



Four Major Plays: A Doll's House / Ghosts / Hedda Gabler / The Master Builder

Henrik Ibsen , James McFarlane (Translator, Introduction) , Jens Arup (Translator)

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Taken from the highly acclaimed Oxford Ibsen, this collection of Ibsen's plays includes *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder*.

Four Major Plays: A Doll's House / Ghosts / Hedda Gabler / The Master Builder Details

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Master Builder Henrik Ibsen , James McFarlane (Translator, Introduction) , Jens Arup (Translator)**

From Reader Review Four Major Plays: A Doll's House / Ghosts / Hedda Gabler / The Master Builder for online ebook

Barry Pierce says

A Doll's House ★★★★★

There's a reason why this is one of the most performed plays in the world. It's just wonderful. I mean, who doesn't love that ending? It's so subversive (especially for the time). This is the best play in this collection.

Ghosts ★★

I didn't really care for this one. It bored me. I understand its inclusion because of the slight parallels with A Doll's House but otherwise it isn't anything spectacular.

Hedda Gabler ★★★

I went into this book thinking that Hedda Gabler was going to be the one that blew me away because well... it's Hedda Gabler. However while I did enjoy it, it wasn't exactly amazing. It reminded me a lot of Chekhov's *The Seagull* (which I think is a better play) and that comparison may have affected my enjoyment of this work.

The Master Builder ★★★★★

My favourite play from this collection. It's a lot more "talkie" than the others and I really enjoy that. While the ending is a bit... odd, it's still wonderfully tragic and stayed in my mind longer than the other three plays.

Michael Reffold says

Ibsen always reminds me of a more earnest Chekhov - a Chekhov with less humour but more emotion. Four great female roles at the centre of each of these plays: even *The Master Builder* is more about Hilde than the male title character.

Samantha says

A second time round, reading these four plays. My first time was as a teen. I noticed different things in the plays this time but enjoyed just as much. I'm sure I'll re-read again at some point.

Ibsen does a good job of questioning social conventions.

Shanti says

Well written but also terrifying {note I just read Hedda Gabler for school}

Alex says

Holy crap, Ibsen is good. I read Hedda Gabler and Doll's House from this collection. Both feature strong female protagonists who are dissatisfied with the lives they feel trapped in. Both women insist on making something remarkable happen in their mundane worlds; Ibsen wants to remind us that extraordinary things can happen even in the most ordinary of families, where that seems almost impossible. Thus the line, "But, good God, people don't do such things!", which shows up at least twice in each play.

Hedda Gabler is sometimes called the female Hamlet, which seems a bit unnecessary. I mean, I get it. Both characters are lost and depressed and searching for something they're not quite sure of. But to me she seems more like Dorothea, the heroine of Middlemarch. Both marry stuffy, oblivious academics, and both yearn for something more out of life. Hedda Gabler is an image of what might have happened to Dorothea, had she been less strong and principled.

I had the good fortune to be able to compare Jens Arup's Hedda Gabler translation, included here, with Michael Meyer's; Meyer's is worlds better than Arup's. It's not even close. McFarlane's translation of Doll's House is the only one I've read, and it came across well, but I would say that given the information I have right now, Meyer's my homeboy.

Nadia says

A brilliant playwright, Ibsen, no wonder his works are still played today. A very powerful voice and a surprisingly modern one too.

Lisa says

Henrik Ibsen, like his countrymen today, was ahead of his time. The four plays published in this book were written nearly 100 years ago. Nevertheless, they would be forward thinking in these times. This is definitely worth reading and re-reading.

The Fat says

A Doll's House - Ibsen's signature play, which is definitely a bit of a shame as he has much stronger other works, but this is a nice introduction to what I consider the dominant theme of his work; the individual working to be the best version of themselves they can be and society's attempts to crush that. 4 stars.

Ghosts - Much better than I remembered, I love the descriptions of the weather and all the saucy family drama lol, however the characters were some of his least interesting during this period. 4 stars.

Hedda Gabler - His second best play (after Peer Gynt) and one that struck me even more on reread. Hedda is a wonderfully despicable and fascinating character. 5 stars.

The Master Builder - All the talk of trolls and castles in the sky is irresistible. 5 stars.

Steven says

I read this because a friend is directing an adaptation of "Ghosts" for the stage. Ironically, I found that play the least intriguing of this collection. However, they were all compelling and I found the collection to be a page-turner.

Ibsen's characters are a bit complex. They screw up, they torture themselves over screwing up, and their relationships with one another are messy, to say the least. They also tend to wax philosophical over the twists and turns in their lives or suffer from frank mental illness. This is somewhat dark stuff; no airy flights of fancy leading to predictable happy endings here... it's not light reading, but it is engrossing stuff. Marriage, in particular, is presented as a less than blissful state.

Also noticeable? The women. And what women they are! Liberated? Well, not exactly, but shrewd and unwilling to be mere victims of the men around them for sure... Hedda Gabler, in particular, is quite a dame... Ibsen is great at characterization.

This is layered material. There are little details in the dialogue and scenes that one can easily miss if one reads this material superficially. Skipping even a line or two may mean that you miss the very essence of a certain character so if you dive into this be prepared to give it your attention, and you will be rewarded. Ibsen earned his accolades. I'm glad I discovered some of his work.

Keera says

I was required to read A Doll's House and Hedda Gabler in school. I really enjoyed both, so I'm considering finishing the other two at some other point.

A Doll's House

I don't think I can explain my love for Nora at the end of this play. The other characters are mere shadows to the development of her character. The symbolism of the title, and the ending were just perfect. Having read the alternate ending, I can't imagine it ending any other way. Certainly in real life and at present time period, this ending would have to be looked at in a totally different way, but without those considerations, and seeing the main message makes this a must-read even today, in my opinion.

My rating: 5/5

Hedda Gabler

The namesake of this play has got to be one of the most terrifying characters I have ever read about. Maybe it's because I wasn't expecting it, as I began the play without any prior knowledge. I think what truly makes Hedda such a frightening character is the fact that the audience lacks the ability to see inside her head. Thus, we only view her actions, and must depend on hearing her voiced opinions. Ibsen deserves credit for making such an astonishing and horrible character into a believable woman. Honestly, she is such a perfect character to hate and the end fits so wonderfully with her previous words and actions.

However, the main detractor of the play for me was that I was often confused about what was going on between the male characters/distinguishing in particular Brack and Lovborg except at the very last act. Perhaps I didn't pay enough attention, but when we would go over certain things in class, I would realize I had completely missed an important detail. Also, I would have loved to see Mademoiselle Diana in action!
My Rating: 4.5/5

Richard says

Ibsen: So what? There's clearly some major historical importance to these plays, but their "political" content trumps their "poetic" content to such a degree that in the end, to me as a "modern" reader, I'm left with a feeling that while I've experienced some kind of exquisite Aristotelean perfection of tragic "form", that's about it - plus I get that with Greek tragedy, and they have so much "poetic" value. Sure - Nora's behavior at the end of *The Doll House* is "shocking" - and we can go on all day about whether she is a "good person" or a "bad person", but in the end I felt like rolling my eyes - is it just me? Hedda Gabler seemed like the best of the lot, some quite complex themes going on, but the ending was so pathetic, if you're going to be Lady Macbeth, go insane or go out in a blaze of glory. *The Master Builder* had some intriguing bizarre conversations between Solness and Hilde but in the end again, a boring, faux-deep ending. Anyway, this seems to be necessary reading to understand the convulsions at the end of the Victorian Era, as these plays are discussed everywhere, but its modern applicability is limited. I will take Galsworthy over Ibsen any day. Anyway, on the plus side, great train reading, and the stage directions were interesting.

David says

In the 1980s BBC production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Judi Dench plays Mrs. Alving—that stiff-upper-lipped endurer of endless misfortune—as a sniping, often sarcastic adversary to self-righteous, simple-minded Pastor Manders (Michael Gambon), who arrives at her home to conduct business but also to needle her about her moral failings. I read the play *immediately* before watching the film, and I have to confess that wasn't at all how I pictured Mrs. Alving. Either because of my faltering skills of inference or the many interpretive possibilities, I imagined Mrs. Alving combating Pastor Manders' authority with a sort of equanimity. There's no contesting the fact that Manders is (in the common parlance) a jerk and somewhat of an idiot (to the extent that he can't decipher Engstrand's motives), and there's nothing a jerk hates more than being unable to 'reach' a victim with his or her insults or judgments. (From this knowledge is derived the contemporary admonition not to feed internet trolls—because they 'win' only if they get a reaction.) To that end, I pictured Mrs. Alving responding to Pastor Manders' admonishments in a seemingly pleasant and even voice, with a pretense to acquiescence, while all the while she develops an implicit case against the religious and moral authority that the pastor represents.

I bring this up to highlight the uniqueness of reading plays. These are texts that are *intended* to be acted out and are often skeletal in design to allow directors, actors, set designers, and so on to add flesh to the story. (Admittedly, Henrik Ibsen attempts to control the set designers to an often ridiculous degree with detailed descriptions, but the dialogue in his plays is generally presented neutrally.)

When you read a play, you are compelled to direct it yourself (in your mind). You might argue that that's true of novels and short stories as well—and that's of course true, but to a lesser extent. There is usually a lot more exposition and description in a story to make the narrative more *specific* in the reader's mind (unless you're reading, say, Hemingway). In most plays, many literalized cues are absent, and this is a good thing—in that it accommodates the creativity of those who put on the play.

I think this is especially relevant to Ibsen because I have watched a filmed adaptation of each one of these plays since I finished them, and all of them—except *Hedda Gabler* (which I think is the weakest of the four included in this volume)—'felt' very different from what I imagined.

Symptomatic of their era, the four plays rely heavily on (sometimes pained) narrative contrivances. These are harder to 'reconcile' when you only read the naked lines on the page, but when an actor or actress effectively embodies the psychology that *results* from these contrivances, they're so much easier to swallow.

I have previously reviewed another edition of *A Doll's House* on this website. I referred to Nora as a 'twit' in that review. But that's of course because of how I was predisposed to direct her in my mind—which surely isn't to discount the fact that Nora is intended to seem flighty and childlike early on in the play. But when Nora is rendered 'human' in a production (in this case, by Claire Bloom in the 1970s version), her traits become less conceptual than an actual iteration of very real human idiosyncrasy.

I enjoyed reading all of these plays and forming ideas of them in my mind, but *Hedda Gabler* doesn't feel sufficiently nuanced to me. The text doesn't allow enough room for an actress to make the title character anything but one-note. I wish there were a little more evidence of vulnerability in her, but she comes across as mainly villainous because her predicament (her indolence, her desire to wield psychological power) isn't explored. In the 1960s version, Ingrid Bergman played the role pretty much exactly as I imagined—and as the dialogue seems to demand.

The most puzzling play in the group is *The Master Builder*, which is filled with ambiguities I haven't fully reckoned with yet. It will take another reading and (I hope) a few more productions of the play to wrap my mind around it. It seems to take place almost in a quasi-reality, embedded with symbolism I haven't really unraveled yet. The play's message, at first glance, seems contradictory, quarreling with itself... but this might be one of its strengths.

Devon Flaherty says

I can't say that I enjoyed these plays too much. Ibsen and I diverge too much in our basic ideas of the world. What he calls bravery, I call cowardice, and vice versa. What he calls virtue, I call selfishness, and again vice versa. But I will try to assess them from a literary perspective, as well as a taste one, especially understanding that many of his morals are the morals of my own society.

Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian man born in 1828, who, as Oxford World's Classics puts it, was a playwright with "a period of sustained creative endeavor unparalleled in the history of modern theater and one which gave a whole new impetus and direction to the drama of the twentieth century." Whew. His most famous play, "A Doll's House," was published in 1879, and began his career as a public menace, the object of outrage. His plays started the stage in Scandinavia, where they met with wide public debate, and in Germany the ending was (forced to be) re-wrote. It took until 1889 for the play to reach London, where its fame preceded it. Amid criticism and hostility were support and love, and Ibsen would continue as a public topic of polarized debate for his career. Ibsen knew his plays, their topics, and his "stark" treatment of them were inciting, but he sought truth at all cost, and dealt openly with subjects like commercial hypocrisy, religious intolerance, political expediency, conventional morality, and established authority (including man's authority over woman). As time continued, he moved from the public sphere of conflict to a personal one, where his characters increasingly wrestled with temperamental and sexual incompatibility, magnetism, force, their unconscious mind, and dreams and visions. Overall, his writing was not only an impetus for social change, but also a game-changer in the arena of theater, where he excelled at using subtleties in language to an extent no one before had ever done before.

The "period of sustained creative endeavor unparalleled in the history of modern theater" began in 1877 and lasted until 1892. The four plays I read were pairs of plays at the beginning (almost) and end of this period. "A Doll's House" was meant to culminate in "Ghosts," and "Hedda Gabler" and "The Master Builder" were—as I have heard the phrase before—spiritual sisters.

I have been doing a lot of thinking about plays as literature, lately (which may be revisited when I review "Hamlet"). It is not quite adequate to read a play, exactly. I would think that in almost all circumstance, plays

are truly realized when they are performed. However, as this is a book blog and plays are often included in lists of novels/great literature, I will review them as I would a novel. If I easily encounter performances of them, I will review those as well. Almost any decent play can become great in the hands of a masterful director, actors, and set artist, and likewise can fall flat without them.

As for Ibsen's plays, I find his characters to be unbelievable, especially one of the shining stars of his fame and accomplishments, Nora Helmer. I guess what I find most obnoxious about these characters is the speed with which they do things, which could be blamed on the necessity of story and play-writing, or it could be that the characters do not show significant glimmers of what they are to suddenly and so surprisingly become. Nora, for example, is this flitting, domestic plaything (thus the title) for nine-tenths of the play, unable to see her own mistakes and the seriousness of the looming catastrophe ahead. Then, all of a sudden, she is a most advanced, thoughtful, determined individual, come to drastic acts with absolutely no passion and able to express her inmost feelings and will to her husband without missing a beat. I've been in arguments. They don't go like that.

Ibsen has also said of his own work that his plays do not make statements, they just pose questions. It is unfortunate that authors can not know their own work or impact as well as they might like (me and everyone else included), but I don't buy this assessment for a second. It is historically interesting that he considered his plays questions, but they are very clearly works of value statements and modes for societal change (which is exactly what they became.) With lines like "If I'm ever going to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone," would you believe his plays are unbiased vignettes, wondering about human nature, and nothing more?

And finally, I have to come back to this matter of taste. Ibsen, as might have been necessary in someone pushing toward individualism and equality in the 1800s, makes selfishness the knight in shining armor of his plays. I can't enjoy story lines where such individuality is honored above duty and community and a moral compass; it's just not something I believe and so I find Ibsen's heroes and heroines unpalatable. In some stories, that's okay, but Ibsen's plays are constructed around the ideal, a pleasurable inoculation of them, so it's much harder than having, for example, a novel where one of the characters commits suicide (a favorite of his) and another runs away (another favorite), and the novel's judgement remains unclear or backward from what the reader might have picked. Let's face it; we expect the just desserts of characters to line up with our morals, or else we have this thing called dissatisfaction. Only a very talented author can make characters so complex that we are willing to stay judgement for love of the character or some other dearly held ideal: that's when literature can bend our future ideas, not when we are presented with characters that shock us and then merrily get the opposite of what we think they deserve.

For all that, I enjoy the story lines of some of his plays, especially "A Doll's House." Others were much less dramatic and, I would go so far, boring (namely "Ghosts"). Again, it's only historically interesting Ibsen thought "Ghosts" was the culmination of "A Doll's House," because "House" is clearly the masterpiece of the two, better in every way I can think of. It's dramatic. It's interesting. It has several different plots interweaving on one stage, in one set, in just a few virtual days.

"A Doll's House"

Like I said, I really enjoy the story of this play, but I find the outcome less than satisfying. I was also astonished by how many lines and ideas have become part of our culture. To wit (just from Nora's lines in the last scene): "I have never understood you, either—until tonight," "I've been greatly wronged, Torvald," "You two never loved me," "It's your fault that I've never made anything of my life," "I thought I was [happy], but I wasn't really," "I must take steps to educate myself," "That's something I must do on my own," "I must learn to stand alone," "All I know is that this is necessary for me," "I have another duty equally sacred ... My duty to myself," "I have to think things out for myself," "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual," I don't really know what religion is," and "But I can't help it. I don't love you

anymore.” It’s probably difficult to remove ourselves enough from the twenty-first to the nineteenth century to see what kind of statements these were, back then, but it seems that I am still hearing the echoes of Ibsen every day, at all levels of our society. That is quite something.

“Miserable as I am, I’m quite ready to let things drag on as long as possible. All my patients are the same. Even those with moral affliction are no different” (p18).

“Ah, Torvald, you are not the man to teach me to be a good wife to you” (p81).

“Ghosts”

Sorry, but I found this play to be a lot of talking with no purpose. Boring. I can barely remember what it wasn’t about.

“My dear lady, there are many occasions in life when one must rely on others. That’s the way of the world, and things are best that way. How else would society manage?” (p102).

“All of this demanding to be happy in life, it’s all part of this same wanton idea. What right have people to happiness? No, we have our duty to do, Mrs. Alving” (p113).

“Hedda Gabler”

Alright, back to interesting. Again, can’t agree with half of what Ibsen implies, but at least there is a vibrant plot(s) here. I imagine you could put on quite a show with this play.

“Because we men, you know, we’re not always so firm in our principles as we ought to be” (p237).

“I’d sooner die! / People say such things, but they never do them” (p262).

“One generally acquiesces in what is inevitable” (p262).

“The Master Builder”

A mildly interesting play with somewhat interesting characters. Funny that “The Master Builder” is considered the culmination of “Hedda Gabler,” when “Gabler” was far superior.

“It’s fantastic the number of devils there are in the world you never even see, Hilde!” (p323).

“Or if one had a really tough and vigorous conscience. So that one dared to do what one wanted” (p323).

In a way, reading Ibsen is like seeing ourselves in a cracked, Victorian mirror. If, indeed, these plays were just questions, then my questions are these: Is Nora the heroine? Or Kristine? And does “Hedda Gabler” have a hero at all?

Despite plenty of online photos of productions of these plays, I found only one video I could get my hands on, which is the Anthony Hopkins version of A Doll’s House (1973). And actually, I really enjoyed it. I thought that what Hopkins did for Torvald was a sight to behold, making the viewer sympathetic to him. And Claire Bloom actually welds Nora’s flightiness and her final conclusions together. It’s really wonderful acting. My only disappointment was the age of Doctor Rank. The guy played it well, but he was much too old to create much sexual tension between him and Nora (although they managed it fairly well, anyhow). If

you are interested in plays or Ibsen, I would recommend this one. (It doesn't view like a modern movie, as much).

***REVIEW WRITTEN FOR THE STARVING ARTIST BLOG.

Laura says

There is no doubt that Ibsen is one of the greatest playwrights. Reading him for the first time was a wonderful experience, and it must be very exciting to see his plays on stage.

On Ghosts:

A widow, Mrs. Alving, has to face the fact that her son, Oswald, has inherited syphilis from his father, Captain Alving. Captain Alving is deceased and is mentioned throughout the play, and it follows that Mrs. Alving did not have the courage to leave her husband when she should have done so. Ibsen attacks nineteenth century attitudes regarding marriage, hypocrisy, religion, etc. Mrs. Alving has a very curious mind. While this is probably the bleakest Ibsen play I have read so far, I thought it was brilliant. The way Ibsen stages realism is wonderful. "I almost think we are all of us ghosts." This means we are haunted by our past, with ideas and beliefs. A society cannot go on believing in old ideas, and this is further discussed in Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*.

On The Master Builder:

This is a play in which an aging architect accidentally kills himself while trying to impress a young woman. All his fortune is built off of a family tragedy, and it is very ironic. It's lonely at the top.

On Hedda Gabler:

In my opinion, this is Ibsen's best work. It is a stirring, thought-provoking drama. It involves an unhappy marriage, which I found very similar to *Madame Bovary*, although *Hedda Gabler* is far better. Hedda is a manipulative character. She destroys and manipulates to get what she wants but she lives in a reality which she cannot accept.

"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."

-Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*

On A Doll's House:

I read this play in a different addition. This one also offered the alternate ending, where Nora does not leave her husband and children. He was forced to change the ending when they were doing a production of the play in Germany, and the leading actress insisted that she would not play the role of Nora unless Ibsen changed the ending. He did so under much pressure, and very reluctantly too. Ibsen encourages women to find their own selves and to think for themselves. Nora is married to a narrow-minded man, Torvald, who cannot tolerate her independence or decision making. Ibsen exposes middle class hypocrisy and encourages society to see the reality and not the ideal. Nora finally confronts the reality of the life she has lived for eight years and famously slams the door when Torvald thinks about "the miracle of miracles." I liked the character development and the symbolism.

This is my first time reading Ibsen and I have to say the experience was wonderful. I would recommend him to anyone.

Sophie says

A Doll's House

????/??

Κοινωνική κριτική με βάση της τη δυναμική των ζευγαριών, τα χρώματα και τη δύναμη που φέρνουν, τη θέση της γυναίκας, τα καθήκοντα και τις υποχρεώσεις της απέναντι στην κοινωνία, αλλά και απέναντι στο σύζυγό της.

Ghosts

?????

Με την παράλληλη ανήγνωση των Βρικόλων και του Κουκλόσπιτου οι ομοιότητες ήταν περισσότερο προδηλές, τα μοτίβα συνεχίζονται. τόσο η αντιμετώπιση από την πλευρά της γυναίκας των ηθών της πατριαρχικής κοινωνίας όσο και η απεικόνιση των ρόλων που η ίδια η κοινωνία υποβάλλει στη γυναίκα.

Hedda Gabler

????/??

Από τα πιο δυνατά έργα που έχουν γραφτεί· πραγματεύεται τη δύναμη, τον έλεγχο και την επιρροή που επιθυμεί και που, κατά επέκταση, ασκεί ο κάθε άνθρωπος στον άλλο, ενώ παράλληλα διερευνάται το αίσθημα και η σημασία της ελευθερίας, της υποταγής και της ανθρωπίνης μέωσης.

The Master Builder

????/??

Η ιστορία του Πρωτομύστορα, έχοντας αρκετές ομοιότητες στη βάση της με το έργο Άντα Γκμπλερ, αφορά την επιρροή εστιασμένη όμως στις προσωπικές αδυναμίες και ανασφάλειες, που λειτουργούν ως κίνητρο για τη χειραγώγηση.
