than audience a comic butt because of his cowardice, with Maurice Morgann's view that Falstaff is an admirable, though not exemplary, character. The question is important because of its bearing on the theme of honor in the Henry IV plays. We might choose both views of Falstaff, as most observers of our day would, but such a choice is also a romantic reading that a consistent historical critic would deplore.

I did not bring up this problem in order to solve it, but I would suggest that the solution depends on what kind of knowledge we are seeking. To know the pastness of the past requires historical knowledge and historical imagination; to know the presentness of the past, which is the task of romantic criticism, requires even more. I am aware that the historical critic does not think the greater comprehensiveness of romantic criticism a virtue, but for most purposes I believe that those who are interested in the relevance of the humanities will want to judge not only by the standards of the past but also by the standards which they believe in. The bulk of criticism since 1800 (including that of Eliot, Hulme, and Leavis) has been romantic, and I do not think we would be creating better readers—or men—by suggesting that they stop sympathizing with Falstaff, Malvolio, Harpagon, or Alceste. To me, it would seem a far more worthwhile critical task in dealing with any comic character to determine "how far, in many of his notions, he might, tho' odd, be absolutely right."

Ibsen's **Hedda Gabler: Tragedy as Denouement**

**Michael M. Dorcy**

Professor Maynard Mack, among others, has remarked that drama is an obvious, yet an often neglected, link between literature and life, and this at all levels of education. Drama is a unique type of *meeting*, to borrow Martin Buber's term. It is not a real life encounter of two persons; rather, it is, or can be, a meeting with oneself in the transparent other. This is especially true of tragedy at its best. And it is especially the time element of tragedy, that sense of the present, which controls the involvement one experiences in the much discussed tragic enterprise.

Some time ago, Richard Chase criticized T. S. Eliot for what he chose to call a "loss of the sense of the present moment in time and the sense of the world about us, the sense of *what is present*." ¹ Chase's citing of poets whom he considers to have conveyed a "sense of the present" at least questions the sweeping indictment by some critics that all poetic activity is basically romantic and therefore an ahistorical enterprise, an escape from time and time's stuff.

The artist, it would appear, has an option. This is especially evident in the dramatic or tragic arts; in these the artist can either side step or come to

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grips with what Mircea Eliade has so tellingly called the "terror of history."

Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler is a fine example of the handling of this alternative presented to the dramatist. For in this play, variously described as tragedy, comedy, "dark" comedy, and tragicomedy, we find portrayed a struggle and a conflict with time itself, resulting in a final imbalance between the past and the present which affects the basic relationship between audience and protagonist, and ultimately prevents the play from being real tragedy at all.

The Dimension of Time: The Sense of the Present

Drama, even in its most primitive forms, reveals a relationship of three basic elements: a place, set aside for a specific function, that of representation; a play-community, aware of itself as a group and gathered for a distinct purpose; and an actor, confining himself to the specified area, the stage, and in all his concrete particularity enacting the representation for which the community is gathered. About the sacred area there is a willing suspension of the limitations of time and space. The actor stands present to the audience in an attempt to stop time and to enter into the fathomless profundity of a single human act. Through the action, the audience finds itself, and is in a sense restored to the human race.

History as a chronicler's account of the future becoming the past, and as viewed from that end only, tends to produce a certain stagnating, dehumanizing effect. This kind of history must become myth before drama becomes possible. Myth is a passport out of the chronicler's history where reason is reduced to historical trend, and where human heart is forgotten in the frigid relating of fact. Through drama, in turn, man takes myth and restores the human element that has been lost. These are human beings performing an action and thus myth becomes real history, history as present. The audience has a glimpse of history at the moment it is being created.

Henrik Ibsen was consciously striving for the Aristotelian ideal of a dramatic action transpiring within a single revolution of the earth about its axis. But whereas in the Greek theater the playwright had only to evoke a myth that was common property and could concentrate on his own present revelation of plot, Ibsen must weave the tissue of his own myth at the same time he is concentrating on his action. The Greek playwright could lift the entire myth into his own presentation and make it reverberate in the present. Ibsen, unable to draw upon established tradition, must reveal all that he would have his audience know about the past, and in doing so he constantly runs the risk of losing his presentation and letting it slip back into the past.

This aspect of Ibsen's dramaturgy receives some elucidation from William Archer's discussion of the "point of attack" in Play-Making. Faced with the vast maze of the universe fabric, the playwright unravels a single strand of activity; then he cuts it, arbitrarily choosing a beginning. He can run the curtain up whenever he wishes: at the start of a crisis, or at the beginning of the catastrophe. Shakespeare's usual practice was to bring the entire action into immediate purview, leaving little to that narrative exposition which becomes the chronicler's history and looses the hold on the present. In Hamlet, for example, in the play-within-the-play, the myth is brought up to date, giving a new depth to the present; the dead past becomes alive again.

Ibsen's point of attack is always late. Only in the League of Youth and in An Enemy of the People could one say that his whole action comes from within the framework of the play. In other presentations Ibsen is forced to go back
in order to put his audience in possession of some of the antecedent circumstances necessary for an understanding of the present action. As his talent aged, Ibsen became more and more adept at avoiding cumbersome prologues. This he accomplished through such devices as the confidant of the classic French theater. Yet the emphasis on the past remained strong, and as Archer remarks, *Ghosts* is a drama of exposition rather than a drama of action. Ibsen fails to strike any "reasonable equilibrium between the drama of the past and the drama of the present." In his last works the aging Ibsen gave an upper hand to the past. In *The Master Builder, Little Eyolf, John Gabriel Borkman,* and *When We Dead Awaken,* we find three-fourths of the action dedicated to a "passionate analysis of the past."

In *Hedda Gabler* Archer sees a more "sound proportion between the past and the present." Yet the opening revelation between Miss Tessman and Bertha in the conventional French mode, and the expository tête-à-tête when Hedda first encounters Thea, remain obvious structural weaknesses in the play. The past is constantly encroaching on the present, and Hedda is threatened with being crowded off stage. She cannot, as Hamlet can, thrust herself forward and assume the role of one whose deliberations are steeped in consequences of eternal significance.

*The Dimension of Freedom*

The present is a notion that makes sense only to a being who is free; freedom is enjoyed only by one who can say "now." The dimensionality of freedom in *Hedda Gabler* depends precariously on the time dimension attributed to all of Hedda's actions.

Hedda is a person who, according to Gabriel Marcel's distinction, has subjected being to having. She has exaggerated the receptive aspect of self and the range of freedom, conceiving, as Sartre does, of an antinomy between absolute power and total subjection, ruling out the possibility of participated freedom. The man who subjects being to having is never available to others. He can only see others as useful or not useful for serving his own ends. Other people must be appropriated. Insofar as they exercise a bit of interiority themselves and do not submit totally to appropriation, they become living hells for someone like Hedda.

Marcel insists that freedom goes beyond the Sartrean distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. It does not follow, as Sartre pretends, and as Hedda thinks, that because a person is not the plaything of his environs he is complete master of himself.

On Marcel's analysis, Hedda's suicide follows consistently from her previous behavior. Brack's astonishment at play's end betrays his shallowness: people, Hedda's type of people, *do* do such things! It is the final gesture of the spectator, the antithesis of the witness's martyrdom. It is a refusal to offer testimony to transcendence, a refusal to say: "There are other beings with whom I must exist, but whom I cannot 'have' to manipulate and control." Hedda, as one whose life has centered on having, regards suicide as the supreme act of absolute freedom. Blinded by the illusion of absolute power, she has turned against herself. Ultimately, and in the simplest terms, Hedda's problem is an absolute inability to say "we."

Hermann Weigand (in *The Modern Ibsen*) has described Hedda as the "quixotic heroine" and sees in her behavior signs of an "absolute concentration of her whole personality upon a single act of willing." It is here that we put our finger on a vital element in comprehending Hedda's character and ultimately in relating that character to the dimensionality of the tragic. For it is precisely her inability to concentrate her whole personality upon a single act.
of will, whether for good or for ill, which keeps Hedda's actions on the periphery, just skirting the fully tragic. Such a concentration of will is denied Hedda from the beginning of the play.

There are three basic ways in which a man can confront existence: He can yield to the beast that broods within him and confine his activity to a simple response to his environment. Or, turning into himself, he can chart and lay strict claim to that meager half-acre we call ourselves, and fend off all comers. Or again, man can attempt to balance the extremes of living completely without or of living completely within. He can pick his way along the precarious tightrope that lies between.

He must chart his half-acre, but he cannot completely fence it off. He must respond to the "without," but not totally. Maintaining the avenue to the "within," which is a sense of himself, he must forage in the uncharted woods that surround him. Before he can live fully, he must, as Jacques Maritain says, assume the ethical category of "existence with." This he must do before he can act for or act with.

Hedda's plight, and it is a plight of her own making, is the choice she has made of the hedgehog existence; self enclosed and with spines alert, she fends off all comers. Or to use the figure Claudel employs to describe Mesa in Partage de Midi, she has so tightly sealed herself off that God himself would break his fingernails trying to pry her open.

In his Range of Reason, Maritain speaks of that initial act of choice, or what he chooses to call "the immanent dialectic of the first free act," when, however young or however beyond the recall of memory the act may be, the individual, reflecting upon himself, chooses or rejects goodness as something in itself and thus comes to a decision about the "direction of his life." This decision binds the future, but only in a fragile way. It does not necessarily confirm one forever in a chosen path. But any deviation from that initial choice must emanate from an act of freedom as deep and as deliberate as the original elections.

The extreme ideal found in some existentialism (notably the Sartrean variety) of the full commitment of oneself, or of the raw confrontation of naked will against the cosmos, places an impossible burden on man and can only result in frustration. Flesh-bound and time-bound man is, "when found at best." And never is he at one single moment all that he would be, or all that others would have him to be, or all that God would have him to be. Man is an aspirant. He tries; then he tries again. But never being able to grasp himself completely in his two hands, he can never offer his complete self—his "best self"—to a single situation. Once or twice in a lifetime he may rouse the greater part of his personality and bring it to a single act of willing. But for the most part man aims at further adequacy—of self-comprehension, of self-expression. Such is man's plight, such is finitude. Man expresses himself, as Teilhard points out, over a lifetime.

I have dwelt at some length (for a paper of this size) on the psychology of free choice because I think it is at this level that we can ground the discussion of the "tragic" element of the play. Great tragedy has always wedded two essential elements: a character who has some hand in making his own history, and an action which is permeated with an awesome sense of the present. The tragic hero must be an individual. To some extent at least, he must be the self-made man, appropriating and integrating his diffused forces and giving direction and impetus to his activity. He cannot be completely the chattel of that modern form of fate which lurks in one's genes or in one's neighbors. The hero must have presence; he must be present. He must be able to say "now."

And the audience is overwhelmed with
that presence. The newspaper headline account of a “tragedy” breeds pathos; foreknowledge of future doom engenders anxiety and a feeling of helplessness; presence demands awe. One feels the urge to loosen one’s sandals on those rare occasions when one experiences presence, albeit only in another man. This lies at the heart of tragedy. It transcends the utilitarian and bourgeois reaction of “if only…” At true tragedy’s end we cannot make a statement of “if only…” Finitude is not that clear, not that clean cut. Overwhelmed with a sense of presence and with a sense of the present, we can only exclaim in awe: “This is it!”

Hedda Gabler is rugged at and fought over by a thousand different designs. Her pregnancy, her boredom, her sense of unfulfillment have fragmented her to the point where she no longer is able to concentrate the forces of her personality on that single act of willing of which Weigand spoke. And if Hedda is to open herself to others, there is required, as Maritain pointed out, an act of deliberation and freedom as deep and as penetrating as the act by which she first locked herself away. Only once is there a hint of such an opportunity, and that occurred before the action of the play, when Hedda first felt a spark of love for Eilert. But even then she was content with her vicarious participation, spectator-like, in Eilert’s careenings. Three times in the play—when she gives Loveberg the pistol, when she burns the manuscript, and at her suicide—she displays a certain strength, a certain force of will. But these displays are in accord with that direction of life she had previously set for herself. The question remains whether in the context of the play, whether in the fragmented condition in which Ibsen has placed her, Hedda has the capacity for the profound sort of act of freedom which can extricate her from the self-centered biography she has carved on time.

Hedda’s real action has been in the past. She remains free, fragility free, but given the time structure of the play with its concentration on the past, she is unable to exercise that freedom. Her activity for the most part is confined to catastrophic re-action. Tragedy has become denouement.

Rhetoric Prize

The May Competition (see below) laid bare a distressing infirmity of our profession, to wit, a sorry incompetence in the shorter rhetorical forms. Readers of this column will agree, we feel certain, that our constituency has acquitted itself handsomely in the making of devious decanal deliverances, subtle scholarly strategems, and the like. All the more unsettling, therefore, to discover that same constituency inept and ill at ease in the expression of great matter in few words. Odd, too, that the age which has produced the lean styles of Hemingway and Beckett, which has prompted treatises like Against Interpretation and The Language of Silence, which has refined the short poem to a wordless quintessence in Christian Morgenstern’s “Fisches Nachtgesang”—that this age should have so ill prepared its English teachers for the drafting of compact messages.

A timely communication has arrived, from Roger B. Rollin of Franklin and Marshall College:

I have a suggestion which may well aid you in your inspirational contests and money-making schemes. Buttons are of