

Suicide and Social Freedom: Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*

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Abstract:

This article investigates the protagonist's somewhat ambiguous suicide in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890). In this play, suicide is used a device for achieving freedom from social restrictions. Ibsen depicts the eponymous character as out of synch with the mindless strictures of her social situation and who uses suicide as a device to break through the frozen surface of her world. Hedda's suicide foregrounds a significant tension between individual freedom and social responsibility.

Keywords: suicide, *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen, freedom

From its earliest reviews, many critical appraisals of *Hedda Gabler* failed to come to terms with the protagonist. Approaching the play as a pinnacle of Realism (as most still do), they were unable to make sense of how a character like Hedda could exist. As a result, her character was almost unanimously rejected. For example, Oswald Crawford, in England's *Fortnightly Review* regarded Hedda as an "impossible" woman (Crawford 1891, 737-738). The *New York Times* reviewer of the first American production believed that Ibsen must have intended Hedda as a pathological case like those "in the pages of the *Journal of Mental Science*."¹ John Lahr reports that "August Strindberg, who saw himself as the model for Eilert Løvborg... spat spiders at the play and its author, whom he called 'a decrepit old troll' and that, after attending a rehearsal of the play at the Moscow Art Theater in 1899, Anton Chekhov exclaimed, "Look here, Ibsen is not a playwright." (Lahr 2009, 110-112)

Recent critics have taken similar attitudes. Jens Arup writes that "every utterance and every action is packed with meaning in its application to the situation of the play itself", but that Ibsen did not provide a "set of categories" with which to judge Hedda as a character. Perhaps, most notable of all, Arup saw the play as "too realistic to have any meaning whatsoever" (Arup 1957, 7). Muriel Bradbrook makes a similar point: Hedda is "a study in a vacuum" and the spectator is given "no frame, no comment" to judge her (Bradbrook 1966, 117). Finally, Weigand comments that this "coldest, most impersonal" drama is, in the end, "simply a spectacle of life from which we retire with shock" (Weigand 1925, 242; 244).

These comments illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding of Ibsen and the whole of his dramatic project, *Hedda Gabler* in particular. To approach *Hedda Gabler* simply as an exemplar of Realism is to overlook one of the most significant aspects of the play. In fact, Ibsen is not concerned with realism at all; rather, he creates in *Hedda Gabler* – its setting and even its character – a larger than life, even grotesque quality which acts as a projection of his own inner violent energy. Hedda Gabler herself is not a realistic character but a tool through which Ibsen expresses the violent energy percolating below and irrupting through a staid, repressive, social surface. As Ibsen writes in his commentary to the play, it is “about the ‘insuperable’, the aspiration to and striving after something which goes against convention...” (*The Oxford Ibsen* 1966, 481). Hedda is the device through which this aspiration and striving occurs.

Rilke, in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, has a most remarkable insight about Ibsen’s *oeuvre* – one that can be applied directly to *Hedda Gabler*. Rilke writes that Ibsen “struggled with the unparalleled violence of [his] work” and sought dramatic means for the outward expression of this violence. In *Hedda Gabler* Ibsen utilizes at least two significant devices to express this phenomenon: the grotesquely exaggerated stage setting and Hedda Gabler herself – a social misfit who maintains a peculiar distance from her tightly restricted environment but whose underlying violent energy frequently irrupts through its staid surface. Errol Durbach writes:

Her desperate need to break free of her repressions finds expression in acts of violence and fantasies of destruction: the threat of setting fire to the hair of her rival for Lovborg’s soul, her demonic ripping and burning of their ‘child’, her firing of pistols at moments of terrible tension, her bursts of wild dance music on the piano. (Durbach 1982, 41)

Noticeably absent from Durbach’s list is Hedda’s suicide – the play’s most extreme and most significant irruption of violence. Like all Hedda’s irrational, impulsive behavior, her suicide occurs without introspection, and Ibsen’s presentation of the act is fraught with ambiguity. While Hedda undoubtedly achieves release from the repressive world of convention, Ibsen ultimately suggests that the cost of this freedom is far too great.

Rilke’s insight into Ibsen’s construction of a grotesque, larger than life drama is notable since it provides a counterpoint to the conventional view of Ibsen as a dramatist steeped in nineteenth-century realism. Moreover, it allows one to appreciate the ways in which Ibsen’s violent interior state is projected on to the outer world. In the following, Rilke comments on Ibsen’s other plays, but *Hedda Gabler* fits the pattern perfectly:

There was a rabbit, an attic, a hall in which someone passes up and down. There was the tinkle of glasses in the adjoining room, a fire outside the windows, there was the sun. There was a church and a rocky valley that was like a church. But that wasn’t enough; finally towers had to be brought in and whole mountain ranges, and avalanches that bury landscapes: inundated stages overloaded with graspable things for the sake of the ungraspable. (Rilke 2008, 61)

It might be understandable why critics have treated the play as a realistic case study. Playwrights who are commonly regarded to have favored realism (and Ibsen is virtually always cited as a key figure) rejected the concept of the well-made play with its mechanical artifices and strict plotting. While this is also true of Ibsen, it must be pointed out that he did not conform to another important criterion of realist drama – the rejection of exaggerated theatrics. Ibsen's stage directions in *Hedda Gabler* are as exaggerated as they are precise; they dictate the placement and appearance of each object in exhaustive, larger-than-life detail. The stage directions for Act One are a case in point. The profusion of objects conveys a monstrous overabundance: "All around the reception room there are numerous branches of flowers arranged in cases and glasses. More lie on the tables. The floors of both rooms are covered with thick carpets." (167)² A sense of heaviness and profusion pulsates against the calm, cold surface. This is even carried into Ibsen's exaggerated character descriptions, such as that of Judge Brack who, as a personification of social convention, is described as "stocky, but-well built and elastic in his movements... his face roundish, with a good profile" (192). Thea Elvsted with her "large, round, and somewhat protruding eyes" (181) conveys a similar sense of the grotesque. These visible details connect to the inwardly ungraspable, an energy whose power can only be detected through its subtle (and not so subtle) outward manifestations.

Indeed, Hedda Gabler herself is Ibsen's primary device for the outward manifestation of this violence. Joan Templeton points out that Hedda's volatile character may be the zenith of two Ibsen patterns, the strong-minded "unwomanly" woman whose prototype is Furia in *Cataline*, and the frustrated wife in a marriage of convenience, whose prototype is Margit of *The Feast at Solhoug*. According to Templeton, the two patterns merge in *The Viking of Helgeland's* protagonist Hjørdis – "an eagle in a cage... a Brynhild shut up in a parlor" – with whom Hedda is often compared (Templeton 1997, 224).

Ibsen creates in Hedda an otherworldly creature with a dangerous force brewing inside her. Indeed, the use of "creature" to describe Hedda is not an overstatement: she is a social misfit, completely out of touch with the world around her. Ibsen emphasizes this by presenting two of the most incompatible characters in Ibsen's entire *oeuvre*. It takes only a few minutes for the extent of that incompatibility to become clear. At first, there is the sense of pleasant satisfaction: Jörgen Tesman has every prospect of becoming a university professor; he has apparently triumphed over his previous rival Eilert Lövborg, has bought his dream house, and has recently returned with his bride from their honeymoon. However, from the very beginning of the scene there are clear indications marking the tension between Hedda and the world she inhabits: Berthe worries that she won't suit her "ever so particular" new mistress (168), and there is unease about money due to the extravagance of the honeymoon and the expense of appeasing a lady of aristocratic background.

Ibsen's stage directions also emphasize the physical distance between Hedda and her surroundings. The first impression of the drawing room itself is one of contrast between a dark, artificial interior, and a bright (though autumnal) exterior. Hedda's complexion is described in terms

similar to those used for the lampshade in the inner room: the lamp is “mat, mælkefarvet”, “dull, milk-colored” and Hedda’s complexion is of a “mat bleghed”, a “dull pallor” (175). Even before she appears, she is assigned a distinct place in relation to the interior: in the centre of the wall of the inner room hangs the portrait of General Gabler, one of the only three objects Hedda inherits and brings to the Tesman home.³ The portrait suggests Hedda’s misplacement – an indication of her past affiliation with the aristocracy that points toward her incompatibility with her new environment. Moreover, the entire house is a relic of the past. Hedda points out that the house has an old maids’ aroma of lavender and potpourri, which Judge Brack says is the scent of its previous owner, Lady Falk, the widow of a cabinet minister now consigned to history. Hedda’s disgust at the household is palpable. One senses that it is only a matter of time before she is no longer able to endure its claustrophobic dustiness.

Hedda’s physical appearance suggests aloofness.⁴ Her eyes are described as “steel grey, and cold, clear, and dispassionate” (175). Miss Tesman remembers her riding along with the General in a long black habit with a feather in her hat. Her distinction is reinforced further by her refusal to bring herself to use the familiar form of address (“du”) to Miss Tesman (Jörgen Tesman’s aunt). She addresses her husband by his surname (except when she needs to appeal to his affection in order to manipulate him). Moreover, while Hedda is linked to the interior of the Tesman home by means of her cold detachment, the first three characters to appear – Jörgen Tesman, Miss Tesman, and Berthe – are together connected to the exterior. In fact, in a letter written on January 14, 1891, Ibsen remarks:

Jörgen Tesman, his old aunts and their faithful servant Berte, together form a picture of complete and indissoluble unity. They have a common mode of thought, common memories, a common outlook on life. For Hedda, they represent a power hostile and contrary to her fundamental nature. And so they must represent a mutual harmony in presentation. (505)

Hedda’s third statement in the play reinforces her connection to the interior: “Ugh... the maid’s been and opened the veranda door. The place is flooded with sunlight” (176). The aversion to the sun sums up the division between the two parties. Hedda dislikes the direct impact of the outer world and does whatever she can to separate herself from it in order to move closer to an interior world distinctly her own. In addition, Hedda’s reaction to Miss Tesman’s hat illustrates her shameless demand to be set apart: she acts as if she thinks the aunt’s hat belongs to Berte, although both women know that this is impossible.

While Hedda remains aloof, her violent energy frequently breaks through the surface. For example, when Judge Brack presses her to explain why she behaved so rudely to Aunt Juliane, Hedda flings herself down in a chair near the stove and openly admits that she is unable to control or even to understand her own actions: “these things just suddenly come over me. And then I can’t resist

them. Oh, I don't know myself how to explain it" (206). One is also reminded that right after Hedda had insulted Aunt Juliane she "walks about the room, raises her arms and clenches her fists as though in a frenzy" (179). She flings back the curtains and stares through the glass doors of her prison. "Calm and collected", she insinuates her misery to Tesman: "I'm just looking at the leaves on the trees. They're so yellow. And so withered" (179). Hedda's hesitancy about stating that the actual month reveals her dread of those months to come. Templeton remarks that Hedda is "trapped for life in the stultifying world of the Tesmans, pregnant by a boy/man [who is] entranced by his slippers" (Templeton 214).

In another example, during Hedda's conversation with Mrs. Elvsted, the latter reveals that Hedda used to pull her hair and that she once threatened to burn it off. While some might see Thea Elvsted's hair as a manifestation of her femininity and a symbol of those female instincts which Hedda either does not possess or refuses to acknowledge, it is more likely that the image of Thea's hair on fire is attractive to Hedda because it is the most violent one she can imagine. Hedda's preoccupation with fire and burning is yet another outward manifestation of her inner volcanism. Ibsen reinforces this through stage directions that often place her in close proximity to the stove in the drawing room of the Tesman home. There is the suggestion of pyromania triggered whenever Hedda is confronted with reminders that her life is circumscribed by convention, and it is not long before Hedda's violent energy becomes much more dangerous. At the end of Act One, for example, when she learns that Tesman is unable to provide her with the social life she was promised, Hedda replies that she has only one thing left she can use to pass the time:

TESMAN [*ecstatic*]. Oh, thank the good Lord for that!

And what might that be, Hedda, Eh?

HEDDA [*at the centre doorway, looking at him with concealed contempt*]. My pistols . . . Jörgen.

TESMAN [*alarmed*]. Pistols!

HEDDA [*with cold eyes*]. General Gabler's pistols. (198)

Clearly, her husband does not understand this violent energy. From his perspective – as from the perspective of virtually all Ibsen's characters (including Hedda herself) – it arises mysteriously and unpredictably. Eilert Lövborg, however, has had some previous experience with it and is, therefore, at least aware of its existence. When Hedda and Lovborg sit in the drawing room while Tesman and Judge Brack chat, drink, and smoke in the inner room, she and Lövborg discuss past conversations that had taken place at General Gabler's home, in which – responding to Hedda's "indirect" questioning – Lovborg came clean about his licentious behavior:

LÖVBORG. Yes, Hedda. . . and then when I used to confess to you... Told you things about myself that none of the others knew at that time. Sat there and admired that I'd been out on the razzle for whole days and nights. For days on end. Oh, Hedda... what power was it in you that forced me to reveal all those things?

HEDDA. Do you think it was a power in me?

LÖVBORG. Well, how else can I explain it? And all those...

those roundabout questions you put to me...

HEDDA. And which you were so quick to understand...

LÖVBORG. That you could sit and ask like that! Quite confidently!

HEDDA. Roundabout questions, if you please...

LÖVBORG. Yes, but confidently all the same. Cross-examine me... about all those things!

HEDDA. And that you could answer, Mr. Lövborg.

There are at least two points worth noting here: first, Lövborg was susceptible to Hedda's "power" to pose "roundabout" questions, even if neither character was able to explain the nature or source of this energy. However, Hedda's use of circumlocutory speech suggests that she circumvented the potentially devastating force of her violent energy by avoiding direct contact with it. Perhaps this may be because Hedda herself – to the extent that she has *any* awareness of what lies within her – somehow sensed the power of her own interior state. Second, and more importantly, her interest in him was seemingly motivated by her desire to act as Lovborg did at the time – unscrupulously, irrationally, and excessively – in a world "that she isn't supposed to know anything about" wherein one is "out on the razzle for whole days and nights" (218-219). Hedda is caught in conventional limitations on her liberty, and sought the release of her violent energy by indulging vicariously in this world, but, ultimately lacking the confidence to do so, became fearful that "the game would become a reality" (219). As Ibsen writes in his commentary to the play, "Lövborg leans over towards 'Bohemianism.' Hedda is drawn in the same direction, but doesn't take the plunge." (*The Oxford Ibsen* 1966, 482). Once again Hedda demonstrates her erratic, unpredictable conduct motivated by the shifting volcanic magma within her. John Lahr notes that "Hedda's contradictory desires both compel and her concealed from her... foreshadowing Freud's notion of the unconscious" (110). Indeed, Freud is said to have learned Norwegian in order to read Ibsen's work.

Ultimately, Hedda's impulse not to join Lövborg interceded; the latter eventually sought refuge and a new partner in Thea Elvsted. Lövborg admits that he and Thea now trust each other completely and talk in full confidence, and Hedda begins to see that Mrs. Elvsted has a control over Eilert that she never had. She perceives Lövborg's adoption of Thea's values as a narrow-minded limitation of his engagement in life, a limitation that corrupts her idealized image of what he once was (and of what he might still become). While he once shared a bond with Hedda, Tesman has now been "rehabilitated." Thea's major achievement, then, has been to convert the Bohemian into a respectable academic, stifling his vitality in the process (Durbach 45).⁵ Having earned Mrs. Elvsted's confidence in Act One, Hedda now believes she has the confidence to set Lövborg against her, inducing him to relapse into drinking after two years of sobriety.

On the spot and without any warning to Mrs. Elvsted (or the spectator or the reader) Hedda conceives of a fantasy in which Eilert's reintroduction into a world of drunken energy will result in

his returning from Brack's party with "vine leaves in his hair" – ecstatic, unrestrained energy made manifest. Thea reacts with bland affirmation:

HEDDA. Ten o'clock... and back he'll come. I can just see him. With vine leaves in his hair, Flushed and confident...

MRS. ELVSTED. Yes, oh I do so hope it's like that.

Understandably, Thea is unable to make sense of Hedda's vision, nor its motivation; all that matters to her is that Lövborg returns sober and at a decent hour. At first, she even construes Hedda's fantasy as consistent with her own wishes. Just a few lines later, however, Hedda's volatility prompts Thea to realize that this is not the case: with no obvious provocation, Hedda "passionately grips" Thea in her arms and states that she "*thinks* she will burn" her hair off [my emphasis]. As always, Hedda acts tentatively, impulsively, without warning or introspection. With regard to Hedda's "condition", Ibsen writes, "Can't understand it. Ridiculous! Ridiculous!" (Archer 483).

Thea Elvsted is not alone in her inability to understand the reference to Eilert returning with vine leaves in his hair. In fact, no one (including Hedda herself) understands it, Judge Brack least of all: ("HEDDA: He didn't have vine leaves in his hair. BRACK: Vine leaves, my lady?" (238)). Ibsen makes Brack's incomprehension more explicit than any other characters: he is the personification of convention, of a legalistic, conformist, repressive world. Nevertheless, the reader recalls that grape leaves are a traditional symbol of rejoicing, of allowing one's desires rather than convention to be the arbiter of behavior.⁶ In her irrational fantasy, Hedda invests Eilert with the iconographic attribute of Dionysus and tempts him to a bacchanalian communion through drink, sending him off to Judge Brack's stag party. Although Ibsen treats the image ambiguously, it undoubtedly suggests frenzied, irrational energy. Errol Durbach confirms this, writing that the image conveys "a sensation of ecstatic release like a pistol fired in the soul, a burst of light, an epiphany of beauty" (Durbach 40). She speaks ecstatically of her fantasy of controlling Lövborg and becomes at least momentarily connected to the idea of his becoming a "free man" – a man free from social convention – through an outpouring of violent energy. One might reasonably imagine that Hedda also yearns for something like this freedom, although, rationally speaking, her connection to the fantasy remains unclear. When it fails to actualize, Hedda's violent energy is redirected toward another mysterious goal – the "beautiful" suicide of Eilert Lovborg.

The details of Eilert's suicide are reminiscent of Werther's. Indeed, Charles Lyons points out several inescapable similarities (Lyons 88). There is the ritualized, ceremonial aspect, the return to the town, and the use of the pistols borrowed from his love-interest. According to Lyons, all this suggests that Ibsen uses details from Werther "to shape Hedda's sense of the potentially aesthetic nature of Eilert's act (89)." Undoubtedly, both suicides share an aesthetic dimension, yet Hedda's constantly shifting fantasy life makes it impossible to capture its precise significance – assuming there is any significance at all:

LÖVBORG: Just put an end to it all. The sooner the better.

HEDDA: (*takes a step closer to him*) Eilert Lövborg... listen to me... Could you let it happen... beautifully?

LÖVBORG: Beautifully? [*Smiles.*] Crowned with vine leaves, as you used to imagine?

HEDDA: Oh no. I don't believe in those vine leaves anymore. But beautifully all the same! Just for this once!... Goodbye.

You must go now. And never come home again. (246)

Perhaps one might recognize something like an Apollonian impulse emerging. The Apollonian has manifested itself in various restrictive forms throughout the play so far (most conspicuously through an environment of restrictive morality and gender differentiation, the latter of which is made clear by General Gabler's brooding presence). Inexplicably, this seems to have become the means through which Hedda imagines the successful expression of violent energy after the failure of her Dionysian fantasy. Like the latter fantasy, however, the dream of the Apollonian is irrational. It makes no real sense why Hedda has shifted her focus from Dionysian frenzy to Apollonian noble order embodied by Eilert's "beautiful" death – a self-inflicted bullet to the head.

By Act Four, the violent tension has grown to such a degree that it can hardly be contained. Hedda paces in a near-frenzied state, intermittently playing piano chords heard from the background. When Brack returns to report the news of Lövborg's fatal wound, Hedda, believing that his suicide was successful, announces: "At last... a really courageous act!... Eilert Lövborg... Eilert Lövborg has settled accounts with himself. He must have done what he did in a fit of madness." (256) Furthermore, because Eilert used her pistol, Hedda feels that she has participated in his death and that she has managed to bring about an irruption of irrational energy – one that results incontrovertibly in a "release":

HEDDA [*softly*]. Ah, Mr. Brack... what a sense of release it gives, this affair of Eilert Lövborg.

BRACK. Release, my lady? Well, of course, for him it's a release.

HEDDA. I mean, for me. It's a liberation to know that an act of spontaneous courage is yet possible in this world. An act that has something of an unconditional beauty. (258)

Judge Brack's description of the true circumstances of the shooting disabuses Hedda of any "beauty" related to his death. It quickly surfaces that Eilert was shot neither in the head nor in the heart, but in the abdomen, accidentally rather than intentionally.⁷ Although one can never be sure of Hedda's thinking, it seems that she regards suicide (especially through a gunshot to the head) as the most violent irruption – one that results in the absolute freedom of the individual from social repression. However, Ibsen, via Judge Brack, suggests that this is an illusion:

BRACK. It pains me, my lady... but I am compelled to disabuse you of a beautiful illusion.

HEDDA. Illusion?

BRACK. Which you would, in any case, have been deprived of fairly soon.

HEDDA. And what that might be?

BRACK. He didn't shoot himself... intentionally.

HEDDA. Not intentionally... Everything I touch seems to turn into something mean and farcical.
(258-259)

Of course, Hedda's "illusion" is irrational, thus incomprehensible. Judge Brack at least realizes that its failure to materialize is a blow to Hedda's dream of breaking out of the world he symbolizes. As the embodiment of law and social propriety, his eagerness to assist in Hedda's downfall is significant: Hedda's energy is in a state of constant confrontation with the opposing, oppressive forces of the world around her; one senses the inevitability and imminence of a major irruption.

Before long, Hedda confronts Brack's blackmail; Hedda, after all, had provided Lövborg with the pistols used to end his life, and Brack insists on a "triangular arrangement" in order to keep quiet, further entrapping and oppressing Hedda: "Well, fortunately, there is nothing to fear as long as I keep quiet" (262). For Hedda, the offer to be subject to his will is too horrible to contemplate; indeed, it is the final confirmation that freedom is, for her, out of the question. This realization, combined with her husband and Thea's reconstruction of Eilert's manuscript, incites her seething energy to rise to the surface for her final, and most extreme, act of violence: "No longer free! [*She gets up violently.*] No! That's a thought that I'll never endure!" (262). Spontaneously, and with no warning whatsoever, Hedda prepares for the only act drastic enough to free herself from her insufferable life. Retiring to the inner chamber, her wild energy erupts as a frenzied dance tune on her piano, and Hedda is chastised by her husband for disrupting the propriety of preserving a calm, mournful atmosphere following the deaths of Aunt Rina and Eilert. Sticking her head out between the curtains after his protests that she be quiet, Hedda announces with a sense of finality that she will indeed be quiet: "And Aunt Julie. And of all the rest of them... I shall be silent in future" (263). Drawing the curtains together again, Hedda once again retires to her inner chamber, a micro-parlor that houses her only belongings – the portrait of her father and her old piano. On the latter, she plays the overture to her suicide – a wild dance melody. Seconds later, with no warning, she shoots herself in the temple, channeling all of her repressed energy into a single, momentous irruption.

Ibsen presents Hedda's suicide with great ambiguity. It occurs with an almost unnatural speed, with less preparation and less introspection than all of her other irruptions thus far.⁸ Moreover, Ibsen keeps the act offstage: a shot is heard and we witness the personifications of convention (Tesman, Mrs. Elvsted, and Brack) rise to their feet as if they have finally been awakened. Hedda kills herself in exactly the same way as she had dreamed Eilert would. The ambiguity of that fantasy carries over into the reality of this one: it is a shocking, unexpected, radically transgressive act, incomprehensible to those who witness it.⁹ Tesman and Brack are shocked, not at the loss of Hedda herself, but at her violation of social decorum:

TESMAN [*yelling at Brack*]. Shot herself! Shot herself in the temple! Think of that!

BRACK [*half prostrate in the armchair*]. But, good God almighty... people don't do such things!
(264)

Like all of Hedda's violent acts, Ibsen portrays Hedda's suicide as excessive and irrational. John Lahr notes that "Hedda's own suicide, when it comes, is not an act of contrition but an act of will, the only gesture of freedom left to her. It is intended as a perverse transcendence, a form of negative creation" (111).

Undoubtedly, Hedda achieves "release", but Ibsen's attitude towards Hedda's release for the sake of social freedom (like Goethe's attitude towards Werther's suicide done for the sake of moral freedom) remains inconclusive. Indeed, the aftermath of each suicide raises more questions than answers. Although Hedda's suicide is not botched in the way of Werther's, the received effect is surely not what either one had envisioned. One concludes that if Ibsen meant Hedda's suicide to be received as an absolute triumph over social convention – a conclusive break with what restricted her – he might not have ended the scene (and the play) with Brack's shocked response, "people don't do such things!" Indeed, perhaps people *don't* do such things, but Hedda has, and Ibsen resists definitive judgment on her act.

Rilke's words about Ibsen might once again apply, now specifically to Hedda's suicide: "The two ends that you had bent together sprang apart; your insane energy escaped from the elastic rod, and your work was undone." Ibsen presents Hedda's suicide – her quest for social freedom – as, more than anything else, this "undoing".

Endnotes:

1. *New York Times* April 21, 1891.
2. All page citations from *Hedda Gabler* are from Henrik Ibsen's *Four Major Plays*, Trans. James McFarlane and Jens Arup. Oxford University Press, 1966.
3. The other two objects are her piano and General Gabler's pistols, both tools for the expression of her violent energy that none of the other characters are able understand and for which Hedda has no rational explanation.
4. Rilke's insight into Ibsen's aloofness and standoffishness might be applied to Hedda as a character: "Who could understand that at the end you did not want to leave the window...You wanted to see the passerby; for the thought came to you that perhaps one day you could make something of them..." (Rilke 2008, 62).
5. The violent burning of Eilert and Mrs. Tesman's manuscript – their "child" – draws attention to Hedda's invincible impulse to seek revenge and to reestablish an unmediated connection to Eilert, a connection she hopes to use to control Eilert. It also illustrates the extent to which Hedda will go to get what she wants. It is a relatively innocuous "killing" – one that leads to a progressive increase in violence culminating in Hedda's suicide.
6. The fact that in Classical iconography grape leaves also represent a ripe maturity with a sense that decay will soon follow foreshadows Lövborg's (and, by extension, Hedda's) end.
7. In a note on his translation, Michael Meyer writes: "When Judge Brack tells Hedda where Lovborg has shot himself, he must make it clear to her that the bullet has destroyed his sexual organs, otherwise

Hedda's reaction makes no sense." Hedda's reactions, however, never "make sense" (*Hedda Gabler*, trans. Michael Meyer, London, 1962, p. 117).

8. The speed with which Hedda's commits suicide stands out within Ibsen's dramaturgy. There is not even the brief discussion as there is in *The Wild Duck* where Relling predicts that Hedvig's suicide will be transformed into the emphatic story that Hjalmar will tell.
9. Charles Lyons, like many critics, misses a crucial point with regard to Hedda's suicide: it is an irrational irruption – it makes "no sense" rationally. Lyons, however, attempts to explain it in various rational ways: as an alternative to a loss of control, as one demanded by Ibsen's sexual paradigm, as an erotic "marriage", as an aesthetic object, as a renunciation of the erotic female, as a romanticized version of reality, and so on. The multiplicity of explanations alone suggest that there is no explanation for her act.

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