

IDENTITY, SELF-REALISATION AND THE EMBODIMENT OF WOMANHOOD IN
HENRIK IBSEN'S NORA HELMER AND HEDDA GABLER

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requirements for the degree of BA in English

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Declaration

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen wrote about 19th century sensitive, taboo topics. His work addresses aspects like corruption, psychological struggles, women's rights, repressive social beliefs and such. Although Ibsen was never a self-proclaimed feminist, many of his plays including *The Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) have been considered to be significant additions to feminist literature. His complex female characters have been criticised heavily. While some argue that Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler are feminist heroines, some argue otherwise. The plays' anti-feminist criticism contributes to Ibsen's humanist philosophy. This paper will address secondary journals and other critics in analysing Nora and Hedda's impact in promoting women's rights. Looking at the contrasting themes of womanhood and identity, how these women navigate through a man's world to find their unique selves and their success in doing so, this paper will aim to answer if the characters are successful in advocating for women's individuality.

Keywords: womanhood, identity, unique identity, feminism, humanism.

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INTRODUCTION

There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a completely different one on woman. They do not understand each other; but in matters of practical living the woman is judged by man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man.—

Henrik Ibsen (1878)

Henrik Ibsen began the notes for his play *Et Dukkehjem* in 1878 with these words (Tornqvist 1). The play's title has been rendered in English as *The Doll's House* and is regarded as one of the first realistic plays to appear in theatre. Although these words were meant to reflect the struggles of Nora Helmer, the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, it does not fail to resonate with Hedda Gabler, the protagonist of *Hedda Gabler*.

For decades, social norms and gender stereotypes have dictated the roles and behaviour of men and women. According to Lois Wyse, "Men are taught to apologise for their weaknesses, women for their strengths." A patriarchal society demands men to feel guilty when disclosing their shortcomings and weaknesses, while women should express regret for expressing their strengths. Wyse believed that women should have the freedom to exhibit their strengths without facing social ridicule and repercussions rather than hiding them. In Henrik Ibsen's plays *A Doll House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), the 19th century setting of the story subjected the female leads Nora and Hedda to a lot of anguish and scrutiny regarding their actions and decisions. They both lived in male-dominated societies in Europe during the 1800s. In these plays, Ibsen provided a space for women to examine the society in which they lived. While Ibsen

casts Nora as the docile, passive and stereotypical 19th century housewife as the protagonist, he casts Hedda in a more nefarious and ludacris role as the antagonist. Regardless, both characters can be considered as feminist figures living in a masculine family devoid of happiness and seeking to escape their unhappy life at home under the guidance of their husbands. Both women eventually managed to get away from their husband's grip which is symbolic of these women breaking free from the social constraints which chain them to the femimne mould. Both characters find an escape for their situation or begin their journey to find themselves as individual human beings – Hedda committs suicide to get out of her position, whereas Nora leaves her household abandoning her children respectively. Nora's actions can be considered to align with Wyse's argument. In the end, Nora proudly displays her strengths and her ability to take control over her life, whilst Hedda hides hers as her death alludes to her scheming gone unrevealed. To enhance Ibsen's writing and better characterise the two female characters, Ibsen used a variety of literary themes and approaches through the play's diction, symbolic ending and underlying feminist tone. Nora and Hedda are two women whose activities were out of the norm for their period and would have been considered outrageous in the 19th century. The characters and texts explore women's oppression in the 19th century by drawing womanhood from two different, contrasting perspectives, illustrate the struggles of women recognising their unique identity and path of self-realisation through Nora and Hedda. The characters also put into question whether the two plays can be considered as feminist plays to begin with. Through these focuses of analysis, this paper will aim to dissect the question whether the characters in question, Nora and Hedda, are the ideal female characters to carry and promote a social cause, and be literary figures on standing against women's subjugation under patriarchal values.

Background and context of A Doll's House

Nora Helmer is a housewife in the late 1800s who surreptitiously pays off a loan without her husband's knowledge in Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. She needed the money to save her husband's life, so she took out the loan. Torvald was anxious and sick, so they took a vacation using the money she loaned them. Nora then lies and claims that the money was obtained after her father's death. Torvald grows outraged with Nora after the truth is revealed. This goes on for a while until he discovers their reputation hasn't been harmed yet. Nora became aware of her husband's true nature when she realised he was only furious because their reputation was in jeopardy. As a result, Nora makes the controversial decision to leave her husband and children to start a new life elsewhere. Nora's identity was shaped by her ability to seek out a fair relationship, which would have been unthinkable in Ibsen's time.

Nora is depicted as an obedient and selfless housewife who is not afraid to take up illegal means for the betterment of her husband, Torvald Helmer. As the story progresses, she transitions into a benevolent and strong woman, abandoning Torvald and her children to investigate societal views and understand these concepts for herself. Hedda, unlike Nora, is seen as a belligerent, selfish woman from the very start. She devastates the lives of those around her, particularly that of ex-lover Eilert Lövborg and childhood friend Thea Elvsted, only to end up taking her own life. Hedda is deprived of the stereotypical feminist traits which Nora embodies. Although Hedda's actions can be condemned, it is important to acknowledge that what she does, she does to secure her own happiness and safety. Moreover, the idea that Hedda is in someone's control or debt, particularly that of a male (either her husband, George Tesman or Judge Brack) is seemingly unacceptable to Hedda. Despite the fact that Nora appeared to have abandoned all

responsibility for her children and kept a secret from her husband, Nora had greater tenacity in tackling social norms and male oppression than Hedda in dealing with her life's challenges. These actions of the characters often set them up as contrasting female characters and question what Ibsen was trying to achieve particularly through Hedda.

Even if the characters do not appear to be interesting or revolutionary at the first glance, the subject matter of both plays and the message the plays convey is a significant contribution to feminist literature. *A Doll's House* has become one of Ibsen's most famous plays with parts of the play now being highlighted with respect to Nora's identity through a feminist lens. While *Hedda Gabler* is more subtle in embodying the suppression of women and their struggle with identity in a patriarchal world. It is worth noting that Ibsen never identified or labelled himself as a feminism. However, his speeches and work show that he was quite aware and concerned about the 19th-century status of women. This is demonstrated by the growth of his characters, particularly Nora, who by the end of the third and final act is more or less the embodiment of a modern woman in terms of choice and action.

When *A Doll's House* was first published in 1879, it was considered to be a coming-of-age play focusing on the lives and anxieties of Victorian Norwegian bourgeoisie women. As Ibsen gives an overview of the tragic losses and sacrifices which came with being born as a bourgeoisie female in a patriarchal society, feminism remains the overarching issue and both plays compact the struggles of women during the 19th century.

On the other hand, there is significant debate on whether or not Nora and Hedda can be considered as feminist icons. It is critical to address some of the issues that Hedda has

encountered during her married life i.e finding happiness in her married life, avoiding scandal by any means possible and most significantly, being independent.

Background and context of Hedda Gabler

Hedda Gabler was first published in 1890. From the very get go with the way she is described, to how she treats her in-laws and to how she manipulates the other characters, Hedda appeared to be a female character filled with malicious intent and no clear objective. This complexity and ambiguity in her character resulted in the initial reaction towards Hedda to be dismal; for audiences to condemn Hedda and later, for feminist critics to reject her as a feminist heroine.

Erling E. Kildalh describes the play and Hedda Gabler as:

Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen is a drama of psychological drives conditioned by a specific socio-economic environment. The particular social system against which the play is etched is its strongest determinant of character development. The woman Hedda Gabler is the product of a singular social heritage and milieu. She cannot but lose her unique magnetism if she is removed from her setting. (207)

However, justifying Hedda as simply a victim of circumstance is not entirely appropriate either. The story develops as Hedda schemes her way into securing herself and eventually, she finds herself in Judge Brack's debt and she herself brings upon her own demise. Nonetheless, it is necessary to question whether she was denied her rights like Nora or not, in order to demonstrate that Hedda Gabler is a feminist drama.

George Tesman, Hedda's husband, and Eilert Loevborg, her ex-lover, try to secure their positions by competing professionally. Hedda is unconcerned about their positions and is reluctant to endorse any of them or even entertain it. She is unconcerned with her husband's success, and she is unconcerned about what Loevborg writes. She solely competes with Thea, and not on a professional level, but in a sadistic and greedy way. She toys with Thea and her emotions while manipulating Loevborg who might cause her scandal. If security was a concern for Hedda, it is evident from the play that her marriage to Tesman provides her with financial and material security. Even under these circumstances, she had a desire to eliminate Loevborg from her life and continuously keep toying with Thea's mind with nothing to gain.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Henrik Johan Ibsen was a well-known 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is generally referred to as “the father of realism” and one of the founders of Modernism in theatre. He has a broad range of work which preach humanism and embody his beliefs regarding humanity. Such works include *Brand*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Emperor and Galilean*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *Pillars of Society*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Master Builder*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*. He is the second most regularly performed dramatist, while Shakespeare remains on top. *A Doll's House* had become one of the world's most acted out plays by the early 20th century. Through his plays, Ibsen spoke about humanism and equality. His plays including *The Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* have been analysed in light of feminist theories but Ibsen's intentions and messages transcend only attacking social and restrictive gender roles.

Social criticism, according to Irish playwright, socialist, and a co-founder of the London School of Economics, Bernard Shaw, is the most important role of all art. In “Mr. Bernard Shaw’s Works of Fiction: Reviewed by Himself,” he said that similar to most of his books, *Love among the Artists* also aimed to “instruct and comment on social ideas rather than to entertain audiences. Shaw’s “expository strategy is the deliberately rhetorical method of the platform speaker” (Crawford 20). Shaw spends minimal time on issues that are easily won and more time on points that are difficult to carry, a trait which can be observed by Ibsen who tackles the more taboo social issues. Leon Edel states that Shaw was “espousing in effect the idea that art should be didactic, that it should be a vehicle for a social idea – especially a socialist idea” (374).

Drama, according to Bertolt Brecht, is not merely a reenactment of an occurrence, but a potent weapon for determining social conditions. Marc Silberman argues that the comedies of Brecht aim “to reveal the incompatibility of ideology and the real social conditions of existence by challenging the audience or reader as partner not only to criticise the bourgeois, capitalist world, but also to recognize its very historicity, its limit” (183). It has the potential to be a tremendous tool for social change in addition to delivering entertainment. A socially conscious dramatist can utilise theatre as a powerful medium to study current societal concerns and convey them in his plays through personal or familial turmoil. The ancient Greek plays used mythological themes to attack social and political issues. Drama was used to enact stories from The Bible and recreate the lives of saints to preach morality during the mediaeval period. In the contemporary age, playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg addressed complex social concerns in their works. For Ibsen, the playwright’s societal concerns are revealed in *A*

Doll's House, particularly the situation of women in a patriarchal society. In England, Bernard Shaw was a proponent of the problem play. He used drama as a vehicle for social change.

The unifying element in many of Ibsen's dramas and also evident in *The Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, according to Michael Meyers, is his concern for the individual's battling in finding an authentic identity unique to themselves while battling repressive social conventions (Templeton 28-30). His characters, particularly female characters, are frequently torn between two aspects – a sense of obligation towards themselves and a sense of responsibility towards others. This analysis can be used to look at Nora Helmer's character in the play *A Doll House*. She is oppressed in her choices and lifestyle being dictated by her husbands throughout most of the play, presenting an inauthentic identity to herself, the people around her and the audience. Although the play is not necessarily about Nora finding herself and seeking out revelations which lead to self-realisation, towards the end of the play she does seek to discover her authentic identity unshackling herself from the constraints of patriarchal views (Templeton 29-31).

According to Philip George Neserius, the core principles that “become a beacon of light which Ibsen unhesitatingly followed through financial distress, social isolation, and severe and often malicious criticism by his contemporaries” are for man, “to be himself,” and “to realise himself.” He goes on to say that Ibsen's ambition to “advance the country and elevate the people” was a “cardinal aim” which he “consistently strove to attain” (25). Ibsen dared to be true to his convictions and spoke the truth when and where he saw it. Neserius further says, “If one never commits himself, he never expresses himself; his self becomes less and less significant and decisive. Calculating selfishness is the annihilation of self” (25). However, this sentiment was not true for Ibsen. In a letter to Bjornson Ibsen writes –

Had I to decide on an inscription for the monument, I should chose the words: 'His life was his best work.' So to conduct one's life as to realise one's self seems to be the brightest attainment possible to a human being. It is the task of one and all of us, but most of us bungle it. (359)

Ibsen worked hard to achieve this goal, and he was a staunch believer in living one's own life, in being recognized as one's own person, and in being understood. He cut ties with his own parents because he refused to be in a state of half-awareness and half-knowledge. He also willingly exiled himself from his homeland in order to better preach his message. Almost all of his works were composed during this time of residence overseas. He was met with a barrage of approval and disapproval, which must have reassured him that he had once again targeted correctly and hit hard at another worn-out, deteriorating social institution (Neserius 25).

Otto Heller argued that Ibsen despised the idea of modifying organised institutions and, above all, of bringing about political reforms. It was a misguided goal, for no reform could make society perfectly absolute in awareness and advancement (67). He further illustrates that Ibsen's goal was to assist society in seeing its flaws, breaking long-held idols and directing it to the truth. Ibsen has opened up avenues of communication that almost cover all aspects of human life. His views on the individual's relationship to society, democracy in general, women's emancipation are all aspects of his work that fascinate and hold the interest of many people to this day.

Emil Reich argued that in Ibsen's play *Catiline* we see a strategic revolt against the ruling class and against social institutions. This work influenced his predisposition to see the person as a unit whose interests are diametrically opposed to the state's general goals. From then on, his entire concept revolved around the individual's relationship to society. This became the primary

and core issue in Ibsen's writings. His revolutionary polemics are directed against the current organisation of human society's administration.

In *Letters of Henrik Ibsen*, Ibsen further writes that despite his continuous belief in women's strength and their ability to exist as individual human beings, he restricts his female characters in a specific social sphere. With *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda comes off as a rather malicious and self-serving character. Ibsen portrays her as someone spontaneous and eventually tells the audience that it was the ideal woman – the wife and mother with noble instincts – who reigned over humanity through her unnerving virtue, and not a woman of masculine intellect and talent (351).

Among Ibsen plays, *Hedda Gabler* won the most attention from critics after *A Doll's House*. In his discussion of Hedda Gabler, Herman J. Weigand indicates that it is “the last of Ibsen's plays to have the dramatic interest centred on a complex woman character” (246). He then explains Hedda's character as a combination of multiple contradicting traits that make it easy for critics to misinterpret her. Her feminine masculinity shadows the notion that the 19th century woman's life was heavily controlled, directed and manipulated by the masculine forces.

According to Montrose J. Moses, in *The Doll's House* Ibsen criticises a culture that accepts a marriage in which the husband is allowed to dominate an almost childlike wife – immature and undeveloped. Ibsen also criticises a society that allows a woman to grow up without being educated or having the opportunities to realise her own capabilities and powers (362). Rather, society itself represses such attributes in women. Although Nora becomes aware of the control she has over herself at the end, this development was not without obstacles. It is only when Ibsen places her in a situation that provokes Nora's self-realisation and forces her to

bring out her qualities, it gives her the vision and insight to realise where she had previously failed. This realisation separates Nora from Hedda. Nora became one of those fortunate individuals who are destined to broaden their horizon and the boundaries of human experience. Elizabeth Jacobs alludes to the letters written by Ibsen in this regard where Ibsen said, “man is right who has allied himself most closely with the future.” Jacobs adds that:

...today Nora's importance no longer rests on her then-courageous exit from the Helmer household, but on the deeper significance underlying this act – her awakening individuality, her courageous acceptance of herself as she then was, and her spiritualized imagination which reached ahead so surely and saw herself as she might become. (428)

According to Edward Dowden, Ibsen is concerned with the “discrepancy between our desires and our power of giving them satisfaction” (Jacobs 426). Although this statement was regarding Ibsen’s first play *Catiline* written in 1850, this aspect takes a prominent role in *Hedda Gabler*. Jacobs goes on to say that this necessity of realising one’s self to the limit of one’s possibilities is a desperate need. If one has “talent, intellect, imagination but no outlet for the latent energy,” then “one is faced with this most tragic of all situations, the realisation that one is doomed to be forever faced with the mockery of what might have been (426-427). Instead of obtaining this level of liberation and realisation, one is confronted with the most tragic of all situations: the understanding that one is doomed to be perpetually confronted with the mocking of what could have been.

In talking about womanhood, the theme of motherhood arises for both Nora and Hedda. According to Paul Rosefeldt, although Nora embodied the ideal feminine qualities which stereotype women, Ibsen’s commentary on patriarchy and its oppression is intertwined into how

the plays' address fatherhood. Most of the male characters in the play are failed fathers or have their own shortcomings as fathers. The female characters have also faced unfortunate circumstances because of the actions of their fathers or husbands. Robert Ferguson argues that in a heavily patriarchal society these women are criticised through a male perspective and in light of male views.

For Hedda, Joan Templeton says that this character has been analysed in multiple ways – as a woman who is devious and deceptive, manipulative and self-serving. Many scholars like Gail Finney, Ross Shideler, Birgitta Johansson, Janet Garton, Helena Forsås-Scott have noted that Hedda does not conform to the traditional role of a wife or mother especially in the light of the requirements of 19th century society and gender roles. Unlike Nora, who appears to thrive in her gender role till the end of the play, Hedda's behaviour alludes that she feels imprisoned in her marriage. Her dissatisfaction and rebellious nature is depicted more in her name, 'Hedda Gabler' where she has not taken her husband's last name. Gail Finney, Toril Moi and Harold Bloom have also commented on her masculine traits like her playing with pistols, being dismissive of her husband's concerns and her insensitivity towards Thea and Aunt Julia.

Jenny Björklund looks into Hedda through Judith "Jack" Halberstam's definition of female masculinity. Female masculinity, according to Halberstam, can help us comprehend "how masculinity is constructed as masculinity" (1). She claims that feminine masculinity is rarely viewed as a distinct type of masculinity. Instead, it is often regarded by "hetero and homonormative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach" (9). As per Halberstam's definition, female masculinity is a distinct category from masculine masculinity. Björklund

argues that Halberstam uses the theme of feminine masculinity to examine a queer subject in a position capable of successfully challenging hegemonic gender conformity paradigms.

Furthermore, Halberstam emphasises that “female masculinity is not a recent phenomenon”. She demonstrates that there were numerous forms of female masculinity even in the 19th century, all of which played essential roles in the formation of contemporary masculinity (Björklund 2).

Halberstam’s definition of the ‘tomboy’ is unique in analysing Hedda. In her definition, she claims that the tomboy is typically thought to be a prepubescent phenomena. The girl is expected to internalise femininity during adolescence, a process connected with repression, restriction, and punishment. Girls are required to adopt conforming kinds of femininity if adolescence means acquiring social power for boys. This concept can be used to analyse Hedda’s association with her father’s name and his pistols and her own internalised masculinity in relation to power.

Masculinity, as R. W. Connell has pointed out, must be viewed as a fluid and within a context. It is defined in terms of femininity. However, it is also crucial to note that there are many different types of masculinity. Halberstam focuses on female masculinities and does not mention Connell’s concept in her work, despite the fact that she recognizes that female masculinity is not a single phenomena but rather a variety of masculinities. Hedda Gabler benefits from a masculinity analysis that incorporates both of Halberstam and Connell’s ideas. The male characters in Ibsen’s play symbolise many types of masculinity, and Hedda relates to these masculinities in multiple ways. Connell’s theories can shed light on how Hedda’s masculinity is constructed in connection to the other characters. It also illustrates how masculinity (or fatherhood in some instances) is a process in which failure is a possibility.

With Hedda being the non-traditional female character, her position as a feminist character is highly debated. Yvonne L. Sandstroem refers to M. C. Bradbrook's comments on Hedda where he claims that "unlike the true tragic heroine, never gains insight" into her intellect and individuality (372-373). Similarly, Caroline W. Mayerson refers to Hedda Hedds as a "mock tragedy" and a "sardonically contrived travesty of tragic action, which Ibsen shows us is no longer possible in the world of the play. (159).

Through the views of feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir the feminist aspects of *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* can be seen. De Beauvoir was a feminist, author, and philosopher from France. *The Second Sex*, first published in French in 1949, would go on to become one of contemporary feminism's most memorable writings. De Beauvoir believed that women were not fully human because femininity was defined by males, that they were the 'other' in a world where humanity was defined primarily in terms of man's identity. De Beauvoir creates an existential history of a woman's life, detailing how a woman's attitude toward her body and functions evolves through time, as well as how society influences this attitude. She portrays both the positive and negative aspects of the feminine body, and women as both who are oppressed and free. The ambiguity of the female body pertains from the belief that women can use their bodies as a vehicle for her own liberation while still feeling imprisoned by it. There is no absolute truth in the situation. It all boils down to how much a woman sees herself as a free and capable individual rather than as a subject of society. Whatever we perceive, including other people, is rendered as a 'object' to our gaze and defined by us, according to Sartre. This idea is taken up by De Beauvoir and applied to men's perceptions of women. De Beauvoir claims that the fundamental concept of 'woman' is a male concept. Here, women are always the 'other' and

men are the 'self'. He is the subject and she is the object — men define what it means to be a woman. De Beauvoir concept can be applied to both Hedda and Nora – Hedda still identifying with relation to her father and yet trying to establish a sense of freedom and individuality through her last name, and Nora's subjugation in her marriage which is quite evident and eventual realisation of herself and her identity.

De Beauvoir's concept of the other can be implemented to analyse the gender bias in the marriage system, individuality of women and their fight for freedom. Ibsen's ideology of the humanist and individuality are the most prominent issues which formulate in his work. For Nora and Hedda, social institutions and constraints inhibit their individuality and reduce their humanity, reducing their personalities and freedom. De Beauvoir states that in patriarchal societies "a woman must break the condos in order to be herself as human being" (125). Males inherently oppress women, according to De Beauvoir, by defining them in opposition to men as the 'Other'. The self, or subject, is occupied by man described to be absolute and whole. On the other hand, the object or other, is occupied by women defined as incomplete and faulty, and the complete opposite of the self. Man extends his will out into the world and has the inherent ability to explore their potentials and identities, but woman is destined to a life of immanence, or inwardness. While there is nothing wrong with humans comprehending themselves in opposition to others, De Beauvoir claims that this process is incorrect when applied to genders. Man effectively denies women's liberty and humanity by recognising and moulding her solely as Other.

Scholars like Micheal Meyer and Joan Templeton have argued that Nora's identity and subjugation has a lot to do with the way Torvald addresses her. In *The Doll's House Backlash*:

Criticism, Feminism, Templeton writes, “Torvald’s famous pet names for Nora-lark, squirrel-to give her a “strong ‘animal’ identity” and to underscore her inability to understand the ethical issues faced by human beings” (30). However, these scholars along with Evert Sprinchorn argue whether or not *A Doll’s House* can truly be considered a feminist play. Templeton further goes on to argue,

A female protagonist is worthy of our critical and moral attention only insofar as it is unrelated to women’s inferior status, and if the text itself is art only to the extent that what the heroine is seeking transcends her sexual identity, then what happens to her is significant only to the extent that it can happen to a man as well. (31)

She adds that,

Nora Helmer and such other famous nineteenth-century heroines as Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Hester Prynne, and Dorothea Brooke could just as well be men-except for their sex...to say that Nora Helmer stands for The individual in search of his or herself, besides being a singularly unhelpful and platitudinous generalisation, is wrong, I’d not absurd” for it means that Nora’s conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a 19th-century married woman, a married woman, or a woman. (31)

Despite contrary opinion, it cannot be denied that Nora’s identity and perception of herself is centred around Torvald, something which becomes evident with closer analysis to the play and in light of De Beauvoir.

Similarly, a prominent theme in *Hedda Gabler* is the struggle with identity. Caroline W. Mayerson explores three thematic symbols in analysing Hedda’s character identity – Thea’s hair, Lovborg's manuscript and General Gabler's pistols. Of these three, the symbolism in the

description of Hedda and Thea's hair and the interpretation of the pistols as phallic symbols allude to Hedda's lack of femininity and her desire for authority. Yvonne L. Sandstroem adds a fourth thematic pattern through the names and titles used in the play. The changes of names of the lack thereof is indicative of the difficulties experienced by the characters and their longing to hold on to a past identity i.e. their identity before the marriage.

While the characters of Hedda and Nora have been criticised over time as to whether or not their stories can be considered as feminist plays, female critics and the modern audience perceive these two characters are rebelling against patriarchal views and oppression.

Ellen Mortesen in *Ibsen and the Scandalous: Ghosts and Hedda Gabler* argues that,

If the public had problems swallowing the female figurations Ibsen presented... Hedda Gabler's femininity created an even greater uproar. The public's reaction to the protagonist of the play was overwhelmingly negative. She was condemned as neurotic, demonic and unfeminine... What provoked the public at large was above all her blatant rejection of motherhood and the fact that she deliberately committed suicide, despite the assumed possibility that she was pregnant at the time. (178)

Joan Templeton in *The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen* argues that due to the progression of the acts in *The Doll's House* and the difference in Nora's characteristics in Acts I and II versus that of Act III, Nora is often "denounced as an irrational and frivolous narcissist... who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness" (29). She argues that Nora's symbolic slamming of the door can be "written off as a silly theatrics" (29) Templeton extensively compiles numerous reactions of critics toward Nora and assess that for Nora's identity as a mother and wife is to be defamed, critics would have to analyse and deconstruct the

entire play in light of Ibsen's ideologies. Maurice Valency said that "there is no indication that Ibsen was thinking of writing a feminist play when he first began work seriously on *A Doll House* in the summer of 1879" (150). Templeton rejects this notion and challenges the belief that Ibsen had no belief in feminist movements. She refers to how Ibsen had proposed to the Scandinavian Club in Rome that women be permitted to vote at club meetings and that the position of librarian be offered to women candidates to strengthen her point (33-37).

In Templeton's words, "Anyone who claims that Ibsen thought of Nora as a silly, hysterical, or selfish woman is either ignoring or misinterpreting the plain truth...that Ibsen admired, even adored, Nora Helmer" (34). Mortesen also looks at the other side of the coin where many female critics have shown appreciation towards Hedda. While during the 19th century Hedda was considered to be vicious, "in the wake of the second wave of feminism [Hedda's] character [held] many attributes that are valued, for instance, her strength, her intelligence and her autonomy" (180). She further goes into Hedda's suicide as being symbolic of revolution against patriarchy, making *Hedda Gabler* a feminist play for the modern audience.

DISCUSSION

In each of Ibsen's two plays, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, one of the characters defies the stereotype or mould that has been placed on them. Nora and Hedda are the two characters in question. However, there are similarities as well as distinctions between the two. Nora is the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, whereas in *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen makes Hedda the antagonist. Nora and Hedda are both trapped in a patriarchal society and abiding by a masculine world, but they approach attaining independence from their male counterparts in different ways.

Nora chooses to ignore the problem she is confronted with. Torvald's words stifle Nora's voice. According to the author, her actions strive to help her husband and save his life. Moreover, whatever Nora does and how she does it, is all catered to her husband's satisfaction and entertainment. She creates an image of herself which she thinks would keep Torvald in love with her and bases her identity on his likings and dislikings. Torvald, on the other hand, treats Nora like an object from which he derives amusement. He remains ignorant towards Nora's sacrifice and intentions and is rather embarrassed by her deception. He goes against his own beliefs regarding corruption in order to save face and keep Nora as a docile housewife. Eventually, Nora no longer is able to stomach being referred to as a "little skylark" and a "spendthrift", and she chooses to leave Torvald, which is unheard of at the time. Nora slams the door and Torvald mumbles to himself at the end of the play. This depicts a woman taking control of her life and overcoming the prejudices that surround her.

Hedda Gabler, the daughter of an aristocratic General, is portrayed as a cold and unsympathetic lady from the start. She married Tesman because she finds her life to be monotonous and wants to change it. As a result, Ibsen depicts a honeymoon that is not happy or joyful since the couple does not love each other. Hedda is dissatisfied with her life, according to Ibsen. As a result, she is unable to alter or perceive social norms and morality, which limit her actions and independence. Hedda adopts a unique method to change the preconceptions that surround her. The men in *Hedda Gabler* perceive Hedda as meek and mild since she is a woman. Her ambition is to manipulate and ultimately destroy a human's fate, which requires her to acquire the trust of, or seduce, another human being. Lovborg, who is indicted to be an old lover, appears to be her target. Unlike Nora, Hedda does not run away from her troubles. Hedda

confronts her difficulties directly in the hopes of altering them for the better. Her sarcastic and snarky tone and nefarious behaviour are a lethal mix. When Hedda persuades Lovborg to commit suicide, the reader is exposed to this mix. This direct approach eventually became too much for her, and she commits suicide.

Embodiment of Womanhood

Womanhood is a key aspect in both plays. However, both plays address womanhood from two different perspectives. The portrayal of this element is contrasting in comparison as the characters themselves are contrasting. It is evident that Nora embodies traditional feminine attributes and Hedda does not, especially in light of the setting of the plays. Upon closer inspection, in *The Doll's House* Nora's role as a mother and wife is further amplified in comparison to the kind of fatherhood that is recurring in the play. Torvald's absence in family affairs, especially with the children is never as highlighted in the play as is Nora's abandonment. Rather, it seems naturally ingrained into the play's actions as nothing out of the ordinary. However, it can be assumed that the servants will be able to look after the household and the children as Nora leaves instructions before she leaves. Until the very end of the play, Nora is never concerned about herself and what she desires. Her main focus remains Torvald. Hedda, on the other hand, is more preoccupied with her own schemes and in shielding herself from scandal by any means possible. If Hedda were a male character her actions would have been more likely to be seen as more justified and probably would not have ended in suicide. Her actions and concerns allude more to the embodiment of masculine femininity.

Nora's Predicament and the Perversion of Fatherhood

Nora's abandonment of her children is an offence against motherhood. Her decision to explore society for herself comes with the sacrifice of abandoning her role as a dutiful mother and wife. While her actions as a wife and mother, keeping secrets from her husband and defying the law might have left the audience questioning her morality, her intentions remained pure and just. It was the ending that shocked the play's original audience as it not only defies motherhood but is also somewhat unexpected from the way Nora's character had been portrayed up until that point. The notion of Nora's purpose and identity, and the concept that the values of motherhood are built upon male values and perceptions of womanhood can be analysed with how fatherhood is portrayed in the play. The failure of fatherhood is what leads the women of the play to take measures for themselves. Contrarily, such failures are often overlooked in the play and appear less shocking.

Paul Rosefeldt argues:

Although Ibsen disavowed feminist causes, he launches an attack on patriarchy by denigrating its prime symbol, the father...In *A Doll's House*, fatherhood, ordinarily associated with the authority and stability of patriarchy, is associated with abandonment, illness, absence, and corruption." (84)

Nora's acquaintance Mrs. Linde can also be seen as the victim of an absent father. Mrs. Linde married a man because it was the smart thing to do. She did not love her husband but still married him in order to support her sick mother and brothers. Her father's absence forced her to replace and seek out another father figure in the form of a wealthy husband. However, he similarly fails in this position, becoming destitute and invalid. Ibsen defames the patriarchal

image by showing male figures who are associated with morality and responsibility as absent or corrupted. The absence of a father penetrates all classes in *A Doll's House*. When Nora's nursemaid and caretaker of her children, Anne Marie, gives birth to an illegitimate child, she is forced to work for Nora's family and unwillingly abandons her children. The absence of her own father and that of the child's father is at the root of her predicament.

The father is not just missing but is also morally tainted. Nora's blackmailer and Mrs. Linde's former fiance, Nils Krogstad is an embodiment of the failure of male figures. He is a parent who is desperately seeking to rehabilitate himself through his children. Moreover, he is also corrupt, having committed the crime of forgery. Rather than facing the consequences, he chooses to conceal his crime and weaponise it against Nora. According to Torvald, Krogstad's crime makes him not only corrupt but also a pollutant to his own household. Torvald states, "Each breath the children take in such a house is full of the germs of evil" in referring to Krogstad. Although Torvald's beliefs are dubious, he does express the societal attitudes of the period. As per Torvald's statement, fatherhood is once again linked to a moral disease, an infectious illness which will eventually infect and destroy the children's lives.

The contaminated father also appears in Dr. Rank and Nora's fathers. Rank inherited syphilis from his father, who had mistresses and contracted the disease. Rank was "sickly from childhood". Rank must bear the consequences of "another man's sin". The "inexorable retribution" is found in every family, according to Rank, who extends his own condition to the state of humanity. Nora's father is seen as immoral in his dealings with money. Additionally, he is blamed for Nora's money spending habits and because of the forgery she commits to loan money. As a result, fatherhood is associated with "universal pollution" (Rosefeldt, 85).

The example of failed fatherhood persists in almost every male character. Nora's husband, Torvald Helmer is no exception. He is yet another example of an absent parent who has failed his children. When the children are in the room, he declares that the space is only meant and appropriate for the mother i.e Nora. When Nora's wrongdoing is discovered, he caves in to Krogstad's demands, revealing his hypocrisy about corruption. He, too, turns into a parent of deception and deception, and who will eventually poison his own children.

When Nora decides to leave, Helmer's astonishment is evident. He is more concerned about her household duties. However, in this instance, Nora refutes her sole purpose of being limited to her husband and children:

HELMER.

It's shocking. This is how you would neglect your most sacred duties.

NORA.

What do you consider my most sacred duties?

HELMER.

Do I need to tell you that? Are they not your duties to your husband and your children?

NORA.

I have other duties just as sacred.

HELMER.

That you have not. What duties could those be?

NORA.

Duties to myself.

Ibsen's description of fatherhood in the play alludes to how women are criticised from a male perspective in light of male values (Ferguson 230). He also comments on a society which is more bewildered by Nora's abandonment of her children instead of the treatment she receives from Torvald and the limitations placed upon her.

Hedda's Feminine Masculinity

For Hedda, her behaviour can be analysed in light of Halberstam's concept of feminine masculinity. In the late 19th century, gender roles in the middle and upper classes were restricted and heavily polarised. Within the gender dichotomy acting as the basis of Ibsen's play, Hedda's behaviour is not recognisable as feminine. Hedda becomes more understandable as a character when we read what she communicates as masculine rather than femininity. Furthermore, Hedda's story aids in understanding how hegemonic masculinity is built. The concept of female masculinity, rather than perpetuating rigorously divided gender norms, has the potential to destabilise them. Hedda's masculinity exemplifies how masculinity is a social construct built in as a part of the inclusion of female masculinity.

Hedda appears to reject femininity more than she embraces masculine. For example:

HEDDA

[Goes up the room.] Well, I shall have one thing at least to kill time with in the meanwhile.

TESMAN

[Beaming.] Oh thank heaven for that! What is it, Hedda. Eh?

HEDDA

[In the middle doorway, looks at him with covert scorn.] My pistols, George.

TESMAN

[In alarm.] Your pistols!

HEDDA

[With cold eyes.] General Gabler's pistols. [She goes out through the inner room, to the left.]

Pistols would have been distinctly perceived male weapons during Ibsen's time. Hedda's fondness for them serves as a reminder that she lacks conventional feminine traits. She also refers to them as "General Gabler's pistols". Through her words, Hedda emulates her father's masculinity.

The other female characters in the play represent the 19th century femininity which Hedda is reluctant to embody or abide by. Thea and Hedda contrast one another. Hedda and Thea's first character descriptions are diametrically opposed to each other. Hedda is described as:

Her face and figure show refinement and distinction. Her complexion is pale and opaque. Her steel-grey eyes express a cold, unruffled repose. Her hair is of an agreeable brown, but not particularly abundant.

Ellen Mortensen comments on Hedda's cold appearance as one which is void of warmth and empathy i.e the attributes commonly associated with 19th century femininity and motherhood (390). Hedda is regarded as a beautiful upper-class woman, yet her demeanour is far from feminine. Her "steel-grey eyes" have a metallic component to it similar to her pistols. Thea, on the other hand, is described with more feminine features:

a woman of fragile figure, with pretty, soft features. Her eyes are light blue, large, round, and somewhat prominent, with a startled, inquiring expression.

Her hair is remarkably light, almost flaxen, and unusually abundant and wavy.

Hair as a symbol of femininity takes centre stage in Hedda and Thea's descriptions.

Thea's hair is particularly thick and wavy, conveying femininity. Hedda's hair is described as not very plentiful, implying a lack of femininity. Furthermore, Thea's big light blue eyes and perplexed expression suggest vulnerability and submission, whereas Hedda's steel grey stare conveys strength and security.

The description of these two characters capture their demeanour and the kind of women they are. Similar to Thea, who had dedicated her life and made sacrifices for the men in her life, Aunt Julia has done the same. She has devoted her life into securing her nephew's future by exhibiting her savings. Hedda is far from these for female characters. Her first interaction with Aunt Julia, Hedda purposefully dismisses Aunt Julia's bonnet claiming it to be the maid's. This behaviour is also uncanny of a woman in the 19th century to extend towards her in-laws. Joan Templeton argues that the women in play other than Hedda exist to serve men. In the end, Hedda's suicide is symbolic of rejecting patriarchy.

Hedda's emotional unavailability is reflected in her attitude toward George where she exhibits a lack of interest with his work and other affiliations. This is further reflected in her attitude towards Aunt Julia in the first act and when Aunt Julia's insinuates that Hedda is with child. Additionally, her refusal of being secured by a man or being dependent on one (George and especially, Judge Brack) is another example of Hedda's rejection of conventional femininity.

Mortensen remarked that one of Hedda's central features is her lack of interest and coldness she extends, distancing herself from the other characters, especially the male characters. The way she distances herself from Aunt Julia, strongly refuses the advances made from the male characters and her desire to establish control over the characters of the play collide with the passive and selfless feminine attributes present in Thea and Aunt Julia. Moreover, even when Judge Brack assures Hedda that she is safe from scandal, Hedda is not satisfied. Despite being assured safety, Hedda refuses to be in Judge Brack's grip and the only escape she finds is in death.

Halberstam brings up the idea that in order to have autonomous bodies, women must violate conventional femininity. Traditional femininity is connected with passivity and lethargy, and is centred on ideals that necessitate a variety of body manipulations. This is evident in Nora's case where we see her consuming macaroons against Torvald's strict instructions. Other varieties of body manipulation and physical influences include the way women dress and rigorous weight management, which can lead to developing eating disorders. Those who exercise regularly and maintain a healthy weight live longer than women who do not. To some extent, rejecting femininity can thus be beneficial (58-59). However, overall health or the lack thereof, transcends the physical. In *Hedda Gabler*, traditional feminine traits such as passivity and inactivity have a greater impact on the mind than it does on the body. Hedda is portrayed as being in opposition to traditional femininity throughout the play. She is not selfless, caring, subservient or meek. As her actions show, she desires a role free of any influence, not just that of a man's. Furthermore, she does not live according to the requirements of the men who surround her nor does she exist to serve them. What she has in common with Nora is her rejection of motherhood as she does not wish to be a mother from the very start. This is further emphasised

in her death when if she were with child, she not only takes her own life but also her unborn child;s. However, her eventual death shows that despite her rejection, she is trapped in traditional femininity.

The male characters symbolise diverse types of masculinity – Tesman is reliant on Aunt Julia and Judge Brack to set up his household and get his finances in order, Judge Brack has an informal relationship with Hedda and appears to have some underlying motives, and Lovborg is fully focused on his life’s work. Hedda interacts with these characters in various ways – she is dismissive with Tesman, reluctant to be in debt with Judge Brack, and manipulative towards Lovborg. Connell's theories shed more light on understanding how Hedda’s masculinity is constructed in relation to the other characters, as well as how masculinity is a process which does not assure success but also one in which failure is a possibility. Mary Kay Norseng mentions Tesman’s “boyishness” rather than describing him as someone with manly attributes (2). His behaviour and Aunt Julia securing him is indicative of how he himself is not able to secure himself. Templeton further refers to him as more boy than man (213). His lack of responsibility in which he allows others to take care of him is an example of the “boyish masculinity” he represents (Björklund 10). For instance, Tesman appears to be unable to take care of himself and as such, relies on his aunt. He again depends on Judge Brack to take care of his finances and to set up his home, which Judge Brack and Aunt Julia do together but by using Aunt Julia’s pension. Tesman also exhibits a “childlike naïveté in the area of sexuality” which is illustrated in his awareness or lack thereof, that Hedda might be with child despite Aunt Julia’s insinuations (Björklund 10). Next to Hedda, Tesman’s behaviour can almost be perceived as feminine. Hedda appears bored, distant, and contemptuous in conversations with and about her husband. She

complains to Judge Brack about the honeymoon and her distaste for Tesman's fascination with old documents. Joan Templeton in *Ibsen's Women* argues that the traditional masculine and feminine traits are reversed in Hedda and George. She says, "Tesman loves to wait on Hedda, fears her pistols, cannot understand her irony, and adores slippered domesticity" (230). Hedda, by distancing herself from Tesman's affiliations, disassociates herself from his femininity. She refuses to touch his slippers and she does not want anything to do with his aunts either. Her actions, in light of conventional femininity, are appalling and confusing. With the added lack of intention in her actions, it puts her morality into question. It might be worth mentioning that Tesman's intentions or morals are never questioned when he secures Lovborg's manuscript. Although he argues that he had taken it for safekeeping, the professional competition between the two is quite evident.

Throughout the play, Hedda can be identified and better understood with a masculine entity. Hedda is more enthused than Tesman about the professional competition from Lovborg, by which Tesman appears intimidated and rather hesitant. Next to Tesman, Hedda seems to symbolise the conventional manhood Tesman lacks. Additionally with competitive nature, she is wary of relying on people as is seen with her interaction with Judge Brack in the last act. Furthermore, she seeks to exert control on the other characters when the opportunity presents itself by not disclosing information. Nora, on the other hand, is under the influence and control of her husband and her secrecy has no ulterior motive to manipulate the situation but to secure the wellbeing of her husband. Accordingly, Hedda's conventional femininity is absent.

Identity And Self-Recognition

Both characters struggle with their own unique identity. While there is an absence of a mother figure in both plays, the women are also absent in a sense that they lack unique identifiers. Both Nora and Hedda have affiliations with male counterparts which makes the audience question who these characters are independently.

Nora's Identity Centred Around Torvald

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* talks about how women have been othered in society. This othering is consistent with the way Nora is treated. The way Nora is spoken to and infantilized symbolises her indoctrinated identity as a docile housewife. Nora is the most fitting example of a woman being treated like a toy, of a woman residing in a culture where the men around her treat her as a plaything. The title of the play, 'The Doll's House', is fitting in that it symbolises Nora as the doll living in a make-believe doll house. This representation reinforces the unlikely existence of a stable family living under patriarchy and patriarchal views and traditions. It can be argued that Nora along with the other female characters in *A Doll's House* are the best representations of the "second sex" or the "other" that de Beauvoir examines in *The Second Sex*.

De Beauvoir asks if women truly exist and what entails being a woman. She argues that women are not born as women, but are shaped into women by patriarchal views, pressures and expectations. *A Doll's House* exhibits a similar concept with how Nora goes from identifying herself in relation to Torvald and her father to identifying first and foremost as a human being. It captures the difficult and constraining lives of middle-class women living in a patriarchal culture.

“Woman is losing her way, woman is lost,” writes de Beauvoir. When we look at Nora's character in the beginning, we see her losing sight of her human self and selflessly abiding to her duties as a wife and mother. She is regarded as an object rather than a human being. That too an object whose place is within the boundaries of the household concerns and looking after the children. What space women occupy in this world is still a question unanswered posed by Beauvoir. Nora's character journey proves that women in her situation are truly never satisfied with their status in society. They are merely objects and toys for men's amusement. Torvald finds Nora to be a source of joy. Her sole trait that is of importance to him is that she is attractive and charming in all regards. For instance, Torvald concerns himself with Nora's appearance and presentation. He forbids her from eating sweets so that her appearance is not spoiled. Nora tells Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank, “Torvald had forbidden [macaroons]. I must tell you that he is afraid they will spoil my teeth.” In essence and in appearance, Nora must be sweet in order to be worthy of Torvald's love. He further reduces her and takes her concerns as futile which is evident when he says, “Is that my little lark twittering out there?” and “Is it my little squirrel bustling about?”. He romanticises calling her “little lark” and “little squirrel”. Nora's passivity, submission and secrecy feeds Torvald's subjugation:

HELMER.

Not been nibbling sweets?

NORA.

No, certainly not.

HELMER.

Not even taken a bite at a macaroon or two?

NORA.

No, Torvald, I assure you really—

HELMER.

There, there, of course I was only joking.

NORA.

[going to the table on the right]. I should not think of going against your wishes.

HELMER.

No, I am sure of that; besides, you gave me your word— [Going up to her.] Keep your little Christmas secrets to yourself, my darling.

In light of Beauvoir's concept, every human being is a unique, distinct individual.

Women should not suppress femininity which is perceived as vulnerability for the sake of a man's affection, but rather for the sake of her own self-love. In Nora's case, to keep Torvald satisfied she hides her actions of taking a loan without his knowledge. It is crucial to point out that this action, even if illegal at the time, stems from a place of wifely concern and love on Nora's part. Nora also lies to Torvald about eating macaroons which alludes to her hiding her vulnerability to keep Torvald in love with her. Her secrecy has a lot to do to maintain how Torvald looks at and perceives Nora.

Nora has always entrusted her identity to Torvald. This reliance had prevented her from developing her own individuality. After discovering that she is merely pretending to be the ideal, conventional housewife in order to please her husband and to keep him happy, it is understandable that she is living for others rather than for herself. "The female is a female by

virtue of a certain lack of qualities,” Aristotle remarked, “we should see the female nature as afflicted with natural defectiveness” (Beauvoir 3). This statement may be seen as alluding to Nora’s lack of decision-making ability, since she expects Helmer to assist her in solving her difficulties no matter how trivial Torvald views them as. For example, she could not determine what to wear to the Fancy Dress Ball, so she asked Helmer what she should wear and how she should dance:

NORA.

There is no one has such good taste as you. And I do so want to look nice at the fancy-dress ball. Torvald, couldn’t you take me in hand and decide what I shall go as, and what sort of a dress I shall wear?

HELMER.

Aha! so my obstinate little woman is obliged to get someone to come to her rescue?

NORA.

Yes, Torvald, I can’t get along a bit without your help.

HELMER.

Very well, I will think it over, we shall manage to hit upon something.

Nora’s dependence on Torvald and focus on his opinion regarding her appearance demonstrates that Nora lacks self-identity and decision-making authority. The extent of her influence transcends her own decisions. She seemingly makes no decisions without Torvald’s approval and simultaneously has no influence over Torvald either.

For instance:

NORA.

But, Mr. Krogstad, I have no influence.

KROGSTAD.

Haven't you? I thought you said yourself just now—

NORA.

Naturally I did not mean you to put that construction on it. I! What should make you think I have any influence of that kind with my husband?

Nora and Krogstad's conversation transpired after he asks (or blackmails) Nora to assist him in securing a job at the bank Torvald works at. When Nora boasted about securing a job Mrs. Linde a job in the past, Krogstad felt she could do the same for him. Nora in that instant realises that she has no actual influence over Torvald's decisions and that she would never be able to convince Torvald to do something against his wishes. Nora's surprise and shock at anyone assuming otherwise indicates her internalised powerlessness and lack of influence.

NORA

The tree shall be splendid! I will do everything I can think of to please you, Torvald!—I will sing for you, dance for you—

Nora continues cleaning up the room after Krogstad has left, She thinks to herself about how she can delight and entertain Torvald. Despite the possibility of facing legal repercussions and having her reputation tarnished, Nora is solely driven to please Torvald and keep him satisfied with the household affairs she is responsible for. In a sense, Torvald is her sole purpose. Nora is still entirely obedient to Torvald at this point in the play, and making everything seem pleasant for Torvald is the most important thing she can think of.

Torvald's language is indicative of Nora's subordination to her gender role and how she is reduced to a toy. Referring to *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers, Judith Halberstam illustrates how linguistic structures can influence individuals and their identities. Halberstam says, "naming represents the power of definition, and name changing confers the power to reimagine identity, place, relation, and even gender." (8). This case of linguistic influences in self-recognition and gender roles is evident for both Nora and Hedda.

Nora is a "little squirrel," a "little skylark," a "little songbird," or a "little spendthrift" to her husband. Her ideas and attitudes are absurd, if not hysterical, and are comparable to those of any other woman. Nora has been labelled the "other" by her father since she was a toddler. Her father then gave her over to her husband, who treated her as if she were a valuable object. Nora's self-awareness and awakening at the play's conclusion finest exemplifies this:

NORA.

[shaking her head]. You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.

HELMER.

Nora, what do I hear you saying?

NORA.

It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you—

HELMER.

What sort of an expression is that to use about our marriage?

NORA.

[undisturbed]. I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you—or else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which—I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.

HELMER.

How unreasonable and how ungrateful you are, Nora! Have you not been happy here?

NORA.

No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so.

In the end, Nora rejects her identity as a wife and mother. She acknowledges the facade she has been living and challenges Helmer when he imposes Nora's identity on her:

HELMER.

Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.

NORA.

I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to

be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them.

HELMER.

Can you not understand your place in your own home? Have you not a reliable guide in such matters as that?—have you no religion?

NORA.

I am afraid, Torvald, I do not exactly know what religion is.

It is with this acknowledgment that Nora rejects the social constraints and values imposed upon her. Ibsen uses Nora as the mouthpiece of human equality and in pointing out that social notions of men and women are restrictive in individualism.

Hedda's Identity in Relation to Men

For Hedda, nothing much of her identity is known in the play. The question, 'who is Hedda Gabler' still remains unanswered. Like her actions, her identity is ambiguous. Elizabeth Jacobs states that Ibsen "realised that individualism cannot disregard the limitations set by social conditions" and is "a life-long struggle to remain above the society whose morality [Ibsen] despised," (423). Hedda is known as George Tesman's wife, Eilert Lovborg's ex-lover and in association to other characters. Tesman is known as a writer-professor and Eilert Lovborg as a writer. This further leaves the question: What is Hedda's unique and individual identity? Although it is commendable that Hedda keeps her father's last name instead of going by 'Hedda Tesman', this too alludes to her sole identity being based upon a male. It is likely that even Judge

Brack knows Hedda only because of her father's fame, as the daughter of General Gabler. Even Aunt Julia refers to Hedda as "General Gabler's daughter" in the first scene.

Her identity as General Gabler's daughter is further extended by Jenny Björklund. The name "Gabler" emphasises Hedda's connection to her father, something Toril Moi argued to be Hedda's desire to cling on to her aristocratic past. Using this name is Hedda's way of associating herself with "power and masculinity and, hence, to a different identity than the one to which she was assigned as a woman in the late nineteenth century" (Björklund 8).

The six-month-long wedding trip is symbolic for both Hedda and her husband as it indicated a shift in their titles (Sandstroem 365). In George and Aunt Julia's conversation, she asks George, "have you nothing—nothing special to tell me?" and further asks, "haven't you any—any— expectations—?" Aunt Julia makes a reference to any news of Hedda's possible pregnancy. However, George appears rather unaware of Aunt Julia's insinuations and instead answers Aunt Julia in regards to his professional standing. Hedda's return home signifies a change in status for her. She is now firstly George Tesman's wife, rather than General Gabler's daughter, a change that her last name does not reflect. Her relationship with the Tesman family as a whole has shifted as well, at least in terms of how they interact. Aunt Julia greets Hedda warmly when she enters the room; however, this is met with playful malice on Hedda's part. She mocks aunt Julia's bonnet claiming it to be the maid's. This exchange ends with aunt Julia saying, "God bless and preserve Hedda Tesman—for George's sake" – perhaps in an attempt to remind Hedda of her place as the Tesman family and to bear offsprings.

According to Sandstroemm, Hedda's association with her maiden name and her status as General Gabler's daughter derives from her desire to cling onto her past life. Instead of holding

on to her pride as an independent lady, this is an indication of how she is holding on to a name which came with some power and authority. “Hedda is not a climber, she is a clinger” as she is holding on to her aristocracy and to her prior dominance over Lovborg. She is adamant about not relinquishing old roles and accepting new ones. Hedda’s marriage to George Tesman marks a change in status that was largely imposed upon her by an event she could not control, particularly her father's death (372). Sandstroemm further argues that, “Ibsen chose to convey the theme of reluctance or refusal to change and accept new realities by means of titles and forms of address” and even though George is more open to these changes, he too shares Hedda’s difficulty in accepting these changes (372).

Another perspective of Hedda’s self-reconstruction and identity is her yearning for beauty. According to Toril Moi, “for Hedda, to yearn for beauty is to yearn for freedom” and “her concept of beauty is at once existential and aesthetic” (437). Hedda’s yearning for beauty is an “incarnation of human freedom” (437). Hedda might have been able to express her desires without fear of scandal if she had not lived in 1800. Her sorrow is that she was a radical idealist in 1890, when her ideals had long passed her by. Toril Moi further argues that:

To read *Hedda Gabler*, then, we need to understand that Hedda’s yearning for beauty and freedom is both an expression of a radical Romantic and Schillerian utopia, and a response to a sense of being made unfree in a highly gendered, sexualized, embodied Way. (438)

Given that the name ‘Gabler’ is Hedda’s way of preserving an identity which came with some power. When Hedda learns that she will no longer be in the same financial situation as

before, she tells Tesman that she still has her father's pistols to occupy her time with and to keep herself entertained.. When Judge Brack comes to visit, Hedda is seen practising shooting in the backyard, almost shooting him. Hedda's pistols are a “safety-valve for the strong, almost masculine, pressures within her,” according to John Northam (156). The pistols are what connect Hedda to power and devastation as emphasised by Birgitta Johansson (249). Björklund stated that “the pistols represent Hedda's longing for masculinity”, referring back to Northam and Johansson (9). The handguns can also be seen as phallic symbols. It represents the phallus and symbolises social authority and access to a society that is closed to her because she is a woman.

In reality, Ibsen’s ideology of humanism led him to see that a female protagonist could more powerfully reflect the dilemma of freedom and meaning in modernity than a male protagonist. Hedda’s experience is further concretised and embodied by the fact that she gets caught in an obviously sexualized trap in the end when she finds herself at the mercy of Judge Brack. Hedda, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, embodies humanity while maintaining her uniqueness.

Hedda’s silence, particularly in the manuscript scene, is quite prominent in understanding Hedda’s desire for her own identity and an identity which comes with power and control. In this one situation, she transcends a man’s world and finds herself in a position of control. Hedda’s supposed surprise when she learned again that Lovberg has lost the manuscript is a perplexing scene. It makes the audience question what Hedda has to gain from this pretence.

MRS. ELVSTED.

[In vehement protest.] Never in this world! Where you are, there will I be also! I will not let myself be driven away like this! I will remain here! I will be with you when the book appears.

HEDDA.

[Half aloud, in suspense.] Ah yes—the book!

LOVBORG.

[Looks at her.] My book and Thea's; for that is what it is.

MRS. ELVSTED.

Yes, I feel that it is. And that is why I have a right to be with you when it appears! I will see with my own eyes how respect and honour pour in upon you afresh. And the happiness—the happiness—oh, I must share it with you!

Hedda's exclamation and excitement are most likely a result of her newfound power, since she now has complete control over Thea and Lovborg's fate. Although they are unaware, the audience is aware that Hedda is in possession of the manuscript and wonders whether she would speak or remain silent.

In this scene, Thea's dedication is to Lovborg's work. She associates her own happiness with his and like Nora, "others" herself. Her entire purpose becomes centred around Lovborg. Additionally, after Lovborg's death, Thea is seen knee deep into resurrecting whatever is left of the manuscript with George.

Moi adds that this scene is treated as a show by Hedda and that throughout the play's final two acts, Hedda acts as a producer and director, attempting to portray Lovborg's death as a tragedy (316). This effort to manipulate the other characters might be understood as a strategy for her to obtain control over the events and power over them. It is as if she is following a story that is about to reach a climax which is incredibly intriguing. She seemed to be entirely absorbed by the picture unfolding before her, uttering her observations beneath her breath. Hedda's elation may also signify the moment when she recognises that, for the first time in her life, she is in a

position of power, the moment when she becomes the director of Lovborg and Thea's tragic destiny. Moi argues that Hedda feels liberated from her own continual self-awareness in this one minute. However, her newfound freedom comes at the cost of full isolation from the rest of the world. It's as though she's separated from the pair she's viewing by a barrier. Her engrossment is devoid of sympathy and empathy, as well as any awareness of others' suffering. Hedda is behaving as if she is watching a show; she is aestheticizing – or, to be more precise, theatricising – Thea and Lovborg. The hazards of theatricalising others, as well as oneself, is one of Ibsen's many major concerns. Hedda has a long list of forerunners in this regard – some of the most apparent instances were in Ibsen's Julian in *Emperor and Galilean*, Nora and Helmer in *A Doll's House*, and Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*. Hedda theatricalises Thea and Lovborg in this scenario by refusing to acknowledge their humanity (440-442).

Stanley Cavell writes,

How is acknowledgement expressed...how do we put ourselves in another's presence?...

By revealing ourselves, by allowing ourselves to be seen. When we do not, we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. (333)

Hedda's concealment of the manuscript being in her possession enables her to escalate the situation. Her concealment shows her sense of isolation, as if she were stranded in a strange land. (Moi 441). It also exposes her belief that words are meaningless, that no matter what she says, no one will ever see who she is or acknowledge her suffering. The two others are "de-souled" by Hedda's position, which turns them into puppets on her strings, just surfaces with no interior life (Moi 441).

Hedda's worst act of cruelty is her silence concerning the manuscript. It does, however, have precedent, namely her casual indifference to Aunt Julia's bonnet which she had purchased "for Hedda's sake." When Hedda sees the bonnet she foolishly yet intentionally believes it belongs to the maid. Hedda's rage appears to be fueled by annoyance at Aunt Julia's obsession with death and pregnancy, as well as Tesman's joy at reclaiming his prized pair of embroidered slippers. Hedda despises the triviality embodied in the slippers and shudders at reminders of human limitations with death.

When Hedda fails and realises she has no influence over anyone and that Judge Brack has gained power over her, she sees no other option other than to commit suicide. She refuses to be powerless and dependent on others. Her suicide, however, can be interpreted in light of Halberstam's concept of tomboys. The tomboy is typically thought to be a prepubescent phenomena, according to Halberstam. The girl is expected to internalise femininity during adolescence, a process connected with repression, restriction and punishment. Girls are required to adopt conforming kinds of femininity if adolescence means acquiring social power for boys. Hedda was also allowed to be affiliated with her father, his riding horses, and his pistols while her father was still living and Hedda was still unmarried. A married woman, on the other hand, cannot reject femininity and embrace masculine fully. Hedda's resistance to give up social authority and accept her subjugation as a woman has no place in the story, so she must be removed.

Arthur Ganz argues that, "the identical aspirations of Nora and Hedda" in which:

Both heroines dream of achieving self-realisation by seeing an admired man perform an act of extraordinary courage. In each play the failure of the man to do what the heroine

desires precipitates the decision by the heroine to take destiny into her own hands and separate herself drastically from the life she has previously known. (10)

This argument summarises the constraints in which both Nora and Hedda remained which held them back from finding their own identity. While Nora had her moment and found herself outside her home and gender role, Hedda was unfortunately unable to find her physical escape and resorted to not living in the debt of her male acquaintances.

Can The Plays Be Considered Feminist?

A Doll's House depicts a woman who starts off with no identity of her own and is later instilled with the ideal of becoming an individual person. It is worth mentioning that the author and the play makes no categorical statements specifically about women becoming people and finding their identity. Rather, it advocates for individuality and being able to explore society and social values through one's own experiences. In light of this, it can be argued that the true essence of the play coincides with Ibsen's humanist ideology which is unrelated to gender and sex. Micheal Meyer in *Ibsen: A Biography* argued that,

A Doll's House is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings, or *Ghosts* about syphilis. Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person. (457).

Anti-Feminist Criticism

Templeton refers to multiple other criticisms of Nora which have focused on the fact that she commits a crime by falsifying documents to obtain the loan that would save her husband's life, as Nora believed. This act and her concealment of this act, puts her morality into question especially in light of the legal obligations during the 19th century. However, such criticism tends to overlook the reality of Nora's intentions. Her actions, no matter how wrong, were completely well-intentioned on Nora's part and are only condemned illegally by the state because she is a woman. In other words, her actions fall under the ethical theory utilitarianism where the outcomes justify the means. Other criticism has centred on her immaturity and flirtatiousness when interacting with other male characters. This criticism ignores the fact that she is performing the role that Torvald wanted her to perform as a stereotypical housewife and mother to keep Torvald in love with her as that is what she was meant to believe and base her entire life upon. Nora's character, her thoughts and actions, all revolve around pleasing Torvald and meeting his expectations. Templeton claims that Ibsen's contemporaries recognised *Hedda Gabler* as a highly feminist play, and that modern masculine critique would surprise them.

Templeton quotes Havelock Ellis, regarding the impact of Ibsen's play,

The great wave of emancipation now sweeping across the civilised world means nominally nothing more than that women should have the right to education, freedom to work, and political enfranchisement – nothing in short but the bare ordinary rights of an adult human creature in a civilised state. (32)

Such anti-feminist critics of *A Doll's House* tend to overlook and ignore the social backdrop of late-19th-century society and the situation of women during the time. Norway, like North America and Western European countries of the 19th century, was heavily patriarchal. Patriarchal views were the basis for social organisation. In 1879 when the play was first performed, Norwegian women had no control over their finances and could only borrow money with their husband's approval and permission. Nora must keep the fact that she has taken a loan for Torvald's benefit hidden from Torvald fearing both legal and social repercussions, and losing her husband's supposed affection. This limitation imposed on Nora essentially drives the storyline. The issue becomes more complicated as Krogstad begins blackmailing Nora since he is well aware of Nora's crime and his involvement in it as well as how he can benefit from it.

Although it is easy to go back and forth between Nora's morality and as a feminist heroine, the same cannot entirely be said for Hedda. It is her distant and cold portrayal along with her ambiguity that paints her as an evil antagonist. Hedda, by many, has been turned down as a feminist heroine. She was considered a degraded woman and a self-righteous narcissist. Above all, her apparent rejection of motherhood, as well as her decision to take her life herself despite the probability that she might have been pregnant at the time, sent shockwaves in the audience. Hedda's character had never settled into married life and in the roles of a wife and mother, as had Nora. From the very first scene she is reluctant to abide by conventional feminine traits. Her attitude towards Aunt Julia, her ulterior motives with Lovbergh and Thea along with her hobbies defy the 19th century conventions for women. It can be argued that although some of her traits are arguably malicious regardless of gender and sex, she also embodies the struggles of women who are confined and limited to their roles as women. Ellen Mortensen argues that

Hedda Gabler, “is a paradoxical figure” who encompasses both charming and repellent characteristics. Her claimed stilled personality, narcissism, and lack of empathy in her interactions with female and male characters have received a lot of critical attention (178). The way Ibsen speaks against the suppression of women is best analysed through Hedda’s suicide.

The Impact of the Plays and Ibsen’s Objectives

The emotional and psychological impact of Ibsen’s play on audiences and readers is unaffected by his reluctance to confine the play’s meaning as a feminist one. It still conveys the shock it was intended to in attacking 19th century social values and morals, especially with the endings of both plays. The play deals with a woman’s position in social spheres as Nora and Hedda are both trapped in their assigned gender roles.

David A. Wheeler stresses that Nora and Torvald’s marriage is built on dishonesty and deception. Although Nora is placed, if not groomed, in an absolutely subordinate position by Torvald’s treatment of her which weakens her individuality and authority, she does demonstrate her potential for autonomous thought and action by arranging the loan and then discreetly repaying it. Despite the power imbalance in the marriage along with the dishonesty, their marriage appears to be a happy one in which, for the longest time, both Nora and Torvald are content. Wheeler argues that Nora’s problem, to some extent, can be her innocence. Unlike Hedda, there is never any malice or ambiguity in Nora’s actions and words. Her actions and thoughts are all intended to please and satisfy Torvald. She is incapable of wrapping her head around why a deed that served to save her husband’s life could spark such scandal and rage, and

change Torvald's perception of her especially because she has worked hard herself in secrecy to pay off the loan in a scenario where women were not supposed to work.

The purpose of Ibsen's depiction of a deceitful marriage is to highlight two elements – firstly, the components of society and human dishonesty that obstruct personal growth and secondly, that this obstruction is what makes marriages and families based on patriarchal values unstable. Torvald feels compelled to have complete control over Nora including what she eats to her appearance. He treats her like an infant, and the nicknames he calls her reflect his infantilization of her, all of which serve to emphasise his control and her ornamental role. It also serves to disempower, dehumanise, and subjugate her and keep her in servitude within the marriage. The nicknames Torvald has for Nora might appear to be innocuous endearments, but they reveal the imbalanced power dynamic in the relationship. In this regard, Yue-hua Guo argues that Torvald might perceive women as a whole to be childlike and defenceless beings, disconnected from reality and completely reliant. His feelings towards Nora are a mix of possessiveness and masculine dominance.

One of the focuses of the play is Nora's disillusionment. At the end of the play, it is Nora who takes a drastic step to leave everything behind through which she gains the modern audiences' compassion. Whatever Ibsen's objectives were, the play has the effect of arousing a tremendous degree of compassion for the cause of women, especially those trapped in their gender roles. In light of Ibsen's ideals, it can be claimed that the play aims to reveal the injustice towards women that was ingrained in the culture and attitude of late-19th century Norway's male-dominated society. It is essentially a desire for justice, whether we refer to it as justice for humanity or justice for women.

Hedda's suicide was an act of desperation in response to female imprisonment, particularly within the confines of the bourgeois household. Her destiny, Ibsen's depicted in the play, was similar to that of many other women at the time. Hedda, a woman of stature, talent, and strength, was ensconced within the four walls of her home with barely anything to keep herself engaged. She considered her existence excruciatingly vapid and uninteresting, utterly pointless and with no possibilities of a future, except as wife and hostess for her husband's acquaintances. In this light, her act of self-destruction becomes a desperate heroic, but tragic gesture (Mortesen 180-181).

HEDDA.

[Looks up at him.] So I am in your power, Judge Brack. You have me at your beck and call, from this time forward.

BRACK.

[Whispers softly.] Dearest Hedda—believe me—I shall not abuse my advantage.

HEDDA.

I am in your power none the less. Subject to your will and your demands. A slave, a slave then! [Rises impetuously.] No, I cannot endure the thought of that! Never!

Hedda has this conversation with Judge Brack moments before she takes her life. It becomes clear that Hedda cannot stomach the fact that her fate and reputation rest upon Judge Brack and his good graces. Her internal fights become much more dramatic when Hedda is read as a heroic, tragic figure in the feminine. Her erratic and angry behaviour could be a reflection of a deeper malaise, a sadness induced by her boredom and the misery of being imprisoned in an

unfulfilling and supposedly unimportant marriage. In that sense, Hedda's horrific yet scandalous suicide could be interpreted as a defiant act, a desperate attempt to assert her independence in the face of submission and servility, the genuine marks of traditional womanhood.

Hedda's ambiguity throughout the entire play is notorious in shielding her true intentions. Charles Isherwood describes her as "a scorpion in amber". As a metaphor of patriarchy's clutches, the gunshot with which Hedda takes her own life is possibly even more powerful than Nora slamming the door. Hedda is unquestionably incompatible with the patriarchal world which she inhabits. Conventional gender roles, her marriage, and her insinuated pregnancy have all made her feel trapped. She fights uniformity, yet she never quite manages to break free until the end. Despite her powerlessness, she requires power through influencing Thea and Lovbergh's destiny with the manuscript. Ibsen's play appears to convey the story of a woman trying to accept her subordination and who constantly questions the social rules but finally fails to transcend them. With a devastating end for herself and those around her, Hedda was placed in ostensibly female roles without any apparent external pressure.

To the 1891 audience, Hedda was understood as an irredeemable woman incapable of being a moral individual. Henry James claimed that the play itself has left him "muddled and mystified, fascinated, but—in one's intellectual sympathy—snubbed" while Templeton describes Hedda as a "moral and sexual coward" in *Ibsen and Feminism* refuting Michael Werth Gelber's claim to Hedda as a woman of a new era. Such reactions to Hedda are understandable. The first introduction to her is where she teases and disrespects Aunt Julia. From there she goes on to betray Thea's confidence, devise Lovborg's demise and burns the manuscript. In the final act, she takes her own life with the possibility of killing her unborn child as well.

Christine M. Bird places Hedda as Nora's counterpart. She says, "As monster, she can hardly be the psychological counterpart of Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*; she is, rather, her foil. Unlike Nora, who is thoughtful, busy, brave, and generous, Hedda is thoughtless, bored, cowardly, and selfish" (105).

If Hedda and her story are so unlikeable and perplexing, it is questionable that she was meant to promote a social cause or even that she would succeed in doing so. Hedda cannot be a feminist figure if her actions do not campaign for women's rights. Furthermore, she cannot bring attention to the lack of them if she is incapable of sympathising with a mistreated woman. In fact, she adds to the mistreatment of women through Thea. In summary, 'a monster' does not make a good advocate. Hedda almost appears to be likely not a feminist if these views of the play are to be the only focus. However, this argument is offset by Susan Torrey Barstow's claim, "Hedda Is All Of Us".

Barstow argues that Hedda provided a sense of belonging for women, as well as a collective voice for hitherto expressed dissatisfactions. This suggests that Hedda has a feminist side to her. For many, it was the first step in the campaign for gender equality, a conscious acknowledgement of long-standing disparities. Ibsen's play had a significant impact on women's thinking and the nascent feminist movement. As such, *Hedda Gabler* can have significant social and political relevance.

Hedda Gabler may have been embraced as a feminist drama by critics, suffragists, and matinee-goers alike, but Ibsen did not. When the Norwegian Women's Rights League honoured Ibsen for his play *A Doll's House* in 1879, he responded, "I have been more of a poet and less of

a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose... I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has always been a question of human rights.”

Hedda Gabler was clearly not written with feminism in mind by Ibsen which is something he clarifies for himself. Ibsen's primary concern was not in women's rights but more in individuality and humanism. Regardless, Ibsen recognised gender inequality in society. He was evidently aware of the oppression and suffering of women, and his plays, both *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* reflected this. Women recognised his achievement, sympathised with Hedda, and utilised it to advance their own social causes. Hedda was advocating for women's rights on the grounds of gender equality, as a feminist drama demands, even if Ibsen did not intend to do so. His goals must be examined while determining whether or not the play is feminist, but it may be feminist nevertheless.

CONCLUSION

Heavy debate and criticism surrounds the two characters as advocates for a social cause, particularly a feminist cause. Regardless, it was evident that Ibsen recognised and was aware of social inequalities, and that included the struggles faced by women. Although he not label himself as a feminist author, he was well-aware of the subjugation and constraints women were under during the 19th century. As an individual who believed in understanding society and one's own place in society through experience, Ibsen spoke up against the limitations which were imposed on women through his work. It is clear that his work has an underlying feminist tone even if his stance was as a humanist.

With Ibsen's denial of the plays being solely feminists and the anti-feminist criticism the plays have received, it still poses the questions of the plays' contribution to feminist literature. The plays do not appear feminist at the first glance but as the stories develop, Nora and Hedda become embodiments of the contemporary stereotypes surrounding women. Their actions, journey and development in the play allude to the struggles of women as human beings in the 19th century and resonate with the limitations women face today. Ibsen also places these women in stereotypical and gender-specific roles (Nora-Torvald and Kristine-Krogstad) to illustrate the instability of a society purely based on male values. Although it is questionable why Ibsen decided to do so and what his intentions were, he illustrates the instability of these strict social roles. The plays allow us to examine women's struggles for their unique identity, liberty and individuality, and sense of purpose within the confines of gender-specific roles. Their attempts at breaking free of these roles is either met with societal backlash or death alluding to how far-reaching and deeply embedded patriarchal views are in society.

What makes these plays feminist is that they call attention to female voices and emphasise women's journey for self-expression. Nora's acknowledgment and vocalisation of her identity as a human and Hedda's yearning for independence and power through her yearning for beauty are indicative of such. On the other hand, we cannot ignore that Ibsen himself had denied such claims of his plays being feminist. His humanist philosophy overlaps with the plays' feminist messages. While it has been proven that both characters possess certain traits which make them ill-suited vessels for a social cause like Nora's childlike behaviour and Hedda's maliciousness, this aspect highlights the repressive social constraints often imposed on women and how women have been judged in light of social values which are built on male values. Especially for Hedda, she

comes off as an evil and self-serving woman as she is compared in light of conventional femininity.

Overall, Ibsen's plays can be argued to be home to complex female characters. Nora and Hedda contrast one another and have polarised traits. While Nora is oblivious to her subjugation, Hedda constantly battles her oppression. They both embark on different journeys to find themselves on their own terms. It can be assumed that Nora finds escape at the cost of her family however, Hedda, despite her constant rejection and battle, remains trapped and eventually does what is presented to her as the only option to escape her subjugation. Both women desire to liberate themselves from the suffocating grasp of patriarchy.

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