

HJALMAR SÖDERBERG " DOCTOR GLAS " 1905
DOKTOR GLAS

" Now I sit at my open window , writing - for whom ? "

Timeline of the novel reaches from mid-summer june 12 to the beginning of winter 7 october . It opens during a heat wave in Stockholm .

Dr Tyko Gabriel Glas....." a doctor must be one of two things ; either a philanthropist , Or else avid for honours . True , I once thought I was both .

He refuses to do abortions...." i'm not a gynecologist "

" it is as impossible for a woman to live without a man , as for a man to bite off his own nose ."

" so much suffering and misery , for so little pleasure . "

Position , respectability , future . As if I were not ready , any day or moment , to stow these packages aboard the first ship to come sailing by laden with action .

" the dream of happiness does not exist that does not bite its own tail " p. 58

" I am the shadow who wished to become a man . " (p . 60)

"Doctor Glas" (1905), by Hjalmar Soderberg (1869-1941), is the philosophically conflicted diary of Tyko Glas, a young medical doctor in Stockholm, Sweden's largest city, in the form of his personal diary. He tells us he is just thirty years old and looking for adventure, a progressive and aesthetic intellectual in a conservative city. He disdains the many requests he receives for abortions, invariably turning them away, not of his own beliefs, but because he fears Sweden's hypocritical society would ostracize him.

Helga, the beautiful young wife of the repellant Reverend Gregorius confides to Glas that her sex life is making her miserable and begs for his help. Smitten with her, he agrees, even though she already has another lover. He does intervene, but when it becomes clear that the Reverend will not give up his "rights," Glas begins planning his murder. Arranged in the form of a journal, this fascinating, deeply moral (yet never moralizing) novel, trans. by Paul Britten Austin, offers the voyeuristic thrill of reading over the doctor's shoulder as he wrestles with his conscience.

Thus begins the struggle between thought and action that drives the plot of Hjalmar Söderberg's most celebrated novel, as Doctor Glas starts to weigh a deed that would liberate Helga, and perhaps himself too.

It also juxtaposes impressions of fin-de-siècle Stockholm against the psychological landscape of a man besieged by obsession. Lonely and introspective, solitary and melancholy, Dr Glas is a sad, tragic figure and a tortured soul.

Loneliness, in one form or another, provides the leitmotif of this book.

"It makes me feel as if there's no one in the world lonely at this moment but I. I, doctor of medicine Tyko Gabriel Glas, who sometimes helps others but has never been able to help himself, and who, on entering his thirty-fourth year of life, has never yet been with a woman."

"Nothing diminishes a man and drags him down so much as the consciousness of not being loved."

"People want to be loved; failing that admired; failing that feared; failing that hated and despised. They want to evoke some sort of sentiment. The soul shudders before oblivion and seeks connection at any price."

One of the things to consider is that Glas tells us that he will not lie. Yet the ultimate mystery could be that he is an unreliable narrator "lying to us" - because he is becoming mentally unstable ? Is the minister such a bad person ? Why does he want to help Helga, when she is in love with another? What has happened in Glas's past that makes him the way he is?

In his diary, Glas wonders if abortion and murder are not similar, in the sense that both relieve a burden of life. Glas wonders if Gregorius could justifiably be killed to relieve the "burden" upon his wife Helga. He reflects on morality, love, sex, and religion, his thoughts become increasingly feverish. He debates the issue through his diary, turning through various twists of logic, trying to find

a relative position which is simultaneously moral and expedient. He even goes so far as to prepare two tablets of potassium cyanide, one for the pastor, and one for himself, should his plan go badly. He clearly loses mental clarity with his obsession over this issue.

Will he actually try to kill Gregorius? Will he woo Helga for himself? Will he drop the entire issue, and snap back to reality? Will he accomplish the impossible reconciliation between morality and his impulses? The resolution will be an interesting one, but Glas will offer only one insight: "Life, I do not understand you."

The book itself is nicely written, the prose lovely of description, polite, high-toned, and at times romantic, and the subject matter frank, from schoolboy wonderment and embarrassment, to "husband's rights" and the moral place of abortion, euthanasia, murder, love, sex, infidelity, and unrequited love in society.

"[*Doctor Glas*] not only sketches the light and shadows of its time, but maps territory still being explored by the writers of today. It is a volcano, shaking, about to erupt." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"Elegant, vigorous, and tightly-knit. . . . One of those marvelous books that appears as fresh and vivid now as on the day it was published. . . . It occurs on the cusp of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, but it opens doors the novel has been opening ever since." —Margaret Atwood, from the Introduction

"Imagine the classic nineteenth century drama featuring a tyrannical older man, his hapless daughter or young wife, and her caddish suitor, as in Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet* and Henry James's *Washington Square*, this time conjured up by a sensibility akin to Strindberg's and Ingmar Bergman's--and you begin to have an idea of the force and candor of this searing masterwork of Northern European literature. The retrieval of *Doctor Glas* in English is a bracing gift to hungry readers." —Susan Sontag

