

# People don't do things like that: hedda gabler and mental illness

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At one hundred and twenty five years old, Hedda Gabler may not seem like the most contemporary or controversial play. At the time it was written however, Hedda Gabler (1891) was part of a growing sense of social awareness of the affect that the stigma around mental health had on those who lived with treated or untreated mental illness. Set amongst the upper echelons of nineteenth century Norwegian society, Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler tells the story of an aristocratic woman who has married beneath herself in a loveless match with a dull historian. Soon bored with her insular life, Hedda begins interfering with the lives of her friends and family.

In the nineteenth century understanding of mental illness had not much surpassed that of the Middle Ages. In particular, mental health issues affecting women were often given the catchall term 'hysteria' which was believed to be caused by the uterus rather than environmental factors. This method of diagnosis had not changed since the classical era. In his portrait of Hedda, however, Ibsen is careful to hint at many environmental factors which the audience understands may have contributed to Hedda's particular fate. As a General's daughter Hedda prior to her marriage, had been able to expect a certain level of interaction with the wider world such as horse riding even if she was also expected to behave to a certain standard.

As a housewife however, Hedda's entire life becomes recentred around her husband and home. The insular nature of this environment becomes such a powerful force over Hedda's life that she develops a rather skewed view of life, romanticising her friend Eilert Lovburg's debaucherous behaviour as being like the behaviour of a "young god" with "rebel fire" who revels "with vine-leaves in his hair". In this environment, Hedda's behaviour grows

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increasingly extreme in her attempts to entertain herself and to acquire significance in the lives of others. Originally partaking in some humiliating if not actually dangerous pranks, Hedda's behaviour takes a dark turn after she declares that she "wants the power to mould a human destiny". Shortly thereafter she begins manipulating Eilert Lovburg, a recovering alcoholic back into drinking so that she can re-live some of the excitement of her youth. Filled with jealousy for the affectionate relationship her former lover Eilert Lovburg has developed with his new creative muse, the younger Mrs Thea Elvsted, Hedda burns the only copy of the manuscript of the book which he and Mrs Elvsted worked on together, referring to it as "[Thea's] child with Eilert Lovburg".

When Eilert eventually becomes suicidal she gives him a gun hoping only for him to make a "beautiful death" for her to admire. Hedda's decision to burn Eilert's manuscript, while born out of her own spitefulness and jealousy is a decision she may perhaps have never arrived at had it not been for the social environment which she was in when they reappeared in her life. With no occupation or recreational activities with which to amuse herself, her husband's elderly aunts and a lecherous judge being the only other visitors she and her husband receive, it is perhaps not surprising that her volatile jealousy is stoked by the comparative success of her friends. Hedda's lack of an outlet through which she can express her mental and physical energies leads her to eventually fixating on the only minor bit of drama in her life, the budding romance between Eilert Lovburg and Thea Elvsted. With little else to amuse her, she becomes fixated on the relationship between Eilert Lovburg and Thea Elvsted. It may seem extreme to compare Hedda's vindictive

behaviour with serious mental illness but the depiction of Hedda's possible mental illness is illustrative of the way in which the public during the late nineteenth century were slowly becoming aware of the psychological affects that the perfect storm of ableism, sexism and restrictive social mores were having on middle class women.

Physically middle class women were expected to lead an insular life, with their movements outside the home limited because sunlight and exercise were considered bad for their health. In a social sense middle class women were expected to lead a life centred around their husband and the care of their children, with the exception of a few acceptably feminine interests such as flower arranging, or playing musical instruments, particularly the piano. The idea that a middle class woman was extremely delicate and therefore should not exert herself in any way was espoused by many people throughout the nineteenth century, including American Clergyman George Washington Burnap in his work *The Sphere and Duties of Woman: A Course of Lectures* which was published as a book in 1848. It was also considered a matter of great shame for a middle class woman to work as it would usually indicate that the husband could not provide sufficiently for the family. Therefore, a middle class woman such as Hedda, whose interests lay outside of the home, would quickly find that there was little to occupy her energy.

At the same time there was also great prejudice against mentally ill and disabled people generally as it was unknown what caused these conditions so for centuries they had been assumed to be either the evil work of devils or retribution for sins. To be associated with mental illness or disabilities of

any kind was considered scandalous and could damage a family's reputation. We see some of this prejudice in the play coming from Hedda herself who refuses to be associated in any way with her husband's Aunt Rina who is dying of an unspecified chronic illness saying " I loathe anything ugly". As previously discussed women with even mild mental illness were often denied treatment, were mistreated or had their concerns dismissed because women were believed to be biologically more prone to mental illness. Ibsen was not the only author exploring the ways in which the environment that they lived in influenced the lives and health of women in the late nineteenth century. A year after the publication of Hedda Gabler, in 1892, the American author Charlotte Perkins Gilman published the thriller novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* about a woman who becomes increasingly paranoid about the world around her after being forced to stay in one room for approximately two months to supposedly cure her mild depression.

Perkins Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* after suffering a similar treatment following a bout of post-natal depression after the birth of her son. In 1887 the American investigative journalist Nellie Bly caused a scandal when she wrote the expose *10 days in the Mad-house* which described her work going undercover for ten days at the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island, in New York City. She uncovered the physical abuse of the inmates, whose mental deterioration she believed was exacerbated by the abusive treatment that they were subjected to . The expose instigated an inquiry which revealed that many doctors could not properly identify mental illness in women and prompted an \$850, 000 budget increase for the department responsible for the maintenance of such institutions, as well as <https://assignbuster.com/people-dont-do-things-like-that-hedda-gabler-and-mental-illness/>

the introduction of more rigorous medical exams to ensure that doctors were better prepared to diagnose mental illness . Women's mental health became a highly controversial subject towards the end of the nineteenth century making the subject of Hedda Gabler highly topical for the time in which it was written.

While concern about women's health is one possible factor behind Ibsen's somewhat sympathetic portrait of Hedda, another which must be taken into account if we are to explain her more melodramatic characterisation is the romanticisation of female suicide which was also widespread during this time. Although male suicide was almost three times more common in Europe in the mid-late Victorian period, depictions of female suicide are more common in the art and literature produced in this period. An example of this theme in other media of the nineteenth century is the 1851 oil painting Ophelia by the English artist John Everett Millais. Ophelia, an adaptation of a famous passage from the Shakespeare play Hamlet (1603), depicts the suicide of the character by the same name in an unrealistically beautiful manner. There are many debates among historians as to why suicide was depicted as predominantly female in the media of the time, despite statistics from the time suggesting that this was not the case. One possible reason may be that suicide at this point was seen as feeble and cowardly, not to mention highly sinful according to certain Christian doctrines.

So, to project this image onto young women who were already seen as over-emotional and biologically pre-disposed to mental instability would have been easier for artists and authors during this period than going against

associations of stoicism and bravery which were often projected onto male figures or characters during work of this time. Hedda's belief in the possibility of a "beautiful death" and her inference to Eilert that a "beautiful death" is worth more than an ugly life is perhaps a parody of the romanticisation of death. Hedda's illusions about Eilert's "beautiful death" are shattered when she learns that he died not by a bullet to the heart, as she had imagined, but when the pistol she gave him misfired, fatally injuring him in the bowels. This death she regards as disgusting. That Hedda later attempts and succeeds with her own "beautiful death" when she is feeling trapped is significant because Ibsen avoids idealising this scene, instead highlighting the hypocrisy of a society which stigmatises mental illness and yet glorifies death with the line "but people don't do things like that!" from the scandalised Judge Brack. With this context in mind, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler reads as the biting social critique that it is instead of a dusty academic play. In Hedda, Ibsen creates a character we can sympathise with, yet never truly like allowing us to see with her eyes the reality and futility of her life and yet also disagree with how she ultimately decides to handle the situation in which she finds herself. At the time it was written Hedda Gabbler was a provocative wake-up call which, like many of Ibsen's plays exposes the intricately interconnected hypocrisies which dominated nineteenth century life.