An Enemy of the People

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HENRIK IBSEN

Born in 1828 to a family of patrician merchants, Henrik Ibsen enjoyed an affluent childhood until he was seven, when his father's business failed. Forced to leave school, Ibsen trained as a pharmacist before moving now Kristiania (now Oslo), attempting and failing to enter the university, and committing himself to writing his first play. Ibsen's first plays gained little attention, but he gained experience by working at a theater as a director and producer. At age thirty Ibsen married Suzannah Thoresen and soon had a son, Sigurd (who eventually became Norway's Prime Minister); frustrated by their financial circumstances, the family moved to Italy, where Ibsen wrote some of his more famous plays, including *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. The family eventually moved to Dresden, Germany, where Ibsen wrote his best-known play, *A Doll's House*, a withering critique of women's subjugation in marriage. Twenty-seven years after his departure, Ibsen returned to Norway as a controversial but respected playwright. He died in Kristiania in 1906.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the Victorian Era (roughly 1837-1901), ideas about the role of literature fundamentally changed. With the industrialization that swept across Europe and America a new middle class arose, access to education increased, and the body of readers expanded to include not just the elites but ordinary people. Because of this, writers who realistically expressed the dramas of daily life and social issues concerning the middle classes – from Jane Austen to George Eliot to Henrik Ibsen – flourished, as did those who used literature to alert the middle classes to the industrial poverty that accompanied their newfound prosperity, like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell. At the same time that authors used literature to shine a light on injustice and examine urgent social issues, strict standards of respectability and morality meant that such work was often criticized or suppressed. Ibsen in particular came under fire for his unflattering portrayals of domestic life; his play *A Doll's House*, in which a wife leaves her husband, was deemed so transgressive that some theaters changed its ending without his permission. Thus, the Victorian era's impact on literature is a two-sided coin: while conservative societies enforced regressive norms of respectability that linger to this day, the now-ubiquitous idea that literature can be used as a tool to expose and correct social problems largely stems from the efforts of pathbreakers during this period.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ibsen is one of the most important dramatists of the modern period, often credited with bringing naturalism and a concern for social issues to the theater. His play *A Doll's House*, currently the most frequently performed play worldwide, portrays a housewife who grows disillusioned with her powerless and degraded position within her marriage. Like *An Enemy of the People*, it expresses great sympathy for the subjugated position of women in Victorian society, and it also examines how political and social developments impact the domestic sphere. *Brand*, one of Ibsen's first plays to gain major recognition, tells the story of a preacher whose obsession with moral purity eventually turns him into a monster; similarly to *An Enemy of the People*, it shows how a well-intentioned pursuit of ideals can go horribly awry.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *An Enemy of the People*
- **When Written:** 1882
- **Where Written:** Dresden, Germany
- **When Published:** 1882
- **Literary Period:** Victorian, Realism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A small town in southern Norway
- **Climax:** Dr. Stockmann's monologue during the public meeting
- **Antagonist:** Peter Stockmann, tyranny of the majority
- **Point of View:** Theater

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Name. After those of Shakespeare, Ibsen's plays are the most commonly performed in the world.

Tongue-tied. While Henrik Ibsen is a Norwegian playwright, he wrote in Danish, which during his era was the shared language of Denmark and Norway.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens in the evening in a small Norwegian town, as various friends and townspeople drop in to visit the local doctor, Dr. Thomas Stockmann, and his wife, Katherine. Billing and Hovstad, the editors of the liberal newspaper the *People's Messenger*, are already there eating when Peter Stockmann, Dr. Stockmann's brother and the town's mayor, arrives. A

conservative and traditional man, Peter resists Katherine's offers of food and takes his brother aside for a stiff discussion of the town's new **bathing complex**, which both men have helped to construct and which is expected to be a much-needed boost to the town's economy. Peter Stockmann criticizes his brother for his freethinking and sometimes impetuous behavior on the baths committee, but Dr. Stockmann waves away his remarks, saying that they're both working for the good of the community. As the mayor leaves Captain Horster, a sailor recently returned from his last voyage, arrives to share a pipe with the doctor.

Everyone is chatting until Petra, Dr. Stockmann's adult daughter, arrives home from her job as a schoolteacher with a letter for her father. Dr. Stockmann reads the letter and becomes very agitated, since it contains the results of an investigation he privately conducted into the quality of the new baths; he's discovered that they are actually full of poisonous bacteria from nearby tanneries, and therefore harmful to people. Dr. Stockmann immediately sends the report to his brother, saying that he will make the findings public and advocate for the baths to be repaired. Hovstad and Billing congratulate him on saving the town from catastrophe and predict that he will be regarded as a hero.

The next morning, Katherine and Dr. Stockmann discuss the curt note that Peter has sent in response to the report. Katherine warns him to be diplomatic with Peter and points out that the baths committee may not welcome Dr. Stockmann's findings and suggestion of expensive repairs, but he shrugs off her advice, saying that the mayor is just jealous that he didn't make the major discovery first. Having heard the news around town, Katherine's father Morten Kiil drops by to ask Dr. Stockmann about his findings, but since he doesn't understand or believe in bacteria he thinks that his son-in-law is playing an elaborate prank and laughs at him.

Next to visit is Hovstad, who ask Dr. Stockman for permission to publish his findings in the *People's Messenger*. He says that the problems with the baths are symbolic of the conservative authorities and their corruption, and that bringing them to light will show people the truth. Dr. Stockmann is taken aback by the idea of attacking the authorities, but just then Mr. Aslaksen, the newspaper's publisher and head of the Householders' Association, arrives to commend Dr. Stockmann on his discovery. He assures him that the majority of the town's citizens will support him and even revere him as a hero. Dr. Stockmann feels pleased and excited in anticipation of this public regard, but he won't agree to publish until he speaks with his brother.

Soon after, Peter Stockmann arrives. He reprimands Dr. Stockmann for undertaking his investigation alone, without the approval of the committee, and says that he doesn't believe in the veracity of his findings. Moreover, it would be disastrous to the town's economy to overhaul the baths now; the only thing they can do is gradually make repairs over a period of years. He also criticizes his brother personally for his individualism, saying that as member of the baths committee he doesn't have the right to his own opinions. Peter demands that Dr. Stockmann publicly disown his investigations, but Dr. Stockmann refuses and impetuously announces that he will publish his findings in the *People's Messenger*. After Peter storms out, Katherine consoles her husband but warns him that standing by his ideas could get him fired, and reminds him to think of his obligations to provide for his family.

In the offices of the *People's Messenger*, Billing and Hovstad are editing the essay Dr. Stockmann has written; they are excited that this news might turn the people's allegiance towards the Liberal party. Mr. Aslaksen, a man who values "moderation" above all, warns them to confine their report to the baths, rather than ranging farther afield and upsetting the authorities. Hovstad and Billing criticize him for his timidity. Soon after, Petra arrives. Hovstad has asked her to translate an English novel for publication in the newspaper, but after reading the book she refuses in disgust, as its moralizing tone conflicts with her beliefs and those of the newspaper. Hovstad tries to placate her by saying that such sentimental stories are necessary to entice people to read the newspaper's more radical pieces, but Petra is incensed by what she sees as an act of trickery, and fears that a publication with such lax morals will not support her father.

After Petra leaves, Peter Stockmann arrives. He confronts Hovstad and Billing about their decision to print the article, saying that the townspeople will have to pay for any potential repairs to the baths through additional taxes, and that the town will be ruined financially if the baths close. Mr. Aslaksen and the newspapermen are aghast and immediately decide against supporting a discovery that will be so unpopular. Just as Peter is giving them an alternative statement to publish, Dr. Stockmann arrives to check on the status of his piece; he's oblivious to the other men's obvious unease, and it's only when Katherine arrives and accuses the newspapermen of exploiting her husband that Peter's presence is revealed and the doctor realizes he's been betrayed. He erupts against the men, saying that as the bearer of truth he won't be silenced. Meanwhile, Katherine vows to stand by him, despite the detriment to her family's security.

Dr. Stockmann calls a public meeting in Captain Horster's house. A group of rowdy citizens arrive; they've already decided to support Peter Stockmann, because the *People's Messenger* and Mr. Aslaksen are on his side. Dr. Stockmann tries to address the crowd, but Mr. Aslaksen suggests that the crowd choose a chairman first. As the chairman of the Householder's Association, he is easily elected, and he and Peter Stockmann lead the crowd in voting on motions to prevent Dr. Stockmann from speaking. From the crowd, Billing and Hovstad call out in support, smearing Dr. Stockmann's character and disowning

him as a friend.

Completely enraged, Dr. Stockmann shouts over the other men, saying that the true discovery he's made in the past days is that the majority of people are ill-equipped and undeserving to have a hand in government. He argues that most men are like dogs, while only some have the intelligence to lead others and make decisions; a society should identify these intelligent men and give them power, whether they are born into the upper or lower classes. The crowd is offended and angry; led by Peter and Mr. Aslaksen, they vote to declare Dr. Stockmann "an enemy of the people," and the entire Stockmann family has to leave the hall amid taunts and jeers.

In the morning, Dr. Stockmann and Katherine survey their windows, which have all been smashed during the night. They receive a letter from the landlord ordering them to leave the property because they are held in such negative public opinion. Petra soon arrives home, having been fired from her job for the same reason. Even Captain Horster has lost his place on the next sea voyage for hosting the meeting.

Soon Morten Kiil arrives and reveals to Dr. Stockmann that he has spent all the money he planned to leave to Katherine and his grandchildren on shares in the bath stocks. The shares will be worthless if Dr. Stockmann continues on his campaign, but if he retracts his discoveries they will make the whole family rich. It turns out that Morten owns one of the tanneries responsible for water contamination, and he is so determined to preserve his business's reputation that he tries to blackmail his son-in-law into saving it. Dr. Stockmann is briefly tempted, but ultimately rebuffs the offer. As he leaves, Mr. Aslaksen, Billing, and Hovstad arrive; they've heard about Morten's activities and assume that the whole discovery was actually a plot to allow the Stockmanns to buy stock in the baths at a low price. Believing that Dr. Stockmann is now wealthy, they offer to rehabilitate his reputation in the newspaper in exchange for financial support. Dr. Stockmann realizes that the newspaper is completely corrupt and self-serving, and throws the men out of the house.

The family doesn't know where to live or what to do, but Captain Horster – the only townsperson to stand by them – offers them the use of his house. Dr. Stockmann vows to recruit young children and start a school to educate them according to his own social principles and raise exceptional young men to change the world. Petra vows to help him. As the final act ends, Dr. Stockmann gathers his wife and children around him and declares that "the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Thomas Stockmann – The play's protagonist, a doctor in a small Norwegian town. Often impetuous and charming, Dr. Stockmann is an affectionate husband to Katherine, and father to Petra, Morten, and Ejlif. He also has a strong sense of public duty – he both planned the newly-constructed **baths** as a way to bring prosperity to his hometown, and exposes dangerous water contamination when it arises. Over the course of the play he stands up for the right to freedom of speech and illuminates the plight of idealistic individuals struggling against wrong-minded or selfish majorities. However, his idealism often slips into egotism. Dr. Stockmann is unwilling to accept challenges to his ideas, dismissing them as attacks on his individual rights, and his conviction that he is a visionary makes him blind to others' perspectives, susceptible to flattery, and easy to trick. He sees his wife and adult daughter as helpers confined to the domestic sphere, but their greater humility makes them better thinkers and often forces them to save Dr. Stockmann from his own errors. By the end of the novel, Dr. Stockmann has become a pariah in his town and vows to set up a school where he will impart his principles onto a new generation of young men; but by this point, it's unclear if his principles are worth following.

Katherine Stockmann – Dr. Stockmann's wife and mother to Petra, Morten, and Ejlif. Katherine is usually shown within the home, performing domestic tasks and catering to her husband and children's needs; this depiction characterizes her as a woman primarily concerned with the security and well-being of her family. Because her husband's political crusade jeopardizes those objectives, she's often doubtful and hesitant to support him, reminding him to his annoyance that pursuing his ideals will irreparably harm his family. Yet she's also often cannier than he is, seeing the importance of diplomacy when her husband dismisses it and realizing before he does the hypocrisy of the newspaper staff. Despite this, she ultimately stands by him publicly even though it's she, attached to his fortunes with no way of supporting herself, who has the most to lose. Dr. Stockmann often sees his wife as a narrow-minded hindrance to his individual goals, but the play shows her as a woman who transcends the social mandate that she restrict herself to the domestic sphere to show serious commitment to a set of ideals. Ultimately, Katherine's blend of principles and practicality emerges as the most sincere activism in the play.

Petra Stockmann – Dr. Stockmann's adult daughter, a schoolteacher who is eventually fired for supporting her father's ideas. Like Dr. Stockmann, Petra is a freethinker with a rigorous notion of truth: early in the play she laments that her job forces her to teach schoolchildren conservative ideas that she does not believe in, and she falls out with Hovstad after discovering that he plans to publish a moralistic novel simply to increase newspaper sales. In comparison with her mother, Petra exemplifies changing norms and opportunities for women: while Katherine is a housewife who ventures into public life only reluctantly, Petra demonstrates a high level of independence, voices her ideas and interacts with men freely,

and supports herself. These factors make her more able and willing to unequivocally support her father's ideas, while her mother's social conditioning and financial status prevents her from doing so. Yet Katherine and Petra are also alike in their innate sense of loyalty and their ability to see through the hypocrisy of others. At the end of the novel, Petra vows to help her father in the new school he plans to establish, simultaneously adopting a position of some authority and committing herself to supporting the goals of the dominant man in her life. This outcome demonstrates the new possibilities and old limitations that exist for women of Petra's generation.

Peter Stockmann – Dr. Stockmann's brother, the town mayor, and one of the play's major antagonists. The town's scion of conservatism, Peter uses his power to uphold traditional norms at all costs; he's actually a canny politician adept at using the power of the majority to advance the interests of the wealthy elite. Even at the beginning of the play, the brothers' strained relationship is illuminated by their inability to work together on the **baths**; Peter accuses his brother of taking more than his share of credit for their inception, while Dr. Stockmann is pleased about his discovery of contamination partly because it proves him right in an earlier quarrel with Peter. In order to save his own reputation and the money of those who have invested in the baths, Peter quickly turns on Dr. Stockmann, engineering not just the defeat of his ideas but his social humiliation. His behavior indicates the corruption and greed of those who have traditionally held power but, contrary to Dr. Stockmann's frequent assertions, it doesn't prove his own stupidity; in fact, he's often much wiser than his brother and easily outmaneuvers him. At the end of the play, Peter secures his political victory but emerges as morally bankrupt.

Morten Kiil – Katherine's father, an enigmatic tannery owner. At first, Morten seems to be a harmless old trickster with a liking for chaos and social upset; while he doesn't understand the concept of bacteria and so doesn't take seriously Dr. Stockmann's findings of water contamination in the **baths**, he thinks the report is a good prank and encourages his son-in-law to frighten those in power. But when Dr. Stockmann implicates his own tannery in the contamination Morten turns on him, using the money he planned to leave Katherine to buy shares in the baths and hoping that his son-in-law will retract his findings in order to make the shares valuable again. Through these actions, Morten demonstrates that he has no true sense of obligation to his family or society and no concerns except for his own social status. Morten is an amoral character, but his obsession with his reputation above all paradoxically contributes to Dr. Stockmann's obsession with his individual rights. While the two men live according to different moral paradigms, their more destructive qualities are ironically similar.

Hovstad – The editor of the town's liberal newspaper, *The People's Messenger*, and Dr. Stockmann's onetime friend. From a humble background but now an educated professional, Hovstad cultivates a reputation as the town's liberal voice and dreams of starting a "revolution." At first he seems to have genuine ideological convictions, and his offer to publish Dr. Stockmann's controversial findings seems courageous; however, it soon becomes apparent that he wants to use the report to help his own political party, rather than effect real social change. Moreover, he immediately turns on Dr. Stockmann when Peter shows him how unpopular his ideas are going to be with the public. Hovstad changes his beliefs, and the opinions of his newspaper, whenever public opinion changes; this trend not only demonstrates his personal hypocrisy but suggests that media can never be an impartial commentator on political events.

Billing – The sub-editor of the town's liberal newspaper, *The People's Messenger*. Billing parrots Hovstad's ideas but seems to have few opinions of his own. While he claims to be a radical progressive and criticizes others like Mr. Aslaksen for their conservatism, it's eventually revealed that he himself has applied for a job within the local government he supposedly reviles. This hypocrisy helps prove that media like newspapers are too dependent on the communities they critique to be an impartial voice for justice.

Captain Horster – A sea captain and stalwart friend of the Stockmann family. Rarely at home due to his occupation, he has little involvement in local government and claims to have no particular political ideas. However, he's also Dr. Stockmann's most loyal supporter, standing by him even when it costs him a commission on a ship and emerging as a foil to characters like Hovstad who claim to be driven by strong principles but actually change their beliefs to match fickle public opinion. Captain Horster's refusal to vote or involve himself in political battles supports Dr. Stockmann's belief that people without knowledge, whether they come from the upper or lower classes, shouldn't have a voice in public life.

Mr. Aslaksen – The wealthy publisher of the *People's Messenger* and head of two important town organizations: the Householders' Association and the Temperance Society. A timid and nervous man, Mr. Aslaksen lives by "moderation" and encourages those around him to do the same; in practice, this means that he never challenges the status quo unless it seems politically profitable to do so. As a leader of two citizen organization, Mr. Aslaksen considers himself a voice of the common people, yet he's also an ally of Peter Stockmann in defending the interests of the rich. In this sense, he's emblematic of the combination of majoritarian tyranny and elite control that plagues the town.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Morten Stockmann – Dr. Stockmann's young son. At the end of

the play, Dr. Stockmann decides to educate Morten and his brother, Ejlif, according to his own principles so that they can lead a new generation of independent and politically righteous men.

Ejlif Stockmann – Dr. Stockmann's young son. At the end of the play, Dr. Stockmann decides to educate Ejlif and his brother, Morten, according to his own principles so that they can lead a new generation of independent and politically righteous men.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POWER AND PUBLIC OPINION

In *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann, a small-town doctor in Norway, faces the consequences of negative public opinion after discovering water contamination in the town's newly-constructed public **baths**. The town prides itself on its democratic principles, but in fact the excessive power of public opinion means that Dr. Stockmann is ostracized and abused simply for making an unpleasant discovery. At the same time, it becomes increasingly clear that the town's wealthy leaders, like Dr. Stockmann's brother Peter and Mr. Aslaksen, are exploiting majoritarian rule to keep the townspeople happy while furthering their own interests, frequently using the democratic processes to maintain their own power. Although the town is purportedly a just democracy, it's actually governed by the tyrannical impulses of both the majority and the elite. With this, Ibsen suggests that people should remain skeptical of government, even if the system claims to be entirely democratic and fair.

For much of the play, it seems that public opinion has a stranglehold on the town. Dr. Stockmann's ideas are evaluated not on their merit, but on their popularity with the public. Acknowledging water contamination would require the town to close the health spa and forfeit the income it would bring in, so the townspeople simply decide that he is lying. They vote to disregard his findings and to declare the doctor "an enemy of the people." Not only have the townspeople opted to continue poisoning visitors to the health spa, but Dr. Stockmann loses his standing in the town as well—not because he did something wrong, but because he failed to appeal to the public's self-interest.

As public outrage with Dr. Stockmann builds, friends like the newspapermen Hovstad and Billing break away from him and publicly disparage his character. Public opinion also upends professional lives: after voicing his ideas, Dr. Stockmann loses all his patients and his daughter Petra is fired from her job as a schoolteacher, while Captain Horster (who publicly supported the family) loses his place on an upcoming sea voyage. Expressed through formal mechanisms like voting and informal social compulsion, public opinion prevents the resolution of a serious social issue and unjustly robs the Stockmann family of its position within society. It is clear that the public majority has a dangerously powerful influence on the town's politics and daily life.

This state of affairs is complicated by the town's wealthy leaders, who exploit majoritarian politics to consolidate power and resources in their own hands. Peter Stockmann, the town's wily mayor, insists that it's up to the majority to decide what to do about Dr. Stockmann's findings. But he also stipulates that the townspeople will be taxed to pay for any repairs to the baths, knowing that this will turn public opinion against Dr. Stockmann. In doing so, he pretends to respect majority rule while also avoiding any personal consequences for the scandal. Peter knows that the townspeople are unable to pressure the bath's wealthy owners to pay for the repairs, showing that the majority can't actually use their democratic powers to hold the wealthy to account.

Peter and Mr. Aslaksen use ostensibly democratic processes to increase their own power. When Dr. Stockmann calls a public meeting, they behave with extreme deference to the rowdy townspeople, who then elect them as "chairmen" of the meeting; in this position, they can "legally" forbid Dr. Stockmann from speaking. While it seems they are fulfilling the will of the people, in fact the people are enabling the mayor and other leaders to further their own interests. At the end of the play, the spa's owners have evaded any responsibility for the safety of the baths, while townspeople and visitors will continue to be poisoned by bacteria-infested water. In this sense, majority rule fails to give the citizens any clout against the elites who control the town.

While Ibsen's critique of the town leaders' conservative and self-interested governance is fairly typical, he goes on to question the idea of majority rule on which modern democracies are based. His depiction of a town thrown into chaos by majoritarian politics gone too far suggests disbelief in the idea, emerging in his time and widespread now, that democracy is the most just and effective form of government—at least, not without protections against the tyranny of the majority.

TRUTH AND THE MEDIA

In *An Enemy of the People*, a small-town doctor attempts to warn the public about water contamination in a newly constructed **health spa** through the *People's Messenger*, the town's liberal newspaper. Dr. Stockmann is at first close to the *Messenger*'s editors,

Hovstad and Billing, and views the newspaper as a beacon of transparency and progress in his traditional town. It's soon clear that this belief is mistaken, however—Hovstad and Billing slant all their coverage to encourage the public to adopt their convictions, but they're also incapable of sticking to those convictions in times of crisis, because they depend on public opinion for their livelihood. By the end of the play, as Hovstad and Billing openly discuss their intention to manipulate the truth for their own ends, the *Messenger* emerges a source (rather than a cure) for the town's corruption. Ultimately, Ibsen sharply critiques the media, arguing that its own self-interest and dependence on public opinion prevent it from being a vehicle for truth and social progress.

Initially, the newspaper seems to be a liberal voice advocating for an egalitarian and transparent government.. As the play opens, Hovstad and Billing gather at Dr. Stockmann's house to talk about politics and progress. When Dr. Stockmann's brother Peter drops in, he's displeased to see them; that they've earned the disapproval of the pompous and stodgy mayor seems to be in their favor. When Dr. Stockmann reveals his scientific discovery to the newspapermen, they immediately offer to publish it. Hovstad even makes the connection between the contaminated water and the larger problem of town elites making decisions without consideration for public health.

But in private, Hovstad and Billing's conversations tells a different story. Both men rejoice that the upcoming story will give the Liberal party a political boost. They're more interested in making a political ploy than bringing important information to the public or presenting an impartial view of current events. Both Hovstad and Billing see themselves as more courageous and freethinking than the newspaper's publisher, Mr. Aslaksen, an excessively prudent man who prides himself on his "moderation" and respect for the authorities. Yet, because Mr. Aslaksen supports the paper financially, they're obligated to represent his views. This is a glimpse at one of the many factors besides genuine concern for the truth at play in the paper. Moreover, when Hovstad and Billing take issue with Mr. Aslaksen's views, the publisher reminds them that the newspaper's previous editor now works for the government and points out that Billing himself is applying for a government job. Ironically, it's one of the town's more conservative citizens who reminds the newspapermen that they're hardly the truth-telling radicals they purport to be.

As the play progresses, it emerges that Hovstad and Billing frequently use the newspaper to manipulate the truth, and even to craft new versions of it altogether. Petra is the first to catch them in the act. They've asked her to translate an English novel for serial publication in the paper, but once she reads the novel, she's disgusted that it gives a sentimental and moralizing view of life—one which, she points out, "conflicts" with all the political opinions expressed in the paper. Hovstad explains that the unrealistic stories are necessary to draw in readers, but Petra is disturbed that the newspaper resorts to tricks, and her discovery undermines the reader or audience's faith in its good intentions.

Proving Petra correct in her disapproval, as soon as Peter Stockmann reveals his plan to pay for repairs to the baths by taxing the townspeople, Hovstad and Billing abandon their plans to support the doctor. They print Peter's version of the facts instead, choosing to misrepresent the truth in order to retain their readership. Unlike their previous, smaller falsehoods, this lie doesn't even aim to further a political goal, but rather to ensure the success the newspaper and its editors personally. By the time Dr. Stockmann calls his public meeting, Hovstad and Billing have unequivocally taken the mayor's side and inflame the crowd by falsely characterizing Dr. Stockmann as an insane radical.

Soon after the meeting, Hovstad and Billing form the mistaken impression that Dr. Stockmann and his father-in-law, Morten Kiil, have made up the water contamination in order to undermine confidence in the baths and buy stocks cheaply. Believing Dr. Stockmann to be in control of the baths, the newspapermen openly offer to fabricate a new version of recent events that will restore his reputation and prominence—in exchange for ignoring the very real problems with the baths. At this point, Dr. Stockmann and the reader/audience realize that the newspaper is the antithesis of truth, working to exacerbate social problems rather than solve them.

Ibsen uses this scenario to argue that, because they are influenced by so many self-interested parties and their own financial needs, the media (particularly newspapers) cannot be effective stewards of truth. Every disingenuous decision Hovstad and Billing make is prompted by the necessity of placating someone who might hurt the newspaper. The newspapermen have to keep the support of the elites: they accommodate Aslaksen because of his financial contributions, and they can't take a stand against Peter Stockmann because he controls the town's political scene. On the other hand, they can't afford to alienate the base of readers who buy the paper, so it's impossible for them to contradict public opinion. In fact, the media reflects the general state of affairs in the town. Majority opinion and elite interests have too much sway in determining its coverage, just as they control local politics and government.

While the *People's Messenger* initially appears to be an idealistic force for good, by the end of the play it's revealed as a control-seeking vendor of lies. Ultimately, the play suggests that newspapers are too self-interested and entrenched in their communities to critique them impartially or successfully.

WOMEN, FAMILY, AND DUTY

Chronicling Dr. Stockmann's quest to solve an injustice in his town, *An Enemy of the People*

examines the role of women in such crusades and asks if activism can coexist with familial duty. While Dr. Stockmann publicizes his findings about the **baths** without thinking about the repercussions for him or his family, other men frequently reproach him for putting his ideals above his obligation to provide for his family, assuming that his wife, Katherine, and daughter, Petra, can't appreciate or participate in his campaign. However, not only are Katherine and Petra his staunchest supporters, they're actually better at furthering his ideological aims and planning for ensuing backlash than he is himself. Ultimately, it's the women who demonstrate both a sincere commitment to ideals and the ability to handle the practical consequences of living by them, thus emerging as the play's real activists and demonstrating the supportive and influential public roles that women can occupy beyond the domestic sphere.

The constant criticism Dr. Stockmann faces for putting his ideals over his family obligations creates a false opposition between the activist and the domestic, traditionally feminine sphere. Trying to bully Dr. Stockmann out of publishing his findings, his brother Peter argues that, regardless of the veracity of his ideas, he must put them aside because if he voices an unpopular opinion he won't be able to support his family. Similarly, at the public meeting, Hovstad says that Stockmann has failed his wife and children because his activism threatens his ability to provide for them. These men's comments suggest that the only thing women value is economic security, and that they are incapable of appreciating or participating in an activist campaign.

In fact, the play's women are more supportive than any of Dr. Stockmann's professed male allies, and much better at advancing his agenda than Stockmann himself. Even though their financial security is at stake, Petra and Katherine stand by Dr. Stockmann publicly, demonstrating a commitment to his ideals much stronger than characters like Hovstad or Billing, who can provide for themselves yet quickly desert the doctor. At the public meeting, the women's loyal and encouraging behavior contrasts with the newspapermen's total betrayal, showing that the women are much more prepared to face the consequences of activism than these self-professed idealists.

While Dr. Stockmann undertakes his crusade with a great deal of naïveté, assuming that everyone around him will instantly understand and accept his ideas, the women display much more prudence and finesse. Understanding that Peter Stockmann feels undervalued and disrespected by his brother, Katherine quietly urges her husband to be more diplomatic with the mayor; she's also the first to express doubt that the spa's owners will enthusiastically accept his recommendation of expensive repairs, showing that she can be savvy and engaged in public life. Just as her mother is alert to possible problems before Dr. Stockmann, Petra discovers Hovstad and Billing's hypocrisy long before her father does, when they ask her to translate a popular novel that conflicts with their ideals. It's only when prodded by his wife and daughter that Dr. Stockmann actually evaluates the men in whom he's put his trust.

As they face social exclusion and even physical attacks at the end of the play, the women's calm efforts to uphold family life while remaining true to their ideals emerges as the most genuine display of activism. Disillusioned by the disastrous public meeting, Dr. Stockmann takes refuge in his disdain for society and the sanctity of ideals, leaving Katherine to handle the practical consequences of his actions. While he stomps around the house, looking at stones that unruly boys have thrown inside, it's she who cleans up and finds a handyman to fix the broken windows.

In the last scene, Dr. Stockmann decides to start a school in which he will educate children to live according to his ideas of truth and individualism. His daughter Petra, who has been fired from her job as a schoolteacher, vows to help him, and he breezily tells Katherine that she'll "have to scrimp and save" in order to run a house on whatever meager income he brings in. In this sense, the women merge their traditional duties with new roles as activists, despite the prevailing view that these spheres are inherently opposed. The women end the play as Dr. Stockmann's partners in activism; however, it's important to note that he includes them not out of any particularly egalitarian feelings about women, but because he can't function without their help.

Dr. Stockmann emerges from his trials without sacrificing his ideals, but this moral victory is entirely dependent on the practical women around him, who are able to forge a life within a society that is hostile to their ideals. Through Katherine and Petra, the play challenges the idea that women and the domestic sphere have no place in activist campaigns, reminding readers that the task of learning to *live* by powerful ideas, though less glamorous, is even more important than simply voicing them publicly.

INDIVIDUALISM VS. AUTHORITY

In *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann has to decide whether to obey the town authorities who want him to suppress findings of water contamination, or follow his own instincts regardless of their desires. Through the character of Peter Stockmann, who invokes reverence for the government as a way to stifle progress and increase his own power, the play argues against blindly respecting authority without questioning its aims. But while Dr. Stockmann is clearly right in making his findings public, his increasing preoccupation with freedom of expression seems to stem not from his moral convictions but from a desire to vindicate himself. Ultimately, while the novel champions individual rights, it warns that individualism can easily transform into egoism.

By showing how Dr. Stockmann's brother, Peter, uses respect for authority to impede change and promote his own interests, the play voices support for individual rights. One of Peter's few comic attributes is his insistence on conventionality. For him, the words "independent" and "freethinking" are serious insults, which he uses to criticize his brother's decision to present his findings to the public without consulting his bosses at the **baths**. More seriously, he argues that because Dr. Stockmann is an employee of the baths, he has no right to personal opinions but must defer to his superiors "for the good of the community." For him, as for other town leaders like Mr. Aslaksen, living in a society means forfeiting individual rights like freedom of expression.

While Peter makes a virtue out of obeying the authorities, it's clear that as an authority himself he has his own good in mind. Suppressing Dr. Stockmann's discovery helps him and the other stakeholders in the baths, while allowing townspeople and visitors to be poisoned by contaminated water. By demonstrating that Dr. Stockmann's individualism is aligned with truth and progress while Peter Stockmann's obsession with authority is a cover for his own shady dealings, the play argues that respect for individualism is necessary on a personal and social level.

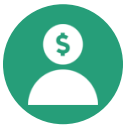
Dr. Stockmann is well-intentioned in bringing forth his findings, and his desire to speak his mind is sympathetic, but over the course of the play it becomes clear that his emphasis on individuality is more about being right than about standing by moral convictions. Peter's attempt to suppress the news is morally odious, but he is right when he points out that expensive repairs to the baths could bankrupt the town. Dr. Stockmann doesn't have any plan to address this problem, and the looming catastrophe doesn't bother him. He's much more interested in achieving an intellectual victory and personal acclaim, anticipating that the townspeople will venerate him as a savior and daydreaming about an increase in his salary.

Dr. Stockmann is similarly unrealistic and unpractical when it comes to the consequences of his actions on his family. His wife, Katherine, faithfully stands by him, but she points out that he won't be able to provide for their children if he becomes a social pariah. He responds by saying that he wants "to have the right to look my sons in the face when they are grown men," voicing concern for his own pride as a father rather than the actual needs of his children. In both of these moments, Dr. Stockmann's insistence on sticking to the unpopular ideas he knows to be right is admirable, but his disregard for the rights and concerns of others means that his individualism borders on egoism.

Although Morten Kiil, Dr. Stockmann's father-in-law, eventually emerges as his greatest betrayer, their brands of individualism actually make them similar. Morten Kiil owns one of the tanneries that Dr. Stockmann accuses of contaminating the town's water. In order to avoid responsibility, he uses the money he's promised leave his daughter and grandchildren to buy shares in the baths, hoping to blackmail Dr. Stockmann into retracting his discovery and making the baths profitable again.

Explaining what he's done to his appalled son-in-law, Morten says that he plans to "live and die clean," language that is remarkably similar to Stockmann's professed refusal to "defile himself with filth" by being party to a lie. Moreover, Morten's determination to save his reputation makes him disregard the people for whom he's supposed to provide—Katherine and her children—just as Dr. Stockmann's individualism makes him blind to his family's situation. Dr. Stockman's similarity to Morten points out that for him, individualism doesn't just mean sticking to his ideals but protecting the purity of his name and reputation at all costs—a goal that sometimes makes him self-centered and blind to the needs of others.

An Enemy of the People champions the importance of individual rights, especially the freedom to express an unpopular opinion. However, it also warns that individualism and egoism can easily blend together.



CLASS SYSTEMS

An Enemy of the People describes Dr. Stockmann's failed attempt to address water contamination in his small town, raising the question of who should have the power to effect or stifle social change. The play critiques the town's upper class, showing that leaders fail to act on Dr. Stockmann's findings because doing so would require them to forfeit some of their money and power. But it also casts doubt on ordinary citizens' ability to govern themselves, painting the townspeople as coarse and brutish and suggesting that they are ill-equipped to consider moral or intellectual dilemmas. Ultimately, Dr. Stockmann argues that power should be concentrated in the hands of the most intelligent men, envisioning an intellectual meritocracy to replace traditional class systems and majority rule—however, the play also shows that his idea is certainly not without its flaws.

Before presenting his findings to the townspeople, Dr. Stockmann takes a hopeful and idealistic view of their character and their ability to address his findings. When Mr. Aslaksen promises him the support of the Small Householders' Association, he rejoices to have the "compact majority" on his side. Similarly, his choice to publish his discovery in the newspaper shows his desire to appeal to each citizen on a personal level, and his belief that ordinary people can and should have a role in public decision-making. Hovstad praises Dr. Stockmann's article by saying that, "one need have no special knowledge to understand the bearing of it," evincing their mutual belief that although the lower classes may not be educated, they are thoughtful and rational readers and voters. Both Dr. Stockmann and his initial allies at the newspaper hope that by engaging the sympathies of the common people, they can circumvent the town's upper class, which governs through

corruption and self-interest.

At the public meeting called by Dr. Stockmann—the only moment when members of the lower class actually appear—the play challenges his previous beliefs by characterizing the townspeople as unintelligent and neither able nor worthy of having a role in public life. The scene begins with rough and drunken men flooding the meeting hall, bragging that they've brought whistles and other instruments with which to disrupt the proceedings. None of them seems to know or care what the meeting is about, and they take their political positions from Mr. Aslaksen without considering any of the ideas at hand. During the meeting, they support Peter Stockmann and Mr. Aslaksen, who appeal to their pride and self-interest, rather than Dr. Stockmann, who wants them to consider ideas and ethics. Through moments like this, the play argues that rather than being enlightened citizens, the townspeople are solely considered with validating themselves (just like the selfish upper-class characters).

Dr. Stockmann is so appalled by the contrast between his previous beliefs and his actual reception by the villagers that he condemns them in a long monologue. Not only does he say that majority rule can often lead to political injustice, he criticizes the character and intelligence of the villagers, comparing them to poorly-bred animals and saying that it's a "social lie" that "the stupid folk should govern the clever ones" or that the majority of people deserve a voice in public life.

Disillusioned with traditional class systems and majority rule, Dr. Stockmann envisions an intellectual meritocracy to replace it. While his ideas suggest a new way forward for a town plagued by political malaise, they also have troubling social implications. Dr. Stockmann argues that, regardless of whether they are born into the upper or lower class, some men are naturally more intelligent than the rest. He believes that these men should be elevated and given power over society while the rest, regardless of their class status at birth, should be denied that power.

While Dr. Stockmann's belief that people should gain power through merit and intelligence is sympathetic, the language he uses is troubling. He compares the majority of unintelligent people to "cur-men" descended from an "ill-bred strain of animals," while the intelligent elite are well-bred "poodle-men." His invocation of breeding contrasts his previous statement that worthy men can arise from any rank, suggesting that certain people are more intelligent precisely *because* of their breeding. The comparison of people to animals and the belief that they should derive their rights and even humanity from the "breed" belong to has long underpinned racist, eugenicist, and fascist movements (most infamously in the 20th century, after Ibsen's death, but also during the time of his writing). Dr. Stockmann's line of thought here seriously undermines his overall belief in a meritocratic society. It's also notable that Dr. Stockmann's opinion of the common people changes only when they reject his ideas, and that his ideal society is one that puts men like him—self-proclaimed intellectuals—at the top of the social totem pole. Just like the upper and lower classes whom he derides, Dr. Stockmann wants his society to reflect his own interests first.

An *Enemy of the People* vacillates between a progressive distrust of the upper class and a conservative skepticism of ordinary people's ability to govern. While Dr. Stockmann envisions a new class system to replace the two flawed ones dominating his town, it's unclear if his rather egotistical proposal would actually lead to a more just society, or merely a new form of corruption and oppression.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BATHS

An Enemy of the People portrays a Norwegian town that has just built, at great expense, a complex of baths that will attract visitors and invalids (at the time, thermal baths were thought to cure a variety of illnesses) and turn the town into a wealthy tourist destination. In the play's first scene, Dr. Thomas Stockmann discovers that the water in the baths is fundamentally contaminated by chemicals from nearby tanneries. At first, this seems to be a purely scientific problem, easily fixed by repairs. However, as the baths are so firmly linked with the town's collective goals and hopes for itself, this contamination becomes an indication of public character. Dr. Stockmann finds that those around him are hostile to his findings and indeed willing to let visitors be poisoned in order to preserve the town's money-making enterprise; these people, he decides, are as corrupt as the water he's studied. At the end of the play, Dr. Stockmann announces that his scientific discovery was only the prelude to a more important moral one, that the unfettered power of the majority is the source of all social contamination. In his words, the baths become a physical symbol of what he sees as the town's moral lapses.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *An Enemy of the People* published in 2012.

Act I Quotes

Peter Stockmann (lowering his voice a little): It is a curious thing that these farmers' sons never seem to lose their want of tact.

Mrs. Stockmann: Surely it is not worth bothering about! Cannot you and Thomas share the credit as brothers?

Related Characters: Katherine Stockmann, Peter Stockmann (speaker), Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Hovstad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the play's first scene, Katherine tries to mediate a chilly discussion between Peter Stockmann, the mayor, and Hovstad, editor of the *People's Messenger*. Peter has taken umbrage at Hovstad's claim that Dr. Stockmann is primarily responsible for the town's recently-built baths, believing that he himself deserves more credit than he's given. It's important that he frames Hovstad's remark not as a difference of opinion but as a "want of tact," or lack of adherence to norms of civility—one of the many kinds of authority to which Peter insists others should submit. Peter is using deference to authority in order to delegitimize those who don't agree with him—a tactic on which he'll rely throughout the play.

It's also notable that Katherine promotes diplomacy and encourages Peter to see the baths as a shared effort. This demonstrates an understanding of Peter's psychology and political motives which her husband (who refuses to placate Peter's ego even when doing so could work to his advantage) notably lacks.

Peter Stockmann: You have an ingrained tendency to take your own way, at all events; and that is almost equally inadmissible in a well-ordered community. The individual ought undoubtedly to acquiesce in subordinating himself to the community – or, to speak more accurately, to the authorities who have the care of the community's welfare.

Related Characters: Katherine Stockmann, Peter Stockmann (speaker), Dr. Thomas Stockmann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Just after Dr. Stockmann tells his brother that he's been performing an investigation of the baths but refuses to reveal the content of that investigation, Peter chastises him for undertaking projects without permission. He uses attributes that are positive (or at least morally neutral)—like independence or "taking one's own way"—as insults, establishing himself as a caricature of pompous democracy and making his comments, on the surface, quite funny. But these remarks preface what is actually a frightening belief, that an individual should always "subordinate itself to the community." Through this passage, Ibsen shows that conventional and thoughtless adherence to social norms promotes authoritarian modes of government. This is especially true because Peter's last comment, which conflates his own authority as mayor with "the community's welfare" shows that he wants people to submit not just to authority in general but him in particular. Moments like this make the reader sympathetic to Dr. Stockmann's claims about the primacy of individual freedoms.

Petra: There is so much falsehood both at home and at school. At home one must not speak, and at school we have to stand and tell lies to the children.

Related Characters: Petra Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Petra arrives home from her job as a schoolteacher to find her father and his friends from the *People's Messenger* sharing a drink. When they ask about her work, she complains that she often feels disingenuous when she instills in her students certain social norms with which she herself does not agree – such as the principle her younger brother learns from his teacher, that work is a punishment reserved for the wicked. Petra's emphasis on telling the truth will establish her as a contrast to the newspapermen Hovstad and Billing, who change facts and their own beliefs along with political circumstances. Her principles align her with her father, Dr. Stockmann, who will give up his privileged place in society to fight for his ideas. However, Petra articulates her principles in a much more modest way than her father, prioritizing the pursuit of truth in general, rather than the defending at all costs her own personal (and possibly erroneous) beliefs. This is one of many ways in

which Katherine and Petra's activism differentiates itself from that of the often solipsistic Dr. Stockmann.

Act II Quotes

Dr. Stockmann: You will see he won't like it's having been I, and not he, that made the discovery.

Katherine: Aren't you a little nervous about that?

Dr. Stockmann: Oh, he really will be pleased enough, you know…

Katherine: I will tell you what, Thomas – you should be good-natured, and share the credit of this with him. Couldn't you make out that it was he who set you on the scent of this discovery?

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Katherine Stockmann (speaker), Peter Stockmann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

After he receives the report detailing contamination in the baths, Dr. Stockmann sends a letter to his brother, but receives in response only a cool note arranging a meeting. Now, he and Katherine speculate on Peter's reaction to the news. Dr. Stockmann anticipates Peter's jealousy and resentment, but he clearly enjoys the fact that he's one-upped his brother, and he's dismissive of the idea that Peter's personal feelings might work against him or frustrate his future plans. This is a serious misjudgment both of Peter's character and his political clout, and it's an overestimation of Dr. Stockmann's own power to bend others to his will. On the other hand, Katherine understands that Dr. Stockmann must placate Peter's ego if he wants to get anything done, and she gives him good advice on how to do so. Throughout the play, many characters will draw distinctions between men's political and women's domestic spheres, but moments like this show that women are just as willing, and sometimes more able, to participate in public life and understand political maneuvers as their male counterparts.

Mr. Aslaksen: We shall proceed with the greatest moderation, Doctor. Moderation is always my aim; it is the greatest virtue in a citizen – at least, I think so.

Dr. Stockmann: it is well known to be a characteristic of yours, Mr. Aslaksen.

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Mr. Aslaksen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In his first appearance, Mr. Aslaksen arrives at Dr. Stockmann's house to discuss the report of contamination in the baths. If Dr. Stockmann confronts the town authorities, Mr. Aslaksen promises the support of numerous community organizations which he leads and which represent the "compact majority"—but he also wants to "proceed with moderation" in order to avoid offending the authorities. Dr. Stockmann's sly retort to Mr. Aslaksen's pompous speech highlights the fact that that Aslaksen has too many loyalties to advocate any meaningful political change. While Mr. Aslaksen considers himself the voice of the people, he's dependent on the town's wealthy elites and personally profits from their control of government, meaning he will never act against them or encourage the majority to do so. In this sense, Mr. Aslaksen's "moderation" is at best inaction, and at worst outright corruption.

Hovstad: The idol of Authority must be shattered in this town. This gross and inexcusable blunder about the water-supply must be brought home to the mind of every municipal voter.

Related Characters: Hovstad (speaker), Dr. Thomas Stockmann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hovstad argues to Dr. Stockmann that his discovery of water contamination in the baths isn't an isolated scientific incident, but rather is emblematic of larger political corruption in the town. It's interesting that he first makes this connection between scientific and moral rot, since Dr. Stockmann will use it in his climactic speech to

criticize the entire community (even Hovstad himself), suggesting that what Dr. Stockmann conceives of as his individual discoveries don't always belong to him alone. Also ironic is the fact that Hovstad rails against "Authority" only when discussing the town's elite leaders; Dr. Stockmann will soon come to see the majority's power as equally tyrannical, but Hovstad defers unequivocally to this form of Authority. Finally, by referring to the people of the community as "municipal voters," Hovstad gives an early hint that he sees those people primarily as political pawns, and that his newspaper works not to effect social change but to advance the agenda of one political party.

Katherine: Oh yes, right—right. What is the use of having right on your side if you have not got might?

Petra: Oh, mother!—how can you say such a thing!

Dr. Stockmann: Do you imagine that in a free country it is no use having right on your side? You are absurd, Katherine. Besides, haven't I got the liberal-minded, independent press to lead the way, and the compact majority behind me? That is might enough, I should think!

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Petra Stockmann, Katherine Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After Peter rejects Dr. Stockmann's report and threatens him with dismissal if he doesn't publicly repudiate it, the doctor argues with Katherine over what to do next. Katherine's declaration that being right means nothing without having power may seem cynical or even self-serving, but in fact it's very prescient: Dr. Stockmann's ideals will fail largely because he doesn't have the political power to present them to the public in an appealing way. On the contrary, Dr. Stockmann's naïve belief in the power of "a free country" and his reliance on the majority and the press will all prove ill-considered. While Dr. Stockmann will eventually emerge as an enemy of majoritarian politics, when he believes the majority supports his ideas he's enthusiastic about it. It's only Katherine who is suspicious from the start of this fickle form of support, showing her better judgment and political acumen.

Dr. Stockmann. The boys——! (Recovers himself suddenly): No, even if the whole world goes to pieces, I will never bow my neck to this yoke!

Mrs. Stockmann (following him): Thomas—what are you going to do!

Dr. Stockmann (at his door): I mean to have the right to look my sons in the face when they are grown men.

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Katherine Stockmann (speaker), Ejlif Stockmann, Morten Stockmann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Katherine begs her husband to consider their sons' future before doing anything rash that will jeopardize the family's finances and security. Contrary to her wishes, Dr. Stockmann says he will not bow to the "yoke" even if everything "goes to pieces" – in other words, even if his children are harmed. He also counters Katherine's concerns about the children with his own "right" to save face before his sons. Dr. Stockmann presents himself as a crusader for ideals, but here he explicitly prioritizes not truth or community welfare but his own pride above his sons' well-being. Other characters often argue that political activism is incompatible with family life, but through moments like this, the play suggests that this incompatibility holds only when the activism is self-motivated. In contrast, Katherine and Petra will eventually figure out a way to live by their ideals while providing security to the family, thus melding the political and domestic spheres and modeling an alternative to Dr. Stockmann's solipsistic activism.

Act III Quotes

Mr. Aslaksen: I am a man with a conscience, and that is the whole matter. If you attack the government, you don't do the community any harm, anyway; those fellows pay no attention to attacks, you see—they go on just as they are, in spite of them. But local authorities are different; they can be turned out, and then perhaps you may get an ignorant lot into office who may do irreparable harm to the householders and everybody else.

Related Characters: Mr. Aslaksen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Aslaksen (inadvertently) casts doubt on the concept that media (such as newspapers) are effective agents of social change. Along with Hovstad and Billing, Mr. Aslaksen presents himself as an advocate of the people, especially through the vehicle of the *People's Messenger*: Here, he says explicitly that most of the newspaper's agitating is useless, because it's directed at the powerful national government. In fact, he encourages this kind of coverage because it makes him seem progressive and courageous without actually jeopardizing the interests of the wealthy—whom, when it comes down to it, he will always support. While Hovstad and Billing claim to be more liberal than Mr. Aslaksen, in fact they're forced to conform with his politics because he supports the *People's Messenger*. As long as newspapers are financially dependent on external sources, they will be unable to represent impartial truth and advocate for people without money to spare.

Hovstad. You are perfectly right; but an editor cannot always act as he would prefer. He is often obliged to bow to the wishes of the public in unimportant matters. Politics are the most important thing in life—for a newspaper, anyway; and if I want to carry my public with me on the path that leads to liberty and progress, I must not frighten them away. If they find a moral tale of this sort in the serial at the bottom of the page, they will be all the more ready to read what is printed above it; they feel more secure, as it were.

Petra. For shame! You would never go and set a snare like that for your readers; you are not a spider!

Related Characters: Petra Stockmann, Hovstad (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Petra has just arrived at the *People's Messenger* offices, bringing with her an English novel that Hovstad had asked her to read and translate. Petra politely refuses to carry out the commission, since the book advances ideas contrary to her own and those of the newspaper, namely that God will reward good people and punish bad ones. Petra views this as a moralizing idea which encourages people to submit to authority rather than fighting social injustice, but Hovstad argues that printing sentimental and comforting stories is the only way to "trick" people into reading and adopting the newspaper's more liberal ideas. Petra's firm belief is that the newspaper should not resort to any such tricks, but should succeed or fail only on the strength of its ideals—a belief that is reminiscent of her father's disdain for politics and his emphasis on individual thought. However, it's important that Petra becomes aware of the newspaper's inherent duplicity long before her father realizes he's been betrayed by Hovstad.

Peter Stockmann. The proprietors of the Baths are not in a position to incur any further expense.

Aslaksen. Is that absolutely certain, Mr. Mayor?

Peter Stockmann. I have satisfied myself that it is so. If the town wants these very extensive alterations, it will have to pay for them.

Related Characters: Mr. Aslaksen, Peter Stockmann (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that the *People's Messenger* plans to publish Dr. Stockmann's report and criticize his leadership of the town, Peter confronts Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen. Cunningly, he tells them that if the baths must be repaired, the people will have to pay for it in the form of a municipal tax; everyone knows that the public will not side with Dr. Stockmann if it costs them money, and may even turn against the *People's Messenger* for raising the issue. Prior to this, the newspapermen have been assuring Dr. Stockmann of the "compact majority's" strength and ability to impose its will. However, here the majority becomes instantly powerless against Peter's unilateral imposition of a tax; neither Hovstad nor Mr. Aslaksen think that they can fight this move or otherwise pressure the owners of the baths. Moments like this show that the majority does not have real power; rather, it can only choose between various options engineered by the elites to serve their own interests.

Mrs. Stockmann. Well, one would not give you credit for much thought for your wife and children to-day; if you had had that, you would not have gone and dragged us all into misfortune.

Dr. Stockmann. Are you out of your senses, Katherine! Because a man has a wife and children, is he not to be allowed to proclaim the truth—is he not to be allowed to be an actively useful citizen—is he not to be allowed to do a service to his native town!

Mrs. Stockmann. Yes, Thomas—in reason.

Aslaksen. Just what I say. Moderation is everything.

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Mr. Aslaksen, Katherine Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Katherine arrives at the newspaper office to berate Hovstad for tricking her husband and to talk Dr. Stockmann out of his rash plans. Dr. Stockmann contends that his status as a husband and father shouldn't prevent him from helping his town and fellow people; but, especially in a patriarchal society in which men must provide for families and women are unable to do so, Katherine is right in asserting her primary claim to his loyalties. Even though Katherine's primary concern right now is her family, not activism, she's showing her ability to publicly advocate for them, leaving the domestic sphere in which the play's other men argue that women naturally are and want to be confined. In this sense, her actions should not be understood – as Mr. Aslaksen interprets them – as agreement with the authorities, but as a new form of activism, one which encompasses both abstract ideals and family obligations.

Dr. Stockmann. You dare not? What nonsense!—you are the editor; and an editor controls his paper, I suppose!

Aslaksen. No, it is the subscribers, Doctor.

Peter Stockmann. Fortunately, yes.

Aslaksen. It is public opinion—the enlightened public—householders and people of that kind; they control the newspapers.

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Mr. Aslaksen, Peter Stockmann (speaker), Hovstad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Stockmann realizes that Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen have turned on him and now support Peter's false interpretation of the report. The newspapermen are proud to affirm that "subscribers" and "public opinion" dictate the newspaper's coverage and what causes it supports; they see this as evidence of the publication's egalitarian nature. However, as Dr. Stockmann is beginning to understand the treacherous and mutable nature of public opinion and prioritize individual thought, this discovery is evidence of the newspaper's fundamental unreliability. As evidenced by his supposition that the editor must control the newspaper completely, Dr. Stockmann has idealized the *People's Messenger* as totally impartial and free from external influence. Now, he's realizing how much it is dependent both on fluctuating public opinion and on the powerful men like Peter and Mr. Aslaksen who influence that opinion for their own ends.

Katherine. But this is too shameful! Why should every one turn against you like that?

Dr. Stockmann (angrily). I will tell you why. It is because all the men in this town are old women—like you; they all think of nothing but their families, and never of the community.

Katherine (putting her arm into his). Then I will show them that an—an old woman can be a man for once. I am going to stand by you, Thomas!

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Katherine Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Seeing how quickly Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen have turned on her husband, Katherine scolds the newspapermen for their treachery. Dr. Stockmann compares their hypocritical pursuit of their own interests to his wife's caution for the sake of her family, delegitimizing her real concerns. That Katherine supports her husband after this public put-down shows her generosity of spirit and lack of ego; in this sense she's a foil to Dr. Stockmann, who repudiates anyone who disagrees with him. Katherine's astute recognition, just

before this passage, that the newspapermen are playing her husband shows how much Dr. Stockmann needs her—but this moment also shows how little he appreciates her contributions, even as they become more essential to his activism. Although Katherine and Petra will subvert some gender norms by taking on greater roles in public life, the Stockmanns' marriage remains far from egalitarian.

Act IV Quotes

Hovstad: And, in the matter before us, it is now an undoubted fact that Dr. Stockmann has public opinion against him. Now, what is an editor's first and most obvious duty, gentlemen? Is it not to work in harmony with his readers? Has he not received a sort of tacit mandate to work persistently and assiduously for the welfare of those whose opinions he represents? Or is it possible I am mistaken in that?

Related Characters: Hovstad (speaker), Dr. Thomas Stockmann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In Act IV, Dr. Stockmann convenes a meeting to present his findings to the public and speak to them without interference from town authorities. However, Mr. Aslaksen, Peter, and Hovstad soon wrest control of the meeting from him and use it to argue for their own side. In this passage, Hovstad publicly defends the *People's Messenger*'s shifting allegiances by saying that it always tries to reflect public opinion. Hovstad thinks that his argument is logical, and it certainly appeals to the self-interest of the crowd, but ultimately it exposes the newspaper's lack of fundamental principles and the meaninglessness of its coverage. It's also important that Hovstad equates the "welfare" of the community with the "opinions" of the majority. As Dr. Stockmann's findings aptly illustrate, the community's welfare (in this case, its need for clean and safe water) may be at odds with the opinions of the majority, who are more concerned with economics than a seemingly obscure threat to public health. The play argues that by conflating the majority's will with the right path, people may do more harm than good to a society.

Dr. Stockmann. You may depend upon it I shall name them! That is precisely the great discovery I made yesterday. (Raises his voice.) The most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom amongst us is the compact majority—yes, the damned compact Liberal majority—that is it! Now you know!

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Stockmann begins to expound on his new conception of the problems with majoritarian rule. This passage strengthens the connection between the physical contamination of the water and the moral contamination of the town, although it's important to note that different parties marshal this metaphor for different reasons; Hovstad first used it to criticize the authorities, while the doctor employs it against Hovstad and the majority he represents. It's in this moment that Dr. Stockmann transforms from a public health crusader to a champion of the broader ideal of individual thought. However, this moment also demonstrates the pitfalls of his individualism – namely, his apparent belief that the majority will give up its power and question its right to govern simply because a brilliant and intellectual man levels a harsh critique on him. Dr. Stockmann's strong belief in the validity of his own thoughts makes him insensible to the perspectives of others and may limit the extent to which he can effectively share his principles to the public.

Dr. Stockmann: It is true we are the finest animals anyone could wish for; but, even amongst us, exceptionally fine animals are rare. There is a tremendous difference between poodle-men and cur-men.

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of his speech about the ills of majoritarian politics, Dr. Stockmann argues that "well-bred" animals are more intelligent and capable than "ill-bred" ones; similarly, he says, there is a great difference between the natural abilities of "poodle-men" and "cur-men." Dr. Stockmann uses

this point to argue that power should be reserved for the intellectual elite; he later outlines a new class system in which such people are recognized and elevated to high positions. Yet his comparison of people to strains of "better" or "worse" animals suggests that intelligence is always derived from one's ancestors—a belief which would reinforce traditional class structures, rather than break them. It's also important to note that comparing human intelligence to animals' inheritance of traits through selective breeding can and has been used to argue that some demographics or races are inherently superior to others (in fact, in the post-WWII context these comparisons are so reminiscent of eugenics and fascism that they have been struck from some adaptations of the play in order to make Dr. Stockmann seem more sympathetic). These analogies, to which Dr. Stockmann refers throughout his monologue, undermine his argument for a meritocracy and suggest that his ideas might lead towards a new kind of authoritarianism.

Dr. Stockmann. The kind of common people I mean are not only to be found low down in the social scale; they crawl and swarm all around us—even in the highest social positions. You have only to look at your own fine, distinguished Mayor! My brother Peter is every bit as plebeian as anyone that walks in two shoes…

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann (speaker), Peter Stockmann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Stockmann argues for a new class system that is simultaneously more and less egalitarian than the one that currently exists in his community. On one hand, he argues that power should be taken away from the majority and placed in the hands of a few capable men. On the other, he suggests that such men might be found in any class and should be given power regardless of their origins – belief that could disrupt the stranglehold that well-born men like Peter and Mr. Aslaksen have on power. It's especially interesting that his argument here seems to contradict his previous (and problematic) comparison of humans to animals, in which he implied that people lack or possess intelligence depending on their origins. Dr. Stockmann's argument for a meritocracy is somewhat appealing here, but it's undermined in other moments by his demeaning and dehumanizing attitude to those he views as incapable.

Act V Quotes

Dr. Stockmann. You should never wear your best trousers when you go out to fight for freedom and truth. It is not that I care so much about the trousers, you know; you can always sew them up again for me. But that the common herd should dare to make this attack on me, as if they were my equals—that is what I cannot, for the life of me, swallow!

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after the disastrous public meeting, Dr. Stockmann and Katherine walk through their vandalized house and meditate on their next steps. Dr. Stockmann complains that the rough crowd has torn the trousers he wore to the meeting, an action he resents more for its show of disrespect than for the physical damage it inflicts. Dr. Stockmann asserts that he doesn't "care so much about the trousers" to evince his lack of material concerns, but this really demonstrates his dependence on Katherine: he can only feel pure of self-interest and devoted to ideology because his wife is standing by to take care of him. The passage thus shows that Katherine's subtle activism is both essential to his work and constantly erased by him. Moreover, his indignation at the "common herd" who dare to contradict him shows how central his own pride has become to his principles. In fact, it implicitly points out that the new class system Dr. Stockmann envisions is one that definitively sets intellectual men like him atop the "herd." Through moments like this the reader can see that Dr. Stockmann's valorization of individual rights is troubling linked to his own egotism.

Peter Stockmann. A man with a family has no right to behave as you do. You have no right to do it, Thomas.

Dr. Stockmann. I have no right! There is only one single thing in the world a free man has no right to do. Do you know what that is?

Peter Stockmann. No.

Dr. Stockmann. Of course you don't, but I will tell you. A free man has no right to soil himself with filth; he has no right to behave in a way that would justify his spitting in his own face.

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Peter Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

In their final confrontation, Peter and Dr. Stockmann exchange harsh words before breaking off with each other forever. Again, Peter weaponizes social norms to suppress individual thought and assert his own authority (importantly, he doesn't have any real concern for Katherine or the children). In contrast, Dr. Stockmann asserts that an individual's obligations are primarily to himself, rather than his family or the wider community. While this belief may or may not be "correct," it's important to note that it marks a major shift from Dr. Stockmann's earlier conception of himself as a servant of the community. Notably, Dr. Stockmann's refusal to "soil himself with filth" is interestingly similar to Morten Kiil's assertion (while blackmailing the doctor) that he will "live and die clean." Morten's claim is obviously self-interested (he admits to caring about his own reputation more than the town's welfare) so that parallel points out the self-centered nature of Dr. Stockmann's remarks here and helps the play argue that respect for individual rights shouldn't be used to defend egotistic individualism.

Dr. Stockmann (lowering his voice). Hush! You mustn't say anything about it yet; but I have made a great discovery.

Mrs. Stockmann. Another one?

Dr. Stockmann. Yes. (Gathers them round him, and says confidentially:) It is this, let me tell you—that the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone.

Mrs. Stockmann (smiling and shaking her head). Oh, Thomas, Thomas!

Related Characters: Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Katherine Stockmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this final scene, Dr. Stockmann's family gathers around to support him and affirm his principles. Even though they have been ostracized and now face an uncertain and probably harsh future, everyone takes hope from Dr. Stockmann's cheerful and confident behavior; even Katherine, who was despairing of the family's prospects minutes before, is now overcome by admiration for her husband's courage. However, it's important to note that while Dr. Stockmann may be alone in terms of the support of other men, it's the support of Katherine and Petra which has saved him from trouble many times and will continue to enable his activism; even this final tableau shows the extent to which he is upheld by his family. The final image Dr. Stockmann draws of the lone idealist is partly an affirmation of the play's emphasis on individual rights, but it's also a conceit Dr. Stockmann develops to boost his own image, and which does not entirely reflect reality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT I

The scene opens in Dr. Stockmann's dining room, an unassuming but well-furnished chamber with doors leading to the hall and the doctor's study. The dining table is full of disorderly plates, as if the family has just finished a meal. Billing, the town newspaper's sub-editor, is sitting at the table while Katherine Stockmann apologizes that she only has leftovers to offer him. Billing compliments her on her cooking and says he enjoys eating alone.

In this opening paragraph, male and female spheres are both mingled and distinct. Dr. Stockmann brings his politically-involved friends and their discussions into his home, but at the same time it's clear that Katherine's duty is not to participate but to provide food and company.

The doorbell rings. Both Katherine and Billing assume that the newspaper's editor, Hovstad, has arrived, but instead Peter Stockmann—the town mayor and Dr. Stockmann's brother—appears. Katherine welcomes him in warmly, but he responds to her greetings stiffly and seems put out to find Billing at the table. Saying that his digestion is bad, he refuses offers of food and drink and brusquely asks to talk to the doctor, who is out for a walk with his young sons.

Even though Peter Stockmann is a member of the family, he clearly doesn't feel as comfortable in the house as Billing. This passage establishes his character as stiff and dictatorial and hints at the sibling tensions that will later prove crucial to the play.

A knock is heard at the door, and Hovstad enters, greeting Peter "distantly" and saying he's come to discuss an article Dr. Stockmann has written for the liberal newspaper, the *People's Messenger*. Disapprovingly, Peter says that he understands why his brother writes for the people with whom he finds "the readiest sympathy," and he pompously praises the town's "excellent spirit of toleration." He says that the ability to live in harmony regardless of individual views comes from the newly constructed **baths**, which will provide benefits to everyone and will soon become the focus of town life.

Given that Peter already seems unsympathetic, it's easy to interpret his distaste for the newspaper as a point in the paper's favor, but this impression will be seriously undermined later in the play. In fact, Peter's assertion that writing for the media is a matter of courting public opinion and political advantage will actually prove cannier than Dr. Stockmann's idealistic conception of the newspaper's role in society.

Hovstad concurs, even adding that Dr. Stockmann's article is in praise of the **baths**—something that evidently surprises Peter. Hovstad adds that Dr. Stockmann is so devoted to the baths because it was his idea to construct them in the first place, but Peter takes issue with this assertion, saying sarcastically that he "took a modest part in the enterprise."

Peter has said that the baths draw everyone in the community together—but clearly, working together to build them has driven him and his brother apart. Just as the baths will illuminate flaws in the community, they are at the heart of the brothers' differences.

Seeking to make peace, Katherine points out that Dr. Stockmann always gives his brother due credit. She ushers Hovstad into the dining room to eat something, and as he leaves Peter gripes that "these farmers' sons never seem to lose their want of tact." Katherine urges him to "share the credit" for the **baths** "as brothers," but Peter suggests that Dr. Stockmann is eager to take more than his share.

Even though no one considers Katherine fit to participate in political discourse, she intuits that it's in her husband's best interest to be on good terms with Peter, and she accordingly acts on his behalf. This shows that Katherine is much more attuned to matters of public life than others give her credit for.

Dr. Stockmann, in good spirits, arrives at the door, accompanied by Captain Horster and the two young boys, Ejlif and Morten. Katherine points out Peter's presence and Dr. Stockmann greets his brother warmly, although with some reservation. He invites him in to share a hot drink, but Peter refuses, hinting that Dr. Stockmann is spending more than he should on entertaining guests with food and drink. Dr. Stockmann brushes off these assertions, saying that after spending so much time working in a remote village to the north, he needs to enjoy the comparative luxury of life in a town. He asks if the postman has come by, but Katherine responds that he hasn't.

Dr. Stockmann's "extravagant" expenses establish him as a warmer and more generous person than his brother. Although as mayor Peter claims to stand for the community, it's actually Dr. Stockmann who cultivates a circle of friends around him. However, this also suggests that he's incautious and often neglects to plan for the future – characteristics Peter will exploit in their upcoming feud.

Peter Stockmann mentions that he's heard about his brother's upcoming article in praise of the **baths**, but Dr. Stockmann surprises him by saying he doesn't want to publish it right now; he hints that there may be some new development that will change his opinion of the baths. Peter immediately becomes frustrated, saying that his brother has no right to keep him, the Chairman of the Baths Committee, in the dark. He chastises Dr. Stockmann for his "ingrained tendency take [his] own way," saying that individuals should submit to communal authorities in all matters.

In this framing moment of the struggle between Peter's authority and Dr. Stockmann's individualism, both brothers have valid grievances. Peter's suggestion that Dr. Stockmann should give up individual thought and meekly parrot the authorities seems absurd and self-serving (since he himself is the authority in question); on the other hand, it does seem like Dr. Stockmann has taken an important matter completely into his own hands, snubbing the other men with whom he's supposed to be working.

Peter abruptly departs, leaving Dr. Stockmann surprised by his sudden fit of bad temper; Katherine sighs, softly asking what her husband has said wrong this time. All the remaining men congregate, conjecturing that Peter has probably left because he couldn't stand fraternizing with the staff of the *People's Messenger*. Katherine brings a hot toddy, and Dr. Stockmann sends the boys to fetch his cigars. Katherine questions Dr. Horster about his upcoming sea voyage, which will take him away from town just before the upcoming elections. Captain Horster says he never pays attention to politics and never votes. Billing chastises him for his lack of communal engagement, but the captain mildly points out unless they are highly informed about political affairs, people shouldn't vote; if they behaved this way on a ship, it wouldn't work out very well.

Throughout the play, Captain Horster will be an important but enigmatic character. As shown here, he has no political loyalties; but while Billing sees this as a lack of moral convictions, Horster will ultimately prove the Stockmanns' bravest and most principled friend. His assertion that people who don't know much about politics ought not to vote reflects a wisdom and humility about his ability to participate constructively in government – qualities which, Ibsen will argue, everyone else in his community conspicuously lacks.

Just as Hovstad is bringing up the article, Petra Stockmann arrives home from her job as a schoolteacher, giving her father a letter. Dr. Stockmann is agitated by its arrival but runs into his study to open to it without telling anyone what's inside. Hovstad asks about Petra's job, which she loves even though it occupies most of her time and energy. Morten pipes up that Petra must be "dreadfully wicked," as his teacher has told him that only sinners have to work hard. The adults chuckle, and Billing suggests that Morten should become a "pagan" like him; then he can do whatever he wants.

Petra's entrance underlines the differences between her generation and her mother's. Unlike Katherine, she has a job and earns her own income. While her mother serves the men food, Petra talks to them as an equal about her work. Billing's glib remark to Morten suggests that he conceives of himself as an iconoclastic radical – an image which, as later events will show, is laughably far from true.

Disliking this turn of conversation and not wanting the boys to question their teachers, Katherine sends them to bed. Petra gently argues with her, saying that "there is so much falsehood both at home and at school" and lamenting that she has to teach her children so many things that she doesn't herself believe; she wishes she could start a school according to her own principles.

Petra's education and relative emancipation allows her to question social norms that her mother has been conditioned to accept. Her desire to start a school based on truthfulness and individualism foreshadows the ending of the play.

Dr. Stockmann returns, waving his letter triumphantly and saying he's made "a great discovery." The others beg him to reveal it; with much fanfare, he announces that, while everyone believes the expensive new **baths** are a health cure for invalids, they're actually a "pesthouse" filled with bacteria from nearby tanneries. Dr. Stockmann first began to suspect something was amiss when he witnessed sickness among bath visitors the last summer, so he privately sent water samples for testing at the nearest university. Now it's proven that the water is dangerous to use.

This is the fateful discovery which will transform Dr. Stockmann's position in the town. While Dr. Stockmann's findings are seemingly disastrous, he's excited to announce them, suggesting that his desire for acclaim and attention has played a significant role in his investigations. It's also notable that the rhetoric of contamination (like the word "pesthouse") which, in this moment, only applies to the water will soon be extended to the entire society.

Hovstad and Katherine praise the doctor, who accepts their words complacently. He says that the situation must be "put right" even though repairs will be costly and "there will be a nice upset in the town." Petra points out that this discovery vindicates her father's earlier argument that the **baths**' conduit pipes should have been laid much higher up—a proposal which was rejected by the rest of the Baths Committee. He orders the maid to take the report straight to Peter.

Dr. Stockmann demonstrates both a desire to help his town and an obliviousness to its practical circumstances—for example, he doesn't understand how disastrous these repairs will turn out to be. Petra's remark about the previous argument suggests that Dr. Stockmann undertook his investigations in part because of a personal grievance against the Baths Committee, although as a loyal daughter she doesn't see it that way.

Petra wonders how Peter will respond, and Dr. Stockmann replies that he will be "glad that such an important truth has been brought to light." Hovstad and Billing announce their intention to cover the discovery in the newspaper, and say that Dr. Stockmann will soon be "the foremost man in town." Dr. Stockmann responds that he won't accept any public displays of gratitude, not even if the **Baths** Committee wants to raise his salary. Everyone gathers around the doctor and toasts his health, while he picks Katherine up and twirls her around.

Dr. Stockmann's prediction of Peter's reaction will soon emerge as completely wrong; as in many other moments, his words mirror his own desires rather than a concrete grasp of reality. Hovstad and Billing's flattery encourages the doctor to succumb to daydreams of acclaim and increased salaries, but their professed admiration will turn out to be worth very little.

ACT II

In the morning, Katherine brings Dr. Stockmann a brusque note from Peter, proposing a meeting at midday. Dr. Stockmann believes that his brother is jealous that he hasn't made this important discovery himself, since he's "so confoundedly afraid of anyone's doing service to the town except himself." Katherine urges her husband to be cautious and diplomatic with his brother, suggesting that he find some way to share the credit.

Here Katherine not only identifies a political risk but proposes a solution: tricking Peter into thinking the discovery was his idea. To his detriment, Dr. Stockmann is too much preoccupied with his personal glory and has too little respect for his wife's opinions to pay attention.

Morten Kiil, Katherine's father, arrives at the house. He's heard rumors about contamination in the water supply. Not understanding the concept of bacteria, he assumes that Dr. Stockmann is playing a prank on his brother by suggesting that animals no one can see have infected the water. He clearly doesn't believe the story, but he hopes the town will fall for it, as revenge for kicking him off the council. Laughing slyly, he leaves the house.

While Dr. Stockmann considers his discovery an unalterable scientific fact, Morten and most others in the community see it as a political event, which can be used, altered, or ignored as the circumstances change. This suggests that success in the community is predicated on the ability to make political maneuvers, rather than more admirable qualities like honesty or integrity.

As he departs, Hovstad arrives. He takes Dr. Stockmann aside and says that, after considering the matter of the **baths** overnight, he's realized its not an isolated incident; the "morass" of chemicals infecting the water is symbolic of the "morass" of incompetent authorities who control everything in the town. Somewhat taken aback, Dr. Stockmann points out that the town's leaders are "men of ability and knowledge," but Hovstad points out that they didn't display much knowledge of the conduit pipes. He wants to write about the issue in the paper, in order to "break up this ring of self-opinionated old fossils" who control the town.

Hovstad is the first person to make the connection between the scientific contamination of the water and the moral contamination of society—specifically, the outsized amount of control wielded by wealthy elites. This is especially interesting given that these linked forms of contamination will form the center of Dr. Stockmann's climactic speech at the public meeting—but by then, the moral issues he decries will include Hovstad's hypocrisy.

Dr. Stockmann agrees that the town needs more progress and transparency, but he's not ready to attack the leaders publicly, especially not his brother. Hovstad cajoles him by arguing that, as a journalist, he has no personal ambitions; he is of "humble origin" and views it as his journalistic duty to give other common people a greater voice in public life.

Here, Dr. Stockmann seems relatively traditional when it comes to the authorities. His reluctance to make a political statement contrasts starkly with his radicalism at the end of the play.

As Dr. Stockmann vacillates, Mr. Aslaksen interrupts the conference. He's heard about Dr. Stockmann's discovery and promises that the Householders' association and the small tradesmen, whom he represents, will back him up. Dr. Stockmann doesn't believe all this support is necessary, but Mr. Aslaksen pompously reassures him that he's a man of utmost "moderation," who wields power among the "compact majority."

Mr. Aslaksen and Hovstad are eager to turn the discovery from a scientific matter into a political cause because it suits their agenda and gives the "compact majority" an opportunity to flex its muscles. Dr. Stockmann's reluctance to get involved testifies to his good instincts, but he'll soon succumb to the combination of power and ideology presented by the two "progressives."

Mr. Aslaksen announces his plan to write a testimonial on behalf of the majority that thanks Dr. Stockmann without offending town leaders. Hovstad protests at this deference to town leaders, but Mr. Aslaksen waves him away, saying it's useless to alienate those "on whom our welfare defends." Refusing a glass of beer because of his leadership position in the temperance society, he departs, again promising the support of the "compact majority."

Mr. Aslaksen claims to be the voice of the majority, but this passage shows that his allegiance to authorities makes all his actions meaningless. Dr. Stockmann does not as yet understand that these twisted loyalties will prevent him from being an effective ally against Peter.

Hovstad remains behind, complaining that Mr. Aslaksen is too timid to take a real stand against the authorities; he announces his intention to "put a little virility into these well-intentioned people." Dr. Stockmann says he must not publish anything before he talks to his brother; but he concedes that if the conference goes badly, Hovstad can publish the entire report.

This passage shows the generous and fair-minded side of Dr. Stockmann's character: even though he's apprehensive about the upcoming meeting with his brother, he refuses to act against him publicly until he absolutely has to.

As Hovstad leaves, Dr. Stockmann reports proudly to Katherine and Petra that he has received support from the town's "compact majority." Katherine sounds distinctly unimpressed, asking "if that is a good thing for you," but Dr. Stockmann is too excited to pay attention, imagining how much good he will be able to do for his native town.

Dr. Stockmann will ultimately present his critique of majoritarian politics as entirely his own discovery, but in fact it's Katherine who first voices suspicion of the majority's loyalty.

Peter Stockmann rings the bell and Katherine greets him cordially, but he dismisses the women for a private conference and immediately reprimands his brother for undertaking investigations without authorization. Peter says he can't believe the "violent language" Dr. Stockmann has used in the report. He also says, without explaining the reason, that he consulted the town engineer on the costs of the doctor's proposed repairs and found them to be astronomical; even worse, the **baths** would have to close for two years, which would cause the town to lose money and status as a popular place for spa cures. If the report goes public, he says, it will ruin the town.

Peter's characterization of the report's language as "violent" suggests that, like Morten Kiil, he sees it as a political attack rather than the result of scientific inquiry. While Dr. Stockmann views events like the water contamination entirely through their abstract or philosophical importance, Peter conceives of them in relation to material or social consequences.


In place of making expensive repairs, Peter says, Dr. Stockmann should simply treat people who fall ill; over the course of years, the **baths** committee can make subtle repairs to shift the water source. Dr. Stockmann is outraged and says he will never agree to such "trickery." He accuses Peter of discounting his findings because he doesn't want to admit that he erred in choosing the water source. Peter responds that he has to protect his reputation "in the interests of the town," so that he can govern effectively and maintain respect.

Peter's suggestion that they continue to allow townspeople and visitors to fall ill shows that he's much more concerned with minimizing political fallout than with protecting the community. His conflation of his own reputation and interests with communal good allows him to govern selfishly while still believing that he is serving the people.


Dr. Stockmann reveals that he has shared the contents of the report with Hovstad and Billing, and he may not be able to keep it from the public. Peter accuses his brother of being "an extraordinarily independent man," and threatens that there will be personal consequences—after all, he has always helped his brother find respectable occupations and provide for his family, but he won't be able to do so if Dr. Stockmann writes incendiary articles about every idea that comes into his head. Dr. Stockmann says it's the "duty of a citizen" to share his ideas with the public, but Peter counters that "the public is best served by the good, old-established ideas it already has."

It's interesting that Peter uses the word "independent" as an insult and reprimand. To him, any kind of individual thought is inherently transgressive. In considering the relative importance of individualism and authority, the two brothers stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. In this passage he's also the first to draw a line between political activism and the domestic sphere—a distinction which, the play will argue, is fallacious.


Peter continues that his brother is wrong to constantly complain about the authorities, when it's he himself who is recalcitrant and hard to work with. After all, it's Peter who is responsible for championing the **baths** project and securing his brother's position on the committee. Even though it was Dr. Stockmann's idea, he could never have accomplished it without Peter's political acumen. Peter considers the new report to be a new effort by Dr. Stockmann to "pick a quarrel with your superiors."

It's hard to sympathize with Peter's bullying demeanor right now, but he does make the valid point that it's hard to bring even good ideas to fruition without some kind of political acumen. Dr. Stockmann treasures the idea that brilliant men (like him) can influence society purely on the basis of their ideals, but this is simply unrealistic.

Peter demands that Dr. Stockmann publicly refute his findings and say that he was wrong to question the water quality. Dr. Stockmann pleads with his brother to understand that any course of action except major repairs to the **baths** is dangerous and inadequate, but Peter simply responds that "as an officer under the Committee, you have no right to any individual opinion." Dr. Stockmann becomes completely outraged, insisting that, as an individual, he can take whatever course of action he feels is best.

Although Peter has pointed out the necessity of working together and respecting some forms of authority, here his disdain for individual thought emerges as definitively absurd. Conversely, Dr. Stockmann's preoccupation with individual thought can make him willfully obstinate, but here it allows him to unhesitatingly stand up to a powerful figure.

Petra and Katherine, who have been eavesdropping, burst in as Dr. Stockmann again refuses to retract his findings. Peter says that he will be dismissed as punishment. When Petra tells her uncle that he's behaving in a "shameful" manner, he sneers at her for volunteering her own opinions. Turning to Katherine, he enjoins her to talk her husband out of his foolishness, if only so that he can continue to provide for his family.

Peter's put-down and its sexist implications (that a young woman is not entitled to air her opinions) shows that his embrace of authority doesn't just spring from a desire for order. Rather, it's a mechanism to delegitimize and ignore other voices, especially those of disenfranchised populations like women.

Dr. Stockmann retorts that he's acting in the interests of his family and his beloved town, but Peter replies that someone who jeopardizes the people's economic interests must actually be "an enemy of the community." The two men almost come to blows, but the women separate them and Peter stalks out.

If someone can become an "enemy" simply for causing economic harm, then the community must necessarily be predicated on economic relations. Compared to Dr. Stockmann's vision of people relating on a moral and ideological level, this is a chilly and transactional view of society.

Katherine placates her husband by agreeing that Peter has behaved badly, but she reminds him that the mayor "has power on his side" and can indeed harm the family. Dr. Stockmann dismisses her as "absurd," saying that he has the support of the compact majority and that, "in a free country," the right ideas always win. Petra takes her father's side, arguing that they have to do the right thing and not think of themselves, but Katherine reminds Dr. Stockmann that she and the boys are completely unable to provide for themselves.

Dr. Stockmann treats his wife dismissively, but later events will show that she has a better sense of political necessity and the economy of power than he does. His strong belief in the power and validity of his individual thoughts makes him naively sure that others will honor them, while Katherine—who as a woman has been conditioned to accept dependence, rather than uphold individuality—understands the extent to which individuals are dependent on those around them.

At this point the boys arrive home from school and peek in at their parents arguing. Dr. Stockmann surveys them for a minute, but then shakes his head and says that, no matter what, "I will never bow my head to this yoke." He says that he wants "the right to look my sons in the face when they are grown men." Katherine starts crying, but Petra applauds her father's courage.

Here Dr. Stockmann considers his sons' material needs (represented by the confused boys themselves) but, shaking his head, dismisses them in favor of his ideological concerns. Dr. Stockmann claims to be acting for his family and his ideals, but he's actually ignoring one over the other.

ACT III

Hovstad is working at his desk in the shabby and disheveled People's Messenger office when Billing enters, having just read Dr. Stockmann's manuscript. Both men laugh and praise Dr. Stockmann for his scathing attack on the authorities, saying that he will put a "revolution" in motion. Even if Peter retaliates, he's sure to lose supporters, either among the common people or the wealthy shareholders of the **baths**; then the people will see that the Liberals ought to control all municipal affairs.

When asking Dr. Stockmann for permission to publish his report, Hovstad stressed the importance of progress and selfless service to the community. But here, he and Billing discuss how the situation can be turned to the advantage of their political party. There's more self-interest in their coverage, and in their representation of themselves, than initially appeared.

Dr. Stockmann enters the office excitedly, instructing Hovstad and Billing to print his article at once and eagerly predicting "a fight in the town." He's even planned out a series of articles, based on his original report, attacking different forms of corruption in the town. Suddenly entering the room, Mr. Aslaksen is disturbed by their fiery rhetoric, saying that he hopes the doctor won't destroy the **baths** entirely. Hovstad turns the subject to the report, which he praises for being intelligible to ordinary people and likely to gain sympathy; reassured by this, Mr. Aslaksen gives his support to its publication.

It's notable how quickly Dr. Stockmann has shifted from protecting his brother to wanting to openly attack him; the fact that this transition occurred because of Peter's personal snub shows how much his new activism is influenced by the need to uphold his pride. Again, Mr. Aslaksen is so timid in acting on his beliefs that they are essentially meaningless.

Dr. Stockmann says he's eager to see the article descend upon the townspeople "like a flash of lightning," and begins to complain about Peter's attack on his rights and dignity. Now he plans to use the *People's Messenger* to attack the authorities until they collapse. Weakly, Mr. Aslaksen warns the doctor to "proceed with moderation," but he continues to pontificate that not only the **baths** but every aspect of public life must be "disinfected." He thanks Hovstad and Aslaksen for their support, comparing them favorably to his brother, and departs.

Here, Dr. Stockmann has adopted Hovstad's link between scientific and social contamination. It's interesting that both men use the image for their own ends: Hovstad to criticize the wealthy elites his party opposes, and the doctor to implicate the authorities who dismiss his ideas. By suggesting that the newspapermen are more loyal and selfless than Peter, Dr. Stockmann makes a serious error in judgment.

Mr. Aslaksen voices his hope that Dr. Stockmann will stick to the **baths**, rather than making any broader attacks. Billing complains that Mr. Aslaksen is too timid, but Mr. Aslaksen says that his experience has taught him that it's one thing to attack the national government, which can't be harmed by a local newspaper, but taking on fragile local authorities "may do irreparable harm to the householders" who want to protect their material interests. Hovstad and Billing fervently announce that they hope never to have any interests to protect.

Mr. Aslaksen's remark is bleakly comic, suggesting that Hovstad and Billing's activism is acceptable only because it's basically harmless to national government. For him, the voicing of progressive ideas is merely a ploy to gain the support of the majority, not a tool to effect any meaningful social change.

Aslaksen cannily points out the newspaper's last editor now works for the government, and Billing himself has applied for a public position. Embarrassed, Billing says he's only done so "to annoy the bigwigs." On the contrary, his "political past is an open book" and he always supports the will of the people.

Hovstad and Billing present themselves as radicals, but they're actively trying to reap the benefits of the government they supposedly distrust. It's ironic that Mr. Aslaksen, the much-mocked "moderate," is the one to make this astute analysis.

Aslaksen leaves and Billing says that they should get rid of him. Hovstad points out that the newspaper needs his financial support. Billing suggests that they apply to Dr. Stockmann, who may inherit money from his father-in-law, but Hovstad shoots this idea down and bitterly points out that Billing will never obtain a government job. Billing leaves to write a letter to the Householders' Association on behalf of Dr. Stockmann.

Hovstad's practical remark about Mr. Aslaksen points out that because they have financial needs, media like newspapers cannot be impartial purveyors of truth. Rather, they are dependent on those who have the means to support them—which, in this case, is a different class than the one the newspaper claims to represent.

A knock is heard and Petra enters. She brings an English novel that Hovstad has asked her to translate but hands it back to him, saying that she can't carry out the job. The story "conflicts" with all the principles expressed in the *People's Messenger*, arguing that "there is a supernatural power that looks after" good people and punishes the bad ones. Unsurprised, Hovstad says that such stories are exactly what readers want; an editor "cannot always act as he would prefer," but must publish some sentimental things in order to draw readers in and convince them to read the more radical content.

Petra is opposed to the novel because it peddles a soft authoritarianism, telling people that if they behave "well" (in other words, submit established norms and class systems), they will somehow be rewarded. In contrast, the newspaper urges people to take action to change their social conditions. Hovstad's response shows that the newspaper is more concerned with increasing readership than publishing the strict truth.


Petra criticizes Hovstad for setting "snares for your readers," but he blames Billing for choosing the story and adds that Billing is applying for a public job. Petra is disturbed by this revelation, saying that by supporting her father's crusade for truth the journalists have chosen "a splendid vocation" and ought to live up to their ideals more than ever before. Hovstad suggests that Petra's idealism stems from loyalty to her father, rather than true conviction in his ideas. Petra responds that Hovstad has permanently injured himself in her opinion, and she will never trust him again. Although Hovstad tries to placate her, she exits in anger, just as Aslaksen enters with the news that Peter Stockmann has arrived.

Like her father, Petra has idealized the newspaper as an impartial and selfless social crusader. In the moment when her father is hitching his social fortunes to it, she realizes that the paper is not as good as they believed. It's important that she makes this realization long before her father does, even though she's had much less interaction with the newspapermen. As in many other cases, Dr. Stockmann's womenfolk are better at detecting danger than he is.

Hovstad is disconcerted but receives the mayor politely. Peter slyly relates that Dr. Stockmann has embarked on an "extremely annoying" course of action and asks if they know anything about it; Hovstad tries to downplay the newspaper's involvement, but Peter soon spots the report on his desk and picks it up. Hovstad quickly says that he's only publishing Dr. Stockmann's views, not agreeing with them, while Aslaksen adds that he has nothing to do with the newspaper's content.

It's disturbing that Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen immediately (and unconvincingly) try to distance themselves from their own newspaper. It shows both that they're not actually as powerful against Peter as they presented themselves, and that they're not willing to stand up for their beliefs when challenged.


Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen try to intimidate Peter by hinting that they are intimately acquainted with the townspeople's beliefs, which will enable them to wield power over the mayor. Peter responds cannily that he's glad to see such a "spirit of self-sacrifice" among the lower classes; he clarifies to the utterly confused newspapermen that the common people will have to pay for any potential repairs to the **baths** through a municipal loan, or tax. Astonished, Hovstad and Aslaksen point out that the men who own the baths should take responsibility, but Peter instantly dismisses this idea.

Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen believed that they could destabilize local government by attributing this catastrophe to them, but Peter quickly shows that he will make sure the lower classes bear the material costs. It's important that Hovstad never suggests that the townspeople might fight this tax or make the wealthy pay it; although the majority feels powerful, it's not able to exercise any real control over the wealthy elite.

Peter then emphasizes that such extensive repairs will require the **baths** to close down for two years. Mr. Aslaksen is deeply affronted at this news, asking how "we householders" will handle the economic loss. Shaken, he accedes to Peter's assertion that the whole thing is "merely imagination" and turns on Dr. Stockmann, denouncing him for his "unjustifiable" attack on the town's well-being. Hovstad, stammering, withdraws his own support from the doctor and asks Peter if he has an alternative article to print, which the mayor instantly produces.

By imposing punishments and framing the issue as a matter of economic cost to the majority, Peter instantly shows that public opinion will be against the report and shifts the newspaper's allegiances. Public opinion is powerful enough to govern the supposedly impartial media, but not enough to threaten the dominance of the upper class.

Suddenly, Mr. Aslaksen sees Dr. Stockmann outside the window. Wanting to avoid an awkward encounter, Hovstad ushers Peter into another office to hide. He and Aslaksen pretend to be occupied when Dr. Stockmann enters, full of enthusiasm, to check on the printing of his piece. The two men are stilted and awkward, but Dr. Stockmann doesn't notice their strange behavior. Instead, he tells them that he's been thinking about the public acclaim he's going to receive when everyone realizes how much work he's done for "the welfare of the town." He warns Hovstad that no matter now much the people want to give him a gift or tribute, the editor must put a stop to it, as his actions have been purely selfless.

In a matter of minutes, Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen have changed from Dr. Stockmann's staunch allies to his betrayers; this sudden shift casts doubt on the integrity of news media as a whole. Meanwhile, Dr. Stockmann is too busy anticipating future acclaim to notice their fairly obvious discomfort. This is a contrast to Petra, who is able to spot hypocrisy even when Hovstad is flattering her abilities as a translator.

Hovstad opens his mouth to tell Dr. Stockmann "the plain truth," but suddenly Katherine enters the office, full of anger. She sharply reprimands Hovstad for "enticing my husband away from his home and making him a dupe," and reminds everyone present that he is "the father of three children." Dr. Stockmann becomes annoyed, asking why his status as a father should prevent him from "proclaiming the truth" and telling her that no one could trick him.

Katherine is mobilizing the supposed distinction between activism and the home to argue that fathers shouldn't be dragged into risky politics. At the same time, by astutely realizing that the newspaper has made her husband "a dupe," she's showing her aptitude for public life and proving the distinction between home and public life false.

Dr. Stockmann triumphantly tells Katherine that he has the "compact majority" behind him, and that she should "go home and look after your house" while he handles the public affairs. Katherine is unimpressed, saying that the majority is "a horrid thing" and predicting that he will almost certainly lose his job if the article is published.

Dr. Stockmann attempts to uphold the distinction between men's public life and women's domestic sphere, but his dismissive language only shows how blind he is to his own peril.

Just as Dr. Stockmann is expounding on the revolution he believes he's about to begin, he and Katherine notice Peter's hat sitting on Hovstad's desk. Dr. Stockmann assumes that the mayor has been trying to entice Hovstad over to his own side, but hid when he saw his brother coming. Gleefully, he puts on the hat and struts around the office, eventually opening the door on a very angry Peter. As Peter pompously demands the return of his hat, Katherine is almost reduced to tears by her husband's performance.

Dr. Stockmann makes a mockery of Peter's authority as mayor through this performance—but in fact, Peter will assert authority over him in the moments that follow. Katherine's understanding that grandstanding doesn't really help individuals advance their goals shows how much more politically aware she is than her husband.

Dr. Stockmann triumphantly announces that his brother's time in power is at an end, since he, the *People's Messenger*, and the Householders' Association are now allied against him. Calmly, Peter turns to Hovstad and Aslaksen and ask if this is the case. The two men astound Dr. Stockmann by admitting that they have retracted their support and affirming their belief in Peter's version of the situation.

Dr. Stockmann has seen the power of the "compact majority" as dependable concept, always standing by what is right. Now, he begins to understand that public opinion is very fickle and can't be counted upon to support individualism or controversial ideas.

Hovstad says that he "dares not" print the article. Dr. Stockmann angrily responds that as the editor of the paper, he can print whatever he wants. On the contrary, Mr. Aslaksen responds, the "subscribers" and "public opinion" control the paper, not the editors. Since Dr. Stockmann's findings would mean the "ruin of the community," none of the public will support them.

Dr. Stockmann saw the newspaper as an impartial defender of the truth, but now he sees that it's the servant of fluctuating public opinion, and thus cannot hold firm ideals.

Hovstad adds that he's also refraining from printing the article out of "regard" for Dr. Stockmann's family, earning him a sharp retort from Katherine that the family is none of his business. Dr. Stockmann turns to Mr. Aslaksen and demands that he print the report as a pamphlet, but Mr. Aslaksen refuses, saying that no matter how much he was paid he could not publish something so contrary to public opinion.

Katherine understands that men like Hovstad who draw moralizing distinctions between public and home life do so not out of any true desire to protect women and children, but rather to suppress dissenting views by pointing out material repercussions.

Snatching the report back, Dr. Stockmann announces that he will call a public meeting to present it publicly. Peter points out that no one in the town will rent him a hall. Katherine bursts out that such behavior is "shameful" and asks why no one will support her husband. Dr. Stockmann says angrily that the townspeople are all "old women, like you" who are only concerned with their families. Taking her husband's arm, Katherine announces her intention to support him, saying that "an old woman can be a man for once."

Here, Katherine commits herself firmly to her husband's political stance, abandoning the conventional caution she advocated before. Dr. Stockmann likens Hovstad and the other men to Katherine, even though it's she who has displayed loyalty and intelligence all along. Although Dr. Stockmann will accept and rely on his wife's contributions to his activism, he will also minimize them or attribute them to himself.

Dr. Stockmann takes new courage, saying that he will proclaim his report in the streets if he must. Katherine adds staunchly that the boys will go with him. Dr. Stockmann kisses her and they exit proudly, leaving Peter and the newspapermen shaking their heads.

Katherine's support and her invocation of the boys suggests that, rather than being a hindrance to his activism, Dr. Stockmann's family will be his best supports.

ACT IV

In a large room in Captain Horster's house, townspeople are gathering before the start of a meeting. One citizen greets another and asks if he's brought his "whistle"; the second responds eagerly that he always brings his whistle to public meetings, and that one of his friends will soon arrive with a cow horn. Another man asks the crowd what the meeting is about. While some citizens express admiration for Dr. Stockmann's disregard for authority, others remark that he must be wrong, because the *People's Messenger* and the Householders' Association have come out against him. They all decide to take their cues from Mr. Aslaksen, as is usual at public meetings.

Dr. Stockmann has grown disillusioned with the ruling elites (represented by Peter) and the educated progressives (Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen). Now, he plans to appeal to the common people's reason and integrity. However, already this seems like a daunting task: Ibsen characterizes the townspeople—who arrive with whistles as if the meeting were a contact sport and blindly promise their support to Peter without understanding the issue—as vulgar and unintelligent.

Captain Horster escorts Katherine, Petra, Morten and Ejlif to a place where they can sit secluded from the rowdy crowd. Katherine asks if there will be a "disturbance," and the captain says gravely that it's impossible to tell. She thanks him for offering his house for the meeting, commending his bravery.

Rather than a civilized discourse, Katherine and Captain Horster anticipate that the meeting will be rowdy and perhaps unsafe. This is the opposite of enlightened government as Dr. Stockmann imagines it.

Hovstad, Billing, and Peter take their places on the floor; soon after, Dr. Stockmann enters in a suit and bows dramatically. He stops next to his wife, who reminds him not to lose his temper, and steps onto the platform to begin the meeting. Before he can say anything, Mr. Aslaksen suggests that the people should elect a chairman for the meeting. Dr. Stockmann doesn't want to do this, but the crowd pipes up in agreement. Peter suggests that Mr. Aslaksen act as chairman, and the crowd voices its agreement. He mounts the platform and speaks about his regard for "moderation," which is "the most valuable virtue a citizen can possess," and encourages Dr. Stockmann to take this into account.

Katherine's plea for diplomacy is wise; Dr. Stockmann might be able to accomplish something with the crowd by addressing it in a tactical manner. It's not only Peter's subterfuge but his own arrogant demeanor that turn the crowd against him. Mr. Aslaksen phrases his speech as a call for "moderation," but in fact he's encouraging people to submit blindly to authority and oppression under the guise of being civil.

Peter asks for permission to make a remark, which Mr. Aslaksen grants. He says that, although he didn't want to participate in the meeting, his concern for the welfare of the town requires him to bring forward a motion to forbid Dr. Stockmann from reading his report, in the interest of the town's reputation. After all, his article in the *People's Messenger* has explained the matter sufficiently to everyone.

Peter uses the meeting's democratic procedures – meant to enforce the people's will – to prevent the people from hearing essential information. Here, the rituals of democracy represent not freedom of expression but suppression.

Mr. Aslaksen voices his support for the motion, saying that Dr. Stockmann doesn't care about the **baths** but is only interested in "a revolution." The crowd applauds him. Hovstad pipes up to explain that he only supported Dr. Stockmann's position when it seemed to be gaining public sympathy, but that Mr. Aslaksen's advice has convinced him to act with moderation. He continues that an editor's foremost responsibility is to "work in harmony with his readers" and reflect public opinion. Even though he has long been friends with Dr. Stockmann and believes in his good intentions, he must distance himself from a man who voices such dangerous ideas, especially at such peril to his family.

Mr. Aslaksen and Hovstad accuse Dr. Stockmann of holding the very ideas they once championed – like starting a political "revolution." Dr. Stockmann's crime is not holding the wrong ideas, but failing to change them in accordance with public opinion. However, it's important to note that even while public opinion governs the conduct of newspapers and individual citizens, public opinion itself is subject to manipulation by canny politicians like Peter.

Mr. Aslaksen decides to put Peter's motion to a vote, but Dr. Stockmann interrupts, saying that he now wants to speak on a different matter. He's interrupted by a drunken man in the back, who shouts about his rights as a "ratepayer" before someone throws him out. Dr. Stockmann says that he's been developing many new ideas over the past few days, and now has a revelation to share with the crowd, of much more importance than the quality of the water. In fact, he says, the "whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood." Mr. Aslaksen calls for moderation.

In previous scenes, Mr. Aslaksen has impressed upon Dr. Stockmann the importance and validity of the taxpayers' opinions. Here, the drunk man's assertion that, as a "ratepayer," he's entitled to share his beliefs is a parody of Aslaksen's sanctimonious behavior and the idea that all people have intelligent and serious thoughts to share. This moment casts implicit doubt on the idea that the majority's beliefs ought to rule society.

Dr. Stockmann continues that he has always loved his hometown. In fact, when he went to practice medicine in the north he often longed for it. This other town, "a horrible hole," was filled with people so isolated and primitive they seemed like animals, better served by a vet than a doctor. The crowd, which had warmed to Dr. Stockmann's elegy for his native town, now murmurs in disapproval.

Dr. Stockmann's assertion that people who live in disadvantaged circumstances are like animals is disturbing. It allows their social class to act as a determiner of their essential humanity while ignoring the fact that their environment, not their essential character, probably contributes to their behavior or lifestyle.

While he was living far away, Dr. Stockmann conceived a plan for the **baths** as a way to "be of service to my native town and the good of the community." When he was able to return home and put these plans in motion, he was full of happiness. But now he is thoroughly disappointed by the "colossal stupidity" and "piggishness" of the authorities, who do nothing but stifle the rights of free men and who should be "exterminated like any other vermin." Peter and Mr. Aslaksen call for the doctor to be quiet, but he shouts over them.

Throughout this scene, Dr. Stockmann will illustrate his philosophical arguments by comparing various individuals and groups to animals, which in some cases should be "exterminated." While some of his ideas are valid (for example, his belief that majority rights sometimes imperil individual ones), these demeaning comparisons evince an essential disrespect for the perspectives of others, and even a belief that holding the wrong ideas can make someone less human.

Dr. Stockmann personally attacks his brother for being unintelligent and bound by tradition, inciting laughter and chaos in the audience and outbursts by a few drunken men. But he continues that despite their incompetence, the authorities aren't event the greatest danger to the communities. Rather, "the most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom" is actually "the compact majority," which includes all the people standing in front of him. The crowd erupts in anger.

At first, Dr. Stockmann considered himself mainly a scientist, struggling to communicate a public health danger to the town. However, that experience has given rise to larger political conclusions – namely, that majority rule isn't the best way to foster innovation and progress in a society.

Hovstad and Billing shout that the majority is always right, but Dr. Stockmann says that this is never true. Logically speaking, he explains, unintelligent people always outnumber clever ones in a society; it's a "social lie" to say that this unintelligent majority is always right and deserves to control those smarter than them. Rather, he says, the "minority is always in the right."

By this point it's clear that Hovstad and Billing parrot whatever views will gain them the most public support; they and their newspaper have now emerged as the very antithesis of truth. Instead, true and immutable beliefs emanate only from individuals, like Dr. Stockmann.

Hovstad accuses Dr. Stockmann of becoming an aristocrat, but the doctor says he has no interest in the established upper class. Rather, he's concerned with "the scattered few" intelligent and independent men. He wants to start a revolution against the "tyranny of the majority," which forces society to cling to old and useless ideas rather than adopting fresh and innovative ones.

While it's easy to interpret Dr. Stockmann's radical statements as an embrace of elitist politics, the doctor is actually arguing for an entirely new kind of class system, which he will go on to explicate.

Sarcastically, Hovstad asks Dr. Stockmann to name one of these outdated ideas. The doctor responds that the entire *People's Messenger* is based on the false premise that "the ignorant and incomplete" have the same right to govern as the "intellectually superior personalities" of the community. The crowd now turns against him entirely, blowing whistles and calling for him to be thrown out.

The new hierarchy Dr. Stockmann proposes would elevate the intelligent over everyone else. While this might not seem better than majority rule, it's important to note that embracing any kind of hierarchy often leads to dehumanizing those on the bottom – just as Dr. Stockmann's remark that unintelligent people are "incomplete" suggests.

Dr. Stockmann calls for them to "be reasonable," saying that, although he never hoped that everyone would support him, he did think that "freethinkers" like Hovstad would see the truth of his ideas. Hovstad denies that he has ever been a freethinker.

Hovstad's comment is ironic given his previous assertions of his radicalism. Hovstad is only a "freethinker" when thinking freely coincides with the views of the majority.

Dr. Stockmann says that he will prove that that the *People's Messenger* is lying, and that "the common people are nothing more than the raw material" of their society. He reminds the crowd of the difference between "well-bred" and "ill-bred" animals: for example, a common hen lays small and poor eggs, compared to one bred for this function over decades. He then calls the audience's attention to the difference between mutts who spend their lives running in the streets and poodles bred in the houses of gentlemen, who are smarter than common dogs ever could be.

Dr. Stockmann's comments here are troubling. He asserts that unintelligent people are not just lacking in one area of human merit but fundamentally less human than those who are smarter than them. And by comparing people to different "breeds" of animals, he implies that intelligence depends on heritage; this undermines his later claim that intellectually superior men can be found in any social class.

If these examples hold true among the animal world, Dr. Stockmann says, they ought to be true of people as well, but Hovstad won't acknowledge the truth because he "retains the traces of his common origin" rather than achieving "true intellectual distinction." Hovstad says that he is proud to come from "humble countryfolk," and the crowd applauds him.

While Dr. Stockmann is criticizing Hovstad for being intellectually (rather than socially) "common," he's not doing so very clearly, which allows Hovstad and the others to seize on his words as evidence of classism. Dr. Stockmann is an elitist, but his prejudices are based on intellectual merit.

Dr. Stockmann clarifies that he doesn't refer to "common people" in the traditional, aristocratic sense of the world. He asserts that people of common intellect can be found on every step of the social ladder – like his brother Peter, who is descended from an old family but can't think for himself.

Dr. Stockmann's comment here clashes with his earlier argument that "well-bred" animals are necessarily better than "ill-bred" ones. After all, he and Peter come from the same "breed," but the doctor is asserting his intellectual superiority to his brother here.

Dr. Stockmann says it's unconscionable for the *People's Messenger* to preach that the compact majority is always broadminded and morally correct, when their actions are always based in "falsehood and deceit." Mr. Aslaksen and Hovstad accuse him of trying to ruin the town, and he responds that he would rather see it ruined than "flourishing upon a lie." He says that everyone who lives based on lies should be "exterminated" before they infect the entire country.

Dr. Stockmann's devotion to his ideals is by this point unquestionable, but his language is quite extreme here when he argues that ideology, no matter how sympathetic, is ultimately destructive if it doesn't include mercy and flexibility.

Hovstad shouts that Dr. Stockmann is a public enemy, and the crowd takes up this cry. Mr. Aslaksen calls a vote to declare the doctor "an enemy of the people," and orders Billing to distribute paper. Citizens hiss at Dr. Stockmann, and Morten and Ejlif fight with other boys. Billing and Hovstad walk around collecting people's ballots, hinting to the populace that Dr. Stockmann drinks, has madness in his family, and is acting from a desire for an increase in his salary.

Although the vote on Dr. Stockmann's status as a "public enemy" is technically a democratic process, it springs from the mob mentality of the meeting, and shows how groupthink and majoritarian power can combine to enable tyranny both at the top and bottom of society.

Morten Kiil, who has been watching silently the entire time, approaches Dr. Stockmann and asks if he's seriously accusing the tanneries—including the one Morten owns—of contaminating the water supply. Dr. Stockmann says that Morten's tannery is the worst involved. Morten says that any attempt to publicize this fact will cost him, but Dr. Stockmann ignores this bizarre comment.

Here, Morten Kiil appears distanced from both his society and his family; he's only concerned with his own tannery. In this way, he's eerily similar to Dr. Stockmann, who alienates himself from everyone around him because of his devotion to his own ideas.

Aslaksen announces that everyone except for one drunkard has voted to declare Dr. Stockmann an enemy of the people. The crowd cheers for the community and the "able and energetic" Peter. Dr. Stockmann urges his family to put their coats on, refusing to leave through the back door; he promises that the people will hear more from him, as he is not as forgiving as Jesus. Mr. Aslaksen chides him for blasphemy. The entire family pushes through a crowd of hissing and angry people to leave.

The final vote emphasizes that Peter and Mr. Aslaksen have been able to mobilize supposedly democratic processes to suppress dissent and the free exchange of ideas. Although Dr. Stockmann has made a number of troubling comments in his speech, this development seems to support his claim that democracy is not the fairest or most efficient mode of government.

ACT V

In the morning, Dr. Stockmann examines his study, which has been thrown into disarray by boys breaking the windows at night. He slowly picks up the stones, telling Katherine that he will "treasure" them and one day bequeath them to Morten and Ejlif, so that they will understand their father's character. Impatiently, he asks if the maid has found the repairman yet, and Mrs. Stockmann replies patiently that she's still looking for him.

As usual, Dr. Stockmann is more interested in his ideological relationship to his sons than his actual duty to care for them now. It's also telling that he doesn't include his daughter, Petra, in this philosophical bequest, given that she's the member of his family who has embraced his ideas most fully.

A letter arrives from the landlord, warning the family of its immediate eviction from their house, due to "regard for public opinion." Dr. Stockmann announces that the family will sail with Captain Horster to the New World, where they can begin another life. It's intolerable to live here, where the community has repudiated him and even torn his pants. He clarifies that he doesn't care about the pants, which his wife can always fix, but he's incensed that "the common herd" would attack him "as if they were [his] equals."

The landlord's decision shows how public opinion, when given too much political power, can result in persecution. Dr. Stockmann's comment about the "common herd" is troubling; as he becomes more alienated from society, his description of others becomes more disdainful and authoritarian, suggesting that the development of his ideas has as much to do with offended pride as the actual character of the public.

Dr. Stockmann continues that tyranny of the majority is probably prevalent everywhere in the world, and that people are just as loyal to their parties in the New World as in Norway; he dreams of settling his family on a distant island, far from this corruption. When Katherine points out that such a life would not be good for the boys, he asks how she can bear for their sons to live in this society, which is full of "brutes." Katherine quietly points out that the townspeople's bad behavior is partly due to the "imprudent" things her husband said.

While Dr. Stockmann can only imagine escaping tyranny by leaving society altogether, Katherine reminds the reader that it's braver and ultimately more useful to find a way to live one's ideals within a potentially hostile society.

As Dr. Stockmann is beginning to respond, Petra enters the house; she's been fired from her schoolteaching job, as several parents have complained about her. Captain Horster soon follows her in, consoling Dr. Stockmann on the disastrous public meeting and subsequent ruin of his house. Dr. Stockmann says he cannot live where he is considered an enemy, and asks when the captain is planning to sail from Norway. But Captain Horster reveals he has been dismissed from his own ship, in retaliation for lending Dr. Stockmann his house. Petra expresses her sorrow that Captain Horster ever became involved with the family, but he reassures her that he does not regret it, and will soon find another commission.

Petra and Captain Horster have both received public punishments for supporting Dr. Stockmann's ideas, even though they have done nothing illegal or wrong; this is one way in which tyranny of the majority can actually subvert democratic norms, rather than upholding them. It's notable Captain Horster continues to be both loyal and apolitical; only by staying away from politics in its current form, the play suggests, can an individual uphold his beliefs and support his friends.

A knock on the door is heard, and Peter enters. The others exit, leaving the two brothers to speak privately. Caustically, Dr. Stockmann points out that it's rather cold in the house today, and advises the mayor to keep his hat on.

This scene parallels the earlier and slightly more congenial discussions between the brothers, showing the final disintegration of their relationship.

Peter curtly presents Dr. Stockmann with a letter dismissing him from his job on the **Baths** Committee, which he says is due to negative public opinion of him. Furthermore, he informs Dr. Stockmann that a petition is circulating to ban him from practicing medicine in the town. He advises his brother to leave for a few months, after which—if he publicly recants his findings about the water supply—Peter may be able to shift public opinion and get his job back.

Threatening his brother with the end of his medical practice, Peter is using majoritarian rule for his own gain. And by hinting at his own ability to shift the town's mindset, he's basically admitting that public opinion doesn't represent any fundamental principles, but rather develops from a combination of self-interest and propaganda.

Dr. Stockmann says he will never be party to "foxy tricks" like this. Peter says that he has no right to disregard his family and their needs, but Dr. Stockmann responds that the only thing "a free man has no right to do" is to "soil himself with filth."

Both brothers are mistaken about the relationship of politics and family life: as Petra and Katherine show, women can and want to participate in activism, but Dr. Stockmann's obliviousness to the family's needs suggests that fidelity to one's beliefs does not excuse one from obligations.

Peter says that Dr. Stockmann is only able to be so stubborn because Morten Kiil will leave money to Katherine and the children, taking up Dr. Stockmann's duty as provider. In fact, Dr. Stockmann had known nothing about Morten's plans for his will, but he rejoices to think that is family will be cared for in the future. When Peter warns him not to make plans on a will that could easily change, Dr. Stockmann replies that Morten has always been amused by his troublemaking and will never disinherit him now. Peter explodes in outrage, declaring his belief that Dr. Stockmann has caused a town conflagration simply to ingratiate himself with Morten. Although the doctor denies this, the mayor stalks out of the house.

This passage shows the positive side of Dr. Stockmann's character. While most characters assess those around them in terms of their social position and the advantages they can confer, Dr. Stockmann is genuinely unaware of his position as Morten's beneficiary and has never tried to flatter his father-in-law. However, his trusting attitude towards Morten will soon prove naïve.

As Dr. Stockmann shouts curses after his brother, Petra quietly announces that Morten Kiil himself has arrived to speak with him. Morten sits down in the drafty study and congratulates Dr. Stockmann on the state of his conscience. Tapping his own chest, he asks his son-in-law what he thinks is inside. Dr. Stockmann replies that he hopes "a good conscience" lies beneath his clothes, but Morten says he has "something better" and produces an envelope full of stocks in the **baths**.

Morten's straightforward self-interest – shown here through his outright statement that money is more important than one's good conscience – is both comic and distasteful. But in fact, he just expresses the principles according to which most of the townspeople live.

Dr. Stockmann is astonished that Morten Kiil has invested in an institution with such an uncertain future, but his father-in-law says that he needs to defend the reputation of his tannery, which has belonged to his family for generations. He knows that people call him a "badger," but he intends to "live and die a clean man," not an animal. He reveals that he has bought the stocks with the money he planned to leave his daughter. If Dr. Stockmann retracts his findings and saves the **baths**, the family will become rich, but if he sticks to his ideas, they'll be impoverished. Sticking to his principles under these conditions, says Morten, is equivalent to flaying his family alive.

It's interesting that Dr. Morten compares himself favorably to animals, just as does Dr. Stockmann. Morten's bald-faced obsession with money and status is obviously unsympathetic, but both men are similar in that their moral beliefs are intertwined with their personal pride, making them willing to advance those beliefs even when doing so involves harm or destruction for others.

Dr. Stockmann is furious with Morten Kiil but also uneasy about losing all this money just as he has lost his job. He wonders aloud if he really is totally certain of his ideas, or if it would be possible for him to treat the water without repairs to the **baths**. Morten advises him to try "rat's-bane," and at this ridiculous suggestion Dr. Stockmann turns on him, saying that he's the one to harm the family irrevocably. Undaunted, Morten says he must give an answer by the afternoon, and leaves abruptly.

This is Dr. Stockmann's moment of greatest temptation and despair – and, admirably, he doesn't take the bait. Even though it's clear that Dr. Stockmann cares more than he admits about his reputation and status in the eyes of others, he's ultimately able to put that aside to pursue his principles.


Just after his departure, Hovstad and Aslaksen present themselves. Dr. Stockmann is astounded they can face him after their behavior last night, but the two men are completely calm; they ask Dr. Stockmann why he never let them in on his plan. Seeing the doctor completely baffled, the two men explain their belief that he and Morten Kiil have concocted the water contamination as a means to buy up cheap stock in the **baths**. Now that they presume him to be a rich man, they offer to use the *People's Messenger* to rehabilitate his reputation.

Here, the two newspapermen openly admit that the People's Messenger's coverage aims not to convey truth but to manipulate public opinion in order to enrich its editors. The editors' open demeanor and lack of shame betrays their bizarre opinion that this is a right or honorable course of behavior for journalists to adopt.

Dr. Stockmann plays along, encouraging them to sketch out a plan of using the newspaper and the Householders' Society to return him to power and restore confidence in the **baths**—in exchange, of course, for the doctor's financial support. Sarcastically, he asks what they will do if, in the end, he refuses to give them the money; Hovstad threatens that they could use the newspaper to expose him for his supposed trick with the stocks. He says that these actions are justified by the fact that "every animal must fight for its own livelihood."

Dr. Stockmann's sarcastic "collusion" emphasizes the extent to which the newspaper is a political tool. Hovstad's blunt assertion that the newspaper is just his "livelihood" and means to advance himself in the world gives the lie to his earlier more idealistic statements about the nobility of the publication's cause and his own sense of ethical responsibility as a journalist.

Dr. Stockmann takes up his walking stick, trying to beat the men and show them that he is "the strongest animal." He tries to force them out through the broken windows, but as Katherine bursts in and restrains him, the two men escape through the living room.

Through this display of violence, Dr. Stockmann stoops to join Hovstad and Mr. Aslaksen in this struggle for "strength," both physical and political.


Calming down, Dr. Stockmann gives Petra a note for Morten Kiil, relaying his refusal of the offer. He turns to his wife and tells her that instead of fleeing the town, they're going to stay in the town and fight for their ideas. Captain Horster offers them the use of his house, since he's rarely at home. Even though most of the townspeople will no longer patronize his practice, the doctor will minister to the poor and share his ideas with them. Katherine reminds him that preaching has done him little good so far, but he says that the "compact majority" will never defeat him.

It's notable that even though Katherine herself earlier protested her husband's desire to leave town, he now presents the brave decision to stay as his own idea. Even though she now has to take a more active role in keeping the family afloat and supporting her husband's beliefs, she's denied any acknowledgment for her efforts.

Suddenly full of optimism, Dr. Stockmann draws Katherine over to the window and gestures at the lovely weather outside. When she says that the family can't live on "sunshine and spring air," he responds that he's not concerned about their welfare; she'll have to "pinch and save a bit," but they will manage. Rather, he's concerned about the fact that there's no one "high-minded enough" to continue his work when he's gone.

Just as he considers his future relationship with his children rather than their current needs, Dr. Stockmann ignores the family's actual circumstances to meditate on his future and legacy.

Interrupting this conversation, Morten and Ejlif arrive early from school. Other boys had been picking on them, and the teacher advised them to stay home for a few days. Dr. Stockmann impetuously decides to educate them himself. He tells them to recruit as many street urchins as they know in order to start a school, in which he will spread his own unconventional principles with Petra's help. Eventually, they'll grow up into men who can "drive all the wolves out of the country."

As her father's assistant, Petra is able to take a more active role in political life and inhabit the center of his incipient movement. At the same time, she's again relegated to relaying someone else's ideas (as she did while a schoolteacher) rather than developing or sharing her own.

Doubtfully, Katherine says that she hopes the wolves won't drive her husband away, but Dr. Stockmann jubilantly responds that he is the most powerful man in the town. Gathering the family around him, he dramatically explains that "the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone." Katherine smiles in admiration of her husband, and Petra grasps her father's hand as the curtain closes.

Dr. Stockmann's jubilant declaration reflects the play's emphasis on individual rights and the importance of clinging to one's beliefs despite social pressure. At the same time, the presence of Dr. Stockmann's family, and his obvious reliance on them for moral support, suggests an inherent human dependence on others.

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