

Problem Play

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Deg-I (English Hons)

Problem Play is a type of drama popularised by the 19th century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. In a problem play, the situation of the protagonist is rendered so as represent a contemporary sociological problem. The dramatist manages it either by the use of a spokesman in the play, or by the evolution of the plot, or both and attempts to indicate that he favours, a solution to the problem which is at odds with prevailing opinion. The issue may be one of the inadequate scope allowed to a woman in the middle class nineteenth century family as in Ibsen's A Doll's House; or of the morality of prostitution, regarded as a typical economic phenomenon Mrs. Warren's profession; or of the crisis in the relations of black and white men and women in present day, America as we find in numerous current dramas and films. Over the years, problem plays have been categorised into various sub-types, the chief of which are the "Discussion play and the play of ideas. Here the social issue are not incorporated into a plot, but expounded in the dramatic give and take of a sustained debate among the characters. As stated earlier Ibsen is accredited with the genesis of problem plays. As a dramatist, Ibsen is regarded a unconventional as he gave

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rather free expression to his views on marriage, love, morality and literature and used them as the themes of his plays, so much so that he came to be regarded as a master critic of his society. The League of Youth is a satire on the new breed of corrupt and unscrupulous politicians. In the Pillar of Society, Ibsen is chiefly concerned with the over-ambitious fast-rising middle-class individuals submerged in provincial petty mindedness. The frank and open discussion of venereal disease in Ghosts shocked most people and they thought that Oswald, the victim is the suffering protagonist, though the play is essentially about a woman Mrs. Alving who is caught in the difficult choice of leaving a good for nothing husband and holding on to social responsibility. An Enemy of People is a stinging satire on the selfishness and mediocrity of a small provincial community. Rosmersdalen is about the attempt of a passion's woman Rebecca West to win her lover by instigating his wife to kill herself. A Doll's House Ibsen's immensely popular play, deals with the idea of a housewife's craving for personal freedom and self-realization. In portraying Nora's predicament, Ibsen was treatment treating her as a person who happened to be a woman. It would not be wrong to say that in a larger sense. A Doll's House is about the ideal of human relationship based on partnership mutual responsibility, faith and confidence. Above all it declares that a

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relationship like marriage is false if not based on love. And the play is about freedom and the urge of every person to discover his or her true self!

A great admirer of Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw took up the tradition of problem plays in England. In his book, Quintessence of Ibsenism, Shaw tried to defend Ibsen against hostile criticism. Continuing on the line of Ibsen, Shaw saw the drama as a vehicle for presenting in entertaining and provocative form his views of the abuses and contradictions of the social order and his suggestions of the true way in which to view human experience and institutions. His object was to satirize, not the invented characters in the plays, but the audience, "I must warn my readers," Shaw once remarked, "that my satires are directed against themselves, not against my stage figures." In his desire to sock rather than to lull, to provoke rather than to amuse Shaw put into his characters' mouths discussions in which wit and love of paradox were given full play. Ibsen's great contribution, as Shaw noted it, had been two fold; the presentation on the stage of life as it is really lived in contemporary society; and the introduction of the discussion into drama. His own plays incorporated both features. Shaw's Mr. Warren's Profession is a typical problem play while Man & Superman, Candida and The Man are discussion plays.

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are discussion plays or plays of Ideas.

Another English playwright who dealt with the problem of his times in his plays is St John, E. C. Harkin. A contemporary of Shaw, Harkin attempted to deal seriously with the problems of contemporary society, but his plays lack both wit and the sense of life.

The discussion on problem play would remain incomplete without mentioning John Galsworthy. Nearly all his plays are problem plays. They reflect the problems of real, actual life. But the problems belong to the English society of his day. He never depicts the problems of any foreign country. His themes spring from and reflect back some social, political, legal, moral problems of English society of his times.

The Silver Box, Loyalties etc., Justice and a number of other plays written by Galsworthy reflect various contemporary problems. According to R. H. Coats.

Galsworthy's naturalism is akin to that of Ibsen; he shares the moral earnestness of Shaw. Yet the essential qualities of his art are not borrowed."

With the emergence of poetic drama in the hands of Eliot, Yeats and others, problem plays have, in a way, dwindled into insignificance though the spirit is very much alive and is riming through, in a more complex form, in the poetic dramas.

By.

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