

May 2013

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Reflective statement: Hedda Gabler

Upon reading Hedda Gabler, I had not grasped the importance of paganism in relation to the characters of Hedda and Loevborg. The interactive oral greatly deepened my understanding of how parallels are drawn between these particular characters and pagan ideals. Most of the class had originally seen the relationship between Hedda and Loevborg as an intimate friendship; however, with the suggestion that "Hedda and Loevborg have a bond which is almost spiritual" we came to the conclusion that their approach to paganism in their relationship represented a fundamental contrast to society with its engrained Christian values.

Unbeknown to most of the class, before the discussion, was Loevborg's close resemblance to the pagan god of passion and wine: Dionysus. The class reflected on how Dionysus' rejection by the gods due to his drinking habits mirrored Loevborg's own ostracization. The significance of Loevborg wearing a crown of vine leaves was revealed as it links Loevborg further to Dionysus and the pagan way of living and is clearly an intimate vision shared by Hedda and Loevborg. This connection between the Pagan Gods and the characters is an intriguing tool used by Ibsen which emphasises their divergence from the norm and how for this reason they are scorned by society. After some consideration, it was concluded that Hedda and Loevborg desire to embrace the ideals encapsulated by paganism; that is to say, "the freedom which it represents" and which society does not provide.

Meanwhile, Hedda's character presents a similar parallel with the pagan god Apollo. Whilst Apollo's symbol is one of arrows and hunting, Hedda's is her pistols. The class's early opinion of Hedda's suicide was that she'd killed herself to escape her lack of purpose in life.

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However, the discussion led us to realise that she had additional motivations: her wish was to free herself in a memorable manner which reflected pagan beauty whilst accentuating her rejection of society's norms. It was concluded that this use of pagan symbolism connects Hedda to an archetype of people who feel oppressed by society rather than placing her as an anomaly.

The interactive oral has been a paramount addition to our understanding of the role of paganism within the play. It made us consider how religious societies can be seen to imprison the spirit of man, placing constraints upon individuals and making the escape from Christian values at the time thoroughly inconceivable.

24.02.2013

The role of humour in Hedda Gabler.

“Why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous?”¹

Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* has been a play shrouded by controversy since its first performance in 1891 after which it was "universally condemned"² by 19th century society. Upon its introduction to the stage it was clear that "Even enthusiastic admirers of Ibsen's work [...] failed to understand what Ibsen meant"³ and were quite bewildered by the comical tone which is recurrent in the play. However, despite baffling Ibsen's contemporaries, the aspect of comedy in *Hedda Gabler* is commonly emphasised in today's productions⁴, viewed as a tool to enhance tragedy rather than a fundamental failure on Ibsen's part. Comedy, present in numerous different forms – such as black humour, comical irony and comedy of the absurd - is a crucial device to the play as it reinforces the audience's understanding of Hedda's frustration at being trapped in the comfort and familiarity of bourgeois society. Yet, in contrast, it is also used to undermine the seriousness of her final dramatic gesture, mocking both society and the audience through Brack and Tesman's ludicrous reactions.

The most pronounced effect of comedy in the play is that it allows the audience to comprehend Hedda's viewpoint, which induces sympathy for a woman who would be otherwise difficult to pity. Humour on Hedda's part principally targets the character of George Tesman, her rather ridiculous husband, whom Hedda ruthlessly teases for his enthusiasm for "His special subject"⁵, a topic of interest which Hedda finds exceedingly dull. This teasing, in which Hedda is accompanied by Judge Brack, occurs in the form of banter between the two,

¹ Ibsen, H. (1891). Translated by Meyer, M. (2002). *Hedda Gabler*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd." p. 99.

² Thomas, D. (2002). Commentary and Notes on Hedda Gabler. In: *Hedda Gabler*. (Ibsen, H. translated by Meyer, M.). London: Methuen Publishing Ltd.

³ *IBID.*

⁴ "George is milked for all his comic potential": a review on the recent production of Hedda Gabler at the Old Vic. in which Sheridan Smith plays Hedda - Letts, Q. (2012). *Fun to watch, but the complex Hedda Gabler proves too difficult to capture*. **Daily Mail**.

⁵ Ibsen, H. (1891). Translated by Meyer, M. (2002). *Hedda Gabler*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd." p. 41.

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in which Tesman's "special subject" is continually emphasised. The humour arises from the oblivious nature of Tesman, who is jokingly addressed as "a specialist on the subject"⁶, and the fact that the cruel nature of Hedda's ridiculing completely eludes him. Despite the shameless unkindness towards her husband, the audience is complicit in this teasing of Tesman whose exaggerated use of meaningless expressions ("good heavens!"⁷, "fancy that!"⁸) and boyish excitement at the reunion with his slippers⁹, make him an easy target for laughter. The audience is therefore made to empathise with Hedda for this unequal match with a man who has neither the wit nor the social class to provide a satisfying conversation for her. A further suggestion that Hedda finds Tesman's company inadequate and unbearable is portrayed through numerous scornful comments which slip through her emotionless facade, such as, "Talking of boring, here comes the professor."¹⁰ or through the occasional verbal slip-up, as is the case when she implores Tesman to "stay as long as you c- as long as you like, dear"¹¹ given her bitter humour, the audience cannot help but find such comments amusing. Whilst this clear lack of any real affection towards Tesman evokes a number of witty remarks from Hedda, it also enables the audience to recognise how fundamentally unhappy, trapped and bored Hedda feels within her marriage.

There are several occasions during the play in which Hedda inflicts a comical misunderstanding upon Tesman, as a result of which the audience can only laugh at his stupidity. Hedda deceptively indicates her passion for Tesman by claiming that she burned Eilert Loevborg's manuscript for his "sake"¹²; this comedy of situation causes a hilarious

⁶ Ibsen, H. (1891). Translated by Meyer, M. (2002). *Hedda Gabler*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd." p. 41.

⁷ *IBID.* p. 11.

⁸ *IBID.* p. 31.

⁹ *IBID.* p. 11.

¹⁰ *IBID.* p. 46.

¹¹ *IBID.* p. 63.

¹² *IBID.* p. 90.

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reaction in which Tesman is left in confusion between his doubt and glee that Hedda actually loves him. With the conviction that Hedda is "burning with love"¹³ for him, Tesman wonders whether "young wives often feel like that towards their husbands?"¹⁴; the comic irony of this question is certainly a source of amusement, given that Hedda has only declared her non-existent compassion for Tesman in order to escape the blame for burning the manuscript. Whilst Ibsen uses this scene to acutely illustrate Hedda's dark and manipulative side, it draws her character closer to the audience as Tesman's highly apparent foolishness makes it easier to side with Hedda and accept the entertainment which comes from exploiting Tesman's gullibility.

Comedy plays another essential role in *Hedda Gabler* by enhancing the tragedy of the play - a role which was initially greatly misunderstood by Ibsen's peers. There comes a point when the humour becomes so bleak and dispiriting that Ibsen is exploiting the thin line between tragedy and comedy. Situations such as these occur on more than one occasion during *Hedda Gabler*, one of the more noticeable being Hedda's "expression of repulsion"¹⁵ once she has discovered that Eilert Loevborg shot himself accidentally in the stomach, "The - lower part"¹⁶. Despite the repugnance and horror of the incident, the exaggerated disgust displayed by Hedda evokes vulgar humour, causing her following comment, "why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous?"¹⁷, to summon nervous laughter from the audience. Yet this dramatic comment of Hedda's is not so far from the truth, making her character all the more pitiable. Hedda's only desire - to influence a man's destiny - has failed to materialise due to the untidiness of

¹³ Ibsen, H. (1891). Translated by Meyer, M. (2002). *Hedda Gabler*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd." p. 91.

¹⁴ *IBID.*

¹⁵ *IBID.* p. 99.

¹⁶ *IBID.*

¹⁷ *IBID.*

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Loevborg's death and as the audience gradually realise that without this power, Hedda's life has become meaningless, the tragedy of the play is greatly elevated.

This darker side of comedy is put to exceptionally good use in the final scene of the play and is crucial to Ibsen's desired effect on his audience. Leading up to the dramatic closing of the play, Ibsen introduces a scene in which the quiet contentedness of bourgeois society is stifling to Hedda. Ibsen accentuates Hedda's tone of frustration and exclusion in the question which she addresses to Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted: "Can't I be of use to you two in any way?"¹⁸, a query to which Tesman rather insensitively replies "No, none at all."¹⁹. Whilst this tragically exposes Hedda's lack of purpose in life, Tesman's tactlessness would evoke a wry smile from the audience, turning the joke on Hedda. As a result, Hedda is backed into a situation in which she feels the only way out is in doing something beautiful with her life - killing herself - throwing it away in a manner so dramatic that her name will most certainly endure. In reality, the shock of what she's done puts an end to Hedda's fantasy, producing a twisted reaction from the remaining characters. Whilst Tesman begins frantically screaming "She's shot herself! Shot herself in the head! Fancy that!"²⁰, Brack is intrinsically stunned at her suicide given that "People don't do such things!"²¹. Brack's outrageous remark, suggesting that what Hedda has done is simply not within the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour, and Tesman's own hysterical bearing might conceivably result in a wave of disbelieving laughter. This humour used by Ibsen almost anticipates the comedy of the absurd which came into being in the mid 1900s. Ibsen forces his audience into discomfort as they laugh at the outrage of their society and, in effect, at themselves. The audience is coerced into accepting the realism behind Ibsen's play as he uses the comic element to eschew the neat and traditional

¹⁸ Ibsen, H. (1891). Translated by Meyer, M. (2002). *Hedda Gabler*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd." p. 103.

¹⁹ *IBID.*

²⁰ *IBID.* p. 104.

²¹ *IBID.* p. 104.

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ending. He opens people's eyes to the distress which is present in the everyday life of women who are oppressed by society and in doing so, he also presents society's 'noble' response – ludicrous laughter and criticism – which haunts every aspect of Hedda's life, even her death.

In conclusion, Ibsen's use of comedy was out of sync with the tragedy of his time and audiences of the day would have found it difficult to accept Hedda's dissatisfaction as a woman, explaining why the humour which arises out of her frustration mystified Ibsen's contemporaries. Humour is used in several ways within the play: to bring Hedda's character closer to the audience so they can empathise with her frustration with Tesman and her situation as a woman, and, to demonstrate the ludicrousness of a society which scorns and shuns those who reject it. Comedy is a fundamental aspect of the play, allowing the audience to see Hedda as a human (and not an emotionless monster) as her resentment towards her life is inherent in her character, emerging through her comical witticisms, thus aiding the audience to feel sympathy for her and understand why she feels the desperate need to end her life.

Without a doubt, had the comedy been eliminated from the play, the element of realism would have receded leaving a tragic tale with little resemblance to everyday life. Ibsen aspired to reveal to his audience the oppression of 19th century Norwegian society in a manner which his peers could relate to; he did so with the aid of the comical aspect. Ibsen's main criticism is of society and as the play unfolds his message to the audience becomes clearer: the joke is on them.

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1. Ibsen, H. (1891). Translated by Meyer, M. (2002). *Hedda Gabler*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd.
2. Letts, Q. (2012). *Fun to watch, but the complex Hedda Gabler proves too difficult to capture*. **Daily Mail**. (review of the 2012 performance of Hedda Gabler in the Old Vic Theatre).
3. Thomas, D. (2002). Commentary and Notes on Hedda Gabler. In: *Hedda Gabler*. (Ibsen, H. translated by Meyer, M.). London: Methuen Publishing Ltd.