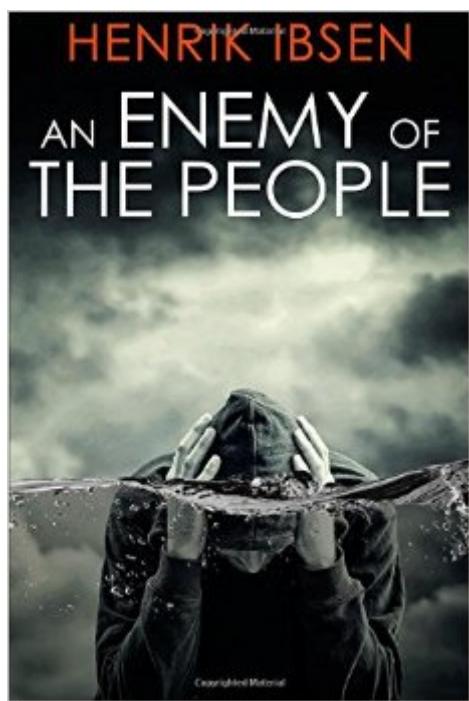


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An Enemy Of The People



Synopsis

An Enemy of the people (original Norwegian title: *En folkefiende*) is an 1882 play by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen wrote it in response to the public outcry against his play *Ghosts*, which at that time was considered scandalous. *Ghosts* had challenged the hypocrisy of Victorian morality and was deemed indecent for its veiled references to syphilis. Upon completion of the play, Ibsen wrote to his publisher in Copenhagen, Denmark : "I am still uncertain as to whether I should call it a comedy or a straight drama. It may [have] many traits of comedy, but it also is based on a serious idea." Themes In *An Enemy of the People*, speaking the language of comic exaggeration through the mouth of his spokesman, the disillusioned idealist Doctor Thomas Stockmann, Ibsen puts into very literal terms the theme of the play: It is true that ideas grow stale and platitudinous, but one may go one step further and say flatly that truths die. According to Stockmann, there are no absolute principles of either wisdom or morality. In this Ibsen is referring indirectly to the reception of his previous plays. For example, the commandment "honor thy father and thy mother" referred to in *Ghosts* is not simply either true or false. It may have been a truth once and a falsehood today. As Stockmann puts it in his excited harangue to his political enemies: "Truths are by no means the wiry Methuselahs some people think them. A normally constituted truth lives---let us say---as a rule, seventeen or eighteen years; at the outside twenty; very seldom more. And truths so patriarchal as that are always shockingly emaciated."

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Henrik Ibsen is the father of modern drama and his 1882 drama "An Enemy of the People" ("En folkefiende") was one of his more controversial works. In the play Dr. Stockmann discovers that the

new baths built in his town are infected with a deadly disease that requires they should be closed until they can be repaired. However, the mayor of the town (the Burgomaster), who is Stockmann's brother Peter, rejects the report and refuses to close the baths because it will bring about the financial ruin of the town. When Dr. Stockmann tries to make his case to the people of the town, the mayor counters by pointing out how expensive it would be to repair the baths and dismisses the doctor for having wild, fanciful ideas. At the public meeting Dr. Stockmann is declared "an enemy of the people" by the Burgomaster. To really appreciate this particular Ibsen play you have to look at it in the context of his previous dramas, because they all represent a conflict between the playwright and his critics. In 1879 Ibsen's play "A Doll's House" ("Et dukkehjem") was produced, wherein the character of Nora pretends to be a silly little wife in order to flatter her husband, who is revealed to be a hypocritical fraud. The idea that a woman would leave her husband and children was seen as being outrageous and basically obscene. Ibsen upset his audience and critics even more in his next play, "Ghosts" ("Gengangere"), an 1881 drama that again attacks conventional morality and hypocrisy. The topic is of congenital venereal disease but the true subject is moral contamination. Mrs. Alving has buried her husband, a degenerate who has left behind a son dying from syphilis and an illegitimate daughter who is probably going to end up being a prostitute. The play ends with Mrs.

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