Four Major Plays Study Guide

Four Major Plays by Henrik Ibsen

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The four plays in this collection (A Doll's House, Ghosts, Hedda Gabler and The Master Builder) are the most well known and frequently produced, of the many plays written by the late 19th Century Scandinavian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. While entirely individualized in terms of characters and situation, all explore common themes - the role and place of women, their varied struggles for freedom, the inability to escape the past, and the importance of public perception.

The first play, A Doll's House, centers around the character of Nora, a pretty, vivacious and somewhat naïve young woman married to Torvald, an ambitious bank manager with very clear ideas of how people in general, women in particular, and his wife in the specific particular, should behave. Nora has borrowed money from a private money lender in order to help her husband, but when she discovers how negatively her husband feels about people who borrow money (and when the money lender attempts to blackmail her), Nora is forced both to confront the darker sides of those she trusts and her own innocence. In one of the most famous final moments in theatrical history, Nora leaves her home and marriage, slamming the door on her innocence, her past, and her children.

In the second play, Ghosts, the central character is Mrs. Alving, the respected widow of a well-regarded military hero. As construction on an orphanage built to honor her husband's memory draws to a close, she discovers that her son (Oswald), her protégé (Regine), and her confidante (Pastor Manders) all believe that Captain Alving was the kind of man who should be honored in such a way. Tired of sustaining a life of lies, Mrs. Alving reveals how morally reprehensible her husband truly was - that he continued having affairs after his marriage, and that Regine is the illegitimate offspring of one of those affairs. Since Regine is being pursued by Oswald, she becomes particularly upset at the revelations. When Oswald reveals that he is suffering from a debilitating disease, passed down to him by his father who himself contracted it as the result of his debauched life, Mrs. Alving is left with nothing but the choice of whether to help her son die.

In Hedda Gabler, the third play in the collection, the central character, Hedda Gabler, has just returned home from her honeymoon with a man who already bores her. When a visit from a former best friend and current rival informs her that a former lover has come to town, Hedda takes steps not only to bring him back into her life, but for him to transform his own life into something she wants it to be. She is also propositioned by an opportunistic friend of the family and pressured by her weak-willed husband to be pleasant to his well-meaning but domineering family. When all her plans backfire and her former lover ends up killing himself, Hedda discovers she is trapped in a life she doesn't want to live and also takes refuge in suicide.

In the final play, Solness, the "master builder" of the play's title, feels threatened by the rising brilliance and ambition of his assistant, Ragnar. He also suffers intense remorse because of his role in triggering the lingering depression of his heartbroken wife, Aline.

The arrival of a young woman, Hilde, whom Solness had met several years before changes his life completely. She has sought him out in order to have him fulfill his promise to create a castle, a home, and a life for her. At Hilde's urging, Solness takes an increasingly daring series of risks, finally succumbing to her determination that he climb a newly-constructed tower in triumph as he had done when they first met. Solness, however, suffers from vertigo and, before the eyes of Hilde, his wife, and his protégé, falls to his death.

A Doll's House, Act 1

A Doll's House, Act 1 Summary

The four plays in this collection (A Doll's House, Ghosts, Hedda Gabler and The Master Builder) are the most well known and frequently produced, of the many plays written by the late 19th Century Scandinavian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. While entirely individualized in terms of characters and situation, all explore common themes - the role and place of women, their varied struggles for freedom, the inability to escape the past, and the importance of public perception.

Nora comes in with an armload of Christmas presents. Torvald chastises her playfully about how much money she's spent. Nora, also playful, reminds Torvald that he's about to be promoted, and that as a result they'll have more money coming in, adding that if they're short they can always borrow. Torvald tells her he doesn't believe in borrowing money under any circumstances.

As Torvald goes into his office, a visitor arrives for Nora - Mrs. Linde, an old friend from school. Conversation reveals that Mrs. Linde's husband recently died, and she hopes Torvald can give her a job. Nora comments that things have been difficult for her, too - she and Torvald had to fund a trip to Italy to strengthen Torvald's health, she had to borrow money from a money lender to pay for it, and she's had to work long hours on secret jobs to pay him back. She adds that she did what she did out of hope for a happy future with her husband and children.

Krogstad arrives to see Torvald. As she and Mrs. Linde react to his presence with uneasy surprise, Nora shows him into the study. Dr. Rank, who has been visiting with Torvald, comes in to greet Nora, and he, Nora and Mrs. Linde briefly debate the value of work and the power Torvald now has.

Torvald comes in, having finished his conversation with Krogstad and is getting ready to go to his bank. Nora tells him of Mrs. Linde's need for a job, and Torvald says he'll do what he can to help. After he, Dr. Rank, and Mrs. Linde all leave, a housemaid shows the children in. Happy playtime is interrupted by the return of Krogstad. After Nora has sent the children out of the room, conversation reveals that Krogstad is the money-lender from whom Nora borrowed for the trip, that he's in danger of being dismissed from his job at Torvald's bank, and that if Nora doesn't convince Torvald to keep him on, Krogstad will show Torvald the IOU she wrote to cover the loan.

After Krogstad goes, Torvald returns. He realizes that Krogstad wanted Nora to put in a good word for him, assumes that Nora was going to, and that she was going to lie about why Krogstad was there. As Nora remains silent, Torvald tells her there are to be no lies in their house. Further conversation reveals that Torvald would be compassionate if Krogstad would only accept responsibility for his actions, and that people with attitudes like that corrupt both their own lives and those of their children. After he goes into his

office to read the papers he brought home from the bank, Nora wonders out loud whether it's possible that she could be corrupting her children in the same way.

A Doll's House, Act 1 Analysis

Many of Ibsen's plays from the middle period of his life and work were, at the time they were performed and published, highly notorious. They became known for their unflinching look at the darker aspects of the human condition (see "Themes - The Dark Side of Humanity"). In this socio-cultural period, such darker aspects simply weren't discussed and the presentation of the subjects in a public forum such as a play was a scandal. A Doll's House was the first of the plays in this period to be performed, the first to create a negative sensation, and to this day is referred to as having one of the most powerful and evocative final moments in all theatre literature. In short, it was a history-making play - for its frankness, for its dark ending, and perhaps most importantly for its exploration of the condition of women.

While many of Ibsen's plays feature strong, richly-characterized women, only Nora in this play can be defined as a heroine in the traditional sense. This identification is possible for several reasons - she struggles with increasing courage against increasing challenges; she develops a clear vision of what she wants from herself and from her life, and above all she undergoes a moral transformation from being a liar to taking steps to understand her personal integrity. This last aspect of both her character and the play has, over time, made her something of a feminist heroine, with her journey from submission to freedom perhaps being seen as archetypally representing women throughout history.

This first act contains many well-defined and well-utilized elements. These include a strong plot, in which event leads to reaction leads to action, with steadily increasing stakes and tension; vividly-defined characters—it's very clear, for example, from Torvald's first moments in the play that he is a patronizing, repressive monster, and important foreshadows. Examples of this last element include Torvald's anger at the idea of taking out a loan, which foreshadows Torvald's anger in Act 3 when he discovers what she's done. Another piece of foreshadowing is Nora's early lies - Torvald asks whether she's brought candy into the house, and she lies and says she hasn't. These lies foreshadow later revelations about her lies about the loan - lies that, in turn, define who she is at the beginning of her journey of transformation and why that journey is necessary.

A reader will probably note the similarities and parallels among the plays. For example, Nora's living of a lie parallels Mrs. Alving's similar life in Ghosts, while her competitive relationship with a friend from school parallels Hedda Gabler's friendship with the similarly troubled Mrs. Elvsted. The principal parallel between Nora, Mrs. Alving and Hedda and their respective struggles for freedom is discussed in more detail in "Themes - Women's Desire for Freedom."

A Doll's House, Act 2

A Doll's House, Act 2 Summary

The day after Christmas, conversation between Nora and the children's nanny reveals that Nora has been keeping herself distant from her children. Mrs. Linde arrives for a visit, and Nora asks for her help in mending her costume for a party and dance that night. Conversation reveals that Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank were at the house for Christmas dinner, and that Rank has a fatal illness. As Torvald returns from the bank, Nora hurries Mrs. Linde away, saying he hates having mending around.

Nora asks Torvald to keep Krogstad in his job, but Torvald angrily reveals his plans to give Krogstad's job to Mrs. Linde. Furious at his wife's interference, Torvald sends orders that Krogstad is to be dismissed immediately. He then goes into his study, telling her to practice her dancing.

Dr. Rank arrives, speaking gloomily about how little time he has left to enjoy his visits with Torvald and Nora. He reveals his plans to keep his final agonies private from Nora and Torvald and to send a postcard marked with a black cross when he's reached those moments. Conversation also reveals that he cares a great deal about both Torvald and Nora, leading Nora to tentatively investigate the possibility of his doing her a favor (the implication is she's going to ask him for money to pay back Krogstad). When Rank impulsively confesses his love for her, however, Nora becomes upset, saying he's ruined everything and adding that the favor she was going to ask him doesn't really matter.

A visitor arrives for Nora, and she asks Rank to keep Torvald occupied. After he's gone, Nora allows the visitor (Krogstad) to be shown in. Conversation reveals that he's been fired, and that he's going to use the IOU to blackmail Torvald to create a new job for him at the bank. As Krogstad leaves, he puts his letter of blackmail in the letterbox in the front door, where it's impossible for Nora to reach.

Mrs. Linde comes back in and a frenzied Nora confesses everything. Mrs. Linde says the only thing to do is for Krogstad to ask for his letter back. She goes out to try to persuade him to do just that, telling Nora to keep Torvald distracted from the letter-box until she returns. After Mrs. Linde leaves, Nora tells Torvald that she needs his advice on her dance. Torvald, who is eager to read his letters, realizes there's a letter from Krogstad she doesn't want him to see. He agrees to not read it until after the dance the following evening and then plays the piano for Nora as she dances more and more frantically. At the end of the dance, Mrs. Linde returns. As Torvald goes in for dinner, Mrs. Linde tells Nora that Krogstad has left town. Nora tells her that a miracle is going to happen, but when Mrs. Linde goes in for dinner, Nora murmurs to herself that she's only got a little more than a day (ie the few hours until the dance is over) to live.

A Doll's House, Act 2 Analysis

On a narrative level, there are several noteworthy elements to note here. The first is the way pressure is increasing on Nora - particularly from Torvald and Krogstad, but also from the well-intentioned, but misguided, Rank. This pressure functions effectively to move both the plot and Nora's journey of transformation, with the one feeding the other. As Nora's situation becomes more desperate, the more intently she comes to realize that the situation has to change. Also on the narrative level, there is the effectively-developed sense of suspense, which reaches its height in the arrival of Krogstad's letter and Nora's inability to retrieve it - the sense of impending doom is quite high. Finally on the narrative level, there are several important pieces of foreshadowing. Rank's reference to the postcard with the black cross foreshadows the arrival of just such a postcard in Act 3, while Rank's references to his impending physical death foreshadows the emotional death of Torvald's innocence (when he discovers what Nora has done) and the equally emotional death of the once deliriously happy marriage. Other noteworthy foreshadows include Nora's speculation about leaving her children (which foreshadows her decision at the end of the following act to do just that), while Nora's hopeful reference to a miracle foreshadows her disappointment in Act 3 when she realizes that her miracle simply is not going to happen.

Other intriguing elements in this act include Nora's somewhat tattered dancing costume (a symbol of how everything about her marriage is both a costume and falling apart) and her dance itself. The tarantella is a stylized representation of the jittery, shaky death dance of an individual poisoned by the bite of a tarantula (note the similarity of names - tarantella - tarantula), and in this context serves as a metaphoric representation of both Nora's increasingly frantic dance to keep the truth from her husband and the volatile dying moments of her marriage.

In terms of parallels with the other plays in the collection, Nora's increasing desperation parallels that of the principal characters in the other three plays (Mrs. Alving, Hedda, and Solness). Meanwhile, the implications of some form of emotional intimacy between the trapped woman (Nora) and a friendly, father figure (Rank) parallel similar implications of intimacy between Mrs. Alving and Manders (Ghosts), Hedda and Brack (Hedda Gabler), and Hilde and Solness (Master Builder).

A Doll's House, Act 3

A Doll's House, Act 3 Summary

The next night, conversation between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad reveals they had an intimate relationship some years before, that Mrs. Linde is prepared to rejoin her life with Krogstad's if he withdraws his letter to Torvald, and that she believes that deep down, he's a good man. He agrees to do as she asks, and then hurries out, saying he's never been happier.

Nora and Torvald come in. As Torvald lights some candles, Mrs. Linde whispers to Nora that Krogstad will withdraw the letter, but that she (Nora) has to tell Torvald about the loan. As Mrs. Linde leaves, Torvald speaks passionately to Nora about how in love with her he is. At that moment, a drunken Dr. Rank comes in, ranting about some tests he's conducted. After he goes out, Torvald collects the contents of the letter box, and discovers a card from Rank with a black cross on it. Nora explains what the cross means; Torvald speaks casually of how much Rank will be missed, and then goes out to read the letters. Nora realizes he's about to read the letter from Krogstad.

A moment later Torvald bursts back in, having read Krogstad's letter of blackmail. He speaks at furious length about how disgusted he is with Nora ("How could you do this to me?" he says repeatedly), how his position is in danger, and how she can no longer be allowed to be near the children. Meanwhile, a note arrives for Nora, but Torvald grabs it first and is ecstatic to learn that Krogstad has returned the IOU and is no longer pursuing blackmail. As Nora remains silent, Torvald speaks at self-righteous length about his relief, how he's forgiven her, how he understands why she did what she did, and how wonderful it is for a man to be able to forgive his wife as thoroughly as he has. "It's as though it made her his property in a double sense," he says. "He has, as it were, given her a new life, and she becomes in a way both his wife and at the same time, his child."

Nora, having changed out of the dancing dress and into her regular clothes, speaks at calm, firm length to Torvald of how she's felt like a doll in his home, how she feels the need to go out into the world and learn the truth of how things are, and how she must leave him and their family to do so. Torvald tells her that her first duty is to her family and children - she says her first duty is to herself. She goes on to explain that she had hoped for a miracle - that when Krogstad's blackmail came to light, he (Torvald) would stand up for her and take the responsibility in her defense, that he would show himself as devoted to her as she showed herself devoted to him when she arranged for the loan. He says no man would sacrifice his honor for a woman, and she says thousands of women have done just that for their men. She concludes by saying that the final straw was when he revealed himself to be focused only on how Krogstad's blackmail would affect him and his reputation. She then prepares to leave, dismissing Torvald's many entreaties for her to stay, to be allowed to write to her, and to be allowed to send her money. He cries out for hope in one last miracle, but she says she doesn't believe in

miracles any longer and goes. As Torvald tearfully hopes aloud for one last chance, the front door slams.

A postscript reveals that at one point in the play's early history, Ibsen was forced to write an alternative ending in which Nora, after being forced by Torvald to look at her sleeping children, chooses to stay, in spite of it being what she calls "a sin against [her]self."

A Doll's House, Act 3 Analysis

The first element to note in this section is the development of the relationship between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, which both parallels and contrasts the relationship between Nora and Torvald. The parallels consist mainly of the way one partner (Krogstad, Nora) is guilty of some kind of transgression, with the contrast appearing mainly in the way the other partner (Mrs. Linde, Torvald) reacts. Specifically, where Mrs. Linde reacts with compassion, selflessness, and forgiveness, Torvald reacts with fury, selfishness, and judgment. Another contrast is the way that Krogstad and Mrs. Linde experience the miracle in their relationship that Nora has so much faith would manifest in hers, meaning that where Nora is disappointed, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad are fulfilled. The irony, of course, is that by the end of the play all of them - Nora, Krogstad, Mrs. Linde - are freed from the repressions and oppressions of their past ... another parallel, if a somewhat darker toned one.

The second key element here is the effective use of subtext - the way in which the meaning of a moment is conveyed in what is unspoken, or under (sub) the dialogue (text). This occurs during the conversation with Dr. Rank, in which what he's saying (that the time has come for him to die) is clearly conveyed to both Nora and the audience without the use of words. A third key element is the portrayal of Torvald, whose revelation of just how deeply selfish he is propels Nora to take the final step along her journey of transformation. That transformation is the fourth, and perhaps the most important, element of this act - her emotional and spiritual transformation from what Torvald perceives as his pretty, brainless plaything to a woman he is forced to accept as a strong-minded, independently thinking and feeling woman. There is an undeniable emotional power to this confrontation, as Nora finally realizes the truth of her marriage, of the man with whom she shares that marriage, and of her situation - specifically, that in many ways it's the same as that of most other women.

Meanwhile, it's interesting to note here the way Nora's process of emotional transformation is echoed physically - specifically, in the way Nora changes out of the dancing dress (which, as previously discussed, represents her relationship with Torvald) and into a new and different outfit, just as she's taking steps towards living a new and different life. Nora's transformation is vividly symbolized by the slamming door in the play's final moments, an incident which has for decades been described as one of the most controversial, evocative, and effective moments in theatre history. While it might be going too far to suggest that it was also a defining moment in the history of women's struggle for freedom, self-identification, and respect, it was certainly a statement that the struggle was at least beginning. In other words, as Nora's door was closing, doors for

her and other women were just beginning to open, doors that Hedda Gabler (Hedda Gabler) feels unable to open, that Mrs. Alving (Ghosts) has struggled all her life in secret to go through, and that Hilde Wangel (The Master Builder) seems determined to kick open and stride on through.

Other parallels with the other plays in this collection include the relationship between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad (which, like the relationship between Mrs. Elvsted and Lovborg in Hedda Gabler is anchored in the idea of redemption), and the offstage moment of climax, the high point of emotion, confrontation and thematic meaning occurring where the audience can't/doesn't see it. Specifically, Nora's door slamming here parallels Hedda's offstage suicide in Hedda Gabler, and Solness' accidental death while falling from his tower in Master Builder.

For further consideration of the rewritten final scene, see "Topics for Discussion - Which do you think ..."

Ghosts, Act 1

Ghosts, Act 1 Summary

In the front room of Mrs. Alving's home, Regine quarrels with her father, Engstrand, over whether she should go back to live with him. Regine tells her father she wants nothing to do with him, reminds him to be quiet (since young Master Alving - Oswald - is upstairs sleeping) and urges him, when he goes, to avoid the approaching Pastor Manders.

Pastor Manders comes in, and Regine tells him of her father's request, adding that she refused but hinting that she would be willing to work for Manders if he asked. Manders abruptly sends her to fetch Mrs. Alving, which she does. When Mrs. Alving comes in, and Manders starts a conversation about whether the orphanage she is having built to honor the memory of her late husband should be insured. Mrs. Alving tells him she insures everything, but Manders suggests that for her to insure the orphanage might suggest to certain hostile individuals in the community that neither of them has proper faith in "divine providence." In spite of her concern over a recent accidental fire (started by a careless Engstrand), she agrees that there will be no insurance. When Manders brings up the question of Engstrand and Regine, Mrs. Alving vows to do whatever she can to ensure that Regine doesn't go near her father. Manders tries to speak on Engstrand's behalf, but the conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Oswald.

Oswald (an artist) and Manders argue over the morality of an artist's life. Manders takes angry exception to Oswald's comments on the positive aspects of artists' morality, and the upset Oswald leaves the room. Manders then takes Mrs. Alving to task for supporting Oswald, reminding her that she did her duty years ago (returning to her painful marriage after pleading with Manders to help her leave it) and she must do so again. He also says that whatever excesses Alving indulged in before his marriage, his behavior eventually improved to the point that the orphanage was built to commemorate him. Mrs. Alving then tells him that Alving's behavior never improved, adding that she undertook and oversaw everything that added to Alving's reputation in an effort to keep Alving's dissolute life a secret. Manders wonders how he can give his speech at the opening of the orphanage, now knowing what he knows, and Mrs. Alving expresses her hope that the orphanage will put her husband's spirit to rest forever. Suddenly they are both shocked to hear Regine, in the other room, telling Oswald to stop flirting with her. The horrified Mrs. Alving tells Manders that Regine's words are the same as those the maid used to her husband. "Ghosts," she says. "Those two ... have come back to haunt us."

Ghosts, Act 1 Analysis

When it was first written and performed a few years after A Doll's House, Ghosts quickly became just as notorious, if not more so. The reason often given is its portrayal of immorality, said immorality often defined as being anchored in the past behavior of

Captain Alving and its consequences. While it's certainly true that what is revealed of Captain Alving throughout the play is unsavory, to put it mildly, there are other instances of what might very well have been, and may still be by some, perceived as immorality. Possibilities include Mrs. Alving's covering up for Captain Alving (since conventional morality suggests that immorality must be punished), Oswald's outspoken advocacy for unmarried (what is now called common-law) relationships (as outlined in his argument with Manders), and the sub-textual attractions between Regine/Manders and Manders/Mrs. Alving. All the so-called immoralities of the play, however, seem in the playwrights' mind not only worthy of dramatic exploration, but manifestations of what seems to be a core intention in all four of the plays in this collection - to bring to light a darker, hidden side to human relationships. This is perhaps the ultimate immorality in a conservative world (which the author's world was at the time) in which good, honorable, decent behavior was not only expected but assumed.

On a technical level, there are several important elements to note. Structurally, the play's plot is effectively developed, with the various confrontations increasing the emotional momentum as it builds to the climactic confrontation between past and present that closes the act. Characters and relationships are effectively sketched in, with each conversation and/or confrontation clearly revealing the goals/intentions being pursued by each character, the tactics they're employing to achieve those goals, and enough background information on each of them to create a sense of curiosity in the reader/viewer of what each is going to do next. Particularly important elements in this area are the overwhelmingly self-consciousness and self-concern of Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving's being matter of fact about what must have been an unbearable living arrangement, and Regin's ambition - perhaps her determination - to leave her past behind is a more apt way to put it. That determination finds echoes not only in this play (in Manders and particularly in Mrs. Alving) but in other plays in this collection. For further consideration of this point see "Themes - The Inescapability of the Past").

Other technical aspects of this act to note include its symbolism (the orphanage symbolizes Mrs. Alving's attempts to redeem both herself and her husband), and its foreshadowing (Mrs. Alving's reference to the fire foreshadows the orphanage's eventual destruction by fire, while her reference to the "consequences" of Alving's immorality foreshadows the moment in Act Two when she reveals just what those consequences are).

Ghosts, Act 2

Ghosts, Act 2 Summary

After dinner, Mrs. Alving reveals to Manders that Regine was the "consequence" of Alving's affair with the maid - that Engstrand was paid to marry her mother and claim the child as his own. Mrs. Alving says again that she's haunted by ghosts, adding that she's not just referring to the ghosts of people and of actions, but of old ideas (specifically, the idea that a wife should honor her husband no matter what). Manaders returns the conversation to the subject of Regine and Oswald, and he and Mrs. Alving agree that the best thing would be to get Regine married off as quickly and as respectably as possible.

Engstrand comes in, asking whether Manders would be willing to lead a service of thanksgiving for the completion of the orphanage. Manders demands to know the truth of Engstrand's relationship with Regine. Mrs. Alving is silent as Engstrand tells Manders he had been in love with Regine's mother, that when she became pregnant she came to him for help, that the father of the child was a traveling American, and that he (Engstrand) married her to help her preserve her reputation. Manders asks him about the money Mrs. Alving said he was given. Engstrand tells him it was put aside for Regine's education - but, he adds, he has plans for the little extra of his own he's managed to gain with investments. As Mrs. Alving reacts with shock, Manders asks for Engstrand's forgiveness for thinking badly of him, and says he will come down and lead the service. After Engstrand goes, Manders says to Mrs. Alving that Engstrand's comments prove he is the good man he (Manders) has always said he was. After hurriedly rejecting a playful hug offered by Mrs. Alving, Manders hurries out.

Mrs. Alving calls Oswald in from the dining room, and comments on how much he's been drinking. He confesses that it's because he can't create any more because of an infection in his brain. He explains that he saw a doctor who told him it was passed on to him by his father ("the sins of the father" is the phrase the doctor used). Mrs. Alving assures Oswald that everything is all right, calling for champagne to lighten the mood. As Regine brings it, Oswald comments on how beautiful she has become, adding that they plan to run away together and that for him Regine represents the joy of life. Mrs. Alving begins to tell Oswald and Regine the truth about Alving, but at that moment Manders returns, commenting on how well the service went, and reacting with disdain when he sees Regine has been drinking with Oswald and Mrs. Alving. Oswald tells him he intends to marry Regine. As Manders reacts with shock, Regine notices that the orphanage is on fire! Oswald runs out, followed by Mrs. Alving and Regine. Manders comments first that the fire is a judgment and then suddenly remembers that the orphanage wasn't insured.

Ghosts, Act 2 Analysis

In a parallel fashion to Doll's House, the action of this play turns on revelations - of past behavior, past feeling, and past mistakes. This act begins with such a revelation (Regine's true parentage), increases the narrative tension by adding more (the romantic history shared by Mrs. Alving and Manders, Oswald's illness), and then winds that tension even more tightly when further revelation of Regine's parentage is forestalled by the discovery of the fire. In other words, the characters relentlessly and mercilessly peel away layer upon layer of long-held secrets to reveal festering truths, suffering, and need beneath.

Almost all these revelations are presented by characters and playwright alike, in a straightforward fashion. The exception is Oswald's disclosure of his illness, the description of which is limited to a decay of the brain. To modern sensibilities, this could mean almost anything, but to contemporary sensibilities (that is, beliefs and values and perspectives of audiences at the time the play was written), the description juxtaposed with Oswald's contention that his condition was passed on from his father could only mean one thing - venereal disease, specifically syphilis.

Back in the time when the play was first staged, syphilis had the same stigma that AIDS does in the late 20th Century (and in some cases still has today). Manders' attitude towards Oswald's revelation is a clear example of this - to have the disease was evidence of a dissolute, spiritually-corrupt life, to admit to having the disease was tantamount to ostracizing oneself from friends/family/society, and to develop symptoms of the disease was to begin a death sentence. The disease could also be passed on, knowingly or unknowingly, with the individual receiving the secondary infection regarded as a victim, as having been as sexually and spiritually corrupt as the primary, or both (to one degree or another). All of which is to say that by giving Oswald what appears to be (and which scholarship generally accepts to be) syphilis, the playwright is making Alving and his lifestyle the worst they can possibly be. Also, by having Mrs. Alving here and later in the play, react to Oswald with compassion that transcends simply being maternal, the playwright is suggesting that there may be, and may need to be, a broader understanding and perspective on those who face the simultaneous trauma of illness and stigma.

On a more symbolic front, however, Oswald's illness combines with the destruction of the orphanage to make the thematically relevant point that ultimately, an evil past (or, for that matter, the past in general) can be neither escaped nor redeemed. This, as previously discussed, is the core theme in each of these plays.

Ghosts, Act 3

Ghosts, Act 3 Summary

Mrs. Alving and Regine watch the dying fire, with Mrs. Alving commenting that Oswald is still there. As she goes to fetch him, Manders comes in, followed by Engstrand. After Regine goes, Manders comments on what a tragedy it is that the orphanage burned down. Engstrand says the fire was the result of Manders' carelessness with a candle. At first Manders denies the act, but Engstrand insists that he saw what he saw, hinting that Manders is in for trouble if word ever gets out. Mrs. Alving comes back in, saying she can't get Oswald to come back. As Manders wonders aloud what's to be done with what little is left of Alving's financial legacy (which isn't enough to rebuild the orphanage), Engstrand hints that if Manders supports him (financially and morally), he (Engstrand) will never again mention what he saw. At first Manders refuses the suggestion, but soon agrees. As he and Engstrand go out, Manders tells Mrs. Alving that he hopes some "order and propriety" will soon enter her home.

As they go, Oswald comes in. As Mrs. Alving comforts him, he asks for Regine's comfort as well, leading Mrs. Alving to tell them both the truth about Alving, but a different sort from what she told Manders. She says that Alving had a great deal of "the joy of life" about him, a joy that was utterly destroyed by life in the small town where they all live, and that he filled the emptiness left behind with drinking and debauchery - including, she adds, his relationship with Regine's mother. Regine and Oswald both react with shock to the news that they are half-siblings, and Regine immediately makes plans to go to work for Pastor Manders, suggesting as she leaves that Mrs. Alving should have raised her as the captain's daughter, not given her to Engstrand.

After Regine has gone, Mrs. Alving suggests that Oswald has suffered a serious shock after learning the truth about his father, but Oswald says he didn't know his father well enough, or care enough about him, to be shocked. He adds that he's surprised that Mrs. Alving still holds onto the old idea that a son should care about his father simply because he is his father. Mrs. Alving tells him she is going to do her best to win his love back to her, leading him to say there is a way she can do it. He reveals that his illness is likely to make him unable to care for himself, tells her that he has made plans to end his life before he gets to the point of being utterly useless, and shows her a box filled with morphine pills - the implication is that he is going to use them to commit suicide. He suggests that Regine would have helped him do what he had to do and asks the increasingly horrified Mrs. Alving to do it in her place. He and Mrs. Alving struggle over the pills, and Oswald makes her promise to do as he asks. She agrees, and then notices the dawn, telling Oswald everything is going to be all right. Oswald, however, suffers a mental collapse, and asks her - numbly, dully, repeatedly - to bring him the sun. Mrs. Alving almost gives the pills to him, but then stands frozen in an agony of indecision as Oswald again asks for the sun.

Ghosts, Act 3 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this, the climactic act of the play. Its several mini-climaxes are, in fact, the first of these elements. The orphanage sub-plot climaxes in the blackmailing relationship entered into by Engstrand and Manders, while the revelation of Regina's birth sub-plot climaxes in her angry exit to go work for Manders. These two mini-climaxes increase the emotional momentum to the climax of the Oswald-is-ill subplot, in his statement that ever since he was diagnosed, he has intended to kill himself (another revelation). This is, in fact the climax of the play, the high point of its thematic statement that the only way to escape the past is to die in the present. Here again it's important to note that this thematic statement can be found in all the plays in this collection (see "Themes - The Inescapability of the Past").

Other important elements here include the revelation of just how important Manders' image is to him, important enough to allow himself to be blackmailed into supporting an enterprise that sounds, the more Engstrand speaks of it, more and more like a brothel or whorehouse. Also important is Oswald's comment about what he believes to be his mother's attitude towards his relationship with his father. It seems, from both her comment and his reaction, that Mrs. Alving is not so advanced in her thinking as the books she (carefully? deliberately?) leaves lying about would have her guests, audience, and herself believe. Finally, Regine's reference to working for Manders echoes her belief, stated in Act 1, that he would be good to work for, as well as her offer to go work for him and Manders' hurried refusal in Act 2. It's never stated outright, but there is a certain sense of sexual tension between these two characters, a tension that might make a thematic mini-statement about how an individual's human nature (sexuality for Regine and Manders, deviousness for Engstrand, debauchery for Alving, compassion for Mrs. Alving, emotional instability for Oswald) is as inescapable as his or her past.

The final, and perhaps most important, key element of this scene is Mrs. Alving's perspective on her husband's life and behavior, a perspective that seems to be a new one triggered by Oswald's comments about the joy of life. There is the sense in Mrs. Alving's words that she is reacting with unexpected insight, a compassionate understanding that may well serve to define and illuminate her essential character. For further consideration of this point see "Characters - Ghosts - Mrs. Alving").

Hedda Gabler, Act 1

Hedda Gabler, Act 1 Summary

Conversation between Tesman and his visiting aunt, Miss Juliane Tesman, reveals that Tesman and Hedda, the beautiful and socially successful daughter of a demanding general, have been on their honeymoon for several months, that Tesman spent most of their time away working on a piece of academic writing, and that he has plans for an academic career. Miss Tesman hints that she, too, has plans - for the many empty rooms in the house. Hedda arrives and greets Miss Tesman with almost rude formality. Tesman comments on how beautiful Hedda is and how much her figure has filled out. Hedda insists she is as she always has been. After Miss Tesman leaves, Hedda promises Tesman that she (Hedda) will try to be more polite, with further tense conversation revealing that Hedda has been upset by the arrival of flowers from a Mrs Elvsted., a friend she hasn't seen in some time.

Mrs. Elvsted appears with news that Eilert Lovborg, her children's tutor and an academic rival of Tesman's, has arrived in town and has just published a new book. Hedda tells Tesman to invite Lovborg for a visit, and he goes out to write the invitation. Mrs. Elvsted confesses to Hedda that she's left her marriage because she can't be away from Lovborg, adding that she's helped him change his "old ways" and that she's been allowed to share in his work, but their happiness isn't complete. Lovborg is still in love with another woman who, when the relationship ended, threatened Lovborg with a pistol. As Tesman returns with the invitation and as Hedda is showing Mrs. Elvsted out, Brack arrives, and is surprised that Tesman knows about Lovborg's arrival. He also reveals that Lovborg is up for the same university job as Tesman. Tesman angrily comments that he and Hedda have planned their future based on that job. Brack promises Tesman will get job and then goes, asking to return for another chat. After he's gone, Tesman tells Hedda they'll have to wait for their plans to come to fruition. Hedda comments that she can fill her time by practicing with her father's dueling pistols. Tesman urges her to leave them alone.

Hedda Gabler, Act 1 Analysis

In this play, as in all the plays in this collection, present action is haunted by the past. In this case, the present is troubled by both the immediate past and more distant past. In the case of the former, the particularly troubling incident seems to have been Hedda's honeymoon with Tesman, which was apparently unsuccessful (perhaps because of his obsession with his academic career, perhaps because his life still seems to be defined by his very close relationship with his aunts - see "Objects/Places - Hedda Gabler, Tesman's Slippers). In terms of the more distant past, Hedda's relationships with Mrs. Elvsted, Lovborg, and Brack all seem particularly significant. It's important to note that there are few, if any, specifics in this act about what those relationships were and why

they are/were so important to Hedda. There is, however, a sub-textual sense of tension, of unresolved issues, in all three.

This sense of the sub-textual, of what is unspoken being more important than the spoken, is a defining element of this play, setting it somewhat apart from the other plays in this collection. Doll's House, Ghosts, and Master Builder all have their sub-textual elements, but for the most part, they play out their conflicts in a fairly overt, direct fashion. Hedda Gabler is different; conflict and information alike are, in most cases, implied rather than overt. For example, there are hints throughout this act and play that Hedda is pregnant. This is seen both in Tesman's references to her figure filling out, Miss Tesman's hints here, and from her and Brack later in the play that soon there will be a great deal to occupy Hedda and Tesman's time. The tension in this act between Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted, as well as Hedda's reactions to news of Eilert Lovborg, are all indicative of something significant going on in her and in the play, a something that is never explicitly spelled out but which becomes clearer and more intriguing as the action unfolds.

Another example of this sub-textual narrative development is the way the pistols are referenced here. Specifically, the juxtaposition of Mrs. Elvsted's reference to Lovborg's pistol-wielding ex-lover with Hedda's reference to her father's dueling pistols suggests very strongly, without actually stating it, that Hedda is in fact the ex-lover. Both references also foreshadow later action with those same pistols (Hedda's playful shooting at Brack, her giving a pistol to Lovborg to kill himself, her own suicide with the pistol she has left). For further consideration of the pistols see "Objects/Places - Hedda Gabler, Hedda's Pistols.)

A last element of foreshadowing in this act is Brack's request to come back for a visit later, which foreshadows his return in the following act and his subsequent manipulations of Hedda, which in turn embodies one of the play's key themes. This is Hedda's struggle for freedom, which is itself a theme of each play in the collection (see "Themes - Women's Desire for Freedom and Power").

Hedda Gabler, Act 2

Hedda Gabler, Act 2 Summary

That afternoon, Hedda uses one of the pistols to shoot playfully at the arriving Brack, who puts the gun back in its case. Conversation reveals that Hedda is already bored with both marriage and her husband. Brack assures her of his ongoing friendship, and hints that in a short time she'll have something to keep her both busy and happy. Hedda tells him in no uncertain terms that is never going to happen.

Lovborg arrives, and Tesman comes in to greet him. Polite conversation about Lovborg's new book reveals that he's finished a second and has brought the manuscript to show Tesman. He adds that he won't publish it until after Tesman has been given the university job. As Tesman and Brack have a private conversation, Lovborg speaks intimately to Hedda about their previous relationship, in particular, his deep feelings for her and his disbelief when she chose to be with Tesman. Hedda says her interest in him and his life were just the curiosity of a sheltered girl, accusing herself of being a coward.

Mrs. Elvsted arrives. Hedda insists that she stay with her and Lovborg, rather than greeting Brack and Tesman. Lovborg's first comments to Mrs. Elvsted are very flattering and seem to disturb Hedda, who suggests that Mrs. Elvsted is afraid that without her, Lovborg will return to his "old ways." Lovborg comments that it doesn't sound as though Mrs. Elvsted has much faith in him, and asks whether he can go with Brack and Tesman to a party. Brack says he can, and the men go out with Lovborg agreeing to come back later to escort Mrs. Elvsted home. Hedda assures the nervous Mrs. Elvsted that everything will be fine, and that Lovborg will be more himself as a result of going. She adds that she herself feels happy and fulfilled, "in control" of someone's destiny.

Hedda Gabler, Act 2 Analysis

This act contains several notable developments of previously-defined elements. There is further information about the conflict between Mrs. Elvsted and Hedda (which seems, in essence, to be that of rivals for the affections of Lovborg), further hints that Hedda was the angry ex-lover with the pistols, and further developments in the Tesman/university position sub-plot. Most of these take place as the result of the introduction of a new and important character - Lovborg, who at his first appearance seems to have professional integrity (in terms of his collegial respect for Tesman) but a lack of restraint in his personal life (in terms of his relationships with both Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted).

Lovborg is, in short, a catalytic character, a kind of antagonist who triggers change and/or revelations of personal truth in other characters. Mrs. Elvsted and Tesman are both changed as the result of encountering Lovborg, but it is Hedda, who, after encountering him, is most obviously and most vividly transformed. He seems to awaken

in her not only a greater sense of self-awareness and self-revelation than she has hitherto shown in her encounters with the other characters (her hints to Brack about never having children notwithstanding). Lovborg also awakens in her an increased desire for freedom - not necessarily for herself, but at least in her life. This desire is what motivates and defines her actions throughout the rest of the play. In other words, if she can't be free herself, she will do what she can to ensure that the dominant symbol of freedom and courage in her life (Lovborg) can and will be free.

In relation to this idea, it's important to note the sense of ruthlessness in Hedda that begins to emerge in this act. Several comments give this impression - her previously referenced remarks to Brack, her referring to Mrs. Elvsted's previous visit (when Mrs. Elvsted had specifically asked her earlier to keep that visit a secret), her revelation about being in control of someone else's destiny, and her comments about burning Mrs. Elvsted's hair. All combine to suggest that Hedda is, and will be from here on in, bound and determined to keep Lovborg as he has always been in Hedda's mind and heart - a true free spirit, the kind of spirit she herself longs to be but, as she herself says, lacks the courage to be.

Hedda Gabler, Act 3

Hedda Gabler, Act 3 Summary

The next morning, a maid brings in a letter from Miss Tesman. As Hedda reads it, conversation with Mrs. Elvsted reveals that Tesman and Lovborg didn't come back from the party. Hedda comments on how Lovborg must have been wearing metaphorical "vine leaves" in his hair, and that Tesman must have spent the night at his aunt's. She then sends the worried Mrs. Elvsted to bed, assuring her that the minute the men arrive, she'll wake her.

As Hedda tends the fire, Tesman returns and tells her Lovborg got drunk, read excerpts from the unpublished book (which Tesman says is brilliant), and talked about the woman who inspired it. He didn't, Tesman adds, identify the woman, but Tesman thinks it was Mrs. Elvsted. He adds that as Brack took Lovborg home, Lovborg dropped the manuscript, which Tesman saved and is desperate to give back. Hedda shows him the note from Miss Tesman, which reveals that another of Tesman's beloved aunts is near death. Tesman is desperate to visit her, but is also concerned about the manuscript. Hedda says she'll look after it, refusing to accompany Tesman on his visit because "she needs to free herself from darkness and death."

As Tesman is leaving, Brack shows up. He and Hedda discuss the events of the party, with Brack revealing that Lovborg drunkenly accused an ex-lover of stealing the manuscript, that there was a fight, and that Lovborg is now in prison. Ignoring Hedda's evident disappointment, Brack adds it's likely Lovborg will have to appear in court, that he will be banned from society, and that it would be a good idea for Hedda to ban him from her company. Hedda realizes that Brack doesn't want any man but him to be her "friend." Brack admits that he's determined to have what he wants. As Brack goes out via the garden, Lovborg arrives, apologetic that he didn't come back after the party. When Mrs. Elvsted comes out to greet him, Lovborg says he's become disgusted with both her and his writing, adding that he's destroyed the manuscript. Mrs. Elvsted tells him it's like he killed their child, and Lovborg agrees. Mrs. Elvsted tearfully leaves, admitting she has no idea what to do with her life now. After she's gone, Lovborg tells Hedda that he couldn't stand the thought of living the life Mrs. Elvsted wanted them to live together and admits he knows he only lost the manuscript; he agrees, however, that it really was like losing a child. In despair, he claims the only way out of his current dilemma is to kill himself. Hedda urges him to do it with beauty and freedom, offering him one of her pistols as a gift. He takes it and goes. After he's gone, Hedda feeds the manuscript into the fire, commenting as she does that she's destroying his and Mrs. Elvsted's child.

Hedda Gabler, Act 3 Analysis

The extent of Hedda's ruthlessness, the manipulations she enters into as the result of that ruthlessness, and the goal of those manipulations all become clear in this act. She is desperate for Lovborg to live up to her vision of him as a free, passionate, creative spirit of the sort she once thought she wanted to be and which she now, apparently pregnant and locked in a passionless marriage with a man with other priorities than her, feels she can never be. In other words, she feels just as trapped by her life as Nora, Mrs. Alving, and Solness (the central characters in the other plays in this collection) all feel. It's important to note, however, that almost all the above aspects of Hedda's character and experience are to be determined and/or understood through audience interpretation of dialogue and event, rather than by actual explanation in the text. This is not necessarily a bad thing; this method of imparting information often more effective at bringing an audience into the world and story of a narrative, dramatic or fictional, than simply explaining everything as it happens.

The destruction of the manuscript (see "Objects/Places - Hedda Gabler, Lovborg's Manuscript") is, on a technical and structural level, a secondary climax to the play. The primary climax takes place at the end of the following act, when Hedda shoots herself - the point at which her personal despair reaches its highest point and at which her struggle for freedom (for herself and for Lovborg) reaches its failed conclusion. The burning of the manuscript, however, is the high point of that struggle, a point of triumph for her expressed desire to control another individual. It could be argued that her giving Lovborg the gun is the high point of that struggle - in controlling his death, she is controlling his life. However, if Lovborg dies and the manuscript remains, Lovborg's remembered life will, for Hedda at least, still be dominated by the presence of Mrs. Elvsted's role in its creation. Whether Mrs. Elvsted is, as Tesman suggests, the woman Lovborg was writing about is a debatable point - such is the power of Hedda's personality and of Lovborg's evident attachment to her that the more emotionally-washed-out Mrs. Elvsted seems to be an unlikely candidate. But whether Hedda is the inspiration or not, the fact remains that by destroying the manuscript, Hedda is destroying the last evidence that Lovborg's life was motivated and defined by someone other than her.

Finally, for further consideration of Hedda's reference to "vine leaves," see "Objects/Places - Hedda Gabler, Lovborg's "Vine Leaves").

Hedda Gabler, Act 4

Hedda Gabler, Act 4 Summary

Later that evening, conversation between Hedda, Miss Tesman and Tesman, reveals that the dying aunt has passed away, but that Miss Tesman believes that soon enough, she'll have plenty to do for Hedda and Tesman to keep her mind off her grief. After she's gone, Tesman says he's worried about Lovborg, adding Mrs. Elvsted had told him what Lovborg did with the manuscript. Hedda reveals that she burned it, saying it was the only way to ensure Tesman got the job he wanted so badly. Tesman admits that while he's sorry for Lovborg, he's also happy that Hedda has shown her love for him so plainly.

Mrs. Elvsted comes in looking for Lovborg. Tesman volunteers to search for him, but Hedda holds him back. At that moment Brack arrives with the bad news that Lovborg attempted to kill himself, and the doctors don't expect him to live. Hedda proudly suggests that what he did was an act of beauty and courage. Mrs. Elvsted, however, suggests he must have been insane. Tesman suggests the manuscript can be reconstructed from Lovborg's notes, which Mrs. Elvsted says she has. As Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted continue their conversation in private, Brack confesses to Hedda that Lovborg is dead and that he recognized the pistol used by Lovborg as one of hers, adding that it would be scandalous if word got out. He hints that if she does as he asks, he will keep her secret. Hedda understands what he means, but refuses to accept that she can no longer call herself free. She comments to Mrs. Elvsted that she (Mrs. Elvsted) is working with Tesman just like she did with Lovborg, and wonders whether she (Hedda) will ever be able to be helpful in the same way. Tesman tells her there's nothing she can do, and asks her to be quiet so that he and Mrs. Elvsted can concentrate. Hedda comments that she'll be completely silent from now on, goes into another room, and closes the curtains behind her.

Tesman suggests that he and Mrs. Elvsted spend their evenings working together on the manuscript. As Brack calls out to Hedda that he'd be happy to come and keep her company while Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted are working, a shot is heard from behind the curtains. At first Tesman thinks she's only playing with her father's guns but then has a sudden fear. He pulls back the curtain and discovers that Hedda has shot herself.

Hedda Gabler, Act 4 Analysis

Here again, the extent of Hedda's ruthless determination to have freedom in her life at whatever cost is vividly portrayed. It emerges through her lies to Tesman, her initially joyful receipt of the news of Lovborg's death, and most tellingly through the intensity of her reaction to the news that he died in a different way from what her goal and hopes needed him to die. In this context, there is some sense here that again, there are parallels between Hedda and the other central characters in the other plays, each of

whom is determinedly ruthless to varying degrees to achieve their goals (see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways ...")

Meanwhile, the chain of events that contribute to her realization that her goals are not to be met is just as vividly defined. There are three key components to this chain - Brack's revelation of how Lovborg really died, Tesman's and Mrs. Elvested's determination to recreate Lovborg's manuscript, and Brack's intentions to blackmail Hedda into a more intimate "relationship" all combine to propel Hedda into the state of despair in which she kills herself. Secondary components are yet more references (again from Brack and Miss Tesman) to her pregnancy. All combine to suggest to Hedda that her struggle for freedom and to enable another to experience freedom, are in vain. The question is whether her suicide is an act of freedom that she so desperately craved, or the ultimate act of submission to a pained, restricted life?

The Master Builder, Act 1

The Master Builder, Act 1 Summary

Master builder Solness arrives as his assistants Kaja, Brovik and Brovik's son, Ragnar, come to the end of their day. As Solness flirts quietly with Kaja, the elderly Brovik asks to speak privately to him. After Solness sends Ragnar and Kaja out of the room, Brovik urges him to give Ragnar some work, saying Ragnar is desperate to start his own business and marry Kaja. Conversation reveals that Solness once worked for Brovik, was ruthlessly ambitious about making a career for himself, and believes Ragnar is about to do the same thing to him that Solness did to Brovik.

After his assistants go, Solness' wife Aline comes in with a visitor, Dr. Herdal. After Aline leaves, Herdal comments that Solness has a history of relationships with younger women and wonders whether Kaja is one such relationship. Solness admits that he's only using Kaja to keep the talented Ragnar at the firm, hints that he deserves Aline's resentment, wonders aloud whether there's a chance that he created the situation by willing it, and comments that he's bothered by the advance of younger people. At that moment, one such young person arrives - Hilde Wangel, an outdoorsy sort who reveals herself to be the daughter of a man who was a prominent citizen of a town visited by Solness several years earlier when he was building a tower for a church. Herdal leaves them to their conversation, and Solness calls to Aline to prepare one of the nurseries for Hilde to stay in. Hilde asks Solness whether he remembers her, describing how they met, how Solness built the beautiful tower in her town, how he kissed her at a dinner party, and how he promised to return for her. When Solness, almost playfully, suggests that none of it happened, Hilde becomes upset. Solness then wonders whether he created this meeting between the two of them in the same way as he created the situation with Brovik, Ragnar and Kaja - by willing it into being.

As Hilde offers her belief to Solness that she can be useful to him, Herdal and Aline return. Solness explains the history he shares with Hilde, and Aline announces calmly that Hilde's room is ready. As Aline leaves with Herdal and as he helps Hilde with her things, Solness comments that she is what he's he's needed the most in his life. Hilde comments that here and now she's found "the magic kingdom" she's been searching for since she was a little girl.

The Master Builder, Act 1 Analysis

While the central character (protagonist) of this play is male, he shares a core characteristic with the female central characters/protagonists (Nora, Mrs. Alving, Hedda) of the other three plays. He, like the women, is desperate for freedom from his guilt over what happened to his children (and perhaps over what he did to Brovik), from the inevitable pressures of time and age, and from his fear that he is becoming something less than what he always intended to be, THE "master builder." A contemporary psycho-

analytical examination of his character might conclude that he is suffering from a mid-life crisis, a condition entered into by a great many men of middle age when they feel their youth and/or value is slipping away. In that context, there can be no doubt that as the youthful Hilde gains more and more influence over him, Solness becomes more and more like the young, dashing lover Hilde imagines him and wants him to be. His desire for youth, however, has tragic consequences.

For her part, Hilde is an actively catalytic and/or transformative character, similar in function to Engstrand in "Doll's House" and Lovborg in "Hedda Gabler." All three are antagonists, directly challenging the protagonists in terms of what they believe, feel, and do, ultimately causing them to change. The other characters in Ghosts (Oswald, Manders, Regine, Engstrand) are all antagonists as well, but the change they bring about in Mrs. Alving is less significant; she is forced into revealing the truth of a secret; whereas, Solness and the other protagonists are forced to take action in order to define a new truth. In other words, Mrs. Alving's function as protagonist is to reveal her life ... that of Solness and the others is to re-shape theirs.

In terms of theatrical storytelling, an important element to note (as is with all Ibsen's plays) is foreshadowing. In the case of this play, foreshadowing appears in Herdal's comment about Solness' relationships with young women (which foreshadows the development of his relationship with Hilde), the references to the tower (which foreshadow Solness' death), and his references to Aline's unhappiness, which foreshadow later revelations of just what that unhappiness springs from the deaths of their children.

For consideration of Solness' comments, repeated here and throughout the play, on the power of the will, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss Solness' repeated contention..."

The Master Builder, Act 2

The Master Builder, Act 2 Summary

In Solness and Aline's drawing room as Solness flips through Ragnar's drawings, conversation between husband and wife reveals that Solness believes things between them are going to be different because of their almost-finished new house. Aline tells him it will never be a home for her, and Solness wonders angrily whether there will ever be any relief from the misery and darkness of their marriage. As Hilde comes in, Solness says light is entering the room. Aline gets ready to go into town, saying she'll pick up some things for Hilde. Hilde says she'd probably be all right going on her own, but Solness comments that because people in town already think he's crazy, they might think she's crazy, too. After Aline goes, Hilde looks at Ragnar's sketches, saying Solness shouldn't be wasting time teaching others when he should be designing and constructing his own buildings. Solness points out the new home he's building for himself and Aline, adding it will have three nurseries just like their current home. This, Hilde says, might be what makes people think he's mad - nurseries in a home where there are no children. Solness says he and Aline did have children who died because Aline developed a fever that poisoned the milk in her breasts. He adds that Aline was good at raising and loving children in the same way he is good at designing and raising buildings, but that her talent has gone to waste, which he says is his fault.

Ragnar appears with news that Brovik is close to death. He asks Solness for some kind words about his work to take back to him, but Solness says he has none, adding that Ragnar and Kaja can marry if they want but Ragnar should have no ambitions of setting up his own business. The disappointed Ragnar goes. When Hilde scolds Solness for being so cold, he says she doesn't understand the full circumstances. He then discusses the fire that destroyed his first home with Aline and the children, saying he believes he willed it into being - at the time, he says, he believed that reconstructing a new home would cement his reputation as a successful architect and builder, which is exactly what happened. He also offers his belief that he and Hilde are responding to a call to live a life greater than the ones they're living. Hilde then demands that Solness make some positive comments about Ragnar's work. Solness refuses but is finally goaded into revealing his fear that if he does, Ragnar will destroy him in the same way that Solness destroyed Brovik. Hilde tells him if he continues to refuse, he will rob her of her belief that he is a great man. This convinces him to do as she asks. As he writes on Ragnar's sketches, he asks why she came to him. She tells him that she wanted the kingdom she says she promised him.

Aline returns, saying she's bought Hilde some things she needs . Solness gives Kaja, who has been working in the next room, the drawings, harshly refuses to accept any thanks, and adds that he no longer wants her to work for him. After she goes, Aline wonders how Solness will manage in the office. Solness tells Aline that once they're in the new house, everything will be fine, adding that that evening he will hang a wreath, traditional symbol of welcome, from the tower. When Hilde comments it will be

wonderful to see him up there, Aline says that heights make Solness dizzy. Convinced that his determination to climb is a sign that he really is mentally ill, Aline runs out to get Herdal. Hilde tells him it will be thrilling to see him atop "her" tower.

The Master Builder, Act 2 Analysis

One of the key themes of "The Master Builder," a theme common to all four plays in this collection, takes center stage in this section. This is the exploration of the relationship between past and present - specifically, the way a character's past comes back to haunt and eventually destroy his/her present. The difference between the way this theme is developed here and in the other plays is the way it is explored from different and contrasting, perspectives.

All three of the central characters here - Solness, Aline and Hilde - are living present lives essentially corrupted by past experiences. Aline is emotionally corrupted by the pain of losing her home and her children. Solness is spiritually corrupted by his ambition to be "the master builder," and the ruthlessness of his actions in bringing those ambitions to reality, his self-confessed destruction of Brovik. He has also been corrupted by the arrogance/self-will that makes him convinced those actions are justified, which have corrupted his presence by infusing them with fear and resentment. All this makes him eagerly receptive to Hilde and her visions of the past, which are a profound corruption for both Solness and ultimately for Hilde. Hilde's past-based beliefs that he is a great man fuel what might be described as her more positive bullying to convince Solness to do the right thing and comment positively on Ragnar's work. Nevertheless, her selfish and infantile obsession with his promise (which, in all realism, any man confronted with a precocious child might make) leads her to bully him into an infantilism of his own - the climbing of the tower, which he knows he shouldn't do, which he convinces himself to do, and which ultimately destroys him body and soul.

Hilde's spirit is also self-corruptive. In spite of its life-affirming essence, it remains immature, unrealistic and childish. In other words, she corrupts her own present by refusing to acknowledge its true nature. This makes her similar, in some degree, to Hedda Gabler, who struggles to hold on to her past in the face of an unfriendly present. But whereas Hedda feels trapped by the differences between her free, self-indulgent past and her imprisoned, self-denying present and ends up killing herself, Hilde resolves the problem in a completely different fashion - she simply refuses to acknowledge the present exists. Perhaps Hilde kills Solness (albeit unwittingly) for the same reason that Hedda in the previous play kills herself - the life of the past and the life of the present simply cannot co-exist.

The Master Builder, Act 3

The Master Builder, Act 3 Summary

A few days later, Hilde suggests that Aline must be looking forward to moving into the new home, saying she's suffered so much in the current one. Aline tells her she suffered more from the destruction of the first house than the deaths of her sons - its destruction, she says, was meaningless; whereas, the deaths of the boys she saw as being the will of God. As Herdal arrives, Hilde offers Aline an embrace, but Aline shrugs it off and goes out with Herdal. When Solness comes, Hilde says she has to leave because she can't hurt Aline for whom she feels friendship. Solness protests he wouldn't be able to go on without her, saying he can't live his life tied to someone Aline who is, in so many ways, already dead. Hilde agrees to stay, and she and Solness talk happily about the kingdom they're going to build together. Ragnar comes in with the wreath to be hung from the tower, and the news that Brovik is dead. As Solness takes the wreath and goes to the tower, Hilde and Ragnar argue over whether Solness is truly a great man, with Ragnar saying he's too fearful to climb the tower and Hilde saying he will because she wills him to do so. When Aline comes back and learns from Hilde that Solness is planning to climb the tower, she sends Ragnar to talk him out of it. Then, in spite of her eagerness to see her husband safe, she agrees to do her social duty and greet some women from the town who have come to see the wreath hanging.

As Solness returns, Hilde confronts him with what she's heard about his fears. Solness says what he's truly afraid of is God's retribution, that it's his belief that at first God wanted him to build only churches, but that he climbed the tower he built in Hilde's home town to make a vow to God that he would only build homes for people who needed them. Finally, he says he wants now to build the only kind of home that matters, one where he can be with her. Hilde says that for her to trust his commitment, she needs to see him atop the tower with the wreath and adds that he will do as she asks - because she wills him to do so. Solness agrees, adding that when he reaches the top of the tower he will make a new vow to God to be with only her forever.

Aline, Herdal and Ragnar all return, and Ragnar announces that the ceremony of the wreath hanging is about to begin. Solness says he's going down to join the workers, and goes. Hilde says Solness is going to climb, but Ragnar doesn't believe her. Herdal says the construction foreman has started to climb, but Ragnar realizes it's Solness. Aline reacts with fear as Hilde narrates Solness' journey up the tower, crying out proudly that he looks strong and powerful. As she describes how he's waving, Aline, Herdal and Ragnar all gasp; Solness has apparently fallen. Herdal comforts the distraught Aline; Ragnar comments cynically that he couldn't do it after all, and Hilde claims that as he reached the top, she heard triumphant music.

The Master Builder, Act 3 Analysis

The action of this act builds effectively to the play's climax of Solness climbing the tower and falling off, In spite of the fact that it takes place offstage, the reactions of the watchers are so vividly defined that the emotional impact of the moment is still significant. A key component of this building up of the action is the way that for a moment, the narrative seems to suggest that what has come to be expected—the continuation of the relationship between Hilde and Solness—isn't going to happen when Hilde, just for a moment or two after her conversation with Aline, abandons her own selfish willfulness. This, in turn, causes Solness to want/need her even more, which leads her to desire him to do more, which leads him to believe in himself more, which then makes the inevitable climax.

Solness' introduction of God into his relationship with Hilde raises an interesting question. Just how afraid is he of God's retribution? Just how seriously does he take his oaths to build churches, and then to build only homes for people who need them? And furthe, how remorseful does he feel about the fire, and his possible willing of it that made him make the oath in the first place? There have been indications throughout the play that he takes himself very seriously, and that Hilde may have been right when she suggested he suffered from an overly-developed conscience. So what role does that conscience and/or his remorse (over Aline, over Brovik, over Kaja, over his whole life) play in Solness' final moments? Does he feel guilty over changing his oath from an essentially selfless one to a selfish one, that of one to build a home for Hilde and himself? Is it possible that out of remorse and guilt he commits suicide? Or is his death simply the result of a foolish, youth-seeking man desperate to impress the attractive young woman who has come into his life? If the latter is the case, Solness is certainly not the first human being to do foolish things to impress a potential beloved. Ultimately, however, the play is so strongly and so compellingly crafted that to maintain that Solness' death is merely accidental seems to simplify the subtext overly much. For further consideration of this question, see "Topics for Discussion - Does Solness ..."

Characters

A Doll's House - Nora

Nora is the central character of A Doll's House and is arguably not only Ibsen's best known female character but his best known character period. At the beginning of the play she appears giddy, thoughtless, naïve and a little greedy. She loves intensely and has utter, unquestioning faith that she is loved just as intensely in return, even though she seems content to let herself be called somewhat demeaning names by her domineering husband. The play dramatizes her sudden, intense transformation into a woman wounded by betrayal and her own vulnerability but still able to claim her own independence of mind, body and spirit, determined to transfer her devotion from her tyrannical, patronizing husband to herself.

Over the decades since the play was first written and performed, Nora has been viewed in many contrasting ways. Conservative audiences, then and now, see her as being selfish, irresponsible, and a bad mother and wife, while so-called liberal audiences have hailed her as a feminist heroine, an ideal of feminine transformation, and an example of how maturation into independence can bring the possibility of fulfillment. This is perhaps a narrow interpretation of the play. While it is certainly the story of a woman struggling for freedom in a world and in a time when women weren't allowed much at all, it can also be seen as an archetypal, human story of awakening, finding courage, and claiming a long-suppressed self. In other words, Nora's is a story with which readers and audiences of any gender could identify.

Ghosts - Mrs. Alving

Mrs. Alving (first name Helene - perhaps a reference to the legendary Helen of Troy?) is the central character of Ghosts. Of all the powerful, flawed female protagonists in this collection of plays (Nora, Hedda, and Hilde are the others) Mrs. Alving is perhaps the least developed. There are several reasons for this, primary among them is that she is essentially reactive. Where Nora, Hedda and Hilde all play very active roles in their own lives and therefore in the action of the plays they inhabit, Mrs. Alving is quite passive, taking action only when confronted, challenged, or faced with a particular need or circumstances. As a character she is not an initiator of the action, but a responder. This is perhaps due to her essential secretiveness, her deep emotional and spiritual wounds, and/or to her basic sense of compassion.

Another likelihood is that Mrs. Alving, as she herself indicates, has had very little life of her own. Nora has a life of her own, which she initially keeps secret but eventually publicly embraces. Hedda is desperate to resume the independence she had before her marriage. Hilde not only has a clearly defined life of her own but a determination for others to live it with her. In Mrs. Alving's case, her entire existence has been defined by her husband - in the early days of their marriage by his brutality, in the middle days and

at the end of their marriage by his reputation which she had to maintain, and after his death by his rehabilitation and redemption. Here again, her day-to-day existence has been that of someone who reacts, someone who copes and ultimately someone who survives.

Hedda Gabler - Hedda Gabler

Hedda is the central character of the play that bears her name, and is the most complicated of the four central characters in the plays. It's intriguing that of all four plays, each with dynamic central characters, this is one play in which the name of the central character is also the title. Solness is the titular "The Master Builder" of that play, which means that it's also intriguing that that title is defined by what he does. Hedda's play, to go by the title alone, is defined by who she is - strong willed, idealistic, perhaps misguided, perhaps lonely, perhaps frightened, definitely angry, and above all desperate for freedom in a life that seems, to her evident and increasing fear, to be closing in around her.

Hedda is perhaps essentially selfish and at times downright nasty. There can be little argument that up to the point the play begins, Hedda's life has for the most part been a generally pleasant one, the vague hints that her father was somewhat upleasant notwithstanding. There is the sense that she has been spoiled and indulged. But it also seems she has longed for something more, something to genuinely challenge her and to awaken in her a sense of personal freedom, but she has lacked the courage to take that freedom. This internal tension between a desire for freedom and an inability to achieve it can be found in all four central characters of the plays in this collection, but for Hedda it seems more intense and more traumatizing than for the others.

This is perhaps why her final choice to end her own life is often perceived with ambivalence - there can be no doubt, for example, that Nora's departure at the end of A Doll's House is a positive move. In the case of Mrs. Alving's final moments in Ghosts, the opposite is true - there can be no doubt that she is left with nothing, and that for her, life from that moment on is going to be miserable. For Hedda Gabler, however, there has always been and perhaps always will be the question of whether in killing herself she has finally found courage and is claiming freedom for herself, or whether she is in fact abdicating self-responsibility for that freedom and giving in to what she has perceived as trapping her.

The Master Builder - Solness

Solness is the central character of "The Master Builder," a title that gives important clues to a few important aspects of his character. In the past, his ambition was to be a "master builder," and there are indications throughout the play that he was ruthless in his determination to realize that ambition. Now that he has reached a professional pinnacle, he fears either being pulled down from it or falling from it (for further consideration of this idea, see "Objects/Places - Solness' Tower). His willing relationship

with the adoring, pushy, idealistic Hilde, however, re-awakens his desire to be "the master builder" and gives him a sense of (false) confidence that he can once again be that.

For all his confidence and ambition, however, Solness is a troubled man. Wracked with guilt and remorse over the pain he believes himself to have caused by willing himself to become "the master builder," he takes out his pain on his well-intentioned but cowed assistants (Kaja, Brovik, and Ragnar - see below) and allows himself to be manipulated by his emotionally-crippled wife. Above all, he becomes susceptible to the demanding presence of the sensual, exciting, infatuated Hilde, who spurs him on to what he believes are great heights of integrity but what are, in fact, great depths of delusion. His ultimate core vulnerability leads him, as such vulnerability has led countless other so-called "tragic" heroes, to his destruction.

Solness is a "tragic" hero in the classical sense, an essentially good and noble human being brought to physical and moral destruction by a particular flaw. Other classic heroes are brought down by indecision (Hamlet), good intentions (Antigone), or arrogance (Oedipus), the essentially good-hearted and sensitive Solness is brought down (literally, brought down to earth in his fall) by arrogance.

A Doll's House - Torvald

Torvald is Nora's husband and one of the primary antagonists of the play. His ambitious, narrow mindedness, his judgmental and patronizing tendency to command, and above all his borderline misogyny (hatred of women) are powerful and effective catalysts for Nora's transformation. Does he love her? There is certainly evidence to support the theory that he loves what he thinks she is, and perhaps even comes to deeper feelings for her when he discovers he is about to lose her. It could also be argued, however, that he is too symbolic and metaphoric a character (representing male societal attitudes in general) for anything much deeper than a superficial experience of affection.

A Doll's House - Dr. Rank

Dr. Rank is a close friend of both Torvald and Nora. His feelings for both of them are sensitive and compassionate, although a reader/audience member might wonder whether he would care so much if he weren't dying from an imminently fatal disease. His death foreshadows and represents the death of Nora and Torvald's marriage.

A Doll's House - Kristine Linde

Mrs. Linde is a friend of Nora's from school who unwittingly gets caught up in the drama between Nora and Torvald. Sensitive and troubled, pragmatic and possessed of clear-eyed common sense, she of all the characters in the play has the most reasonable and reasoned perspective on the entire situation. Perhaps as a result, she is the one who realizes a solution to the dilemma and acts upon it, thereby triggering an explosive

release of the truth that brings happiness to her and Krogstad (see below), clarity to Nora, and a painful but necessary release of delusion to Torvald, and perhaps even to the audience/reader.

A Doll's House - Krogstad

Krogstad is essentially the villain of the piece, a lonely desperate employee of Torvald's who attempts to blackmail Nora into helping him keep his job. Despite Krogstad's apparent wrongdoing, however, there is still a certain sense of dignity and almost nobility; He is, after all, struggling to provide for himself and his children. His redemption, resulting from the transcendent compassion of Mrs. Linde, is an interesting and very telling contrast to the lack of redemption experienced by Nora at the hands of her furious, insecure husband.

Ghosts - Pastor Manders

Manders is the primary antagonist in Ghosts, a sometime friend and confidante to Mrs. Alving, but who nevertheless challenges, manipulates, judges, and dismisses her. Hypocritical and conservative, there are indications that in the past, and perhaps even in the present, he was attracted to her, but because he is more self-interested and self-serving than anything else, and because he's fully aware that giving in to his feelings would mean loss of his social status, he keeps his feelings under firm control.

Ghosts - Oswald

Oswald is Mrs. Alving's young son, an aspiring and idealistic artist returned home to confess to his mother that he is no longer able to create because of what he believes is a fatal, degenerative illness passed on to him from his father. Desperate for unconditional compassion, he at first believes he can and will find it in Regine (see below), but once he finds out that she is his half-sister, he directs his pleas towards his mother. At the end of the play, there is the sense that the inevitable, final mental deterioration brought about by his illness (syphilis?) has begun.

Ghosts - Regine

It's never quite clear what, exactly, Regine is to Mrs. Alving - a surrogate daughter, a servant, a protégé, all are possible. But in terms of who she is as opposed to what she does, her character is very well defined. She is spirited, ambitious, independent, outspoken, and passionate, all characteristics that were perhaps displayed by the young Mrs. Alving prior to her marriage.

Ghosts - Engstrand

Engstrand is Regine's adoptive father, an often drunk laborer with whom she is evidently disgusted. He is fawning and submissive, flattering and manipulative, eager to exploit anyone and everyone around him in any and every way in order to maintain what little power and status he's got.

Ghosts - Capt. Alving

While this character never actually appears in the play, his presence is pervasive. He is constantly discussed, and each of the characters owes his or her state of being in the present to his essentially dissolute and immoral nature and his past behavior. He is the embodiment of the play's central theme, which is also a key theme in the other plays - that the past is inescapable.

Hedda Gabler - Tesman

Tesman is Hedda's husband and is a somewhat self-absorbed, childish/childlike academic. Historically seen as weak (particularly when placed against the strong-willed Hedda with her powerful personality), he is arguably just happy with his small, narrow sphere - his research, his job, and his aunts. He is bewildered by being married to the popular and successful Hedda Gabler and is definitely bewildered at who she seems to have become. Good hearted to a fault, there is the sense that his sensitivity and generosity of spirit are, and would never be, a match for the self-absorption and determination of his wife.

Hedda Gabler - Brack

Brack is, like Dr. Rank in "A Doll's House," a so-called "friend of the family." Also like Rank, he seems to nurse an attraction to/for for the lady of the family. Rank's evident fondness for Nora is echoed in Brack's evident attraction to Hedda. The main difference between the two characters is that Brack seems to be much more devious and manipulative in terms of an intention to act on that attraction. There is the sense, in fact, that that deviousness has echoes of Hedda's own ruthlessness and desire to control. It's interesting to note that in many translations of this play, Brack is defined by the title "Judge." Placing him in a position of some legal and presumably moral authority makes his attempts to control Hedda all that more unsavory.

Hedda Gabler - Mrs. Elvsted

This character also has a parallel in one from "A Doll's House" - in this case, to Mrs. Linde. Both characters are without husbands; both characters are somewhat lost as a result; both characters have somewhat more watery personalities than their friends, and

both characters attach themselves to men they believe need them. In Mrs. Elvsted's case, her being without her husband is an act of choice; whereas, Mrs. Linde's husband died, and this difference is key to understanding Mrs. Elvsted's function to Hedda Gabler, the play and the character. Specifically, Mrs. Elvsted's choice to leave is a manifestation of the kind of personal freedom Hedda so desperately desires. This is perhaps a key reason why Hedda's animosity towards her is so intense.

Hedda Gabler - Lovborg

Lovborg is also a parallel character, but not to an individual in "A Doll's House" but to Solness, in "Master Builder." Both men are essentially artists who have been built up in the eyes of an admiring, dependent woman (in Lovborg's case, at least three admiring dependent women) to an almost god-like status, who fail to live up to that status, and who die as a result. Whether Solness in "Master Builder" kills himself is debatable (see "Characters - The Master Builder - Solness", above). But whether he did or not, the fact remains that both his death and that of Lovborg, who is in many ways a much more weak willed character than Solness, seem clearly to be the result of having too many unrealistic expectations placed upon them.

Hedda Gabler - Miss Tesman

This relatively minor character essentially serves to define the character of her nephew, Tesman, and to antagonize her new niece-in-law Hedda, specifically by making continual and heavy-handed comments about Hedda's pregnancy. There is evidently genuine affection in Miss Tesman for both her nephew and (to a lesser degree) for Hedda, but she is portrayed as essentially a busybody, as interested in controlling the lives around her almost as much (but in a more warm hearted and potentially comic way) as Hedda.

The Master Builder - Hilde

Hilde Wangel is the primary antagonist in "The Master Builder." In the way of all such active antagonists, she challenges Solness to change, to transform, and to broaden both his physical and spiritual experiences and perceptions. And, in the way of many antagonists, she herself remains unchanged. She is a catalyst, triggering a process of change without actually being changed herself. She is charming, outspoken, child-like (in that her desires are essentially innocent and without guile) and childish (in that her temper erupts when she's thwarted, she doesn't consider any desires but her own, her momentary lapse into compassion for Aline in Act 3 notwithstanding).

The Master Builder - Aline

Aline is the wife of Solness, the "master builder" of the title. She is wise and observant, but deeply troubled and perhaps unhealthily devoted to/protective of her husband. She

is somewhat child-like and childish, in that her emotions remain (for the most part) as they were when she was a girl. But unlike Hilde, her perceptions and attitudes are colored by a degree or two of additional maturity and perspective.

The Master Builder - Herdal

Herdal is Aline's friend and confidante, a voice of reason and objectivity to both her and the somewhat less receptive Solness. Like other "friend of the family" characters, he provides additional challenges to the protagonist (in this case Solness) as he struggles to achieve his goal. Herdal, however, enacts a less important role in the overall narrative and thematic development of "The Master Builder" than other, similar characters in their respective plays.

The Master Builder - Ragnar, Kaja and Brovik

These three characters are Solness' subordinates in his architecture/construction business. Their function, essentially, is to illustrate aspects of his character (ruthlessness, selfishness) that are important to understanding who, how, and why he is in his other relationships and narrative pursuits.

Objects/Places

A Doll's House - Nora's Home

In the early scenes of the play, Nora's home, which she shares with Torvald, their children and some servants, is a haven of safety, security, love, and play. Later, as Nora comes to realize just how imprisoned she has been by the attitudes and actions of both Torvald and herself, she comes to see her home as a cage, a "doll's house," in which she has been kept as a plaything and which, in order to survive, she must escape.

A Doll's House - Nora's Macaroons

These candies (a mix of chocolate and coconut) that Nora nibbles illicitly throughout the first scene of the play function as a catalyst to reveal her capacity for lying and self-indulgence.

A Doll's House - Nora's IOU

This is the note Nora wrote to guarantee repayment of the loan made to her by Krogstad, a note on which she forged her father's signature and which is the key piece of evidence Krogstad intends to use to blackmail her. As such, it plays an essential, catalytic role in the unfolding of the action.

Ghosts - Alving's Orphanage

Mrs. Alving has an orphanage built to redeem both her husband's memory and herself for submitting to his will and behavior. The fact that the orphanage is destroyed by fire makes the metaphoric suggestion that such redemption is impossible, that Alving's "sins" and those of his wife (in covering up those sins) are irredeemable.

Ghosts - Mrs. Alving's Books

The titles and/or the content of these books are never explicitly revealed, but it is evident from Manders' reaction to them that they represent, at least to some degree, radical and/or untraditional thought. They are symbolic of Mrs. Alving's own untraditional ways of thinking and/or acting to both cover up and redeem her husband's debauchery, as opposed to condemning it (which traditional belief systems would have her do).

Ghosts - The sun

At the end of the play, Oswald cries out for his mother to bring him the sun. This can be seen as a cry for freedom from his present agony, brought onto him by a corrupt past. The sun is a symbol of hope.

Hedda Gabler - Hedda's Pistols

Hedda's pistols, originally used by her father the General, for dueling are a legacy from her military grandfather. On one level, they perhaps represent another legacy, a capacity for violence both emotional and physical. For Hedda, however, they clearly represent freedom, courage, and beauty of action. Perhaps every time they're fired, on stage or off, they represent an act of defiance, of self-claimed liberty, and of faith in oneself.

Hedda Gabler - Tesman's Slippers

Tesman's slippers, presented to him by his doting aunt after forgetting them when he went on his honeymoon, represent his connection with his past, and more specifically his inability and/or unwillingness to break his overly-dependent ties on the women who raised him in order to devote himself more fully to his new wife and marriage.

Hedda Gabler - Lovborg's Manuscript

This piece of writing by Tesman's intellectual and romantic rival represents for Lovborg a moving forward, an attempt to free himself from the obsessive romantic struggles of his past. For Hedda, however, ostensibly the woman who created those struggles and who destroys the manuscript, it represents his ties to another woman (of whom she is deeply jealous) and to a life defined by others - a life from which she is desperate to be free.

Hedda Gabler - Lovborg's

The freedom Hedda desires for Lovborg is symbolized by her repeated reference to "vine leaves" in his hair, an image of wildness, freedom, self-expression, or self-pleasure. The specific reference is to worshipers of the ancient Greek god Dionysus, a god of wine, revelry, the theatre and artistic expression, and of feckless freedom of the spirit. By invoking vine leaves as part of her own expression of feeling for Lovborg, Hedda expresses her desire for both of them to be fully and un-selfconsciously free.

The Master Builder - Ragnar's Drawings

These architectural sketches by Solness' protégé, employee and potential rival symbolize the looming power and threat of youth to Solness' security, as a man and as

"the master builder." The fact that Hilde gets Solness to acknowledge the value of the sketches represents the success of her first efforts to bend him to her will. As such, the signing of the drawings foreshadows Solness' climbing the tower - the second, and climactic, example of Hilde's successful efforts.

The Master Builder - Solness' Towers

There are two towers worthy of note in "The Master Builder." The first is the tower, which, according to Hilde, he constructed and triumphantly climbed in her hometown. Both the building and climbing of these towers are what made her fall in love with him. The second tower is the one Solness constructs and climbs in his hometown. Both represent the same thing - Solness' youth, power, and ambition. In the case of the first, it represents what he possessed at the time, while in the case of the second it represents what he desires to posses in the present. In Freudian psychology and analysis, such towers are often phallic symbols, evocations of male sexual power as represented by the symbol's resemblance to an erect penis. Perhaps in the case of Solness' towers, this psychological interpretation has some validity.

The Master Builder - The Nurseries

In contrast to the towers which represent power and fulfillment, the nurseries represent emptiness, loss, and failure. The fact that Solness is perpetuating the emptiness of his old home into his new home by constructing three identical nurseries which will remain empty suggests a desire to maintain a deep-seated connection with his grief, remorse, and self-recrimination. It is interesting to consider that while the towers represent male power, the nurseries could be seen as representing the nurturing aspect of femaleness. To take the idea further, it might not be unreasonable to suggest that the emptiness of the nurseries symbolically represents the ultimate emptiness of Hilde's femininity, her desirability, and her urgings for Solness to be more of a man and provide for her.

Themes

Women's Desire for Freedom and Power

The action of all four plays is to a significant degree defined and motivated by a woman's desire for freedom from traditional, male-defined roles and power. Nora in "A Doll's House," Mrs. Alving in "Ghosts," Hedda in "Hedda Gabler," and Hilde in "The Master Builder" each, in varying ways, to varying degrees, for varying reasons, and at varying points in their respective plays, act out of a desire to essentially be the human being she wants to be instead of what the men and society want. The struggles of each woman end differently - Nora ends her struggle with freedom but an uncertain future, while Mrs. Alving, as she watches her son lose his mind, ends more painfully trapped than ever by her husband's will and ways. Hedda, for all her selfishness and idealism, struggles to live a self-defined life, but when she discovers she can't, or that she won't be allowed to, takes what she sees to be a final heroic act and, through suicide, removes herself from the possibility of imprisonment. In other words, she sees her death as the ultimate act of freedom.

Of all four women, Hilde Wangel is the one whose sense of freedom is intact, fully developed, and above all fully lived right from the beginning. The same might also be said of her desire for power, which in its own way is as strong a motivator as it is for Nora and Hedda (Mrs. Alving less so - she merely wants to survive, and uses what little power she has to ensure it). What sets Hilde apart from Nora and Hedda is that her power is secure at the play's final curtain - Nora's is new but uncertain; Hedda's is old but in most ways completely vanished. Her suicide is the last powerful act of an otherwise powerless woman. Hilde's power, on the other hand, along with her freedom, are both fully developed and intensely manifested.

For consideration of the other female characters in the plays, see "Topics for Discussion - Contrast the portrayals of ..."

The Inescapability of the Past

In all four plays, all four central characters (Nora, Mrs. Alving, Hedda, and Solness) have wrenching encounters with their past, all of which have both physical and emotional/spiritual components. When Nora is confronted with a blackmailing money lender, she is also confronted with her own naïvete and eventually with her long-standing delusions about herself, her husband, and their marriage. Mrs. Alving is faced with the memory of her debauched husband in the form of the orphanage given his name, his illegitimate daughter, and the disease he passed on to their son, all of which trigger a crisis of conscience. As Hedda comes face to face with both an ex-lover and an ex-rival, she also comes face to face with her longing for the status, freedom, and power she enjoyed when she was young. By contrast to the three women, however, Solness is confronted by a past (in the undeniably desirable form of Hilde Wangel) that

wasn't all that traumatic, a casual, friendly encounter with a passionate little girl. That girl, however, has in her own mind transformed the encounter into something much more significant, giving it an intensity of importance that overwhelms Solness in the same way as the intensities of their experiences overwhelm Nora, Mrs. Alving, and Hedda.

In all four narratives, there is the powerful sense of inevitability about the encounters each character faces with his or her past, a sense that both the present and the future are haunted, whether the characters believe it or not and whether they sense it or not, by what has been left unfinished. There is also the somewhat fatalistic sense that only death - of Nora's marriage, of Mrs. Alving's illusions, of Hedda and of Solness themselves - can truly free the sufferer from the painful chains that such a past wraps around a life in the present.

The Importance of Public Perception

In all four plays, the perceptions and opinions of the public are primary motivating factors for at least one character. For the most part these characters are the antagonists. Torvald in Doll's House, Manders in Ghosts, Tesman and Brack in Hedda Gabler - all are essentially concerned with preserving appearances and status in the face of the determination shown by the protagonists (Nora, Mrs. Alving, Hedda Gabler) to live freely and without concern for convention and/or public opinion. Their determination to live a certain kind of "acceptable" life is at direct odds with the desires of the women in their lives to live freely. The exception to this point is Solness in Master Builder, the one protagonist who is also concerned with public appearances - specifically, with maintaining his status as the "master builder." For him, the women in his life (Hilde and Aline) are catalysts for his achievement of that goal, with Hilde inspiring him and Aline's melancholy fueling his guilt, which in turn fuels his ambition.

There are two other interesting aspects of this theme to consider. The first is that all the characters concerned with public perception are men, which suggests that for the author women have, or at least are striving for, lives of honesty and integrity (see "Women's Desire for Freedom and Power" above). The second is the fact that all these men are hypocrites, full of integrity and rectitude in public, but monsters in private (Torvald is repressive and domineering; Manders is judgmental and self-serving; Tesman is weak and easily manipulated; Solness is sexually predatory and paranoid). All in all, the importance of public perception is shown throughout these four plays (and in many of this author's other works) as being vain, shallow, corrupting, and dangerous.

Relationships between Parents and Children

While appearing in all four plays, and while it is perhaps less thoroughly developed than the other common themes, it nevertheless explores several intriguing permutations, many of which cross three generations. In "A Doll's House," Nora's financial indiscretions are constantly placed in context with those of her father, while Torvald

seems almost obsessed with the idea of sin (specifically the sins of lying and financial indiscretion) being passed on to his children. In "Ghosts," the effects of Alving's moral indiscretions (which veer perilously close to self-indulgent debauchery) not only affect the lives of his legitimate son (Oswald) and illegitimate daughter (Regine), they also come back to ruin the potential happiness of the children who would have lived in the orphanage built in his name—if Pastor Manders is to be believed and the destruction of the orphanage is retribution, at least in part, for Alving's immorality. Secondary examinations of this theme in "Ghosts" play out through the tense, confrontational, manipulative father/daughter relationship between Regine and Engstrad, a relationship vividly contrasted with the loving, needy, relationship between Mrs. Alving and Oswald.

In "Hedda Gabler", this theme is played out in a more indirect fashion than in the first two plays. First there is the relationship between Hedda and what the audience is led to believe is the unborn child she is expecting, a relationship which on Hedda's part is already defined by resentment. Second there is the relationship between Hedda and her father, General Gabler, which isn't defined in explicit detail but which seems to have been, at least on the General's part, indulgent and dangerous (ie giving Hedda a weapon as a memento). Third, there are the surrogate parent relationships - the loving, smothering one between Tesman and the mother figure, Miss Tesman, and the corrupt, manipulative one between Hedda and the father figure, Brack. Finally, the parent/child relationships in "The Master Builder" also play out on several levels. There is the mutually loving, desperately supportive relationship between Ragnar and his father Brovik, the lost and lonely relationship between Aline and her dead sons, and the relationship between Solness and Hilde, in which he begins as an easily influenced father figure and eventually becomes a kind of lover-to-be. All four plays develop the thematic suggestion that there are very dark aspects to every parent/child relationship, aspects which can and do overwhelm what has been, or what could have otherwise been, something positive, nurturing and healthy.

Style

Point of View

There are two key points to consider about point of view in these four plays. First, the story in each unfolds with a narrative focus on a particular character - Nora ("A Doll's House"), Mrs. Alving ("Ghosts"), Hedda ("Hedda Gabler") and Solness ("The Master Builder"). Each narrative follows the character from their point of view, from beginning to end. Even when they're not on the stage, the actions and conversations of the other characters relate directly to what they (the other characters) can, will, and intend to do in relation to the central ones.

The second noteworthy element relating to point of view in this book is the author's expressed intention (as identified in an introduction) to expand perception of the role of women in the society of his time. There is the very strong sense throughout each of these plays that the author is showing his audiences aspects of womanhood/femaleness that were unfamiliar both in terms of drama and culture. Not all these aspects are easy to watch. Nora's decision to leave her children, Mrs. Alving's enabling of her husband, Hedda's selfishness, Hilde's obsessiveness - all have the potential to be troubling beyond their challenging of traditional female roles and attitudes. Nevertheless, the fact remains that all four characters, in their desire to be free and exploration of their power (see "Themes", above), were revolutionary for their time and perhaps continue to be so even today.

Setting

On one level, the setting of these plays is irrelevant. The stories they play out (relationship difficulties, the sudden painful emergence of the past, frustration in marriage, temptation to infidelity, loss and grief) are archetypal and universal, and these human experiences are the same anywhere. On another level, however, the setting of these plays is profoundly significant, an essential component of why they're so important to the history of theatre in general and of theatrical literature in particular.

All four plays are set at the time in which they were written - the late 1800's, a period of staggering industrial and economic transformation, social and political unrest (the rise of labor and socialism, the simultaneous death of aristocracy), and moral/intellectual exploration. They simultaneously reflected and triggered emerging insights into the human condition, with their unflinching, almost deliberately extreme portrayals of adultery, disease, lies, desire, and in the case of Hedda Gabler (both the character and the play) borderline psychosis. The drama of the plays and the transformations of the characters reflect the drama of the times and the transformations of the lives lived during those times. The art and craft of these plays reinforced this close relationship between what was being created and what was being lived. Theatre up to that point had been declamatory and presentational, full of attitudes and poses and speeches. The

characters in these plays relate directly and intimately to each other, playing out dynamic relationships that brought audiences into a new, intensely-emotional world that made them think and feel and in many cases things they didn't want to think and feel, but in Ibsen's opinion and experience, they had to.

Language and Meaning

These works are all translations, and as such, are a degree removed from expressing the author's original linguistic and/or thematic intentions. There is a certain sense of Britishness about these particular translations (as there are with many translations of European plays, particularly older translations), as well as a somewhat pedantic dryness, giving a feeling that these plays, in this particular translated form, are intended to be read rather than acted. This is the second noteworthy point about language in this book, and it's an important one because that's what plays are intended for - to be acted. As such, they have to carry the weight of theme, of character development, and of action in their dialogue. Meaning therefore emerges through what is said and through what is implied (the sub-text) by what is said.

Perhaps most importantly, there is the sense in all these plays that the language and dialogue are what might be described as muscular. There is little poetry and little that seems extraneous or indulgent. There is a certain sense of extravagance about a few specific words because of a translator eager to show the breadth of his/her vocabulary, because the original language is by nature occasionally extravagant, because the characters themselves occasionally express themselves melodramatically, or any combination thereof. For the most part, however, language is clear and direct almost to the point of being aggressive, of almost continuous confrontation. There is little or no room for reflection in either these plays or the world they inhabit, giving them the clear sense that as theatre, they would be powerful, engaging, and more than a little intense.

Structure

While the content of the plays is in many ways revolutionary, their narrative structure is relatively conservative and traditional. Each play is divided into acts - Doll's House, Ghosts and Master Builder have three, Hedda Gabler has four (most contemporary dramas, even contemporary stagings of Shakespeare, have two). This has been the traditional anchoring structure of theatrical narrative for decades, if not centuries. Within those acts and throughout each play as a whole, the story unfolds in a purely linear fashion, with the narrative line moving unfailingly from Event A to Event B to Event C to climax. This tried-and-true structural convention draws both characters and readers/viewers unavoidably and inevitably forward, creating a powerful sense of momentum, tension, and ultimately of meaning - structure is, after all, a form of order, and order/meaning are each fundamental factors in defining the other. In the case with drama more than fiction, structure is as much defined by character as it is by plot. Specifically, Events A, B, and C, as well as the climax, are all placed where they are in the structure of the story because of what happens to the characters - how they act to

achieve their goals, how they react when they don't, and what happens when they eventually do or irrevocably don't. Narrative structure in a play is essentially a manifestation of human need, shaped by a playwright to draw an audience into the world and inner life of individuals living out that need - needs that, quite possibly, have clear echoes with one in an individual watching from the audience, echoes reinforced (and given meaning) by structure.

Quotes

"There's always something inhibited, something unpleasant, about a home built on credit and borrowed money." Torvald to Nora, A Doll's House, p. 3.

"My pretty little pet is very sweet, but it runs away with an awful lot of money. It's incredible how expensive it is for a man to keep such a pet." Torvald to Nora, A Doll's House, p. 4.

"Isn't a daughter entitled to try and save her father from worry and anxiety on his deathbed? Isn't a wife entitled to save her husband's life? I might not know very much about the law, but I feel sure of one thing: it must say somewhere that things like this are allowed." Nora to Krogstad, A Doll's House, p. 29.

"My dear darling Nora, you are dancing as though your life depended on it." Torvald to Nora, A Doll's House, p. 59.

"When you've sold yourself once for other people's sake, you don't do it again." Mrs. Linde to Krogstad, A Doll's House, p. 65.

"You loved me as a wife should love her husband. It was simply that you didn't have the experience to judge what was the best way of going about things...you just lean on me, I shall give you all the advice and guidance you need. I wouldn't be a proper man if I didn't find a woman doubly attractive for being so obviously helpless." Torvald to Nora, A Doll's House, p. 78.

"I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are ... I'm not content any more with what most people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear." Nora to Torvald, A Doll's House, p.82.

"What can you do with yourself out here? Is it going to be any use to you, all this education the lady's lavished on you?" Engstrand to Regine, Ghosts, p. 95

"I am your father, you know. I can prove it from the parish register." Engstrand to Regine, Ghosts, p. 96.

"There's really nothing new in these books; there's nothing there but what most people think and believe already. It's just that most people either haven't r eally considered these things, or won't admit them." Mrs. Alving to Manders, Ghosts, p. 101.

"Yes, you certainly bear the name of a fine, enterprising man, my dear Oswald Alving. I trust it will be an incentive to you." Manders to Oswald, Ghosts, p. 109.

"All this demanding to be happy in life ... what right have people to happiness? No, we have our duty to do, Mrs. Alving! And your duty was to stand by the man you had chosen, and to whom you were bound by sacred ties." Manders to Mrs. Alving, Ghosts, p. 113.

"I'm inclined to think that we are all ghosts ... it's not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It's all kinds of old defunct theories ... it's not that they actually live on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. Over the whole country there must be ghosts, as numerous as the sands of the sea. And here we are, all of us, abysmally afraid of the light." Mrs. Alving to Manders, Ghosts, p. 126.

"What if a child has nothing to thank its father for? Never knew him? You don't' really believe in this old superstition still, do you? And you so enlightened in other ways?" Oswald to Mrs. Alving, Ghosts, p. 158.

"And to think that you'd be the one to walk off with Hedda Gabler! The lovely Hedda Gabler. Imagine it! So many admirers she always had around her." Miss Tesman to Tesman, Hedda Gabler, p. 171.

"There's the shadow of a woman who stands between us...someone or other from - from his past. Someone he can't really forget ... he said that when they parted, she threatened to shoot him with a pistol." Mrs. Elvsted to Hedda, Hedda Gabler, p. 191.

"Think of Hedda, man! You, who know her so well ... I couldn't possibly have expected her to put up with a genteel suburb." Tesman to Brack, Hedda Gabler, p. 193

"I demand no more than a nice intimate circle of acquaintances, where I can rally round with advice and assistance, and where I'm allowed to come and go as - as a trusted friend ... this sort of triangular relationship - it's really highly convenient for all concerned." Brack to Hedda, Hedda Gabler, p. 203.

"When I think back to that time, wasn't there something beautiful, something attractive - something courageous, too, it seems to me - about this - this secret intimacy, this companionship that no-one even dreamed of." Hedda to Lovborg, Hedda Gabler, p. 218.

"I don't want to look at sickness and death. I must be free of everything that's ugly." Hedda to Tesman, Hedda Gabler, p. 235.

"Ejlert Lovborg has settled accounts with himself. He had the courage to do - what had to be done." Hedda to Brack, Hedda Gabler, p. 256.

"It's a liberation to know that an act of spontaneous courage is yet possible in this world. An act that has something of unconditional beauty." Hedda to Brack, Hedda Gabler, p. 258.

"People don't do such things!" Brack to Tesman, Hedda Gabler, p. 264.

"I'm never going to back down! I'll never give way to anybody! Never of my own free will. Never in this world will I do that!" Solness to Brovik, The Master Builder, p. 273

"You saw your chance and took it. Started out as a poor country lad, and now look at you - at the top of your profession. Yes indeed, Mr. Solness, you certainly have had all the luck." Herdal to Solness, The Master Builder, p 285.

"The turn is coming. I can sense it. I feel it getting nearer. Somebody or other is going to demand: make way for me! And then all the others will come storming up, threatening and shouting: get out of the way! Get out of the way!" Solness to Herdal, The Master Builder, p. 285.

"You said that I looked lovely in my white dress. That I looked like a little princess ... And then you said that when I grew up I should be your princess ... and when I asked how long I had to wait, you said you'd come back in ten years - like a troll - and carry me off. To Spain or somewhere. And there you promised you'd buy me a kingdom." Hilde to Solness, The Master Builder, p. 293.

"Why did [Aline] have to say all that about duty ... oh I can't stand that nasty, horrid word ... it sounds so cold and sharp and prickly. Duty, duty, duty! Don't you think so too? That it seems to sting you?" Hilde to Solness, The Master Builder, p. 208.

"That fire, and that alone, was the thing that gave me the chance to build homes. Warm, cheerful, comfortable homes, where fathers and mothers and their children could live together, secure and happy, and feeling that it's good to be alive. And more than anything to belong to each other - in great things and in small." Solness to Hilde, The Master Builder, p. 315.

"That's what people call being lucky. But let me tell you what that sort of luck feels like! It feels as if my breast were a great expanse of raw flesh. And these helpers and servants go flaying off skin from other people's bodies to patch my wound. Yet the wound never heals - never!" Solness to Hilde, The Master Builder, p. 322.

"Once Ragnar Brovik gets started he'll have me down in the dust. He'll break me - just as I broke his father ... he represents youth standing there ready to beat upon my door. Ready to finish off Master Builder Solness." Solness to Hilde, p. 326

"Is it true or isn't it ... that my master builder dare not - cannot climb as high as he builds?" Hilde to Solness, The Master Builder, p. 331.

"This whole business is so stupid, so absolutely stupid ... this not daring to reach out and lay hold on happiness. On life! Just because standing in the way happens to be somebody one knows!" Hilda to Solness, The Master Builder, p. 339.

"This is the way I've seen him all these ten years. How confident he looks standing there ... look at him ... don't you hear a song in the air ... I hear a song. A mighty song! Look! Look! Now he's waving his hat! He's waving to us down here ... hurrah for the master builder!" Hilde to Ragnar, The Master Builder, p. 354

Topics for Discussion

Which do you think is the right ending to A Doll's House? Which is truer to Nora's character? To the story? To a woman's perspective? Explain your answer.

In what ways do the other female characters in this collection (Mrs. Alving, Hedda, Hilde, Mrs. Linde, Mrs. Elvsted, Aline Solness) live in "a doll's house"? In what ways do they try to escape? In what ways do they allow themselves to remain?

Consider the role played by love in "A Doll's House." Nora protests that she got the loan from Krogstad out of love for her husband and family and that she forged her father's signature on her IOU to Krogstad out of a loving desire to not trouble her dying father. Are these really acts of love, or is she merely claiming to love out of a desire to justify and/or protect herself?

Is there a connection between Manders' determination to not have the orphanage insured and Engstrand's contention that Manders caused the fire that burns it down? Consider his judgmental attitudes to Mrs. Alving's behavior and her reasons for doing what she did to redeem her husband's memory. Is it possible that Manders deliberately burned down the uninsured building? Why or why not?

Discuss Oswald's decision/determination to commit suicide once he becomes absorbed in his illness. Is his choice justified? Why or why not? Debate the general question of euthanasia of the self as well as of others. Is it ever a valid choice? Why or why not?

It's clear what Oswald wants from Regine in Ghosts - compassion, safety, and affection. But what does Regine want from him? Consider her determination to have Oswald live up to his joking promise to take her to Paris. Does this give her a degree of resemblance to Hilde in Master Builder? What might Regine want from Oswald that she believes she can also get from Manders? What does he offer that makes her interested in him throughout the play and then immediately switch her focus from Oswald to him the moment that Oswald reveals himself to be unavailable?

Why is the play called "Hedda Gabler" and not "Hedda Tesman," which is the actual (married) name of the character?

Is Hedda Gabler an admirable character in her struggle for freedom for herself and for Lovborg? Is she reprehensible because of what she does to achieve that freedom? Is she both? To what degree?

In what ways are Hedda Gabler's ruthless determination to achieve her goals paralleled in Nora? In Mrs. Alving? In Solness? In other characters (Torvald and Krogstad in Doll's House, Manders in Ghosts, Hilde in Master Builder)? How do Hedda's tactics and intensity differ from those of the other characters?

Discuss Solness' repeated contention that he has created the important circumstances of his life by an act of will. Is this self-centeredness? Arrogance? A manifestation of his need for power? An expression of a universal truth (i.e., each human being creates his/her own life, consciously or not)? Explain and justify your answer.

Consider the character of Hilde Wangel. What might her reasons be for carrying her childhood beliefs so determinedly into her adulthood? She evidently has complete faith that Solness will do exactly as she asks and run away with her. Such faith is obviously not reasonable, but what might the reasons be for her being so unreasonable? Discuss her situation in the context of considering the other characters throughout the four plays who are also driven/defined by their pasts.

Does Solness commit suicide, or is his death merely an accident? Explain your answer.

There is a "friend of the family" character in each of the four plays - Rank in "Doll's House", Manders in "Ghosts", Brack in "Hedda Gabler," and Herdal in "Master Builder." Compare and contrast the characters of the four men - who they are as people, each man's function in each play, and each man's intention and course of action. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? Is it possible for insight into one character to trigger insight into another? If yes, give examples.

Contrast the portrayals of the "new" women in these plays (Nora, Mrs. Alving, Hedda, Hilde) with those of the perhaps more traditional (stereotypical?) women - Mrs. Linde, Mrs. Elvsted, Aline, Kaja. In what ways do the portrayals differ? Is one type of portrayal more accurate than the other? More relevant to essential femaleness? Where does Regine fit into the continuum?