

FROM A JOURNEY OF INNER STRUGGLE TO A CATASTROPHE: ^

HENRIK IBSEN'S *HEDDA GABLER*

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ABSTRACT

In a cultural framework shaped by patriarchal ideology, Ibsen's 1890 play *Hedda Gabler* explores women's two major roles within the family, daughter and mother/wife and examines how the title character's resistance to these female roles, as the play unfolds, is characteristic of her rebellion against the conventional turn-of-the-century view of woman's place. The play portrays the reduction of the woman to her status as female, and this adds to the hopelessness of Hedda's situation and, undeniably, brings about her catastrophic end. Her being a member of a declining aristocratic class and the fear of ending up as a spinster make Hedda see marriage into a respectable middle class/academic family as the only means of escape. Nevertheless, she becomes oppressed by the narrow conventions and conformity of a petit-bourgeois society that imprison her in conventional expectations of female roles. Despite the hints that she should have a baby, Hedda resists the maternal role throughout the play, which is commonly considered to be a woman's sole and inevitable vocation in life.

It is within this framework that this paper aims at discussing how Hedda's refusal to fit into the accepted female roles of wife and mother results in her victimization and downfall: she kills herself with a pistol immediately after she plays a "frenzied dance melody on the piano" through which she metaphorically cries for help raising her voice because she recognizes that she is confined to her feminine role.

Key Words: *Hedda Gabler*, Henrik Ibsen, maternity, female roles.

**FROM A JOURNEY OF INNER STRUGGLE TO A CATASTROPHE: HENRIK IBSEN'S
*HEDDA GABLER***

Ibsen wrote that he called the play *Hedda Gabler* because "he intended to indicate thereby that as a personality she is to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than as her husband's wife" (McFarlane, 1966, p. 500). This remark of Ibsen, in a letter of 1890, undoubtedly tells us a lot about Hedda's relationship with her father, her marriage to her husband, George Tesman, and her eventual

self-annihilation when the play comes to an end. Before Hedda appears on the stage the audience have already met her late military father, whose absent presence dominates the play with a portrait on the wall: the “portrait of a handsome old man in general’s uniform” (Act I, 942). Thus as the title and the portrait of the general that is meant to be visible on the set signify Hedda had already an identity before her marriage and till the end of the play she will continue to act as her father’s daughter, not as her husband’s wife. As Elizabeth Hardwick (1970) argues the man Hedda marries is “much more of a girl than she is,” (p. 57) because in contrast to his wife’s motherless, father-dominated upbringing on horses and pistols, Tesman was raised by his two maiden aunts as a child. The unmarried, childless, Juliane Tesman, kind, good-natured, and self-sacrificing, still takes care of her nephew as an adult: she has mortgaged her annuity to furnish the newlyweds’ home.

The father’s stranglehold on his daughter, among other things, is further reinforced by her killing herself with one of the pistols that she has inherited from him. Gail Finney quotes Juliet Mitchell who draws attention to the fact that “It is quite specifically the importance of the *father* [rather than of men in general] that *patriarchy* signifies” (as cited in Finney, 1989, p. 103). In this sense the play also depicts woman’s “daughterly” place in patriarchal societies. General Gabler, an image of power and paternal authority, still assumes god-like omnipotence and omnipresence in his daughter’s new household, and highlights her inability to exercise control and power over her own existence in order to realize herself. She remains deeply influenced by the values that the general had instilled in her. Therefore Hedda will attempt to revitalize her existence and express herself through manipulating the lives of others and attacking what she herself lacks: “For once in my life I want to have the power to shape a man’s destiny,” she says. “I have never had it” (Act II, 978) Towards the end of the play she leads Lövborg, her former lover, a debauched but inspired writer, to drink and then to suicide because she envies Thea, an old school acquaintance, who has a great influence upon Lövborg’s trying to re-establish himself in society. In doing so, she comes to exercise power for the first time via her control over another human being utilizing him as an instrument for her wishes and attacks Lövborg-Thea friendship and the creativity she herself cannot possess. “Oh, if you could only understand how poor I am—and you are allowed to be so rich,” (Act I, 953) she tells Thea, who, after Lövborg’s suicide, decides to reconstruct his manuscript with Tesman’s support.

After her father’s death, Hedda marries Tesman, an academic who hopes to become a university professor. She is well aware of her increasing age, diminished circumstances, and her precarious financial position, and Tesman seems to offer her a chance to retain her social position. Hedda is a representative of the effete turn-of-the-century aristocracy that is about to be overrun by the burgeoning middle classes. “By 1890, the year the play was published, political and economic innovations were in the process of destroying the traditional foundations of society” declares Erling E. Kildahl (2015) in his essay entitled “The Social Conditions and Principles of *Hedda Gabler*” (p. 207). Times have changed and the social structure of the country at the turn of the century has undergone a radical alteration. This is a society in which the bourgeoisie has successfully proclaimed its social and political primacy. Hence, a woman of 29, like Hedda Gabler, with no means of her own in a male-oriented commercial world, decides to marry since marriage into a respectable middle-class academic family is seen as the only means of survival for her. She desperately clings to the glamour of being General Gabler’s daughter, and

does not want to lose her comfortable lifestyle or endanger her social standing. She just strives to keep herself clean of the world's problems and avoids taking responsibilities as an individual. Ibsen's own notes about the play support the already noted arguments: "Hedda's desperation is a conviction that life must offer so many possibilities of happiness, but that she can't catch sight of them. It is the want of a goal in life that torments her" (McFarlane, 1966, p. 121). Moreover, to make things worse, the passage of time reminds her of the uncontrollable and pathetic progression in her body: she is beginning to age and panic. She confesses to Judge Brack that she married Tesman because she "had danced [her]self out," because her "time was up" (Act II, 963); in other words, because she was afraid of ending up as an old maid.

Unfortunately, the solution that she has found brings her no good. Her marriage within the bars of the narrow house makes her life even more claustrophobic and unbearable and the restrictive institution of marriage and its effects on women become a source of anger, desperation, and destructiveness both of herself and the others because she can find no possible role for herself that would make up a life. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984) comment that, in the nineteenth century, woman's ineffectual life and agonizing boredom within the repressive atmosphere of the house often led to psychosomatic disorders (p. 54) such as claustrophobia, which certainly attests to the woman's inability to cope with the social pressures placed on her. The emotions of Hedda about her marriage and her newlywed husband are made clear by the adjective "excruciating" (Act II, 963) that she uses to describe their honeymoon. In this picture of an ailing marriage, she takes every opportunity to mock and belittle her husband, who is really unsophisticated about the ways of the world. She even evades addressing her husband by his first name, *George*, except in contempt. Otherwise it is always *Tesman*—a cold, patronizing way of address. Her husband is completely absorbed in his book, his only interest in life according to Hedda, which revolves around domestic industries in Belgium and Holland in the Middle Ages. She comments to Brack that "there's nothing [Tesman] likes better than rooting around in libraries and copying old pieces of parchment, or whatever it is he does" (Act II, 963). The repetitive and mundane talks on her husband's work indicate the absence of any real communication between them. The gaping void of physical and emotional fulfillment can never be breached and it turns into a form of destruction, violence and manipulation. Havard Nilsen (2003) points out that,

It becomes obvious as the events unfold that she has not married her newlywed husband out of love, but out of a strange blend of convenience and desperation, possibly depression and loneliness. (p. 16)

Women's two major roles within the family, daughter and mother/wife are all represented by Hedda in different ways: she is a daughter, wife, and would-be-mother. In the first place, her role as the daughter of a man of an aristocratic and military class supposedly provides Hedda with a sense of privilege, hence power, which is closely bound up with her resistance to the conventional view of woman's place in the home as wife or mother. Her taste for pistols and horses is evocative of her intense desire to be less feminine and to be a woman of unusual independence. More significantly, pistols and horses, phallic and Freudian symbols, by definition, also accentuate a rigidly conventional, male-oriented society marked by a sense of petty propriety and respectability that attempts to keep the

female in her proper place and, to borrow Elaine Showalter's (1985) words, "to confine [her] to the doll's house of bourgeois femininity (p. 5), the house constituting the most powerful emblem of enclosure of the female. Hedda discards the role of submissive domesticity and rebels against certain female roles as elements in her self-definition. She is hemmed in by the restrictions and inhibitions of a society that offers her very little and deems motherhood an inevitable and single vocation for females, thereby exerting a destructive pressure on their individuality.

In spite of the hints that she should have a baby, Hedda resists the maternal role throughout the play. It is not explicitly stated that the title character is pregnant, but the play teems with implications of her pregnancy. When Tesman tells to his aunt that Hedda has "filled out" on their honeymoon, she rebukes him for his "wrong" observation saying that she is exactly as she was when she left (Act I, 949). When her husband praises her "flourishing" situation to Brack, she becomes furious and tells them to "leave [her] out of it" (Act I, 960). She is distressed at being thought to be pregnant. In response to the remarks about the possibility of pregnancy made by her husband, his aunt, and Judge Brack, who all emphasize the sacred institution of motherhood, and in doing so, reveal their common tendency to reduce women to their female status rather than to regard them as individuals, Hedda changes the subject immediately or reacts with anger saying, "I have no leanings in that direction, Judge. I don't want any—responsibilities" (Act II, 967). She does not want a baby, however, the stereotype of motherhood is put on a pedestal in the sentimental reactions of all those around her who insist on woman's "natural talent" for this vocation.

The myth of maternity is viewed as women's destiny by patriarchal tradition, the only vocation open to them. The overwhelming power of the issue of motherhood as the proper calling for women is so strong that the other two major female characters in the play have been preoccupied with maternal thinking around which they have established their existences. Unmarried Miss Tesman has never experienced biological motherhood. She, however, has raised Tesman who has become her surrogate child and has been nursing a bed-ridden sister for a long time. After her sister's death, she even plans to find another invalid to occupy her days. Similarly, the other motherless woman, Thea, though she has stepchildren, has developed a kind of maternal language toward a metaphorical child. She refers to the book that Lövborg has created with her help as their child since for her it has become the embodiment of her existence. Woman must acquiesce in her passive role in art and society at large. Acting as Lövborg's personal secretary, helping him in his writing and research, she is actually reduced to the role of muse who should inspire the male's creative powers but should not create herself since the patriarchal notion insists that "the writer fathers his text just as God fathered the world" (Gilbert&Gubar, 1984, p.188).

Society's reduction of her to her female status produces in Hedda an inner state of desperation. Indirect references to her approaching maternity are followed by the signs of her feelings of nervousness and suffocation. In her famous book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1977) interprets woman's biological destiny as mother as her "misfortune" (p. 72). There is no denying that when patriarchal culture has felt itself to be under attack by rebellious women, one defence they have developed is to label women as mentally disturbed. Clinical observations as well as sexual prejudice have also contributed to this association: rebelliousness which is commonly appeared to be producing nervous

disorder and its attendant pathologies has come to be associated with the idea of hysteria, and in time hysteria has become the incarnation of female anxiety and anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition for feminist theorists and authors (Showalter, 1985, p. 145). That is, in fact, a price the female pays for her desire for self-affirmation in a male-dominated culture. In this perspective, Hedda exemplifies a major female response to woman's oppression or to the reduction of the woman to her femaleness. In the nineteenth century, male oppression of women gave birth both to the suffragist figure and the female hysteric. Hysteria can be seen within the specific historical framework of the nineteenth century as "a form of feminist protest, the counterpart of the attack on patriarchal values carried out by the women's movement of the time" (Showalter, 1985, p. 5).

In stark contrast to Freud, who maintained that hysteria¹ is caused by a traumatic incident or series of incidents and came to believe that the traumatic event is usually sexual in essence and that hysteria is the expression of secret sexual desires and linked it with his patriarchal conceptions of the sexuality of women, Ibsen portrays Hedda's hysteria as a reaction to the roles of wife and mother that she does not want to act out. When the play comes to an end, her hysteria will find a form of rebellion against the rationality of the patriarchal order in music like Nora's in dance, in Ibsen's another play, *A Doll's House*.

Hedda's pursuits of "freedom" are limited only to masculine acts like riding horses and firing pistols taught to her by her father. Bound to a rigid social code and patriarchal values, Hedda pays too much attention to appearances and the show of propriety typical of the leisure class. Tesman says that she insisted on having all her baggage with her on the journey, which suggests self-indulgence. Although she knows that her husband cannot afford a new piano, a butler, and a horse she insists on having them and scorns Thea that it is "stupid" of her to be inexpensive. She confesses to Judge Brack that she really does not care the house Tesman has purchased for her, yet she convinces Tesman to go on believing that the house is precious for her, while it is a great financial burden for her husband. She also demonstrates signs of vanity. She spends hours dressing in front of the mirror and she is jealous of Thea and her "irritating hair" (Act I, 951), long, wavy and abundant, which, in male discourse, is a significant ingredient as far as female sexuality is concerned. Despite all her complaints and frustrations, Hedda remains obsessed with the image of conventional female figure: she wishes to charm men and render herself visible to them in a feminine way, which points to the complexity of her character. She puts an emphasis on social conventions, which is made evident in the "bargain" she has made with her newlywed husband—if she married him they would live "in society" and "keep a great house" (Act I, 961) because Tesman is about to be appointed as a professor, which means a distinguished and lucrative

¹ In his "Female Sexuality" Freud attributes women's greater susceptibility to hysteria to their sexuality. This connection is further clearly expressed in his famous patient "Dora", an eighteen-year-old-girl, whose father wanted Freud to persuade Dora that her perceptions were simply adolescent fantasies. The father was having an affair with the wife of a friend, Herr K., who had attempted to seduce Dora when she was only fourteen, and she felt that she had been given to Herr K. by her father in exchange for his complicity in the adultery. Freud associated Dora's hysterical symptoms with the repression of her desires for her father, for Herr K., and for Frau K.

post. Nevertheless, Tesman's big dream will elude him. As such, Hedda will not attain the kind of life she has craved for. She will have no horses, no servants, no society.

Her hatred of impropriety is shown in her reaction to Tesman's aunt who has left her hat in the drawing room which is "just not proper" (Act I, 949). She wastes no time putting his aunt in her proper place. Furthermore, the values of her class and culture play a significant role in her dread of scandal that she will experience towards the end of the play. In the context of the rules of society concerning "proper" feminine behaviour, Thea proves herself to be more courageous than Hedda and this is clearly exemplified when she leaves her insensitive husband in order to shape her own life. It is not Thea, but Hedda, who worries about what people will say. Hedda's being incapable of change or compromise is strongly contrasted with Thea's boldness: she defies society and asserts her individuality: Triggered by a set of socially conditioned reactions Hedda would not dare to besmirch her proud name:

Hedda: Then you have left your home—for good and all?

Thea: Yes. There was nothing else to be done.

Hedda: But then—to take flight so openly...what do you think people will say of you, Thea?

Thea: They must say what they like, for aught I care I have done nothing but what I had to do.
(Act I, 956)

Thea is willing to be ostracized by respectable society in order to follow the man she loves. Hedda would never do so in spite of the fact that she has made a loveless marriage. Most significant of all, when Judge Brack threatens to reveal Hedda's role in Lövborg's suicide if she does not become his mistress, she cannot bear the idea of scandal, since she lacks the courage that would make life "bearable" (Act II, 966). The complexity of her character is further delineated in her conversations with Lövborg whom she hopes to see with "a crown of vine leaves in his hair" (Act II, 978). They talk about his adventures with women and drinking parties. She wishes she could be at his drinking parties as an invisible onlooker to watch the enjoyment the men have in parties and hear their talks. That is the picture of a world that "she isn't supposed to know anything about" (Act II, 974).

Vine leaves are an ancient symbol associated with the Greek God Dionysus or Bacchus often depicted wearing a wreath of vine leaves on his head. God of wine, fertility and a revitalizing force in nature, he was believed by the Greeks to inspire his followers with creativity and liberate them from limitations through ecstasy. Because of the frenzied rites of Dionysus's worshippers, he was associated with orgies and unlimited behaviour.² In view of the meanings of the adjectives Dionysiac and Dionysian—ecstatic, wild, or frenzied—Hedda's expectation of Lövborg with "vine leaves in his hair, burning and unashamed!" is illustrative of her own romanticized image of a heroic man: free, courageous and in control of himself. She is yet not aware of the creative inspiration behind the concept of Dionysus that seems to be a kind of blessing since it frees the artist from restraints, giving him a sense of courage. Unlike Hedda, who has no interest in his books or achievement, Lövborg has realized

²"Dionysus." Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*.

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/dionysus.html>. April 23, 2009.

himself in his profession as a writer though he had forfeited his social respectability due to a series of scandals related to his drinking. He was once stigmatised as an outcast; but now he has found artistic fulfillment with Thea, as his inspiring and nurturing force, and reasserted himself in the eyes of the community through the book “on the course of civilization—in all its stages” (Act II, 970) that he has recently written.

Hedda expresses her desire for masculine license and her fear of direct involvement, which suggests her being imprisoned by her acceptance of society's prescription for feminine behaviour. Intriguingly, she seeks masculine experience vicariously. She projects her own inexpressible desires unto Lövborg since the world of male freedom and wildness are forbidden to her. She dreams of practicing the acts of defiance and joy through him. Nevertheless, when she perceives that Lövborg is unable to live out her fantasy of vicarious emotions she gives him one of her father's pistols and encourages him to commit suicide—to end his life “beautifully ((Act III, 989). Contrary to Hedda's high expectations, Lövborg dies accidentally, after being shot in the stomach. Hedda is disappointed when Judge Brack informs her that he has not shot himself in the temple or the chest.

Hedda's sense of anguish as well as the social and psychological pressures placed upon her are illustrated throughout the play by means of the vivid metaphor of the stifling feeling that she constantly experiences. The weight of her role as wife and would-be-mother intensifies: she constantly flings back the curtains, which evokes a sense of entrapment in a dull, suffocating bourgeois world characterized by boredom and frustration. Further, Hedda evinces symptoms of extreme nervousness; her gestures are as compelling as her words: she raises her arms, walks nervously around the room, clenches her fists: “Something comes over me, all of a sudden, and then I can't stop myself. I don't know how to explain it,” (Act II, 966) she confesses in a confounded manner. In relation to her complex character, Randolph Goodman (1971) states that:

It [*Hedda Gabler*] is a drama that depicts a type of neurotic personality that has become more universally recognized in our day than it was at the turn of the century. Long before the advent of Freud, Ibsen understood intuitively that there are internal pressures that drive people to commit inexplicable and wanton acts. (p. 25)

Similarly, Thea remembers being threatened by Hedda when they were schoolmates. As the play unveils, her repressed hatred and anger make her perverse and drift her into a state of inner deterioration, revealed by her actions, gestures and speeches. She slaps Thea, pulls her hair, and drags her across the room. At the close of Act II, Hedda shows her envy of her friend overtly who has confided in her, and consequently, she has learnt that her old schoolmate is in love with Lövborg (Act II, 978):

Hedda: “I think I'll burn your hair off, after all!

Thea: Let me go! Let me go! You frighten me, Hedda!

In a fit of jealousy, Hedda burns the manuscript which has been created by Lövborg and Thea. She compares it to their child: “Now I am burning your child Thea. You, with your curly hair. Your child and Ejlert Lövborg's. I'm burning it – burning your child” (Act, III, 990). Caroline W. Mayerson (1965) argues that, “[Hedda's] impulse to annihilate by burning is directed both toward Thea's “child” and

toward Thea's hair and calls attention to the relationship between them. [...] Ibsen was using hair as a symbol of fertility" (p.133). As such, Hedda attacks Thea's femininity as well as her fertility, ruining Lövborg-Thea creative relationship and the manuscript, which has become their "the child."

Judge Brack has understood that it was Hedda who gave Lövborg the pistol and she finds herself under the power of Judge as he intends to use this information to threaten Hedda in order to make her his mistress. Brack expects sexual favours in return for protecting her from the police and scandal, the things that Hedda has been taught to keep herself from:

Brack: Well, fortunately there is nothing to fear so long as I keep silence.

Hedda (*looks up at him*): And so I am in your power, Mr. Brack. From now on I am at your mercy.

Brack (*whispers more softly*): Dearest Hedda—believe me—I shall not abuse the position.

Hedda: In your power, all the same. Subject to your will and your demands. No longer free! No! That's a thought I'll never endure! Never!. (Act IV, 999)

Hedda is torn between two traditional attitudes regarded as improper as far as female sexuality is concerned: her fear of scandal and of adultery. She becomes paralyzed by fear and kills herself. The desperate rage of the woman explodes in an act of suicide, which, like Nora's departure from home in *A Doll's House* by her slamming of the door, demonstrates Hedda's eventually breaking off the restraints inflicted on her by the patriarchal system. She turns into one of the followers of Dionysius despite the prevailing image of pagan orgies in Dionysian festivities, which actually conflict with the aristocratic values of Hedda.

Hedda does not verbally voice her anger any more but resorts to music. As a prelude to committing suicide, she plays "a frenzied dance melody on the piano" (Act IV, 1000), which is, furthermore, reminiscent of Nora Helmer's tarantella in *A Doll's House*, in that, both the music and the dance are emotional discharges liberating the female from a repressive environment and from the restrictions and inhibitions of the social matrix by which she is formed. Nora finds a way to cry, scream and dance in an impassioned dance of desire, in the language of the body through which she comes to enact her raging desires and opposition, thereby subverting the linear logic of male discourse. In this sense it is worth noting that hysteria is a sort of female language that is strongly opposed to the rigid structures of male discourse and thought. That is why her husband, in extreme amazement at her dance, denounces it as almost "pure madness." As Catherine Clément (1996) in *The Newly Born Woman*, notes, the tarantella, as performed by women in northern Italy who have supposedly been beaten by the spider, is a form of hysterical catharsis (p. 20). These two women, Nora and Hedda, tell their stories in music and dance and raise their voices in those performances, thereby giving a voice to their enforced conditions.

Lacan's relegation of language to a "symbolic" order that is inherently patriarchal is starkly juxtaposed with the idea of the feminine that French feminist theorists associate with gaps in speech,

with the unnameable or unrepresentable. As opposed to the symbolic that is related to the masculine, the law, and structure, Kristeva's semiotic is the realm that has to do with the musical, the poetic, the rhythmic and that which lacks structure and meaning. In view of these distinctions between the symbolic and the semiotic, it is appropriate that the melody Hedda plays on the piano breaks the continuity and traditional rhythms of a rigidly social language. She, in a way, escapes from the prison of language created by patriarchy, the most important representative of which was her late father. Hedda's repressed feelings and ideas, accordingly, "speak" through music as a response to her inner turmoil, frustration, and fury. She retreats into a kind of hysterical state that acts out her unarticulated rebellion against male-dominated society. "There is a voice crying in the wilderness, Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous (1996) say – the voice of a body dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying. Whose is it? It is, they say, the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage" (ix, introduction).

Ibsen in *Hedda Gabler* offers a dramatic portrayal of a female figure whose sense of unfulfillment, her flawed marriage and pregnancy find redemption in a suicide that is partly a protest against domestic confinement, an escape from a world in which Hedda lacks the power to act with freedom or control. Now she does not need to live her male-oriented desires vicariously. Drifting into a state of spiritual torpor that grows toward despair, Hedda finds her loss of power and control intolerable and shoots herself in the head, the seat of reason, which within our dualistic systems of language and representation, is commonly designated as men's domain along with discourse, culture and mind. Hence she dies a man's death and intriguingly enough, it is only through death that she can bring herself to assert control over her ultimate destiny.

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