

### The Ambiguously Realistic Villain in *An Enemy of the People*

Saeid Rahimipour  
Farhangian University  
Iran

#### Abstract

The dramatic art to go beyond the sheer aim of art for art's sake in the realm of literature has been concerned with the revelation of the condition of the time and the era of the playwright. In this article, Henrik Ibsen's work *An Enemy of the People* has been closely analyzed from the perspective of theme and character development to show his tact in pinpointing the social dilemmas and problems of his time. It tries to show how the protagonist's status as the realistic hero turns out to be a mere villain of the society and the time. At a macro level, Ibsen's overwhelming characterization can be taken as a good indicator of the different demanding social domination of pre-modern age idiosyncrasies.

**Keywords:** villain, realistic, *Enemy of the People*, drama

#### Introduction

*An Enemy of the People* stages the character of a doctor who has a perfect knowledge of the city water storage. He is accompanied by his brother who is the mayor of the city. Dr. Thomas Stockmann, the protagonist of Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, discovers a serious health threat in the Baths of his Norwegian town. The Baths have been marketed as a health resort to lure visitors. Dr. Stockmann alerts officials about the problem and assumes that they will close the Baths until it is corrected. He is met with fierce resistance, however. His brother, the town's mayor, favours keeping the Baths open and correcting the problem gradually. He advances multiple arguments that appeal to the economic interests of the town and Thomas's role-related obligation as a citizen. He finds himself under the pressure of his family and his friends alike though they all know that he is right. Sometimes, some officials on their responsibilities make annihilating decisions. He knows the wrong side of his decision but he sacrifices

the rest at the cost of covering his own wishes and faulty attitude. This maybe a good indicator for the mayor, his brother. His wife, Katherine, wants him to cooperate with the mayor. Seemingly, she has succumbed to the terrible side of the society's force in persuading her husband in leaving the case and swim with the river and not against it. Ibsen wants to remind us of this reality that we live in societies in which everything can be justified at the cost of some plans and purposes of private nature.

### **I. Discussion of main theme – from health issues to democracy**

Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People* (1882), is set in the nineteenth century in a Norwegian coastal town. The town has recently opened its Baths, a kind of health resort designed to attract 'visitors' and 'convalescents'. The Baths are expected to bring great economic benefits to the town and enable its citizens to flourish in ways they had not previously managed to do.

The protagonist of the play is Thomas Stockmann, a physician. His brother, Peter Stockmann, is the town's mayor. Thomas and Peter have an intense sibling rivalry, a force that is present throughout the play. Early in the play (Act I, p. 6) readers learn that they often quibble about whose idea the Baths were.

Though all of the townspeople are excited about what the Baths will do for their standard of living, early on readers are alerted that Dr. Stockmann may have uncovered a problem (Act I, pp. 10–11). Because some of the previous patrons had become more ill, Dr. Stockmann took a sample of the water and requested that a local university test it. When the results come, Dr. Stockmann declares that the Baths are a 'cesspool', 'poisoned' and a 'serious danger to health' (Act I, p. 18). The pipes must be re-laid in order to purify the water. Though this will be inconvenient, Dr. Stockmann expects to be treated as a hero (Act I, pp. 19–20).

Dr. Stockmann's expectations prove to be naïve, however. The press—represented by Hovstad, editor of the *People's Herald*, Billing, a journalist, and Aslaksen, a printer—claim that they will give Dr. Stockmann full support. When Mayor Stockmann questions the report's accuracy and points out how costly it will be to re-lay the pipes, however, the press's allegiance changes. Dr. Stockmann becomes an object of ridicule and is eventually declared 'an enemy of the people' (Act IV, p. 85).

Given how quickly the press and the townspeople turn against Dr. Stockmann, and given that they do so based on little or no evidence, one suspects that this play is a critique of one aspect of democracy. Arthur Miller suggests that a central theme of the play 'is the question of whether the democratic guarantees protecting political minorities ought to be set aside in times of crises' (Miller (1950). This seems correct, and such a theme gives the play much contemporary interest. But there is another theme at work that is also of consequence to contemporary readers. The three main characters in this play—Thomas Stockmann, Peter Stockmann and Thomas's wife, Katherine—each has special obligations in virtue of his or her role. But these special obligations are not jointly dischargeable. The moral success of one agent seems to require the moral failure of another. These agents are in what Heidi Hurd calls 'moral combat' (Hurd, 1999). Dr. Stockmann's role as a physician gives him a special obligation to look out for the health of people. But correcting the problem with the Baths may have an adverse effect on his community. Such a conflict may be similar to those faced by other physicians who occupy dual roles, such as those asked to assist the state in carrying out the death penalty, or by doctors who are serving in the military.

## II. Analysis

This drama is composed of five acts and it is perfectly symmetrically constructed. In the first act the characters, social environment, and roots of the conflict, and the social and political aspects of the drama are introduced. The city's water has been contaminated by something which Dr. Stackman is well aware of. This leads us towards some climaxes in the course of the play. The first climax happens in the second act in the discussion between the doctor and the Mayor about the content of the report. He believes that in an ideal world (and a democratic one may well be one) every citizen has the right and should speak his or her mind. So he decides to take his discovery to the authorities.

Hovstad: You said yesterday that the water was contaminated by impurities in the soil.

Dr. Thomas Stockmann: Yes, there's no doubt it all comes from that poisonous swamp up at Mölledal.

---

Hovstad: You'll forgive me, Doctor, but I think it comes from a very different swamp. (p. 47)

But then, he faces a new aspect of human society, the mind frame of politicians. He is amazed but, undoubtedly, sees that the opinion of the masses is wrongfully manipulated to confirm the ideas of their authorities.

Dr. Thomas Stockmann: And so I am to give myself the lie, publicly?

Peter Stockmann: We consider it absolutely necessary that you should make some such public statement as I have asked for. (p. 60)

In the course of the play we come across different characters that represent different fractions of the society. *An Enemy of the People* is one of Ibsen's so-called problem plays, which by some are termed critical realism and by others modern cotemporary drama (Hemmer, 1994 cited in Eide, 2009). The character of the doctor can be interpreted as the modern day equivalent of a whistle-blower. This social and political role which is often filled by the members of the press is very important in a democratic world. As we can see nowadays, people often come across realities and facts that apparently no one knows about. Then the battle begins in the mind of the whistle-blower whether to literally blow the whistle or not. For instance, recently we have seen and heard the news about Edward Snowden the American computer professional, a former systems administrator for the Central Intelligence Agency and a counterintelligence trainer at the Defense Intelligence Agency. He found out all about the NSA spying on all the people of the US as well as the world leaders. As the doctor in Ibsen's play, he decided to speak his mind. But what happened then is a literal copy of the play that we are talking about now. He was forced to leave his country; he was named a threat for the people and an enemy of the nation. It seems that the politicians depicted in Ibsen's play are artfully depicted to resemble the real politicians out there. We can see that in the course of the play: 'Did you never think what consequences this might have for you personally?' 'For you and your family' (Act II, p. 37). Those politicians hate whistle-blowers and manipulate the ideas

of the masses in order to demote the contrary ideas spoken by responsible individuals.

Another character in the play is the mayor which is conveniently the doctor's brother. He symbolizes the real politicians of the world. He knows that the problem that his brother is talking about can have catastrophic consequences, but instead he feels that the money which is going to be made, of course up to the moment when the majority of people get sick, is much more important than the health of the people. What he does in the end is the fact that he is behind his brother's dismissal from his job. He comes to inform his brother that he is fired.

Peter Stockmann [taking a big letter from his pocket]: I have this document for you, from the Baths Committee.

Dr. Thomas Stockmann: My dismissal?

Peter Stockmann: Yes, dating from today. [Lays the letter on the table.] It gives us pain to do it; but, to speak frankly, we dared not do otherwise on account of public opinion.

Dr. Thomas Stockmann: [smiling] Dared not? I seem to have heard that word before, today. (pp. 134-135)

Here we can clearly discern the methods that the politicians use in order to control the nation or community. As Matos (2008: 19) has asserted, the society "in its exploration of the culturally ascendant man of science, addresses the communal and psychologically problematic dimensions of a missionary reformism in a society resistant to its demands".

They do not sit beside you as a citizen or brother and talk about the problem. They consider all the contrary ideas as pure nonsense and try to convince everybody to just shut up and not talk about it. On the other hand, when they cannot convince you, they resort to the tools at their disposal, their authority, their friends and timid people whom they can intimidate and manipulate to do whatever they can to demote and devalue the contrary ideas. They say "We give falsehood a violent blow with the Truth to knock it out and behold! Falsehood vanishes away". (Malik, 2011: 137)

Another opinion supports the same idea:

There is no doubt that politicians are experts at manipulating everything. They know the interests of people well and manipulate the truth in such a deceitful manner that seems to be in line with the people's interests and welfare." (Hooti & Davoodi, 2011: 203)

One of the tools available for the politicians includes those people who can be bought. Hovstad and Aslaksen are among that category of people. When Thomas tells Peter that he will proclaim the truth about the Baths on every street corner, the Mayor calls him 'absolutely crazy' (Act III, p. 65). When Morten Kiil tries to force Dr. Stockmann to recant by tying all of Katherine's inheritance to stocks in the Baths, Thomas nevertheless refuses. This prompts Kiil to say, 'But you couldn't be so stark, staring mad as all that, not when it affects your wife and children' (Act V, p. 97). They can be so manipulative since they do not have any real internal values. In the play, they both promise the doctor to back him up and publish his report:

Aslaksen: Is what I heard from Mr. Billing true, sir? – that you mean to improve our water supply?

Dr. Thomans Stockmann: Yes, for the Baths.

Aslaksen: Quite so, I understand. Well, I have come to say that I will back that up by every means in my power.

Hovstad [to the doctor]: You see!

Dr. Thomans Stockmann: I shall be very grateful to you." (p. 43)

When the mayor gets to them and talks about the financial burdens of publishing such news, they turn and change their minds as quickly as possible:

Aslaksen: If you offered me its weight in gold, I could not lend my press for any such purpose, doctor. It would be flying in the face of public opinion. You will not get printed anywhere in the town." (p. 98)

It all shows the devilish power of the society and the political systems. The way they quickly can handle the situation is something which is at their disposal.

Socially speaking, we can have a reference to the web hovered on the society and its members. They are being manipulated, deployed, and controlled by the social and political figures. They, each, per se have their own sense of contribution to the monitoring and control of the social segments.

Aslaksen: Both as a citizen and as an individual, I am profoundly disturbed by what we have had to listen to. Dr. Stockmann has shown himself in a light I should never have dreamed of. I am unhappily obliged to subscribe to the opinion which I have just heard my estimable fellow-citizens utter; and I propose that we should give expression to that opinion in a resolution. I propose a resolution as follows: 'This meeting declares that it considers Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Medical Officer of the Baths, to be an enemy of the people.'" (pp. 119-120)

Dr. Stockmann's behaviour and the behaviour of his family, the press people and their instability, the destructive trick of the society and official members upon their being, for sure, all indicate some sense of strange, unfathomable, and bizarre interactions. Therefore, the individual must always be prepared to reject the norms of society for the sake of the higher authority of a personally valid way of life. Kierkegaard ultimately advocated a "leap of faith" into a Christian way of life which was the only commitment that could save the individual from despair. (Yegane 2006: 593). They get even as tough as putting an end to the job, social identity, and the existence of the person in the society. They become fierce and vicious as if having been enemy from birth in case of the doctor and his brother, the mayor. Eide (2009: 9) asserts that

The conflicts of political interest are being put aside and a new alliance is born. With the symbols, Ibsen reminds the reader who the Mayor really is – a man of power with means of retaliation and punishment.

Humanity turns pale, morality gets blurred, social identities are violated, the social welfare proponents turn insolent and detached

from the whole society to the point that they are left with no choice. As the doctor refuses to leave the city, he says:

Dr. Thomas Stockmann: Good. Going away, did you say? No, I'll be hanged if you are going away! We are going to stay where we are Katherine!

Petra: Stay here?

Dr. Thomas Stockmann: Yes, here. This is the field of battle – this is where the fight will be. This is where I shall triumph! As soon as I have had my trousers sewn up I shall go out and look for another house. We must have a roof over our heads for the winter. (p. 150)

Great people, when forced by social forces, succumb to wills. Miseries would drive them to the corner. The humiliated identities of different types due to telling the truth and keeping the disciplines and moral responsibilities push the protagonist towards misery and desolation. Stockmann's bravery and readiness for a victorious battle in the battle field, retreats as he tries to get along with his family coming up with this idea that his family members do not follow his capability and belief in his believes and attitudes. The society has got to be blamed for the cruel actions it takes against people in the world of Ibsen and other worlds for assigning Dr Stockmann its own "shape and destiny" (Budgen, 2004). Finally, the seemingly hero turns into a defeated villain in the course of the play.

### Conclusions

The dramatic art has the power of revealing the problems of the era on the stage deploying what tact availed. Ibsen in *An Enemy of the People* talks about the ambiguity of the real hero of the play and the society which may introduce him as a villain who should abandon the society. This can be the deed of the oppressing political systems which care for no human discipline and try to turn everybody in a way they want; if they do not conform, they will label the identity of the beholder in a way that even he himself is forced to accept. They have the power to transform the realistic hero into a ruined villain like Dr. Stockmann who was the main objective of this article as a micro-level manifestation of a macro-level social phenomenon. They make his identity ambiguous and blurred. He is sociologically and



morally, psychologically and mentally threatened. It shows that the very basic conditions of humanity are called into question not by means of correct judgement, but through violating the man's state of mind, his own perception of himself, his family status, as well as his position in the society in which he lives. This may be in a sense the reflection of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in which everything is formed in a way a group of power holders wants. What happens in the play is a reflection of such a modern condition of the world and the presentation of conspiracy and of the means leading to achieving one's desired objectives. However, one should hope that these are the objectives of the entire humanity and this should be done under no circumstance by turning a positive hero into a villain one, a fact which has proved to be one of the idiosyncratic features of the modern world. Hence, the revelation of such themes via the dramatic genre, aspect which has been the purpose that this article has tried to serve.

### Bibliography

- Budgen, Frank (2004): "Conversations with Joyce (1934)", in *James Joyce's Ulysses-A Casebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 257-266.
- Eide, Tom (2009): "Understood Complexity: Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People' - On Complexity, Sense-making, Understanding, and Exit/Voice/Loyalty", in *E:CO*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 1-15.
- Hemmer, B. (2003): *Ibsen: Kunstnerens Vei* [Ibsen: The Artist's Path], Vigmostad&Bjorke.
- Hooti, Noorbakhsh; Davoodi, Amin (2011): "The Battle between Responsibility and Manipulation in Henrik Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People' in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 1, no. 20, pp. 202-210.
- Hurd, H. (1999): *Moral Combat*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ibsen, H. (1960/1882): *An Enemy of the People*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Malik, F. (ed.) (2011): "The Qur'an in English Translation", [online] available: <http://www.mideastweb.org/> (August 02, 2011)
- Miller, A. (1950): *Adaptation of 'An Enemy of the People'*, New York: Penguin Books.
- McConnell, Terrence (2010): "Moral Combat in 'An Enemy of the People: Public Health versus Private Interests, in *Public Health Ethics*, vol. 3, no1, pp. 80-86, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Matos, Timothy Carlo (2008): "Choleric Fictions: Epidemiology, Medical Authority, and 'An Enemy of the People'" in *Modern Drama*, volume 51, number 3, fall 2008 pp. 353-368.

Yeganeh, Farah (2006): *Literary Schools*, Iran: Rahnama Publication.

### Saeid Rahimipour

**Affiliation:** Farhangian University, Iran

**Position:** Assistant Professor

**Email:** sdrahimipour@yahoo.com

**Research interests:** English Literature, Drama

**Selected papers:**

(2014): "The survey of Existential and Social Motives at the Postmodern Theatre", (Rahimipour, S.; Kheirisatar, L.) *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.2 No.5A, pp.618-624

(2013): in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, volume 18, Bacău: Alma Mater, pp. 121-130

(2010): "The quest for self in Samuel Beckett's Drama" (Saeid Rahimipour) in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, volume 15, Bacău: Alma Mater, pp. 183-192