

[Name of institution]

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Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie

Introduction

Ibsen's Hedda Gabler and Strindberg's Miss Julie are complex works which have been thoroughly analysed since they were written over one hundred years ago. In this research we will conduct a detailed comparison of the two and so I shall, instead, concentrate upon a single issue: whether the female leads in each play needed to commit suicide. In my research I will determine whether or not it was necessary for Hedda Gabler of Henrik Ibsen's 'Hedda Gabler' and Miss Julie of August Strindberg's 'Miss Julie' to die.

Purpose of study

August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen were both great playwrights of the 19th century, and both played a large role in the evolution of modern day naturalism/ realism. The plays I will be discussing are Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, (1890) and Strindberg's Miss Julie (1888). In Karen's lecture on Strindberg, she told how the two playwrights were rivals in a sense, mainly caused by Strindberg's attitudes on social issues- Namely his thoughts and theory on the role of women in society. Thus, I am lead to believe that Hedda Gabler was written by Ibsen as a direct retaliation to Strindberg's Miss Julie, just as Karen believes that Strindberg's The Father was written as a reply to Ibsen's Ghosts. Although both plays end with the suicide of the leading character, the circumstances by which they occur are very different (Jorgenson, pp 231-190).

Research Question

Hedda Gabler And Miss Julie – Did They Really Have To Die? And Should We Care?

Literature Review

As Ibsen's work begins, Hedda is at a low point, frustrated and bored after returning from her honeymoon with Tesman. When she finds that Loevberg, an old flame, is in town she hopes to achieve some reflected glory by inspiring this gifted academic. However, Mrs Elvsted seems to have taken on the dual role of Loevberg's amanuensis and probation officer. She has helped him fight alcoholism and provided clerical assistance with his new book. Hedda destabilizes this cosy arrangement by encouraging him to start drinking again and by secretly burning the only copy of his ground-breaking manuscript. Not surprisingly, he gets depressed, leading to an inglorious death when a pistol Hedda has given him is accidentally discharged. The roguish Judge Brack finds out about her involvement in the affair and makes it clear that he will expect sexual favours to keep quiet. Hedda decides that suicide is the only way out.

Ibsen embraced Realism in which dramatists "tried to put on the stage only what [they] could verify by observing ordinary life" (Strindberg, pp 27-190). Although Ibsen may have believed that it was necessary to reflect on the stage what might happen in the real world, he certainly did not believe it was sufficient. Most everyday situations are dull and undistinguished with blurred beginnings and inconsequential endings. Even though Ibsen had shunned the well- made play structure, he evidently still believed plays, and even each act, should end with some surprising event or revelation. Each of the first three

acts of Hedda Gabler ends with a climax which sets the audience thinking and makes them curious to know what will happen next. Following a long-standing tradition of the theatre, Ibsen also needed to provide a fitting and stirring finale.

So, assuming that the play needed to have a suitable ending, what might this be? Hedda could have walked out on her husband as Nora does in *A Doll's House* but she is too sensitive to scandal to consider such a move. There are several references to her concern about appearances dotted throughout the play. For example, we infer that she had previously refused to marry Loevberg because of his dissolute lifestyle. A change of heart at the end of the play would hardly be credible. The possibility that she could continue to endure her worsening plight is even less likely. Even in Act One, before the main events of the play have unfolded, she wrings her hands in desperation when left alone. Hedda has no other choice but to kill herself (Lucas, pp 121-167).

Now, we need to ask whether suicide is consistent with Hedda's character. It was important for Ibsen to have his characters behave in a credible fashion. "I write to depict people," Ibsen once remarked. I believe Ibsen has provided sufficient motive for her to carry out the act from how she behaves in the play and from her back story. It would have been intolerable for her to face the prospect of scandal that an affair with Judge Brack might cause. She has also lost her one chance of leading a glorious life (albeit vicariously) by supporting Loevberg, so feels she has nothing to live for. Only her dead father has set an example of heroism. His portrait faces us from the small inner room for the whole of the play and reminds us of his influence over his daughter. We are to infer that she has inherited his steely resolve (Garton, pp 45-367).

So, Hedda has to die, but should we care? I believe we should. She is sarcastic, haughty and brittle and one would certainly not wish to share a flat with her but it is difficult not to feel, from a safe distance, a certain admiration and pity for the woman. Ibsen purposely exaggerated Tesman's stupidity in later drafts of the play (Strindberg, pp 27-190) to show how difficult it would be for a high-minded person like Hedda to be married to him. The sense of suffocation she must feel is compounded when she has to endure his aunt's solicitations and lower-class manners. She also has to suffer knowing comments about her pregnancy and dreads the thought of having a baby since it epitomizes the drudgery and crudity of the everyday world. She symbolically destroys the infant when she burns Loevberg's manuscript at the end of Act Three. Tellingly, as pointed out by Garton (Strindberg, pp 27-190) she actually says, in Norwegian, 'burn the child' rather than 'your child' as it is usually translated

It could be argued that encouraging Loevberg to drink and burning the manuscript are spiteful and unworthy acts. Hedda does not see them this way. They are means to a laudable end. She wishes to wrench him away from the clutches of Mrs Elvsted, who, after all, is only using Loevberg as an escape from her own humdrum existence. Hedda believes that she can inspire him to heroic heights (Garton, pp 45-367). In Aristotelian tragedy, the hero makes a mistake, hamartia, leading to a reversal of fortune, peripeteia. Hedda's misjudgement is that Loevberg can live up to her ideal when she hands him the pistol, but this leads, instead, to his accidental death, and the unwanted attentions of Judge Brack (Lucas, pp 231-190).

Miss Julie, like Ibsen's heroine, has fluctuating fortunes. When Strindberg's play opens, her fiancé has left her because of her domineering behaviour. Consequently, she

has chosen to spend Midsummer's Eve with the servants rather than be subjected to her father's displeasure. She seeks some sort of comfort from sparring with her father's valet, Jean, but he is not such an easy opponent as she expects. Initially, her status gives her the upper hand, but the valet's native wit and self-confidence gradually asserts itself in their verbal skirmishes. After they make love her position is compromised and she becomes almost totally compliant. She feels so wretched she even seeks comfort and advice from the cook. Having compounded her problems by stealing money from her father's desk, she cannot face the consequences and chooses to end her own life (Ferguson, pp 34-189).

Strindberg wanted to depict reality. To this end, he turned his back on the traditional play structure with its acts and chronological discontinuities. Miss Julie takes place in real time with no breaks, encouraging us to believe we are watching people going about their lives rather than being told a story as in *Hedda Gabler*. Given this approach, it is questionable whether Strindberg needed to wrap up his play in the way he does. According to Lucas (Lucas, pp 231-190), Strindberg originally planned to have Miss Julie snatch the razor from Jean in order to commit the act. This would have been more heroic but perhaps Strindberg felt that such an ending would distort the psychological arc of the play merely to achieve a melodramatic effect. I believe he should have gone further and dispensed with the suicide altogether. Certainly, in later works such as *The Ghost Sonata*, Strindberg eschewed neat plot development and endings. An alternative conclusion could have the homecoming of the master and a return of Jean to his deferential state. Jean could then pass on a message from the speaking tube, announcing that the master wishes to see Miss Julie, as she simpers and wrings her hands.

The audience could then be left to ponder subsequent developments (Jorgenson, pp 231-190).

Assuming it is not of vital dramatic importance for Miss Julie to commit suicide we now ask the question: is it believable and consistent for her to do so? Strindberg gives us a great deal of background detail about her. At this stage in his career, he espoused Zola's concept of Naturalism where novels and plays were "clinical laboratories in which might scientifically explore the consequences upon his characters of their birth and background (Styan, pp 189-234). From the text we can infer that Miss Julie is weak, impulsive and suggestible. She has a masculine streak, as when she attempts to dominate her fiancé, but this is primarily due to her upbringing by her mother (Stanton, pp 11-190). Like Hedda she is highly influenced by her father. Strindberg emphasizes the absent master's power by having a large bell on stage which he uses to summon his valet. Also, at the beginning of the play Jean places the master's riding boots where we can see them. As noted earlier, Hedda Gabler is her father's daughter and wishes to emulate him but Miss Julie is, perhaps, afraid of her father.

At the end of the play, Miss Julie has imploded emotionally, lacking any will-power to think for herself. In this state, it is improbable that, she could summon up the mental energy to kill herself. Strindberg was interested in hypnotism (Strindberg, pp 27-190) and there is an implication that Miss Julie is in a trance when she takes the razor from Jean, but there is no evidence that a hypnotist can cause people to harm themselves, never mind commit suicide.

Conclusion

In summary, Hedda Gabler needs to die, and to die boldly to assure us that there is heroism left in the world. We feel sorry for her since her motives are worthy if misguided, but can take some comfort from her act. Miss Julie, in contrast, does not have to die. She is already degraded and her demise is an unnecessary coda to events. She should live, to endure the wrath of her father and to ensure Jean pays for his misbehaviour. Her suicide is a capitulation in comparison to Hedda's positive and defiant gesture.

Work Cited

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