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Absurd Ethics and Suicide in Hedda Gabler

Hedda Gabler the unruly woman, the force of nature that wants to watch the world burn, the fierce opposition to the prison she lives in: these are some of the more extreme ways people view Hedda as a character. The more negative reviews around the time it came out claimed she was a "monster created by the author in the form of a woman who has no counterpart in the real world" and "We neither understand nor believe in Hedda Gabler. She is not related to anyone we know" (Templeton 204). Fear and wonder are aspects of Hedda's character thrust upon the audience as they hear her utter the phrase, "Now I'm burning your child, Thea! With your curly hair," (Ibsen 246) an act so drastic that it receives the aforementioned reactions. However, it is the final act of suicide that continues throwing audiences into confusion. Why would someone who exerts so much physical and psychological control on the other characters decide to take her own life? It is this action that interests me, and calls for an inquiry into the ethics of Hedda as a character, and as a representation of the 'trapped woman,' similar to Nora and many of Ibsen's women, where one has an obligation to society and yet vehemently opposes said obligation. Due to the complications of misogyny in many of the traditional views of Hedda, and in order to fully focus on her suicide, it is important to try and view Hedda as an Absurdist character--similar to Camus' 'Absurd Man'--and the normative claims it makes on suicide. As an absurd character, Hedda's actions and her representation of the 'double absurdity' women face in society, must be seen as ethical in an effort to fight societal structures, but unethical when it comes to her suicide.

In order to investigate the connections and consequences of Hedda's absurdity, it is important to understand the absurd as described by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In one of his most influential works, Camus describes the absurd, writing, "the absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 28). The need he describes is that of meaning, and it is only when one becomes conscious of this conflict that one experience the absurd. Any investigation of the world in search for meaning, especially religion, is met by a silence that leaves the subject in the 'desert of the mind.' It is in the desert, a landscape known to many, a mind is left devoid of water, lacking the essential materials needed for humans to live, and yet here lies a being. The human left to die lives, and "that revolt of the flesh is the absurd" (14). Nothing exists in this space to nurture said human, and yet there is this unthinkable ability to survive. This revolt is what completes the cycle of the absurd reasoning, "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (54). "At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face"--this is the moment of consciousness--and after that strike, a person is left alone in the desert, and all that is needed is the revolt against death" (10-11). Living ends up being the only thing one can do to oppose the absurd, and in the desert life is most vital.

Due to the rhetoric of Camus, it is further necessary to understand the 'double absurdity' of women in society, creating a parallel to the original conception of the Absurd Man. The Absurd Man is one who goes through the process of the absurd from consciousness to revolt. Sisyphus is Camus' paramount example, and he expresses his plight through the unearthly task of rolling a rock up a hill and watching it fall back down for eternity (199-123). Every time Sisyphus reaches the top of the hill he watches the rock roll, so he descends to retrieve it, and "it

is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. [...] That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness" (121), and as he continues his mundane task, a futile inevitability, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). His happiness, his smile is the revolt against the futility of his actions. In the death of a never-changing action, he lives.

Because Camus creates a gender binary by only using male examples, and further feeding into the systematic order of philosophy, one must extrapolate the Absurd Man's process to accommodate the subjectivity of women. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir begins by posing the questions about gender binaries and feminism, "Is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women?" (Beauvoir 3). This question on the existence of women problematizes the traditional ideas about what women are, and what they should be: a fascinating discussion pertaining directly to Hedda and her relationship to Thea, to be discussed later. The idea of male othering of women establishes male subjectivity, and "the man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find in her a deep complicity. Hence woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as *Other*" (10). Over the centuries man has othered women in order to discover subjectivity, but this has created an entire section of the human population subsequently unable to establish their own subjectivity, since one cannot have subjectivity without maintaining the Other's otherness. This thought becomes a complicated play with words, but it is important to recognize this othering of women as a representation of the absurd. Woman desires to gain subjectivity in order to make meaning of her life, and yet because Man has created her as Other, the world is

meaningless. This is the absurd, and all she can do is live. Before consciousness of the absurd happens, there is a preliminary consciousness of the absurdity of women. This creates an absurdity for women that then exists within the traditional understanding of the absurd. Two absurdities exist, acting on women, trapping them in the male-dominated society, and yet there is life, and therefore revolt. For the sake of further inquiry, this 'double absurdity' is the cornerstone of the Absurd Woman.

Hedda Gabler was not always an Absurd Woman, but the action of the play catalogues her various steps toward consciousness, and then investigates the moment of revolt. Hedda is conscious of the absurdity associated with women, expressed in her first discussion with Judge Brack. After a lengthy discussion about her happiness, Hedda expresses "Yes, there we have it! It's these paltry circumstances I've landed up in…! That's what makes life so painful! So positively ludicrous!...Because that's what it is" (Ibsen 208). The boredom she has come across in domestic life stifles her like the flowers in the room. In conforming with the societal norm of marriage, she has given into otherness, and "is trapped for life in the stultifying world of the Tesmans, pregnant by a boy/man entranced by his slippers" (Templeton 214). Nothing around her makes sense and she lives in a house she never enjoyed, where "in this ardour for Lady Falk's villa Jörgen Tesman and I met in mutual understanding" that she would perform the role of woman in the marriage, including pregnancy (207). In this section she silently expresses the desire for excitement and life, as her continual talk of boredom and death infers. This is only the consciousness of the absurd surrounding every woman stuck in the male-dominated society. The revolt comes from living, but contains no actual change. However, due to this consciousness, Hedda is placed in a role of agency as she begins to revolt against her second absurdity.

After the audience views Hedda's initial consciousness, she begins to express her desire for freedom from societal constraints, but when this freedom is deemed impossible, Hedda finally experiences the absurd, completing the double absurdity. The first obstacle to her freedom is the relationship between Ejlert Løvborg and Thea Elvsted. Thea acts as a counterpoint to Hedda's confinement. As a woman she went from being single, to a housekeeper, to a mistress of the master, to marrying the master, and finally running away from the master, escaping the grasp of a much older patriarch. Opposed to Hedda's path from daughter to wife, Thea has more social movement as a woman. Hedda and Thea's visual counter comes through their hair, where "unlike Hedda, the thicker-haired Thea has the courage to challenge society's conventions by leaving her husband to follow the man she loves, and her 'hair is a manifestation of her femininity and a symbol of those female instincts which Hedda either does not possessor refuses to acknowledge'" (Templeton 209). For Hedda, the destruction of Thea is equivalent to gaining freedom, as her "need to put some meaning into her life, even at the cost of borrowing it, or stealing the meaning out of someone else's" manifests (231-232). The burning of the manuscript as a symbolic act of killing Thea's--and possibly her--baby, acts as a ritual taking of Thea's ability to transcend the societal structures associated with marriage. She can have her hair, and perform the escape exemplified by Thea. For once she has won.

However, when looking at Thea, one notices that her "unconventionality is the approved sort or women; she risked reputation for a man," leading Hedda to only truly face the absurd in the final act of the play after recognizing that her attempts to escape absurdity was futile (219). Hedda knows that she is trapped in her house with Tesman, and she attempts to steal Thea's unconventionality. However, "throughout the play, Hedda identifies with heroic masculinity and

despises domestic femininity," where "Hedda's horror of *det lave* ("the low") is a horror of the ordinary and the everyday, which she associates with farce" (Moi 317; 316). It is after Hedda expresses her act of anger and resentment--the burning of the manuscript--that she is exposed to the audience. Her real desire is to escape the role of woman and become a man, because that is the place of power in the world, and she knows she will never be free as a woman. In the aftermath of her manipulations, including provoking Løvborg's suicide, her ideals are crushed and she is further faced with entrapment. Judge brack approaches her, inquiring about her involvement in Løvborg's death, and in turn blackmails her into adultery:

> BRACK: Well, fortunately there is nothing to fear so long as I keep silence.
> HEDDA: And so I am in your power, Mr. Brack. From now on I am at your mercy.
> BRACK: Dearest Hedda...believe me...I shall not abuse the position.
> HEDDA: In your power all the same. Subject to your will and your demands. No longer free! No! That's a thought that I'll never endure! Never!
> BRACK: One generally acquiesces in what is inevitable.
> HEDDA: Perhaps you're right.
>
> (Ibsen 262-263)

Løvborg denied her an honorable death vicariously, and she once again finds herself trapped by the society she is so desperately trying to escape. She cannot become a man and she cannot escape them. Everything around her closes in, and as the world spirals into chaos she stares into the abyss. This is where we find Hedda at the end of the play, a woman trapped by society, unable to transcend her situation, who can only see boredom and oppression for the rest of her life. She is the female version of Sisyphus, and "*suddenly she is heard to play a wild dance tune on the piano*" (263). She is paused, conscious and at the crossroads. Can we imagine her happy? When the act of eternally rolling a rock uphill is represented in a realistic human being, can we continue saying to ourselves, *faut-il imaginer Hedda heureux*?

Watching the progression of Hedda through to her moment of consciousness allows for a much more understandable and comprehensible character, especially when faced with the normative rightness of her actions. Would one normally classify the act of deliberately destroying someone else's well-being, for a seemingly incomprehensible reason, good? In an effort to revolt against the absurd in her situation, this action is not deemed good, but rather it is necessary for Hedda's personal development. Hedda is on her way to fully representing an Absurd Woman, but it is in her final action that she falls short.

Camus' absurdism does not make many normative claims, but one that rings throughout his essay due to its placement in the beginning, is the claim that when faced with the absurd, suicide is not a valid option. For Camus, "dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" (Camus 6). As the mind becomes conscious and is thrust into the desert, it is the revolt that shows the value of life, and then there is the opposite. There is nothing in this desert except for the human facing the absurd. Natural death is imminent, but suicide is always an option, for "in its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death [...] the point is to live" (54; 65). The absurd is something that, when conscious of it, there is no going back. It is a "passion, the most harrowing of all" and the revolt against death is all a being has in the world (22). That step away from the inevitable is the first step toward absurd freedom. Through the acceptance the absurd, one is free from meaning.

As one returns to Hedda as she plays the piano, she is at this point in the desert: revolt and die, or die now. As a representation of the Absurd Woman, she does not complete her progression. She does something that, for an ethics of the absurd, is the only unethical act one can do. In the double absurdity it is understandable, and in fact most acts of suicide can be looked at as understandable in some way, that that weight may weigh heavier, but it still saddens the heart to see such an action take place. As Judge Brack ends the play, "people don't do such things!" (Ibsen 264), and yet this is not such an uncommon act. As Joan Templeton states, "In *doing* what 'people don't *do*," deviant Hedda dies acclaiming her difference, the pistol shot her final 'Non Servium'" (Templeton 232), and yet that difference is meaningless as she never fully completes to progression of the Absurd Woman.

Even in this analysis there continues to be a sense of the senseless in Hedda Gabler. It is difficult to approach this work as a white, heterosexual male and not try and find a way to fix a problem or explain the unexplainable, and yet "Ibsen's protagonist remains an enigma and his drama a work about nothing but its strange self" (205). In an opposition to the phrase, "Hedda, in other words, was born bad," by looking through an absurdist lens she moves away from the negative world of men claiming her as the representation of evil, and becomes a human being representing complete entrapment to the point of terror who makes a final human mistake. Nothing she does throughout the show is unethical until she accepts the abyss of the absurd, and even that act is inevitable. Hedda is not cruel. Hedda is not manipulative. She is not any of the negative connotations associated with her unless one gives her the chance of being a human being, and recognizing her consciousness. The image of her facing the absurd is one of the strongest portrayals of her humanity.

As an epilogue I will take on the role of director for a production of *Hedda Gabler*. The almost perfect representation of an Absurd Woman disappoints and denies the audience a picture of a progressive future. What do I want the audience to bring away from the production? A depressed demeanor, tears, or a handful of sorrows? No. I want the audience to do what Hedda could not. I want them to live.

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