

Hedda Gabler – Supplementary Reading

Introduction

Hedda Gabler was published in December 1890 and first performed in Munich, Germany in 1891. Since then it has become the most frequently performed of all plays (with the possible exception of one or two by Shakespeare). With over 60 productions, many of which have enjoyed long runs, *Hedda Gabler* has appeared almost continuously somewhere on the American or European stage over the whole of the last century. First translated into English in 1890 and revised for its first English-language performance in 1891, it has been republished and retranslated more than fifty times since then.

Hedda Gabler's popularity is due in part to the opportunity the title role offers to actresses. But more than that, of all the early modern plays, its subject has remained relevant while its written text has an ambiguity that allows for many different interpretations. Depicting Hedda's frustrated attempts to escape from the constrictions of marriage and a patriarchal society, *Hedda Gabler* has been a key text for feminists for most of the 20th century and there onwards. Simultaneously passionate and cold, daring and weakened, possibly pregnant yet rejecting the obligations of motherhood, asserting masculine authority but unable to defy social norms, Hedda is both a victim and a demon. Her struggles for self-realization destroy the only man she might have loved. To cover up her responsibility for his shameful death, she burns the manuscript which is his life's work, only to find herself open to sexual blackmail by the hands of another man. With her husband fully committed to rewriting the ruined manuscript and ignoring the sexual coercion that haunts her, Hedda accepts the only form of self-realization or escape left to her: suicide. The image of Hedda with her pistol is as iconic as Hamlet holding a skull.

feminist: someone that fights for equality between the sexes

self-realization: fulfilment of one's own potential

Contextual Overview

To appreciate the nature of the play and its achievements, *Hedda Gabler* has to be seen in the wider context not only of Henrik Ibsen's career, but also against the political, social, and literary background of the period. Ibsen's development as a playwright can only be understood in terms of the cultural battle for Norwegian independence, and his own response which valued individual freedom over political liberty. Equally significant is the relationship of Ibsen's dramas to the Women's Movement in Norway; the struggle for legal equality, financial independence, and the right to vote gave shape to *Hedda Gabler*.

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Norwegian Nationalism

Norway had been ruled by Denmark until 1814. It was then transferred to Sweden in a union that – again – subjected Norwegians to a foreign king. Despite this political change, the Norwegian people's art and literature remained almost exclusively Danish during the first half of the 19th century, while the Norwegian language was largely fractured. But in 1828, the year of Ibsen's birth, the historian Rudolf Kayser developed a series of "new Norwegian history" lectures, giving force to the fight for a distinctive Norwegian culture and an independent Norwegian nation. This inspired a recovery of the Norwegian language, which spurred a rediscovery and recording of Norwegian songs and folktales. All this gave rise to an explosion of national pride, and in 1848 – the "Year of Revolutions" in which the proclamation of the French Republic led to violent revolts across Europe – the first Norwegian grammar was completed, offering the people a common language that was entirely different from the Danish tongue. Ibsen was just twenty years old then.

In 1850, Ibsen, moved by the political passion that had swept Europe, helped to establish a highly political newspaper called *Andrimmer* which called for the overthrow of the Swedish king and the founding of an independent republic in Norway. At this time, the theater was a major focus of those fighting for a national literature, and in 1850 the Norske Teater was founded in Bergen. Before this, no plays had been written in Norwegian, and there were no Norwegian actors. The first all-Norwegian-speaking company appeared on the Norske stage in 1852, the same year that Ibsen had joined the playhouse as its resident dramatist. This move placed him at the forefront of the struggle for Norwegian cultural independence. Indeed, in choosing to write his poems and plays in Norwegian, Ibsen was making a strong political statement. At the same time, he ensured that his plays were available for the world stage by having them immediately translated into German.

nationalism: having pride in one's country; wanting political independence for one's country

In 1879, Ibsen commented in a letter to one of his protégés that “an extensive knowledge of history is indispensable to an author; without it he is not in a position to understand the conditions of his own age, or to judge men, their motives and actions, except in the most incomplete and superficial manner.” Ibsen's work criticized society, as he was less concerned with nationalism than individual freedom. In an 1879 letter to a fellow Norwegian playwright, he wrote: “It is said that Norway is an independent state, but I do not value much this liberty and independence so long as I know that the individuals are neither free nor independent.” Ibsen's dissatisfaction with the prejudice, conservatism, and narrow-mindedness of Norwegian society had already led to a self-imposed exile in 1864.

The Women's Movement

A crucial element in Ibsen's plays was the position of women. The Naturalist Movement – particularly at the time when it reached the theater – coincided with the fight for women's rights and strengthened the demands for legal equality, financial independence, and voting rights in Norway.

Naturalism is a literary movement that seeks to identify the underlying causes for a person's actions or beliefs. The naturalist theory is that certain factors, especially heredity, environment, and social conditioning, are unavoidable determinants in one's life, thus rejecting the idea of free will or the ability to create real change in one's life circumstance. Naturalist authors immerse themselves in the world of fact, but they select particular parts of reality on which to focus: misery, corruption, vice, disease, poverty, prostitution, sexism, racism, and violence. They are often criticized for being too pessimistic and for concentrating excessively on the darker aspects of life.

Of course, there were a number of major female characters before the Naturalist Movement, but they were almost all presented as evil, or as tragic victims, or punished for playing an active male role or for achieving a greatness that did not fit the traditional ideals of submissive women. In sharp contrast, Ibsen's women are portrayed without this bias, as figures of authenticity who stand out in a patriarchal society. Each is a fully individualized personality set in a specific and recognizable contemporary context (rather than being historical).

The naturalistic emphasis on women was something decisively new in theater, and Ibsen led the way with his strong female characters. What made it new was not the number or even the centrality of female characters, but the way female experience was presented. Ibsen's plays presented the ideology of the Women's Movement in theatrical images that resonated with the public because they were easy to understand, and the empathy created by stage performances encouraged identification. The female characters' views were given equal weight to those of the men in the plays, and since these women defied the male-dominated society that oppressed them, it was their voice that predominated. Ibsen, obviously, was widely followed.

The situation of women in Scandinavia had already become a subject of debate by 1854 (the year when Norwegian daughters were first given equal inheritance rights to sons). In the same year, two Swedish economists wrote of peasant women and servants: “Woman in the North is the household beast of burden and the slave of man. We are so used to it that it does not arouse our shame.” Contemporary sociologists confirm that this poor regard extended throughout the social scale:

Women in the middle classes although spared from drudgery were even more cut off from functional activity. They were either intimate servants or decorative house plants. If their fathers and husbands were rich enough to keep them in indolence, they might be given excellent formal educations, but they were separated from the world by a wall of proprieties – modesty, helplessness, delicacy, gratitude, ignorance, and obedience – which usually served to frustrate any desires for active self-expression. As far as their means permitted, the men of the lower middle classes demanded of their women the same behavior. Never so much as then was home the woman's place . . . If the lot of the daughter and the wife was drab, that of the unmarried woman was incredibly dreary. She was not even ornamental. Where she could perform some useful work in the house of her relatives she was able to maintain her self-respect and was often welcome. Otherwise she must become a burden, or seek refuge in some sort of foundation, or take employment as a servant.

gender norms: a set of ideas about the way men and women should dress, behave, and carry themselves in society

It was not until 1866 that a law was passed in Norway giving women the right to work in any profession, thus enabling them to earn an independent living. The conservatism of Norwegian society was highlighted by the fact that equivalent laws had passed significantly earlier in the other Scandinavian countries. Unsurprisingly, the frustrations of gender norms and the isolation of women from public life form the context for almost all of Ibsen's female characters, with Hedda Gabler as the most notable example.

Ibsen had associated himself with the Women's Movement in Norway since 1879. Writing to Camilla Collett, one of the most influential advocates of women's rights in Norway, he expressed his "complete sympathy with you and your life-task." When the Norwegian Women's Rights League invited Ibsen to speak at their convention in 1888, it was in recognition of the role that his dramas had played in fostering public awareness of the weak position of women in Norwegian society and generally across Europe. That convention marked the League's campaign for the first constitutional proposal to give women the right to vote – and it was typical that even though Ibsen had signed a petition in 1884 to change the law to allow married women to retain their own property and earnings, Ibsen's speech at the League's convention rejected any specific gender bias. Instead, he argued, "My task has been the description of humanity."

Naturalism

It was only in mid-career at the age of 49 that Ibsen achieved more than local Scandinavian fame by a change in his dramatic material and style. When he turned from his historical dramas, which were his contributions to the recovery of Norwegian folktales, to the portrayal of ordinary people in contemporary Norwegian society, Ibsen joined the major literary trend of the 19th century: Naturalism. Already established by novelists in France, this movement was not yet present in theater. It was Ibsen who created the first dramas that were recognizable examples of naturalism. The eight plays he wrote over fourteen years, culminating with *Hedda Gabler* in 1891, broke new ground and made him the leading naturalist playwright.

On one level, naturalism was a revolt against traditional styles of performance that had become outdated and were no longer capable of representing social conditions in a rapidly changing world that was on the verge of the modern age. However, naturalism was also the expression of moral or social revolution.

The crucial factor inspiring naturalism was the theory that all human behavior, including a person's character and personality, was formed by a combination of heredity, environment, and the value placed on the individual by society. This meant that ordinary citizens, including workers and the poor, became the protagonists. This equalizing of literary subjects called for the "study of reality" and inspired playwrights to establish a new approach to theater. These developments were accompanied by modern changes in stage lighting (spurred on by the introduction of electric lighting in 1881) and in scenery, which for the first time began to present a realistic, three-dimensional context for drama characters. Having been stage director at the Bergen Theater and the manager of the Norwegian Theater, Ibsen had practical experience of both the changes in drama material and new lighting and scenic techniques.

For most of the 19th century, the standard style of acting was excessively theatrical and exaggerated, using codified gestures to display emotions, but the way the new dramatists presented people deviated greatly from such traditional acting. Modern characters acted on a series of unclear motives, not out of a simple and fixed nature. As such, character was given priority over plot in order to make the acting and the production more lifelike. In an 1874 letter to his English translator, Ibsen wrote: "The illusion I wished to produce was that of reality." Thus, the general principles that he followed in his subsequent plays included: the focus on modernity, the individualization of even minor characters, and the use of everyday language. Writing in 1884, he restated the same principles: "The effect of the play depends a great deal on making the spectator feel as if he were actually sitting, listening, and looking at events happening in real life."

Critical History: Interpretations of the play by audiences and critics

Hedda Gabler was the first of Ibsen's "international" plays, as his previous dramas were first performed in Scandinavia. By contrast, not only was the premiere of *Hedda Gabler* in Germany, but almost simultaneous productions appeared in Munich, Berlin, London, and Copenhagen (all between January and April 1891), with a Paris production in December 1891. While Ibsen was performed in Germany more than anywhere

else during the early period, *Hedda Gabler* has subsequently appeared more frequently and received more critical attention in Britain and America than even in Norway.

Ibsen and His Public

In considering the reception and criticism of *Hedda Gabler* it is important to have some idea of the initial response to Ibsen's work as a whole. Almost all of Ibsen's naturalistic plays were initially greeted with public outrage. This was particularly true in Britain where the official view was that the society Ibsen portrayed so unpleasantly was too inconceivable to have any influence on the British public.

On its appearance, *Hedda Gabler* was a sad disappointment to many, including some of Ibsen's most ardent admirers. The reason was precisely because of Ibsen's shift in focus from the restrictions of individual freedom by social forces (public abuses) to the struggle of the individual mind that is endlessly divided between the calls of duty and the search for happiness (private dilemmas). Readers and viewers expected Ibsen's usual damning of contemporary life, but the best they could find was a brilliant but essentially pointless dramatic portraiture: the story of a woman's temperament. In Scandinavia and Germany, audiences rejected *Hedda Gabler* as incomprehensible and unpleasant, but it passed without public scandal. The Christiania and Munich reviewers focused exclusively on the performance of whichever actress was playing the title role. By contrast, *Hedda Gabler* was the most popular of Ibsen's plays on the London stage in the 1890s.

Although Ibsen's plays both shocked and confused, his works became very popular. Interestingly, the major impact of his work came through publication rather than stage performance. His first naturalistic work, *The Pillars of Society*, was published in Norway a month before its first production and quickly sold 6,000 copies, with a second printing of 4,000 copies within two months. In English-speaking countries the effect was even more marked. The first play to reach the London stage was *The Pillars of Society*, given one afternoon performance in 1880. By 1892 five other plays had been staged in England. Up to 1893 fewer than 10,000 people in England would have seen staged performances of any play by Ibsen. In contrast, by the same year over 30,000 copies of Ibsen's plays had been bought by the British public. It was suggested in the *Fortnightly Review* of July 1, 1893 that by adding together the sales of individual plays, "we are well within the mark of estimating that 100,000 dramas by Ibsen have been bought by the English-speaking public in the course of the past four years." It is not surprising that Ibsen's naturalistic plays became a standard feature of the English-speaking repertoire, as they had a decade earlier in Germany.

Thus, Ibsen was responsible for a totally new phenomenon – the simultaneous launching of a single dramatic work in a range of Europe's cultural capitals. The publication of a new Ibsen play sent profound cultural reverberations throughout the Western world. Never before had a playwright so dominated the theaters of the world or so monopolized public debate.

Interpreting Hedda Gabler

As previously noted, many critics dismissed *Hedda Gabler* as a pointless case study of one woman's internal struggles. It is Ibsen's own notebooks that prove otherwise. There, in a wealth of planning notes for the play, he wrote: "The demonic thing about Hedda is that she wants to exert an influence over another person"; and again: "The despairing thing about Loevborg is that he wants to control the world, but cannot control himself." Thus, *Hedda Gabler* is most convincingly read as the record of personal battles for control and domination: over oneself, over others, and over one's world. The play is deeply focused on the nature of power, particularly the power of one mind to influence another.

* For more, refer to "*Hedda Gabler* in context" (lxv) in the Commentary section of your textbook. *