

## Psychoanalytical Theory and its use in Henrik Ibsen's Plays: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes Henrik Ibsen's plays in the context of Freudian theory. In the realm of English literature, Freudian theory is frequently employed to examine the motivations of characters, the symbolism embedded within their narratives, and the underlying psychological states portrayed. The primary objective of this paper is to explore the instances where the author has employed psychoanalytic theory within his works. This qualitative analysis delves into the nature of the protagonists and their levels of self-awareness. The research methodology involved the utilization of two data sources: primary and secondary. The primary data source is the textplays themselves, while secondary data sources encompass articles, essays, biographies of Henrik Ibsen and Sigmund Freud, as well as other relevant materials obtained from the internet. The data collection method employed is rooted in extensive library research. Within "A Doll's House," Ibsen tactfully employs a psychological perspective to delve deeper into Nora's subconscious. Similarly, in the case of "Hedda Gabler," Hedda's profound yearning for autonomous control over her own life and her disdain for mediocrity can be deciphered effectively using a psychoanalytic lens.

**Keywords:** consciousness, desires, hysteria, literature, Oedipus complex, psychoanalysis

### Introduction:

Humans are social beings who are primarily motivated by social urges. During their interactions with society, they encounter various facets of life, often in desperate need of assistance from others to make ends meet. For human beings, interpersonal interaction is

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indispensable. In our interactions, we come across a multitude of diverse individuals, each with their own unique qualities and personalities, adding vibrancy to our existence. However, it is not uncommon for friction to arise during these interactions, leading to hurt feelings, disappointment, and anger. Such conflicts may stem from offensive speech, writing, or actions that inadvertently offend others (Sigmund Freud, 733-739).

Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright (1828-1906), is hailed as one of the central architects of contemporary drama, often referred to as the "father of modern drama." His writings are renowned for their psychological depth and accurate portrayal of characters.

Born in Skien, Norway, Ibsen faced financial hardships in his early years. However, his later works gained international acclaim, while he initially enjoyed success as a playwright in Norway while pursuing a career in theater. It is his realistic plays, which explore contemporary social and psychological themes, that brought him the most recognition.

1. "A Doll's House" (1879): This play addresses women's rights and cultural expectations through the story of Nora Helmer, a woman who discovers her confined position in her marriage and society.

2. "Hedda Gabler" (1890): The central issue faced by the protagonist, Hedda Gabler, is her sense of being trapped and unsatisfied with her life. Hedda is a complex and intriguing woman who confronts her social obligations and personal ambitions.

Before psychoanalysis turned the unconscious mind into a field of methodical study, according to Freud, poets made the discovery of it. Psychoanalytic theory was greatly influenced by literature, especially drama. Examples of this genre include Greek tragedies, Shakespeare's plays, and Ibsen's socially and psychologically charged dramas. It is no accident that the Oedipus complex, which is frequently hailed as the seminal discovery of psychoanalysis, was named after the tragic figure of Sophocles rather than the original narrative. Freud also invoked Ibsen and Shakespeare to support the Oedipus complex's universal applicability. Poets, according to Freud, have transcended common people and have a greater "knowledge of the mind" (Freud, 1907, p. 8).

Freud's works illustrate the argument how literature significantly contributed to the conceptualization of psychoanalysis. Moreover, his interpretations of literary and dramatic works laid the groundwork for a tradition of psychoanalytic literary criticism that saw psychoanalytic theory as an established truth, providing literary analysis with a scientific foundation.

Early in the 20th century, contemporary psychology began to take shape, and as it did, so did the psychological examination of literary works. Concepts from eminent sociologists including Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and Otto Rank were included into this style of criticism.

Freud initially employed psychoanalysis as a technique for treating neuroses, but he quickly expanded its scope to consider broader societal developments and practices, including warfare, mythology, religion, literature, and other domains.

Literature has served as a source of psychoanalytic concepts and has also been used in the explanation and exploration of psychoanalysis. We have observed attempts to apply psychoanalysis to literature, while literary criticism has utilized psychoanalytic theory to analyze works of literature.

Ibsen's plays frequently grapple with contentious and thought-provoking issues, sparking

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important discussions. His exploration of the human mind and societal norms has had a profound impact on subsequent playwrights and literary figures. The psychological depths, motivations, and intricate relationships depicted in Ibsen's tragedies can be understood within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis. Numerous essays, articles, books, and academic studies have examined the alignment between character actions, motives, and conflicts in Ibsen's plays and Freudian ideas of the unconscious, repression, sexuality, and the Oedipus complex.

Ibsen's works pushed the boundaries and questioned established norms in theater, contributing to the flourishing of modern drama. His influential body of work continues to be studied, performed, and honored worldwide, upholding Henrik Ibsen's enduring legacy.

Psychoanalysis enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate psychological facets of Ibsen's characters and their relationships. By elucidating the underlying symbolism, emotional conflicts, and significance present in his plays, psychoanalysis sheds light on the inner workings of the human psyche as portrayed in his dramas.

Literary criticism and theory have always drawn strong parallels to psychoanalysis. Despite being a contentious approach for many readers, psychoanalysis has been employed by authors in their written works. This article aims to explore instances where authors have utilized psychoanalysis in their literary works.

#### **Literature Review:**

Sigmund Freud, in the late 19th century, developed psychoanalysis, a psychological theory and therapeutic approach, with the aim of exploring and comprehending the unconscious mind and its impact on individuals' emotions and behavior. His contributions encompassed key concepts such as the unconscious, the Oedipus complex, defensive mechanisms, and the structure of personality (id, ego, superego). Freud's groundbreaking work laid the foundation for contemporary psychology and had a significant influence on fields like psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Despite its intriguing and rewarding nature, psychoanalysis is regarded as one of the most compelling approaches for interpretive analysis. It has evolved into a method for uncovering hidden meanings in literary texts, while also considering the writer's personality and their overall life experiences, from birth to the act of writing a book.

Applying Freudian theory to Henrik Ibsen's plays has received considerable scholarly attention. The psychological depths, motivations, and intricate connections depicted in Ibsen's tragedies can be comprehended within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis. The exploration of the similarities between Freud's ideas and Ibsen's works has been extensively studied, with a particular focus on plays like "Hedda Gabler," "A Doll's House," "Ghosts," and others.

Academics have analyzed the alignment between character actions, motives, and conflicts in Ibsen's plays and Freudian concepts related to the unconscious, repression, sexuality, and the Oedipus complex. Ibsen's works challenged established theatrical norms, contributing to the flourishing of modern drama. His influential collection of work continues to be studied, performed, and honored worldwide, ensuring the endurance of Henrik Ibsen's legacy.

Psychoanalysis enables a deeper understanding of the intricate psychological aspects of Ibsen's characters and their relationships. By shedding light on the deeper layers of

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symbolism, emotional conflicts, and significance found in his plays, psychoanalysis elucidates the inner workings of the human psyche as portrayed in his dramas.

Ibsen faced strong objections to his portrayal of neurotic characters, particularly notable in the case of Hedda Gabler, a character deemed enigmatic and difficult to comprehend by reviewers. Critics fiercely debated and criticized Hedda Gabler, leading to widespread confusion upon its simultaneous publication in English, German, French, Dutch, and Russian, as noted by Hans Heiberg.

Such analyses provide deeper insights into the intricate psychological nature of Ibsen's characters, offering alternative perspectives and shedding light on subtextual meanings. Within the realms of literature, psychology, and cultural studies, there remains ample scope for further investigation and discourse on the relationship between Freudian theory and Ibsen's plays.

### **Methodology and Questions:**

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Qualitative research that analyzes characters and themes through psychological lenses, often drawing on Freudian or Jungian theories.

1. Had Henrik Ibsen found out about Sigmund Freud concentrate on psycho examination and set it up as a regular occurrence in his plays?
2. Was Henrik Ibsen the power behind Freud's hypothesis?

### **Analysis:**

#### **Hedda Gabler as a subject of Freudian psychoanalysis:**

Hedda Gabler, the central heroine of Henrik Ibsen's 1890 play "Hedda Gabler," holds significant recognition as one of Ibsen's most prominent creations, second only to Nora Helmer (May 80). Rather than being portrayed solely as a victim of the societal limitations imposed on women during that time, Hedda is depicted as a victim of her upbringing as the daughter of a General. A key element for understanding Hedda Gabler's character lies in the presence of the General Gabler image within the play's interior room, serving as a constant visual reminder throughout the narrative. Ibsen intended to portray Hedda Gabler more as the General's daughter than as Tesman's wife. Her upbringing under her father's influence instilled within her a profound sense of discipline, surpassing her preparation for marriage or motherhood. Moreover, she imbibed a range of traditionally masculine behaviors such as horse riding and pistol shooting.

Throughout the play, Hedda is often seen engaging with her father's pistols, which can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the Freudian concept of the "phallic symbol," encapsulating her repressed desire to embrace masculinity. Her admiration for the alluring and frequently sexual pursuits typically undertaken by men stems from this masculine training. As a consequence, she rejects feminine practices and yearns to become someone who does not conform to societal expectations. However, being a woman, she finds herself restricted by the rigid confines of social norms, unable to transform into the person she aspires to be. Consequently, she suppresses her unfulfilled desires, perpetually longing for unattainable objet d'art.

As Hedda Gabler continues to grapple with these psychological conflicts and repressions, her

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behavior gradually reveals signs of neurosis, further exacerbating the inherent mental imbalance she experiences. In spite of her undeniable allure as an attractive young woman, none of the men who show interest in her venture as far as proposing marriage. As she progresses through the aging process, a profound sense of despair begins to consume her. Ultimately, she accepts Tesman's marriage proposal, albeit conditionally, for Hedda acknowledges the financial security that Tesman stands to gain through his anticipated appointment as a professor.

In an intricate tapestry of emotions and societal constraints, Hedda Gabler's character captivates audiences as she navigates the intricacies of her upbringing, contemplating her desires and confronting the limitations imposed upon her.

Regarding this, Havard Nilsen stated that As the story progresses, it becomes clear that she did not marry her recentlywed husband out of love, but rather out of a peculiar combination of convenience and desperation, possibly coupled with depression and loneliness.

Tesman, however, finds himself unable to secure the prestigious professorial position he had fervently hoped for. This unfortunate circumstance implies that Hedda, his wife, would be unable to attain the sufficient financial means to sustain the opulent lifestyle that she aspires to lead. Persistently, Tesman rebuffs her earnest pleas, which encompassed the acquisition of both a manservant and a magnificent steed, citing their need to exercise prudence with their expenditures until he receives an invitation to assume a professorship. Consequently, a deep sense of discontentment takes root within Hedda, manifesting in her restless demeanor and her peculiar fascination with her late father's firearms.

Moreover, Hedda's disheartenment extends beyond her unfulfilled material desires; her marriage, devoid of love, fails to provide her the contentment she craves. Trapped within the monotony of her existence, day by day, her once-vibrant personality fades into a state of deterioration. Paradoxically, amidst her profound dissatisfaction, Hedda remains fixated upon the societal expectations imposed upon women, a testament to the relentless indoctrination of conventional norms by her father. An overwhelming sense of melancholy pervades her as she laments her union with Tesman, yet lacks the strength of character necessary to break free from him.

It is worth noting that well before her marriage, Hedda rebuffed the advances of Lovborg, a man with whom she had some connection. This inclination can be seen as suggestive of an "Electra complex" or an "Oedipus complex," for she yearned for an individual who possessed the same magnetic allure as her father. Alas, her spouse and the flirtatious men surrounding her fail to emulate her late father's commanding presence. Strikingly, although she yearns for physical gratification, Hedda remains devoid of any genuine attraction toward anyone, leaving her unable to satiate her own sexual desires.

Ibsen demonstrates in this play how Hedda's "suppression" of her sexual urges has a significant impact on her behavior throughout the play, making her a victim of "sexual frigidity" (Clurman 162). She has been denied everything she has ever wanted as a result. This suppression gives birth to her extremely neurotic personality. Hedda is a woman who is drawn to the freedom that men experience, as was already said. She used to have Lovborg recount all of his outrageous sexual exploits when she was a small kid. Later in the play, she even tells Brack that she would like to 'come along as an invisible bystander' and observe the men's unrestrained pleasure of the party.

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**To borrow from Gail Finney's words:**

Hysteria develops from the conflict between Hedda's unfeminine tendencies and the actions she takes to follow the traditionally feminine route of marriage and pregnancy.

Hedda's manifestation of 'hysteria' stems from her profound discontentment with the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. Firmly resistant to succumbing to the roles of wife and mother, Hedda finds herself trapped in a life that falls short of her desires, ultimately plunging her into a state of despondency. The catalysts for her hysterical behavior can be traced to her undesired pregnancy and the unfulfilling marriage she is tied to. In a similar vein to Nora's cathartic Tarantella dance in "A Doll's House," Hedda seeks solace and release through the unconventional piano melodies she plays, a poignant outlet for her inner turmoil. An undercurrent of envy permeates Hedda's interactions with others, a sentiment fostered by her father's repressive imposition of social conformity, which denied her the freedom to partake in wanton and sexual exploration. This resentment, akin to a type of psychological "transference," manifests itself as hostility, violence, and a deep-seated inclination for destruction, redirected towards those whom she perceives as possessing the opportunities she is denied. Through manipulative tactics, Hedda seeks to wreak havoc upon the lives of those around her, driven by her anger and the ensuing jealousy that engulfs her existence. This insidious nature of her character is exemplified starkly when she goads Lovborg into attending a party, fueled by her envy of Mrs. Elvsted, resulting in calamitous consequences. When Lovborg returns from the gathering disheartened by the loss of his manuscript, Hedda, instead of returning the precious document, encourages him towards a path of self-destruction, even bestowing upon him one of her father's pistols, romanticizing the notion of a beautiful demise.

Hedda's destructive disposition extends further as she succumbs to jealousy, which ultimately leads her to burn Lovborg's manuscript, further deepening her malevolence. This penchant for destruction, which Harold Clurman identifies as a characteristic of the neurotic temperament, coupled with Auguste Ehrhard's designation of her as 'the demon of destruction,' underscores the perturbing nature of Hedda's character. It becomes evident that this cruelties instilled within her were present since her early years, as evidenced by her troublesome behavior towards Mrs. Elvsted during their school days, from pulling at her hair to even threatening to burn it off. Hedda's propensity for destruction solidifies her status as an abhorrent figure, further exacerbated by her refusal to take responsibility for her actions—a refusal that becomes an undeniable aspect of her neurosis.

Central to Hedda's neurotic psyche is her vehement denial of responsibility, evident in her distorted thinking, wherein she feels entitled to be married but vehemently rejects the idea of bearing a child. She vehemently dismisses any hints or allusions to her impending pregnancy unintentionally made by Tesman. Rather than embracing the responsibilities of impending motherhood, Hedda obstinately counts down the months with growing disdain. Any mention of her obligations as a parent, as highlighted by Brack, baits a cauldron of fury within her, as she resents all forms of duties that encroach upon her pursuit of a life free from any distressing or unsightly aspects.

In summary, Hedda's hysteria arises from an entrenched dissatisfaction with prescribed gender roles, leading to a spiral of despair and destructive behavior. Repudiating conventional

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expectations, Hedda's character is fueled by envy, transference, and a profound aversion to responsibility, resulting in a complex and deeply troubled persona that captivates audiences while inciting both intrigue and repulsion.

Following this, Randolph Goodman stated that:

The drama Hedda Gabler portrays a kind of neurotic mentality that is more commonplace today than it was at the beginning of the century. Ibsen had an innate understanding of the psychological forces that lead people to conduct senseless and wanton deeds long before Freud.

### **Nora's Psychoanalysis :**

The character of Nora undergoes a profound psychological shift in Henrik Ibsen's 1879 drama, "A Doll's House," exhibiting resonances with the emerging concepts of psychoanalysis. Her evolution from a dutiful wife to a woman in search of autonomy and self-discovery can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of her psychological growth and liberation from societal constraints. This transformative journey aligns with several psychoanalytic principles, including the exploration of the subconscious and the process of individuation. While "A Doll's House" predates the full development of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Nora's character bears resemblances to some of Freud's ideas. One can argue that Nora's actions, such as forging her father's signature and discreetly borrowing money, reflect attempts to manifest her unexpressed needs and desires—an interpretation consistent with Freud's emphasis on the unconscious and repressed urges. Likewise, Nora's decision to abandon her family in pursuit of self-realization and a more truthful existence can be seen as a depiction of Freudian concepts relating to individuation and the quest for one's identity. Although the play predates Freud's theories, it offers an intriguing lens through which to examine Nora's persona and assess its alignment with his subsequent ideas. However, it is important to acknowledge that the play was written before Freud's theories were fully formulated, hence it may not have been directly influenced by them.

Initially portrayed as a seemingly naive and obedient wife adhering to societal norms, Nora undergoes a remarkable transformation by the play's conclusion. She becomes cognizant of her own worth and recognizes the oppressive nature of her marriage. Ultimately, Nora resolves to depart from her family in order to embark on a journey of self-discovery, acknowledging the need to defy conventional standards and pursue her own identity and independence. The focus of the drama lies in Nora's metamorphosis from a constrained and submissive individual to an emancipated and self-aware woman. At the outset, she projects an image of helplessness and dependence, epitomized by her dynamics with Torvald and her concealed vices. However, as the narrative unfolds, Nora experiences an ego crisis and realizes her yearning for autonomy and validation—this realization ultimately drives her decision to part from her family. Nora's progression from gratifying immediate impulses (id) to pursuing self-identity and fulfillment (ego) aligns with Freud's notions of the id, ego, and superego.

### **Findings:**

It is worth noting that Ibsen's exploration of psychological and emotional themes in his characters predates formal psychoanalysis, but his works offer rich material for later interpretations through a psychoanalytic lens. While Ibsen may not have directly

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incorporated psychoanalytic theory into his plays, his deep exploration of human psychology and inner turmoil remains a significant aspect of his dramatic contributions

**Conclusion:**

The protagonists' quest for independence and identity is shown in both plays. A psychoanalytic perspective could explain Hedda's strong desire for control over her life and her contempt for mediocrity as an expression of her unconscious fears and aspirations. Many important psychoanalytic ideas that Freud would later address, such as neurosis, repression, hysteria, phallic symbolism, the Oedipus Complex, transference, etc., are clarified by the current Ibsen study. It is also commonly known that Freud was a huge fan of Ibsen and used several of his characters as inspiration for his case studies. Not to be overlooked is Freud's study of Rebecca West in Rosmersholm. Furthermore, according to Kate Taylor in a New York Times story, Freud studied Ibsen's plays in their original Norwegian.

Consequently, this reasoning suggests only one direction: Freud was undoubtedly influenced by Ibsen in some capacity while studying psychoanalysis. Hedda is more dangerously neurotic than Nora because, in contrast to Nora, who just leaves her children behind, Hedda vehemently opposes having children and ends her own life in order to murder her unborn child. The drama narrates the story of a woman who battles an internal conflict between her unfeminine desires and her journey down the conventionally feminine path of marriage and motherhood. She is presented as a woman who finds it difficult to define who she is. She also kills herself as a result of her identity dilemma. According to Randolph Goodman, the main character in *Hedda Gabler* (1890) is a neurotic woman who can't figure out who she is and ruins everything around her.

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