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## Investigating Failure in Establishing Intimate Relationships: A Psychoanalytical Study of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler

**Abstract:**

*Ibsen's play Hedda Gabler is full of psychological implications. It is a play in which Ibsen has dealt with the complexity of romantic relationships. The study relies on Freud's theory of the unconscious involving unconscious motives, repression, fear of intimacy, displacement, anxiety and neurosis. Many young characters in the play try to establish intimate relationships, but they fail in their effort. Most of the characters are suffering from the fear of intimacy. This leads to make an analysis of their unconscious motives and desires. The study finds that most of the characters in this play are controlled by their unconscious desire for having power over the people they want to be intimate with. This is why they fail to establish intimate relations with the important individuals in their life. The study offers an application of Freudian concepts to literature. It also helps in understanding causes for the failure of intimate relationships.*

**Key Words:**

Anxiety, Displacement, Fear of Intimacy, Repression, Unconscious Motives.

**Introduction**

Henrik Ibsen was a prominent nineteenth century dramatist and his influence on modern theatre has been quite significant. His play, *Hedda Gabler* was published in 1890 and it was premiered at the Munich Residenz-Theater in Germany in 1891. Hedda is the protagonist of the play and she turns out to be a tragic heroine of a unique character. Hedda is the daughter of General Gabler and she has married George Tesman on her own accord. This young fellow George Tesman is a research fellow in cultural history. He is working on a book that deals with the subject of the domestic craftsmanship practices of medieval Brabant. He is a man from the middle social class and hence has little financial prospects. He is fascinated both by Hedda's physical charm and her upper social class status. Hedda's intentions in marrying a man who belongs to a social class lower than her own are quite mysterious. It is obvious that the two young persons do not make an ideal couple. In fact, their family backgrounds, tastes and ambitions are so different that they hardly find anything significant to share with each other. Ibsen has utilized this situation quite skillfully to invest the character of Hedda with psychological and tragic implications. The present study intends to offer a psychological interpretation of Henrik Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler*.

**Literature Review**

Ivan [Bunin \(2007, p.26\)](#) considers *Hedda Gabler* to be a fine example of realism. In the opinion of Anton [Chekhov \(1973, p.385\)](#), *Hedda Gabler* is a great creation of nineteenth century theatre, while E. I. [Haugen \(1979, p.142\)](#) regards it as a classic work of world Drama. In the Norton critical edition of the authoritative texts of *Ibsen's Selected Plays*, editor Brian [Johnston \(2004, p.288\)](#) writes in his introduction to *Hedda Gabler*: "Ibsen has demurely engineered within a fashionable drawing room a carnage of Shakespearean magnitude". Johnston declares *Hedda Gabler*, along with *A Doll House* to be "the most

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performed (Ibsen) play in the United States” (p.289). Regarding the title of the play, Ibsen wrote in his letter to Moritz Prozor: “Hedda as a personality is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than as her husband’s wife” ([Ibsen, 1908, p.435](#)). Commenting on the characters of *Hedda Gables*, Ibsen, in his letter to Kristina Steen, made the following remark:

Jorgen Tesman, his old aunts, and the faithful servant Berte together form a picture of complete unity. They think alike, they share the same memories and have the same outlook on life. To Hedda they appear like a strange and hostile power, aimed at her very being (Ibsen, 1964, p.298).

J.W. [Krutch \(1953, p.11\)](#) points out a link between *Hedda Gabler* and Sigmund Freud although the latter study of psychoanalysis was brought out almost ten years after the publication of *Hedda Gabler*. In the opinion of Krutch, Hedda is one of the prototypes of women characters in literature suffering from a developed form of neurosis. According to Krutch, Hedda is not rational in her behavior, but she is not completely crazy either. The logic of her conduct is both personal and mysterious. Although she succeeds in realizing her wish, yet her acts would not be appreciated by many people who are regarded as normal and sane. It is this mystery and irrationality that allows us to peep into her unconscious. To Bernard [Paris \(1997, p.59\)](#) Hedda’s behavior was the outcome of her “need for freedom... her craving for power ... to shape a man’s destiny.”

### Research Methodology

The present study offers a psychoanalytical interpretation of Ibsen’s play *Hedda Gabler*. It is a play that portrays complex relationships (especially romantic relationships) between young men and women belonging to various social classes. Pamela [Thurschwell \(2001, p.10\)](#) has remarked: “Psychoanalysis is a theory of intense emotions. In Freud’s world of mental life one loves or hates, longs to be enveloped in womb-like comfort or feels murderous rage...”. The relationships between various characters in the selected text are quite complex and they revolve around the central character of Hedda who is herself a complex character. The real motives behind Hedda’s actions are not easy to understand. There is something negative and distressing about them. Therefore, she has been pushing these disturbing motives into the unconscious and she has succeeded in this effort to a certain extent. But, this repression is not always successful. Her defense mechanism finally breaks down and she suffers from anxiety and neurosis which result in her suicide at the end of the play.

The present study takes insights from classical psychoanalysis as propounded by Sigmund Freud. For this purpose, the psychoanalytical concepts of the unconscious, repression, displacement, the fear of intimacy, and anxiety have been utilized. Referring to the possibility of the unconscious, Freud has observed: “... there could be powerful mental processes which nevertheless remained hidden from the consciousness of men” ([Freud, 1989, p.10](#)). In the words of M.A.R. [Habib \(2005, p.574\)](#): “Freud saw repression as the foundation of our understanding of neuroses”. Thurschwell defines repression as: “An operation whereby the subject repels or confines to the unconscious, a desire that cannot be satisfied because of the requirements of reality or of the conscience” (2001, p.21).

Characters in *Hedda Gabler* suffer from the fear of intimacy which is one of the core issues and is closely related to anxiety. Lois [Tyson \(2006, p.16\)](#) writes: “... sometimes our defenses momentarily break down, and this is when we experience *anxiety*”. So fear of intimacy is one of our core issues which are an indication of anxiety which is created as a result of the failure of our defense system. For the purpose of the present study, the following research questions have been framed:

- i. Which characters in *Hedda Gabler* are shown to be suffering from the fear of intimacy? In what ways the romantic relationships of the characters are affected by their fear of intimacy?
- ii. What light does the fear of intimacy throw on the unconscious motives of the characters in *Hedda Gabler*? How does anxiety expose the core issues of the characters?

The present study attempts to apply the concepts of the unconscious, repression, fear of intimacy, displacement and anxiety to the situation of different characters in the selected text of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. It endeavours to find the reason why these characters fail to establish intimate relationships when they seriously need to establish such relationships and they also struggle to establish them. For the purpose of the present study, the text of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* is taken from the Norton critical edition of the authoritative texts of *Ibsen's Selected Plays* edited by Brian Johnston (2004).

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### **The Desire for Intimacy Along with the Fear of Intimacy**

The characters in *Hedda Gabler* have been shown to be in dire need of establishing meaningful bonds with significant individuals, but they are also carrying the fear of intimacy with them. Of all the characters in *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda herself, the central character of the play, is shown to be suffering from the fear of intimacy. A brief look at the personality of Hedda would be useful here. Right from the start of the play we are told that Hedda is a proud and snobbish lady. She is incapable of taking care of sick people. Berta, the maid, tells about Hedda that she is "so particular about things" ( Act I, p.291). Miss Tesman thinks that beautiful Hedda was the trophy ( a kind of special prize) and George Tesman was able to win her "with all her suitors" ( Act I, p.293). Ibsen (1964, p.298) in his letter to Hans Schroder, while referring to the character of Hedda, talks about "the demonical basis of the character." Hedda had this "demonical" tendency in her personality since her school days. There is something in her personality that prevents her from establishing strong, positive relationships with other people. This fact is made evident when Mrs. Elvsted tells that at school Hedda always used to pull her hair. Hedda even said that she would burn it off (Mrs Elvsted's hair). When Hedda takes keen interest in Mrs. Elvsted's unhappy marital life, it is because Hedda herself has a dissatisfying home. She is unconsciously interested in learning how the other people (particularly Mrs. Elvsted) are coping with the problem of a dissatisfying married life. Mrs. Elvsted's remark about her husband: "I just can't stand being with him. We don't have a single thought in common..." ( Act I, p.304) may have been said by Hedda herself about George Tesman. In fact, Hedda becomes almost jealous when she learns about a strong emotional and mental bond between Mrs. Elvsted and Eilert Lovborg, when she learns that they have been working like "two good comrades" (Act I, p.306).

Hedda has realized quite clearly on their honeymoon trip that she and George Tesman, her husband, have quite different temperaments. Talking to Judge Brack, her family friend, about her honeymoon trip, Hedda tells him about the thing that was "most unbearable of all" (Act II, p.313). In her own words, it was: "To be together forever and always - with one and the same person" (Act II, p.313). When Brack asks indirectly if she "loves" Tesman, Hedda replies, "Uch, don't use that syrupy word" (Act II, p.313). Though Hedda does not think that her marriage with Tesman was such a remarkable thing, she makes a very significant remark about why she chose George Tesman, when she says: "... he went around constantly begging... for permission to let him take care of me ..." (Act II, p.314). This remark of hers sums up nicely the essence of her personality. It is her unconscious desire to be loved, but she wants to get it as a tribute rather than as a right. Hedda and Brack both belong to the same class, and they share a similar view of intimate relationships which is actually based on the fear of intimacy. They show their preference for a kind of "triangular arrangement" (p.314) in which there is room for "a third person" (p.314-15).

It is clear that Hedda does not love Tesman. But does she believe in the magic of love itself? Earlier in Act I, she referred to love as a "syrupy word" (p.313). In Act II, while talking to Lovborg, her former friend, she says: "Love? Don't be absurd" (p.324). When Lovborg asks her if there was an element of love in their relationship (between Lovborg and Hedda) in the past, Hedda's answer is quite complex: "... there was something really beautiful - something fascinating, something brave about this secret comradeship" ( p.325); but it was not love! Through Lovborg, Hedda, as a young girl, wanted to have a glimpse of the world that was not permitted to her. Both Hedda and Lovborg blame each other for breaking off that "comradeship" which

they shared secretly in the past. Talking about the sad end of their secret friendship, Hedda tells Lovborg that their friendship was broken, "... when it looked like reality threatened to spoil the situation" (p.326).

It is quite significant that Hedda fails to establish a passionate relationship with Lovborg, though their relationship had many positive qualities which Hedda admired. Hedda acknowledges that they were "... two good comrades, two really good, faithful friends" (p.324). She liked to be frank and open with him. The most significant aspect of this relationship was that Lovborg made all those confessions to her which no one else knew in those days. It was a clear proof that Hedda had some power over him - the sort of power which Mrs. Elvsted later had over Lovborg and Tesman. It was the sort of power which Hedda always burned to have over other people.

Hedda feels jealous of Mrs. Elvsted because she has power over other people – people like Eilert Lovborg and George Tesman. Hedda fails to realize that in order to have real power over important individuals, one needs to be selflessly intimate with them. Hedda has been close to all the three male characters that are significant in the play, i.e., Lovborg, Tesman, and Brack. But she fails to establish an intimate relationship that is lasting with any of these three men. In fact, the very thought of an everlasting relationship is unacceptable to her. It appears that she is incapable of establishing a strong romantic bond that is based on trust and sincerity. Her rejection of Judge Brack is quite justified because he also is suffering from the fear of intimacy. On intimacy, the Judge has almost the same views as Hedda herself has expressed. They both come from the same social circle also. Lovborg has succeeded in establishing intimate relations to a certain extent, but he fails to maintain them. From Hedda to Mrs. Elvsted to Miss Diana, he has been trying to find refuge for himself unsuccessfully.

There is a clear example of displacement when Hedda pours her anger on poor Miss Tesman's hat because Hedda cannot fully express her real frustration in an obvious manner. She was not only extremely bored on her honeymoon trip but was also greatly disappointed with Tesman's attitude towards herself. Hedda hates Miss Tesman because George expresses greater regard for Miss Tesman than for Hedda herself. Hedda has not shown any signs of conception, therefore, unconsciously, she dislikes the mention of a child. She burns Lovborg's manuscript for two psychological reasons: one, it was a sort of child to Lovborg and Mrs. Elvsted, and, two, it was a solid proof of a strong bond between Lovborg and Mrs. Elvsted. Hedda takes great interest in Mrs. Elvsted's marital affairs because unconsciously she is thinking of her own unsatisfying marital life. Hedda is interested in considering unconsciously the situations of Mrs. Elvsted and Lovborg: the two persons who are caught up in situations where their self-respect and freedom are at stake. Hedda feels surprised (and jealous) to know that Mrs. Elvsted has run away from the house of her husband and she is willing to put her honour in danger for the love of Lovborg. Hedda is also interested in knowing whether Lovborg is able to survive in a situation where life has lost its meaning for him. When Hedda sees that she will have to lead a life where she has no power over other people, rather other people (Judge Brack) might be having control over her life, she takes her own life.

George Tesman is a research fellow in cultural history. He makes his appearance on the stage soon after the play begins. He has just returned after the honeymoon with his newly-wed wife, beautiful Hedda Gabler who has been his "heart's desire" (Act I, p.296). George's fear of intimacy is evident from the fact that all during his honeymoon, he has been travelling with a suitcase stuffed with "notes - just notes!" (Act I, p.292). George had taken a long honeymoon trip – extending over almost six months - but more than a honeymoon, he considered it part of his research project. It is quite ironic that a man who "carried off Hedda Gabler! Beautiful Hedda Gabler ... with all her suitors" (Act I, p.293) remained busy with his books during his long honeymoon trip. George, instead of taking interest in Hedda, often talked about his old slippers on their trip. Hedda often regrets the fact that Tesman is a specialist and nothing else. Tesman was also involved with Mrs. Elvsted in the past. Tesman's real motif in marrying Hedda is not to enter into a passionate bond with a woman. Though he has achieved his doctorate, he is still struggling to get recognition as a researcher and scholar. His ambition of becoming a professor is still a dream for him. Under these circumstances, Hedda is a sort of trophy for him and winning her hand in marriage is a kind of victory for him, at least at the social

level. Tesman becomes disinterested in Hedda as soon as he succeeds in marrying her. Towards the end of the play, when Tesman is working in close collaboration with Mrs. Elvsted, his real motif is not to enter into an emotional bond with her but rather to revive Lovborg's lost book. It would be a kind of intellectual achievement for him because work on his own book is still in its initial stages. For Mrs. Elvsted, however, this may be her last chance to enter into an intimate relationship with a suitable man.

## **Conclusion**

In the play *Hedda Gabler*, the characters like Hedda, Tesman, Lovborg, Mrs. Elvsted, and Judge Brack are the people who are driven by unconscious motives and desires of which they are not fully aware. Hedda and Tesman enter into a marriage bond not to establish a strong marital relationship that is based on passion and mutual trust. Tesman is still struggling to get substantial recognition in the field of his desire. For him, Hedda was a sort of trophy and winning her raised status in the society. For Hedda, Tesman was someone on whom she thought she could exercise her power and when she failed in having power over Tesman as well as over other people, life became meaningless for her. She experienced anxiety when she failed to repress her secret motives. Her defense mechanism broke down and she ended her life. Mrs. Elvsted has been trying unsuccessfully to establish intimate relations with different men. She also wants to have influence over her friends and lovers and that is why she tries to prove that she is useful for them. Brack has declared frankly that he is not interested in a lasting bond with a single individual. He, too, is afraid of building a strong bond with other individuals as it will jeopardize the power which he enjoys over other people. The case of Eilert Lovborg is much more complicated than the other characters. He did succeed in establishing strong bonds with Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted to a significant degree but failed to maintain them. He seems to be in search of his lost object of desire in the Lacanian sense. Thus, the play *Hedda Gabler* is quite rich in its psychoanalytical implications and the fear of intimacy is a significant feature of the psychological personalities of the most of its characters.

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