disappointment of pursuing social transcendence under the light of the bourgeoisie system.

### **Ideology**

Society is governed by numerous ideological perspectives that shape its structure and influence individuals' popular opinion. Ibsen's *Ghosts* clearly portrays the use of bourgeois ideology in the play's characters. Mrs. Alving, as a central character, presents the internal struggle between ideological opposition and resistance. She accepts marrying Mr. Alving despite his immorality and deceitfulness to possess social respectability. Her commitment to securing the image of a morally upright, well-organized household reflects the prevalent social norms of the era. She acknowledges her direct speech to Pastor Manders: "I put up with things, although I knew very well what was going on in secret outside this house. But when it came to scandal within these very walls..." (Ibsen, 2011, p. 117). Mrs. Alving's quote shows how bourgeois respectability prolongs personal pain by highlighting the intense social pressure that forced her to hide her husband's corruption and keep his reputation quiet. Althusser suggests that ideology is a pivotal generator of social control; hence, people are willing to accept their role in a corrupted system (Althusser, 2014, p. 35). Interestingly, Mrs. Alving fears social scandals as she holds her husband's reputation in a society that fully defines her.

Despite her first compliance, Mrs. Alving started doubting the principles she once possessed. In an attempt to remove her husband's legacy, she decided to fund the orphanage, which simplified her intense desire to escape the ideological traits that had imprisoned her. Nevertheless, her attempts to fulfill her desire have not been accomplished, as the orphanage was tragically set on fire, and her escape from the restrictions of the bourgeois once failed, demonstrating the tenacity of the exact social system she was trying to abandon. Connectedly, it aligns with Marx's and Engels' demonstration that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling



class" (1846, p. 64). Marx's approach to ideological restrictions is supported by Mrs. Alving's sad conclusion that her endeavor to resiliency from her social oppression was unsuccessful, which clarifies the role of ideology in shaping personal traits. In this regard, Mrs. Alving's seeking functions as a dynamic illustration of how social factors link people to a system that, despite its apparent flexibility, is inherently inflexible and undetachable.

Oswald Alving is another representation of the tragic oppression of the ideological social oppression of the bourgeois society. Oswald not only inherited his social ideologies by being born into a bourgeoisie family, but he also inherited his father's physical illness and syphilis. His endeavor for emancipation is shown in his bohemian lifestyle when he was living in Paris and his clash with the inherited life of his homeland. Oswald expresses his frustration with his current life by protesting: "You don't know what it was like at home.... the joy of life, mother- that is what they stifle so devilishly" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 139). Oswald's expression "the joy of life" represents his inner conflict with the social norms he is suffering from, particularly with his mother's and Pastor Manders' ideologies.

Henceforth, from a Marxist standpoint, Oswald's condition represents a broader social condition in which bourgeois systems deprive people of their real interests and change them into useless objects of intellectual manipulation. According to Marx, "the worker... does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Marx, 2016, p. 154). Oswald's declining health serves as an example of the broader degradation of the bourgeois system; his most prominent inheritance is his unabandoned illness. With his melancholic recitation of "the sun.... the sun" (p. 164), Oswald's final plea for release/euthanasia reflects his desperate need to end the psychological and physical suffering imposed by social and ideological oppression. According to Toril Moi, *Ghosts* exposes bourgeois hypocrisy; he protests that "moral values serve as a mechanism of control rather than a force for individual freedom" (2006, p. 43). Oswald's tragic end shows how ideology controls not only people's beliefs and thoughts but also their final fate of life and death, depriving people of their own liberty under the oppression of their families and social norms.

Moreover, in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Pastor Mander's character represents the religious and moral authority of the bourgeois and is a perfect example of the ruling class's dominant ideologies in the play. Ideological rhetoric permeates his speeches, particularly regarding social responsibility and gender roles. Manders claims, "A wife is not appointed to be her husband's judge. It is her duty to bear his cross" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 114). The patriarchal worldview that requires a woman's subservience in terms of morality and virtue is highly depicted in his speech. Hence, religion, according to the Marxist perspective, works as an ideological instrument to appease oppression. According to Marx, religion is "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (1978, p.64). Interestingly, Manders, as a religious man, suggests that Mrs. Alving remains a complicit subject within this oppressive and devilish system.

In addition, he mismanages the orphanage's funds due to his devotion to doctrine, which ultimately leads to its devastation. Mandes advises not to insure the orphanage because he is afraid it could offend public opinion, which eventually leads to its destruction, as it was set on fire. He cannot perceive reality well due to his ideological and religious fanaticism, which illustrates how ideology corrupts awareness and promotes structural instability.

Engstrand and his daughter Regina represent another example of the proletariat's conflict inside the capitalist society and the overall ideology that governs their lives, besides the illusion of securing a stable life within the system. Engstrand, as an ordinary carpenter, seeks to have his sailors' hostel because he thinks it would give him financial security and fulfill his desires. Engstrand states, "A poor common man like me has got to make the best of what he finds handy" (Ibsen, 2011, p. 94), which he thinks justifies his goal. His speech clearly represents the 'false consciousness' in which people believe that,

under the exploitation of capital society, social and financial security can be achieved only by personal endeavor.

Likely, Regina quests for social security and escapes from servitude by marrying Oswald, hoping to achieve a better life and transcend her social class with this marriage. Regina states, "I have no intention of being dragged down to misery and ruin" (p. 133). Her illegitimacy, however, dispels this delusion and supports the Marxist notion that meaningful mobility of the working class is fundamentally rejected within the bourgeois society. Furthermore, the capitalist structure, according to Marx, restricts real social development by forcing people into an inflexible class system (Marx, 1844, p. 124). Moreover, Regina's ultimate decision to leave highlights the unavoidability of social ideology since it represents both opposition and resignation. She refuses to be a mere servant, yet she has no other choice. Marx claims that the working class is frequently restricted in a notion of exploitation with little prospects for absolute liberty, which is connected with Regina's situation (p. 94).

## 5. Conclusion

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* works as a crucial criticism of bourgeois society through the depiction of the ideological norms and oppressive manifestations that the capitalists act. The play highlights the profound exploration of social and political oppression, class struggle, ideological oppression, and the illusion of social mobility. This study depicted the Marxist framework to show how Ibsen exposes the inconsistencies and hypocrisies that uphold the ruling class's domination by crashing the bourgeois legitimacy. Moreover, the play emphasizes the internal struggle people have while trying to balance their own beliefs with social norms through the character of Mrs. Alving, eventually exposing the unremarkable hold of ideology. Engstrand and Regina portray the working class's quest for social and financial security by struggling against the deception of the bourgeois system. Meanwhile, Pastor Manders represents the religious organization and can serve as a tool for the capital system to achieve dominance and social control, which echoes Althusser's approach to ideological state apparatus.

On the other hand, Oswald's tragic downfall, who inherited his father's illness and the unavoidable social ideologies for being part of this society, represents the useless endeavour for him to be released from his social life. Besides being an appeal for liberty, his final appeal, "the sun .... the sun", also acknowledges his entrapment in a system that rejects individual emancipation. This supports Marx's claim that the ruling class alienates people from their real potential, transforming them into powerless subjects of ideological control.

In conclusion, the play protests against the bourgeois system and questions the possibility of liberty for people within the capitalist system with their inherited social ideologies. Mrs. Alving and Oswald take a step against their inherited limitations. However, their failure highlights the Marxist notion that significant change necessitates a structural reconstruction of social connections rather than individual revolt. Henceforth, *Ghosts* is a protest against capitalism, a critique of their morality, and an appeal to acknowledge the intellectual underpinnings of social class oppression. By accomplishing this, *Ghosts* keeps being criticized for not comprehending how literature can represent reality and social and political issues.

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