Representation of Duty in Henrik Ibsen’s Ghosts: Critical Analysis

Henrik Ibsen’s Ghosts offer an insight into two different notions of duty. The portrayal of these different extrapolations of duty are not only incompatible with each other, but part them in opposition to each other allows them to become understandable. Within the play, Pastor Manders is portrayed to hold an idealised notion of duty which in his belief must be upheld indefinitely; a Christian understanding of duty. Mrs Alving’s concept of duty, however, is more focused toward the pursuit of happiness for herself and son, Oswald; a sense of the social opportunities that can be afforded to an individual through notions of duty. Although, both characters offer different concepts of duty; one commonality between is that they remain silent about something in expressing their ideas about duty. Through how the respective silences are constructed, we see how silence is used to depict the different politics demonstrated by Manders and Mrs Alving. The construction of silence in Ghosts, is something that is not only associated with the speeches and duties of individual protagonists but something that is central to the play, the silence about the syphilis inherited by Oswald from his father, Captain Alving. By constructing silence as a means for protagonists to impose their ideologies of duty while, at the same time, the text is haunted by the silencing of syphilis that surrounds the family meaning that the two silences are interrelated. This interrelation of silences suggests that not only is the characters’ sense of duty is defiled through the play, but more specifically the construction of silence also serves as a means for disease to be inscribed into duty suggests that the poisoning occurs from inside ideologies of duty; allowing for a different politics of silence.

In the play, Manders understands duty as an absolute principle, with the abandonment of self-interest at the forefront of duty. For example, in the first act Manders tells Mrs Aling that a wife’s duty is to remain with her husband regardless of what he has done: “No, we have our duty to do, Mrs Alving; and it was your duty to cleave to the man you had chosen, and to whom you were joined in holy matrimony.” The referencing to ‘holy matrimony’ here not only emphasises Manders’s position as a man of faith, but also illustrates how duty is something which must be followed no matter the circumstances. For Mrs Alving, this is when she returns to her husband, becoming a martyr; sacrificing herself for the higher principle. However, this notion of sacrifice for a higher principle, duty, cannot be addressed as an isolated notion. Instead, principles of duty should be mapped against one another; one principle follows the another creating a system of principles that create notions of duty; all of which should be followed. Thus, Mrs Alving, in Manders’s eyes has failed her maternal duty as a mother in her sending of Oswald away: away: “Just as you failed once in your duty as a wife, you have since failed in that of a mother.” Manders’s belief that Mrs Alving has failed in her duty can be seen how one principle links to the other. The principles must be followed, but as they are followed, they become a manifestation of humanity, thus, haunting the individuality of each person. However, Manders insists that despite the circumstances the individual finds themselves in; the circumstances always must be subordinate to the absolute principles of duty. Although, implicit in Manders’s viewpoint is that the principles that haunt the human are like ghosts, which cannot be recognised as they need the support of immediate circumstances, a pragmatic authority; something that Manders cannot admit. In order to silence this need for a pragmatic authority, Manders turns to the distinction between the private and public, which in turn disfigures the principles of duty he embodies.

In his turn to the distinction between the private and the public individual, we see in the public sphere, principles surrounding duty are guaranteed by those surrounding. It is what Vardoulakis defines as the “pragmatic presence of the others,” which serves as a protector of the absolute principles that Manders embodies. We see what is at stake in his distinction between the private and public when the question is raised whether the orphanage should be insured with an insurance firm. Where financial decisions are concerned with the orphanage, we see Mrs Alving leave most of these decisions to Manders, yet she does assume that the orphanage will be insured through a legal organisation of society, the insurance firms. However, it comes as a shock to her when Manders is opposed to taking up such a policy. Manders’s opposition to taking out a policy is reasoned that while there is a legal order, there is a higher order, the divine order and the orphanage is to be “consecrated to a higher purpose.” Therefore, as a man of the Church, Manders believes that the orphanage must be seen to an extension of the divine thus, be a principle of helping disadvantaged children and by insuring the orphanage it avoids the people coming “to the conclusion that neither you nor I had a proper trust in the Divine Providence.” Here, Manders’s ideological belief about duty presents itself to have a notion of “circularity” which is dependent on silence. This silence, for Manders, is his obedience to duty, his obedience to God. However, the silence that the Pastor displays, the non-signing of an insurance policy is not only an expression of the private self, is also recognised by the public as part of his private duty when it remains unarticulated. This silent principle of duty is still received by the public meaning that despite Manders’s best efforts spheres meet. Silence becomes the technique that allows for the public to infringe on the private within the play.

In the play, we understand that for Manders duty is a trial; one that must be lived through by focusing on the endurance of duty and placing the circumstances of the situation as a secondary notion. Mrs Alving however, presents us with the view that principles of duty originate in from the individual’s circumstances. In contrast to Manders’s belief that she failed in both her marital and maternal duty; Mrs Alving exposes that his notion of reality is nothing more than a mere fantasy. For Mrs Alving, her reality was that she was bound to an adulterous husband; incapable of fulfilling his duties. The proof of this manifests in two ways. The first is through the silent contaminator of the play, syphilis, but the second is visible to both the audience and the reader; Regina. However, Mrs Alving’s focus on duty is clear; her seeking of happiness was not her taking a step back from her role or duty as a wife, but was instead, a means of operating her maternal duty. Mrs Alving wanted to shield her son from the ruinous behaviour of his father; her searching for happiness presents itself to secure a practical and good life for him. Instead, we understand her silence as a sacrifice of her maternal feelings as she explains that she “thought he might be poisoned just by the unwholesome atmosphere of this house …” This sacrifice of maternal feelings for her son constructs silence to be a practical measurement hence suggesting that her actions “had been less driven by ‘duty’.” Something which is demonstrated through her silence surrounding her discovery of Captain Alving’s affair with Regina’s mother. She explains that through the affair, she “had a weapon against him.” Highlighting that her silence surrounding the affair was merely for practical reasons in her striving towards a better life for herself and Oswald.

Despite her workings to fulfil her maternal desires, creating a better life for her and Oswald; her silence works against this. Mrs Alving’s technique of silence in the play to an extent reveals what she seeks to deny regarding Captain Alving. We see this through the symbolism of the orphanage. The orphanage was believed to be built in to honour the life of Captain Alving; however, Mrs Alving reveals that the building of the orphanage has an ulterior motive: “I didn’t want Oswald, my own son, to inherit anything whatever from his father.” Here, the term

‘inherit’ becomes expansible into her silence regarding her husband. Firstly, we see that Mrs Alving did not want Oswald’s happiness to be soiled concerning her dead husband, but that she also did not want Oswald to inherit anything from his father’s estate. For Mrs Alving, she sees her duty as eliminating everything concerning ‘inheritance’. In her attempt to move Oswald away from any direct inheritance of his father, her own actions reaffirm the intractable mark. This untraceable mark returns to contaminate her maternal duties. Where Mrs Alving believed she was protecting Oswald from the ‘poison’ in the house, Oswald had already been poisoned through his genetic inheritance from his father. The disease Oswald contracted from his father remains in the play as a silent signifier, even after he discloses to Mrs Alving that he suffers from the unnamed syphilis. Nevertheless, when Oswald discloses that he syphilis we see him believe that it is his own behaviour that caused the disease rather than the silent, familial contamination: “If only it had been something I’d inherited – something I wasn’t to blame for…” Here, we see Mrs Alving’s silence fail; her son desires the idealised father she has created. However, we also see how the silence surrounding the disease can demonstrate how Mrs Alving has further failed her son as Soloski explains that Mrs Alving’s “adherence to restrictive social norms – maintaining the secret of her husband’s sickness and continuing a detestable marriage – cause the infection of her son.” This viewpoint suggests that despite the sins of the father, her silence surrounding him ultimately contaminates her maternal duty to Oswald.

The silent signifier, syphilis that floats throughout the play not only allows for the ghost of the past to return and genetically embody Oswald; it allows for the production of a new silence. This new silence that is produced goes beyond the politics of the individual and cannot be reduced down to them or to the syphilis that contaminates the play. This silence haunts the text, allowing the ghost to become inexhaustible. We can no longer see the respective duties of protagonists as articulate because the haunting that occurs within such duty means that the ghost within escapes the confines of individual intentionality. The silence that is constructed within ghosts allows for the ghost to appear, but we do not get the intention to contain it, allowing it to become a contaminator.