

Characters

Doctor Thomas Stockmann - A practicing medical doctor, the medical officer of the town baths, and the brother of the [mayor](#), who got him the job at the baths. Stockmann is idealistic and excitable. For much of his life he was destitute and lived in the countryside; now he is happy to be fairly prosperous and living in a bustling town.

Mrs. Katherine Stockmann - [Dr. Stockmann](#)'s wife. She is loyal and practical and often encourages her husband to think of his family when he is being rash. [Morten Kiil](#) is her adoptive father, or grandfather, depending on translation.

Petra Stockmann - The daughter of [Thomas](#) and [Katherine](#), Petra is as idealistic as her father. She is a hard-working teacher, and she is frustrated that the law requires her to teach things she doesn't believe in.

Peter Stockmann - Peter is [Dr. Stockmann](#)'s brother. He is also chairman of the baths committee. He is a cautious but sometimes ruthless politician.

Hovstad - Hovstad is editor of *The People's Herald*, the town's leftist newspaper. Although slightly corrupt, he is at heart a political radical.

Aslaksen - Aslaksen is the newspaper's printer. Because he lets the paper print on credit, he has a degree of editorial control. He is also the chairman of the homeowners association, which represents the town's small business class, the majority of voters. He also has great influence with the Temperance Society, and he is a lover of moderation.

Billing - An assistant at the newspaper, he is a radical, like [Hovstad](#), but he is also ambitious and plans to run for office. He is in some way courting [Petra](#).

Captain Horster - A ship captain who has little interest in local politics, Horster provides the hall for [Doctor Stockmann](#)'s speech, but he is fired from his ship as a result.

Morten Kiil - A rich old man, Kiil owns several of the tanneries that [Dr. Stockmann](#) implicates in his water pollution report. He is the adoptive father or grandfather (depending on the translation) of [Mrs. Stockmann](#), and his will assigns a good deal of wealth to her and her children.

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Analysis

[Dr. Stockmann](#) makes a discovery that he thinks will help the town. He presses for changes to be made to the baths, but the town turns on him. Not only have his scientific experiments been a waste of time, and not only will the townspeople suffer, but his freedom of speech and self-respect are being attacked. He then decides that the only reason that the leaders have turned on him is that they are afraid of the people. He, thus, lashes out at the people. He is motivated both by his anger and by true realizations about the corruption of the town.

It can be concluded that *An Enemy of the People* has two key messages. First, it is a criticism of democracy. Second, it is the story of how one man's bravery and self-respect can survive overwhelming odds.

Ibsen's critique of democracy is twofold. First, he shows the tyranny of the majority. The majority is a tyrant insofar as the leaders of society are afraid to do what is right because they are at the people's mercy. Even though [Hovstad](#) wanted to print the doctor's report on the baths, he was afraid to do so because his subscribers would be upset. The [mayor](#) cannot propose any changes to the baths because the public might find out that the mayor had made a mistake in the original plans and, thus, oust him. The majority is afraid of risk and, according to the doctor, it is not intelligent enough to do what is right.

While Ibsen illustrates the tyranny of the majority, he also shows how leaders can manipulate the majority. When [Aslaksen](#) and the mayor take control of the town meeting, they are manipulating the majority, using the majority to their ends. It could be that Hovstad merely cited his subscribers' possible wrath as an excuse because he himself did not want to print the article. More likely, both he and his subscribers would have been against the doctor. Those who are in power, like Hovstad and the mayor, automatically guess what the

majority will want, and they always try to please the majority. While Aslaksen and the mayor manipulated the audience at the town meeting, they influenced them in the only way possible. In other words, it would have been almost impossible for the mayor to convince the crowd that they should support the doctor's comments about the stupidity of the masses. Ibsen's idea is that the majority does not rule directly; instead, the idea and threat of the majority keeps leaders from acting honestly.

The personal story of Dr. Stockmann is secondary. The key thing to remember is that he is extremely idealistic and maybe even a little naive and foolish. His wife, after all, feels compelled to remind him of practicalities.

Summary

The town in which the play is set has built a huge bathing complex that is crucial to the town's economy. [Dr. Stockmann](#) has just discovered that the baths' drainage system is seriously contaminated. He alerts several members of the community, including [Hovstad](#) and [Aslaksen](#), and receives generous support and thanks for making his discovery in time to save the town. The next morning, however, his brother, who is also the town's [mayor](#), tells him that he must retract his statements, for the necessary repairs would be too expensive; additionally, the mayor is not convinced by Dr. Stockmann's findings. The brothers have a fierce argument, but Dr. Stockmann hopes that at least Hovstad's newspaper will support him. However, the mayor convinces Hovstad and Aslaksen to oppose Dr. Stockmann.

The doctor holds a town meeting to give a lecture on the baths, but Aslaksen and the mayor try to keep him from speaking. Dr. Stockmann then begins a long tirade in which he condemns the foundations of the town and the tyranny of the majority. The audience finds his speech incredibly offensive, and the next morning the doctor's home is vandalized. He and his daughter are fired. The mayor insinuates that the doctor's actions were merely a scheme to inherit more of [Morten Kiil](#)'s money, and Kiil himself soon arrives to suggest just such a plan to Dr. Stockmann. However, the doctor refuses all such suggestions and decides to defy authority and remain in town. His family is supportive, and he says that the strongest man is the man who stands alone.