

The relationship between oppression and society expectation in *Hedda Gabler* and *Medea*

Oppression is one of the features within the two novels; it is the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner and the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions or anxiety. We as the audience see that Euripides's and Ibsen's protagonists, Medea and Hedda Gabler are oppressed as they are exploited by the male antagonist and this oppression presents a perspective of their society. The protagonists however prevail against their oppression from their courageous actions by causing death or dying for justice.

Medea is oppressed by Jason because she can not marry another person unlike Jason who could, Medea is divorced and "... divorce brings disgrace on a women" (Euripides 56) however the Greek society viewed it acceptable for a man to divorce and marry another person but wasn't for woman: "When a man becomes dissatisfied with married life, he goes outdoors and find relief for his frustrations. But we are bound to love one partner and look no further" (Euripides 57). From the quotation above we can see the freedom that the man had in the Greek society and the society expectation for women. Women in Greek society were basically commodities since Medea mentions being "[bid for] the highest price in dowries just to ...buy some man to be dictator of [her] body (Euripides 31). Though they were above slaves on the social ladder, they were at times still treated like nothing more than property. The rest of society would reject them if they left their husband and in this case Medea was a foreigner from Colchis so she would be alienated within alienation.

Hedda Gabler is also oppressed by Tesman and Brack except that she is in a different situation. Hedda Gabler is also seen as a property to Tesman because she is treated like his 'prized trophy'. He constantly congratulates himself for marrying the most eligible bachelorette in town. "I rather suspect I have several friends who'd like to trade places with me" (Ibsen 250) However as a viewer, we might ask ourselves, why did Hedda marry Tesman, he isn't financially well off nor does he have any social status? The answer to that question is that Hedda lives in the Victorian era and her society expected her to marry someone. Brack on the other hand is a Judge that abuses his power by blackmailing Hedda to be his mistress in order to conceal the scandal of Lovborg's suicide since Hedda gave Lovborg the gun. Hedda has to live by society's expectation of keeping a respectable reputation; this entrapment causes her to hide her immense rage inside of her.

However Medea doesn't withhold her anger inside of her; instead she lashes out on everybody even her innocent children. Medea's hatred for Jason causes her to not want her children anymore "O cursed children of a hateful mother, I want you to die along with your father..." (Euripides 112-114) the reason she had children in the first place was because she believed that it was the duty of a Greek woman to bear her husband's sons, and that a wife who did not do so was worthless, as we can see from this quotation, "...you have the wickedness...to get yourself another wife, even after I have borne you sons! If you had still been childless then I could have pardoned your hankering." (Euripides 240)

Society also expected women in the Victorian era, like Hedda, to be restricted as a housewife and mother. Hedda despises the idea of being a housewife and definitely hates being a potential mother, as we can see evidently in Act I, when Hedda enters the parlor, she is

distraught to find the glass door open and light pouring in. She immediately has George close the curtains. She also dislike the smell of flowers in her house, and instructs her husband to keep the door open for fresh air. Light and flowers are typical signs of life, but Hedda finds them distressing. Why? Because she doesn't want to have a baby. Hedda doesn't want the child because it goes against her ideal which is to "have power over a human being" (Euripides 272), if she has the child then she is trapped and obligated to live a boring life as a mother and a house wife, also her life will be dominated by the priority of caring for the baby which is the opposite of her ideal.

In order to keep her ideals she committed suicide to 'free' herself from the oppressors Brack who is shocked by Hedda radical action as he says "But good God! People don't do such things!" She also frees herself from being Tesman 'prized trophy' and society expectation. Hedda adhere to her ideal which is to control other people and not to be controlled. However she does not want to lose her respectable reputation therefore she makes a finalized decision to commit suicide in order to escape from her potential humiliation but also to keep her integrity.

Hedda triumphs because she uses her courage which makes life "livable" (Euripides 266). In the real world, people are concerned with keeping up appearances, with acting normally, with playing their part in the game of life. By shooting herself, by doing what people don't do, Hedda embraces her ideals and breaks free from the society expectation governing her every action. The Judge is right: people don't do such things. But Hedda, in committing suicide is saying "I do."

Medea ultimately builds up enough courage to confront Jason and get revenge. In a way, Medea is speaking out against the inferior status of women by getting justice. The death of Medea's sons could also be a symbolic act of feminine revolt. Medea is put upon by the male-dominated society around her: she is banished by Creon, deserted by her husband. She could be seen as rebelling against the role of mother, in which women were often trapped. There's nothing wrong with being a mother; the problem comes when that's all you're allowed to be. Also, it's probably no coincidence that Medea's final act of revolution is to kill two young boys. You could interpret the murder as the destruction of the next generation of potential oppressors. In the end, the slaughter of Medea's sons seems to be a symbolic act of bloody resistance. Medea's violence is the result of oppression. The fact that she gets away with it, makes the ending even more unsettling. It's almost as if Euripides wanted to leave his all-male Athenian audience with a note of warning – beware those you oppress. One day they might not take it anymore, and you may not be able to do anything about it.

In conclusion, Medea is presented as a strong-willed and courageous character that uses her burden of mothering Jason's children as a weapon by employing their children to wreck his new life. Medea prevails over her hardships of being oppressed by Jason and triumphs and achieves her justice by reversing the suffering against him. She was also able to derive happiness from his grieving. Medea was also able to triumph against her oppressors by keeping her integrity and sticking to her morals by not being entrapped in a dull lifestyle as a housewife or mother, or a mistress. In both of these plays we can see that the protagonist's problems are the oppression and the society's expectation, both of these cause radical actions from the protagonist and the outcome is inevitably a tragedy.