Setting as a clarification of motives in hedda gabler

Literature, Books

Setting as a Clarification of Motives in Hedda Gabler Henrik Ibsen centralizes one of his most renowned plays, Hedda Gabler, around an upper-class housewife, and the complexities behind her seemingly average life. The title character finds herself in conditions that would be highly sought after by most young women of the nineteenth century: in a seemingly stable marriage with a comfortable home, and significantly more freedom than most females were offered within the context of the play.

For this reason, Hedda's tragicsuicidecomes as a surprise, and is often considered to be incomprehensible and unjustifiable in the minds of audience members. That being said, Ibsen clarifies Hedda's motives by using the play's setting to offer hints and explanation regarding the character's condition as well as the factors that make her a victim of society.

By understanding Ibsen's use of the broader setting of nineteenth century Norway, as well as the smaller and more detailed setting on stage, one can in turn begin to understand the reasoning behind Hedda's final impassioned decision and the events leading up to the play's tragic conclusion. The nineteenth century was a time of patriarchal dominance, which is the foundation beneath most of Hedda's internal conflict. Being raised by her father as a young girl, Hedda was treated more like a son than a daughter, and therefore able to enjoy freedoms that were typically reserved for males of the time.

In the first scene of the play, Miss Tesman brings attention to this fact by exclaiming, " what a life she had in the general's day! " (Ibsen 201) and remembering the days when Hedda would ride horses with General Gabler, "

galloping past" (201), rather than trotting as would be customary for young women of the era. When Hedda agrees to marry George Tesman, she sacrifices this liberty of gender ambiguity, and confines herself to the societal restrictions of the time.

Nevertheless, although Hedda displays an outward compliance to the female expectations of the time, inwardly, Hedda rejects the idea of being dominated by a husband, which manifests in her passive aggression towards George. Ibsen underscores this idea even further through the title of the play, " Hedda Gabler", which uses the woman's maiden name, indicating that she remains attached to a time when her father was the only man in her life. Notwithstanding these social restraints, the hindrances to Hedda's liberty cannot solely be blamed on the 1879 setting.

Rather, the confines placed upon Hedda by societal expectations are compounded and made increasingly restricting by the woman's own obsession with maintaining outer appearances and social mores. Should she choose to, Hedda could leave her husband like Mrs. Elvested to pursue her own idea ofhappiness, but in doing so, the protagonist would sacrifice her social standing and image as a well-esteemed and proper wife. With that, she decides to enshroud her life in a facade at the expense of her contentment.

The threat of this mask of grace being removed, which would result in her becoming an outcast of nineteenth century society, becomes one of the deciding factors in Hedda's suicide. To elaborate, in her twisted hunt for "… something spontaneous and beautiful" (Ibsen 118), Hedda sets out like a

venomous arachnid, weaving web after web of conflict and deception to amuse herself, while maintaining an outward impression of integrity. This disguise becomes endangered when Judge Brack becomes privy to Hedda's malicious behaviour and her role in Lovborg's suicide, then threatening to expose her should she not surrender to his chokehold of power.

Due to the social conditions of the Norwegian setting, Hedda is provided with two options, to become an even greater victim of female repression under the hands of Judge Brack, or to be banished by the upper-class society that is so vital to existence. In a more contemporary time, alternative options would be available to the protagonist due to theequalitywith which women are now perceived, and the social acceptance of independent females in the present day. Contrarily, in the sphere of the play's context, Hedda is faced with the fact that the only way to avoid relinquishing all control over her life is to end it by her own hand.

This notion alone shows the significance that time and setting have on the character's actions, as it is arguable that if the play were to take place in the twenty-first century, the relevance of Hedda's actions would be entirely lost, based upon the liberties and opportunities that would be available to her in today's society. In addition to utilizing setting to establish the social circumstances affecting Hedda, Ibsen also offers descriptions regarding scenic design and stage directions to reveal information concerning the title character's sense of inner conflict. Firstly, a great deal of significance arises from he fact Ibsen contains the play's action within the Tesman's smalldrawing room, a very deliberate and strategic choice of setting in terms

of character development. As the piece progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent through the setting and the young woman's interactions with it, that the drawing room contains Hedda's life, both literally and metaphorically in some senses. Within this room, she is able to deny her present circumstances by detaching herself from the outside world. Hedda's interactions with the set reinforce this idea, particularly when she orders George to draw the curtains due to the sunlight.

By including this action in his work, Ibsen physically dims the stage, representative of the darkness with which Hedda masks her life, while also reflecting the dominant position she holds in her marriage by having George perform a task that would typically be viewed as woman's work within the world of the play. All things considered, while the drawing room is in fact a representation of the control and freedom in Hedda's life, it also serves as a simultaneous, albeit paradoxical, symbol of imprisonment. Within its four walls, Hedda is able to ignore the outside world.

That being said, the drawing room and its contents also represent the suffocating aristocratic life that the young woman struggles to maintain despite its smothering effects. The conflicted relationship that the woman has with the room and her identity is illustrated when Hedda makes reference to yet another set piece: the piano. Although she acknowledges that the instrument " doesn't really fit in with all [the] other things [in the room]" (Ibsen 208), Hedda declares that she is unwilling to part with it when Tesman suggests trading it in for a new piano.

Rather, she suggests moving it to the inner room, and getting “ another here in its place” (208). Through her relationship with this object, Ibsen again demonstrates the conflict that Hedda experiences as she attempts to replace the ways of her past with her new aristocratic identity, while still clinging onto fragments of her old life. Ultimately, it is this paradoxical state of being that leads to the title character’s unwinding. Unable to find a middle ground in her life, Hedda comes to understand that the only way to avoid trading either her inner or outer desires for the other, is to take complete control of her life by sacrificing both.

Despite the aforesaid arguments, some audience members and critics may still consider Hedda’s suicide, as well as the actions leading up to it, to be unwarranted acts of selfishness. That being said, regardless of whether or not one chooses to approve of Hedda’s choices, it is undebatable that Ibsen at the very least succeeds in clarifying the motives behind her decisions, particularly her sense of inescapable imprisonment. Ibsen manages to achieve this feat largely through the precision with which he makes use of the play’s setting.

With that, it is inarguable that without the foundation of nineteenth century society and the choices made by Ibsen regarding stage design, the pieces of Hedda’s story would remain fragmented to audiences, and the intense torment leading to the title character’s final breath would be left unexposed. Works Cited Ibsen, Henrik. Hedda Gabler. Trans. Rolf Fjelde. The Norton Anthology of Drama, Volume Two: The Nineteenth Century to the Present. J.

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