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CONTRASTING VISIONS:
PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA
IN HENRIK IBSEN’S PILLARS OF SOCIETY

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Throughout the nineteenth century, America was a topic of lively and contentious interest among Europe’s literary elite. In most cases, however, the evident fascination with the United States was due not so much to its rising international standing, but rather to its status as a new civilization – one with roots in the Old World, yet in many respects profoundly different from it. Intensified by the onset of mass emigration from the 1830s and onwards, this great debate about American civilization pitted enraptured accounts of freedom and authenticity against glum visions of the moral and cultural misery awaiting European emigrants in the United States. More often than not, these conflicting representations were rooted in endogenous, European affairs. For all their professed knowledge of America, literary authors mostly remained prisoners of long-standing and deep-seated biases, and their pronouncement on the United States were often little more than coded responses to key political and social issues at home – thus, popular and politically radical writers tended to extol America (thereby implicitly criticizing the prevailing situation in Europe), whereas conservatives would normally opt for a strongly dismissive stance (thereby implicitly defending the domestic order of things). Rarely an object of dispassionate enquiry, the United States remained shrouded in mythologies and preconceptions. As a result, the European image of America tended toward extremes, casting the New World either as a dream or a nightmare (Arendt 409-10).

Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, founder of the modern drama, is not normally regarded as a major contributor to the debate about America in nineteen-century European
letters. Indeed, Ibsen does not seem to have been particularly interested in the United States. His private correspondence contains only sporadic references to this country, even though two of his younger siblings had emigrated there, and his son had served for three years at the Swedish-Norwegian embassy in Washington. His personal library included none of the standard contemporary accounts of America, whether fictional or factual (cf. Haakonsen). Most importantly, his published works tend to avoid the topic altogether. In fact, we would be justified in speaking, not simply of a lack of interest, but an apparent lack of awareness of America on the part of Ibsen the author, were it not for a few scattered references in his poetic and dramatic writings as well as a fuller, yet still seemingly peripheral representation of the United States in *Pillars of Society*, the first of Ibsen’s great cycle of “modern” plays.

In this article, I offer a new look at this pivotal drama, aimed specifically at reconstructing its complex views on the United States. Never a critics’ favorite, this reputedly “clunky” play has attracted scholarly attention mainly due to its formal innovations (Hemmer) as well as its seemingly redemptive conclusion, which, according to a much-cited paper by James MacFarlane, should be understood ironically rather than literally (MacFarlane). To the extent that the American theme has been touched upon at all, the verdict has invariably been that the play is strongly sympathetic to the United States, associating this country with freedom, vitality and moral decency. In the following I present a different view. While Ibsen’s lack of genuine interest in the United States seems beyond doubt, *Pillars of Society* is in fact deeply involved in the nineteenth-century European conversation about the nature and values of American civilization. Yet, Ibsen’s position within this conversation is marked by an unusual degree of complexity that far transcends the simple opposition between uncritical infatuation and shrill disparagement. Rather than subscribing to either of these abstract positions, Ibsen appears in this play to be conducting a review of the contemporary European discourse about America. Freely
using the available positions for the purposes of characterization and critique, the play seems to endorse some of the key tenets of romantic anti-Americanism, while on the other hand using the United States “positively” as a foil for what is seen as the hypocrisy and repression of bourgeois society in Norway and Europe.

Through a combination of historical and textual analysis, this article aims to disentangle the intricate web of discursive and narrative threads that make up the image of America in *Pillars of Society*. The main outcome is a better appreciation of how this play draws on contemporary debates about the United States, while at the same time imbuing these debates with new complexity. In addition, the proposed reading of the play sheds new light on Ibsen’s development as a dramatist and offers new insights into the literary discourse on America in the late nineteenth century.

**Emigration and the discourse on America**

An author’s comparative disinterest in a foreign country is rarely a topic worthy of detailed commentary; after all, such disinterest can often be put down simply to temperament or personal preference. Yet for a writer as focused as the later Ibsen on the key social issues of the day, the relative neglect of the United States is remarkable. Not only did the United States undergo a rapid transformation in the second half of the nineteenth century, gradually making it a world leader in terms of technological prowess and economic power; it also had a special relevance in Ibsen’s native country as the new homeland of hundreds of thousands of Norwegian emigrants. As Toril Moi has shown (39), Norway in this period was “colonial” and “post-colonial” society, struggling to escape the dominance of its Scandinavian neighbors. Yet it was also very much a colonizing society, which yearly contributed thousands of its population to the settlement of the American West. Beginning in earnest in the mid-1830s, Norwegian emigration peaked in the decades between the mid-1860s and the mid-1890s, a period roughly corresponding to
the “modern” phase of Ibsen’s career as a dramatist. During this period, Norway’s annual emigration rate frequently exceeded a full one percent of the population (a figure topped only by Ireland). The vast majority of these emigrants went to the United States, and it has been estimated that a total of more than 800,000 Norwegians settled in this country between 1836 and 1930 (Haugen 14).

This massive outflow of people triggered an extensive and often animated public debate, focused partly on the causes and consequences of emigration at home, and partly on the United States as the emigrants’ destination of choice. With Ibsen as the most notable exception, Norway’s major poets and writers of the period were deeply involved in this debate, and together they turned America and American emigration into a major theme in the national literature of the late nineteenth century. Several of them even visited the Midwestern emigrant settlements themselves, conveying their impressions back to the Norwegian public in the form of articles, letters, and travel books.

The literary negotiations over the United States began almost at the same time as organized mass emigration. As early as 1843, a time when emigrant numbers only averaged around one thousand per year, the influential national-romantic poet Henrik Wergeland sounded the alarm, railing against what he regarded as the “emigration frenzy” and comparing emigration to a dangerous epidemic disease that caused its victims to lose their good sense (qtd. in Blegen 155). Two years later, Wergeland followed up this direct attack with a short anti-emigration play, Fjeldstuen (“The Mountain Cabin”, 1845). Here, expanding on his epidemiological imagery, the poet likens emigration to the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages and describes it as a serious threat to the ongoing endeavor to craft an independent national culture – an endeavor to which most of his own activity as a writer was dedicated. Yet Wergeland primarily directs his anger against emigration agents, represented in this play as cynical exploiters who trick naïve peasants into a life of misery far away from the true national home. In a manner typical of European anti-
emigration literature of this period, emigration is represented as a risky undertaking likely to end in disillusionment, if not in death (Wergeland).¹

Even as he rails against emigration, Wergeland rarely speaks ill of the United States itself. However, in the following generation, when migrant numbers had risen considerably, the positions for and against emigration invariably correlated with similarly polarized attitudes toward the United States and American civilization. The opposing views were politically charged and rooted in ongoing domestic debates. Liberals tended to describe emigration as unavoidable given the political and economic situation at home, and further regarded the freedom and the democratic ideals of the United States as a model for their own reformist proclivities. Conservatives, on the other hand, tended to discourage emigration, regarding it as a threat to the vitality of the homeland and conversely perceiving the United States in Eurocentric terms as a country without history and hence also without culture (Gulddal 20-25).

The liberal position was advocated eloquently and with integrity by 1903 Nobel Prize laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norway’s national poet and author of its national anthem. The emigration question features very prominently in Bjørnson’s work. As a young man in the 1850s and 1860s, writing within the tradition of nationalistic romanticism, his views on the matter were still wholly under the sway of Wergeland. Emphasizing the need for talented people to remain in Norway for the benefit and improvement of the nation, early works such as the novels Arne (1858) and En glad gut (1860) represent emigration as a selfish and damaging undertaking (Haugen and Haugen 6-7). Yet, like Ibsen

¹ The narrative of the disillusioned emigrant is a significant but neglected subgenre in European literature of the mid-to-late nineteenth century; notable examples include: Gustave de Beaumont, Marie, ou L’esclavage aux États-Unis (1835); Charles Dickens Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44); Ferdinand Kürnberger Der Amerikanüde (1855); and Victorien Sardou’s L’Oncle Sam (1872). For a comprehensive discussion of this genre, cf. Gulddal 45-53.
in the same period, Bjornson undergoes a political transformation around 1870 that changes his outlook from nationalism to democratic liberalism. As a result of this ideological shift, the emigration question acquires a new critical potential in his writings: emigration is from now on seen as a consequence of the backwardness of Norwegian society, while the United States is held up as a model of political freedom, economic opportunity and individual strength. A seven-month visit to America in 1880-81, equally divided between the intellectual centers in New England and the Norwegian emigrant communities in the Midwest, would confirm this new outlook, and the travel letters that Bjornson published in the Oslo newspaper *Dagbladet* are full of praise of both the emigrants and their new country; at times, the author even goes to the extreme of encouraging young Norwegian tradesmen to try their luck in the New World (Haugen and Haugen 254). Upon returning home, Bjornson continued this campaign for a more temperate and realistic perception of the United States. In a rare and insightful analysis of the domestic brand of European anti-Americanism, the author thus takes exception to what he refers to as the “endless defamation of an entire people” – the undifferentiated hostility toward the United States that often served as a corollary of the conservative hostility both towards democracy and emigration (Bjornson).  

The conservative position had a somewhat extremist spokesperson in novelist Knut Hamsun, another Norwegian Nobel Prize winner (1920), whose views on the United States were partly a reaction to Bjornson’s liberalism. As a young man, the destitute

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2 Bjornson’s impassionate defence of America against its conservative detractors in Norway often leads him to represent this country in heavily idealized terms, eulogizing it as the “miracle republic of the world” and characterizing the “men and women of New England” as the “best company in the world” (Bjornson). Here, the United States is clearly not so much a real place as way of making a point within a domestic debate.
Hamsun had spent a total of more than four years in the American Northwest (1882-84, 1886-88) in a bid to gain the financial wherewithal to pursue a career as an independent writer back in Norway. The bid was unsuccessful. After having worked a variety of jobs from farmhand and cable-car conductor to itinerant lecturer, Hamsun returned to Scandinavia and immediately set to work on a firebrand invective against America entitled *Det Moderne Amerikas Aandsliv* (“The Cultural Life of Modern America”, 1889). Rather than analyzing the major social and political problems of contemporary America, this book concerns itself almost exclusively with the cultural ramifications of the country’s commercial, industrial, and technological modernity. The conclusion is always the same and always in keeping with that of conservative romanticism: culture in the European sense is impossible in a young republic devoted to business and material prosperity, and for this reason Americans are condemned to a life of utter spiritual emptiness. Disturbingly, Hamsun shores up this line of reasoning, not only with blatantly misogynistic attacks on the (relative) independence of American women, but also with references to the contemporary discourse of biological racism and its warnings against racial miscegenation. Blood contamination is seen here as an important reason for America’s cultural ineptitude: “Instead of founding an intellectual elite, America has established a mulatto studfarm” (Hamsun 144).

The two most important statements on the United States in Norwegian literature of the nineteenth century, Bjørnson’s travel letters and Hamsun’s anti-American diatribe demarcate the extremes of a cultural environment where America had taken on diametrically opposite meanings – as a land either of freedom or of moral and cultural decadence. Ibsen’s various remarks about America are not direct responses to either of these authors (they mostly belong to a slightly earlier period, namely the 1860s and 1870s), yet they are nevertheless products of the same extensive and often self-contradictory discourse on America that had developed in Norway with the onset of mass emigration. Familiar with
this discourse from its earliest beginnings, Ibsen would later, as a long-time exile, have seen it reflected in the wider European debate over the United States in this period, not least in his main country of residence, Germany. When Ibsen wrote about America, this discourse with its conservative and liberal poles served as his inescapable point of departure.

The two earliest of Ibsen’s literary reactions to the United States both belong to the negative, anti-American strain associated with political conservatism and hostility toward emigration – even if Ibsen does not explicitly endorse these views. The first is the poem “Abraham Lincolns Mord” (“The Murder of Abraham Lincoln”, 1865), which presents an idiosyncratic interpretation of the assassination of the American president as the joint product of Europe’s “grafting twig” and the “rich soil” of the New World. Underneath this horticultural imagery lies a quasi-Hegelian view of history, predicated on the idea of a gradual development toward a point of crisis that will produce a new beginning. Framed by this view, America is portrayed as the high-point and logical outcome of Europe’s perennial treacherousness and ever-increasing moral corruption. If this means, dialectically (and similar to the view of the United States in classical Marxism), that the United States is somehow closer to the “victory of dawn”, it also entails a highly negative representation of this country as a place where “justice sits on the edge of the knife”, and where the present age has “inverted itself to its own caricature” (“Abraham Lincolns Mord” 398-401).

The second example, to be found in Act 4 of Peer Gynt (1867), expands on these views while explicitly linking them to the emigration issue. While never representing the United States directly (and never mentioning it by name), the rascally protagonist’s account of his experiences as an emigrant makes it clear that America is seen here as a place of unbounded materialism where morals and humanity count for nothing. After ten years in the United States, having become rich through a combination of slaveholding, smuggling
and colonial trade, Peer Gynt has degenerated into an unprincipled scoundrel – an exemplar of “the Yankee rabble’s worst progeny” (Peer Gynt 391).

Both biographically and historically it would make sense if these bleak, albeit relatively rudimentary, representations of America in Ibsen’s earlier works were transplanted by more positive views in the dramatist’s decalogue of modern prose plays – that is, if Ibsen’s perception of the United States evolved in the same direction as that of Bjørnson and in parallel with the evolution of the author’s social and political views. In fact, this preconception seems to inform the standard interpretation of Pillars of Society. According to this view, Ibsen uses America primarily as a foil for bourgeois Europe, letting it stand for freedom and honesty as opposed to emotional repression and hypocrisy (e.g. Johnston 104-5; Rossel 16). Yet, this play’s overall image of the United States is in fact much more complicated and much less immediately positive. Unusually for literature of this period, Ibsen resists the temptation to reduce America to a neat, homogeneous idea, whether positive or negative, and stages instead a multilayered confrontation between incongruous ideological positions. A closer investigation, based on the brief historical reconstruction offered above, will reveal how Ibsen’s modern breakthrough play offers a dynamic mise-en-scène of the contemporary debates about the United States that explodes the dichotomy of American “dreams” and “nightmares”. This dismantling of the traditional discursive order of things hinges on a strict separation within Ibsen’s play between America fictions and American realities.

American fictions

Like Ibsen’s modern plays in general, Pillars of Society levels an all-out attack on the hypocrisy and repressiveness of late nineteenth-century bourgeois society. Adhering to the dramatic ideals of the Aristotelian-Sophoclean tradition, the modern plays are typically structured around a process of gradual revelation that brings to light the moral corrup-
tion (although rarely outright criminality, as Franco Moretti has recently argued) lurking under the surface of bourgeois respectability. In this particular case the unwelcome revelations come crashing down on Consul Karsten Bernick, the owner of a shipyard in a small town on the Norwegian Atlantic coast. As the town’s “foremost citizen” (Pillars 95), Bernick is involved in all aspects of its commercial life and further represents a moral ideal to his fellow citizens by virtue of his seemingly perfect family life. However, this standing is based on a body of lies that is dragged into the light when Bernick’s two in-laws, half-siblings Johan Tønnesen and Lona Hessel, suddenly return home after having lived for many years as emigrants in the United States. The absence of these family members has long allowed Bernick to use them as scapegoats for his own wrongdoings, which include an affair with a married actress as well as some shady financial dealings designed to save the family business. Representing the repressed side, or the guilty conscience, of bourgeois life, Johan and Lona are the only persons other than Bernick himself who know the truth. At first, they have no intention of exposing the Consul’s secrets, yet a series of unexpected events ultimately makes it impossible for them to keep up appearances any longer.

Even though its two main positive characters have spent fifteen years in the United States, Pillars of Society only touches upon the American theme peripherally: it has very little to say about the emigrant experience, it has no named American characters with speaking parts, and everything said about the United States is surrounded by conspicuous vagueness. Yet this country is nevertheless a permanent presence in the play, not least because the characters, positive as well as negative, repeatedly compare life in small-town

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3 Moretti’s contention meets its limit in this particular drama, in which the male protagonist is clearly guilty of criminal irresponsibility and attempted murder.

4 Quotations from this edition have occasionally been modified with reference to the Norwegian original (Samfundets Støtter).
Norway to the very different conditions on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. In doing so, they implicitly refer to the contemporary Norwegian and European debate on America with its two basic attitudes of conservative resentment and liberal admiration.

Superficially considered, the rule applies that the play’s positive characters have a positive attitude toward the United States, while negative characters generally express anti-American sentiments. Thus, the mainly female victims of bourgeois hypocrisy all seem to fantasize of a more authentic and less repressive existence in the New World. Lona Hessel, whom Bernick deserted many years earlier in favor of her half-sister, the shipyard heiress, articulates this pro-American longing in exemplary form when she juxtaposes the “air of the prairies” with the stench of “burial shroud” in her native town, thereby associating the United States with life and bourgeois society in Norway with death (Pillars 45). The housemaid Dina Dorf, who in reality is the victimized daughter of Bernick’s former actress lover, similarly imagines Americans to be more “natural” rather than “so very decent and moral” – the latter being the key attribute of the local bourgeois hypocrites (Pillars 57-8). Finally, the Consul’s unmarried sister, Martha, explicitly associates America with freedom, sunlight, strength and youth, once again drawing a clear distinction between the vitality of the New World and the corruption of the Old (Pillars 101, 103).

The opposite view prevails among the “respectable” male citizens, the main beneficiaries of the reigning social order and its values. Here, we encounter a firm belief that their own society is built on a “sound moral foundation”, as Bernick puts it (Pillars 39), and for this reason they are markedly skeptical towards everything foreign, whether it be technological innovations, changing mores or social reforms. The main representative of this brand of conservative provincialism is the deeply self-righteous and intolerant Dr. Rørlund. Exposed as a reactionary hypocrite as early as in the play’s opening scene, Rørlund warns against “more frequent contact with the depraved world outside” (Pillars 39) and repeatedly rants against the “great modern communities”, first among which United
States whose glittering façades he describes, with unintended irony, as a cover for “hollowness and corruption” (Pillars 25). The sickly and effeminate Hilmar Tønnesen, a cousin of Bernick’s wife, provides corroboration for this view from a very different angle. Compensating for his poor physical constitution, he frequently indulges in fantasies of masculinity involving buffalo hunting and fights with “redskins” in the American West. When encouraged to emigrate himself, he points to his health as the only impediment. Yet in reality he is strongly dismissive of the United States, characteristically greeting the tune of “Yankee Doodle” with an indignant cry – habitual, yet tripled for this particular occasion – of “Ugh, ugh, ugh!” (Pillars 42).

As it is clear from these contrasting attitudes, Ibsen’s characters use America as a vehicle for either attacking or defending their own society. Here, significantly, the United States is not so much a real place that the characters have a genuine interest in understanding, but an imagined alternative to small town Norway that is represented as positive or negative depending on the speaker’s gender and social position. America becomes a medium of cultural self-interpretation, and it is important to note that the opposing viewpoints are equally disconnected from reality – they are nothing other than dreams and nightmares, articulated in view of the local Norwegian context rather than the United States. Yet given the fact that the negative views are consistently attributed to negative characters and utilized to ridicule them, it seems natural to conclude that the image of America in Pillars of Society is biased towards the positive pole, and that this play consequently has little to do with the discourse of contemporary European anti-Americanism. Further, the rejection of the United States by the play’s bourgeois hypocrites leads us to believe that Ibsen is politically in agreement with Bjørnson, accepting emigration as inevi-

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5 The sound is expressive both of a sickly disposition and, more pertinently in this context, of moral and aesthetic dismay.
table and endorsing the values of what Bernick calls an “agitated society like that of America” (Pillars 62).

**American facts**

According to Joan Templeton, the United States features in *Pillars of Society* as one of Ibsen’s “alternate, offstage geographies”, designed as a “challenge to the hegemony of the bourgeois home” (Templeton 601). This is an astute observation, yet any critical appraisal of this play’s representation of America would be incomplete if it overlooked the fact that the United States also has an *onstage* presence in the form of the dilapidated American steamship “Indian Girl” and its rowdy crew. When the United States is transformed in this way from fantasy to tangible reality, the locals suddenly forget their otherwise irreconcilable differences and instead condemn the Americans in one voice. Thus, the American sailors are represented by all parties in strongly negative, even dehumanizing terms. It is hardly surprising that Hilmar Tønnesen and Dr. Rørlund, both representatives of the town’s deep narrow-mindedness, are repulsed by these unwelcome American visitors: true to his delicate disposition, the former anxiously reports that the ship’s captain was formerly “a pirate, or a slave-trader” (Pillars 78), while the latter uses the sailors as an opportunity to rant once more against a “great modern society” like the United States: “I would rather not sully your ears by speaking of such human refuse. But even in respectable circles, what do we see? Doubt and unrest fermenting on every side; spiritual dissension and universal uncertainty. Out there, family life is everywhere undermined. An impudent spirit of subversion challenges our most sacred principles” (Pillars 25). Significantly, however, these disparaging views of Americans are shared by the play’s positive characters. Thus, when Bernick complains to his foreman, Shipwright Aune, that the sailors are an “unprincipled horde”, instigating “riots” and committing unmentionable indecencies, this honest worker agrees wholeheartedly, characterizing the Americans as
“a depraved lot” and later stating that “there aren’t any human beings in the Indian Girl – only beasts” (Pillars 49, 76). Even Lona Hessel, the play’s benchmark of integrity and reason, refers to the sailors as a “gang of ruffians” (Pillars 106).

When confronted with “real” Americans, the play’s entire cast comes together in condemning them as criminals, barbarians or animals – truly a rare ecumenical moment in Ibsen’s modern dramas. Importantly, the comprehensive stigmatization of the sailors is gratuitous in the sense of having no genuine narrative purpose. While the plot requires a derelict merchant ship bound for the United States, there is strictly speaking little reason why the ship and its crew have to be Americans, why the American crewmen should be cast as more depraved than sailors of other nationalities, and why their depravity should be commented by such as wide range of characters. The only plausible explanation seems to be that Ibsen is taking this opportunity to lash out against the “Yankee rabble” and their anarchic country, as he had done a decade earlier in Peer Gynt.

Further to this question of America’s tangible presence in the town, the American steamship itself is accorded an important narrative function. “Indian Girl” is old and rotten; it has suffered major damage on its latest crossing, and is at the beginning of the play undergoing extensive repairs at Bernick’s shipyard. However, the American owners inform Bernick by telegram that the ship must be readied without delay: “Execute minimum repairs. Despatch Indian Girl as soon as in floating condition. Safe season. At worst, cargo will keep her afloat” (Pillars 41). This telegram is of key significance, being the only non-perspectival testimony about the United States in the entire play. While the surpris-
ing agreement among the cast regarding the American sailors already produces an illusion of objectivity, the telegram is the only piece of evidence that is not mediated through the particular ideological biases and interests of the characters. As such, it must be seen as crucial to the play’s representation of America.

The telegram evidently places the American ship-owners in a negative light, yet it is not in itself an expression of anti-American bias: American businessmen can be unscrupulous, just like businessmen of any other country. However, the question is whether the ship’s American nationality is simply incidental. Ibsen-scholars such as Halvdan Koht (305) and Michael Meyer (“Introduction”, 54-5), among many others, seem to think so when pointing toward a European context of the “Indian Girl” segment, namely the debate initiated in the United Kingdom by Member of Parliament Samuel Plimsoll concerning the abysmal standards of repair and safety in the British merchant navy. Historically, this contextualization makes perfect sense: Plimsoll’s crusade against the infamous “floating coffins” peaked in the mid-1870s and led to the passing of the Merchant Shipping Act in 1876, just a year before the first performance of Pillars of Society; moreover, it had a profound resonance in the seafaring nation of Norway, where a very similar debate raged around the time of Ibsen’s homecoming visit in 1874 (Meyer, Ibsen 435). Yet logically and in terms of narrative, the parallel is not entirely satisfying. Had Ibsen wanted to reference the contemporary debates on safety at sea, he could have let the ship fly British or Norwegian colors, or could at least have made less of its American nationality. As it is, all information provided about the “Indian Girl” – its crew, its captain, its owners and even its name – serves to underscore that it is in fact American. In other words, the play “nationalizes” the issue, essentially making it a question, not of maritime safety standards, but of American business practices: like the characterizations of the American sailors, the “Indian Girl” episode seems designed first and foremost to highlight the despicable nature of the “Yankee rabble”.

For this reason, the reference to Samuel Plimsoll needs to be supplemented with an equally pertinent reference to the traditional anti-American idea that profit in the United States always takes precedence over moral considerations, including matters of health and safety. This view, which Ibsen had already endorsed in *Peer Gynt*, was firmly entrenched in Western European culture of the nineteenth century. It received an early, theoretical formulation in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of history; writing around 1830, Hegel states that the essential character of the American republic consists in the “private person’s striving for acquisition and profit”; and since the legal institutions in the United States lack genuine “integrity”, American businessmen are famous for “cheating with the protection of the law” (Hegel 88-9). Two decades later, in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44), Charles Dickens went one step further by repeatedly pointing towards the fatal consequences of American fraudulence; in fact, the novel’s protagonist almost succumbs to it himself, having been tricked into buying a lot of land in a pestilent swap with the alluring name of Eden.  

Yet it is Austrian writer Ferdinand Kürnberger who provides the closest match-up with *Pillars of Society*. Kürnberger’s novel *Der Amerikamüde* (1855) – a classic example of radical anti-Americanism – contains a detailed account of a lethal ship collision on the Lake Erie, caused by the greed and recklessness of the American captains who care only about delivering their cargoes as fast as possible and have no regard for passenger safety (Kürnberger 514-15).

Ibsen’s Consul Bernick subscribes to exactly the same anti-American view when interpreting the telegram, not as being pertinent to British or Norwegian controversies of

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7 Cf. Dickens’s description of American businessman Major Pawkins: “In commercial affairs he was a bold speculator. In plainer words he had a most distinguished genius for swindling, and could start a bank, or negotiate a loan, or form a land-jobbing company (entailing ruin, pestilence, and death, on hundreds of families), with any gifted creature in the Union. This made him an admirable man of business” (Dickens 261).
the day, but rather as an indictment of America: “Oh no, really, this is typically American! How absolutely disgraceful! [...] Eighteen human lives at stake! And those gentlemen don’t turn a hair” (Pillars 40-41). This reaction effectively invalidates the hypothesis that Ibsen is simply thinking of Samuel Plimsoll and the notorious “coffin ships”. The phrase “Typically American” not only implies that the practice in question is widespread in the United States, but also, more importantly, that it brings to light something quintessentially American, namely the reckless pursuit of profit and the cynical disregard of human life. While Plimsoll’s campaigns are clearly relevant to this drama, the logic of the “Indian Girl” episode indicates that the primary reference of this passage is to the tradition of European anti-Americanism.

Bernick’s condemnation of the American ship-owners is of course highly ironical: after initially ignoring the request to halt the repair work, he is later tempted in an altogether similar way to sacrifice human lives for the sake of personal gain. Having fallen in love with Dina Dorf, Johan Tønnesen decides to return permanently to his Norwegian hometown, yet has to return to the United States one last time and plans to make the crossing with “Indian Girl”. This turn of events spells disaster for Bernick, and in order to be rid of the increasingly inconvenient brother-in-law, he orders the ship to be readied for immediate departure, well aware that it will almost certainly go under if without further repairs. Although the Consul later regrets this decision, he has nevertheless revealed himself to be as cynical and calculating as the American owners. However, rather than discrediting Bernick’s previous anti-American outbursts, this ironic twist actually increases their weight. The point is not that murderous behavior of this type knows no nationality, but that Bernick, desperate to protect his status as the town’s “foremost citizen”, is willing to act as unconscionably as an American. In this way, the play makes Americans a yardstick of moral depravity.
Thresholds

As we have seen, the representation of the United States in *Pillars of Society* is split between two different, even contradictory modalities.

On the one hand, a range of central characters repeatedly invoke a *fictional* America, derived from the transatlantic myth-making of European romanticism, as a means of understanding their own community. This process of cultural self-interpretation exists in both affirmative and critical versions, being employed variously as a means of defending and attacking the local bourgeois society and its values. Inasmuch as the positive characters harbor positive ideas about the United States, while the negative characters find America to be purely negative, the play as a whole seems to advocate a favorable stance, rejecting the anti-American sentiments of the likes of Rørlund and Bernick as the mark of an ideologically retrograde outlook. Read in this way, Ibsen’s attitude toward America is close to that of Bjørnson in the same period.

On the other hand, we also encounter the *real* America in the form of the “Indian Girl” and its depraved crew. Here, the play seems instead to adopt a strongly anti-American attitude, branding the Americans as immoral in their business dealings and beastly in their social comportment. Far from being incidental, as was perhaps the case in *Peer Gynt*, this anti-American dimension is emphasized by the play’s structural design. Not only is the all-out attack on the American sailors gratuitous from the point of view of narrative motivation (Ibsen is going out of his way to represent them negatively); it is also voiced in unison by a broad selection of both positive and negative characters, and it receives further corroboration in the form of the telegram, which importantly is an objective element in the play, in the sense of existing independently of the specific viewpoints of the characters. As a result, the anti-Americanism directed against the “real” America is accorded the status of an objective fact. Read in this light, *Pillars of Society* is
closer to the romantic tradition of anti-Americanism, of which Knut Hamsun’s vitriolic rants are a late and characteristically extreme product.

Complex or even contradictory attitudes toward the United States are not uncommon in nineteenth-century European literature, even though a certain polarization around positive and negative extremes is the more usual situation. Thus, for example, praising the pristine landscape while at the same time deprecating the political institutions and social mores is a common strategy in romantic commentary on the United States, featuring perhaps most prominently in Chateaubriand’s American novels and later making up the ideological core of Gustave Aimard and Karl May’s Indian romances (Markovits 50-56). Ibsen’s play shares this ambivalence: when fantasizing about America, the female characters generally refer to natural attributes (open spaces, fresh air, sunlight, health, youth), whereas the undercurrent of anti-Americanism is focused predominantly on what is seen as the moral failings of American society.

Yet the representation of America in *Pillars of Society* differs markedly from the established patterns. Rather than simply juxtaposing different mythologies about the United States, Ibsen employs both the positive and negative myths as part of his critique of bourgeois society, while at the same time exposing the fictitious character of these myths by contrasting them with what is seen as American reality. Here, the commonplace distinction between American dreams and nightmares is undercut by a more fundamental distinction between American fictions and facts. In order to understand this complex structure, we need to take into account both Ibsen’s development as a dramatist and the general evolution of the European image of America toward the end of the nineteenth century.

*Pillars of Society* is a threshold piece within Ibsen’s writings, marking a complete break with his earlier, national-romantic or idealistic phase and the beginning of the more important, modern phase encompassing the great cycle of realist dramas of the 1870s to
1890s. Highly fertile in terms of its thematic and formal innovations, Ibsen’s turn toward modern drama also had profound political implications and inevitably affected the author’s standpoint within the contemporary European debate concerning America and American emigration. As we have seen, the early Ibsen had been closer to Wergeland’s nationalistic rejection of emigration than to Bjørnson’s liberal fascination with the freedom and opportunities of the United States; indeed, he had gone further than Wergeland by attacking America itself, associating it with violence, lawlessness, and deception. However, in the context of a progressive agenda in both literature and politics, the New World acquires a whole new meaning, uneasily placed between the positive and negative poles of late nineteenth-century European discourse on America, and between the conservative and liberal views on emigration.

Seen in this light, the anti-American position that Pillars of Society develops in relation to the “real” America must be regarded as a late version of Ibsen’s earlier stance, which focused on the United States as a culturally and morally noxious environment for European emigrants. However, in a contrasting and distinctly “pro-American” maneuver Ibsen refunctionalizes the bi-polar Romantic discourse on America as a critique of the European bourgeoisie. The shrill rejection of the United States by the town’s leading citizens becomes a new way of exposing their provincialism, while the occasional enthusiasm for the United States on the part of the positive characters is used as a way of gesturing toward an alternative to the mendacious, claustrophobic life in the small coastal community. However, these opposing attitudes are clearly nothing other than imaginations: they are not serious descriptions of the United States, but ideological markers used to distinguish stubborn conservatives from progressive reformers within a very European setting. Ibsen takes great care to separate this imagined America, which serves as a screen for European projections, from the real America, present in the play in the guise of the “Indian Girl” and the American sailors. Whilst allowing the imagined America to
take on positive meanings, *Pillars of Society* represents this “real” America as morally and culturally corrupt. In this way Ibsen performs a remarkable tightrope act, which is characteristic of his later views on the United States: he uses America critically without retreating from the baseline anti-Americanism of his earlier career.\(^8\)

The attitude toward the United States, then, constitutes a major fault line within Ibsen’s first modern play, vividly testifying to the author’s ideological struggles in the transitional period of the late 1870s. Yet apart from being significant in terms of Ibsen’s political development, the representation of America in this play is also indicative of a general change within the European perception of the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. The discourse on America in the early part of the century had been dominated by the opposite romantic fictions of America as a land of either freedom or cultural and moral corruption. These fictions had been kept alive partly by incessant recycling, and partly by a relative scarcity of reliable information that often reduced the United States to a projection screen for European fantasies. Increased traffic, greatly boosted by the introduction of steamships on the transatlantic shipping routes, gradually altered this situation and paved the way (if only temporarily) for more realistic perceptions. Ibsen’s multidimensional representation of the United States in *Pillars of Society* is a remarkably clear manifestation of this new realism. In utilizing conflicting fictions about America as part of a critique of the European bourgeoisie, these fictions are precisely

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\(^8\) This basic structure is also apparent, albeit on a much smaller scale, in Ibsen’s later play *An Enemy of the People*. When briefly considering going into exile in the United States, the much-reviled Dr. Stockmann muses: “Mind you, they’re probably not much better in America. The majority’s rampant there too, and liberal public opinion and all the rest of the rubbish. But the context is larger there, you see. They may kill you, but they won’t torture you slowly; they don’t pin a free man in a vice like they do here. And if you want to, you can stay independent outside it all” (*Enemy* 204-5). Here, too, Ibsen uses the United States as a way of criticizing the conditions at home, yet this critical use does not exempt this country from being criticized as well.
exposed as fictions. Even if Ibsen fails to extract himself fully from the prejudices of European anti-Americanism, this in itself is a major achievement: to have demonstrated in dramatic form the inherently imaginary character of Europe’s perceptions of America.

Works Cited


