An overview of the socio-economic context of the period – 1000 words

The nineteenth century was a period of comparative oppression when juxtaposed against today's more liberal society, especially in terms of societal expectations of behaviour. This encompasses gender roles, political viewpoints, opinions of established institutions, and the acceptance of societal hierarchy, amongst other things.

Gender roles fell increasingly under scrutiny towards the end of the nineteenth century, as authors became more and more open in their criticism of the plight of the individual in society, particularly in terms of the requisite adherence to established roles within the home. A ruling class dominated by male figures demonstrated little regard for the autonomy of females within society; this was reflected both explicitly, in the form of policy enshrined in the legal system of the time, as is evident in the plight of Nora in *A Doll's House*, and implicitly, as is demonstrated by Thomas Hardy in the character of Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as she lives apart from her husband at *his* request.

The notion of gender equality was a prevailing concern of both these works, which may, perhaps, be considered iconoclastic to the concerns of the society that they were published in. Both are, amongst many other works, 'guilty' of bringing to light the hypocrisy of the period in its treatment of women, particularly – although this is not their sole concern. Hardy's work, from its very subtitle ("A Pure Woman"), criticises a society in which a protagonist is made to bear the consequences of a sin against her, whilst the offender, Alec d'Urberville, can go on to achieve a (short-lived) salvation which Tess herself rejects in her blind devotion to her husband. In this society, authors argued, a person's inherent nature was inconsequential in the face of prejudice and societal expectations forced upon people.

The only way such requirements could be circumvented, as portrayed in literature of the period, was through sufficient status created by wealth – something reflected in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which Mrs. Touchett claims "You can do a great many things if you're rich which would be severely criticized if you were poor," which is similarly echoed in sentiment albeit not as explicitly, in Hardy's *Far From the Maddening Crowd*, in which his protagonist rules over an estate even when she is unmarried in a notably assertive manner. She is, to an extent, androgynous in nature; this character is portrayed as having typically 'masculine' qualities, whilst Hardy actively develops her feminine nature – Bethsheba's attraction of no fewer than three suitors, and particularly her flirtations with Boldwood, all serve to reinforce this in face of her assertive qualities. The proposition that a woman was capable of such leadership would generally be rejected in the society of the time, but, through granting her an inheritance, her status was assured by economic means.

There is a dual comment in this – the first of which identifies a prevailing inequality in terms of societal expectations, and secondly on the class distinctions which existed within that society. Artists of this period were revolting against the establishment in their work, and not accepting the 'limitations' society imposed upon them. Brontë, for example, could never have enjoyed success but for her use of a male pseudonym to publish her works in the earlier part of the 19th century. This observation is made irrespective of the message present in her works – the notable act in this instance is not the content published, but rather the means by which she achieved this. Class distinctions had, to an extent, diminished towards the middle of the 19th century, at least in urban centres – this

made works such as Courbet's *The Village Maidens* all the more controversial, as they were an unwelcome reminder of continuing class distinctions in provincial France.

Rejection of such limitations was not restricted to the realms of gender inequality and class. As has already been suggested, composers such as Hardy were criticising other aspects of the establishment – and religion was not excluded from this. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was one such text, in which the 'purity' of a woman was based on something outside of her control, and the hypocrisy of the pervading religion of the time was exposed in this. Similarly, Ibsen's play *Ghosts* comments on a wide range of perceived societal problems, commenting also on religious hypocrisy through Pastor Manders' concerns of social perception, and extending so far as to propose euthanasia as right, much to the chagrin of audiences.

Such overt criticisms may be attributed to new scientific observations, such as Darwin's theory of evolution halfway through the century, and the philosophy of the late Enlightenment (specifically the writings of Kant and Rousseau) bore heavy influence upon many of the thinkers of the nineteenth century. Socially, a belief in absolute values dictated by a deity continued to be pervasive, but the artists of the period bore the scepticism of the previous century, instead adopting a belief system based around extreme relativism – and, in the case of some philosophers, a belief system based around the *inversion* of Judeo/Christian morality, a prominent example being the writings of Nietzsche, whose ideology focussed on the betterment of society through whatever means necessary, rejecting the conventional notion of 'sin'.

The rise of socialism is also influential on the writings of many European authors, particularly in light of the industrial revolution, which resulted in the emergence of a 'proletariat' viewed by observers as the victims of an unregulated marketplace. Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (extrapolating their theory of 'scientific socialism') proposed that social justice could only be brought about by means of a revolution, although this was by no means the only proposed solution. Figures such as John Stuart Mill proposed liberalism as a solution – an enlightened bourgeoisie whose action would reform capitalism to achieve social justice whilst preserving the notion of ownership. Socialism was a pervasive force in the literature of the nineteenth century, and, towards its end, of growing relevance to the general populace.

The literature of the nineteenth century was characterised by the emergence of these new philosophical and political ideologies, as well as the decline of absolute value systems mandated by religious belief systems. Towards the end of the century, individualism was an emergent force, and, as the feminist movement began to gain support, compositions of the period came to reflect that also.

Despite the changes in philosophy seen to have taken place in literary circles, oppression of free expression by artists continued throughout the century – but this is not reflected in the literature created so much as circumstances and correspondence regarding it. The work of more controversial composers such as Henrik Ibsen, Richard Wagner and Émile Zola, amongst others, was all subject to much criticism, as the views communicated in their work, as with that of innumerable other artists, clashed with a society still reluctant to accept their liberated ideals.

A critical essay: How do nineteenth century composers bring the plight of the individual to the consciousness of their responders? – 1500 words

Nineteenth century composers bring the plight of the individual to the responder's awareness through their portrayal of such characters in a way that appeals to the responder either through the use of empathy, or, in the case of other works, through the use of a rising/falling conflict model in conjunction with elucidatory dialogue to elicit a response from the responder.

Henrik Ibsen's play *Ghosts* uses the latter model, making use of clever expositions presented by character in order to force readers to question the society in which they find themselves, and their roles as individuals within that framework. An encompassing work, *Ghosts* has been criticised as being "a little bare, hard, austere", in which Ibsen has conformed too much to the prosaic ideal and stifled his poetic nature – and, in this, become an author who "cares more for ideas and doctrine than for human beings." Ironically, it is this portrayal of such ideas and doctrine that, for many, makes this work one of overwhelming humanity.

The model employed by Ibsen here renders characterisation superfluous – his characters are not bound to a single person, to a single *individual*, but are seen to represent any number of people *individually* within humanity. Having said this, Ibsen's works do not generally support the notion of a universal common humanity in which beliefs are shared, drawing a distinction between the "outposts", the ruling classes, and the "compact majority" – and there is no reason to suppose he deviates from this understanding in *Ghosts*.

Rather than being a character-driven book, in which empathy is used to endear a protagonist to the responder, Ibsen's characters are somewhat flat and undeveloped, although in their behaviours, established through dialogue and stage directions, as well as their interactions, they are portrayed as being in conflict. Pastor Manders embodies the oppressive, hypocritical nature of religion – he is more concerned for the appeasement of those who would criticise his lack of faith than he is for the practicality of insurance – a practicality he recognises, but advises against for "the attacks that would assuredly be made upon me in certain papers and periodicals".

The gullibility of this character with regard to Jacob Engstrand's nature is not simply that, but rather a reflection of the blindness of religion to many aspects of individual natures within society as a whole – Ibsen comments on the irrelevance of religion in the limited characterisation of Manders, and then further delineates this irrelevance through the conflict introduced between various characters and this figure.

Yet Manders is not simply the representative of the church. Within Ibsen's model of society, Manders wields a ruling influence from which the "compact majority" draw their values and belief systems. The critique is not only one of the religious establishment, but is inclusive of the state and legal systems – something reflected in the injustices portrayed in *A Doll's House*. The accusation levied against such institutions is one of aloofness – Ibsen proposes such institutions are distant from the individual, and cannot adequately comprehend their needs. The epitome of this is his support of euthanasia in the closing scene of the play – a something wholly unacceptable within that society, and similarly open to question in this age. Ibsen

argues in favour of this, the closing scene of the play being emotive in its stark nature and eloquent stage directions. The work concludes almost poetically, with Oswald mindlessly repeating a phrase, as his mother, Mrs. Alving, grows hysterical at what he has asked her to do – and the responder can empathise with both figures, neither of which have been understood by the establishment. In establishing such a dichotomy between the state and the individual, the plight of the individual in a collective sense – that is, humanity as a collection of individuals – is brought to the consciousness of the responder.

Empathy is limited as a result of (deliberately) restricted characterisation, but Ibsen's purpose is still achieved in this work, though perhaps without the nuance of his other works. *An Enemy of the People*, also by Ibsen, draws a distinction not between the state and the individual, but rather between those on the "outposts" and the common people. It is not, however, solely a work of philosophical self-gratification.

In this instance, the denunciation is instead of the failure of society as a whole to hear any message contradictory to its desires, irrespective of what evils this may require, and similarly without regard for the sustainability of such a stance. The pollution, Dr. Thomas Stockmann argues, is not simply of the baths, but of society. He declares at a public meeting that he has discovered "all the sources of our moral life are poisoned and that the whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood."

Such blatancy is not wholly uncharacteristic of Ibsen, his career being one of the more controversial of the great nineteenth century playwrights – undoubtedly also as a result of his popularity. Yet the point remains as an ostracised individual shouts his disillusionment and chagrin with society in this play, a point common to each of his five prose plays, composed from 1877, and termed by Ibsen the "drama of ideas".

The context in which it was written must also be considered, quite apart from the period in time in which these works were composed. Ibsen's plays were performed to audiences all across Europe, and resistance to these works varied from active censorship in Prussia (unified Germany) and England, to passive censorship – the play was eighteen months old before a theatre agreed to produce it – to public and media criticism. Ibsen's plays attacked many aspects of the establishment, and, by his own acknowledgement, point to nihilism as an inherent human condition for many people, leading to their turmoil during the play, and subsequent social demise (or, more optimistically, their emancipation) at its conclusion.

France was perhaps one of the more liberal nations in Europe at this time, with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century perhaps having the most effect upon their state. The subsequent revolutions that had swept across France had created a pervasive progressive mood, but there remained a societal structure rather in accordance with Ibsen's portrayal of it, albeit with the addition of a middle class supportive of more liberal ideals. This notion of 'class' was, for many of the French people, a remnant of a time past which numerous revolutions had failed to abolish – or, more accurately, class *distinctions*. Artists such as Gustave Courbet criticised this continuing societal rift towards the middle of the century, through the portrayal of alms-giving. His work was not unique in this theme, with other artists such as Bonvin and Pils creating works depicting the same action in the same year, but Courbet's *The*

Village Maidens Giving Alms to a Guardian of Cattle (or *The Village Maidens*, 1852.) *is* unique in the manner it portrays such an act. The work is "an unvarnished, enormous and most unwelcome reminder of class distinctions in the provinces – a reminder that all was not smiling peasantry and reassuring folklore in Franche-Comté, but that there too, the petty bourgeoisie was setting itself apart from the, now threatening, proletariat – and furthermore, with the artist's own sisters, clad in contemporary bonnets and dresses, rather than regional folk costume, playing the role of moneyed beneficience."[1] This was, for the middle-classes of Paris, a rather unwelcome reflection of themselves that they sought to avoid recognition of.

The theme of such charity is continued in another of Courbet's works, *Beggar's Alms* (1868), which portrays a beggar granting a young boy a coin – significant, relative to the beggar's means. The plight of the individual in both these works is portrayed as being of little consequence in an uncaring society – the poor are required to care for the poor, as an indifferent bourgeoisie continues life unburdened.

Burdening of the individual is another theme common to many works of the nineteenth century critical of society, a key example of this being Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The protagonist of this text, Tess Durbeyfield (or d'Urberville), bears the sin of a man who goes on unhindered by his act, unaware of its consequence, until he again meets Tess some years later, leading to his demise. Her marriage to Angel Clare is an unqualified failure, despite her continuing devotion to him until, finally, under the weight of her desperation, hope of his return elapses and she is compelled to reside with Alec d'Urberville in order to support her mother and siblings.

Without a husband, Tess d'Urberville is 'incomplete' – she is incapable, in the society in which she finds herself, of living independently, as a result of the expectations placed upon her. Society has caused this circumstance through the patriarchal expectation of 'purity' falling solely upon a woman with no means of recourse – Alec d'Urberville may be viewed as a motif of oppression rather than an actual character, as his persona is developed by its elements, rather than explicit characterisation. Conversely, Angel Clare is extensively developed so he is endeared in the mind of the responder, such that he exists as an individual as does Tess – his individual actions being guided by his own failure to meet society's expectations (his lack of religious convictions), but he remains in conflict with this as he leaves Tess whom it is quite clear he loves from his unconscious actions on the first night of their marriage.

Ultimately, Hardy's protagonist's plight is the tragic consequence of a sin against her held by society to be a fault of her own. The responder is brought to value the protagonist as an individual in such a conflict through Hardy's endearing portrayal of her in accordance with the first model outlined at the beginning of this critical essay, and it is thus that an awareness of her plight is raised.

[1] Nochlin, L. *Realism*. Penguin, 1971. Page 124.