

Session: May 2013

Reflective Statement**Hedda Gabler – Henrik Ibsen**

My knowledge of the Norwegian social and cultural situation in the late 19th century was very limited prior to the interactive oral. Consequently my understanding of Hedda Gabler (Henrik Ibsen) was equally limited.

As a result of the discussion of social classes in 19th century Norway, the reasons behind Hedda's marriage to Tesman (someone she outranked socially) were debated. Did she want a relationship in which she could dominate or was Tesman her last chance of pursuing the lifestyle she had enjoyed as the daughter of a general? Furthermore this analysis of social class helped define the purpose and function of each character in the play (such as Lövborg who symbolizes the undefined social delimitations in Norway at the time subsequent to the abolishment of nobility) as well as the relationship Hedda shares with different characters. For instance, she envies Mrs Elvsted because the latter embodies the freedom Hedda longs for. Furthermore her relationship with Brack is one in which the gender and class distinctions overlap. Although the two are social equals; he can manipulate Hedda due to his advantage over her as a man. This highlights the fragility of Hedda's position in the play. As the relationships between characters are equally defined by gender; the discussion of this topic clarified the social expectations of women and consequently also Hedda's marriage to Tesman as well as her desire for the power to which men were entitled to. She subjects herself to a miserable life, married to George Tesman, and refuses to "step outside" of her comfort zone (as Mrs Elvsted has done) because to do so is unthinkable to her. As a result it is necessary to consider whether she is constrained by her gender or her personality. This pushed me to exhibit a sympathetic approach when analyzing Hedda's character and circumstances.

The interactive oral was an indispensable experience, without which I would never have fully understood the social and cultural obligations that dictated Hedda's life and from which she so desperately wanted to escape.

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The symbolic significance of Loevborg’s manuscript in Henrik Ibsen’s play *Hedda Gabler*

“I’m burning it! I’m burning your child!” (Act III)

Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* is set against the background of an evolving Norwegian society in the late nineteenth century as it moves away from aristocratic social values towards those of an emerging middle class. Such social transformations were also accompanied by a revolution in the nature of relationships between men and women in Norwegian society. The item which most accurately symbolizes such evolutions is Eilert Loevborg’s manuscript, his “real book” (pg. 49) which discusses “the future” (pg. 49). The former takes on symbolic significance in the course of the play, specifically in the climactic scene in Act III when Hedda burns the manuscript. This scene is key in understanding the lengths to which Hedda will go in order to fulfil her ambitions to control a man’s fate.

Loevborg’s manuscript is first mentioned during his call to the Tesman household in Act II where he refers to it as his “real book” (pg. 49). The manuscript is the source of competition between the two very differing characters of George Tesman and Eilert Loevborg. At the start of the play Loevborg is in fact referred to, by Auntie Juju, as “the man who was [Tesman’s] most dangerous rival” (pg. 9) as the two men are “in the same field” (pg. 19) and “studying the same subject”. Furthermore, Judge Brack’s announcement of that Tesman and Loevborg will be competing for the same “nomination” (pg. 31) highlights, for the audience, said struggle with authentic rivalry. Furthermore Loevborg intends to “defeat [Tesman] in the

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eyes of the world” (pg. 51) with the publication of his manuscript; the key to his success. The individual rivalry escalates to represent existing class competition between the aristocratic and bourgeois societies as these two characters embody the social values of their respective classes. Loevborg is originally of a high and aristocratic society but in recent years he has “had the mightiest fall. And now he’s lying [...] in the pit he dug for himself” which is an eloquent manner of describing his fall from the grace of his relatives, who “wield a good deal of influence” (pg. 30), due to his morally questionable antics. George Tesman, however, is clearly of a lower social class to both Loevborg and his wife Hedda (an aristocrat) as it is apparent they are not social equals. This becomes evident to the audience whilst she describes, for Brack, her reasons for marrying Tesman. As Hedda puts it she had “danced herself tired” (pg. 38) and consequently settled for Tesman; a “very respectable man” (pg. 38).

Such social alterations are further conveyed by the nature of the manuscript itself which treats the subject of “the future” (pg. 49), the “forces that will shape [...] civilization” and “the direction in which that civilization may develop” (pg. 49). The topic of Loevborg’s research is an unconventional one, this is conveyed to the audience by Tesman’s astonished response; “But, I say, we don’t know anything about that.” (pg. 49), his reaction may have mirrored Ibsen’s prediction of the audience’s reaction to such works. The very nature of the manuscript presents a future in which the two men will no longer be competing on social grounds, but rather on intellectual grounds. Similarly, it also represents the evolution of the nature of relationships between men and women. This theme in the play is represented by Mrs Elvsted and Loevborg’s partnership, which is revealed to the audience by Mrs Elvsted

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who tells Hedda that “Whenever he wrote anything [they] always – did it together” (pg. 26). Furthermore “[Loevborg] made a – sort of – real person of [her]. Taught [her] to think – and to understand all kinds of things” and then “let [her] work with [him]” (pg. 25-26). This working relationship proved to be one of a platonic and intellectual nature, and argument which can be cemented by Loevborg’s declaration to “have no further use for [her]” (pg. 80) as he doesn’t “intend to do any more work” (pg. 80) as a result of losing his manuscript. This statement demonstrates that their association was founded on intellect. The document symbolizes the fruits of Loevborg and Mrs Elvsted’s relationship (one between two individuals who are the product of social liberation) which serves as evidence of the success of this revolutionized male-female relationship. However, this purely intellectual affiliation between the two characters is contrasted by their reference to the manuscript as their “little child” (pg. 81), as if it were their offspring which would convey an affinity of a more intimate nature. Ibsen’s personification of the manuscript possibly disproves the hopes for an evolved relationship between the genders as it suggests a return to the “traditional” relationship between a man and a woman; one of procreation.

The climactic scene in the play is the final scene of Act III when Hedda “(*throws the pages into the stove and whispers to herself*) I’m burning your child, Thea! [...] I’m burning it! I’m burning your child!” (pg. 84, 85). Not only does Ibsen’s violent depiction of Hedda relishing the act of burning a child shock the audience, but it also highlights her fear and resentment of motherhood (a recurrent theme in the play). Nevertheless, this can also be interpreted as a violent outburst of anger and envy directed at Mrs. Elvsted and Loevborg. In this scene it become clear that her eruption is one of envy directed at Mrs. Elvsted who Hedda singles out

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as she “burns [her] child! [Her,] with [her] beautiful, wavy hair!” (pg. 84, 85). This jealousy supports the notion that Hedda envies the power Mrs. Elvsted has to “shape a man’s destiny” (pg. 82) (which she secured when she succeeded in developing the significant relationship Hedda is unable to develop) which is expressed in Hedda’s comment “(*as though to herself*)” (pg. 82).

Additionally it is important to note that another fictitious symbolisation for the manuscript is introduced in this scene; that of Eilert Loevborg himself. This representation is created when Loevborg lies to protect Mrs. Elvsted and says that he “tore it into a thousand pieces. And scattered them [where] they will sink. Deeper and deeper. As shall [he].” (pg. 80). Consequently Hedda’s act of destroying the manuscript represents an act of ruining Loevborg. Moreover Loevborg’s intentions of protecting Mrs. Elvsted are made unambiguous to Hedda as he explains to her what would be worse than “to kill a child” (pg. 83). It is also at this point that Hedda believes she has taken control and will be the force for a “beautiful” suicide (pg. 84); finally shaping a man’s destiny. Ironically her plan does not go as she had planned and the “child” is to be brought back to life by Mrs. Elvsted and Tesman, leaving Hedda at the mercy of Judge Brack.

Thus the manuscript underlines crucial character developments, specifically for the presentation of Hedda Gabler. Her jealousy stems from the fact that Mrs Elvsted embodies all that she yearns for; the control over a man’s life akin to that which Mrs. Elvsted exercises over Loevborg as she reformed him. Moreover, Hedda envies the relationship shared between Mrs. Elvsted and Loevborg which is one in which she has “inspired him” (pg. 58). In burning

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the manuscript Hedda is inadvertently manifesting, to the audience, her resentment of the transformations society is undergoing. Consequently she is also manifesting an opposition to the evolution of society. Therefore the burning of the manuscript symbolizes Hedda's inability to move forward and adapt to the changes moulding late nineteenth century Norwegian society. This resentment stems from Hedda's yearning for the privileged life she was entitled to as "General Gabler's daughter" (pg. 2) and her terror of anything that might separate her from such an entitlement (this argument is also one that justifies her fear "of a scandal" (pg. 56)). The manuscript represents the elements of Norwegian society that the audience witnesses Hedda struggle against throughout the play.

Owing to the fact that the manuscript represents competition between George Tesman and Eilert Loevborg, and the class competition existing between the aristocratic and the bourgeois societies, the manuscript is a symbol in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* for the social changes reforming late nineteenth century Norwegian society. Moreover the manuscript is a symbol for the fruits of an emerging revolutionized male-female relationship which is symbolized by Loevborg and Mrs Elvsted's affiliation. Finally the burning of a manuscript discussing the future could be a dramatisation that Ibsen has used as a means of foreshadowing Hedda Gabler's fate. Her action of burning the book reflects her inability to contemplate social evolution, and ultimately her inability to allow herself to be moulded by the forces transforming society, a vice that inevitably leads to her defeat and ultimately her suicide.

Word Count: 1443

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Bibliography

Sources used

Ibsen, Henrik, *Hedda Gabler*. Methuen Drama, A&C Black Publishers Ltd, London, 1962