

The Function Of Symbols In Ibsen's Hedda Gabler

Ebtihal Mudaher Habeeb

AL_Mustansiriya University / College of Engineering

Scientific Affairs Unit

E.mail : ebtihalhabeeb2004@yahoo.com

Abstract

Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906) a Norwegian dramatist has been called the "Father of Modern Drama" by many literary historian and critics and is one of the very greatest names in the world of literature. He was a central figure in the modern break-through in the intellectual life of Europe. His plays are still highly topical, and continue to be staged in all parts of the world. It is said that Ibsen is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare (Menchen, Introduction to Eleven Plays of Henrik Ibsen, pp.vii- xi).

Ibsen's plays of the earlier period are romantic, poetic and highly artistic, which deal for the most part with the past, while the plays of the second period are realistic, written in prose and deal entirely with the present. His realistic work is even more perfect and finished than his romantic one. Ibsen's prose dramas preserve the sense of reality. He produces to the reader the impression that what he is reading is actually taking place before him. This sense of art is produced by the use of symbol. Of the symbolism of Ibsen, it may be said so close is the union between symbol and meaning in that the case of doubt the symbol will throw light on the meaning of the play. (Northam, Ibsen's Dramatic Method: A Study of Prose Dramas, pp.218-19). Symbolism was a late nineteenth- century- art movement of French, Russian and Belgian origin in poetry and other arts. The term symbolism is derived from the word "symbol" which derives from the Latin symbolism, as expressed in a symbol of faith, and symbolus , which is a sign of recognition. Symbolism was a reaction against naturalism and realism, and the anti-idealistic styles which were attempts to represent reality in its gritty particularity and to elevate the humble over the ideal. Symbolists believed that art should represent absolute truths that could be described indirectly. Thus, they wrote in a suggestive manner, using particular images or objects with symbolic meanings. In Hedda Gabler, 1890, one of the plays of the second period, symbols stand first for a character of the play and second for the meaning of the play as a whole. Ibsen himself thinks and feels in pictures. He does not plan bare, architectural dramas, nor ingenious play and counter play of events. He thinks and feels in pictures of living images which reveal the soul, in whose action is centred the interest of the play (Lee, The Ibsen Secret: A Key To The Prose Dramas Of Henrik Ibsen, pp74 and 105).

Ibsen presented Hedda Gabler as an indictment of the wrongs society and tradition inflicted upon the woman of his era. One of the social issues dealt with in this play is the oppression of women by conventions

limiting them to a domestic life. The play concerns primarily with the themes of power/ control and sex as related to women who are denied equality and opportunity (Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot, p. 48).

Hedda Gabler

Hedda Gabler revolves around the relationships between characters. The seven characters in the play are a tight-knit group: Hedda, the daughter of general Gabler ; her newly married husband, George Tesman , where his Aunt Julia ; the old family maid servant Berta; Thea, a school fellow of Hedda ,George's former companion and fellow historian Lovborg who has ruined his reputation through drink and Judge Brack , a family friend. The play portrays the life of a young newlywed woman named Hedda Gabler and her attempts to overpower people around her. Hedda's marriage to her husband Mr. Tesman only increases her desire for power to control others because it is a constant re-minder that now belongs to Mr. Tesman. She yearns for freedom, but feels as if she had not left her marriage. To occupy her time, she manipulates the lives of everyone around her. She needs control even over herself and in order to gain control over her life, she commits suicide and she does it beautifully to fulfill her romantic quest.

There is little plot of a conventional sort in this play; instead the progress of the play is structured by an underlying pattern. One who is accustomed to thinking of action and plot as synonymous must dissociate the two terms when dealing with the work of Ibsen. His plays including Hedda Gabler have plot in abundance, but nothing happens in them. The action takes place in the soul of character or in the relation between characters. In this play, he focuses attention upon the action of the soul and to this form of drama no artistic method could be so well suited but that of symbol. The action is not progressive to be revealed by events, but by pictures; that is by symbols, the soul is revealed in pictures. Layer after layer, the play opens out. It would appear, then, that the symbols while they do not carry the whole thematic burden of Hedda Gabler , they illuminate the meaning of the characters and the action with which they are associated (Lee, The

Ibsen Secret: A key To the Prose Dramas Of Henrik Ibsen, p.88,p.99). Hence, there are number of symbols that enrich the meaning of the play by emphasizing the aspects of character and conflict. The symbols are:

- 1- The pistols
- 2- The manuscript
- 3- The vine leaves
- 4- Thea's hair

The three particular objects; the pistols, the manuscript and the vine leaves have guided us toward the real Hedda ; her thirst for freedom and her conflict against the nineteenth- century -society.

The Pistols

The pistols, like many other symbols used in the play, are not merely symbols, but have important plot function as well. The pistols left by Hedda's father represent an important characteristic; the father has passed to have complete control over others. Raised by her military father, Hedda possesses the characteristics of a soldier; she is proud of herself, and cares nothing for ordinary interests, but she is cold and imperious towards lower ranks. She makes fun of Aunt Julle's hat; describes Mrs. Elvsted, her school mate, as a woman with provoking hair (Bradbrook, The Humanist in Ibsen The Norwegian a Revolution ,pp. 97- 116):

Hedda:(pointing)Look there! She has left her old bonnet lying about on a chair.

Tesman: (in concentration, drops the slippers on the floor).Why, Hedda___

Hedda:Just fancy, if any one should come in and see it!

Tesman:But Hedda __ that's Aunt Julia's bonnet.

(Act One p.9)

Hedda: Exactly. The girl with the irritating hair, that she was always showing off.....

(Act One p.11)

She is also mean to Aunt Rina's death .

Hedda: (follows Tesman coldly and searchingly with her eyes). I almost believe your Aunt Julia's death affects you more than it does your Aunt Julia.

(Act Four p.62)

This all shows that she has no sympathy for women who show signs of weakness. We see her as a woman of frustrated potentialities. She rejects the warm emotional life of the Tesmans and she grows up shooting and riding horses instead of playing dolls like other girls, a fact which reveals her fascination for violence (McFarlane, Drama and the Mind: Hedda Gabler,pp. 286-7).

Hedda: Well, I shall one thing at least to kill time with in the meanwhile.

Tesman:(Beaming) oh, thank heaven for that!, What is it, Hedda? Eh?

Hedda: (In the middle doorway, looks at him with suppressed scorn) My pistols George.

(Act One p. 23)

Hedda is identified by the pistol; she is recognized as a human pistol walking about the stage. The first description reveals the conception:

Hedda:

Her complexion is pale and opaque. Her steel- grey eyes express a cold, unruffled repose. Her hair is of an agreeable medium brown, but not particularly abundant.

(Act One p.7)

The pistols also emphasize aspects of Hedda's character. She enjoys freedom, freedom to socialize with different people and have absolute control over them. She wants to be not only in control of her own life, but also of some other person's life.

Hedda(Rising slowly and wearily).It was part of our compact that we were to go into society ___to keep open house.

(Act One p.23)

However, she does not care to control George Tesman as she considers his life too boring, but, at the age of 29, She needs home to settle down in order to maintain her status and reputation. Tesman, her husband, is a perfect match according to her plan because he is unquestionably obedient to her and provides her with material satisfaction and freedom to access social life. She is also uninterested in controlling

the life of a child, she does not wish to become a mother, as that role would limit her even more than the role of woman and wife. After marriage her control is limited to the house. She will have no control outside the house due to the fact that it is unthinkable for woman to receive acceptance from a public and professional field. She does believe that she has some control over men (Lovborg the poet and Judge Brack man of the world). Hence, the pistols left by Hedda's father represent an important characteristic, the father has passed to Hedda a desire to have complete control over others (McFarlane, Drama and the Mind:Hedda Gabler,pp. 286-7).

The pistol also plays an important role in the relation between Hedda and Lovborg. Hedda has once aimed the pistol at Lovborg when they were lovers; and in Lovborg last visit, Hedda hands the same pistol to Lovborg which accidently ends his life .The pistol here reveals Hedda's control over Lovborg and her destructive character as Lovborg becomes the victim under her control (Knight, Imprisoned Souls in Henrik Ibsen, pp.65-7):

Hedda:(nodding slowly). Do you recognize it? It was aimed at you once.

Lovborg: You should have used it then.

Hedda:Take it ___and do you use it now.

Lovborg : (puts the pistol in his breast pocket). Thanks!

Hedda: And beautifully, Eilert Lovborg . Promise me that!

(Act Three p.59)

When Lovborg comes first to town, he has both career and love; he has social reputation from his first book and is in romantic relationship with Thea . Moreover, there will be bright future ahead of him after publishing his second book. But Hedda destroys Lovborg's life step by step. First she discloses Thea's secret that she came to town because she is worried that Lovborg will start drinking again, then, by burning Lovborg's manuscript without telling the truth. Lovborg's career collapses and his romantic relationship ends, Hedda's pistol is the final push for Lovborg to the edge of death. Again, the pistol is used as a symbol of aggressive control, the control of life and death and the power to mould a human destiny.

Hedda: Yes, I have, I want for once in my life to have power to mould a human destiny.

(Act Two p. 45)

At the end of the play, the scene of the pistol is emphasized again when Hedda kills herself with a shot to the temple. Hedda's suicide is not a cowardly action; rather it is a part of her rebelling against the society. Her designed death proves that she is in control of nobody but herself. She is indeed like the pistols she owns: dangerous, destructive and powerful.

Tesman:(*Shrieks to Brack*) Shot herself! Shot herself in the temple! Fancy that!

Brack: (*half fainting in the arm- chair*) Good God! ___ People don't do such things.

(Act Four p.72)

The Manuscript

In this play, Ibsen connects the four main characters Hedda, Lovborg, Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted through creating, burning and recovering the manuscript. The symbol the manuscript represents is

the defiance against nineteenth-century norms. The manuscript's content is not only innovative, but Mrs., Elvsted is involved in its creation and it is revolutionary in itself, because a woman participates in a seminal work. The symbol of the manuscript has many phases. The manuscript is Lovborg's soul.

Lovborg:

.....

For this is the real book—the book I have put my true self into.

(Act Two p 34)

and he in turn may be the poet-side of humanity mutilated and destroyed by a fierce touch of intellect and degraded by passion. The manuscript represents intellectual power and it also represents Lovborg's creative powers; he can influence the world with his ideas just as Hedda's father influenced the world with his military power and status represented by the pistols (Lee, The Ibsen Secret: A Key To Prose Drama Of Henrik Ibsen, p 153).

The contrast between Hedda and Thea is reinforced by procreative imagery of the play. The manuscript stands for Thea's child or it is seen as Lovborg and Thea's child. The sterile Hedda throws this manuscript into the fire at the climax of her vindictive passion. When Hedda is burning the manuscript, she whispers to herself:

Hedda:(*throws one of the quires into the fire and whispers to herself*)
Now I am burning your child, Thea! ----Burning it, curly – locks!

(Act Three p.59)

Hedda is jealous of Thea's exuberant life her courage towards freedom and self-realization. Thea leaves her husband and chooses to realize herself- value assisting and inspiring a promising writer.

Mrs. Elvsted: Well, to make a long story short: My husband did not know that I was coming.

Mrs. Elvsted: I shall never go back to him again.

(Act One p.17)

Hedda's anger and jealousy drives her to burn the manuscript and persuade Lovborg to suicide. Hedda is jealous of Thea because she is creative and is able to inspire both her husband and Lovborg while Hedda can do none. Hedda's power diminishes in front of Thea. While Hedda is not capable of taking control outside the house she loses control inside the house as well. On the other hand, Thea has control over Lovborg by the creation of the manuscript and she will have control over Tesman by recovering the manuscript at the end of the play. Unlike Hedda, Thea kept all the notes, and; therefore, there is a possibility to recover the original piece (Knight, Imprisoned Souls in Henrik Ibsen, p. 65-67).

Mrs. Elvsted: Yes, I have them here. I put them in my pocket when I left home. Here they still are _____

.....

Tesman:Fancy, if we could make something out of them, after all! Perhaps if we two put our heads together.

(Act Four p.67)

When Hedda sees the image of Thea and Tesman together recovering the manuscript, she sees the rebirth of the "child" she has just destroyed, and now she realizes that she has no power to stop the manuscript from coming to life any more. Hence, Hedda's triumph is reduced when the literary "child" comes to life again from the notes which Thea has kept and her sense of emotional inferiority is heightened when her husband would devote his life to the reconstruction of the lost work.

The Vine Leaves

Tesman: We will manage! We must! I will dedicate my life to this task.

Hedda: Does it seem strange for you, Thea? Here are you *sitting* with Tesman__just as you used to sit with Eilert Lovborg?

(Act Four p.71)

The vine leaves are mentioned by Hedda many times in the play:

Hedda: At ten o'clock --- he will be here. I can see him already ___ with vine leaves in his hair ___ flushed and fearless ___.

(Act Two p. 44)

Hedda : Nonsense! First you should have a cup of tea, you little stupid. And then ___ at ten o'clock___ Eilert Lovborg will be here___ with vine – leaves in his hair.

(Act Two p. 45)

Hedda: Had he vine-leaves in his hair?

Tesman:Vine- leaves? No, I saw nothing of the sort. _____

(Act Three p. 49)

Hedda: (gazing straight before her) so that is what happened. Then, he had no vine-leaves in his hair.

(Act Three p. 54)

Lovborg: Beautifully? (Smiling). With vine-leaves in my hair, as you used to dream in the old days ___?

Hedda: No, no. I have lost my faith in the vine-leaves. _____

(Act Three p. 59)

The symbol comes from Greek mythology, in which God Dionysus is a happy drunk man wearing a wreath of vine leaves on his head. Dionysus is the god of wine, revelry and bacchantic elation. Hedda's fantastic vision of Lovborg with " vine leaves" is This manuscript a very obvious image or symbol of the beautiful, the ideal aspect of bacchit elation. His life is all about seeking pleasure (Archer, Preface to Hedda Gabler :In The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen,pp.xii,xvi,xviii,xix p65).

Hedda sees Lovborg as god Dionysus, a man full of creative ideas, bacchantic and free from orders and disciplines. He can have a reputation in his career, and at the same time keeps romantic relationship with a woman .Hedda herself is Dionysian: ecstatic, orgiastic, irrational and undisciplined. Due to the society limitation and her irresponsible attitude towards everything, her rebellious thoughts cannot put into action. When Mrs. Elvsted says that Lovborg now left his old ways because of her, Hedda thinks that Lovborg's bacchantic nature is being suppressed, and she is eager to set his true self free. Hedda discloses the secret to Lovborg that Mrs. Elvested comes to town to prevent him from drinking. Lovborg angrily leaves the house to join Brack's party. Hedda convinced Thea that Lovborg will come back with vine leaves in his hair. Nobody knows what vine leaves in his hair means except Hedda herself. She sees the revival of Dionysian inside Lovborg.

Hedda: Nonsense! First you should have a cup of tea, you little stupid. And then __ at ten o'clock__ Eilert Lovborg will be here___ with vine – leaves in his hair.

(Act Two p. 45)

Thea's Hair

There is considerable evidence that Thea's hair is a sign of that potency which Hedda envies. Ibsen had ample precedent for employing hair as a symbol of fertility. Through this symbol of hair we know more about the two characters and a contrast is made between the two. Hedda's hair is not abundant while Thea's hair is abundant and wavy. Hedda recalls her as "the girl with irritating hair that she was always showing off". Moreover, Thea fearfully recollects Hedda's school girl reaction to it:

Thea: Yes, dreadfully. For when we met on the stairs you used always to pull my hair....yes, and once you said you would burn it off my head.

(Act One p.15)

As Hedda wants to burn off Thea's irritating hair, we feel that some wild reaction is about to occur, it occurs when Hedda goads Lovborg into drinking and accepting Bracks invitation to his party. Thea's hair is a sign of that potency which Hedda envies even when she ridicules its possessor. Although Ibsen's description of the hair of each of these women may seem at the time only casual stroke in the sketch ,Thea's red hair is to serve as a symbol of her straight forward sexuality. Thea's appearance deepened the contrast between the two. Her blondness ranks her with the Teamans, leaving Hedda's isolation by colour more marked. Thea's bright hair and light eyes emphasize Hedda's restrained coldness .In addition, the abundance of Thea's hair is plainly to be contrasted with Hedda's sparsity.Thea lacks Hedda's poise and strength, but she has light and warmth. This strong visual distinction between the two women gives more force to the more subtle distinction of character which is unfolded bit by bit (Northam,Ibsen's Dramatic Method : A Study Of The Prose Dramas, pp. 152-3, 162).Thea is described in the stage direction as:

Thea is a woman of fragile figure, with pretty, soft features. Her eyes are light blue, large, round and somewhat prominent Her hair is remarkably light, almost, flaxen, and unusually abundant and wavy

(Act One p. 11)

The strong distinction between the two characters is more emphasized when Thea is made responsible for some of the flowers in the room, which Hedda dislikes.

Berta: That lady , ma'am, that brought some flowers a little while ago, is there again .

Act One p.11)

Again flowers are used as a symbol of love and warmth. The contrast between the two characters is the contrast between the cold and the dark interior world represented by Hedda and the warm and light exterior world represented by Thea. Hedda's cold refinement links her with interior world and it seems that she dislikes the bright outer

world and she dislikes flowers as they are associated with the exterior world:

Hedda: No, no not that! Tesman, please draw the curtains. That will give a softer light.

Tesman: at the door. All right__all right. There now, Hedda, now you have both shade and fresh air.

(Act Four p. 8)

That is why her complexion is described in terms similar to those used for the lamp-shade.

On the other hand, Hedda is described as:

Her complexion is pale and opaque. Her steel- grey eyes express a cold, unruffled repose. Her hair is of an agreeable medium brown, put not particularly abundant. _____.

(Act One p.7)

The Conclusion:

Ibsen in Hedda Gabler deals with one of the social issues which is the oppression of women by conventions limiting them to domestic life. In Hedda Gabler the heroine struggles to satisfy her ambitious and independent intellect within the narrow role society allows her. Hedda manipulates the fates of others in order to fulfill her own desires. She grew up without a female influence as her father who was a General raised her around guns, because she was his daughter, people would show great respect and loyalty towards her. She needs control over others and her own life and in order to gain control over herself, she commits suicide. Ibsen, as a Norwegian dramatist, his works are notorious for their revealing the truth that the society preferred to keep hidden. The symbols used in this play do not only carry the whole thematic burden of the play, but they also illuminate the meaning of the characters and the action with which they are associated. Characters other than the main one stand out as unmistakable

symbols. Hedda, the main one, has her own symbol, the pistol, she in turn is a symbol__ if it may be so called. She is not merely a woman, but a type; the cold destructive woman of intellectual power who kills the soul of a poet. And side by side with her are other types, Thea the goddess woman, the poet's good angel who would inspire him and save him to the world. Besides them are the two masculine types, the man of the world Judge Brack, and the mere student, Tesman who, too, plays their part in the tragedy of the poet's soul. Hence, Ibsen thinks in, pictures, in living images, and these images reveal the soul, in whose action is centered. His play focuses attention upon the action of the soul, and to this form of drama no artistic method could be so well suited as that of symbol.

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الغرض من استخدام الرموز في مسرحية

"Ibsen — Hedda Gabler

م.م. ابتهاج مظاهر حبيب

الجامعة المستنصرية / كلية الهندسة / وحدة الشؤون العلمية

الخلاصة باللغة العربية

يعد هنريك ايسن (1828- 1906) كاتباً مسرحياً نرويجياً سمي من قبل العديد من المؤرخين والنقاد "بأبو الدراما الحديثة" وواحد من اكبر الأسماء في عالم الأدب. كان ايسن شخصية محورية في الحياة الفكرية المعاصرة لأوروبا. لا تزال مسرحياته في القمة و تمثل على المسرح في كل أنحاء العالم ويقال بان ايسن هو أكثر كاتب مسرحي تؤدي مسرحياته في العالم بعد شكسبير.

تعد مسرحيات ايسن للمرحلة المبكرة رومانسية، شعرية، وذات فنية عالية وتتعامل مع الماضي في حين تعد مسرحيات المرحلة الثانية واقعية ومكتوبة بالنثر وتتناول على الأغلب الوقت الحاضر. إن أعمال ايسن الواقعية هي أكثر كمالات المسرحيات الرومانسية. ان مسرحيات ايسن النثرية تمتلك ذلك الحس الواقعي وان ايسن يترك انطبعا على القارئ بحيث يشعر القارئ إن ما يقرأه هو ما يدور أمامه. أنتج ايسن هذا النوع من الفن باستخدام الرمز وفيما يخص رمزية ايسن فانه هنالك نوعا "من التوافق بين الرمز والمعنى وفي حالة الشك يقوم الرمز بإلقاء الضوء على معنى المسرحية. وفيما يخص الرمزية فانها حركة فنية تعود إلى القرن التاسع عشر وهي ذات أصول فرنسية، وروسية وبلجيكية في الشعر وباقي الفنون الأخرى. إن مصطلح الرمزية مشتق من الرمز والذي يشتق من الرمزية اللاتينية كرمز للإيمان ورمز الإدراك، كانت الرمزية رد فعل ضد الرمزية الطبيعية والواقعية و ضد الأنماط المثالية والتي هي محاولات لتمثيل الواقعية بخصوصيتها ومحاولة رفع ما هو متواضع فوق المثالي. يعتقد الرمزيين إن الفن ينبغي إن يمثل الحقائق المطلقة والتي يمكن وصفها بشكل غير مباشر . لذلك كتب الرمزيين بطريقة موحية وذلك باستخدام الصور او كائنات خاصة مع معنى رمزي. في Hedda Gabler (1890) واحدة من مسرحيات الفترة الثانية التي استخدم فيها ايسن الرموز بالدرجة الأساس لشخصيات المسرحية وثانيا لمعنى المسرحية ككل. إن ايسن يفكر بالصور وبصور حية . لم يخطط ايسن لدراما مجردة ولا مسرح أحداث. كان ايسن يفكر بصور حية وهذه الصور تكشف الروح التي بها يتمركز اهتمام المسرحية. قدم ايسن في Hedda Gabler لائحة اتهام للمجتمع والتقاليد والإخاطر التي ألقت بتأثيرها على المرأة. وواحدة من القضايا الاجتماعية التي تناولتها المسرحية هي اضطهاد المرأة في تلك المرحلة بسبب التقاليد التي تجعل حياتها مقتصرة على الحياة العائلية. تهتم المسرحية بالمقام الأول بالقدرة والسيطرة والجنس كونها تهتم بالنساء من الذين حرمن من المساواة والفرص.