

Death and Suicide in Henrik Ibsen's Drama with Special Reference to Hedda Gabler, The Wild Duck, and Ghosts

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Abstract: By the end of the nineteenth century, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was revered a major artist throughout Europe and North America. He created singular and very complex characters who sought to discover their mission in life and to resist the pressures of society.

As a mature dramatist Ibsen would give death and suicide substantial focus in his plays. However, it was no longer he who struggled with thoughts of death and suicide. Rather he created a series of stage characters who look death in the eye and choose suicide – whether directly or indirectly – as their exit from (but not necessarily) the final solution.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the various types of suicide and death in Ibsen's plays with special reference to three plays: *Hedda Gabler*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Ghosts* and discuss the main reasons and the surrounding conditions that have led to these tragic acts.

The paper concludes that in Ibsen's plays as in the Greek tragedy the past haunts the present. The dead maim the living; the past is powerful enough to kill. As in ancient Greek tragedy, the sins of the parents destroy their children. In *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, fathers "kill" their sons via the transmission of hereditary syphilis; in *Hedda Gabler* a father "kills" his daughter. Hedvig, in *The Wild Duck*, is an innocent victim, but the generations before her are the guilty ones. In *Ghosts* the mother is the central figure, forced to reexamine her life and to acknowledge that her puritanism contributed to her husband's corruption, that her sacrifice produced not redemption but disaster for her son.

Henrik Ibsen (1828- 1906) bewildered and shocked his contemporaries a century ago with his seemingly obscure dramas, with his controversial themes, images and subject matters and delineation of characters unfamiliar to the theatre of his time, providing commentators and drama critics with very little idea about the real purpose of the texts.

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Two of the most significant themes that he has delineated are death and suicide.

With the exception of *A Doll's House*, which gives us the possibilities of a hopeful life afterwards, and *Lady from the Sea*, which has the redemption of love in its final moments, every major play such as *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler* and *Ghosts* ends with death or impending death- death that alters the lives left behind.

Brian Johnston says

"... Ibsen often gives the remaining characters something positive to do for the rest of their lives pledging to work together, or to be better husbands and wives, parents, sisters or friends, or finding liberation through death as with Rebecca and Rosmer throwing themselves in the millrace. These are weak aftershocks however, after the earthquake has leveled everything. Ibsen is consumed with mortality—with how we live before we die, and how with our actions we push ourselves and others to the brink of despair, and ultimately death" (86-87).

There is no bigger theme in the life of a human being; it is universal, it transcends cultures, time and distance. It is why Ibsen is a writer for the ages, the greatest dramatist after Shakespeare and the father of modern drama. As Bjorn Hemmer of the University of Oslo writes: (Ibsen brought) "...an ethical gravity, a psychological depth and a social significance...giving European drama a vitality and artistic quality comparable to the ancient Greek tragedies."(21).

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As a mature dramatist Ibsen would give suicide substantial focus in his plays. However, it was no longer he who struggled with thoughts of suicide. Rather he created a series of stage characters who look death in the eye and choose suicide – whether directly or indirectly – as their exit from (but not necessarily the final solution).

In Hedda Gabler Ibsen gives us an insight into the household of a scholar and his high-class wife. The play, which primarily is a play of human relations, shows us the disintegration and then the suicide of the protagonist, Hedda Gabler. A lot has been written on Hedda's suicide attributing her final tragic act to various reasons varying from her place

into society, her emotional state, her lack of power, her lifestyle, and to her notion of beauty which she sees broken.

Hedda Gabler commits suicide- an act- which, as Albert Camus has written "is prepared within the silence of the heart" (quoted in Alvarez, 52). In his study of suicide and the literati, *The Savage God* (1971), the English poet and critic. A. Alvarez, discussed the idea of "the unknowable" in driving a person to committing suicide, "The real motives which impel a man to take his own life are elsewhere; they belong to the internal world, devious, contradictory, labyrinthine, and mostly out of sight. The successful suicide is, in every sense, beyond the expert" (123-4).

Hedda is neither normal nor abnormal and she is different from other women: "unlike the generality of women" (*Hedda* II.81).confronting hardships correspondent to her distinctiveness. She has relations with two different men: Tesman and Eilert Lovborg. Tesman's "dry as dust" researches in contrast with the creative talent of Lovborg, with whom Hedda had once, before her marriage, had a close association, which she broke off for fear of scandal:

Lovborg:: [Who has never taken his eyes off her, says softly and slowly:]
Hedda-- Gabler!

Hedda. [Glancing hastily at him.] Ah! Hush!

Lovborg: [Repeats softly.] Hedda Gabler!

Hedda. [Looking at the album.] That was my name in the old days—
when we two knew each other.

Lovborg. And I must teach myself never to say Hedda Gabler again—
never, as long as I live. (II. 97-100)

Lovborg has since become a drunkard and been rescued by Mrs. Elvsted, an old school-mate of Hedda's whom she bullied and threatened to burn her hair. Hedda has evidently been jealous of her friend since their

days at school. Thea remembers that she was frightened of Hedda in school, because:

Whenever you met me on the staircase you used to pull my hair.

Hedda. No, did I?

Thea. Yes. And once you said you'd burn it all off.

(Act I Part I. 37-39)

Hedda is jealous of Thea's hair which represents both her femininity and her fertility. Consequently, Hedda attacks both Thea's femininity and her fertility, destroying her relationship with Eilert Lovborg by purposefully tempting him back to drink and destroying the manuscript, the "child" of Thea and Eilert. However, Thea's abundant fertility conquers even this, and as the play draws to an end, she is working with Tesman to reconstruct the manuscript/child. While Thea is able to create and recreate, Hedda can only destroy. She destroys the manuscript, destroys Eilert Lovborg, and finally, destroys herself. Caroline Mayerson comments that:

"The manuscript is Lovborg's and Thea's 'child,' the idea of progress born of a union between individuals who have freed themselves from the preconceptions of their environment. This manuscript the sterile Hedda throws into the fire at the climax of her vindictive passion. Her impulse to annihilate by burning is directed both toward Thea's "child" and toward Thea's hair and calls attention to the relationship between them....Ibsen was using hair as a symbol of fertility ..." (133)

G. Wilson Knight says that Hedda burns the manuscript, "partly, of course, from thwarted jealousy", and adds that, "Mrs. Elvested has done what Hedda would like to do, moulding " a human destiny", and if she may not do it positively, she will do it destructively, like Bishop Nicholas when he burns the crucial letter in *The Pretenders* (64-65).

Hedda's incapability to be her own person is the main cause of her disintegration. Her life is empty and purposeless, boring and tedious, and prospects extremely limited. She takes no interest in her surroundings, except at Lovborg's death. By giving him a pistol, she wants to show herself that her ideals of 'a beautiful death' could still be achieved:

Hedda: Eilert Lovborg – listen to me – Will you not try to – to do it beautifully?

Lovborg: Beautifully? [*smiling*] With vine – leaves in my hair, as you used to dream in the old days - ?

Hedda: No, no. I have lost my faith in the vine leaves. But beautifully nevertheless! For once in a way! (Act III, 150 – 56)

In Lovborg, Hedda sees the opportunity to witness beauty. She envisages Lovborg dying beautifully, "with a crown of vine leaves in his hair, burning and unashamed." She encourages his suicide, handing him a pistol with which to commit the act. Jealous of Lovborg's relationship with Thea and anxious to ensure he will carry out the "beautiful" act, Hedda burns Lovborg's manuscript, the symbol of his relationship with Thea and the product of Thea's inspiration of Lovborg that Hedda envies.

When carrying out these acts, Hedda is continually afraid of scandal. She worries enormously about how society will perceive her actions; an additional pressure with which she has to cope. Her fear of public scrutiny is demonstrated when she questions Thea: "But what do you think people will say? (Act I)

Ibsen makes use of the set in Hedda Gabler to illustrate the sum of these pressures on the protagonist. The Tesmans' residence is "decorated in dark colours" to create a somber, melancholy mood. It is full of heavy wood furniture, and is covered with thick carpets. The set is symbolic of the life to which Hedda has committed herself – the death of her extravagant way of living and the start of a life of boredom. In the first two acts, the set is full of sinister bouquets of flowers which Hedda considers oppressive rather than refreshing as we would expect:

"The room needs some fresh air. All these flowers!" (Act I)

Judge Brack describes the smell of the residence as "a bequest from the late Mrs. Falk" – the smell of death already hangs over the characters, and, as the motif of death continues with the passing away of Aunt Rina and the obscure death of Lovborg, we realise that a climax as a result of the pressures placed on the protagonist is inevitable.

It is a culmination of these pressures that forces Hedda to commit suicide. In the final acts of the play, each one of these pressures grows to new proportions – the ungraceful death of Eilert and George's plan to dedicate his life to the restoration of Lovborg's book place added stress on Hedda. The event which finally impels Hedda to take her own life,

though, is the thought of Brack having power over her through his blackmail involving the manuscript and the added grievance of knowing that she would have to spend every evening with the man. Brack ironically remarks:

“We’ll have great times here together, the two of us!” (Act IV)
Hedda plays a wild tune which is almost as out of place in a household that is mourning as she is out of place in society, and ends her life beautifully with a shot to the temple.

Judge Brack’s concluding comment, “But good God! People don’t do such things!”(Act IV)), establishes the conventionality and rigidity of his contemporary society. In the context of a society which placed significant pressures on women by denying them the life they desired, the outcome is not predictable. In Hedda’s case, a combination of pressures from her society and circumstances surrounding her upbringing lead to a perversion of her every action. Her suicide, then, is reasonable because the alternative would have been for Hedda to lead an unsatisfying life, continually restraining her behaviour in fear of scandal.

Lisa Elaine Low, “In Defense of Hedda”, says:

“What does Hedda Gabler want? Cleopatra wished to rule over the entire world, in company with her Antony, while Iago longed to disintegrate Othello, and brilliantly achieved this ruin. Restless, vibrant yet life-denying, equivocal in every respect, Hedda desires a huldre’s [female troll, in Norwegian folklore] revenge upon human reality. ... We can be certain that Hedda Gabler has done it [committed suicide] beautifully, if hardly as elegantly as Cleopatra, in her apotheosis of a suicide. Not exactly a feminist martyr, and restricted to a narrower stage than Cleopatra’s world-theater, Hedda has nevertheless done the best she could manage in the stifling middle-class morality of Ibsen’s Norway. If she does not dazzle us quite as Iago does, we must grant her that Løvborg is no Othello.” (53).

One may consider *Hedda Gabler* an existentialist play with Hedda searching but not finding real meaning in this earthly life. As a terrible, inevitable consequence, her only escape is suicide. If Hedda’s act of suicide is an escape from a senseless life, this is not the case with Hedvig in *The Wild Duck* whose suicide is committed in the form of self immolation and has been used as a form of protest. Self- sacrifice for

others is not usually considered suicide, as the goal is not to kill oneself but to save another.

Hedvig's suicide is another example of a choice and consequence. There are two possible interpretations of her action. One school of thought contends that Hedvig, coached by Gregers to sacrifice something that she loves to prove her love to her father, determines that self-sacrifice will make the most stunning gesture. An opposing viewpoint contends that Hedvig decides to kill herself only after hearing her father's scornful comment that Hedvig has been playing him for her own purposes. Regardless of why, Hedvig decides to kill herself, as Relling's scrutiny determines. Aside from her death, her action has the consequence of binding her mother and father — but they had begun that process even before her death — and providing her father further opportunity for self-pity (Killingmo 6-7).

The tragedy of the play takes place in the inner recesses of the loft, but also in the inner recesses of Hedvig's consciousness: And her death is a mystery. Had she sacrificed the wild duck, Gregers' would have been proved right: we see Gina and Hjalmar reconciled when they hear of her supposed sacrifice. We can never know why Hedvig killed herself because we do not 'see' the moment of her resolve - as we will see Hedda Gabler's. Like everything else in this play it is open to multiple interpretations. Ibsen does not tell us because he wants to keep all these possibilities open.

Although Gina Ekdal immediately senses the danger that Gregers poses to her family and to the protected world she has created for Hjalmar, she is unable to recognize the depth of the threat he poses, for her focus, as befits her role in life, is on the practical rather than the symbolic and emotional. For instance, she questions Gregers's assertion that he would like to be a clever dog, the “kind that goes in after ducks when they plunge and fasten themselves in the weeds and the tangle in the mud” because she mistakenly interprets his statement literally. Although she is only a child, Hedvig understands that Gregers speaks symbolically:

Gina: Wasn't that crazy talk, wanting to be a dog?

Hedvig: You know what, Mother — I think he meant something else.

Gina: What else could he mean?

Hedvig: Oh, I don't know. But it was just as though he meant

something different from what he was saying-the whole time.

Gina: You think so? Well, it sure was queer though. (Act II.. 46)

Hedvig's tragedy, however, arises because she takes words too seriously. First, she believes Gregers's words — that sacrificing the wild duck is the best way to demonstrate her love for her father. More importantly, she takes Hjalmar's rejection utterly seriously. When he calls her an intruder, Hedvig grabs the pistol and escapes into the attic. She overhears him speak of her "manipulation" of him, rhetorically stating: "If I asked her then: Hedvig, are you willing to turn your back on life for me? [*Laughs scornfully.*] Thanks a lot-you'd soon hear the answer I'd get!" (Act..V. 116) In response and in despair, Hedvig kills herself.

Her parents' reactions further underscore the tragic-comic elements of the play. Upon discovery of Hedvig's body, Gina reacts as would a normal parent. She bursts into tears and cries out, "Oh, my baby! My baby!" Hjalmar, in contrast, describes how Hedvig must have "in terror. ... crept into the attic and died for love of me." He dramatically clenches his hands into fists and berates the heavens. "Oh, Thou above . . . ! If Thou *art* there! Why hast Thou done this thing to me?" (Act V. 117). In the midst of his overdramatizing, however, the serious undercurrent remains ever apparent, for even at this moment of Hedvig's greatest loss — the loss of her life — Hjalmar cannot see past how it will affect his own life. Maurice Vallency notes that amidst a backdrop of caricatures and melodramas, "only the child suffers. Her death is the one tragic note in a distinctly comic situation" (12).

Quite a few readers or members of the audience would not hesitate to call Hedvig's death a tragedy, and this would be appropriate if we were to consider the events of the play in a normal human perspective. It is bitter and disastrous that a young person dies by her own hand. Hedvig's suicide whether she considers it while in possession of her full senses or as an impulsive act, is triggered by motive forces that do not pertain to her own guilt. She assumes responsibility for confirming the life content of Hjalmar's existence. In this perspective Hedvig can be considered a victim of the manipulating mythologizations of her half-brother Gregers and his

need to create "a true marriage" between her parents, and her suicide thus becomes a form of *expiation*. As seen by Bjørn Killingmo, her suicide means that Hedvig "meets her death to expiate the family's burden of guilt". (6)

In all of Ibsen's plays death as an option and final end is present in the minds of the main characters throughout central parts of the unfolding events – though their deaths cannot really be called suicides. Others of Ibsen's most famous stage characters cause their own deaths more directly. This is the case with Hjørdis in *The Warriors at Helgeland* (1858), who ends her life by throwing herself into the ocean after first having killed her beloved Sigurd with the shot of an arrow. On the contrary, some characters like Oswald in *Ghosts* (1881) makes plans for his own death, but is unable to carry out the suicide himself. Does Oswald's illness trigger a depression that makes life unbearable? If the answer is affirmative, this means that the death is seen as an expression of moral guilt, or as "false" or ruinous solutions to problems that should rather have been treated by a therapist or addressed by the sufferer, possibly leading to rational perception and recovery of mental balance. If so, Ibsen's plays apparently claim that suicide may be a logical resolution of major life problems. One can interpret the suicide in *Ghosts* as a self-destructive consequence of disappointment over the emptiness of life. Instead of living through pain so that it may open for positive renewal and development, this condition results in inner confusion and regression, where an unrecognized pattern of birth and death triggers the wish to pass a death sentence on oneself.(Brudal, 3).

Ghosts is the story of the Alving family. From the outside, they seem like a fairly normal family. But in reality they are haunted by dark secrets, bizarre behavior, and the deadly disease syphilis. Oswald Alving is the son of the Captain and Mrs. Alving. Ever since he was a child, he was sent away so he would not be morally contaminated by his father who has died of syphilis. In the play Oswald has returned home with the intention of staying. He intends to stay and marry the maid, Regina; he is unaware that Regina is his half-sister, sired by the dissolute Captain Alving.

During the course of the play, Pastor Manders, the mother's former lover, also visits and reprimands Mrs. Alving for not living a more conventional life and rearing her son. Finally, at the play's climax, Oswald reveals that he, like his father, is suffering from syphilis and will inevitably develop dementia. Oswald asks his mother to make up for the past and to prove her love, by giving him a fatal dose of morphine when

signs of dementia appear. As the play ends, Mrs. Alving's intentions are not clear; we are not sure what she will do.

The play leaves us asking many questions. Just how did Oswald contract syphilis from his father? It is evident in the play that Mrs. Alving is not infected and Oswald had presumably never shown signs of congenital syphilis, although his doctor has told him that, "you've been worm-eaten from birth" (Ibsen, *Ghosts*, 63). Perhaps Oswald was promiscuous like his father was... That might be true, but the implication is that the syphilis (like Oswald's anger) is a "ghost" of his abnormal family and childhood. The play also raises issues like assisted suicide and euthanasia: Will his mother agree to give Oswald the morphine? Is assisting her child in suicide proof of a mother's love... or just another family sin that will continue to haunt the family?

When Oswald breaks out in horror at the prospect of his mental decline, of becoming "like a helpless child," she can say with a certain satisfaction: "My child will have his mother to look after him" (Ibsen, *Ghosts*, 98). Oswald understandably rejects that gesture with violence, in part, surely, because it springs not just from compassion, but from the mother's partly unconscious desire for ego-fulfillment--to be really the mother of the little boy that she had once sent away from home. And even after their truce, when she has told him that when the time comes she will give him the pills, she relapses into this self-deceptive maternal dream:

"This was just a terrible delusion of yours, Oswald--only a delusion.... now you shall have a rest--at home with your own mother, my dearest boy. You shall have everything you want, the way you did when you were a little boy. There! It's all over now. You see how simple it was--I knew it would be. And look, Oswald, we're going to have a lovely day--bright sunshine. And now you can really see your home" (Ibsen, *Ghosts*, 100).

What is the basis for the Ibsen's obvious fascination with death and possibly suicide as an end or "solution" to human conflicts? Is the motive based on his personal experiences? Some critics have understood the processes leading to the deaths as the result of "sick" or unsound states of mind, in keeping with a strictly realistic interpretation with long traditions in research into Ibsen's works. Emphasis is then given to the fact that Ibsen's characters suffer from miscellaneous mental aberrations, misguided idealism or simply the inability to cope with life, and in line

with this they interpret the deaths and suicides as human defeats. Does Oswald's suicide trigger a death wish that expiates for an ideal past? How can a person cope with the baggage of the past? If suicide is motivated by expiation for previous morally reprehensible acts, this implies an acknowledgement of guilt that triggers indirectly self-imposed punishment. Through this the suicide rejects and deletes his or her former self in the instant of suicide. Anna-Marie Taylor says

The idea of sacrifice to society, and also the way that truth cannot be quenched, is graphically shown at the end of the play by Oswald being burnt up by his disease, and is further accentuated by accumulating references to light and fire. The conflagration at the orphanage reduces to ash the very foundations upon which Mrs Alving has maintained appearances of happy family life. Eventually the sunrise at the end of the play (the only time that rain has made way for sunshine) does not appear to represent a new beginning, but rather demonstrates how nature can cruelly overwhelm the nurturing process, as the ever-present natural landscape, ignored throughout the play, eventually pervades the elegant and outwardly ordered trappings of the Alving household (13).

One can conclude that in Ibsen's plays as in the Greek tragedy the past haunts the present. The dead maim the living; the past is powerful enough to kill. As in ancient Greek tragedy, the sins of the parents destroy their children. In *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, fathers "kill" their sons via the transmission of hereditary syphilis; in *Hedda Gabler* a father "kills" his daughter. Hedvig, in *The Wild Duck*, is an innocent victim, but the generations before her are the guilty ones. In *Ghosts* the mother is the central figure, forced to reexamine her life and to acknowledge that her puritanism contributed to her husband's corruption, that her sacrifice produced not redemption but disaster for her son.

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