

**FIVE FASCINATING FEMALES IN THE  
PLAYS OF HENRIK IBSEN**

**BY**

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FIVE FASCINATING FEMALES  
IN THE PLAYS OF  
HENRIK IBSEN

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By  
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Diane Toombs entitled "Five Fascinating Females in the Plays of Henrik Ibsen." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

Thayer W. Birch  
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Accepted for the Council:

William H. Ellis  
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## FIVE FASCINATING FEMALES

There runs through Henrik Ibsen's works a continually increasing faith in women. Practically all of the women in Ibsen's plays stand head and shoulders above the weak, irresolute men whose lives they dominate. These females seek to realize themselves, and to find their true vocation. From A Doll's House through Rosmersholm the major female characters are given an increasingly dense psychological nature with pasts which explain their present condition and action.

Ibsen stated, in "The Primacy of Character," how he felt about the characters he created. "I always proceed from the individual . . . I am certain of the individual in every aspect of his humanity."<sup>1</sup> His female characters seem to bear this out.

Beginning with Nora in A Doll's House, Ibsen created a group of women who were truly individuals. These women are not stereotypes, but a new breed of women seeking self-knowledge. Often, they are compelled to revolt in one way or another in the search for an identity of their own.

A Doll's House is the Norwegian version of the great theme of later nineteenth century literature throughout Europe, the sufferings of women in a masculine world. The limitations placed on a woman by society is the idea on which the play is based.

Nora is in conflict with others and society. She sees that her whole family life has been a lie, like make-believe people in a doll's house. Torvald, her husband, treats Nora like a beloved inferior. She does not wish to be the stereotype of the beautiful woman which was prevalent at that time. Women who were pretty were not to be taken seriously, and were supposedly not intelligent. Yet Nora is forced to assume this role, first created by her father, and carried on by others, particularly Torvald.

Nora's marriage becomes "eight years prostitution,"<sup>2</sup> as she gradually learns the true nature of her relations with Torvald, and the true nature of Torvald's feelings for her. Nora had been secretly raising money so Torvald could take a trip to restore his health. She had to tell him that the money came from her father, since Torvald would die rather than go into debt. Actually the money was obtained from a moneylender. Nora forged her father's name on the promissory note; the moneylender discovers the illegal act, and Nora is in his debt until the note is paid.

When Torvald eventually learns of Nora's activities, he is neither understanding nor sympathetic. His caustic reaction causes Nora to see herself as an ignorant and silly woman, a dangerous mother, and a wife kept for her husband's pleasure only. G. B. Shaw describes Nora's disillusionment:

Nora clings to her illusion about Torvald . . . she resolves to kill herself rather than allow him to destroy his own career by taking the forgery on himself to save her reputation. The final disillusion comes when, he, instead of proposing to pursue this ideal line of conduct when he hears of the forgery, naturally enough flies into a vulgar rage and heaps invective on her for disgracing him.<sup>3</sup>

Nora realizes that there is more to life than being someone's "little squirrel." Defying the world of respectability, she leaves her husband and family in order to fulfill herself as a human being. She is, in a sense, emancipating herself. However, it must be remembered that Nora, through her leaving, was "putting herself outside society, inviting insult, destitution, and loneliness."<sup>4</sup>

That Nora could change so rapidly from a submissive housewife to a woman ready to leave home is believable only if one assumes that these feelings of discontent have always been there. The implication from the first act is that there is more to Nora than there seems to be. She manages to get her way with Torvald by using feminine wiles and her good looks. Yet she is well aware that these powers will eventually fade, and realizes she will not be young and beautiful forever.

Nora is frightened at the end of the play, but she is ready to face the world. Not only does Nora exert her rights as a woman, but also she exemplifies the theme of the play which is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she potentially is, and strive to become that person.



Valency characterizes Nora quite well when he states:

Nora is a carefully studied example of what we have come to know as the hysterical personality--bright, unstable, impulsive, romantic, quite immune from feelings of guilt, and, at the bottom, not especially feminine. It is a vastly enlightened conception of woman.<sup>5</sup>

Nora was, in one sense, forced to revolt against the role her father and her husband created for her. The future will be considerably different from the life she has been living.

The female characters in the next four plays also introduce attitudes that widen the gap between their past actions and future hopes. Gina, Rebecca, Hedda, and Hilde have had experiences in their pasts which will affect their present and future conditions.

What is humiliation for Nora becomes a game for Gina in The Wild Duck. As opposed to Nora, Gina can be characterized as the "Earth Mother." She runs the family, yet manages to make Hjalmar, her husband, think that he does this job. Gina appears to be reasonably happy with her lower class situation, possibly due to her lack of education. She also possesses the ability to put the care and feelings of others above her own. She often becomes irritated and does without many things, but she manages to survive. Though unimaginative and practical, Gina is a successful wife.

Gina's problems begin when Hjalmar learns that their daughter was probably fathered by another man. He is crushed and makes plans to leave. Gina, with her understanding nature, makes it possible for Hjalmar to stay, although things will never be the same, now that the "truth" is known. Gina manages to keep her family together, at least for a while, because she possesses something Nora must find. She knows who she is and where she belongs.

The wild duck may represent, among other things, people who have been damaged by life, and cannot get over it and fit in. They need protection from society. Gina, however, does not depend on illusion, and is seen as one of the strongest characters in the play. This point is well-illustrated in Act V, after the child, Hedvig, shoots herself. When the body of the child is carried out, the following scene occurs:

Hjalmar: Oh, Gina, Gina, how can you  
bear it!

Gina: We must try to help each other.  
For now she belongs to us both,  
you know.<sup>6</sup>

Along with a disparity between the past and the present, the next three women to be discussed, Rebecca from Rosmersholm, Hedda from Hedda Gabler, and Hilde from The Master Builder, are all driven by an almost hysterical thirst for power and a fatal desire. This desire involves playing with



other people's lives until suddenly things take a new turn, and they are caught in the network of their own scheming.

Valency describes these femme fatales:

They are not there to ruin men, or to tempt them into the voluptuousness of destruction; on the contrary, they incarnate the dream of normal passion and blessed felicity of the sexually underprivileged male. Even Hedda Gabler, who comes closest to the fascinating malignance of the vampire-woman, is earnestly involved, so she thinks, in the improvement of her lover; she certainly has no idea of destroying him for her pleasure. But while none of Ibsen's ladies is really Satanic, all of them have a piquant trace of sadism which betrays their affinity with the decadent ladies of the romantic school.<sup>7</sup>

One of Ibsen's most complex characters is Rebecca West. The audience can see both her innocent surface facade, and a surprisingly different inner reality. She seizes life and makes it do what she wants it to do until it destroys her.

In Rosmersholm, Rosmer is the last of a long line of landowners. Once a Christian minister, Rosmer lost faith, but still clings to the hope that morality can survive. Rebecca is a young woman who has abandoned Christianity, even going beyond agnosticism. Her secret aim is to marry Rosmer, and convert him to her way of thinking.

Rebecca has much will power, but no real knowledge of herself until the end of the play. While at Rosmersholm, she lures Beate, Rosmer's wife, to her death at the millrace in order to clear the way to Rosmer. Rebecca is undeniably a temptress. She manipulates to satisfy her own desires. Once Beate is dead, Rebecca's eroticism is disclosed to Rosmer. This results in Rosmer "being unable to continue within the illusion of their innocent relationship."<sup>8</sup>

Rebecca confesses her love for Rosmer, and her responsibility for the death of Beate. Even with all that is known of Rebecca's past, Rosmer agrees to marry her. However, Rebecca comes to the realization that there must be some justification for her past actions. She goes to the millrace and drowns herself. The past, or the beliefs of Rosmer, overpowered her plans for the future.

In reference to Rebecca's past, Bradbrook states:

Rebecca's past is altogether hidden. Yet she is bound by it; she cannot be his wife because of her past, though only her love for him has revealed the significance of the past to her . . . Rebecca's devotion is absolute. Rosmer dies in the name of justice, but Rebecca accepts the verdict for both; she was ready to die for love.<sup>9</sup>

Rebecca goes to her death in a condition of calm and rest, with an "ennoblement" which is a re-created innocence. Her renunciation of sexuality, created by

her guilt, was not enough. She was unable to accept the change in Rosmer from innocent to erotic. Death was the only answer, for only then could the threat of sexuality be removed and innocence returned.<sup>10</sup>

About her noble death, Rebecca states:

Rebecca: . . . The Rosmer view of life does make men noble. But-- but--but--

Rosmer: But? What?

Rebecca: But it kills happiness, my dear.

Rosmer: Do you feel that, Rebecca?

Rebecca: For me, at least.<sup>11</sup>

Halvdan Koht, a biographer of Ibsen, sums up Rebecca's character in this manner:

The northland had made Rebecca West a woman of great strength and great longing, and because her witchcraft is the exact opposite of all that the white horses (of Rosmersholm) represent, conflict between them is inevitable. In the beginning she must seem the stronger, gaining the upper hand; thus she is able to drive Rosmer's sickly wife into the millrace. But the hidden sense of guilt that is a mark of her vulnerability is apparent in her need to conceal so much. Ibsen strikes this note at once in Act One when she says that she loves the fragrance of flowers because it "makes one forget so beautifully." This guilt is the weakness in her armor, and through this the forces she meets at Rosmersholm, the traditional Rosmer view of life, make their attack and gain ascendancy over her; she is "enobled" and finally "broken."<sup>12</sup>



The joy of Rosmer and Rebecca is broken by ethical obligations. The past, or the belief in Rosmer, overpowers Rebecca's plans for the future.

Rebecca: That's the terrible thing, that now, when you freely offer me every happiness, now I am changed so that my own past stands in my way.

Rosmer: Your past is dead, Rebecca. It's no longer part of you--nothing to do with you--as you are now.

Rebecca: Oh my dear, those are only words. And freedom from guilt? Where will I find that? 13

The self-knowledge Rebecca acquires comes too late. Her desires result in her death, as well as the death of Rosmer.

While the character of Rebecca is well drawn and multi-faceted, Hedda Gabler is probably Ibsen's most complexly human character, possessing a highly ambivalent nature. Herbert Blau sees Hedda as "both repulsive and fascinating at once . . . and her demonic resistance to entrapment reveals a quick and cynical mind, but also, surprisingly, a definite naivete."<sup>14</sup>

Hedda can be described as a malicious woman of evil instincts, jealous, treacherous, and cold-hearted. Yet she is a coward. Hedda is afraid of life, and wishes to experience life, love, and death vicariously. Unlike Rebecca, she does not understand love, and she is eaten up by envy and pride.

No one adjective can serve to describe Hedda. She is neither good nor evil. She is creative in that she wishes to help Loevborg, yet destructive in that she burns the manuscript. She has a noble nature, yet is totally despicable at times. Mary McCarthy describes Hedda's behavior:

Hedda does not discuss herself; the General's daughter is too haughty for that. Instead, she behaves, and the subject of the play is visibly present, as it was in A Doll's House and The Wild Duck. Her suicide at the end is less convincing than her burning of the manuscript, and her burning of the manuscript is less convincing than the transfixing moment in the first act when she pretends to think that the aunt's new hat, lying on the sofa, is the servant's old bonnet.<sup>15</sup>

Hedda suffers from a boredom and frustration often found in modern society. She lacks self-understanding. Blau compares Hedda's problem of self-realization with Nora's in A Doll's House.

Nora in A Doll's House represents more than the emancipated woman; she represents potential actuating itself. But Nora's conflict, though it is philosophically and dramatically perennial, loses potency when the circumstances in which it arises are no longer felt as real. It has more value than Hedda's, but it is subject to greater loss.<sup>16</sup>

The complex nature of Hedda, as well as her ambiguity, has been the topic of much scholarly

research. G. B. Shaw devotes an entire book to Ibsen, and frequently talks about the characters and why they act as they do. Concerning Hedda, Shaw states

. . . that though she has imagination, and an appetite for beauty, she has no conscience, no conviction: with plenty of cleverness, energy, and personal satisfaction she remains mean, envious, insolent, cruel in protest against others' happiness, fiendish in her dislike of inartistic people and things, a bully in reaction from her own cowardice.<sup>17</sup>

Hedda ends by killing herself. She is disgusted with Loevborg for not dying "beautifully," as she would have liked. Hedda is also disgusted with herself because of her pregnancy, as well as Brach's hold over her. As in Rosmersholm, death is the only solution. Hedda does something on her own, and kills herself "beautifully."

Hedda's past and the society in which she lived were partly responsible for her death. She was the daughter of an aristocrat, and married hastily, and unwisely. With so much leisure time, she had few channels for all her energy. Even though Hedda makes the statement, "For once in my life I want to have the power to shape a man's destiny,"<sup>18</sup> she is not able to deal with this responsibility. She has the chance to shape a destiny with a child of her own, but instead, she kills herself.



Hedda lived vicariously, evaded responsibility, and manipulated others until her fatal end. Her desires led to the death of Loevborg, and ultimately to her own.

The final character to be discussed is Hilde of The Master Builder. The characterization is so lifelike that one could imagine that she was drawn from life. Robert Brustein believes she was:

The character of Hilde, that voracious, beautifully plumed bird of prey who urges Solness towards a fatal demonstration of his will, virility, and potency--is based on an eighteen-year-old girl whom the sixty-four year old playwright had recently met.<sup>19</sup>

Like Rosmersholm and Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder develops around a sensitive man whose life is bounded by two women. Hilde, like Rebecca in Rosmersholm, comes to Solness as a symbol of youth, bringing with her freedom from the past.

Hilde, ten years after first meeting Solness, knocks on the Master Builder's door. It seems that Solness once promised Hilde, then a much younger girl, the kingdom of Orangia. Hilde is now a vigorous young woman who wishes "to build castles in the air." She demands her kingdom, and eventually convinces Solness to climb to the tower of the new house, telling him that he is a superhuman being, beyond the good and evil of ordinary mortals. Solness feels he can make it to the top of the tower with Hilde's hand in his. Since she

has the power to will Solness to go to the top of the tower, Hilde is partly to blame for his destruction.

Hilde is responsible for the death of a human, yet seems oblivious to this death at the play's end. She stands, still waving the shawl, while Solness lies dead at her feet. Hilde is celebrating her success, but she is also retreating from the reality of Solness' death.

In The Master Builder, Hilde is Solness' object of tempting innocence, seen simultaneously as a bird of prey hunting him down. Lyons sees their final relationship as "a focused ambivalence: he fulfills her demand and falls; she inspires and kills. But each functions for the other."<sup>20</sup>

Of the beautiful and dangerous ladies who bring false love to the heroes of Ibsen's plays--Rebecca, Hedda, and Hilde--only Hilde survives the doom. Hilde's strength lies in her youth. Her power over Solness is the ability to free him from his past through death.

The female characters of Ibsen share several characteristics. First, all of these women exert some kind of authority over their male counterparts.

Nora leaves Torvald because he will not treat her as a human being. He can only see her as an inferior, and she will not accept this situation.

Gina runs the household, yet manages to make Hjalmar believe that he does. Rebecca's eroticism and

convictions finally convince Rosmer to marry her, even though the marriage can never take place.

Hedda dominates Tesman, so much so that he is blind to her true discontent. And finally Hilde, with her strength of youth, gains control of Solness, and becomes, to a large degree, responsible for his death.

A second point of comparison is that all of the women have a past that affects their present situation and their future happiness. This widening of the gap between the past and the future places each of the women firmly in the realm of modern drama.

Nora hides her forgery, and when Torvald discovers the deed, he is enraged. Nora must seek her true identity in a society she knows little about.

Gina, years before, gave in to the advances of Old Werle. When Hjalmar learns this, he begins to doubt his paternity of Hedvig. This truth leads to the destruction of a reasonably happy marriage, and to the suicide/death of Hedvig.

Rebecca's past makes it impossible for her to continue into the future. The guilt she feels for her past actions becomes too much to bear, and she kills herself.

Hedda's background and an abundance of misplaced energy make her a victim of her obsessions. She is unable to accept responsibility for her actions, since she



has always been protected and humored. She escapes the society that has enveloped her by taking her own life.

Hilde's past brings her to Solness. She comes to claim her kingdom, bringing death with her. The "castles in the air" she hoped for would never be built.

While it is true that these women have characteristics and problems in common, each woman is a unique individual, a separate entity. The audience sees Nora manipulating Torvald and sneaking macaroons. She exerts her individuality by escaping from her man-made prison, and facing society on her own. The audience can identify with Nora, and wish her luck in her future endeavors.

Gina is unique in that she suffers so that others can try to find happiness. This "Earth Mother," strong, yet passionate, is indeed a new creation of the modern theatre, which concentrates more on the individual psychology, and less on universal characteristics.

Rebecca fights a moral and intellectual battle with her conscience. Her individuality is marked by her conception of right or wrong. She is beyond the agnostic, a point where no woman in drama has been before. The play becomes so much more than the defeat of evil and the triumph of goodness, primarily because of Rebecca and her courage.

While Rebecca's motives are genuine, Hedda's are questionable, to say the least. Hedda Gabler is perhaps

the most fascinating woman in modern drama. Many actresses have portrayed the role of Hedda, most finding it difficult, yet challenging. It is a deeply psychological study of a woman in conflict with herself and with the society in which she exists.

Hedda's actions may seem insane and even evil, yet she is following her own secret personal logic. The things that she desires, and often gets, are not what a normal person would admit. Her actions do not convey rational motives. The audience sees her burn the manuscript, give Loevborg the gun, and even point the gun at Brach, along with other seemingly insane actions. Hedda's individuality lies in her secret system of values, and in her inability to experience life first-hand.

With Hilde, the power of her youth is the hold she has over Solness. She helps create the illusion of "castles in the air." Her individuality is seen in her ability to control Solness, and inspire him to creative endeavors, even though the final result is the death of Solness, as well as the end of her illusions of the future.

It is remarkable that Ibsen was able to create so many diversified, while at the same time, innovative women. He portrayed women the way they should be--with needs, desires, obsessions, revolts--as true human beings.

These fascinating female characters come alive on the stage, but that is not all. They ride home with the audience, and long remain in their hearts and minds.



## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Henrik Ibsen, "The Primacy of Character," The Modern Theatre, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1964), p. 34.
- 2 M. C. Bradbrook, Ibsen The Norwegian (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), p. 83.
- 3 George Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism (New York: Hill and Wang, 1913), p. 86.
- 4 Bradbrook, p. 86.
- 5 Maurice Valency, The Flower and the Castle (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), p. 181.
- 6 Henrik Ibsen, The Wild Duck, Classic Theatre, eds. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 442.
- 7 Valency, p. 182.
- 8 Charles R. Lyons, Henrik Ibsen The Divided Consciousness (Carbondale: The Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), p. 110.
- 9 Bradbrook, p. 115.
- 10 Lyons, p. 118.
- 11 Henrik Ibsen, Rosmersholm, Four Modern Plays, ed. Henry Popkin (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 69.
- 12 Halvdan Koht, Life of Ibsen (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971), p. 374.
- 13 Ibsen, Rosmersholm, p. 70.
- 14 Herbert Blau, "Hedda Gabler: The Irony of Decadence," From Script to Production, ed. Jonathan Saville (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 148.
- 15 Mary McCarthy, "The Will and Testament of Ibsen," From Script to Production, ed. Jonathan Saville (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 126.
- 16 Blau, p. 151.

17 Shaw, p. 109.

18 Henrik Ibsen, Hedda Gabler, Classic Theatre, eds. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 477.

19 Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 75.

20 Lyons, p. 161.

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