

# Psychological Motivations of Hedda Gabler

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Manipulating and controlling everyone around her, Hedda Gabler is an unlikeable character but this doesn't mean she can't be a sympathetic or understandable one. When first introduced to Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, a reader or audience member can have difficulty understanding Hedda's motivations for her behavior. Examining Hedda's role in society, her relationships with the few people in her life, her psychological pain and her final situation and given circumstances make her motivations and actions that lead to Løvborg's death and her suicide logical.

At first glance Hedda's manipulative behavior can seem evil as she uses words as weapons, cunningly insulting and offending her husband's Aunt Julie while still remaining on the edge of propriety. She claims friendship with Thea only to wring information out of her. She destroys the relationship between Løvborg and Thea in order to gain control over Løvborg. She shows no patience for Tesman, promises Brack a sort of 'triangular relationship,' and gives a gun to Løvborg, the only person she seems to have cared about, encouraging him to commit suicide. Without looking further into her character, it is easy to write Hedda off as simply cruel.

The myth of the femme fatale: what might be described as Hedda's "evil," manipulative behavior- everything from giving Løvborg a gun to hurting Aunt Julie's feelings about her hat- has been far more provocative, and compelling, than her pain. Gender prejudice: controlling women do not suffer, they make others suffer, is a judgment commonly held. (Norseng 10)

It is a simple thing to pick and choose aspects of Hedda with which to define her, but all of her must be taken into consideration before passing judgment. Many early and Freudian readings look at the sexual and romantic behavior of Hedda, or the lack

thereof. Some psychological interpretations claim that Hedda is afraid of sex and would be improved by loving and giving herself to a man. These schools of thought don't observe Hedda as an intelligent, thinking woman, and "to claim that Hedda is a defective or neurotic woman because she loves none of the men in the play is to assume that simply because they are there, she ought to love one of them; it is to ignore her own feelings about them, as though she has no rights in the matter" (Templeton 211). Hedda should be allowed to choose who she loves, just as the men in the play are allowed. Taking the context of their aristocratic marriage into account, Hedda should not be expected to have sexual feelings for her husband. She clearly explains to Brack that she had no other options and married Tesman out of convenience. She tells him "I had danced myself tired, my dear Judge- and I wasn't getting any younger" (Ibsen 112). Tesman promised her the life of comfort that she expected to have and she married him to get it. Her disgust at any hint of intimacy between the two of them is completely understandable, as she has never been physically attracted to him. Both Tesman and Brack treat her as an object and don't seem to truly care for her. Brack is only interested in her now that she is not available, while Tesman and his Aunt speak of Hedda in terms of a prize that he won or a feat that he accomplished instead of a person that he loves. If Tesman doesn't truly love Hedda, she should not be required to love him.

Hedda was shaped by her role as a lady in society. She outwardly conforms to social expectations and carefully crafts an external persona to present to the world. She is attractive, quick witted, good at controlling and directing conversation, and has many of the talents expected of a young bride, such as playing the piano and

being a hostess. The thought of scandal is abhorrent to her, which she admits to

Løvborg:

Hedda: I have such a fear of scandal.

Løvborg: Yes, Hedda, you are a coward at heart.

Hedda: A terrible coward. (Ibsen 137)

Brack later confronts her with this fear, reminding her that if she was discovered as the owner of the pistol Løvborg shot himself with, she would be dragged into the court case. This thought is abhorrent to her, and forces her to be under his power, but the thought of being under someone's power is just as repugnant, which leads to her suicide. While it is easy for Hedda to wear a brave face in the world she knows, she fears stepping outside of that world. Though Hedda has continually pushed the boundaries of that world by becoming dangerously close to Løvborg in her youth, enjoying more masculine hobbies, and walking a dangerous line in her battle of wits with Brack, she never allows herself to go too far. She knows that her world prizes her name and reputation second only to wealth, and will not jeopardize her social standing. Societal expectations have shaped Hedda, and "the sense of *noblesse oblige* which, in spite of her lack of nobility in the simple things of life, is yet a strong factor in much of her behavior" (Le Gallienne, 8). A constant reminder of the noble world she was born into and her societal obligations, her father, General Gabler, looks out at her from his portrait throughout the play. To survive in her upper-class world, Hedda has finely crafted her external appearance to show everything that a lady of her station should be. She is able to take full advantage of her limited resources. All she really controls is her appearance, her words and her body language, but that is all she needs to maintain her power in her immediate world. Everything from her

outward demeanor to the garments in her closet has been carefully constructed to present an image. Le Gallienne, who has frequently played the role, came to the following conclusion:

Hedda would choose her clothes carefully and with a subtle art. They would be quite definitely 'her own', for she is in everything an individualist while never going beyond the bounds of good taste and refinement. She is enormously aware of the impression she creates, very self-conscious always, and exquisite. (Le Gallienne 10)

Hedda seems very aware of the image of a lady that she presents to the world and, as she is almost constantly with others onstage, there are very few times that she allows that image to lapse. Hedda rarely speaks without other people around, and even in the presence of others she always keeps it brief. Ibsen has not given her any monologues, which would have given readers and audience members alike a chance to see a deeper side of Hedda.

To understand why Hedda organized Løvborg's destruction, their relationship must be examined. She has commonly been read as a woman who is afraid of sex or not sexual. One can take argument with that, however, by looking at her relationship with Løvborg. "While the violence with which she ended their relation suggests the force of her desire, Hedda has too much self-respect to become Løvborg's woman" (Templeton 222). The description of their comradeship and passion of their parting shows a sexual energy. She chooses not to act on it, but this is not as much out of fear of sex as it is fear of scandal. Hedda knows she cannot be what she and others expect her to be if she yields to him. It has been argued that if Hedda had given in to Løvborg she would have been happy or would have become a more complete woman, but if she had married Løvborg neither of those things would have been

possible. “The fascination of his complex, demonic personality, had spoiled her for more ordinary men, and yet her conventional nature told her that such a match would be disastrous to her welfare, even had it been possible to win General Gabler’s consent” (Le Gallienne 29). Unlike Thea, Hedda is not a natural caretaker. She would never be content giving up so many aspects of her life to nurse and guide an alcoholic husband. She has a fantasy of Løvborg with “vine leaves in his hair. Flushed and fearless” (Ibsen 147), but the reality of his bacchanalian tendencies would cause Hedda misery, not joy.

Hedda’s motivation to give a gun to Løvborg, enabling his death, and then commit suicide herself becomes more understandable when Hedda’s desire for control is taken into consideration. Hedda wants to control and manipulate Løvborg and “her egotistical nature would have had him forever crushed and lost, since he could not have her. In fact, it is she who has been frustrated and lost through not having dared accept his love, through not having had the courage to really live” (Le Gallienne 21). When she meets Løvborg again she does everything in her power to regain her control of him. Aware of his drinking problem, Hedda offers him punch but Løvborg refuses, even when she insists.

Hedda: *[Looks at him intently.]* But if I want you to.

Løvborg: It makes no difference.

Hedda: *[Laughs.]* Poor me! Have I no power over you at all, then?

Løvborg: Not in that respect. (Ibsen 141)

When confronted with this denial, she turns it to Thea, telling her that she had nothing to worry about where Løvborg is concerned, and her anxiety was unfounded. This is news to Løvborg and he becomes upset with Thea’s lack of trust,

causing him to drink in front of her, as if to punish her. Hedda steps in to stop him after his second glass, reminding him that he plans to go out with the other men, and with that she is in control once more. Even though she cannot allow herself to be with him, she cannot stand to let anyone else have a hold over him. Regaining her control set him on the path to self-destruction, and the only way for her to keep her power is by continuing to shepherd him down the path. Hedda's destruction of his manuscript causes a final rift between Løvborg and Thea, leaving Hedda as the only woman in his life. He comments that she is the only one he can be honest with. As a final act of guidance and control, she gives him her pistol as a token to remember her, guiding him towards his death. As a married woman, there is no way she and Løvborg could be together, and being together doesn't seem like something either party could actually bring themselves to do.

To those who have not seriously considered self-harm, the reasons behind Hedda's eventual suicide can be hard to decipher. In *Suicide And Ibsen's Hedda Gabler*, Norseg notes that, "ultimately authorities on suicide return to psychological pain as 'the basic ingredient.'" A closer look at Hedda can reveal this psychological pain. In her few moments of solitude, Ibsen's stage directions give her a desperate energy. The audience is given a glimpse of another side of Hedda, because "we never once during the play see her lose control when there are other people in the room. Only when she is alone do we penetrate deeply into her inner hell. Her restlessness of spirit is revealed only in a matching restlessness of movement" (Le Gallienne 14). Hedda is trapped and confined by restrictions placed on her by both society and herself. Her need to marry led her to Tesman, a man she cannot stand, for the rest of

her life. A fear of scandal and need to protect her reputation made her reject Løvborg. She is not allowing herself to be who she truly is and wants to be; she is an aristocrat as the aristocracy begins to decline. There is no question that her home and living conditions with Tesman are less than she became used to while living with her father, although they are better than the conditions she was left in after his death. The reality of her situation will not allow her to keep an open house in the way she would like, which would at least keep her busy. She and Tesman do not have the resources for her to push him into politics, and Hedda blanches at having traditional role of mother fill her time. Hedda is occupied by more masculine, independent activities, like riding horses and shooting pistols. While she is careful to show a meticulously crafted noble exterior, she possesses of strength of mind, body and will that are atypical of the gentler sex and more typical of a man. Hedda seems to be completely on her own. She cannot stand Tesman. She confides in Brack, but still keeps him at arms length. "Beyond the frame of the lonely daughter, every cameo of Hedda in the past is of someone existentially alone, isolated from the rest, be she taunting Thea, riding her horse, or walking home with a man who bored her" (Norseng 17). None of these traits belong the world surrounding her, instead they point out ways she doesn't fit. Looking at the pain Hedda feels, the steps leading to her suicide fall into place.

Before she kills herself, her circumstances are closing in on her, as Løvborg's death isn't what she expected, Tesman has rejected her and Brack has turned to blackmail. Throughout the play she frequently engages in battles of wits with Brack; all of their conversations resemble a fencing match. Her mastery of language allows



her to walk the fine line between domestic and destruction. She flirts with him, allowing him to push the boundaries of civility and even hinting at impropriety herself, but correcting the conversation before it can go too far. She asserts her power over the situation, not allowing Brack to hint at Tesman's foolishness. Hedda holds her own in these exchanges until Brack brings her the threat of scandal connected with her pistol. He corrects the story of Løvborg's death, destroying Hedda's idea of Løvborg's perfect death. When first hearing the news of Løvborg's death, it gives Hedda hope. She even speaks out loud to the horrified group, exclaiming "I say, there is beauty in this" (Ibsen 189). She revels in his perfect death, which is something she wants for herself. "But through her pistol she has privately participated in Løvborg's great deed, and he has freed her, symbolically, along with himself" (Templeton 226). Brack destroys this ideal by telling her the truth of what happened. The shining act that Hedda had planned to depend on is suddenly turned to dust, leaving her with nothing to look to. Between Brack's revelation of Løvborg's death and his knowledge of the pistol, he gains power over both the situation and Hedda herself for the first time- something Hedda cannot have. He assures her of his secrecy and tells her that he looks forward to all the time they will have together, implying that he may take advantage of her. In Hedda's last moments, Brack has begun to blackmail her, Thea and Tesman have sat down to work together, and Tesman has assured Hedda she is not needed. Hedda has no obvious course of happiness, or even contentment. Instead she can see a future filled with having to please Brack, deal with Thea as a new presence in her life, and continue to manage Tesman and his overbearing Aunt.

Appearing cruel and calculating, Hedda was raised in a world where a good reputation came before personal happiness and does not know how to be both happy and refined. She has an inner monologue of pain and a yearning for a beautiful ideal that is at war with how she has allowed her social situation to dictate her life. She is driven by a need for control that she grasps at by her manipulation of others, which she attempts to achieve by her management of Tesman and his family, her calculated flirtations with Brack. Her power is finally demonstrated when she regains her hold over Løvborg, concluding with her encouragement Løvborg to take his life and her own suicide.

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