



Human Reaction to Life Absurdity in Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler

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Article Information

Article History:

Received May26, 2023
Reviewer June 3 .2023
Accepted June 10, 2023
Available Online March1 , 2024

Keywords:

Hedda Gabler,
Class conflict,
Discriminative attitudes

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Abstract

The categorization of people into classes is a matter which affects physical and mental achievements of equality in societies. It leads to the development of discriminative attitudes, as members of the upper class look down on those lower to them in level. This explains why in some communities' members of the lower class are considered less significant despite having the same heritage as those of the upper class .

In the play, Hedda Gabler, Henrik Ibsen highlights the issue of class and its implications on individuals. Ibsen presents to us the marriage of Hedda Gabler and George Tesman as an illustration of class conflict. The consequences of such conflict lead to the drastic end for more than one character.

DOI: [10.33899/radab.2023.140608.1938](https://doi.org/10.33899/radab.2023.140608.1938), ©Authors, 2023, College of Arts, University of Mosul.
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ردة فعل الانسان تجاه تفاهة الحياة في مسرحية هيدا كابلر لهنريك ايسن

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المستخلص :

إن عملية تصنيف الناس إلى طبقات مجتمعية يؤثر حتماً على مستوى الإنجاز في المساواة الإجتماعية، مما يخلق وراءه مواقف عنصرية. في مسرحية هيدا كابلر للمسرحي المعروف هنريك ايسن يظهر هذا الموضوع بصورة جلية. فالتمييز الطبقي لمختلف الشخصيات يحدد ماهية التعامل بينهم مما يصل في النهاية إلى أسوأ الخيارات. كما أن نظرة المجتمع لطالما تسهم في تحديد وضع الإنسان في مكان معين من الصعب عليه ان يُغيّر من واقعه، خاصةً اذا كان في السابق محاطاً بكل سبل العيش الرغيد. وهذا هو ما تعاني منه هيدا

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التي كانت تعيش حياة الرفاهية سابقاً. إلا أن وفاة والدها الثري بعد خسارة مالية كبيرة جعلها تضحي بنفسها بالزواج من شخص ذي مستوى اجتماعي ومالي أدنى منها. وهنا تبدأ معاناتها.
الكلمات المفتاحية: هيدا كابلر، صراع الطبقات، المواقف التمييزية .

About the playwright: Life and Achievements

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), born at Skien in Norway, is considered the father of modern drama who first displays realism in his plays. He is one of the earliest playwrights to dramatize the individual's alienation from society. Although never fully appreciated during his lifetime, he has come to be recognized as one of the greatest dramatists.

Among Ibsen's major works are the following plays: *A Doll's House*, *The Wild Duck*, *When We Dead Awaken*, and *Hedda Gabler*. He is known for presenting strong and challenging characters in his plays. Indeed, it is a common place to assert that modern drama originates with Ibsen's plays.

About the Play: Summary of main Events

Hedda Gabler revolves around Hedda Gabler who marries George Tesman. The couple arrives from their six-month honeymoon. Hedda tries to manage her new situation. Soon after, Thea Elvsted enters bringing news about the return of George's academic rival, Eilert Lovburg— who initially is a social misfit as a drunken man. His arrival threatens the professorship that George aspires to.

Hedda provokes Eilert against Thea, making him join George and Judge Brack (among the circle of his friends) for a drink. Then, they left for a party, leaving Hedda and Thea by themselves. By dawn, they came with Tesman announcing to Hedda that he has the manuscript that Eilert dropped on the way. George intended to return it back to him. Hedda takes the manuscript and keeps it. Later, Eilert arrives to tell Hedda that he has lost his manuscript and wanted to kill himself. She hands him a gun with which he accidentally shoots himself. Then, sent to the hospital, he later dies. With the possibility of a scandal about Hedda being responsible for accident, she shoots herself.

Life Absurdity in the Play

In the play, there are several points that show the level of absurdity the characters are concerned with. The paper tackles some of these absurdities, represented by: "Social groupings" and "Miscommunication".

Social Groupings:

Henrik Ibsen brings out the social groupings in the play by dividing the characters into main social groups: the middle-class and the upper-class. Some of the characters such as Hedda initially belong to the upper social group. Hedda used to be rich due to her father's wealth. yet, she is no richer since her father died, leaving her a small amount of fortune. Yet, she still clings to her class.

As a representation of the middle, George Tesman, Hedda's husband, hopes to have the opportunity to get rich through his academic work. The middle-class group's wealth comes only through inheritance and even this is used to be restricted. As for Eilert, he used to be socially respected; yet, he is about to lose it due to his personal behaviors which tend to be different from society's expectations. On the other hand, Judge Brack represents the upper class that turned rich and wealthy by their own achievements.

Ibsen shows how people try to maintain social consideration, no matter what the price might be. Social status during the Victorian age used to be so important. It brought people to a degree of honor that enabled them to live in prosperity. According to Hedda, she married George Tesman in a hope to restore

her lost social status. She also aims at using her social status to discriminate and manipulate those below her. This made of her a vicious and ambitious character.

Another representation of the social group is also through the attitudes of the characters. Hedda is very rude and difficult, simply because she comes from a high social group. She expects special treatment since she is beautiful and wealthy by inheritance. The middle class, on the other hand, tends to accommodate the whims of the higher group. Tesman goes all out to ensure the comfort of his new bride and gets her a new house. Contrary to his belief, Hedda does not even like the house.

Ibsen shows that people are ready to do anything to ensure their belonging to their social groups. Hedda marries Tesman for financial reasons. And so did Thea—who married an older man, not out of love, but to safeguard her social status. The case is that Hedda accepted to marry Tesman just because she wants to ensure a good level of life for her. There is no affection towards him. It is all about social groups and easy – going life.

What draws the attention here is that the playwright shows that social groupings are not permanent. Despite living in denial about her wealth, Hedda fell from an upper social grouping and is just grasping on the perception of the middle-class provided by Tesman. Hedda's father dies leaving her with a small amount of money, which means that he already lost much of his wealth. Yet, Eilert finds it hard to believe that Hedda could even marry from such a class. He exclaims: "Hedda Gabler married? Move over, married to—George Tesman! Such a scenario is unbelievable." (Meyer.1962:36).^{*} But Hedda's only comment is that it is how the world goes.

Tesman also needs the professorship for the sake of the family so as not to sink into poverty. He already has spent much in purchasing the house for Hedda. And this puts him in a difficult situation. In a way, these classes are superficial and have the potential to collapse at any moment.

Due to this social grouping, characters started to show pretense and sacrifice in order to maintain specific social image. They cannot show their true selves. Also, the social groupings affect the personality of an individual including the fear of losing the class level through which they occupy good status quo.

Hedda cannot even acknowledge her pregnancy. She fears that it may affect her social standing as a beautiful lady. The play displays that social standing as temporal. It also reveals the need to maintain it, in spite of the harm it may cost those who are in need of it. Indeed, it may cost them even death.

Miscommunication

Miscommunication is a main theme in the Play. There is a master-slave relationship between the main characters due to many considerations This created a case of telling lies and hiding realities. Human absurdity is reflected in the character of Hedda. She feels disappointed with herself because she fails to find out her existence:

Hedda: I am burning your child.

(Act3)

Here, Ibsen is adding another feature to his character. Hedda misses the way to communicate with others so she finds herself bored. In order to pass time, she starts to play on the nerves of, Eilert Lovborg (her ex-lover) since she could not stir up ill will with his wife, she tells him that she burned his child. Here "child" refer to Lovborg's manuscript. She is jealous and psychologically unrested woman.

^{*} Quotes from the play refer to this edition here after by Act number.

She also suffers a lack of understanding with her husband, Tesman. She feels herself alienated in her own home. Indeed, this is due to her state of mis communication with even her husband.

Christopher Trogan suggests that even stage direction shares to show how far the miscommunication between Hedda and her surroundings (P. 271):

[The first impression of the drawing room itself is One of contrast between a dark, artificial interior and a light exterior. (Act one)]

This clearly shows that Hedda suffers from personality disorder. Her marriage to Tesmen creates within her a case of unbalanced feelings. She tries to cooperate at the beginning. Yet, by the passage of time, she comes to realize that such a statement cannot be dealt with anymore, she just can't bear it.

This may have a certain cause: she laments with herself her rejection for her ex- lover, Lovborg:

Eilert Lovborg: Yes, Hedda, you are a coward-at heart.
(Act 2)

This comment underscores Lovborg to show Hedda her weak point. Although, it also shows that Lovborg himself has also some remained passion towards her and that he is anguished by her rejection. This matter was so hard for her. As a reaction, she tends to stir up fabricated things so as to separate Lovborg from his wife.

Hedda knows already that she has to go on with her marriage for many reasons. One Important reason is purely materialistic. After she lost her father's fortune , she has to keep living in the same level she is accustomed to. In spite of not being rich, Tesman has the opportunity to be a professor and hence he can make her be rich and stable.

Such a type of life makes Hedda cover realities and even lie, in-order to hide her feelings and her real picture. Indeed, Hedda tends to tell lies which even becomes part of her manners. Accordingly, she is "a social misfit, completely out of touch with the world around her" (Templeton. 1997:65). Her lies are mostly what cause her to enlarge the gap between her and the others around her. She is misfit due to her miscommunication. It is this matter which helps, then after, to think of some strange thoughts within herself:

Hedda: I want for once in my life to have power to mold a human destiny.
(Act2)

This saying of Hedda provokes another layer in her character. She lives with her husband almost in a normal way: she supports her husband, after all. She is also faithful to him, even if she is no longer loving him or satisfied with him. She is not able to shape her own path. This causes her to interfere in the lives of others. In spite of being related to the same social level, Judge Brack, yet he is not content with what she thinks of:

Judge Brack: people say such things _but they don 't do them.
(Act4)

Here, Brack is underestimating Hedda Gabber, in his final chat with her. She previously states that she prefers to die than to be a slave to Judge's whims. Brack, on his part, challenges her to be able to kill herself. Hedda, as he claims would have to get used to his frequented, unwanted visits.

Another side of the miscommunication Hedda suffers is her husband's family name. It is quite known that a woman would have her husband's name as hers, the moment she gets married to him. But in Hedda's case, it is not. And the title of the play displays this matter clearly; *Hedda Gabler*. It is not Hedda Tesman as supposed to be. This, in fact, illustrates the identity of the character of Hedda as a first, class citizen. Hedda clings to her past life. She refuses to be Hedda Tesman. This is regarded a type of violence on her part. She is strong-minded, un womanly person. Her frustrated marriage causes her to insist on being Gabler's daughter, then Tesman's wife. Hedda Gabler herself is "Ibsen's primary device for the out-ward manifestation of this violence". (Temptation 1997:224)

It is important not to miss the fact that Hedda is disconnected from others around her at least mentally. yet this gives her a type of freedom to express her feelings, but her violent energy is redirected towards her serious goal - the suicide of Elert Lovborg. Indeed, the details of his suicide remained unclear. But it is still clear that she evoked him to commit the suicide.

Hedda (take a step closer to him) Eilert
Lovborg listen to me could you let it
happen ... beautifully? (Act3)

She handles him a pistol of her father and challenges him to kill himself "beautifully". Indeed, "Hedda openly admits that she is unable to control or even to understand her own actions." (Haugen. 1979:98). She admits that such things suddenly come over her. This shows that she cannot cope with her situation at all. It is due to the lack of communicating ideas. She loses interest in everything around her. She is completely disappointed with her reality; and this is what urged her to commit a suicide. Both the husband and wife have a loveless life. This is what caused disappointment. Hedda keeps thinking that her husband is incapable of securing a good life for her –emotionally and physically -This miscommunication makes her judge him as unfit partner for her.

Cocclusion

The play, *Hedda Gabler* highlights the absurdity of social conventions and expectations. The characters in this play are expected to confirm to strict gender roles and societal norms. Yet, this would often causes conflicts with their true desires and personalities. The play raises important questions concerning the role of individuals in shaping their own lives. Also, the extent to which they can break free from the constraints of society.

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