

Nietzschean Antiheroes in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*

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The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler* in 1890, therefore in the second part of his artistic career and at a time when Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy had already been spread in Scandinavia due to the role played by the Danish critic Georg Brandes in the late 1880s. The present paper aims at a close reading of the work so as to identify Nietzschean features of two antiheroes of the play, Hedda Tesman (born Gabler) and Ejlert Løvborg. We will analyse how the Dionysian ideal applies in their case and how they want to prove they are the stronger part in their relationships with Jørgen Tesman and Thea Elvsted, by taking into consideration the master-slave morality. But at the same time, Hedda wants to show her power on Ejlert. Although it is obvious that neither of these two characters is fully Nietzschean, an influence of Nietzsche's philosophy upon them can definitely be considered.

Keywords: Ibsenian theatre; Hedda Gabler; antiheroes; will to power; Dionysian; master-slave morality.

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen has never acknowledged an influence of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on his work. In 1900 for instance after his last work (*When we dead awaken*, 1899) had already been written, he gave the following interview in *Verdens Gang*, on 26th of November:

— A great thinker has died since we last talked, Mr. Ibsen – Nietzsche! / — Yes, however I was not very familiar with him. It was actually only a few years ago that he became known. He was a special gifted person, but because of his philosophy, he could not become popular in our democratic time. / — Some say that Nietzsche was a spirit risen out of darkness, a Satan. / — Satan – no. No, Nietzsche *was not that*. [— *En stor Tænkter er død, siden vi sidst talte sammen, Hr. Ibsen - Nietzsche!* / — *Ja, jeg kjendte forresten ikke saa meget til ham. Det var jo først for faa Aar siden, han egentlig blev bekiendt. Det var en eiendommelig Begavelse, men paa Grund af sin Filosofi kunde han ikke bli populær i vor demokratiske Tid.* / — *Nogle sier, at Nietzsche var en Aand, steget frem af Mørket, en Satan.* / — *Satan – nei. Nei, det var Nietzsche ikke.*] (Ibsen, 1928-57: 436)

Nevertheless, Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy was introduced in Scandinavia by the Danish critic Georg Brandes in 1888 through a series of lectures delivered at the University of Copenhagen and then through the publication in 1889 of Brandes' essay on *Aristocratic Radicalism* in the journal *Tilskueren*.

On the other hand, Henrik Ibsen wrote his play *Hedda Gabler* in 1890, consequently, immediately after the above mentioned period. In this play, character features similar to Nietzsche's will to power or traits associated with the superman are present although here the main character is a woman in a society dominated by men, a woman who has had her father, General Gabler, as a role model and therefore knows the importance of power and position in society (the title of

the play itself proves that Hedda's personality is rather in accordance with her former life as a general's daughter). Moreover, the public debate which Brandes had with the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding from August 1889 to May 1890 seems to have inspired Ibsen's two main male characters Ejlert Løvborg, respectively Jørgen Tesman, as Evert Sprinchorn claims (1972: 58). If Løvborg reminds of Brandes, he reminds at the same time of Nietzsche. In fact, Ibsen's return to strong-willed characters is obvious in several plays from the last decade of the 19th century, including *The Masterbuilder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896).

The antiheroes Hedda and Løvborg

Hedda Gabler is a cold drama about power and powerlessness – and it unfolds in the light of the historical and social process of which Hedda and her environment do not seem to have any clear understanding. [Hedda Gabler er et kaldt drama om makt og avmakt – og det utspilles i lyset av den historiske og sosiale prosessen som Hedda og hennes omgivelser ikke synes å ha noen klar oppfatning av.] (Hemmer, 2003: 417)

Hedda is the daughter of General Gabler and the wife of Jørgen Tesman, the holder of a scholarship in cultural history and a man aspiring to become a university professor. Just like other Ibsenian characters (Chamberlain Alving in *Ghosts*, Rosmer's wife in *Rosmersholm* etc.), General Gabler is an invisible character who has on the one hand the role of explaining Hedda's character and on the other hand the role of enhancing the dramatic effect of the play. Hedda has been deprived of her mother's care, while the influence of her absent father is still present also in the portrait she keeps in her new home. Perhaps this lack of maternal love in a men's society makes her even more solitary and creates an instable condition for her. Hedda is about 29 years old, so she has not got married at an early age for that period, but is still characterized by a "face and figure shaped in a noble and distinguished way [*ansigt og skikkelse ædelt og fornemt forme*]" (1997: 341).

From the very beginning of the play, Hedda is bothered by the sun and prefers to draw the curtains although it is morning. The room is moreover decorated with dark colours as if she wanted to hide in a cave just like Zarathustra's. The piano in the house, Hedda's piano, reminds of Nietzsche's Dionysian music. In fact, "Hedda thinks of herself as a devotee of a Dionysian ideal, the ideal she alludes to so often during the play by her use of the image of vine leaves in the hair, a traditional symbol of the Dionysian" (Webb, 1975: 53). According to Bjørn Hemmer,

her fabling about men's joyful life with vine leaves in the hair has little to do with the realities of the time. Hedda searches backwards for something that belongs to a bygone era and a different culture than the current one. Ejlert, for his part, is pre-occupied with something that is equally unreal: the cultural development of the future. Neither of them is able to gain a foothold in contemporary life. [*hennes fabling om menneskets glade liv med vinløv i håret har lite med tidens realiteter å gjøre. Hedda søker tilbake til noe som tilhører en forgangen tid og en annen kultur enn den nåværende. Ejlert på sin side er optatt av noe som er like uvirkelig: fremtidens kulturutvikling. Ingen av dem makter å vinne feste i samtidslivet.*] (2003: 405)

Nietzsche's thinking puts a stress on the aristocratic caste as the one able to ennoble mankind. But by marrying Tesman, Hedda has given up her aristocratic name and position. However, the extravagant purchases from the honeymoon trip, and Hedda's desires for the future (a new piano, entertainment) render her aristocratic style. Miss Juliane Tesman, her husband's aunt, makes reference to "The life she was used to while the general was alive. Can you remember when she rode by with her father? [*Slig, som hun var vant til at ha det, mens generalen leved. Kan du mindes, når hun red med sin far ud over vejen?*]", she asks the servant Berte (338). Neither of them could have believed that Hedda and Tesman would form a couple even if Tesman has just earned a Ph.D. degree during the six-month journey he has returned from, which coincided with his honeymoon.

While Hedda wants to be a strong woman with a strong will, her husband seems to be the weak part: “Because he himself, the doctor, he said nothing [*For han selv, - doktoren, - han sa’ ingenting*]” (338) – he seems rather a puppet in her hands. She even addresses her husband by his surname to show her superiority. She feels contempt for him and manipulates him as she pleases because she wants to be the master of the house. Meanwhile, Tesman behaves as a husband worried about money, as a nephew worried about his aunts he has a close relationship with and as an intellectual preoccupied with his future career.

Although Norwegians are usually not concerned with titles, Ibsen emphasizes them in this play and makes reference to several of them: Mrs. State Counsellor Falk (whose villa the Tesmans have bought to live in) or Mrs. Sheriff’s wife Thea Elvsted. He also writes that Tesman has “the very best chances to become a Professor [*de aller bedste udsigter til at bli’ professor*]” (339). Titles do matter for the aristocracy. Ibsen himself received the title of a Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Uppsala in 1877, and then insisted on being called “Dr. Ibsen”.

Besides her husband whom she wants to manipulate, Hedda also offends other characters and wants to transmit them the feeling of superiority. She asks for instance Thea if she had been a housekeeper in her husband’s home, whereas she had been a governess (an upper social position in society). Miss Tesman, her husband’s aunt, buys a new imposing hat so that Hedda should not be ashamed with her in case they went for a walk together: “The charming Hedda Gabler. Think about that! She, who had so many gentlemen around her [*Den deilige Hedda Gabler. Tænk det! Hun, som havde så mange kavallerer omkring sig*]” (339). Tesman’s aunt goes from calling her “dear Hedda [*koere Hedda*]” (341) to “little Mrs Hedda [*lille fru Hedda*]” (341) on seeing that Hedda behaves as a superior being, scornful of the inferior caste. Hedda even seems to be mistaken and says that the aunt’s new hat was in fact the servant’s old one.

Ejlert Løvborg, Tesman’s enemy, has recently published a successful book. Tesman and Løvborg are former friends with the same type of studies. Just like Zarathustra in his cave, Løvborg has lived isolated at the Elvsteds “up there somewhere [*der oppe et steds*]” (343), and there he has written this new book about the development of culture, which he enthusiastically wants to share with others “in this dangerous city. Alone! With all the bad company that is here [*i denne farlige by. Alene! Med alt det slette selskab, som her findes*]” (344). But “when the book came out, he was no longer able to find his peace up there with us [*da bogen var kommet ud, så havde han ikke længer rist eller ro på sig oppe hos os*]”, says Thea (344). Much of the story is related to the manuscript of the sequel of this work, which Hedda burns in the last act before its publication, since she becomes desperate. This sequel is in fact his masterpiece. The book concerning a new era, the future, can be compared with Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886). “Hedda, burning the book, is like the Titans tearing to pieces the infant god of vitality. Disappointed in her own dream of a Dionysus, she has turned against the true Dionysian and against those who, like Thea, and like Løvborg in his calmer hours, are its true worshipers and servants. The Dionysian is there in Hedda’s world; it just is not what she expected or wanted it to be” (Webb, 1975: 60-61). Just like Nietzsche, Ibsen relied on superior individuals, especially “on the nobility of character, of mind and will. Only that alone can liberate us [*paa Karakterenes, paa Sindets og paa Viljens Adel. / Den alene er det, som kan frigjøre os*]”, as it is asserted in an Ibsen’s speech delivered in Trondheim, on 14 June 1885 (Ibsen, 1928-57: 407-408).

When he reads Løvborg’s masterpiece, Tesman is envious of him although he adds: “he simply cannot be moderate when involved in pleasures [*han kan slet-ikke holde måde i nydelsen*]” (365). After getting drunk, Løvborg loses the only copy of this masterpiece in the street and Tesman finds it. Before giving it back to its owner, Tesman leaves it in Hedda’s care: “Jørgen Tesman is really an innocent soul, Mrs. Hedda [*Jørgen Tesman er virkelig en troskyldig sjæl, fru Hedda*]”, considers Judge Brack (366). The manuscript was like Løvborg’s child (his and Thea’s at the same time). “Thea’s pure soul was in that book [*Theas rene sjæl var i den bøk*]” (370) and Hedda kills this ‘child’.

Nevertheless, in the very end of the play she proves not only destructive by burning the manuscript, but also self-destructive as she commits suicide. She shoots herself with the second of

General Gabler's pistols, after having given the first pistol to Løvborg (these were in fact duel pistols perfectly suitable for two antiheroes who belonged to the same aristocratic circle). Her voluntary death reminds of other Ibsenian endings in a Nietzschean note such as the deaths of the two main characters Rosmer and Rebekka in *Rosmersholm* (see Leon, 2011: 70). By this she wants to prove her strong character, and that courage may lead to absolute beauty. *Beauty and liberation* are two key-words that she frequently uses:

what a liberation there is in this issue with Løvborg [...] a liberation to know that however, something voluntarily courageous can really happen in the world. Something over which there falls a glimmer of involuntary beauty. [*Hvilken befrielse der er i dette med Løvborg [...] En befrielse at vide, at der dog virkelig kan ske noget frivilligt modigt i verden. Noget, som der falder et skær af uvilkårlig skønhed over.*] (375)

or “Løvborg has had the courage to live his life according to his own mind. And now he has done something great! Something full of beauty [Løvborg har havt mod til at leve livet efter sit eget sind. Og så nu – det store! Det, som der er skønhed over]” (375). When Judge Brack tells Hedda that Løvborg has shot himself she says: “In this there is beauty [dette her er der skønhed i]” (374). In fact when Hedda gives Løvborg one of her father's pistols, she urges him to use it “in a beautiful way [i skønhed]” (370).

Most of Ibsen's characters remain free whether we think about Osvald Alving in *Ghosts* who finds in death a solution to his degrading state caused by illness or Nora in *A Doll's House* who leaves her home. “In taking her life Hedda has demonstrated that although her body may have been given up to compromise, she still, ultimately had power over a human destiny – her own. Her suicide is the triumphant assertion of individual over species-identity; the most absolute statement of freedom” (Stanton-Ife, 2001: 247). For Ibsen himself, freedom was extremely important, and that is why he chose a 27-year self-exile in Germany and Italy.

Hedda dreams of Løvborg as a Dionysian superman, and it seems that “her attempt to find her Dionysus in Løvborg is her last desperate effort to make her world habitable for her” (Webb, 1975: 58). Another Nietzschean antihero, Løvborg allows himself to call her in private Hedda Gabler instead of Mrs. Tesman and make fun of her marriage. Mrs. Tesman, her new identity, is perhaps Hedda Gabler's worst enemy. While Tesman proves a respectable person, Løvborg shows an immoral side.

Just like in Nietzschean philosophy, Hedda is obsessed with having power over someone in a weak position according to the master-slave morality: “For once in my life my will is to have power over a human destiny [*Jeg vil for en eneste gang i mit liv ha' magt over en menneskeskabne*] (362)”. Løvborg himself confesses: “Still what kind of power was there in you that forced me to confess such a thing? [*hvad var det dog for en magt i Dem, som tvang mig til at bekende sligt noget?*]” (359). While Løvborg thinks that there had been love between him and Hedda, for her it seems to have been “friendship in the lust for life [*kammeradskab i livsbegæret*]” (359). The desire of having power on someone else “consumes not only the protagonist and Brack, the master manipulator, but also several of the more mild-mannered characters like Auntie Julie and Thea and gives rise to numerous brilliantly dramatized miniature demonstrations of the exercising of will to power” (Van Laan, 2006: 286).

Dance, music and drinking are all associated with Dionysian characters. And Hedda and Løvborg are two such characters, two Bohemians in search of the above-mentioned “lust for life”. For instance Hedda plays a wild dancing song on the piano before she kills herself, while Løvborg drinks a lot. They are moreover the two ‘courageous’ characters who used General Gabler's pistols. Løvborg is also a person who wants to show his superiority, and the fact that he does not want to compete with Tesman for the professorship is such an example. He only wants to hold lectures after the publication of his latest book and tells Tesman that “I just want to defeat you in the people's mind [*jeg vil bare sejre over dig, i folks mening*]” (357).

Jørgen Tesman and Thea Elvsted are two weak characters of the play, two puppets in the others' hands: "I think it is so enjoyable to serve you, Hedda [*jeg synes det er så svært morsomt at opvarte dig, Hedda*]", says Tesman (358). Thea is the one who helps Løvborg to write his masterpiece and even claims in the first act that she has power over Løvborg since he has given up his old habits. But this situation is not to last after Hedda begins to exert her power in her turn. Løvborg also says about Thea that she as a person is "too stupid to understand [*for dum til at forstå*]" (359) although in order to reform Løvborg, she has left even her husband. Thea helps Tesman to re-write Løvborg's manuscript after the latter's death, following the notes she has still kept. When referring to this manuscript, Tesman asserts: "Hedda, you can never believe what a work it will be! It is certainly one of the most remarkable which are written [*Hedda, du kan aldrig tro, hvad det blir for et værk! Det er visst næsten noget af det mærkeligste, som er skrevet*]" (364). As a weak person, Thea is afraid to admit the truth when faced by Løvborg: "Mrs. Elvsted (wringing her hands): Oh, Hedda, do you hear what he is asking about! [*Fru Elvsted (vrider hænderne): Å, Hedda, hører du, hvad han spør' om!*]" (361), accepts Hedda's bad treatment at the present moment: "You really do not have more brain than a hurt sheep, Thea [*Du er virkelig et lidet færebode, Thea*]" (364) and did it as well in the past when they were colleagues at the boarding school: "how dreadfully afraid I was of you at that time [...] Because when we met on the stairs, you always used to rumple my hair [*hvor gruelig ræd jeg var for Dem dengang [...] For når vi mødtes på trapperne, så brugte De altid at ruske mig i håret*]" (345). Hedda is a hypocrite, and thus she addresses Thea by calling her: "Sweet Thea, - You cannot imagine how I've been waiting for you! [*Søte Thea, - du kan ikke tænke dig, hvor jeg har ventet på dig!*]" (360). In her turn, Thea uses the polite form of the pronoun when she addresses Hedda ("De" written with a capital letter, as opposed to "du/you") although the two had been colleagues. The same superior being, Hedda "looked at her with sympathy [*ser deltagende på hende*]" (345), "conceals an involuntary, mocking smile [*dølger et uvilkaarligt hånsmil*]" (347), is "cold, restrained [*koldt, bebersket*]" (347), or "is looking at TESMAN with a cold smile [*ser på TESMAN med et koldt smil*]" (357). In this respect, the stage directions are very relevant.

Hedda is born an aristocrat, and this makes it difficult for her husband, who confesses to Brack: "You, who know her so well. - I could not then possibly offer her clearly lower middle-class conditions. [*De, som kender hende så godt. - Jeg kunde da umulig by' hende rent småborgerlige omgivelser*]" (348). That is why, Tesman is permanently preoccupied with how they will make a living. In fact, Hedda married Tesman so as to be able to continue with her aristocratic life including gallantry, soirées and riding horses, while Tesman married Hedda being sure that he was going to become a professor: "We have got married according to prospects, Hedda and me. We have upped and run into big debt. And borrowed money from Aunt Julle as well. [*Vi har jo giftet os på de udsigterne, Hedda og jeg. Gåt hen og sat svær gæld. Og lånt penge af tante Julle også*]" (349), but it seems that "it was adventurous to up and get married and build a home only on a mere prospect [*det var eventyrligt at gå hen og gifte sig og sætte bo på blotte og bare udsigter*]" (350). Tesman was the person available to accompany her home from receptions, and living in the expensive villa was initially a topic of conversation when she pitied Tesman who did not find any other topic. But she does not care about the house as she does not care about other people either, and what she is looking for is to escape reality. She once dreams about her husband becoming a minister only out of boredom. Otherwise, she hates having responsibilities and assuming motherhood. Pregnancy is a threat to her former life that she does not want to give up. Hedda's calling seems in fact "getting bored to death [*at kede livet af mig*]" (355).

Hedda often plays with her father's pistols and feigns to shoot others within this game again as a sign of power and a wish to defend her territory against all people including her confidants: "(raises the gun and aims). Now I will shoot you, Judge Brack [*haver pistolen og sigter. Nu skyder jeg Dem, assessor Brack*]" (351). Judge Brack is an unscrupulous family friend who wants to have an affair with Hedda. Thus, Hedda is in reality an isolated person with no true friends and no members of her aristocratic family around her.

The play also deals with guilt and Hedda's guilt seems to be the loss of her honourable posi-

tion by her marriage with Tesman. As a consequence, she wants to demonstrate that at least she still has power. And so as to show her power on Løvborg (a person who does matter for her), she makes him start drinking again. It is not out of jealousy that Hedda has Løvborg go back to his bad habits, but out of her will to influence someone's destiny. "I am afraid of you, Hedda. [*Jeg er ræd for dig, Hedda*]" (362), says Thea. When she finds out that Løvborg has been found dead in the room of a prostitute, lacking dignity (uncertain if he has committed suicide or has been shot), and realizes that she is in the hands of Judge Brack, she kills herself as well: "what is ridiculous and low falls like a curse on everything I just touch. [*det latterlige og det lave, det lægger sig som en forbandelse over alt det, jeg bare rører ved*]" (376). But Hedda kills herself beautifully, in an aristocratic way, by shooting a bullet through the temple. Hopefully, she will be reborn due to the eternal return and fulfill her previous dreams of transforming the world. The book which she has burnt will also be resurrected thanks to Tesman and Thea. Thea's name resembles that of the Greek goddess Rhea, mother of Zeus, who brings Dionysus back to life.

Conclusions

Hedda's dream of independence and freedom makes her want to influence others' destinies. Her will proves however enchained by exterior and interior forces. Death becomes a replacement of life. "Like Nietzsche, Ibsen knew that when the instincts are turned inward, they become destructive. He also understood the need for a tension to exist between the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of man. This tension kept Ibsen productive and sane" (Sprinchorn, 1972: 76).

The play *Hedda Gabler* has obvious characteristics associated with Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking (will to power, master-slave morality, concept of the superman, Dionysian features), but none of the characters is fully Nietzschean and moreover, Ibsen gives a central role in his works in general to women characters with strong personalities. Although it is unsure whether Ibsen had read Nietzsche's works before writing this play in 1890, he must have come into contact with Nietzschean philosophy especially through Georg Brandes in the late 1880s.

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