

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE WILD DUCK

Henrik Ibsen

Overview

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright—he wrote in Danish, the culture language of Norway at the time—who spent most of his adult life living in Germany and Italy. He is widely considered the modern world's finest social dramatist, after Shakespeare; his courageous look at the social world of his time, in the 'new Europe,' woke consciousnesses, and continues to do so, having won him, in his time, the title of the 'Founder of Modernism.' His ground breaking plays—'A Doll's House,' 'Peer Gynt,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'The Master-BUILDER,' 'John Gabriel Borkman'—a dozen in all—exercised an intense influence on European cultural consciousness, and, though dealing in social and familial 'scandals' which might seem dated today, continue to raise global theatrical consciousness. 'The Wild Duck,' however, tweaks the Ibsen pattern. In a sense, as the watcher discovers, the play in part argues for the importance of life-lies, illusions that make social happiness possible.

Story

The play opens at a dinner party held by Hakon Werle, a wealthy industrialist, and introduces us to Gregers Werle, Hakon's son, who has returned to his father's home after a lengthy self-imposed exile. After returning home, Gregers learns about the fate of an old friend, Hjalmar, who had long before married a maid in the Werle household, Gina. It is Hakon Werle who promoted this marriage, by providing a job for Hjalmar as a photographer. It had been the conviction of Gregers' mother, who has passed on, that her husband had arranged to job for Hjalmar, in order to cover up his own affair with Gina. This implication infuriates Gregers, who can't stand the idea that his old friend, Hjalmar, should be living a life built on falsehoods.

After the first Act, the action of the play takes place entirely at the home of Hjalmar, where at first sight domestic harmony seems to join Gina and Hjalmar, the latter of whom is busy with the photographic business he has set up in his house; the couple dote on their young daughter, Hedwig. Hjalmar confesses that Hedwig is both his joy and sorrow, for she is losing her eyesight. Hjalmar shows Gregers a loft where the family keep pets—for the delight of Gina; one of those pets is a wild duck, whom Hakon Werle—a huntsman but also a victim of failing eyesight—has accidentally shot, and which has been rescued and brought back to health.

Gregers gradually gets to know the family life of Hjalmar, and is no longer delighted. Hjalmar, it seems, keeps his daughter home from school, because of her eyesight problems, but cannot find time to tutor her, for he and his father are both preoccupied with events in the loft of their house. The older man is another hunter, and amuses himself by shooting rabbits and squirrels in the loft, while in the same place Hjalmar spends much of his time working at his photographic invention, the exact nature of which he will not specify.

Gregers, increasingly angry over the degenerating scene in Hjalmar's house, reveals to Hjalmar the secret of the long past affair between old Hakon Wehrle, and Gina; Hjalmar is deeply upset, turns away from Gina, and asserts he will no longer share with her the photography business in which they are partners. In the midst of the argument, between Hjalmar and Gina, Gregers enters, and is shocked to see that the couple is not relieved, to be freed of the burdensome lie concerning Gina's long past affair. He does not half realize the crisis that has hit Hjalmar and Gina. We learn that Hakon is remarrying, and leaving a subsidy for Hjalmar's dad which will, at old Ekdal's demise, revert to Hedwig. At this, Hjalmar begins to suspect that Hedwig is Hakon's,

and not his own, child. Suddenly Hjalmar cannot stand the sight of Hedwig, and rushes out of his house. Gregers, left to console Hedwig, who feels she is losing her father, suggests she should sacrifice the wild duck, for the sake of her father's happiness. She agrees that Old Ekdal should shoot the duck in the morning. Skipping important details, we can say that the conclusion reveals to us that Hjalmar, still preoccupied by his unrealized invention, is transferring the equipment to a new place of residence, while Hedwig, in despair at the fantasy that she has lost her father, goes to the loft and kills herself.

Themes

Truth. Much as Hakon has contrived, to keep secret the truth of his long past affair with Gina, events finally destroy his efforts. Hjalmar's suspicions lead to the destruction of his happy family, and to the death of Hedwig.

Childhood. As soon as Hedwig learns of the conflict between her parents, she is desperately anxious. Failing eyesight was no great burden to her, when her parents were at peace; but when their conflict took over, she was already a goner.

Characters

Gregers. Gregers is a haunted and dependent son, who is deeply marked by the marital infidelity of his father. He is crushed when he realizes that that infidelity has torn apart the conjugal life of his best friend, Hjalmar.

Hjalmar is an underconfident dreamer, who has for a long time constructed his life on the guilty conscience of Hakon Werle. When he realizes that even his beloved daughter may be Hakon's, he is crushed.

Hedwig is an innocent child of an adulterous relationship. When she is forced to realize, that her father is no longer united to her, she can think of no other solution than to kill herself.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Gregers (conscientious)

Character The first act finds Gregers Werle at a dinner party held by his father, from whom he is estranged, and whom he has not seen for a long time. At the party, Gregers meets an old classmate, Hjalmar Ekdal; each of the men suspects the other of hostility, but neither is quite right, and that very evening Gregers pays a visit to his 'old buddy.' They swap old tales, get reacquainted, and Gregers reacquaints himself again with Gina, now the wife of Hjalmar, and formerly a servant in the household of Gregers' dad. From the play's beginning, we have seen Gregers putting together the pieces of a puzzle in his mind; what he is gradually to realize is that Gina was the mistress of his father—and a terrible thorn in the side of his mother—and that Dad had married Gina off to Hjalmar, setting the proxy husband up as a photographer. A bad realization for Gregers? You bet. But what is the *character* with which he reacts? He makes Hjalmar aware of the whole story, disturbs (destroys) the tranquility of Hjalmar's family, and puts truth before that kind of ignorance (life-lie) that can often give us happiness.

Parallels Idealists shun or fear the 'life lie,' for they tend to be innocent and to revel in innocence. We see something of these traits already in Odysseus' son Telemachus, who is both naïve and hopeful. Modern literature offers parallels in such complex idealists as Hamlet, who knows and wants the whole truth to be out, but trembles through the process of achieving this: Pip, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, 1881, begins life in the humblest of circumstances but with a positive and hopeful optic onto the challenging new events the narrative forces on him; while Jude the obscure, in Hardy's novel of the same name, 1894, rides the stuff of dreams to make of

himself his ideal, a classical scholar, and though setbacks finally become the name of his game, he remains at heart a positive man trusting in the truth.

Illustrative moments

Encounter Gregers is genuinely startled to meet his old classmate, Hjalmar, at the opening dinner party at Gregers' father's home. We are, of course, only at the outset of discovering what Gregers is about to discover—that fate and personal history have trapped the two guys in a complex and finally deadly weave. Gregers has been isolated from his family for the 'sixteen or seventeen years' since he and Hjalmar met, and is innocently pleased to see how good his old friend looks. 'Well how goes it with you? You look well. You have put on flesh, and grown almost stout.' Little does Gregers know at this point—nor do we—what Gregers is about to learn, concerning his own mother, Gina, or Hjalmar's life-sized disappointments.

Bitterness Gregers is bitter toward his father, for his father's mistreatment of Gregers' mother, whom Dad had eventually replaced with a mistress, Gina, the now wife of Hjalmar. (Gregers is just beginning to put these details together in the First Act.) Learning that his Father is remarrying, Gregers accuses the old man of having invited him (Gregers) back to the house for dinner, in order to create a show of family unity. 'So this is what made it absolutely essential that I should come to town in person. For the sake of Mrs. Sorby (Dad's new bride) we are to get up a pretence of family life in the house...'

Counsel As Gregers realizes the relative impoverishment of Hjalmar—eking out a living as a photographer, dreaming pipe dreams of a great invention he is working on—and the 'life-lie' on which Hjalmar exists, not knowing who his wife really is, and that his child may not be his—as Gregers, the idealist, realizes all this he decides he must truth-tell and advise his friend. 'I don't say that your wing has been broken, but you have strayed into a poisonous marsh, Hjalmar; an insidious disease has taken hold of you.' Not surprisingly, Hjalmar rejects this characterization of his condition, but from now on Gregers will not be deterred from his 'helpful' path.

Confrontation As the play develops—and the expansion of Gregers' mind becomes the basic narrative—the young idealist increasingly blames his father for the woes of the life situations of himself, Hjalmar, Gina, and Hedwig, the eyesight-impaired daughter of Gina and Hjalmar. 'You have crippled my whole life,' he tells his father...it's thanks to you that I am continually haunted and harassed by a guilty conscience...' Gregers' dad urges his son to join him as a business partner, but is rebuffed, as he is when he tells Gregers that his inheritance is awaiting him. The idealist will hear nothing of it.

Discussion questions

Does Ibsen admire Gregers for his 'idealism,' his 'desire for complete transparency in human relations'? Or does Ibsen side with the 'life lie,' as a necessary survival tactic?

Is Gregers the idealist also a great friend to humanity? Does he want to improve Hjalmar's life? Or does he just want to promote honesty and understanding?

Does Gregers take sufficient responsibility for the bad blood between him and his father? Or does Gregers see himself almost entirely as victim of his father's bad actions?