

Chapter V -- An Example of Pessimism.

(Summary of preceeding chapters:

1. The living influence of a book, studied in Ibsen's popularity;
2. Fads: the means used by scheming publishers to imitate the real process of popularity, by training a weed, and endowing it with the qualities of a real flower;
3. Idols: real forces with their powers magnified;
4. The cause of the decay: the magots of naturalism, pessimism, and secularism.)

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Ibsen's play, "Ghosts", is an excellent example of pessimism. Mary Shaw brought it out in New York about twenty years ago. There was no orchestra. The first scene is dismal -- the interior of a carpenter's shop on a rainy day. A father is turning his daughter out to lead the life of a harlot. He depicts brutality as the characteristic of the lower classes.

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Scene two contends that duty, law, order and all Christian virtues are terms for hypocrisy. Pastor Manders, a Protestant minister, makes all kinds of senseless blunders -- in the name of religion. (Ibsen knew only Protestantism.) He refuses to take out insurance on a new building, trusting in Providence to protect it. He loses out in an argument on morality. He objects on principle to a public act which he is called upon to perform and then acquiesces. Religion is a tissue of weakness, vacillation and hypocrisy.

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Mrs. Alving, mother of Oswald, the hero, is the main figure, and typifies "New Thought." Oswald, just returned from Paris, discourses on the happy families there of "artists too poor to get married." "More beautiful homes I never saw," says Oswald to the shocked Pastor; "The vice of Paris is the vice of married man, not of the single artist." The Pastor has nothing more to say.

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Scene after scene of moral filth is enacted. The son discloses the fact that a Parisian doctor has told him that he would sooner or later get softening of the brain -- that he was dry-rotten -- and the mother tells him the disease is hereditary. The mother even consents to his taking his own sister, either as mistress or as wife, as she desires that if his life must end soon he should have all possible enjoyment out of it while it lasts. Finally the mother consents to poison him as soon as the fatal idiocy breaks upon him -- and the curtain mercifully comes down as the mother takes out the poison to administer it.

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"When it was over," said Alan Dale, "those of us who liked cocktails, rushed to the nearest bar." The crimes it defends are: 1) prostitution; 2) the immoral life of the son in Paris; 3) the carnal love of brother and sister; 4) murder, in the name of mercy. Its aim is to ridicule religion and undermine Christianity.