

# The Ambiguously Realistic Villain in the Enemy of the People

*Saeid Rahimpour, (Assistant Professor)*

Farhangian University, Ilam Moddaress Campus Humanities Group Head

---

## 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 *the Enemy of the People* has been closely analyzed from the orientation of theme and character development to show his tact in pinpointing the social dilemma and problems of his time. It tries to show how the protagonist 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

The 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, favors 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 cast 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.

## **Discussion**

He has proved successful in his family life and his own career and is really respected by everybody in the society. This has been the igniting fuel behind his inner zest for more help and enthusiasm towards his people and the society welfare. 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 have not previously done.

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 had taken a sample of the water and requested that a local university test it. The results are back. 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.

### **Analysis**

This drama is composed of five acts and 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. 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. (Ibsen, 2005, p. 60-henceforth *An Enemy of the People*)

In the course of the play we come across different characters that represent different fractions of the society. An enemy of the people is a 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 whistleblower. 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 whistleblower 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 whistleblowers 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 till 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. *An Enemy of the People*, pp. 134-135)

Here we can clearly discern the methods that the politicians use in order to control the nation or community. As Trimothy has asserted the society "In its exploration of the culturally ascendant man of science, it 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 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, P .137)

“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 and Davoodi, 2011)

One of the tools available for the politicians includes those people who can be bought. Hovstad and Aslaksen are among that category of people. What Mc Covel has asserted in his article well clarifies this” 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).”(p.85)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. THOMAS 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. THOMAS STOCKMANN: I SHALL BE VERY GRATEFUL TO YOU (AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE, 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 IT PRINTED ANYWHERE IN THE TOWN. (AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE, 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."(An Enemy of the People, pp. 119-120)

The behavior of Dr. Stockman and 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. (593, 2010, Yegane). 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 enemy from birth in case of doctor and his brother, the mayor. Eide 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 "(P.9). Humanity turns pale, morality gets blurred, social identities is violated, the social welfare proponents turns 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 and says:

DR. THOMAS STOCKMANN: GOOD.--GOING AWAY, DID YOU SAY? NO, I'LL BE HANGED IF WE ARE GOING AWAY! WE ARE GOING TO STAY WHERE WE ARE, KATHERINE! PETRA: STAY HERE?

MRS. STOCKMANN: HERE, IN THE TOWN?

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. (AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE, P. 150)

The great people when forced by social forces, succumb to the 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, pushes the protagonist towards misery and desolation. Stockman'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 beliefs 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. Stockman its own "shape and destiny" (Budgen, 2004). Finally, the seemingly hero turns into a defeated villain in the course of the play.

### **Conclusion**

Dramatic art has the power of revealing the problems of the era on the stage deploying what tact available. Ibsen in *the Enemy of the People* talks about the ambiguity of the real hero of the play and the society which may introduce as a villain who should abandon the society. This can be the oppressing political systems which cares for no humane discipline and try to turn everybody in a way they want; if they do not conform, they will be labelled the identity of the beholder in a way that even he himself is forced to accept. They have the power to introduce the realistic hero into a ruined villain like Dr. Stockman who was the main objective of this article as micro level manifestation a macro level social phenomenon. They make his/her identity ambiguous and blurred. He is sociologically and morally threatened. It shows that the very basic conditions of the humanity is called into questions which are not normally correct, but through violating the man's state in his own mind, his family status, as well as the society in which he lives. This may be in a sense the reflection of the Huxley's *Brave New World* in which everything is formed in a way they want. What happens in the play is such a modern condition of the world and their conspiracy on the way of their desired objectives not that of the humanity and this should be done under any circumstance no matter turning a realistic hero into a villain one which has proved to be one of the idiosyncratic features of modern world. Hence, the revelation of such themes via the dramatic genre has been the purpose this article has tried to serve.

**References:**

- Budgen, F. (2004). "Conversations with Joyce (1934)". In: James Joyce's *Ulysses-A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp.257-266.
- Eide, Tom. *Understood Complexity: Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People'* E: CO Issue Vol. 11 No. 3 2009 pp. 1-15
- Hemmer, B. (2003). *Ibsen: Kunstnerens Vei [Ibsen: The Artist's Path]*, ISBN 9788241902796.
- Hooti, Noorbakhsh & Davoodi, Amin. (2011). *The Battle between Responsibility and Manipulation in Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People"*; *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*; Vol. 1 No. 20; 202-210
- Hurd H. *Moral Combat*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 1999.
- Ibsen H. *An Enemy of the People*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1960/1882.
- Malik. F. (2011). *The Qur'an in English Translation*, Malik. F (Ed.) [online] available: <http://www.mideastweb.org/> (August 02, 2011)
- Miller A. *Adaptation of an Enemy of the People*. New York: Penguin Books; 1950.
- Terrance McConnell, *Moral Combat in an Enemy of the People: Public Health versus Private Interests*. University of North Carolina at Greensboro, *PUBLIC HEALTH ETHICS VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 1 • 2010 • 80–86*
- Timothy Carlo Matos , *Choleric Fictions: Epidemiology, Medical Authority, and an Enemy of the People*. *Modern Drama* Volume 51, Number 3, Fall 2008 pp. 353-368 | 10.1353/mdr.0.0065
- Yegane, Farah (2006). *Literary Schools*. Iran: Rahnama Publication.