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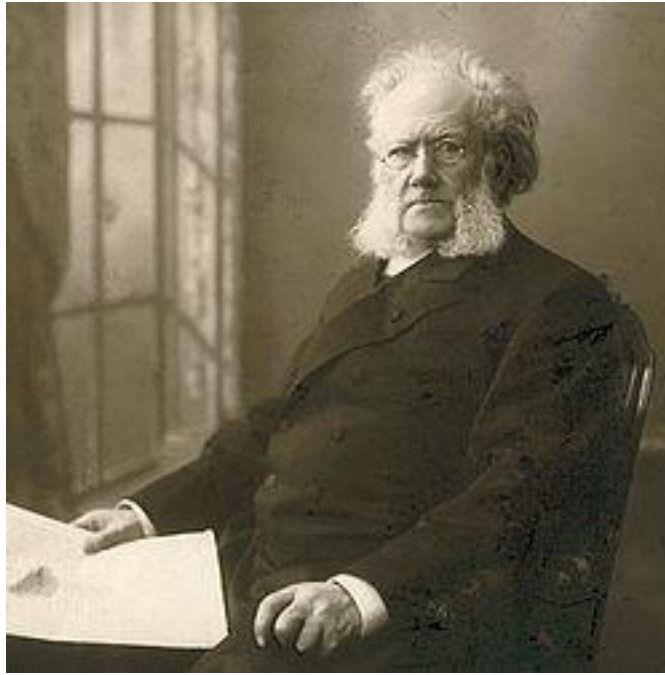
**The Impact and Relevance of *Hedda Gabler* in Modern Days**

**Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.**

## The Impact and Relevance of *Hedda Gabler* in Modern Days

Shanthi Nehemiah

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Henrik Ibsen

From Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrik\\_Ibsen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrik_Ibsen)

### Literature Mirrors Life

In many ways, literature mirrors life. It reflects, criticizes, and/or enhances life. Some literary works transcend time and become classics, relevant to all time to come. Henrik Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler* seems to reflect the life then and now. The play was first published in 1890. Hedda Gabler is a character that people can relate to in the new millennium. She is one of those characters whom we may see on television or right next door in our neighborhood. I think that Ibsen wrote this play with a futuristic vision.

The following news in *The Times of India*, for example, partly complement the theme and the course of the play. These news items relate to desperate women in desperate circumstances who enter into acts of murder, through instigating and misleading others. Hedda does this to secure her future and her luxurious living.

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These reports given below prove that Hedda is not an imaginary character and the movements of the play are not unusual, though it was originally published in 1890.

### **News from India**

News report 1 is published with the heading, **A Priest's Daughter, Now a Woman on the Run!** According to this report, Parthasarathy is an itinerant Hindu priest, who officiates as priest performing marriage ceremonies. His daughter, Sangeetha, was the youngest of his children. Sangeetha was arrested for double murder case.

Sangeetha got married four times, the latest being to Dinesh, who is also a accused in the murder case. Her first husband, Kannan, a priest residing in Sholinghur, and their marriage lasted for seven years, from 1994 to 2001. She then married Jaganathan, a casual labourer in the railways. The marriage lasted from 2002 to 2005, before she got married to Uma Shankar, who runs a private manpower agency in 2008. They got separated within a few months. Meanwhile, she attempted suicide and was admitted to a private hospital in Kancheepuram, where she met Dinesh and got married a month ago" (report by A. Selvaraj in the *Times of India*, dated January 6, 2009).

News report 2 is published with the heading, **Cops hunt for woman mastermind!** This was published in the same newspaper under the signature of the same journalist, A. Selvaraj, on January 5, 2009.

Dinesh said Sangeetha was married to Kannan of Sholinghur, with whom she lived for eight years. She then married Jaganathan of Arakkonam and stayed with him for three years. Later on, she married Uma Shankar and lived with him for six months. Two months ago, Sangeetha met Dinesh at a private hospital in Kancheepuram, where she was admitted for injuries following a suicide attempt. Sangeetha and Dinesh got married a month ago.

Dinesh said Sangeetha had planned the murders. She told Dinesh that her parents were objecting to her fourth marriage, and that she was being held captive in a relative's house in Chennai. She said Anandkrishnan's daughter, Jothi, had helped her escape and that they should now help Jothi.

"Though Anandkrishnan did not have a daughter named Jothi, Sangeetha created a imaginary daughter. She told Dinesh that if the couple were murdered, all their property would come to Jothi, which would benefit them too. She also instructed Dinesh to steal the jewellery. Dinesh engaged his friends and committed the murder," Radhakrishnan [Police Chief] said (report by A. Selvaraj in the *Times of India*, dated January 5, 2009).

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Another report (Aug 2008) in the same daily newspaper had this heading: **Wife hires killers for her husband.**

Vasu (38), owner of a hair salon in JP Nagar was also a real estate businessman. He lived with his wife Prabhavathi (30) and they had three kids. He had constructed a new house in Basaveshwaranagar. Although they were married for several years, their relationship was not going well as they used to have constant altercations.

Prabhavathi allegedly had an illicit relationship with Beeresh from Kanakapura, with whom she had planned to murder Vasu. She thought her husband was a hurdle in their relationship.

On August 17, on the pretext of purchasing a plot [of land], Prabhavathi and her lover took Vasu to the outskirts [of the city], with four others to survey the site.

On the way, they had strangled him to death using a wire. Then they dumped the body in the Shimsha river and returned to the city. Akash, a friend of Vasu and co-worker in the salon, had filed a complaint with JP Nagar police about Vasu's disappearance.

The police then tracked the accused through the mobile phone record of Vasu. Prabhavathi, Beeresh and three others were arrested immediately. But Krishna, leader of the group, is absconding and the police are searching for him.

## **1890s in India**

1890s are exciting times for India – the Indian National Congress came into being in 1885 and the Parliament of Religions of the World was held in Chicago in the year 1893, which showcased the spiritual renaissance of India, especially the Hindu religious thought, to the entire world. While Vivekananda's address to this Parliament is often remembered as its great contribution to India, in the very same Parliament, an Indian woman also spoke, signaling the emergence and the future of Indian women:

'Tell the women of America that we are fast being educated. We shall one day be able to stand by them and converse with them and be able to delight in all they delight in. And so I have a message from each one of my countrywomen...'

As Thirumalai (2005) points out, "In Miss Serabji's speech, we see anguish for the welfare and equality of Indian women, a project that would not find a focused place or attention in other speeches. This was an earthly speech in a conference of spiritual leaders, and it drew the attention

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of the audience subtly to the condition of Indian women, and their hopes and aspirations.”  
(Thirumalai 2005, <http://www.languageinindia.com/march2005/parliamentofreligions1.html>).

### **Portrayal of Women as Villains**

Portraying women as vile, villainous and bad is not something new to Indian mythology and epics. However, large scale incorporation of such themes in Indian stories, I feel, is from 19<sup>th</sup> century. One may say that *Hedda Gabbler* is one such story that has impacted literary creativity throughout the world. Women seeking freedom from tradition and pursuing their own identity and liberty, would be portrayed not simply going beyond what the society expected of them, but even as vile and immoral in their pursuits. Miss Serabji’s speech praying for the equality of Indian women, in this context, should have worked as an antidote, but creativity often refuses any bounds.

### **Henrik Ibsen**

Henrik Ibsen was scandalous in his day. "Ibsen was the best-hated artist of the nineteenth century," commented Huneker. Ibsen was also one of the most revered. Ibsen once wrote, "I prefer to ask; 'tis not my task to answer." Thus Ibsen was more for description and portrayal of what he considered to be real than for any moral teaching. It appears that Good and Evil distinction that dominates much of literary creativity was not his forte. He explores the complexities of human behavior and the ambiguities of reality.

### **This article aims at**

This article aims at the gradual exposition of the predatory nature of the characters to promote their self image. The article aims to show how Ibsen achieved this through his ability to imbue the natural and mundane objects and ordinary speech with a persistent and convincing symbolic meaning.

### ***Hedda Gabler* – one of the problem plays**

In his later works, Ibsen created a new genre of "problem" plays in which he used his characters to trace either the general moral decay of society or to pinpoint a specific problem that would ultimately lead to the downfall of a community. *Hedda Gabler* is one of these, though it has always been a subject of debate as to what exactly Ibsen is critiquing through his central character.

Ibsen himself offered a clue when he wrote to a friend, "The title of the play is *Hedda Gabler*. My intention 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. It was not really my intention to deal in this play with so-called problems. What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings,

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human emotions, and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day."

The newly-married protagonist should really be called Hedda Tesman but Ibsen allows her to retain her maiden name in order to demonstrate that she is not the chattel that a late 19th century husband had every right to expect.

### **Hedda Gabler – The Character**

This play is a very profound character study of an extra-ordinary woman. Hedda Gabler is an anti-heroine. She is a woman with strong ideals who has failed to find her way in the world. Hedda is clearly the central figure. It is fitting that the title of the play is Hedda's maiden name, Hedda Gabler, for the play is, to a large extent, about the formerly aristocratic Hedda's inability to adjust to the bourgeois life into which she has married.

Hedda is the daughter of the famous General Gabler. As a child, she was used to luxury and high-class living. As the play begins, she is returning from her honeymoon with Jurgen Tesman, a scholar with good prospects but not as much money as Hedda is accustomed to. From the moment of her first entry, it is clear that this young lady is not the carefree, happy woman that one might expect after a six-month honeymoon with a husband who has just received his doctorate. Hedda is an intelligent, unpredictable, and somewhat dishonest young woman who is not afraid to manipulate her husband and friends. She hopes that life can be beautiful, can measure up to a certain standard. She is amused by how much Tesman worries about making a living. Hedda seeks high standards of material living and is impossible to please. We see that Berte, the servant, in Act I is afraid Hedda cannot be pleased.

### **Hedda's obstinate implacable personality**

The incident involving Aunt Julle's hat provides another example of Hedda's obstinate implacable personality. Aunt Julle had decided to wear the hat especially for Hedda, but Hedda criticizes it. In the second act with Tesman still in the room, Hedda complains to Brack that she isn't happy. Brack reminds her that at least she has the house she always wanted, but Hedda replies that the house is a joke. Brack hints that soon she will have children to occupy her attention, but Hedda says she finds no happiness in things that make a claim on her freedom. Tesman's private conversations with Brack and Aunt Julle center on the cost of pleasing Hedda materially, especially on the expense of the house, but now we learn that the house basically means nothing to Hedda.

### **Hedda - the father's child**

Hedda's grating dissatisfaction arises from a conflict pitting her needs against conventional notions of politeness, modesty and female fulfillment as an adoring, dutiful, submissive wife and nurturing, loving mother. Hedda struggles violently against the conventional wife-mother role, a

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role she does not want but is mortally afraid to reject. She is unable to face or to escape the suffocating reality of marriage and motherhood. That surely is as big a factor in her self-destruction as is her fear of being held sexual hostage to the sinister Judge Brack, who threatens to expose her to scandal, of which she is at least equally terrified. Brack tells Hedda that the police will trace the pistol which was seen beside the dead body of Eilert Lovborg and that she may have to appear in court, and he knows how much she hates scandal. Hedda is horrified by the thought of being dependent upon Brack to keep the secret of the pistol's origin.

### **Implied Information**

As there is much more divulged about Hedda's past, there is also much more implied about Hedda than any other female character in the play. The influence of her motherless, father-dominated upbringing is everywhere evident. Her inheritance reveals itself in her masculine traits, her fondness for horses and pistols, for example, or her excitement over the impending contest between Eilert Lovborg and her husband George, or her interest in manipulating George into the male arena of politics.

In some ways, she seems more masculine than George, the fussy foster-child of two maiden aunts who is uninterested in politics and is afraid of Hedda's handling of her father's pistols.

To Hedda, the masculine ideal is represented by her father General Gabler. His portrait, a constant reminder of his influence, hangs in a prominent place in her inner sanctum. Under her father's tutelage, she had become a fit masculine companion for him, but not one suited for her husband, who merely bores her.

### **Similarity and Contrary to other female characters**

Hedda has no real female friends, no confidantes with whom she is either close or honest. In fact, she perceives each of the other women as an antagonist. The fact that the other women seem at peace with themselves profoundly annoys her and contributes to her mounting hysteria. The other women in *Hedda Gabler*, even those unseen, have one thing in common with Hedda. They are women who have either failed to meet the male ideal of woman as wife-mother or have rejected it, as Hedda, the least suited to the task, desire to do. They also differ from Hedda in a vitally significant way: they have made peace with themselves. And therein they represent some of the limited alternatives to what society at large viewed as a woman's primary goal — marriage and motherhood. George Tesman's two aunts are maiden aunts, Thea Elvsted has fled a brutal and loveless marriage, and Berta, having given her life over to service, remains, presumably, unattached outside the Tesman family.

Berta is another selfless woman who finds meaning and satisfaction in her service to others. In Act One, it is disclosed that she has been a loyal retainer in the Tesman family for years, and that with George's marriage to Hedda, she has come to the newlyweds' villa as servant and caretaker. Nothing is disclosed of her private life, but she speaks of "all the blessed years" that she spent

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with the Tesmans, suggesting that she has found fulfillment only in their employ and that she has had neither husband nor children. George and Juliana both treat her with affection and respect. Also, as if she were a member of the family, they confide in her, something that Hedda cannot do.

That and her overly-protective behavior towards George irk Hedda, who wants to rid the house of Berta and threatens to do so with a petty complaint about her carelessness. And indeed, when Hedda enters the room in the opening scene she immediately complains that Berte has opened the window "Oh, there the servant has gone and opened the veranda door, and let in a whole flood of sunshine." Like Juliana, Berta represents a threat to Hedda's control over George, something that she will not tolerate.

Hedda is also mean-spirited towards her husband's well-intentioned aunt, Juliana, whom she views as an insufferable busybody, an unwelcome intruder, and a possible threat to Hedda's control over George. Juliana is more than a nurse. For good or ill, she has also been a surrogate mother and father to George, as he cheerfully admits in the opening of the play. She and her sister helped shape her nephew's adult character, explaining why George utterly lacks the strong-willed and arrogant hardness of his wife. Unwittingly, they turned George into someone safe for Hedda. She can easily manipulate him, verbally beating down whatever objections the docile and compliant husband raises. Juliana, a dedicated nurse, is simply beyond the selfish Hedda's comprehension. Juliana lives only for others, but Hedda lives only for herself. From Hedda's perspective, Juliana is both a fool and a threat.

A sickly invalid, Rina is most important because she is her sister's main burden. Since Juliana is a selfless and loving person, she bears the burden with affection, dignity, and grace, all to Hedda's annoyance. To Hedda, Rina's death only means that Juliana may become a more frequent and trouble-some visitor, even though Juliana confides to both Hedda and George that she plans to devote herself to caring for some other sickly person. She tells them that "it's such an absolute necessity for me to have one to live for."

Hedda's most troubling female adversary is, of course, Mrs. Elvsted. Towards Thea Elvsted, she feigns a friendship, and she quickly betrays what trust Thea places in her. She does not stand in Hedda's way of controlling George; she stands in Hedda's way of a greater challenge, controlling Eilert Lovborg. Hedda's frightful dislike of Thea is mixed with intense jealousy. It goads her that someone who seems like such a simpleton has been able to redeem Lovborg from his recklessness and inspire his work. Thea, for all her experience, acts like an innocent compared to Hedda. She is gullible and vulnerable, easily duped by Hedda into believing that Hedda is her friend. She does not sense Hedda's spite and is both surprised and hurt when Hedda betrays her confidence.

### **Hedda's control over the male characters**

The male characters are more or less in love with Hedda, perhaps because of her almost decadent sense of beauty. Brack wants to establish a private relationship with her, parallel to her relationship with Tesman, and Ejlert dearly hopes that she shares his "passion for life." She finds

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both of these ideas silly, openly rejecting Ejlert's notion and teasing Brack by saying that he wants to be "the cock of the walk." Because of this popularity, she is the most powerful character. She seems to enjoy semi-adulterous relationships with men not because she admires the men but because she wants to control them. She toys with others because she can find no solace or entertainment in life. A key method in controlling Brack and Ejlert, apparently, is to make them think that she wants to keep them in her confidence without letting Tesman know.

Aunt Juliana's final appearance in the play is intensely ironic. At the beginning of the play, when Aunt Juliana first visited, the room was bright with morning—but Hedda immediately said that it was too bright and closed the window. Now, largely because of Hedda's actions, her cold treatment of others, her encouragement of Ejlert in his suicide, her burning of the manuscript- the room has been "darkened" in a symbolic sense, while also becoming literally dark with the fall of evening and the donning of the black clothes of mourning. Aunt Juliana 's cheerful suggestions that Hedda might be pregnant seem wildly naive in light of all that has transpired.

### **Hedda torn between the "wild" self and community's norms**

One of the more compelling themes in *Hedda Gabler* involves how an individual is groomed to cope with the stifling pressures of society, and whether they maintain the trappings of their "wild" self or succumb completely to a community's norms. Hedda is obviously torn between the two - Individual and Group, but right before shooting herself, she plays a "wild piano piece", as if to claim her soul before burying it.

Hedda is preoccupied with self-determination - the idea that she can dictate the course of her own life, no matter how many societal pressures may try to move her along a different course. And yet, as the play moves on, we see just how much a victim Hedda is of the "group": she married a man she didn't love simply because her "time ran out"; will have children simply because she is supposed to; and ultimately destroys herself because she fears being thrust into the spotlight of a public scandal. What Hedda discovers is that an individual has no power in the face of a group unless they can manipulate that group - something which she continually fails to do.

Hedda believes that the power to determine when and how one dies is the ultimate freedom, and is perhaps the only real control that an individual has in life. At first, she attempts to prove this vicariously by encouraging Lovborg to have a "beautiful death" - she gives him one of her pistols, essentially pulling all the strings that might make him veer towards suicide. Indeed, Hedda's power is so far-reaching that her own self-destruction leads almost inevitably to the destruction of the other characters' lives.

However, when Lovborg dies from an unintended shot to the groin, Hedda realizes that the beautiful death is still a fantasy - and she can only bring it to life for herself. She wants to demonstrate what a beautiful death is. She commits suicide in the belief that there is no escape from a disappointing life. The events of the act have been hinted at throughout the play, beginning with the end of Act 1 when Hedda goes to play with her pistols out of boredom; once again, she

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has turned to her pistols to alleviate her world-weariness and sense of tedium. Her tragedy lies not only in her own suicide but in her desire that Ejler should have a "beautiful" suicide. When she commits suicide Brack exclaims that "No one does that!"

## **Conclusion**

Literature written from any part of the world makes its readers feel that it is in some sense 'real.' Literature describes an emotion or feeling which, even if one does not actually feel it, one recognizes it in the circumstances that one might come across.

The detailed study of the character of Hedda brings to the light the hidden, suppressed nature of humanity. The varied facets of Hedda's traits can be seen in the society as it is evident from the above news items. Literature does, in fact, 'hold the mirror up to the nature' to use Hamlet's phrase. And yet, excessive claims of reality and frequency with which women are portrayed as evil in Indian movies and TV serials need to be surely condemned. Often for no purpose such portrayals are indulged in. But, then, this is a theme that I'd like to visit another time.

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