

Ibsen And Freud: A Study Of Hedda Gabler From A Psychoanalytical Perspective

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Introduction

One of the questions that still haunts us is whether Henrik Ibsen got wind of Sigmund Freud's study on psychoanalysis and put it into practice in his plays or whether Ibsen was the force behind Freud's study. However baffling the question is, one thing everyone agrees on is that both are masters in their own areas. Henrik Ibsen is hailed as the 'father of modern drama' while Freud is known as the 'father of psychoanalysis.' The intention of this paper is to examine Ibsen's female character, Hedda Gabler, from a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective. At the end of the paper, a plausible answer to the question of who influenced whom will be attempted. For this purpose, the paper is divided into five parts viz. Introduction, Hedda Gabler at the Time of its Publication, Models for Hedda Gabler, Hedda Gabler under Freudian Psychoanalytical Scanner, and Ibsen and Freud.

Hedda Gabler at the Time of its Publication

In *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Ibsen lays a great emphasis on individual psychology. It is a full-length portrayal of a woman character of the same name as the play. In the play, Hedda Gabler is depicted as a neurotic character and Ibsen shows his deep understanding of individual psychology, especially abnormal psychology. However, it is worthwhile to note that *Hedda Gabler* was not understood at the time of its publication. Ibsen's portrayal of this type of a neurotic character was met with the most vehement criticisms. The critics found Hedda Gabler to be a mysterious and incomprehensible female character. The critics outdid each other in condemning Hedda Gabler. Hans Heiberg said that the play 'was published simultaneously in English, German, French, Dutch and Russian and was received with almost total confusion all over the world' (257).

Even her Norwegian contemporaries received Hedda Gabler as a weird character. Her character traits were very unfamiliar to the people of that time. In this regard, Bredo Morgenstjerne remarked that 'we do not understand Hedda Gabler, nor believe in her. She is not related to anyone we know' (Nilsen 8). Another critic wrote in *Morgenbladet* that Hedda was 'a monster created by the author in the form of a woman who has no counterpart in the real world' (Nilsen 8). With special emphasis on *Hedda Gabler*, Alfred Sinding-Larsen denounced Ibsen saying that 'Ibsen's modern drama is the drama of abnormality. His main characters have nothing human about them save the flesh in which they are clothed' (Meyer 671).

Gunnar Heiberg was the only person in Norway who seemed to have a liking for the play. However, it seems that he did so just because he was a die-hard fan of Ibsen and not because he really understood Hedda Gabler. In this connection, Hans Heiberg said:

The only person in Norway, to defend it was that Ibsen admirer, Gunnar Heiberg, who maintained that she was neither unreal nor incomprehensible. But he did not

elaborate: he simply went on to jibe at all those who had written unfavourably about it. (257)

It was only when the science of human behaviour developed that people began to show more eagerness in the play. And people began to understand it. Now, *Hedda Gabler* has become one of the most performed of all Ibsen's plays. The play has also received favourable criticisms from many well-known literary figures. Randolph Goodman has remarked that '*Hedda Gabler* is Ibsen at the height of his creative powers' (25). Another well-known Ibsen scholar, Harold Clurman, also praised *Hedda Gabler* as 'certainly a masterpiece in its own right' (150).

Models for *Hedda Gabler*

Various critics have pointed out many models on which the character of Hedda is based on. Randolph Goodman, in his book, *From Script to Stage: Eight Modern Plays*, has shown that Hedda has been inspired by a character called Helena of August Strindberg's short story, *Corinna*. Goodman brings out the similarities between Helena and Hedda Gabler in these words:

Helena ... is the daughter of a general and is brought up to excel in horseback riding, gymnastics, and other masculine sports. She despises women, holds men in contempt, is revolted by sex, and, like Hedda, is afraid of the responsibilities of motherhood. Out of financial necessity she marries a college teacher, a weakling she looks down upon but helps him to acquire a professorial chair. Though she treats him disgracefully, he is madly in love with her. All these elements, of course, are fundamental to the plot of *Hedda Gabler*. (26)

Strindberg was so certain of his influence on Ibsen and he himself declared that 'my seed has fallen in Ibsen's brain-pan—and germinated' (Goodman 27). Certain others have claimed that Hedda was based on Emilie Bardach, Alberg and Victoria Benedictsson. However, Dr. Arne Duve, a Norwegian Psychologist, 'has persuasively argued that Hedda is a self-portrait, and that she represents Ibsen's own repressed and crippled emotional life' (Meyer 674).

However, Havard Nilsen argued only a few years back that the most likely model for Hedda is Lou Andreas-Salome. In his essay, *How Ibsen found his Hedda Gabler*, Nilsen shows the many resemblances between Hedda Gabler and Lou Salome:

Hedda Gabler is of the same age and appearance as Lou was when the play was published; like Lou, she is the daughter of a general. Her strong relationship to her father, the general, who is at the root of her own masculine independence, is accentuated, as Ibsen also explicitly indicates in a letter to a friend: 'The title of the play is *Hedda Gabler*. My intension in giving it this name was to indicate that Hedda as a personality is to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than as her husband's wife.' (17)

Nilsen continues:

To the surprise of her many admirers, Hedda has married a somewhat boring academic scholar, just as Lou in 1886 had surprised everyone by declaring her engagement to the 40-year old sinologist Friedrich Carl Andreas. ... Just as Lou would often find herself surrounded by two men rivaling for

her attention – Nietzsche and Ree; Andreas and Rilke; Freud and Adler – the play is centred on Hedda's similar relationships of rivalry. ... She [Hedda] is sexually attracted and repelled at the same time. This is similar to the enigmatic side of Lou's personality when Georg Brandes met her in the early 80s – she could speak of sexual matters with a shocking frankness, while in reality she was still a virgin and admitted no lovers. (18)

It is highly possible that not one but all the models suggested by various critics were instrumental in the creation of one of the most famous women characters of Ibsen.

***Hedda Gabler* under Freudian Psychoanalytical Scanner**

Hedda Gabler, the most prominent character in the play is 'today the best known of Ibsen's creations apart from Nora Helmer' (May 80). She is portrayed in the play more as a victim of her upbringing as a General's daughter rather than as a victim of the restrictions her society placed on women. The portrait of General Gabler that adorns the inner room, and which can be seen throughout the length of the play, has significant importance in the understanding of the character, Hedda Gabler. Ibsen himself intended Hedda Gabler to be portrayed in the play more as the General's daughter than as Tesman's wife. The General has imbibed in her a strict sense of discipline. Moreover, her father taught her all kinds of masculine acts like riding horses and firing pistols instead of preparing her for wifehood or motherhood. These masculine lessons transformed her to admire the attractive and often sexual pursuits which men enjoy. In the play, she is found playing with her father's pistols, a possible Freudian 'phallic symbol' which shows her latent wish to be a man. Thus, she wishes to shove away all feminine ways. But being a woman with a strict compliance to social conventions, she cannot become the sort of person she wishes to be. Thus, her unfulfilled desires are repressed and she keeps on yearning for things she can never attain. This psychological 'repression' ultimately makes Hedda Gabler a 'neurotic.'

With this mental unbalance, she grows up into a handsome young woman. However, none of the flirts surrounding her propose her for marriage. And as she becomes advanced in age, she starts to suffer from depression. Finally, when Tesman proposes, she accepts readily. However, she accepts Tesman's proposal on the basis that Tesman is almost sure of being appointed as a professor. Hedda, sees only the money that Tesman will get from such a lucrative post. In this regard, Havard Nilsen said:

It becomes obvious as the events unfold that she has not married her newlywed husband out of love, but out of a strange blend of convenience and desperation, possibly depression and loneliness. (16)

However, Tesman's expected post of professorship keeps eluding him. This means that Hedda could not get enough money to enjoy the kind of life she wants. Tesman keeps on rejecting her demands, which include among other things a man servant and a saddle horse, saying that they ought to be careful with their expenses till he gets the post of professorship. This makes her terribly dejected and she plays with her father's pistols. And, as she has not married for love, she could not find pleasure in her married life. Her life becomes more and more boring. Her personality keeps on deteriorating day by day.

However, Hedda, in spite of all her discontent, remains obsessed with the image of conventional woman, probably because of the strict compliance to social conventions her father instilled in her. Thus, she can only complain about her marriage but she does not have the courage to leave Tesman. Even before her marriage, she refused the advances of Lovborg, the man she had some sort of a relationship with. In this connection, it would be apt to state that she suffers from 'Oedipus complex' or rather 'Electra complex.' None of the flirts surrounding her, as also her husband, were as charismatic as her father. And thus, though she wants her sexual desires to be fulfilled, she could not as she was not attracted physically to any of them. In this play, Ibsen shows that Hedda's 'suppression' of her sexual desires affects her behaviour throughout the play so much so that she becomes a victim of 'sexual frigidity' (Clurman 162). Thus all her life, all that she wants is suppressed. Her utterly neurotic character is born out of this suppression.

It has already been noted that Hedda is a woman who is attracted by the freedom with which men enjoy. When she was a young girl, she used to force Lovborg to tell all his wild sexual adventures. Later on in the play, she even tells Brack that she would like to 'come along as an invisible onlooker' and watch the free kind of enjoyment the men will have in the party. She really wants to experience all these unfeminine pursuits. But being a sexually frigid woman who has gone down the feminine path of marriage, she keeps on suppressing her desires. To quote the words of Gail Finney:

The clash between Hedda's unfeminine inclinations and the steps she takes down the feminine path of marriage and, inevitably, pregnancy results in hysteria. (100)

Hedda's 'hysteria' is the reaction to her female roles to which she is unsuited. Hedda rejects marriage and pregnancy but it does not mean that she achieves the way of living she wants and thus she becomes very depressed. Her unwanted marriage and pregnancy is thus the major cause of her hysteria. It is seen in *A Doll's House* that Nora's hysteria finds release in the Tarantella dance. Likewise Hedda's hysteria finds release in the wild dance tune she plays on the piano.

Hedda's resentment of her father, who had prevented her from experiencing wanton and sexual pleasures by instilling in her a strict compliance to social conventions, is transferred onto everybody she meets. This resentment is directed towards others in the form of hatred, violence and destruction, which is a form of 'transference.' It is worthwhile to mention that 'transference,' according to Freud, is the redirection of feelings and desires retained from childhood towards a new object. Thus, the utter resentment she had for her father from childhood is redirected to everyone who comes onto her path. She hates all those who could achieve those desires she cannot attain. And in her hatred and subsequent jealousy, she tries to manipulate the lives of others to ruin them. The most glaring example of this is when she instigates Lovborg to go to the party. Her sinister influence is the result of her envy of Mrs. Elvsted when she sees her having control over Lovborg. Orley Holtan says in this regard that 'Hedda's jealousy is immediately aroused and her action is at least partly motivated by the desire to win Ejlert [Lovborg] away from her rival [Mrs. Elvsted]' (83). And when Lovborg finally comes back from the party frustrated over his lost manuscript, Hedda, instead of giving him his manuscript, encourages him to commit suicide. She even gifts him one of her father's pistols so that he may end his life beautifully. It is because of this destructive nature of Hedda that Harold Clurman said, 'the neurotic temperament, the frustrated, the physically or morally unsatisfied often see beauty in destruction' (164). Moreover, she

eventually burns Lovborg's manuscript out of her jealousy for Mrs. Elvsted. It is precisely for this reason that Auguste Ehrhard referred to her as 'the demon of destruction' (Mayerson 131). However, this cruel destructive side of Hedda was present in her right from her childhood. It is mentioned in the play that Hedda used to pull at Mrs. Elvsted's hair when they were in school. Hedda had even once threatened to burn it off.

Being a destroyer makes Hedda an unacceptable woman but she becomes all the more reprehensible to the audience for her reluctance to take responsibility of anything. Hedda's complete unwillingness to accept responsibility is one of the biggest aspects of her neurosis. Hedda is not in a right frame of mind as she thinks that she can marry but should not get pregnant. She bluntly rejects every reference Tesman unknowingly makes of her pregnancy. She even keeps on counting the months in dread of her approaching childbirth. And when Brack refers to her responsibility of having a child, she becomes furious as she resents all kinds of responsibilities and even pregnancy because she wants to enjoy life and 'shuns everything painful and ugly; she cannot tolerate the sight of sickness or death' (Clurman 164). Her burning of Lovborg's manuscript which she refers to as Mrs. Elvsted's child is the manifestation of her desire to kill her own child. It can be aptly said that Hedda is more dangerously neurotic than Nora because while Nora only leaves behind her children, Hedda vehemently avoids the very notion of childbirth and murders her unborn child by killing herself.

Thus, the play deals with the story of a woman who is torn with an inner conflict between her unfeminine cravings on the one hand and her journey along the feminine path of marriage and pregnancy on the other. She is portrayed as a woman who cannot find her own identity. And in her quest for identity, she ends up killing herself. In this regard, Randolph Goodman said that '*Hedda Gabler* (1890) has for its protagonist a neurotic woman who is unable to find her identity and destroys herself' (23).

Ibsen and Freud

Ibsen published *Hedda Gabler* in 1890 about ten years before any of Freud's works were published. This means that while Ibsen was writing *Hedda Gabler*, Freud was still, at most, at the initial stage of his study on psychoanalysis. Moreover, no critic has ever mentioned that Ibsen knew and conversed with Freud. Thus, there is no possibility that Ibsen learnt anything from Freud. On the other hand, the character analysis of *Hedda Gabler* shows that Ibsen was no fluke in the science of human behaviour but was well adept in it. Randolph Goodman stated in this regard:

It [*Hedda Gabler*] is a drama that depicts a type of neurotic personality that has become more universally recognized in our day than it was at the turn of the century. Long before the advent of Freud, Ibsen understood intuitively that there are internal pressures that drive people to commit inexplicable and wanton acts. (25)

The present study of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* throws many a light on some key aspects of psychoanalysis like Neurosis, Repression, Hysteria, Phallic symbols, Oedipus complex, Transference, etc. on which Freud was later to deal on. It is also a known fact that Freud admired Ibsen and used some characters from Ibsen's plays for his case studies. Especial mention can be made of Freud's study of Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*. Moreover, Kate Taylor stated in an article published in *The New York Times* that Freud learnt Norwegian to study Ibsen's plays in the original language (www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/theater/04taylor.html). Thus, this argument points to

only one direction: that Ibsen was definitely, in some ways, an influence to Freud in his study of Psychoanalysis.

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The established view of Hedda Gabler sees the play as a study of the frustration and despair engendered in the exceptional individual by a. In this paper I present a psychoanalytic re-interpretation of the play which in certain respects inverts this received reading. Insofar as it does so, however, my interpretation is intended not to cancel the received view but to play against it. The first section of the paper is predominantly Freudian in approach. Introduction "Ibsen and psychoanalysis. "Ibsen did not write or think as a Freudian," writes Robin Young in the Preface to his study of the dramatist (1989, p.12). As a scholar of the Norwegian language and its literature Young writes with at least one kind of indisputable authority.