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THE FRUSTRATED SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN *HEDDA GABLER*

Abstract

Critics have always complained that *Hedda Gabler*, one of the most controversial plays of Ibsen, is obtuse and morbid, and its protagonist is un-redeeming and inscrutable. Some also allege that it is a play without a thesis, not generally seen with Ibsen. The paper tries to clear some of these doubts surrounding *Hedda Gabler* by identifying the underlying idea behind the play.

Key Words: Inscrutable, Illogical, Perverted femininity, False ideals, Identity, Dilemma, Self-vindictive

Introduction

Ibsen has been superb in his understanding and portrayal of feminine nature. His women are not the great radiant representative types of a Shakespeare; they are not exactly normal; but they hold our attention because they represent his conception of the woman-problem - and are struggling and sometimes tortured individuals. Twice in his career, however, the dramatist has presented us with an objective picture, masterly in execution, of feminine decadence. The first, that of Hiordis in his verse play *The Vikings*; the second is the center of the canvas in *Hedda Gabler*.

Hedda is a composite of variants, as Moses says, "raised to the nth power" (Moses 429). Hedda belongs to the same class as Rebecca West (Rosmersholm) and Ellida Wangel (The Lady from the Sea). She is "the pagan, persuaded of the legitimacy of her natural instincts and of her right to happiness" (Moses 430). However, she differs from them in being continually the victim of ennui, a condition due to lack of passionate excitement on the one hand, and an insensibility to other forms of interest on the other. Further, Rebecca and Ellida

were passionate women, clamoring for happiness; but they were susceptible to the calls of duty, affection, and noble service. Hedda seems to be deaf to such appeal. Thus, critics have always wondered about the logic behind her creation.

A Play without a Thesis?

When the play was first published in 1890, it received more uniformly negative response than any of Ibsen's plays. Many critics, whether European, British, or American, were horrified by *Hedda Gabler*. In the words of Michael Egan, they condemned the play as "the study of a malicious woman of evil instincts, jealous, treacherous, and cold-hearted"(223). She is not the "woman every man takes down to dinner"(Moses 429). David Krasner observes, "Critics complained that it was obtuse, morbid, cruel, and its protagonist un-redeeming and inscrutable" (59). They resented against the play because they thought that Ibsen was condemning the entire society through its protagonist Hedda Gabler, who does not accept the conventional duties and responsibilities assigned to a wife and mother by the bourgeois society. One appalled response was to deny that such a woman could exist in real life, such "a hopeless specimen of degeneracy," such a vicious, heartless, cowardly, unmoral, mischief-making vixen" (Kinzer).

Even some supporters of Ibsen were confused by this play, because they expected another problem play; a number of his previous plays had dealt with contemporary social issues like syphilis or political corruption. As Michael Meyer notes, "Even critics normally friendly towards him found the play illogical"(653-54). For them, *Hedda Gabler* might be brilliant, but it was also pointless. Edmund Gosse could not find "any sort of general idea from *Hedda Gabler*...or satire on any condition of society"(191). Critics pointed to this play as an instance of purely objective art, without any idea or thesis at all.

However, the play is not just a specimen of objective art, without any thesis. Writing, on December 4th, 1890, to Count Prozor about the play, Ibsen himself claimed:

What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions, and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day. (*Letters* 435)

Ibsen is quite right. He has indeed depicted "human beings, human emotions and human destinies" under the influence of prevailing social conditions and principles. Having investigated the feminine character in a male-oriented society in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen enlarged his scrutiny to encompass the full pathology of the social female.

Although Hedda is an example of perverted femininity, her situation illuminates what Ibsen considered to be a depraved society, intent on sacrificing to its own self-interest the freedom and individual expression of its most gifted members. “Hedda is basically a creative personality who cannot realise her potential in a society which does not allow women to live as independent human beings” (Esslin). Hedda Gabler is the victim of poor early training, false ideals, and wrong social adaptation.

The Conflict

As a product of the nineteenth century, when women were destined to become either respectable old maids like George's aunts or humble housekeepers like Mrs. Elvsted, Hedda is an anomaly. Since it was unthinkable at the time for a woman to receive either an intellectual or a professional education, Hedda's intelligence remained stultified. Unable to recognize the demands of her individuality, she remains enslaved to a standard of social conventionality and can only admire from afar the forbidden world where there is freedom of expression and an uninhibited exuberance of life.

Hedda has no identity outside of her “relations,” no center, no “I” to call her own, nothing but a reflection of images by others – trophy wife, general’s daughter, bitch goddess, femme fatale, and “sado-masochistic, manipulative, murderous, and suicidal”(431), to quote Harold Bloom – that is at odds with herself. Hedda is full of creative desires. For Hedda, the surface reality is “appalling and ugly”(35), as Errol Durbach suggests. She desires beauty and aesthetics in life, and it is symbolized in her repeated references to the “vine leaves.” However, there is no “place” for her to assert identity professionally, socially, or creatively. Michael Goldman refers to Hedda’s “vine leaves” as her “last-ditch sensual invention”(148).

Hedda seems to be torn between her social self and her essential self. Sharing Nora's craving for freedom and Mrs. Alving's compliance with social conventions, Hedda finds no outlet for her personal demands; she is constantly torn between her aimless desire for freedom and her commitment to standards of social appearance. In Hedda, too, we can notice Ibsen’s often repeated pattern of a woman’s conflict between her prescribed, gendered identity and her individual autonomy – what society tells her she should be and what she is free to become. The conflict embodies what Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson have called the “two faces, positive and negative, of the modern as the anti-traditional: freedom and deprivation, a living present and a dead past” (qtd. in Templeton 333).

David Krasner asserts, “Refusing to live imprisoned by convention – though she fears any act of non-conformity – she is a person lacking an outlet. Her pent-up frustrations curdle like sour milk, making her mean-spirited and aloof”(61). It is not surprising, thus, that though she seeks an ideal world and self-sufficiency, she falls short in both endeavours. “Each action she undertakes, which is meant to bring her closer to her ideals and her autonomy, actually sets in motion a reversal”(Krasner 60).

Hedda, like Nora in *A Doll's House*, has been held up as an exemplary feminist character. There is no doubt that Nora and Hedda experience bigotry, and both wage battle against the society, in their respective ways. There is still an essential difference between Nora and Hedda. When Nora Helmer recognized her own unsatisfied needs, she left her husband and children, considering her most ‘sacred duty’ was to find herself. Like Nora, Hedda Gabler is a stranger to herself. However, lacking Nora's daring and defiance of conventions, she is unable to undergo the trials of self-evaluation and becomes a morbidly self-vindictive, destructive virago. Martin Esslin insightfully remarks:

Hedda is trapped in a truly tragic dilemma. Her seeming wickedness results from the confusion and contradictions within her own self-image between, on the one hand, her need to reject the role into which her upbringing and society have forced her (the dutiful and middle-class housewife and mother-to-be) and, on the other, her inability to do so because of the strength of her conditioning and the pressure of public opinion. Her destructiveness is thus merely her creativeness gone wrong, her tragic failure to achieve true selfhood.

Orley Holtan expresses a similar view when he writes, “In *Hedda Gabler* (Ibsen) portrays a character, who longs for a finer and more beautiful life but who is aborted or warped in such a way that she can bring only destruction to herself and many of those around her” (181). Not having any positive influence in the world, Hedda Gabler can only define herself negatively: she destroys what she cannot accept. Undermining her husband with her coldness, denying her pregnancy, destroying Thea's life-work, burning Lövborg's creative product, ruining the child-manuscript, and finally, committing suicide are all perverted attempts to satisfy her "craving for life" (Ibsen, *Works* 132).

Seen from another angle, the conflict in the play lies in the gulf between Hedda's aesthetic worldview and everyone else's material view. Hedda's various attempts to destruct symbolize an unspoken rebellion against the society which thwarts the claims of creative individuals. Hedda's aesthetic sense comes into conflict against the pragmatism of those men who surround her. Peter Gay describes these men as “the obedient, passive, supremely

uncreative bourgeois, as a ‘herd animal’ who had been to the university and occupied positions of leadership in the academy, business, and government”(34).

Hedda, appearing on the surface to be the conformist, is actually the rebel against these men and her rebelliousness is manifested in her resistance to the female roles of wife, mistress, and mother. “Hedda’s resistance to the female role of muse and mother,” remarks Gail Finney, “is characteristic of her consistent rebellion against the conventional turn-of-the century view of women’s place”(155). Finney is obviously right, however, Hedda in the play is more than just a woman, who is fighting for her rightful place. She is symbolic of the creative spirit who has the desire, but not the opportunity, in a suffocating environment, to express herself. It is not surprising that she expresses her frustration in destructive attempts at self-expression and ultimately commits suicide. “The Tragedy of Hedda is that in her world, she can achieve autonomy only by dying” (Templeton 334).

Conclusion

In *Hedda Gabler*, by depicting the frustrated journey of a woman whose search for her own identity finds no support or solace in a hostile environment, Ibsen declares his most vigorous protest against the bourgeois society. All the best drama is made up of the existential struggle for selfhood; and *Hedda Gabler* reflects how cruel and tragic this struggle can be for a woman in our society.

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