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Ibsen: In High School?

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IN "Literature and the Heightened Mind,"¹ Dwight L. Burton stresses the importance of using literature as a means whereby students become aware of the complexity of human character. Bearing Burton's statement in mind, I recommend the plays of Henrik Ibsen, especially *A Doll's House* and *An Enemy of the People*, for high school seniors. I first used these plays with an Advanced Placement section of senior English, having been advised to do so by another teacher of AP English. My knowledge of Ibsen was limited to a cursory examination of *A Doll's House* during a college course dealing with representative world drama. Consequently, when I re-read the opening lines, I questioned the wisdom of my colleague's advice: What twentieth-century high school student would read beyond Helmer's calling Nora his "little lark, little squirrel"?

I had failed to take into consideration the unpredictability of students. So infuriated were they with Nora's child-

ishness that they read the entire play overnight, anticipating Helmer's finding a mature "other" woman, the "traditional" plot line.

Their reactions to the play were diverse: surprise at Helmer's duplicity, respect for Mrs. Linde's integrity, appreciation for Nora's desire to know herself. Despite their individual attitudes toward the characters, the students agreed on one point: Ibsen forced them to re-evaluate his characters in the light of their contradictory values and actions.

Class discussion revealed that people are complex beings. As one girl remarked, "I thought Helmer was all honor; but if he was so interested in the law, why did he hide evidence about Nora's father?" This question led to arguments about motivation: To what degree should motivation be considered when one judges another's actions? Is an action always black or white? When motives result in actions which are diametrically opposed to previously stated motives, is one a hypocrite?

In lieu of a test on this play, I assigned a paper to be written on what they had learned about people through their reading of *A Doll's House*. My one

¹See Dwight L. Burton and John Simmons, *Teaching English in Today's High Schools* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1945).

stipulation was that they were not to choose personality traits applicable only to Ibsen's characters; they had to show that their new-found knowledge was descriptive of "real" people. The papers were a revelation. The students had found in Nora desires similar to those of today's woman: the desire to save one's beloved, the desire to be an individual, the desire to be needed as a useful human being. In Krogstad, they saw a man seeking a chance to redeem himself, to regain respectability. In Helmer, they recognized the dedicated businessman, placing promotion and public approval above his wife. Most of all, they saw the complexity of people. "Just when

I thought I understood Krogstad to be a base blackmailer, he turned around and helped his former sweetheart's friend," read one comment.

This experiment with Ibsen occurred eight years ago. Since that time, I have added *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*, always with similar results. My classes are now heterogeneous; so I do not limit Ibsen's appeal to students of Advanced Placement standing. Perhaps his success with high school students lies in his treatment of individuality and the contradictions within individuals. Who could better appreciate Ibsen than our young non-conforming conformists?

Secondary Section Committee Nominees

At the November convention the Secondary Section chose the following nominating committee:

William W. West, Syracuse University, Chairman
 Carl A. Ladensack, Scarsdale High School, New York
 Ruth E. Reeves, Houston Independent School District, Texas

The committee presents the following nominations for members of the Secondary Section Committee and for NCTE Directors to be elected by mail in May:

For Members of the Section Committee:

(Three to be elected, terms to expire in 1971)

Sister M. Jeanne Dolores, O.P., Dominican Commercial High School, Jamaica,
 New York

William H. Evans, Southern Illinois University

Kathryn E. Hearn, Hayes High School, Delaware, Ohio

George H. Henry, University of Delaware

Elaine Kenzel, Coral Gables Senior High School, Florida

Shizuko Ouchi, Hawaii State Department of Education

For Directors Representing the Secondary Section:

(Two to be elected, terms to expire in 1971)

Sister Mary Cathlin Casey, B.V.M., Xavier High School for Girls, St. Louis, Missouri

Jane E. Gulick, Harriton High School of Lower Merion, Rosemont, Pennsylvania

Sally B. Rushmeyer, Houston Independent School District, Texas

Gladys Veidemanis, Oshkosh High School, Wisconsin

The NCTE Constitution states: "Additional nominees either for the Section Committee or for Council Directors to be named by the Section may be added by a petition signed by 15 members of the Section, to be sent to the Executive Secretary of the Council not later than April 15 for presentation on the printed ballot. Such petitions shall be accompanied by written consent of the persons nominated."

Directors representing the Sections shall take office in November at the beginning of the Annual Meeting. Section Committee members shall take office at the close of the November meeting.