

# Why do Ibsen's children die?

## Abstract

The death of children is a strikingly frequent topic in Henrik Ibsen's dramas, and could be a key to his writing. In this article I briefly discuss works where children die and analyse medical histories and possible causes.

The cases vary considerably from a medical point of view. Some children simply die of starvation in his earlier works. In our time we tend to forget the high rate of childhood mortality in this country in the mid 1800s.

In Ibsen's contemporary dramas the cause of death is often complex. Despite the fact that he uses symbols, there are medical elements which are theoretically probable. He rarely makes obvious mistakes about medical issues. A common feature in these tragic child destinies is that the writer shows us inadequate or poor parents.

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There is considerable disease and death in the works of Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), affecting children and adults alike. Even when adults are the main characters, children and adolescents play important parts. The most famous children who die, are Hedvig in *Vildanden* – *The Wild Duck* (1884) and Eyolf in *Lille Eyolf* – *Little Eyolf* (1894). Literary people like to refer to this as «Kindermord». This is a notion which is repeated in the research of Ibsen in several languages, expressing the fact that children die, more or less, as a direct result of the parents being inadequate (1–6).

An obvious answer to why the writer lets the children die could be that he makes use of it as a dramatic effect. It is more difficult to understand why he never stops (2, 5). One explanation could be that experiences in his childhood and adolescence were of great significance. Another element is that his writing reflects the high rate of child mortality in Norway in the mid 1800s.

In this article I wish to present Ibsen's dead children with emphasis on the course of events and causes of death. I have examined three long dramatic poems and his collection of dramas from the so-called 100-year-edition which was published in the period 1928–57. Some children are unborn and some are older. The death of children figuratively, where the writer uses metaphors, has also been included.

## The dead children

### The 1850s

The first work about dead children, is *Hærmændene på Helgeland* – *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1858). Ørnulf from the fjords has seven sons who are all killed at the same time during a family feud. A 4-year-old boy, Egil, should also have died, but just managed to escape. This is one of Ibsen's earlier works, in which he is inspired by the blood dripping sagas.

### The 1860s

In three works from the 1860s the topic reappears: *Terje Vigen* (1866), *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867).

Terje rows to Denmark in an open boat to purchase wheat; he is taken prisoner and sent to «Prisonen». When he returns home, his daughter and wife are both dead, buried and forgotten. Time passes. After a horrendous storm a helpless yacht is driven ashore. The pilot Terje can now take revenge. He is, however, unable to be insensitive towards the mother's pleading cry for her child. The comparison between Terje's dead daughter and the woman's daughter who is alive, is the poem's nerve. When the lord wishes to express his gratitude, Terje gently touches the child and answers. «Nej, den som frælst, da værst det kneb, det var nok den lille der!» (No, the one who rescued you when things were at their worst, was indeed this little one here).

In Brand's coastal town, there is also starvation. Brand meets a woman who desperately pleads him to help her dying husband. He has killed one of their three children out of darkest desperation before the child starves to death. Then he turns the weapon on himself. Brand crosses the fjord during a violent storm, and because of the way he goes about his ministry deed he wins Agnes. Later he loses both her and their son Alf.

In *Peer Gynt* child death is not the main theme. However, during the shipwreck, the ship's cook, who has a whole tribe of chil-

dren at home, drowns. «Black hunger lives in his house» according to the captain. On the overturned boat, the cook pleads for his life. «Å snille-spar! Husk på de små jeg hjemme har!» (Please spare me! Remember the young ones I have at home!). Peer is unyielding, and we suspect that the cook's children meet the same fate as Terje's daughter.

### The 1880s

There has been a lively debate about whether Osvald in *Gengangere* – *Ghosts* (1881), was born with syphilis. It is believed that Ibsen set the scene for this (7, 8). The boy grows up, and crumbles at the age of approximately 27, as a handicapped person.

The 14-year-old Hedvig in *Vildanden* – *The Wild Duck* (1884), also has a hereditary disease, but meets a violent death. I believe she hears Hjalmar's words to Gregers down below: «Hvis jeg så spurte hende: Hedvig, er du villig til å gi' slip på livet for meg?» (So if I asked her: Hedvig are you willing to give up this life for my sake?). A shot is heard.

Ellida's and Dr. Wangel's child in *Fruen fra havet* – *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), dies mysteriously at around 6 months of age. The stranger, a sailor, is the child's spiritual father. Ellida has promised to be faithful to him. Later, she marries Wangel and becomes pregnant. During the pregnancy she has a serious nervous breakdown and becomes fearful of her past.

### The 1890s

The childhood home of Aline Solness in *Bygmester Solness* – *The Master Builder* (1892), – burns down. The Master Builder starts his successful business in the burnt out ruins. His conscience tells him that his career is based on an accident that he

## Main message

- Henrik Ibsen was to a large extent preoccupied with the theme of children's death
- Ibsen uses medical aspects more or less successfully, but is rarely wrong in a direct sense
- An important message is the significance of security and love during childhood and adolescence

wanted to happen. He loses his twin sons. However, Ibsen does not let them perish in the fire. The children and Aline are carried out. Aline loses her nine beautiful dolls. She becomes ill with «feber som gikk over i mælken» (fever which spread to her milk). She insists on breast-feeding her twins, but they die of «poisoning».

Nine-year-old Eyolf on crutches in *Lille Eyolf* – *Little Eyolf* (1884), walks into the sea and drowns. As an infant he fell from the changing table and became permanently handicapped.

#### «Kindermord» of unborn children and as metaphors

In the four works *Keiser og galilæer* – *The Emperor and the Galilean* (1873), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *Når vi døde vågner* – *When We Dead Wake* (1899), Ibsen occasionally uses metaphors. Hedda's suicide has several tragic consequences. When she shoots herself, she also kills her and Tesman's unborn child. Figuratively, she destroys the child and at the same time the manuscript of Løvborg and Thea. Rebekka West jumps into the waterfall with her fatal lie to Beate about her being pregnant with Rosmer. In *When we dead wake* Rubek and Irene's «child» – the work of art – is unable to live as planned. Another child who dies inside its mother's womb, is the unborn child of Julian and his wife Helena in *The Emperor and the Galilean*. Helena is killed with poison, but before she dies she admits that the child's father is Julian's cousin Gallos.

#### Discussion

It is clearly evident in this review that Ibsen never abandons the theme of death among

children, literally or as a metaphor. In the extensive span of Ibsen's works, this has been an interesting subject (1–3). As late as in 1994, it was established that «child abuse is an almost obsessive theme in Ibsen» (9). Not even Charles Dickens (1812–70), who wrote a great deal about children, was so monomaniac on this subject. Variations of the theme where the victims do not necessarily die as young children, are found in most of Ibsen's writing. Greek tragedies, victim motifs in the Bible, mindsets of the times and first and foremost his own life experiences have been discussed as contributing factors.

A striking number of children in Ibsen's works are illegitimate or a result of a loveless relationship between parents. In modern literature it has become almost too trite to point at the writer's own background as an adolescent with an illegitimate child in Grimstad (10, 11). No one can believe, however, that this has not indeed had an effect. We are given the impression that to be born illegitimately has a poor prognosis for the child – a «nemeses over avkommet» – (a nemeses of the offspring), as he expresses it himself (12). In his writing, attitudes from those close to the child have implications for the future. Where a child dies the evidence of a break in the bloodline is striking. The dead children are the only representatives of their generation, and with them the bloodline dies out.

If Ibsen's children do not succumb to hunger or disease, they are the result of an unfavourable relationship between the parents. They are parents who in their own egoism merely think about their own interests, they go separate ways, lead immoral lives or live on lies. It is of no help if Ibsen introduces a person – often a doctor – who

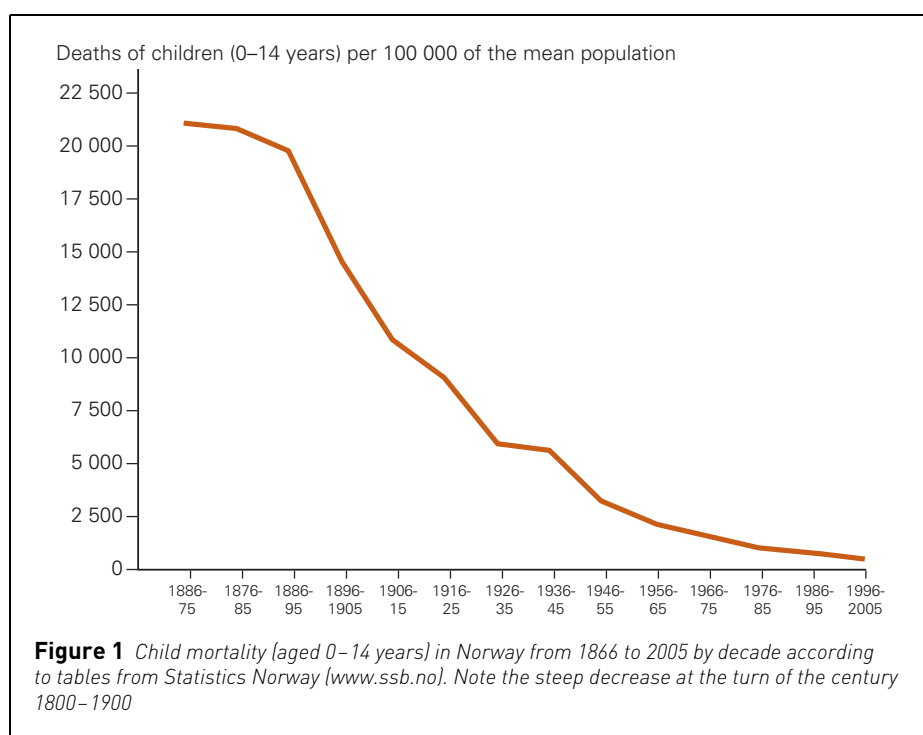
diagnoses the problem. The incompetent parents are usually the result of a difficult childhood themselves (13).

#### Hunger and disease

The death of children in Ibsen's dramatic poems appears to be realistic. Child mortality early in the 1800s was so extreme that nearly a third of all the children born in one year died before the age of 14. Data from the south of Norway during Terje Vigen's time show this (14). We have great difficulty grasping this fact today. People were, however, much more accustomed to death and they expected that a new child would come. The birth rate was considerably higher. The cause of death was often a result of poor general health and living conditions complicated by common infections such as measles, scarlet fever and whooping cough (14). 100 years came to pass before adequate nourishment, improved hygiene, vaccinations, chemotherapy and birth control lead to enormous improvements. Hunger was the norm in the 1800s. Figure 1 shows the dramatic drop in mortality over a period of 150 years. Improved social conditions and societal aspects in general had an especially noticeable effect at the turn of the century.

In *Brand* there is both hunger and disease. Alf's medical history shows this clearly. The doctor was of the opinion and rightly so, that the boy would have a better chance if he moved away from the cold and windy fjord and the house without sun. Some point at tuberculosis (4). Could Agnes, who also dies in the course of a short period, have carried the disease and passed it on? «Tæring» (consumption) was a common disease, but Alf's early years witness against such an early death in lung tuberculosis. Agnes, however, dies at an age typical for this disease, which took so many young and strong lives. It is more credible that the child was well nourished from birth, but was troubled by recurring infections of the respiratory tract, perhaps with signs of asthma, which can be life-threatening for young children, even in this day and age. The writer also lets us understand that it is the grieving over Alf, and Brand's relentlessness that breaks Agnes. Her reaction is heart-breaking when a poor woman comes in from the cold with yet another weak infant in her arms, demanding the christening bonnet left by Alf.

Brand should of course have sent Agnes and the sick child away early. Many react emotionally to Ibsen when he lets them stay against the doctor's advice. Georg Brandes (1842–1927) criticised him for this, in literary terms, in a review in the national newspaper *Dagbladet*, soon after the play was published in 1866. In Brand's time, the change of environment was, in fact, the only thing that could lead to permanent improvement. The writer himself sought the South with its warmth and light in order to preserve





The actor Henki Kolstad (1915–2008), as Hjalmar Ekdal, together with the 12-year-old Kjersti Dalby as Hedvig in the film «Vildanden» – The Wild Duck by Henrik Ibsen. The picture was taken during the production of the film in 1962. Direction Tancred Ibsen. Photo Ivar Aaserud/Aktuell/Scanpix

his creative force. Brand's choice of residence is unrealistic if the drama concerns saving a sick child. What the drama shows, however, is Brand's willingness to sacrifice everything to what he believes in. Ibsen therefore sacrifices both mother and child.

Around the 1850s or earlier newborn babies had less favourable chances of becoming adults. Nearly one third of them died. Even though there is a difference between the social circumstances of the sailor and the priest, it is not particularly surprising that the children of Terje Vigen, Peer Gynt's cook and Brand all die. What Ibsen tries to do in the drama is to make us understand that the deaths could have been avoided if only Terje and the cook had reached the mainland, or if Alf had been given the opportunity to move away.

#### *Symbolic or medical reality*

Modern scientists do not base their conclusions on Ibsen's own life (11, 12). Analysis of the text is the important thing. They find symbolism in connection with the children's death, as for example in *Fruen fra havet* –

*The Lady from the Sea* and *Bygmester Solness* – *The Master Builder*. The writer himself was, to a large extent, irritated over any interpretation attempts (8). In reverence we could ignore the symbols. My intention, however, is to look at the patient stories.

*The Solness Twins*. In clear medical terms Ibsen says that the twins are infected by Aline's poisoned breast milk. They are about 20 days old when they die. This is an example of Ibsen's ability to take short-cuts which are not up to standard. The existence of poisoned or poor breast milk is a dubious myth. We can, however, accept that Agnes is suffering from depression after the birth, the fire and the loss of her nine dolls. Post-natal depression is a well-known phenomenon which can have a negative effect on breast-feeding. If she has an insufficient supply of milk, especially for her twins, the under-nourishment might have made the twins too weak to fight off an infection, thus resulting in their deaths. An effective treatment could be to call in a wet-nurse, which was common in those days. Solness would have had enough money. Aline, how-

ever, was opposed to this, and grieved for the rest of her life because she had failed in her duty. Ibsen shows that the ethics of fulfilling one's duty can be fatal.

*Wangel-sønnen* – *The Wangel Son*. Ellida Wangel, the boy's mother, was very psychologically unstable during her pregnancy. There is no way of knowing whether this had any significance. The child dies, without any diagnosis, at a medically critical age of around 6 months. In medical terms this is an age referred to as the «immunity gap», i.e. the immunity protection that the mother has passed on to her newly born comes to an end. A child's own immunity system should take over in a natural way. Infants can be especially vulnerable during this period. There can be a breakdown in the child's ability to create anti-bodies; or the child might contract an especially serious infection with fatal consequences.

Pediatricians will focus mostly on the fact that the boy dies at an age where the condition sudden, unexpected infant death frequently occurs (cot death). Several possible causes are known and in most cases it



occurs in boys. A healthy child is found dead in its cot, from an unknown cause. Sudden, unexpected infant death is not uncommon. It has occurred during all times and is also described in the Bible, with which Ibsen was very familiar. It is possible that the writer had knowledge of this phenomenon, and/or was aware of this especially vulnerable age.

Sometimes Ibsen has a medical hit, but the mention of the Wangel sons' eyes seems purely symbolic. «The fish eyes» come from the unknown sailor. Findings in the eyes can have a medical significance in syndrome diagnosis. Has Ibsen once again inserted fragments of knowledge from his experience or from what he has read? The description does not give any medical suspicion. «The child's eyes change colour according to the sea». Even Dr. Wangel, the father, is unable to explain «what was the issue with the child's eyes.»

### Inheritance and disease

Ibsen has a predilection for doctors and medical topics (15). Syphilis was a find for a writer who was preoccupied with inheritance. Sometimes Ibsen confuses inheritance, infection and acquired characteristics (7). It has little significance as long as the writer is able to express his determinism. In *Et dukkehjem* – *A Doll's House*, it is the doctor himself, Dr. Rank, who is ill. In *Gengangere* – *Ghosts*, it is Oswald. Both have fathers whom Ibsen portrays in a negative manner.

In *Vildanden* – *The Wild Duck*, Hedvig is the victim. She gradually loses her sight probably due to optic nerve degeneration. We may think that Ibsen is using his favourite disease once again. Hedvig's syphilis diagnosis, however, has a weak medical basis. It is true that the writer lets it shine through that Hedvig has caught the disease from her father, the versatile wholesaler Werle, who is also becoming blind. Hedvig's mother, Gina, breaks into the discussion about the child's eye condition with a somewhat vague statement that poor eyesight is also hereditary in Hjalmar's family. She has her reasons for doing so.

Hedvig does not die due to hereditary disease as Oswald does; she shoots herself right in the heart at a close range as the old lieutenant explained. The gunpowder has scorched the waist of her dress. Clear medical speech from the writer here. He makes a blunder, however, in the detailed description of how the child immediately becomes rigid and that the pistol had to be prised from her fingers.

### Suicide

Hedvig and Eyolf are not unique. Here the writer is equally monomaniac as far as child mortality goes. People commit suicide or contemplate doing so in almost all of Ibsen's contemporary dramas. Ibsen himself considered it during his life crisis in 1860.

Around 1890 there was an increase in suicide tendencies in Europe. His writing reflects both contemporary problems and causalities (8, 16).

In *Brand*, one of Ibsen's most important works (8, 12), the main character does in fact commit suicide in the Ice church together with another «winged» child, Gerd. Brand's unhappy childhood emerges in his harsh words to his mother just before she dies. «Du var ej mor, jeg var ej søn» (You were not a mother – I was not a son).

*Lille Eyolf* – *Little Eyolf*, is a drama with numerous interpretations (6, 17). In the «Kindermord» literature Eyolf's suicide is a favourite theme (1–5, 10). Psychoanalysts sharpen their weapons. The main focus is on the parents Alfred and Rita who, together with Asta, lived in a destructive matrimonial triangle. Asta had also had a difficult childhood. The boy was not loved. The Rat Lady, a strange being, understood this and made a fateful contact with the boy. A simplified answer as to why the boy committed suicide is expressed in Alfred's words. «Nu har vi fået det, – slig som du ønsked, Rita... At Eyolf ikke var her.» (This is what you wanted, Rita... That Eyolf should no longer be here).

Traditionally, Hjalmar Ekdal emerges as a poor father, as he becomes heavily involved in the final scene where Hedvig commits suicide. In a more sympathetic interpretation, which also shows how fatherhood is an axis in Ibsen's dramas, Hjalmar is seen as a good father (18). We would like to believe that thoughtless words spoken during that sad day were merely expressions of his own desperation.

### The writer of death

If we consider Ibsen's conclusions in a cold and cynical manner, it conjures up visions of our present TV-series filled with family problems and tragicomic soaps. Depictions of suicide and death amongst children are overly frequent. Many see Ibsen as a dark and cold person, a writer of death (19). This applies, with few exceptions, to all his written work. It is indeed not in the intrigue itself where Ibsen's glory is found. We believe in his characters. They do not just communicate through actions but also in how they express themselves. Ibsen became a giant in world literature because he wrote his most famous works for the stage. For Ibsen researchers that is in fact a trivial point, but it cannot be emphasised enough that the writer must first and foremost be understood and interpreted as a dramatist. He revolutionized European drama. Many of Shakespeare's (1564–1616) characters die as well. Good literature can be read in various ways. The classics can face a challenge.

### Conclusion

Children die in Ibsen's dramas throughout his entire career. The medical stories are

very diverse. He is on safe ground, medically speaking, when he uses starvation as a cause of death. Little by little he uses a poetic license in his approach to medical knowledge and even myths, and from a medical perspective he is more or less successful. His later works are subject to various interpretations. There is a natural development in line with the spirit of the times, when psychoanalytic methods and psychiatry dominate.

Ibsen was preoccupied with security and love for children during their childhood and adolescence. A well-known quotation sheds light over what he wrote about children, and provides an answer to the theme of this article «Virkelige foreldre finnes det meget få af i verden» (There are very few real parents in this world) (20).

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