

Idealism and constraint in hedda gabler and master harold...and the boys



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For centuries, authors have strived to use their literary texts as a medium for social change and justice – conveying their thoughts and ideas on a variety of key issues and themes. In “ Hedda Gabler” by Henrik Ibsen and “ Master Harold and the Boys” by Athol Fugard, this key concept of conformity and disobedience is clearly addressed. “ Hedda Gabler” is an outspoken drama of psychological drives, which expresses the short-lived period of life experienced by a newly wed couple as they experience the tumultuous social change around them in a Norwegian society in the 1890s. “ Master Harold and the Boys”, a riveting autobiographical play, set in the 1900s, idealized a future without Apartheid in South Africa. During this time, the plays paralleled the tensions between older paradigms, which relies on the oppression of genders and races into submissive social roles and newer, more progressive worldviews of equality that were slowly become enmeshed in day-today life. Both playwrights targeted the general audiences who were entrenched in racist or sexist norms, and attempted to shed light on the struggle for social justice in the hopes of swaying the audience to accept the liberating change that was occurring.

Though both plays took place in very different times and advocated different social causes, several parallels can be drawn between the situations of Hedda and Harold, the protagonists of Ibsen’s and Fugard’s work. They both suffer from traditional hierarchies of their society – Hedda being trapped in a claustrophobic relationship, and Harold being unable to form sincere friendships with his black servants due to societal stigma. Both use extensive characterization to depict the social concerns of their era through the exploration of themes such as societal conditioning and idealism.

Both Fugard and Ibsen effectively emphasize social constraints as being an oppressive influence on the protagonists. Hally, whose 'pale' skin color is viewed as dominant and idealistic is constantly pressured into racially abusing two old servants Sama and Willie in his mother's tearoom. Fugard uses the pathetic fallacy of the weather to draw parallels with such constraints instilled upon the young boy. The 'incessant rain' symbolizes an ongoing segregation during the apartheid and the 'wet and windy' nature of the weather further emphasizes the power society holds upon Hally. By using two of the four dominant natural elements, Fugard creates a sense of higher power; further influencing Hally's judgment as the play proceeds. Like Fugard, Ibsen also uses natural elements to enhance social pressures, however, he focuses more on lighting. 'The shining sun covered by the thick curtains' emphasizes Hedda's desire to cover or block out the social requirements women were forced to conform to. Her constant need to "cover the verandah" conveys her struggle to face the outside world. Unlike Hally, Hedda is a woman and therefore the minority in the play. Ibsen uses diction to underscore how constraints cloud Hedda's judgment and pressurizes her to her demise at the end of the play. Hedda's worries about "what will other say" highlight her fear of public scandal. Ibsen uses her insecure nature to stigmatize the intrusive nature of social beliefs. Furthermore, Ibsen uses terse phrases to mirror the harsh society women lived in. For example, Tesman tells Hedda that she 'must put it down' in response to Hedda playing with the pistols. The use of the imperative 'must' asserts his dominance over Hedda. Analogously, Judge Brack's outright statements as well convey a man's assumed dominance in the 1890s Norwegian society. Judge Brack even uses the law to persuade Hedda into a

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triangular relationship' by stating it to be 'highly convenient for all concerned'. Incongruity and conflict between characters is also a means to show social concern through the two plays. Society's control over an individual are undeniable. We see this when Hedda tells Aunt Julle " People don't do such things". The concern with what " people" at large do demonstrates her thirst for societal acceptance and approval, suppressing her individual views and needs in light of the society's. This motif is further accentuated through Brack's statement at the moment of finding about Hedda's demise when he said that " But, good God Almighty...people don't do such things!".

Like Ibsen , Fugard uses particular diction to highlight racial segregation. Phrases such as ' he's a white man and tat should be good enough for you' reveal the indoctrinating nature of society as it shapes and molds a naïve boy into a heartless ' master'. Fugard uses repetition to show the constant pressure placed on Hally by white society. ' You mustn't be rude", " you must listen to your father", demonstrate the need for Hally to conduct certain values because of his status as a white boy.

Idealism is another theme that is prevalent in both the texts and substantially helps improve their aim to convey social concerns of their respective times. Setting is an immense part of both the plays. Through the isolation and psychological oppression that Hedda faces, Ibsen reveals the hedonistic and decadent aristocratic class of 1890s Norwegian society. Her continuous desire to present herself in a certain way to the society demonstrates her thirst for an idealistic world. This is further accentuated through the use of the symbol of the drawing room which is a physical and <https://assignbuster.com/idealism-and-constraint-in-hedda-gabler-and-master-haroldand-the-boys/>

symbolic inhibition of Hedda Gabler and parallels how Hedda is restrained by her acceptance of society's values. It demonstrates that Hedda is constrained to the private sphere in the Victorian Society where the public sphere of the workplace is dominated by men. The glass door within the drawing room that overlooks the verandah outside can also be seen as symbolic of the social and material barriers that keep Hedda unhappily inside the domestic realm, where she is forced to believe that the drawing room is a women's space to entertain guests as clarified when she proclaims: "For me it was horribly tedious!" "For six months on end, never meeting anybody in our circle. Who could talk about our own affairs." Fugard effectively stages props to convey Hally's alienation and the scene begins with "all tables and chairs stacked up" yet only "one chair standing in the middle of the tearoom". Fugard uses this scene to draw parallels with Hally, a boy who feels alienated from both his white parents and his black staff working there because Hally's internal conflict and external societal suppression forbids him to side with only one. The theme of idealism also juxtaposes the conflicting views of society through the way both playwrights portray power. Fugard uses education as a means of escape, one because of which Hally feels superior to Sam and Willie and his parents. He uses Hally's disgust at 'his father's comic books' to further highlight Hally's superior intellect as he urges Sam to have a discussion on 'men of magnitude'. Through such occurrences, Hally is not only able to instill his views on Society but also condemn any premeditations Sam and Willie may have. Ibsen also focuses on this concept of idealism, however symbolizes it through power and violence. The two eminent symbols 'general Gabler's pistol and portrait' and well as the punch' serve as a means through which Hedda can assert her

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dominant personality and in a way remain free from the constraints of society. Through describing pistols as 'black and shiney' Ibsen draws parallels with Hedda's physical appearance. Her eyes 'steel grey and shiney' embody the violent power associated with weapons. Moreover, in Hedda Gabler, Hedda thinks of herself as a devotee of a Dionysian ideal, the ideal she alludes to so often during the play by her use of the image of vine leaves in the hair, a traditional symbol of the Dionysian. Her ideal, however, is quite opposed to the cyclical pattern of fertility and vitality, which has been the traditional center of the cult of Dionysus. She is disgusted by both decay and the cycle of renewal in life, and her ideal is a sort of transcendent grandeur that would transfigure the trivial round of ordinary life into something beautiful and incorruptible. As the play goes on, she comes to realize that her ideal is only a dream, that it will never have any power in the real world revealing a deep sense of irony at the core of this message.

In conclusion, the two texts show the struggle of numerous individuals who have endured the oppressive nature; through facing those who have increased power, living and abiding to strict cultural connections and societal norms as well as struggling to survive through restrictive settings and conditions due to the pressures within society. Social concerns are clearly conveyed through the themes of societal conditioning and idealism.