

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

An Enemy of the People

by Henrik Ibsen

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An Enemy of the People

Lecture

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) popularized a new form of drama during his writing career. A Norwegian, Ibsen was responsible for the creation of moral dramas that addressed issues of the time and society in which he lived. His approach differed from contemporaries who wrote light dramas about forgettable characters.

Ibsen's plays also contrasted the allegorical nature of what preceded his morality dramas. Plays that were meant to teach theater-goers a lesson took place in ancient societies and were removed from people's lives in Ibsen's time. Ibsen took the premise of a play's ability to carry a message and placed it in a setting to which every member of his audience could relate.

Short, static dialogue, a staple of Ibsen's work, is exhibited in plays such as *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of the People*. In the latter, Ibsen introduces the concept of environmentalism as a key component of the plot. This was a new idea to many people outside the scientific community, and it allowed Ibsen to describe a very real problem with terms that seemed magical to a layman.

Readers should pay close attention to the conflict between brothers, the vulnerability of the town to persuasion, and the importance of the newspaper in the society. The ability of the media to raise and then destroy a good idea is as relevant today as it was in Ibsen's time.

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Characters

Dr. Thomas Stockmann – Dr. Stockmann is the protagonist in the play. He is the medical officer in charge of inspecting the baths. Dr. Stockmann is the person who proposes the idea of the baths to the town.

Peter Stockmann – Peter is Dr. Stockmann's brother, the mayor of the town, and the principal antagonist in the play. He is the elder of the brothers, and he is in charge of the Baths Committee.

Aslaksen – Aslaksen runs a printing press in the town and he is responsible for the printing of the *People's Messenger*. Aslaksen protects his own personal interest at all costs.

Hovstad – He is the editor of the *People's Messenger* and is capable of influencing a great number of individuals with what he allows to be printed in the newspaper.

Mrs. Stockmann – The wife of Dr. Stockmann, she is a loving and devoted woman. She worries frequently about the pursuits her husband is involved in, particularly his study of the Baths.

Petra Stockmann – Petra is the elder daughter of the Stockmanns. She is a teacher in the town and has been taught by her father to be a free-thinker.

Morten Kiil – He is the adoptive father of Mrs. Stockmann, who has made a substantial amount of money with his tannery. It is his business that is causing the largest amount of pollution to the Baths.

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Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. write a short character sketch for three characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Peter Stockmann, and Hovstad. Explain the role of the character in the play and what the cause and result of his actions were.
2. discuss the idea of persuasion as it relates to the People's Messenger. Relate the idea to modern journalism and media practices.
3. discuss the theme of environmentalism that is part of the plot-vehicle of the play. Explain why Ibsen's use of pollution is well suited as a theme.
4. analyze the relationships between family members. Identify the brother vs. brother conflict between Thomas and Peter and the teacher/student relationship of Thomas and Petra.
5. analyze the writing style of Ibsen. Write about the abruptness of the dialogue and the straightforward narrative.
6. define and find examples of the following literary terms:
 - irony
 - protagonist
 - antagonist
 - metaphor
 - climax
 - conflict
 - simile
 - theme
7. point out how self-preservation controls much of Peter Stockmann's attitudes and actions, in contrast to Dr. Stockmann, who cares very little about his or his own family's situation.
8. explain two of the three types of conflict that occur in the play and find examples of both.
9. understand why the people of the town, especially the powerful and semi-powerful, rally against Dr. Stockmann, despite his having their best interests at heart.

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Questions for Essay or Discussion

1. Explain the title An Enemy of the People. To whom does this title refer and why is this character an enemy of the people?
2. Discuss the relationship between Dr. Stockmann and Peter Stockmann. How does their relationship affect the town?
3. What role does the town newspaper the People's Messenger play in the development of the plot?
4. In Act IV Dr. Stockmann and the townspeople argue over who controls the town government: the poor masses or a select group of privileged lawmakers. Which do you think is true in the society in the play and in your own society and why?
5. How would you describe the relationship between Petra and Dr. Stockmann? Is Petra's occupation and belief system like the majority of women in her society?
6. Discuss the environmental issues raised by the play with respect to the time period in which it was originally written and performed.
7. Compare and contrast Hovstad and Aslaksen with particular emphasis on each character's attitude toward the Baths situation.
8. Is the end of the play plausible? Discuss your reaction to the ending including what changes (if any) you would make to Act V?
9. Compare the private and public lives and opinions of Peter and Thomas. In other words, is what they say motivated by what each one truly believes, or is there a personal element in their attacks, strongly held ideas, and duty?

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Act I

Vocabulary

acquiesce – to consent or comply
arrack – an alcoholic drink
capital – excellent
duffer – one who attempts to deceive
indefatigable – tireless
infusoria – a disease-causing one-celled organism
mettle – spirit; courage
pagan – one who does not belong to one of the major organized religions
sepulchre – tomb
toddy – a drink made with spirits, hot water, sugar, and a slice of lemon

1. Cite an example of irony in the first act.

2. Why would invalids travel to the town? How could this help the town?

3. What does Peter say is one of Dr. Stockmann's "ingrained" tendencies?

4. Why does Billing think that Dr. Stockmann is anxious over the mail not yet arriving?

Act IV

Vocabulary

censure – to reprimand or blame disapprovingly
pestiferous – infested with parasites
plebeian – pertaining to the common people, often vulgar
plucky – brave and spirited
quagmire – a hazardous situation; a marsh or soggy land

1. Where is Dr. Stockmann's lecture being held?

2. What effect does the election of a chairman have on the meeting?

3. Who is selected to be the chairperson?

4. What motion does Peter Stockmann attempt to pass at the outset?

5. Find the quote in his speech which shows how Thomas' views have changed.
