

A Comparative Analysis of Hedda's and Thea's Ways of Appreciating Beauty in *Hedda Gabler*

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Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* highlights the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical. This thesis tries to use the theory of art and moral by John Ruskin, a famous British writer and art critic, to make a comparative study of Hedda's "aesthetic" way of viewing beauty and Thea's "theoretic" way of appreciating beauty, pointing out that only viewing beauty with morality, people can lead a healthy life. The "aesthetic" way of ignoring morality and seeking only sensual pleasure will eventually do harm to people.

Keywords: *Hedda Gabler*, "theoretic", "aesthetic"

Introduction

Published in 1890, *Hedda Gabler* is recognized as a masterpiece of Henrik Ibsen, who is referred to as "the father of realism". This Norwegian playwright creates a compelling and enigmatic story which portrays a desperate and selfish housewife Hedda who is trapped in a loveless marriage with a boring scholar named George Tesman. She is dissatisfied with losing her aristocratic status after marrying this middle class man, and also falls in jealousy after learning that her longtime acquaintance, Thea, leaves her husband for the writer Eilert Lovborg, who used to be Hedda's suitor. She then creates plots and manipulates people. With her sick aesthetics, she not only instigates Lovborg to shoot himself in a beautiful way with the pistol she gives him, but also shoots herself in the end.

Ibsen takes the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical into consideration. Though Ibsen denies the fact that the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has impacted on him, as he states that he "has only read little and understood even less of" Kierkegaard (Ibsen, 1867 p. 179), Eivind Tjønneland does find evidence and points out that "Ibsen was influenced by the aesthetic mode of life depicted by Kierkegaard" (Tjønneland, 2016, p. 145). Ibsen wrote to the Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in 1865 that

I have expelled the aesthetic from myself as it earlier had power over me, isolated and with a demand to be valid in its own right. Aesthetics in this sense is now in my view as large a curse for poetry, as the theology is for religion. (p. 111)

As Tjønneland (2016) stated, these lines show Ibsen's "struggle with the aesthetic mode of life in Kierkegaard's sense" (p. 145). Kierkegaard (1941) believed that there are three stages of existence in which a person can move through in his or her lifetime: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage.

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Kierkegaard (1941) maintained that “while aesthetic existence is essentially enjoyment, ethical existence is essentially struggle and victory” (p. 256). The main motivations in the aesthetic stage are self-gratification and pleasure, especially the pleasure of experiencing beauty.

Tjønneland (2016) demonstrated that Kierkegaard’s influence on Ibsen’s dramas can be documented throughout the 50 years of Ibsen’s career (p. 145). Thus, the conflict between art and moral must have been lingering in Ibsen’s mind. He presents the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical in *Hedda Gabler*. He creates a heroine with a morbid aesthetic view which leads to serious ethical problems. This conflict coincides with John Ruskin’s theory of “aesthesis” and “theoria”.

With the help of John Ruskin’s theory of art and morals, this thesis intends to interpret the aesthetical issues and ethical issues in *Hedda Gabler*, illustrating that Hedda’s morbid pursuit of beauty goes against moral while Thea’s sincere way is consistent with morality. The aesthetic way of seeking only sensual pleasure will lead to self-destruction while the ethical way of viewing beauty can bring people hope. Only when people view beauty with theoretic eyes, that is, pursuing beauty within the bounds of morality, can they see things deeper and lead a healthy life.

Art and Morals

John Ruskin is one of the most influential English art critics. He comes up with aesthetic theories that offering a forceful justification of the attitudes of the Aesthetic Movement. Although he is a key figure in Aestheticism, the more he concerns about beauty, the more he realizes that to make a more beautiful world is related to politics, economy, and society. Thus, some of his theories also diverge from the aestheticists. One of the most important ideas in Aestheticism is “art for art’s sake”. However, unlike aesthetes who aver that art exists for the sake of beauty only and that it does not need to serve political, didactic, or any other purpose, Ruskin (2007) pointed out that art has three functions and the second of these functions is to perfect “the morality, or ethical state, of men” (p. 38). In Ruskin’s eyes, beauty cannot stand alone without morality. An artist’s work is the expression of his or her spirit, so the artist’s morality determines the quality of the work. For example, Ruskin (2007) maintained that Virgil’s infinite grace in the words and Pope’s severity “arise wholly out of the moral elements of their minds” (p. 40). The conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical also arises in the way people appreciate beauty. If a person pursues only sensual pleasure, then this way of viewing beauty may conflict with morality. On the contrary, if a person values the inside spirit more than the outside appearance, this way of appreciating beauty is ethical. In order to better distinguish these two ways of viewing beauty, Ruskin puts forward a conception of “theoria” to oppose “aesthesis”. German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten had introduced “aesthetic” in 1735, saying that “aesthetics should be a separate, independent concern dealing only with pleasures of perception” (Landow, 2015, p. 158). In Ruskin’s (1906) masterpiece *Modern Painters*, he states that “the term ‘aesthesis’ properly signifies mere sensual perception of outward qualities and necessary effects of bodies” (p. 13). He believes that the impressions of beauty “are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral” (p. 13). Ruskin tries to distinguish the morbid “aesthesis” from the grateful “theoria”. While calling “the mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness ‘aesthesis’”, he calls “the exulting, reverent, and grateful perception of it ‘theoria’” (p. 17). He avers that “aesthesis” represents a degradation of the response to beauty in nature and in art to a mere operation of sense or of custom. If people make beauty “a mere minister to their desires, and accompaniment and seasoning of lower sensual pleasures”, then all their emotions will “take the same earthly stamp”, and the sense of beauty will “sink into the servant of lust” (p. 19).

On the contrary, he claims that “theoria” is the operation of the faculty by which ideas of beauty are morally perceived and appreciated. Ruskin believes that only people with special minds are “capable of fine, true, and full experience of beauty” (Ladd, 2008, p. 108). In this way, artist who creates the greatest work of art is considered to be the most virtuous man.

In order to avoid viewing beauty in an “aesthetic” way and becoming a servant of lust, people should see things deeper, see through the fashionable appearance, and find something reverent. Then, people can find delight as well as beauty from the meanest objects.

Aesthesis: Hedda's Way of Appreciating Beauty

Through Hedda's “aesthetic” way of appreciating beauty, Ibsen demonstrates the conflict between the ethical ordinary life and the aesthetic longing for more. Tjønneland (2016) depicted these aesthetic longings as “the impossible” or maybe “a beautiful death” (p. 167). Hedda is born into a noble family. As the daughter of General Gabler, she is used to living a luxurious life different from Tesman's, so it is not surprising that she is very sensitive and picky about beauty. The villa that Tesman buys for her is “tastefully furnished” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 15). Also, she dresses “tastefully” (p. 27). However, Hedda's taste is not so noble as people think. When Aunt Julia visits them, she wears a new bonnet deliberately, it is bought on Hedda's account so that “Hedda needn't be ashamed of” her (p. 20). However, when Hedda sees this bonnet, she mistakenly thinks that it belongs to the servant, so she says rudely that this bonnet is old and blames Berta for putting this ugly hat on the chair. Hedda is angry because this bonnet does not go with this tastefully decorated room. It is true that Aunt Julia's aesthetic level is not the same as that of Hedda's, however, it is very rude of Hedda to point out publicly, so it is enough to show that her “aesthetic” way of appreciating beauty is against morality, which goes against Ruskin's opinion that first a person should be a good man and then his or her good taste can complete in him or her all that is best.

Like an artist with a morbid aesthetic, Hedda takes other people's lives as a work of art at her disposal. She acts like a director, creating plots and tricking people to act as what she designs. She marries Tesman whom she does not love, abets Lovborg to commit suicide, burns the book that Lovborg and Thea works so hard on. In this way, art becomes a mere amusement; it is divorced from any moral function. Hedda's way of viewing beauty degenerates into what Ruskin calls “aesthesis”. Once she sees beautiful things that make her jealous, she tends to destroy them. Hedda is a beautiful woman with agreeable brown but not particularly abundant hair, while Thea's hair is “remarkably light, almost flaxen, and unusually abundant and wavy” (p. 36). Thea's beautiful hair reminds her that she will never have the courage to pursue a new life like what Thea does, so her “aesthetic” way of viewing beauty push her to destroy it. She thinks Thea's hair is irritating and she used to threaten Thea to burn the hair (p. 43). To her, Thea is just an object. Burning Thea's hair brings Hedda sensual pleasure.

Ruskin (1906) believed that when someone is angry, reason has no time to operate, then he or she is controlled by passion, this is a case of sensual pleasure (p. 15). Hedda is controlled by passion, not reason. Knowing that Thea and her old-time suitor Lovborg have a close relationship, she is so angry and jealous that she loses her head. Lovborg used to be an alcoholic, with Thea's help, Lovborg becomes a brand new person and publishes a book. He has another manuscript that is even more promising. But he loses the manuscript when he is drunk and it is found by Tesman. Unlike Tesman and Thea, Hedda views the book in the “aesthetic” way, so instead of returning the book, Hedda burns it. While burning it, she murmurs that “now I am burning

your child, Thea! Burning it, curly-locks! Your child and Eilert Lovborg's" (p. 138). Her morbid "aesthetic" way of appreciating beauty makes her blind to the value of the book but only the sensual pleasure while destroying it.

What reflects Hedda's extreme aesthetic way the best is that she lends Lovborg a pistol and asks him to die beautifully. She deems Lovborg's suicide as "a deed worth doing", she thinks that "there is beauty in this" (p. 152). Hedda is particularly picky about Lovborg's way of death. She believes that temple is the most ideal part to shoot himself dead. Thinking of Lovborg's beautiful death brings Hedda sensual pleasure, but when she finally finds out that Lovborg died with the pistol wound to his bowels, she shows an expression of loathing.

What Hedda really cares about is the external form of art; she never pays any attention to the inner beauty. She wants to possess beauty and destroy it according to her own wish. Just as she destroys Lovborg and Thea's book and Lovborg, her morbid "aesthetic" way of appreciating beauty leads to her self-destruction.

Theoria: Thea's Way of Appreciating Beauty

Different from Hedda's self-centered "aesthetic" way of appreciating beauty, Thea's "theoretic" way is more ethical. She cares not only the external beauty but also the internal beauty.

Thea is a meek but passionate woman. Like Hedda, she also marries a man she does not love. There is a gap of at least 20 years between her and her husband, a sheriff, in age, so it is not surprising that these two have nothing in common. Her husband regards her simply as "a useful property" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 47). However, the misfortunes of life have not made her as cynical as Hedda. This loveless marriage finally pushes her to leave her husband and bravely pursue the life she wants. She appreciates Lovborg not as a work of art as Hedda does. After Lovborg's falling from social grace, she and her husband welcome Lovborg into their home as a tutor for her husband's children. During this process, Thea grows attached to Lovborg. She serves as Lovborg's helpmate and muse. She never intends to control him, but inspires him. As his muse, she helps him finish two promising books. Lovborg gives her credit as the co-author of his new book. Even Tesman claims that Lovborg has never written this well before and confirms that Thea is a real muse to Lovborg, all of which matches Ruskin's "theoria": It values morality over sensual pleasure and this influence is not one-sided. With Lovborg's help, Thea also changes a lot. He teaches her "to think, and to understand so many things" (p. 50). Thea is not manipulative, strong-willed or even that smart compared to Hedda. However, she treats people with all her heart. Thus, it is clear that her way of appreciating beauty surpasses "aesthesis" and reaches to "theoria".

In Thea's opinion, art should not be separated from morals and emotions. When Hedda sees Lovborg's death as a kind of performance art, she is heartbroken about it. She is in "mortal terror" (p. 148) and recriminates Hedda for "talking of beauty in such an act" (p. 152). Her "theoretic" way of appreciating beauty is no longer an objective evaluation towards Lovborg's death; it makes her feel the pain.

Thanks to Thea's reverent "theoretic" view of viewing beauty, she understands the value of the book that Hedda destroys and gives her whole mind to restore it. She has kept all the loose notes Lovborg used to dictate from. Though these notes are all mixed up, she stays positive and starts this difficult task right away. She believes that she can restore the book as long as she never gives up. While Hedda's "aesthetic" way leads to self-destruction, Thea's "theoretic" way leads to hope.

Conclusion

Applying John Ruskin's theory of art and morals, it can be found that there is a conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical in *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda's "aesthetic" way of appreciating beauty is against morality while Thea's "theoretic" way is ethical. What Hedda pursues is only sensual pleasure; however, Thea sincerely respects other people. By comparing Hedda's aesthetic way with Thea's, it is clear that the mere animal way of viewing beauty can lead to destruction. However, the reverent way of perception can lead to hope.

Ruskin's distinction between "aesthesis" and "theoria" and the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical portrayed by Ibsen in *Hedda Gabler* have profound guiding significance for the contemporary society. In Ruskin's view, all arts with the only purpose of recreation must lead to the degradation of society. Only when people throw away the "aesthetic" way of appreciating beauty and have a "theoretic" way of viewing beauty can they live a healthy life.

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