

# AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

by Henrik Ibsen



## THE AUTHOR

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) grew up in a poor family in Norway. After being apprenticed to an apothecary in his teens, he began the study of medicine, but soon turned to play writing. His early plays gained little popular recognition, but in 1863 he went to Italy on a scholarship, and here began writing the plays, including *Peer Gynt*, that were to make him the most famous playwright in the history of Norway. His early plays were in verse, but beginning in 1877, he turned to prose plays, producing, among others, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Wild Duck*. He became the director of the Norwegian National Theater in Christiania, the town in which he died in 1906.

*An Enemy of the People* (1882) was written largely because of the attacks Ibsen experienced after the publication of *Ghosts*. The extent to which he was ostracized by those he was trying to warn makes most critics believe that Dr. Stockmann is Ibsen's most autobiographical character. Like many of Ibsen's other plays, this one deals with the relationship between the individual and society, and the extent to which an individual can be destroyed by the very people he is seeking to help. The play favors no side of the social debate - both the conservative political establishment and the liberal press take a pounding. This version, an adaptation prepared by Arthur Miller, removes speeches that some have criticized as supporting racial supremacy, though such notions could not have been further from Ibsen's mind. On the contrary, the play fits very well with the liberal principles of other Miller plays such as *The Crucible*.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Dr. Thomas Stockmann - The protagonist of the play, he discovers that the medicinal spring that provides his town's main source of income is polluted. When he tries to publicize his findings, the whole town turns against him.
- Catherine Stockmann - Tom's wife, who tries to keep Tom from publishing his findings out of fear for her family.

- Petra Stockmann - Tom's daughter, a local high school teacher who is his staunchest supporter.
- Ejlif and Morten Stockmann - Tom's young sons.
- Morten Kiil - Catherine's father, an old, slovenly, but wealthy fool.
- Peter Stockmann - Tom's brother, who is the mayor of the town and Tom's chief persecutor.
- Hovstad and Billing - Editors of *The People's Daily Messenger*, a liberal paper that supports Tom's crusade until pressured by the mayor and told that the reconstruction of the spring will be paid for by a tax on the people.
- Aslaksen - The publisher of *The People's Daily Messenger*, a cautious man who is the first at the paper to desert Tom's cause.
- Captain Horster - An old family friend of the Stockmanns who is the only one to stick by them when the crisis arises. He allows them to use his home, first for the town meeting, and later for the school they intend to start.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“You have an ingrained tendency to go your own way, Thomas, and that simply can't go on in a well-organized society. The individual really must subordinate himself to the overall, or ... to the authorities who are in charge of the general welfare.” (Peter, Ii)

“The public doesn't need new ideas - the public is much better off with old ideas.” (Peter, Iii)

“Without power, what good is the truth?” (Catherine, Iii)

“You know what I'm going to do, boys? From now on I'm going to teach you what a man is.” (Tom, Iii)

“And I have the people because I have the truth, my friends!” (Tom, Iii)

“In ordinary times I'd agree a hundred per cent with anybody's right to say anything. But these are not ordinary times. Nations have crises, and so do towns. There are ruins of nations, and there are ruins of towns all over the world, and they are wrecked by people who, in the guise of reform, and pleading for justice, and so on, broke down all authority and left only revolution and chaos.” (Peter, Iiii)

“I don't admit it! I proclaim it now! I am a revolutionist! I am in revolt against the age-old lie that the majority is always right!” (Tom, Iiii)

“The majority is never right until it *does* right.” (Tom, Iiii)

“You’re trying to build a town on a morality so rotten it will infect the country and the world! If the only way you can prosper is this murder of freedom and truth, then I say with all my heart, ‘Let it be destroyed! Let the people perish!’” (Tom, Iii)

“A word can be like a needle sticking in your heart, Captain. It can dig and corrode like an acid, until you become what they want you to be - really an enemy of the people.” (Tom, III)

“But remember now, everybody. You are fighting for the truth, and that’s why you’re alone. And that makes you strong. We’re the strongest people in the world ... and the strong must learn to be lonely!” (Tom, III)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - The play begins in Dr. Thomas Stockmann’s home, where his father-in-law Morten Kiil is just leaving after having enjoyed his daughter’s hospitality. Soon Dr. Stockmann’s brother Peter, the mayor, arrives, and begins talking about the newly-opened Kirsten Springs, which he hopes will be a financial boon for the town. Dr. Stockmann then returns with his two sons, Ejlif and Morten, and Captain Horster. When Peter informs Tom that the local paper is about to publish an article he had written months ago lauding the water in the spring, Tom suddenly seems hesitant, but won’t say why. After Peter leaves, Tom sits down for a talk with Hovstad and Billing, the editors of *The People’s Daily Messenger*. As they talk about the coming election, Tom’s daughter Petra arrives from school, where she is a teacher. She gives her father a letter she took from the mailman, and he immediately goes to his room to read it. When he returns, he tells the editors that he has the story of the year for them - it turns out that the springs are polluted by organic waste from further up the mountain, and are making people sick rather than curing them. As a result, the entire intake system of the spring will need to be rebuilt. Tom is convinced that the townspeople will be grateful for his discovery, which will surely keep them from spreading more illness and benefit them in the long run. He immediately sends a copy of the report to his brother the mayor, who is also the chairman of the board of Kirsten Springs. Hovstad, Billing, and his family congratulate him for a discovery that will surely bring him the acclaim of all around him.

**Act I, scene 2** - The next morning, Kiil arrives at Dr. Stockmann’s home, chuckling about the “great trick” his son-in-law has pulled on the uppity town council - ruining their marvelous spring by talking about “cockroaches” no one can see. Tom, of course, insists that he has perpetrated no hoax, but is warning the town of a very real danger. Hovstad then arrives, and tells Tom that the report about the spring is just what he needs to bring down the mayor and his cronies. Tom, of course, had intended no such thing. Then Aslaksen, the publisher of the newspaper, arrives and tells Tom that he intends to organize a demonstration so the little people of the town can show their support for the rebuilding project at the spring. Hovstad offers to print the report on the spring, but Tom tells him to wait until he talks to his brother, who he is convinced will be pleased by the entire business. Peter then walks into the house, and he clearly is not happy with the report; it turns out that the needed repairs would cost over 300,000 crowns and would take at least two years - in short, without the tourist dollars from the spring for two years, the town would be ruined financially. Peter insists that the springs be kept open while minor repairs are made quietly, but Tom refuses to countenance such deceit. Peter then informs him that his report not only will not be presented to the board, but that it must never be made known to the public. In fact, he orders Tom to deny any rumors of pollution

that may surface in the press or in conversation around the town. Tom refuses to do any such thing, and Peter then threatens to dismiss him from his post at the Kirsten Springs Institute and stomps out of the house. Tom's wife Catherine then tries to persuade Tom to go along with his brother for the sake of their family, but he insists that he will take his stand on the truth.

**Act II, scene 1** - The scene takes place in the office of *The People's Daily Messenger*. Billing and Hovstad are talking about the revolutionary implications of Tom's report, hoping that it will overthrow the current corrupt administration once and for all. Tom enters, tells them of his quarrel with Peter, and authorizes the publication of his article. Aslaksen agrees, but after Tom leaves, he tells his editors he is reluctant to do anything drastic that would jeopardize the entire town. After Aslaksen leaves, Petra comes into the office; she is upset because the English novel Hovstad asked her to translate for serialization in the paper goes against everything the newspaper stands for. Hovstad says he never read the book, but that it attracts readers so they have a platform for their political message. Petra remains unconvinced, and storms out, accusing Hovstad of hypocrisy and claiming that he has no principles at all. After she leaves, Peter arrives, coming through the back door to avoid being seen. He then informs Aslaksen that, if reconstruction of the spring occurs, it will be paid for by a new tax on the people - in other words, the businessmen of the town will face two years of little income and higher taxes, while the stockholders of the spring pay nothing and reap the eventual benefits. Aslaksen and his editors begin to rethink their position, since advocating something that would be so costly to their readers would undoubtedly hurt the paper's circulation. When Tom comes back, he is anxious to see the final proofs of his article, but Hovstad stalls him. Catherine then enters and accuses Hovstad of wanting to ruin Tom and his family by *printing* the article. Tom then sees Peter's cane on the table, and a confrontation occurs in which Hovstad tells him that the paper will not print the article, even as a separate pamphlet. Tom then threatens to go straight to the people by calling a town meeting. He remains confident because he has the truth on his side.

**Act II, scene 2** - The scene takes place in the home of Captain Horster, who has opened his house for the town meeting Tom wanted to call concerning the spring. A crowd has gathered, and they are angry with Tom because the newspaper has printed a statement from the mayor without saying a word about Tom's research. Catherine and Petra arrive and angrily confront Billing. Peter comes in, and is told that Tom is going around the town trying to assure a good attendance at the meeting. Tom comes in, still confident because he is finally going to get his platform. As soon as he begins to speak, however, someone in the crowd calls out that they need to elect a chairman to run the meeting - and it soon becomes clear that they do not even intend to let Tom speak, since they already think they know what he is going to say, and they don't want to hear it. Aslaksen is chosen chairman, and gives Peter the floor. The mayor then caricatures Tom's position, stating that he wants to destroy the spring because he hates authority; he then argues that, while freedom of speech is a noble principle, there are certain times when it must be denied because the consequences would be too harmful - i.e., Tom should not be allowed to speak. He then entices the people with visions of future prosperity from the springs and of ruin if Tom's ideas are publicized, then moves that Tom be silenced; the crowd concurs. Tom finally gains the right to speak only if he avoids speaking about the spring. He then decries the loss of freedom imposed by the majority, and begs once more to be allowed to share his findings. When the crowd insists on silencing him, he tells them that he will take his news to out-of-town newspapers. By now they are ready to do him violence. Aslaksen calls for a vote to the effect that Tom be declared an enemy of the people, and only Captain Horster and

the town drunk oppose the motion. Tom and his family ask Horster if he has room for them on his ship to America, then leave the meeting with dignity, pursued by an enraged, howling mob.

**Act III** - The last scene of the play takes place in Dr. Stockmann's home. The windows have been broken, and as Tom collects the rocks from the floor, another one flies through one of the few remaining unbroken panes of glass - thrown by a child. They can't get anyone to come fix their windows, Catherine is afraid to go shopping, and the mailman delivers an eviction notice. Petra then comes in and announces that she has been fired from her teaching job. Captain Horster then arrives to tell them that he has been refused a berth on the vessel that was to take him to America. Peter then enters to tell Tom that he has been fired from the board of the spring, and that there is a petition circulating around the town to the effect that no one will come to him for medical services. Peter does hold out hope, however - if Tom renounces his findings, he will be allowed to keep his job and gradually and quietly make the needed improvements. He also tells Tom that his father-in-law has been running all over town buying up stock in the spring, and that, if Tom publicizes his findings elsewhere, Peter will have him arrested for conspiracy to defraud the town and enrich his family. As Peter leaves, Kiil comes in and informs Tom that he has purchased the stock in Kirsten Springs with Catherine's inheritance; in other words, if Tom publishes his findings, he is ruining his own family financially, but if he keeps quiet, their future will be assured. He also tells Tom that the pollution that is ruining the spring comes from his tannery up the mountain, and that he wants his name cleared. As Kiil leaves, Aslaksen and Hovstad arrive and offer to support him again, to portray his actions in buying up the stock (in the person of Kiil) as a public-spirited attempt to get rid of a corrupt board, if only Kiil will pay them for the circulation they will lose when they begin the campaign. They will not, however, support the tax to pay for the renovations, so they expect him to continue to do nothing about the water. Tom refuses, and escorts them from the house. Then Ejlif and Morten arrive from school, and it is obvious that Morten has been beaten up by his schoolmates. After throwing the last of the intruders out of his house, Tom gathers his family about him and announces that they are staying to fight. He tells the boys to gather about a dozen street urchins, who will be educated by himself and Petra in their home, and thus create the beginnings of a new and just society. As the mob howls outside and another rock comes through the window, the curtain falls.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The version of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* we read in class was adapted by Arthur Miller, the author of *The Crucible*. It is not difficult to understand why Miller was attracted to this play. Compare and contrast the two stories, being sure to make reference to both their protagonists and their themes.
2. Compare and contrast the characters of Catherine Stockmann and Elizabeth Proctor in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. In what ways are these wives passive victims of the events in which their husbands are engulfed? Are they right to try to persuade their husbands to submit? Why or why not? Support your arguments with specifics from the two plays.

3. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was written in the context of the McCarthy Red Scare in the United States. His adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* actually came out three years earlier, in 1950. Is Ibsen's play as applicable to the circumstances surrounding McCarthyism as is *The Crucible*, or does it focus on more general issues? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
4. Discuss the political and economic viewpoint reflected in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Is the playwright more sympathetic to capitalism or socialism? to liberalism or conservatism? Support your conclusions with specific quotations from the play.
5. Discuss the playwright's view of democracy in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. To what extent does he believe that democracy is a source of tyranny? What form of government do you think he would prefer? Why?
6. In Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, do you consider the protagonist to be a noble hero or a headstrong fool? Why do you think so? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
7. Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* is an attack on hypocrisy in its many forms. Choose three kinds of hypocrisy Ibsen attacks in the play, and discuss why each is a danger to society. Use specifics from the play to support your discussion.
8. Discuss the issues of freedom of speech and freedom of the press as they are presented in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Why does Ibsen believe these freedoms are essential? To what extent are these freedoms a safeguard against tyranny, and in what ways may they become a source of tyranny?
9. Discuss the role of truth in society as presented in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Choose three characters in the play who assert their commitment to truth, and assess that commitment. To what truth are they committed? What are they willing to sacrifice in order to maintain that commitment?
10. In Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann is an idealistic and largely naive character. To what extent does his naivete drive the plot? If he had been more politically savvy, how might the story have turned out differently? Is Ibsen suggesting that political skill is essential if one really wants to change society, or is he arguing in favor of the doctor's steadfast idealism? Support your conclusions with specifics from the play.
11. In Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, is Dr. Stockmann a tragic hero? If so, what is his tragic flaw? If not, why not? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
12. Today, newspapers are quick to publicize even the slightest rumors about threats to people's health. Such an issue is central to Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. How do you think Ibsen would have responded to the tactics used by contemporary newspaper publishers in treating matters of public health? Would he have supported or opposed such journalistic practices? Why do you think so? Support your argument with details from the play.

13. In Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Peter Stockmann on many occasions accuses his brother of seeking to undermine authority. Is this a fair accusation? Is Dr. Stockmann really opposed to all authority? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
14. In the climactic scene of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann is declared an enemy of the people at a town meeting. Later, he proudly claims that title for himself. What did the townspeople and their leaders mean by the title? What did the protagonist mean when he claimed it? Which use of the phrase was a better reflection of the real situation in which the town found itself?
15. Evaluate the overall impact of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Is the play optimistic or pessimistic? Does it engender hope or despair? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
16. In Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann at one point considers taking his family and moving to America, hoping to find a more congenial atmosphere in which to live. Discuss the legitimacy of the doctor's view of the New World. Would he have gotten a better response in America than he did in his native Norway? Why or why not?
17. One of the clichés of American politics is that people "vote their pocketbooks" - in other words, they are swayed by conditions, arguments, and promises that are financially beneficial to them. Discuss this tendency in the light of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Would Ibsen have agreed that people are swayed by their own economic self-interest to the exclusion of almost anything else? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
18. In Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, the Stockmann brothers serve as foils for one another. In what ways does the juxtaposition of the two characters bring out more clearly the traits of each?
19. Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* ends with Dr. Stockmann's assertion that the strongest people in the world are those who stand alone. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not? Support your answer with specifics from the play.
20. Compare and contrast the critiques of the press found in Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. What practices do the two authors agree on as worthy of censure? Do both see the problems as equally damaging? Can you find any aspects of the work of the press on which the two disagree?
21. George Bernard Shaw greatly admired Henrik Ibsen and did much to promote his plays in England. Both playwrights engaged in social criticism and their works share many themes in common, including the idea that the world cannot tolerate saints and must destroy them for their own protection. Analyze the ways in which this theme is handled in Shaw's *Saint Joan* and Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Be sure to consider the ways in which the protagonists are portrayed and the ways in which they are destroyed by society along with the aspects of their societies the playwrights are criticizing. Use specifics from both plays to support your arguments.

22. Compare and contrast the decisions made by Alexander Powers in Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* and Dr. Thomas Stockmann in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Both men spoke out against illegal and immoral acts committed by businesses with which they were associated, and both suffered the consequences of their moral stands. Which man made the more costly decision? Which do you admire more, and why?
23. In William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the title character is an inveterate truth-teller; whatever passes through his mind is certain to come out of his mouth. Furthermore, he refuses to ingratiate himself with the common people - a flaw his deceitful enemies use against him, ultimately leading to his downfall and demise. Compare and contrast Coriolanus with Dr. Stockmann in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. To what extent do the unwillingness of both men to tell people what they want to hear contribute to their destruction?
24. Three years after writing *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People*. Both plays portray a society that is more concerned with appearances than with reality and one that idolizes money, though they do so in very different ways. Compare and contrast the two Ibsen plays in terms of the way they develop their central themes.
25. Three years after writing *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People*. Both plays portray a society that is more concerned with appearances than with reality and one that idolizes money, though they do so in very different ways. Choose three pairs of characters from the two plays and compare and contrast the ways in which they serve to illustrate Ibsen's central critiques of society.
26. Sibling rivalry is a theme that appears in many works of literature. Compare and contrast the roles of conflict between brothers in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Consider the ways in which the brothers portray the conflict of good versus evil and how they demonstrate the respective authors' views of that conflict and its role in human life.