

Henrick Ibsen's Hedda Gabler

A Reflection of an Age

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Henrick Ibsen's position in the literary movement of the late nineteenth and the early Twentieth centuries is a prominent one. His contribution to the Realist movement is notable due to the enormous influence of his dramatic works, especially the later ones. "Much has been written of the influence of Ibsen on the English dramaHis work towers over all that the English stage has produced in the modern period." ^١ In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Realism has become "a literary method, a philosophical and political attitude, and a particular kind of subject matter" ^٢ The innovative and radical subject matters tackled by Ibsen , especially in his later plays, makes him the most influential figure who has accelerated the popularity of this movement. "In drama, the French stage and Ibsen combined to offer examples of Realism." ^٣

In spite of the growing contradictory opinions about him, Ibsen has continued in his efforts to commence his challenging ideas, exposing the actual way of life of the Victorian era and focusing on the hidden realities beneath the ideal Romanticism of the middle class. "The effect of this emphasis was to centre attention on elements in Ibsen....on the Emancipation of Women, on the Freedom of Youth; on the slam of Nora Helmer's front door." ^٤

In his attempt to give a picture of ideas, emotions and the inner conflicts of ordinary people who belong to the rising middle class, Ibsen has been quite extensive in his influence on other dramatists among whom is G.B Shaw. To emphasize this fact, Shaw wrote:

Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage, but not our situations. ... Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves but our situations. ...One consequence is that his plays are much more important to us than Shakespeare's ^٥

Ibsen's works : he has adopted more
pragmatic tech quies and asides to the

advantage of using a more realistic language; specifically prose. Ibsen states that “What I sought to depict were human beings, and therefore I would not let them talk the language of God.”^٦ This simplicity of language earns him a substantial means to shed more light on the social predicaments of his age. According to Anthony Burgess, Ibsen “delved deep in to the social and domestic problems of his age.”^٧

Ibsen is quite ground-breaking in his rejection of the prevailing plays of dramatic intrigue which constitute the typical production of his time. The main feature that characterizes those plays is that their success “depended on a complicated plot, moving at high speed around certain stock scenes.”^٨ and the characters are similarly conventional as “ a heavy father, innocence distressed, jealous husband, faithful friend.”^٩, but Ibsen does not confine himself to such dictating conventions. He calls for a drama that’s mainly characterized by its simplicity of plot and characterization. According to his perspective “The skill is the result of simplification, the flawless plot is designed to exclude any real complexity.”^{١٠}

Ibsen’s defiance of the social and the moral conventions of his time is declared through his works. “Ibsen’s plays are about rebels – from Catiline to Brand ... and Nora Helmer to Hedda Gabler”^{١١} It is rather typical for Ibsen to declare his support for feminism in a work like *A Dolls House* which is considered to be “valuable as a rejection of the earlier morality.”^{١٢} This constitutes one of the main reasons behind regarding a play like *A Doll’s House* a straight confrontation of the Victorian social conventions considering woman’s situation in society.

In this support for feminism, Ibsen is accentuating the magnitude of the individual’s self-determination and liberty to make choices without any social restraints that might inhibit this freedom. Ibsen states that “for me liberty is the first and the highest condition of life.”^{١٣} Yet, Ibsen’s idea of liberty does not imply any correlation with political freedom. “I shall never agree to making liberty synonymous with political liberty.”^{١٤} For Ibsen, freedom must be achieved by the human being to create his own identity and consequently be truthful in making his own choices that would determine his way in life. Ibsen’s plays have turned out to become social rather than literary experiences and the appeal that his plays achieved is mainly because of the sense of identification between the audience and his characters that seemed livelier

to the audience. “Ibsen’s characters appeal to our sense that we too are thwarted, limited and shaped by the wills of others or by our narrow range of opportunities.”^{١٥} This idea was the core of concern of Ibsen’s plays, especially the late ones among which is *Hedda Gabler* that is written in ١٨٩٠.

Hedda Gabler is a four-act play in which Ibsen does not violate the three unities of time, place and action. The plot is simple with no sub-plots and the events happen in only one place with no leaps of time. The plot revolves around the heroine of the play about whom Ibsen is trying to conduct a psychological study to demonstrate his conceptions. “I have to have the character in mind through and through. I must penetrate to the last wrinkles of his soul.”^{١٦} The name of the heroine is Hedda Gabler which happens to be the title of the play. In this respect, Ibsen states that “The title of the play is *Hedda Gabler*. My intention in giving it this name was to indicate that Hedda, as personality, is to be regarded as her father’s daughter than her husband’s wife.”^{١٧}

Hedda is presented as a dominating, controlling character. In spite of her absence at the outset of Act I, but hints about her personality are made by other characters to prepare the audience before her actual appearance on the stage. “Before Hedda has even entered the stage her commands are being fulfilled.”^{١٨} On her arrival, Hedda starts giving orders that no one, even her husband can discuss:

Miss Tesman: But surely they’re not going to
use this room as a parlor?
Bertha: So I gathered, Miss, from what Madam
said. He did not say any thing. The Doctor.^{١٩}

Other characters are presented to become inferior to Hedda as they participate effectively in strengthening her sense of superiority and control. When Tesman was praising his aunt’s new hat, Miss Tesman replied: “So that Hedda needn’t be ashamed of me, in case we ever go for a walk together.” (p.٢٦١)

As soon as Hedda appears on the stage, she starts demonstrating her decisiveness and her capability of controlling others. “Ibsen creates in *Hedda Gabler* a dominating, fiercely controlling female heroine who controls everyone in her circle.” that contained George’s old things, he was^{٢٠} When Miss Tesman bought the package

happy, but Hedda tried to confirm her control:

Tesman: You cannot imagine what memories they
have for me.

Hedda: Not for me.

.....

Hedda: Tesman, we really cannot go on keeping
this maid

Miss Tesman: Not keep Bertha?

Hedda: Look at that! She's left her old hat
lying on the chair ...

Tesman: But, Hedda- that's Antie Juju's hat? (p.٢٦٥)

From the beginning, Ibsen wanted to create the idea that passion and love do not prevail in Hedda's marriage. Ibsen employed the imagery of seasons to convey this meaning to the audience:

Tesman: What are you looking at Hedda?

Hedda: Only the leaves. They are so golden. And
withered.

Tesman: Well, we are in September now.

Hedda (restless): Yes, we're already into
September (p.٢٦٦)

To Hedda, marriage to George Tesman is not a sacred bond that unites her to this man, but a bond that destroys her freedom. Ibsen wanted to confirm the notion that Hedda cannot tolerate the responsibilities of marriage life, particularly the responsibility of having a child as it would restrain her freedom. "She cannot find herself through freedom and responsibility... the dread is of adult responsibility." When Tesman makes intimation that Hedda might be pregnant, she becomes upset:

Tesman: Have you noticed and healthy she's looking
And how she's filled out since she went away

Hedda: Oh, can't we forget it ?

Tesman: You can't see clearly with that dress on. But
I've a good reason to know –

Hedda: You have not good reason to know anything
(p.٢٦٦)

Throughout the first Act, Ibsen ensues in depicting Hedda's controlling part. Her meeting with Mrs.Elvsted underscores this aspect of her personality and sheds more light on her character before marriage:

Mrs.Elvsted: Yes, but you were a year senior to me. I
used to be terribly frightened of you in these

days.

Hedda: Frightened of me?

Mrs.Elvsted: Yes, terribly frightened. Whenever you
you met me on the staircase, you used to
pull my hair ...and once you said you'd
burn it all. (p.٢٧٠)

When Mrs. Elvsted tells Hedda about Eilert Loevborg , and how she came to this town looking for him without her husband's permission, Hedda is quite interested and she urges Mrs. Elvsted to divulge the secret of her affair with Eilert. Hedda used to have an affair with Eilert before marriage and she wants to make sure that he did not reveal the secret to Mrs.Elvsted. The fear of scandal constitutes another social restraint that frightens Hedda. Simultaneously, there is another overwhelming feeling that she cannot resist.

Mrs. Elvsted is able to do what Hedda is so eager to accomplish in the sense that Mrs. Elvsted is able to make a choice regardless of the consequences. The conversation between them is quite expressive and ironic:

Mrs. Elvsted: whenever he wrote anything- we did
it together.

Hedda: like good pals?

Mrs. Elvsted:...That's exactly the word he used.

.....
Mrs. Elvsted: something stands between Eilert and
me. The shadow of another woman.

Hedda: who can that be? ...what has he told you
about her?

.....
Mrs. Elvsted: He said when he left her, she tried to
Shoot him with a pistol.

Hedda: what nonsense. People do not do such things
(p.٢٧٣)

Hedda is the woman who tries to shoot Eilert and ironically, she will give him the same pistol at the end to kill himself. What is also ironic is that Judge Brack is going to use Hedda's exact words "People do not do such things" to comment on her suicide. Being a General's daughter who had been raised with masculine traits, Hedda always boasts playing with pistols given to her by her father. It constitutes a motif to concentrate on the importance of certain themes. Playing with pistols is an act of demonstrating her control. She needs this verification of control frequently to feel the power of controlling and directing some the circumstances around her since she's

unable to control society and to live the nostalgic sentiment towards the past when she used to be a ‘General’s daughter’ who is free of any confining responsibilities. Also it serves to prepare the audience for the hideous end of the play.

Hedda: Ah, well I still have one thing left to amuse
Myself with.

Tesman: What’s that Hedda?

Hedda: my pistols , George darling.

Tesman: Pistols !

Hedda: General’s Gabler’s pistols. (p.٢٧٧)

The first Act ends with a pervasive mood of bewilderment and confusion. This atmosphere of bewilderment also dominates the outset of the second act.

Act II starts with the same motif that ends Act I. Hedda also is presented playing with pistols. She even fires one of them in the air to frighten Judge Brack who comes to visit her. When he asks her to stop playing with those pistols, she replies: “Well, what on earth am I to do?” Her marriage and the domestic limitations associated with it are the burdens that subjugate the freedom she used to enjoy; a situation that she cannot change and consequently her dissatisfaction with this situation is quite apparent. This prominent inconvenience is substantial to Judge Brack

who has unusual interests in her:

Hedda: Having to spend every minute of one’s life
with the same person.

Brack: Yes, what a thought ! morning, noon ,and...

Hedda: Tesman is only interested in one thing. His
special subject..... (p.٢٧٩)

Then she tells him about the reason of getting married to a person like Tesman:

Hedda: Why on earth did I marry George ?

.....

Hedda: I’d danced myself tired, Judge. I felt my
Time was up. (p.٢٧٩)

Brack is quite aware of her needs. That’s why he knows well how to manipulate her.

“Judge Brack hides his desire for an intimate relationship with Hedda with an outward friendship for George Tesman and a cloak of respectability.”^{٢٢} When Tesman tells

them about his book, Brack says:

Brack: You’re not really happy. That’s the answer.

.....

Brack: A trusted friend – someone who

understood.

Hedda: and was lively and amusing.

Brack: and interested in-more subjects than one.

Hedda: Yes, that would be a relief.

Brack: The triangle is completed. (p.٢٨١)

The change that Hedda wants to take place in her life is not in the direction of being more involved in the consequent commitments of marriage, but in the direction of setting herself free from all kinds of responsibilities that confine her will to create her own independent identity. In Act II, Ibsen introduces a key character that has much in common with the female protagonist of the play. “Gabbler and Lovborg are depicted as individuals unable to accept life's routine pettiness and circumstantial monotony.”^{٢٣}

Eilert Loevborg's appearance on the stage is not abrupt. Three characters are talking about his past and how he has gone through a kind of reformation.

Hedda: Mr. Loevborg is a man of principle now.

You know what they say about a reformed sinner. (p.٢٨٥)

As an academic rival, Eilert is widely appreciated by scholars, especially Hedda's husband. Eilert has almost finished writing a book which represents the work of his life. The book is in one manuscript. With Eilert's appearance, Hedda shows her disapproval to her husband's way of thinking. Her attempt to be alone with Eilert was quite successful as she knows that he will try to be more intimate to her which exactly what she wants.

Loevborg: Didn't you love me ? Not just a little ?

Hedda: Well, now I wonder? No, I think we were just good pals – really good pals who could tell each other anything. (p.٢٨٩)

The culminating point in Hedda's conversation with Eilert is when she tells him about her ultimate need; the need to be free from all the imposed social frustrations. Those frustrations have prohibited her from being acquainted with the masculine world. Consequently, her affair with Eilert in the past was merely to go through the experience of being involved in an affair as an act of defiance of society that looked negatively at such issues. This act of defiance represents her ultimate need:

Loevborg: why did you do it then?

Hedda: Do you find it so incredible that a young girl, given the chance to do so without anyone knowing, should want to be allowed a

glimpse into a forbidden world of whose
existence she is supposed to be ignorant? (p.٢٩٠)

This would provide a reasonable justification for her controlling rather than submissive personality. In addition, she broke her relation with Eilert off as she feared that this relation might constitute another restriction of her freedom of making choices. Yet, this pursuit of freedom and independence influenced her life and the lives of other characters in a destructive way. She envies Thea Elvsted for being defiant as she left her husband and came to town for Eilert's sake. So, Thea Elvsted was able to complete the triangle as she did what Hedda was unable to achieve. This constituted a good reason for Hedda to seize any chance to destroy both Eilert and Mrs. Elvsted.

The chance comes in Act III when Tesman informs her that he has got the manuscript of Eilert's book by coincidence and he plans to get it back as soon as possible. She offers to take care of it which is not going to happen. Having lost the work of his life, Eilert is completely devastated. Now, he has nothing to live for:

Loevborg: I destroyed it, all the same, I destroyed
it Hedda.

Hedda: I don't understand.

Loevborg: Thae said that what I had done was like
Killing a child.

.....
Thea's heart and soul were in that book
It was her whole life. (p.٣٠٥)

Eilert feels guilty for ruining Mrs. Elvsted's life, but Hedda does not feel any guilt for huding the book and ruining their lives. Instead, she gives Eilert one of her pistols to end his life. Act III ends with Hedda burning the pages of the Eilert's manuscript in the stove:

Hedda: I'm burning your child, Thea ! ...the child
Eilert Loevborg gave you. I'm burning your
child. (p.٣٠٥)

The rising tense of Act III paves the way for the ominous atmosphere of the fourth Act. Act IV starts with the ironic speeches of Miss Tesman who comes to tell about the death of her sister:

Miss Tesman: I must go and break the news of death
to Hedda myself- here in the house of
life.

.....
Hedda Tesman must not let her hands
be soiled by contact with death. Or let
her thoughts. Not at this time. (p.٣٠٦)

The atmosphere of death prevails Act IV from the beginning while it is supposed to be quite the opposite because a new life is to be expected.

While Hedda tries to convince her husband that burning Eilert's manuscript was for his sake, Judge Brack enters to break the news that Eilert attempted killing himself. The news is quite appealing to Hedda:

Hedda: At last ! Oh, thank God.

.....
I'm saying there's beauty in what he has done.
(p.٣١١)

To her, Eilert has done something that she lacks the ability and courage to do:

Hedda: Eilert Loevborg has settled his account with
life. He's had the courage to do what – what
he had to do. (p.٣١١)

There's no way to set her free except death:

Hedda: Oh, Judge ! this act of Eilert Loevborg's
doesn't it give one a sense of release?

.....
Oh, I don't mean him- I mean me ! The
release to know that someone can do
something brave. (p.٣١٢)

To Hedda, Eilert is the most outstanding incarnation of freedom and bravery. He lived according to his own terms and vision and now he chooses to end his life. Yet, to her surprise, Brack informs her that Eilert did not shoot himself on purpose, but he is found shot. Her pistol is found with him and the police are looking for the owner of the pistol. Brack is quite relentless in telling her that he has recognized the pistol but he will not notify the police. He offers a compromise of not informing the police in return of his interest in her.

Now Hedda realizes that she's no longer powerful enough to control anything around her. She must subdue to the fact that she has lost her last grip of the supposed freedom she struggled to attain:

Hedda: I'm in your, Judge. From now on, you've
got your hold over me
.....

I'm in your power. Dependent on your will
and your demands. Not free. Still not free. No
I couldn't bear that. (p.٣١٥)

Eventually, She shoots herself in the head.

Hedda's failure to be her own person is the foremost source of her breakdown. Her life is bare, meaningless, and tedious, and her prospects are tremendously limited. She has been subjected into different kinds of pressures. The strains of her life style as well as the pressure of her lack of power to control the confining society represent the major strains that impacted her life. She commits suicide for the reasons that she fears the scandal that may result; she believes that the only escape from her unacceptable life is death. She, like Eilert, has nothing to live for as she lost the last hope of setting herself free. She thinks she can manipulate other people, but she realizes that she is no longer able to do that. She has dedicated her life to a certain hope of an independent will, yet the illusion is shattered and she finds herself in the power of others who would shape this will the way they want. Her freedom is as precious as her life. To think of the play as a mere affirmation of woman's rights is to misjudge the intention of the play. As it is an inspection of Hedda's life and her want for self-realization, it is also, in a more general sense, a concentration on man's need for freedom and self accomplishment. The precedence given to a woman character cannot be attributed to Ibsen's personal discrimination, but because they correspond to a facet of the larger concern of man in general. To Ibsen, the woman provides an image of humanity introverted from achieving a self-determining personality.

NOTES

^١ Ifor Evans, *A short History of English Literatur*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd, ١٩٦٣),p.١٣٣.

^٢ C.Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (Indiana: ITT Boobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing Company, Inc. ١٩٨٠),p.٣٦٦
^٣ Ibid.,p.٣٧٠.

^٤ Raymond Williams. *Drama From Ibsen to Eliot* (England: Chatto & Windus ١٩٦٤),p.٤٨

^٥ Shaw, in Raymond Williams, p.٤٨.

^٦ Evert Sprinchorn,ed., *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* (New York: Hill & Wang. ١٩٦٤),p.١٤٥, in Ikhlās Sabāh Abdullah,an M.A Thesis, ٢٠٠١

^٧ Anthony Burgess, *English Literature: A Survey for students*, (London: Longman Group Limited, ١٩٧٤), p. ١٩٩.

^{٥٠} Williams, p. ٥٠

^{٥١} Ibid., p. ٥٠

^{٥٢} Ibid., p. ٧٥.

^{٥٣} Eric Bentley, *Henrick Ibsen: A Personal Statement* in Rolf Fjelde (ed.) *Ibsen A collection of Critical Essays* (N.J: Prentice Hall, Inc ١٩٦٥), p. ١٤.

^{٥٤} Williams, p. ٧٧.

^{٥٥} Sprinchorn, in Ikhlas Sabah Abdullah, an M.A Thesis, ٢٠٠١, p. ١٩٩

^{٥٦} Ibid., pp. ٨-٩

^{٥٧} Ronald Gaskell, *Drama and Reality*, (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, ١٩٧٢), p. ٢٥.

^{٥٨} Ibid., p. ٢٨.

^{٥٩} Ibsen, in Raymond Williams, p. ٩٣.

^{٦٠} <http://www.academon.com/lib/essay/hedda-gabler.html>

^{٦١} Jerome Beaty & J.Paul Hunter, *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (New York: W.W Norton & Company ١٩٩٨), p. ٢٦١.

^{٦٢} <http://sv3.123helpme.com/search.asp?text=Henrick+Ibsen&forwarded=true>

^{٦٣} Williams, p. ٩٣.

^{٦٤} <http://www.enotes.com/hedda-gabler/judge-brack>.

^{٦٥} <http://www.academon.com/lib/essay/hedda-gabler.html>, p. ٣

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