

Women oppression in hedda gabler



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, the oppression of women in the Victorian era is shown through Hedda's resistance of those societal norms that limit her to a domestic life. It is fitting that the title of the play is Hedda's maiden name, Hedda Gabler, for the play largely draws upon the idea that Hedda views herself as her father's daughter rather than her husband's wife. Throughout the play Hedda struggles to satisfy her ambitious and independent nature within the narrow role society allows her. Unable to be creative in the way she desires, Hedda's passions become destructive both to others and to herself.

Although she strives for independence with her masculine traits, Hedda also internalizes the Victorian conception of how a proper lady should behave. Hedda desires intellectual creativity, not just the domestic norm she has fallen into that binds her to a limited social function. Raised by a general, Hedda has inherited the characteristics of a leader and is wholly unsuited to her new role of suburban housewife. General Gabler's portrait keeps him present throughout the play, as do his pistols and Hedda's insistence on being her father's daughter rather than Tesman's wife.

In Ibsen's time, pistols would have been depicted as male objects. Hedda's fascination with the pistols shows that she lacks typical feminine characteristics. It's also important that she refers to them as "General Gabler's pistols" (1, 801) after Tesman expresses concern of her referring to them as her pistols: "Well, I shall have one thing at least to kill time with in the meanwhile...my pistols, George" (1, 796-799) Tesman shows he has anxiety about the fact that his wife Hedda does not conform to the traditional ideals of femininity of the time.

Pistols are viewed to most as dangerous objects however Hedda sees them as just toys; this is very similar to the way that her lethal manipulations are solely for her own amusement. Hedda is unaccustomed to her new life; she has fallen into a lower class and subsequently is not thrilled with her new social position. Other characters also acknowledge Hedda's fall in social standing: "General Gabler's daughter! Think of the sort of life she was accustomed to in her father's time" (1, 26-27).

Since Hedda is unable to have the authority or the wealth her father once had, she exercises power by manipulating her husband George Tesman as well as others around her by exhibiting her very masculine traits. Hedda displays these traits throughout the play because she does not want to conform to the feminine ways or the accepted stereotypes of her gender in society. Hedda's marriage to her husband, Mr. Tesman, only increases her desire for power because he is a constant reminder that now, according to society, she belongs to Mr.

Tesman, which Hedda resents. Hedda's unsuitability for her domestic life is also shown by her impatience and evasiveness at any reference to her pregnancy. Women at this time were expected to marry and then have many children immediately after getting married. At the start of the play Tesman's aunt bombards him with questions of the suspected child to be "But listen now, George, have you nothing, nothing special to tell me?" (1, 112-113) She expects Hedda to most certainly be pregnant, especially after such a long honeymoon.

Hedda on the other hand clearly does not want to face the prospect of being controlled and tied down by one more responsibility and expectation. When Tesman refers to the possibility of Hedda being pregnant, “ but have you noticed what splendid condition she is in? How she has filled out on the journey? ” (1, 276-277) Hedda’s only response to this is “ Oh, do be quiet... Oh, you can’t see anything. ” (1, 278) She avoids any questions or conversations about children or a pregnancy throughout the play.

Hedda is not at all warmed up to the idea of pregnancy and the prospect of motherhood. Alluding to her pregnancy Judge Brack says to Hedda, “ suppose now that what people call in elegant language a solemn responsibility were to come upon you? A new responsibility, Mrs. Hedda? ” (2, 262-264) She does not want to hear anything of the sort and again avoids the conversation of the possibility of pregnancy. She angrily responds to Brack, “ Be quiet! Nothing of that sort will ever happen... I have no turn for anything of the sort, Judge Brack.

No responsibilities for me! ” (2, 265) Hedda does not want another responsibility, and if in fact she is pregnant she is at all cost avoiding dealing with the thought for now. Throughout the play Hedda is competing with Thea for control over Lovborg. Her destructive envy compels her to push Lovborg, a reformed alcoholic, to drink. This, as can be anticipated, is the beginning of his downfall. When Lovborg refuses Hedda’s offer of a drink and Thea supports his sobriety, Hedda laughs, “ Then I, poor creature, have no sort of power over you? (2, 596)

Hedda wants this control because she resents the way Mrs. Elvsted was able to leave her husband she was unhappy with and more importantly how she was able to ignore the way society views her after doing so. She tells Mrs. Elvsted after manipulating Lovborg to drink, “ I want for once in my life to have power to mould a human destiny... I have not, and have never had it (2, 711-712). ” Hedda’s conversation with Thea introduces the vine-leaves, a major symbol which expresses her desire for freedom. Hedda has idealized Lovborg’s drinking into a rejection of society’s restrictions.

His drinking seems to her an act of courage, which she wishes she had. The connection among the vine-leaves, freedom, and courage is clearly stated. Hedda expects him to return fearless: “ At ten o’clock he will be here. I can see him already with vine-leaves in his hair flushed and fearless” (2, 701-702) For Hedda, the reformed Lovborg lost his love of life, his courage, and his freedom; therefore, by resuming his former lifestyle he will once again be free from the restrictions of society: “ And then you see then he will have regained control over himself.

Then he will be a free man all his days” (2, 704-705). Hedda does not want Lovborg to remain reformed, for in her mind by forcing Lovborg to start drinking again she can live vicariously through him. Hedda’s relationships with men are often about living vicariously. There is so much she isn’t allowed to do because of her sex, so she experiences it through others. She wishes she had the ability to escape the judgment of society, which for Hedda would mean abandoning her fear of social exile and living a life free of restrictions and feminine stereotypes.

Hedda is a strong, bold, and independent woman for her time, yet she is determined to live her life through the context of the society around her. Therefore she is caught in a vicious cycle of expectation and disappointment. While Hedda might portray her masculine traits inside the privacy of her own home, she is terrified of scandal and becoming the subject of gossip. Hedda realizes that she is held back by her values and wishes she could escape them. Hedda is jealous of Mrs.

Elvsted, she wants a life of freedom but is stuck in her new boring situation:

“ Oh if you could only understand how poor I am. And how fate has made you so rich! (2, 716-717) Despite her apparent independence and rebellious attitude, Hedda is still restricted by her adherence to traditional values of the nineteenth century. She denies the advances of Lovborg telling him, “ But I won’t hear of any sort of unfaithfulness! Remember that” (2, 465). Even though she does not particularly care for her husband, Hedda was raised to believe that it is extremely improper for a married woman to be involved with another man.

Inevitably it is her desire to escape societal norms of femininity and her fear of scandal that leads to her suicide. Hedda reveals several times throughout the play, “ I have such a dread of scandal” (2, 156) Judge Brack knows of this dread when he explains to Hedda that the pistol that killed Lovborg can be traced to her: “ Yes the scandal of which you are so mortally afraid.

You will of course be brought before the court” (4, 385-386) Brack is the one character that knows of Hedda’s inner fears and desires, from the beginning he plays off her desire to be free of society as well as her fear of being

socially exiled. Hedda's drive for power will make it impossible for her to be under the control of an outsider such as Brack: " I am in your power none the less. Subject to your will and your demands. A slave, a slave then! No, I cannot endure the thought of that! Never! (4, 401-403) Hedda will not allow anyone else to control her; she had enough of being trapped in a stuffy house married to a husband she does not like and controlled by the expectations of society. Therefore in order to escape more oppression Hedda plans to produce a beautiful death that will create a scandal that she will not have to face, Hedda ends her life. Hedda Gabler questions woman's role in society by presenting a character that gets completely engulfed by the society she both despises and adheres to.

Hedda desperately wants to escape her suffocating life but cannot do so because she was raised to conform to the rules of society. Although she is a strong independent woman, especially for her time period, Hedda struggles to break free of her internalization of the Victorian housewife stereotype. In the end Hedda is not able to live the life she wanted, so in her last act of selfish dramatics she ends her life to create a lasting scandal to affect the people she manipulates throughout the play.