

A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF THE PLAY GHOSTS

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Abstract

Semiotic studies of drama attempts to describe how to choose the signs and how to create interaction among them on the stage. It is known that every element that is used on the stage such as light, costumes, stage designs, props, music etc. are the signs for the audience. In this study the well-known Norwegian playwright Ibsen's play *Ghosts* is going to be analysed in terms of semiotic studies. This play was performed by ShawChicago in honour of World Theatre Day, 27 March 2009, at Selçuk University. In this essay, the relation between the signified and the signifier of this performed text is going to be studied in connection with the audience, director, actor/actress, light, costumes, music etc. and the influence of this harmony on the success of the play is going to be discussed.

Key Words: Ibsen, *Ghosts*, Semiotic study of drama.

HORTLAKLAR (GHOSTS) ADLI OYUNUN GÖSTERGEBİLİMSEL ÇÖZÜMLEMESİ

Özet

Tiyatro göstergebilimi, sahnede kullanılan göstergelerin nasıl seçilmesi ve birbirleriyle ne tür bir etkileşim içinde olmaları gerektiğini araştırır. Işık, kostüm, sahne düzeni, aksesuar, müzik vs. gibi her bir unsur seyirci için birer göstergedir. Bu çalışmada Norveçli oyun yazarı Ibsen'in *Ghosts* (*Hortlaklar*) adlı oyunu göstergebilim açısından değerlendirilecektir. Bu oyun bu yılki Dünya Tiyatrolar Günü'nde, 27 Mart 2009, ShawChicago grubu tarafından Selçuk Üniversitesi'nde sahnelenmiştir. Bu makalede, seyirciyle buluşan bu oyundaki gösterge ve gösterilen arasındaki ilişki üzerinde durulacaktır. Böylece seyirci, yönetmen, oyuncu, ışık, kostüm, müzik vs. arasındaki ilişkinin önemine değinilecek ve bu uyumun oyunun başarılı bir şekilde sahnelenmesindeki etkisi tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ibsen, *Ghosts*, *Hortlaklar*, tiyatro göstergebilimi.

INTRODUCTION

Ibsen's play *Ghost* was written during the autumn of 1881 and was published in December of the same year. It was performed firstly in 1882 in the Aurora Turner Hall in Chicago. In the play Mrs. Alving lives with her maidservant, Regina, in a mansion in Norway's countryside. She endured her husband's debauchery till his death. And she sent away their son, Oswald, at the age of seven, with the hope that he would never discover his father's immorality. Being under the influence of social values, she tries to give the impression that Mr.

Alving was an honourable man. But Oswald's return from abroad with a fatal disease destroys her plan and causes her to tell Oswald and Regina the truth about Mr. Alving.

Ghosts can be characterised as a realistic contemporary drama; making problems in society the subject of debate, having a socio-critical perspective, having a contemporary setting, and presenting everyday people and situations. Ibsen generally in his realistic plays does not cover the negative sides of society, hypocrisy, dissimulation, use of force, and he demands for truthfulness and freedom. In *Ghosts* Ibsen also criticises the pillars that support bourgeois society, marriage and Christianity, and he underlines the key terms such as truth, emancipation, self-realisation and personal freedom. In this play, Ibsen challenges the conventional morality with social and sexual themes. He regards the social lie, paralyzing effect of duty, and lack of joy as destructive elements of life. As it is seen in *Ghosts* iconoclastic aspect of Ibsen's themes are "his attack on life-denying idealism, and his constructive employment of internal contradictions." (Innes, 1992;15).

The aim of this study is to analyze Ibsen's play *Ghosts* in semiotic terms. The play was performed by ShawChicago at Selçuk University.⁹ In this essay the performed text is going to be analysed by focusing on the elements of semiotics: the signifier and the signified. It is known that multidimensional and dialectic interactions among the signs are important for semiotic studies of drama. As Esslin points out the director, actor/actress, designer and the audience should understand the function of every sign to get the exact idea of the text and to approach it with a critical point of view. (Esslin,1996;10). Regarding this idea, in this study the importance of semiotic studies of drama is underlined by the analysis of *Ghosts*.

⁹ A World Premiere adaptation production of Henrik Ibsen's drama, *Ghosts* is adapted and directed by ShawChicago Artistic Director Robert Scogin. ShawChicago's Turkish performance will include Chicago actors Adrienne Cury, Tony Dobrowolski, John Francisco, Sienna Harris and Michael McAlister. The production team includes Stage Manager Julia Zayes-Melendez, costumes by Iris Bainum-Houle, set by Rick Paul, lighting design by Jacob Snodgrass and sound design by Joseph Bowen.

1. SEMIOTIC STUDY OF GHOSTS

1.1. Set Design

Set design is the visual environment in which a play is performed. Its purpose is to suggest time and place and thus create the proper mood or atmosphere. The first act's scene of *Ghosts* is described in the text as "A spacious garden-room, with one door to the left, and two doors to the right. In the middle of the room a round table, with chairs about it. On the table lie books, periodicals, and newspapers. In the foreground to the left a window, and by it a small sofa, with a worktable in front of it. In the background, the room is continued into somewhat narrower conservatory, the walls of which are formed by large panes of glass. In the right-hand wall of the conservatory is a door leading down into the garden. Through the glass wall a gloomy fjord landscape is faintly visible, veiled by steady rain" (p.1, Act I).¹ But in Scogin's adaptation there are some changes in the set design. At first there are no doors on the stage. The director prefers to use the black curtains as doors which open to the kitchen and the dining room. On the left there is a sofa and this side is also the entrance of the hall. On the right there is a round table, with chairs about it. The forbidden book lies on the table centre-stage like an accusation during the whole action. In the performed text the table-chair and sofa functions differently. The actors/actresses are around the table when they are talking about official issues; such as insurance of the orphanage. But they sit on the sofa when they discuss family events; such as the truth about Mr. Alving. Also it is interesting that at the end of the second act Oswald's chair is near Regina's which signifies their equality in the social ladder.

In the middle of the stage there is a curtain that the landscape is painted on and it functions as a window. In the performance this painted curtain gives a clue about the countryside to the audience and at the same it helps the characters to have a communication with outer world. In the text for Mrs. Alving this window/painted curtain symbolizes her freedom, and at the same time her lack of courage. Thus, she questions 'law and order' of life in front of the window. But in the performed text Mrs. Alving never looks out of the window. Instead her repentance is given with her words, gestures and mimics. The only character used that curtain is Oswald. At the end of the play he looks out of the window and complains about the darkness of the country and life.

On the right side of the stage symbolically the image of the orphanage is hanged in the air. At the end of the second act the actors/actresses, Mrs. Alving, Regina, Pastor Manders and Oswald, look at the right side of the seatings as if the orphanage is there. With the words and movements of the actor/actresses the audience understands something wrong happens in the orphanage. Then on the stage the red light is seen on the symbolic image of the orphanage which gives the impression that the orphanage is on fire.

¹ The quotations from *Ghosts* are taken from the e-text of the play; <http://www.enotes.com/ghosts-text/>

It should be pointed out that these set designs are created by regarding the transformation problems from the USA to Turkey and the size of the stage of Selçuk University, Süleyman Demirel Culture Center.

1.2. Actors/Actresses

It is known that Ibsen's social plays have little physical action; the emphasis is all on a psychological contest of minds as the characters question the taboo subjects. Esslin underlines that Ibsen's characters express their motivation and psychological reality gradually and indirectly through dialogue and action. (Esslin,1991;324). "Ibsen's lines do embody characters who possess all the qualities and dimensions necessary to fashion a great individual performance." (Styan,1981;30) In this play also the characters are breathing characters and all of them have a story and a goal in life.

Jacob Engstrand (Michael McAlister) is the carpenter and his left leg is bent. He has a clump of wood under the sole of his boot. From the beginning his eagerness for money is underlined and he does not hesitate to use his physical defect and religion to reach his aim. McAlister is successful in giving hypocrisy of this character.

Sienna Haris achieves to create Regina as a young woman who discovers her sexuality and runs after her desires in life. In the beginning of the first act the playwright shows us two sides of Regina. While she is disrespectful of her father, she is full of respect for Pastor Manders because of her sense of pride and desire to move up in the world. And this inner conflict is seen in Haris' usage of her body and voice.

Pastor Manders (Tony Dobrowolsky) is a gullible person who always concerns about public opinion. He is eager to find an easy answer to things and does not want to deal with scandals or disagreements against the public values. Throughout the play he prefers to stand when he criticizes or convinces Mr. Alving. This visuality also signifies the physical superiority of Pastor Manders.

Oswald Alving (John Francisco) has a completely different worldview from Pastor Manders. It is especially clear in their discussion about marriage. Francisco achieves to tell Oswald's illness verbally and also physically by looking fixedly, clapping his hands, breaking into bitter sobbing, looking up with despair in his eyes, using a dull, and toneless voice and having a glassy stare.

Also Mrs. Alving (Adrienne Cury) shows her sorrow with her gestures and mimic when Oswald tells the truth about himself. She cannot decide whether she should sit or stand, she wrings her hands and walks in silent struggle with a white face. It is underlined that Mrs. Alving's entire life has been marked by the sense of duty; controlling over her husband's reputation, keeping her husband home at night, keeping her son ignorant of his father's failings, keeping Regina ignorant of the identity of her real father. She is shocked when she learns the truth about

Oswald. And her first reaction is to emphasize her maternal role, by calling him 'boy' and by getting him whatever he wants. She does not want to believe that he is ill or he is going to be in a helpless, hopeless situation. And finally she has enough courage to accept his illness and decides to tell everyone the truth regardless of public opinion. Cury is successful in giving these feelings and also passing from one feeling to another.

1.3. Language

In a letter to the Swedish theatre man August Lindberg, who was in the process of putting on *Ghosts* in August 1883, Ibsen wrote:

"The language must sound natural and the form of expression must be characteristic of each individual person in the play; one person certainly does not Express himself like another. In this respect a great deal can be put right during the rehearsals; that is when one easily hears what does not strike one as natural and unforced, and what must therefore be changed and changed again until the lines achieve full credibility and realistic form. The effect of the play depends in large measure on the audience's feeling that they are sitting, listening to something that is going on in actual real life"(Styan, 1981:28).

The realistic drama provides the illusion of recognisable reality. Thus the characters speak and behave naturally. In the performed text the actors/actresses use old English (Victorian period) which is understood with the tonality and rhythm of the language. Also a sense of decorum is established by the actors/actresses. Their words/utterance are suitable to their social status, and motto. For instance Regina speaks colloquial language with his father; "It's the devil's rain, I say", "Be off! and has an educated conversation with the Poster. She also uses French words; 'rendezvous's, fi donc!, pied de mouton, savoir vivre' which signify her desires to go to Paris. Engstrand speaks two languages, too. One the one hand, his language is vulgar, containing curses that reveals that he is a common, rough man. On the other hand, his language is full of cliché; "this worl's full of temptations", "what a child owes its father" that shows hypocritical side of him. He sometimes uses cliché to persuade Pastor Manders: "I've bought up the child, and lived kindly with poor Johanna, and ruled over my own house, as the Scripture has it" or "a man's conscience isn't always as clean as it might be."

Pastor Manders' clichés; "A child's proper place is, and must be, the home of his fathers" gives clue about his motto in life. He likes to give orders about social life and religious life. For that reason 'must do' is used in his statements. But when he learns the truth about Mr. and Mrs. Alving's marriage it is seen that for the first time he does not know what to say and it is given with questions such as; "This is—this is inconceivable to me. I cannot grasp it! I cannot realize it! But how was it possible to--? How could such a state of things be kept secret?" (p.22, Act I). Pastor Manders' speech is generally ponderous, highly rhetorical, and full of stock

phrases whereas Oswald's language is impassioned. This usage signifies that Pastor Manders lives his life according to concrete set of ideals, whereas Oswald acts from the heart.

It should be mentioned that the forbidden subject-matter of *Ghosts*, and the Victorian double-standard of sexual conduct cause Ibsen to use Sophoclean method of telling the story in retrospect, that is, as if the main event had already taken place before the curtain rose. So much of what is said is a cover for what is deeply felt. Michael Meyer explains that "Mrs. Alving and Manders especially spend much of the time circling round a subject to which they dread referring directly, and at these moments the dialogue is oblique, sometimes even opaque." (Meyer, 1967; 490).

In the text it is seen that the playwright uses leitmotives and symbols to underline the debate effectively. "The past lives on in Ibsen's leitmotives, conjured up by their mention. Symbolic events are used to link the past to the present. The motif of genetic inheritance serves more to make the past present than it does to embody the antique notion of fate." (Szondi, 1987;17). The leitmotive that is used in the play is 'ghost'. Pastor Manders is the one who reminds the 'ghost' throughout the play. His emphasis on ideas of familial loyalty is a plague on all the characters in the play. Regina does not want to return to Engstrand, Oswald does not believe that marriages must be sanctioned by the church, Mrs. Alving does not believe that she should have been loyal to her husband. It is clear that these ghosts are within the entire community.

Mrs. Alving's speech underlines the importance of this term, 'ghosts', for the plot as: "It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that walks in us. It is all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we cannot shake them off." (p.5, Act II). Mrs. Alving says that these ghost ideas make them afraid of the light. Throughout the play, gloom, clouds, and rain symbolize hypocrisy, fear, duty, and cowardice. Another symbol in the play is light. It is given through signifiers; fire, sunshine and lamp. The fire is not the light of enlightenment but destruction. The sunshine clears away the gloom, and all the facts are on the table. Yet the result is not enlightenment again, but madness. Throughout the play Oswald complains about the lack of sun in Norway, compared to sunny Italy. That idea signifies the lack of intellectual and moral 'light' in his homeland.

1.4. Music/Sound and Sound Effects

In the play the music is used to give the impression that the play is not a comedy. It gives the feeling of fear. In the performed text the play is two-act. The director prefers to give the second and third act together and he uses music for that passing. By this way the audience understands that the play continues with a different scene but without any break. In the performance sound effect is also used to create a rainy weather. In the first act the sound of rain is given to achieve that

effect. This illusion is also continued with the complaints of Pastor Manders and Engstrand about the bad weather.

1.5. Lighting Design

In a play, lighting design illuminates the stage and the performers; and also creates mood and control the focus of the spectators. In this performed text floodlights and spotlights are used according to the psychology of the characters and atmosphere of the scene. For instance, in the first act a broad area is illuminated, but because of the rainy weather it is not so much lighted. It should give the impression that the mist lies heavy over the landscape. In the scene when Oswald talks about his illness with his mother the stage is dimmed. And the spotlights are used on the sofa where these two characters close to each other. By this way the intensity is created on the stage. At the end of the play sun shines. For that impression yellow light is given behind the painted curtain.

1.6. Make-up and Costume

The characters' make-up is not exaggerated so that their mimics and gestures can easily be seen. Besides make-up the costumes generally convey information about the character and aid in setting the tone or mood of the production. (Kocabay, 2008;59). In this performed text the costumes are chosen by regarding the time of the play. It is seen that the costumes are suitable to the characters' social class and personality traits. They also function as character's signature. For instance, Oswald enters the stage with a pipe and hat on his hand which signifies a painter's costume. In the text his physical appearance is given as "a light overcoat, hat in hand, and smoking a large meerschaum" (s.14 Act I). Pipe is an important signifier. It reminds Pastor Manders of Mr. Alving. Oswald's light overcoat contrasts with Pastor Manders' heavy overcoat. This detail is highly symbolic; while Oswald is practically driven crazy by the gloom of the community and natural setting, the Pastor is well adjusted to it.

1.7. Audience

Majority of the audience in Konya are the students of English Language and Literature Department, and Theatre Department of Conservatory. Thus, there is not any language problem on the part of the students to follow the play. Especially the audience's reactions give clue about their understanding. Although it is a tragedy, the audience laughs during several scenes of first act. For instance, they follow the discussion between Oswald and Pastor Manders in silence. But when Mrs. Alving says "You musn't get excited, Oswald. It's not good for you" and Oswald replies as "Yes; you're quite right mother. It's bad for me, I know. You see, I'm wretchedly worn out" the audience laughs at the weakness of Oswald and how he listens to his mother as if he is a little boy. In fact the words 'wretchedly worn out' implies he has a serious illness that is going to be focused on later. The same reaction is seen when Pastor Manders says "When Oswald appeared there, in the doorway, with the pipe in his mouth, I could have sworn I

saw his father, large as life” and Mrs. Alving’s utterance “Oh, how can you say so? Oswald takes after me.” (p.15, Act I). The audience regards Mrs. Alving’s words as a kind of jealousy. In fact she is worried about her son’s future whether he is going to experience the same fate of his father.

The audience also follows the hypocrisy of Engstrand and gullibility of Pastor Manders. They catch the irony in Engstrand’s speech when he is cheating people: “ ‘No’ says I, ‘that’s mammon; that’s the wages of sin. This dirty gold—or notes, or whatever it was—we’ll just flint, that back in the American’s face’ says I. But he was off and away, over the stormy sea, your Reverence. ... So Johanna and I, we agreed that the money should go to the child’s education; and so it did, and I can account for every blessed farthing of it” (p.10, Act II).

It is important to note how Ibsen uses irony and suspense to keep the audience interested in his play. By making the audience privy to various conversations, the audience knows more than any one character. Thus, the audience wonders when a given character will reveal information to another or find out a secret that the audience knows. It can be said for this play that audience gets the irony in the play and gives the right reaction to the characters’ utterances and behaviours. Because in the end they share the sorrows of the characters.

CONCLUSION

Semiotic studies of the art drama concerns communication of the audience, director, actors/actress, designers etc. with the performed text. (Çamurdan,1996;37). Semiotics of the drama is the collaboration of signs such as costum, make up, music, movement, colour, mimics and the meaning that is understood from these signs. (Erkman, 2005; 14). In this essay it is seen that the signs that are used on the stage underline the main theme of the play, *Ghosts*. With costumes, make-up, light, language and set design the play’s world is created successfully. And the actors/actresses achieve to use the signifiers to give the meaning of the text. As a result, the performed text reaches the audience and this means that the audience, actors/actresses and also the director share an experience together. Semiotic study of drama analyses the text according to the scientific terms. It means that creativeness of art and a semiotic approach to drama can enhance its use and open new ways to directors/actors/audience.

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