

# “Angel in the House”—On the “Demonic” Temperament of Hedda Gabler

WANG Zhiyi

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

As a unique female character created by Ibsen, Hedda Gabler has always been in the spotlight of critics. Hedda, neither an “angel” nor a “demon”, is a special woman with “demonic” temperament. This paper attempts to find the “demonic” temperament in Hedda, to analyze her “demonic” behaviors as well as to uncover the reasons behind these. In addition, this paper points out that Hedda’s suicide is the peak of her “demonic” performance, which is also the most valorous act and a real liberation for Hedda.

*Keywords:* Ibsen, Hedda, demonic temperament

Being one of Ibsen’s late plays, *Hedda Gabler* has attracted extensive attention from critics since its publication. However, controversy over the protagonist Hedda has not appreciably abated. Carolyn Meyerson regards Hedda as a neurotic who is spiritually sterile. She thinks “Hedda gains no insight; her death affirms nothing of importance” (Meyerson, 1950, p. 158). Jens Arup concedes no value to Hedda’s final tragic death, holding “Hedda repeatedly goes much too far” (Arup, 1957, p. 14), while in the view of Errol Durbach, Hedda “strives to assert meaning in the cultural void” at the cost of her life (Durbach, 1971, p. 143). For Moi Toril, Hedda embodies humanity like Hamlet (Moi, 2013, p. 439). In addition, some scholars deem Hedda as a “decadent” (He, 2004, p. 137), while others contend that Hedda has “an independent and rebellious spirit” (Xu, 2000, p. 39). Both scholars at abroad and home have made fruitful and diversified interpretations of *Hedda Gabler*. This paper holds that Hedda, contrary to the “angel in the house”, is a female with “demonic” temperament.

## The Demonic

The concept of the demonic first appeared in ancient Greek literature with religious and theological flavor. It is an intermediate force between man and God, and “will come up when people lose their rationality and thus make things worse” (Chen, 2011, p. 233). It cannot be measured by simple good and evil, it is the life force of human nature, especially the spiritual aspect, and it is a violent life form with both creativity and destruction.

Ibsen’s Hedda is the female image of this demonic temperament. Harold Bloom once commented that “Something fundamental in Ibsen, a sly uncanniness uneasily allied to his creativity, is pure troll” (Bloom, 1994, p. 354). He thinks Ibsen’s works center upon the figure of the troll, and Hedda is “the most formidable humanized troll in Ibsen” (p. 354). Very different with the image of traditional Victorian “angel in the home”,

who gives everything for her family, without their own thoughts and desires, Hedda is distinctive as well as independent. Her masculine characteristics, colossal egotism, her strong drive to shape other's destiny and her idealist yearning for sublime beauty and death are all her demoniac. However, under the action of internal and external forces, rationality is seized by the original desire, and was subject to the absolute control of this destructive power. Hedda becomes neurotic and destructive, and finally goes to the tragedy.

### **The Embodiments of the Demoniac**

Firstly, Hedda's masculinity and uncontrollable impulse reveal her demoniac temperament. Her appearance draws attention as soon as Hedda appears. “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” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 27). Generally speaking, the expression of traditional women is gentle and tender with abundant hair. While Hedda's eyes are calm and cold, words usually expressed to describe men, and hair are sparse, which implicate Hedda's different temperament from women, namely masculinity. Thea Elvsted is the one with whom Hedda is most obviously contrasted. “She so brilliantly fits the stereotype of the gentle, clinging, defenseless little woman” (Spacks, 1962, p. 159). Her hair is beautiful, thick, and curly, which always stirs Hedda's jealousy whenever she meets her and even pulls Thea's hair, threatening to burn it. Hedda violent behavior and Thea's hysterical reaction (“Let me go! Let me go! I am afraid of you, Hedda!” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 107)) are indications of her “demoniac” temperament. Moreover, when Hedda met Aunt Julia for the first time, she insulted the good old lady by saying that aunt Julia's hat belonged to a maid. And afterward Hedda said to Judge Brack, “these impulses come over me all of a sudden; and I cannot resist them” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 75). Hedda has no idea how to explain her impulse and could not put it under her control. She insulted others viciously with no reasons while still felt unhappy.

Secondly, Hedda's demoniac lies in her intense desire to dominate and destroy. Hedda longs to assert her dominance and wants to “have power to mould a human destiny” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 106). The fate of Lovborg is the most obvious example. Lived a dissipated life in the past, Lovborg now begins his new life and, with the help of Thea, he publishes a book. They have also collaborated on a new book manuscript, which they call their joint “child”. Seeing that, Hedda envies them so much that she tries to sow discord between them and manages to redominate Lovborg's life. She encouraged Lovborg to attend party and imagined him coming back with vine leaves in his hair, a symbol of orgy. Lovborg, however, not only did not have vine leaves in his hair, but also lost the manuscript. He came back to apologize to Thea, believing that he had killed his “child”, like a child-murder. When Lovborg wanted to “make an end of it” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 137), Hedda reformed Lovborg's destiny, by handing him General Gabler's pistol. It is entirely for her own sake that Hedda manipulates Lovborg, her deepest lust for control and joy. It is the demoniac nature of Hedda to satisfy her desire ignoring even others' life. As Templeton puts it, “There is no tenderness in Hedda's feelings for Lovborg, only passion, and in the end she becomes extremely selfish due to her own misfortune. She doesn't care now whether he lives or dies, or anyone else” (Templeton, 1997, p. 224). What's more, Hedda's behavior of throwing the manuscript into the fire is the climax of her vindictive passion and her impulse to annihilate. “Now I'm burning your child...I am burning—I am burning your child” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 138). Who could burn a child as she is pregnant?

Thirdly, morbid attitude toward beauty and death is the demoniac of Hedda. She romanticizes Dionysiac ecstasy, and keeps imagining of Lovborg with vine leaves in his hair, showing her unique “romantic” aesthetic

and taste, but she goes too far. She becomes more “demonic” when she gives Lovborg the pistol and reminds him “to do it beautifully” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 137). While others surprised that Lovborg had shot himself, only Hedda kept asking where the gun had been fired and when she knew the place Lovborg had shot, her eyes twinkled, and she acclaimed “a deed worth doing...there is a beauty in this” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 152). Her morbid attitude toward beauty and death shocked us. Hedda lives in her “beauty illusion”; however, when she found the truth of “ugly”, Hedda played a “wild dance” upon her piano and shot herself “beautifully” through the temple with Gabler’s pistol. To some extent, Hedda accomplishes her quest for sublime beauty and a “perfect death”.

### **The Roots of the Demoniac**

The formation of the demonic temperament is the combination of internal and external forces. For one thing, Hedda’s demonic is closely related to her own personality. Heraclitus confesses “man’s character is his demonic” (Zucker, 1969, p. 37). As the daughter of General Gabler, Hedda was raised by her father as a boy, so she was masculine in nature. People used to “see her riding down the road along with the General in that long black habit—and with feathers in her hat” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, Hedda “inherits his father’s military character and indomitable temperament, and has a strong desire for power in her heart, always wanting to have the ability to control the fate of others” (Yan, 2015, p. 159). Power desire is the original desire hidden in Hedda’s heart, and a major reason for her demonic temperament formation. Growing up in a high class, Hedda has power that other women cannot match at that time. Though the destinies at Hedda’s disposal are somewhat limited, she wants to assert her dominance by controlling others’ fate. Hedda deliberately participates in the form of marital infidelity with Brack in order to relieve her boredom. She likes his company, and flirts with him whenever she had the upper hand in conversation, which made her extremely happy and enjoyed a great deal. However, Judge Brack wants power too and intends “to assert masculine sexual dominance” (Spacks, 1962, p. 161). He tries to control Hedda through the close relationship established with her, and develops the “triangle” relationship. Hedda by no means can bear to be controlled by others, and the “demonic” factor in his heart is constantly aroused under the shadow of desire. In the meantime, Brack quickened the pace of his hunting and took complete control of Hedda through Lovborg, placing her in an insurmountable position. “I am in your power none the less. Subject to your will and your demands. A slave, a slave then! No, I cannot endure the thought of that! Never!” (Ibsen, 2005, p. 163). The pursuit of power and the character of not wanting to be controlled by others made Hedda’s rationality completely swallowed up by this demonic power and subjected to the absolute control of it, leading to Hedda’s death.

For another, marriage triggers Hedda’s demonic temperament. In the Victorian period, when patriarchy dominated, women were in a subordinate position and could only rely on men closely; thus being a good wife and mother was the standard to measure women’s goodness. After General’s death, Hedda lost her refuge, and the life she had indulged in comfort and luxury was gone forever. “I had positively danced herself tired...My day was gone”, Hedda confessed to Judge Brack (Ibsen, 2005, p. 69). She had to find a husband to support her, to give her financial security and status. Of all the suitors George Tesman seemed to be the most outstanding one. He had an economic foundation and a promising future. Therefore, out of the satisfaction of material desire, Hedda married Tesman without love, exchanging the freedom of spirit for material wealth. However, Hedda was unwilling to take any responsibilities as a wife and mother. She becomes depressed and feels nothing but boring. “There is only one thing in the world I have any turn for—boring myself to death” (Ibsen,

2005, p. 79). Marriage has become a cage constrains her. The bondage of marriage and her yearning for freedom make Hedda’s heart gradually twisted, close to madness.

### Conclusion

Hedda is incompatible with the traditional female image of “angel in the house”. She is not an angel, instead with the demoniac temperament. Hedda has masculine characteristics, strong drive to shape other’s destinies and morbid aesthetic taste. Her “demoniac” temperament is her distinctive nature, which is closely related to her living environment, especially her family background. As Ibsen writes to a friend, “Hedda is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than as her husband’s wife” (Ibsen, 1905, p. 435). At the same time, because of self-decadence and the emptiness of marriage life, Hedda finally pulls the trigger to end the fate. For Hedda, it is also the most courageous act and a real liberation.

### References

- Arup, J. (1957). On Hedda Gabler. *Orbis Litterarum*, XII, 3-37.
- Bloom, H. (1994). *The western canon: The books and school of the ages*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Chen, S. H. (2011). *The cosmopolitan factor in Chinese literature*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- Durbach, E. (1971). The apotheosis of Hedda Gabler. *Scandinavian Studies*, 43(2), 143-159.
- He, C. Z. (2004). On Hedda Gabler as a decadent. *Foreign Literary Review*, (3), 137-143.
- Ibsen, H. (1905). *The correspondence of Henrik Ibsen*. (M. Morison, Trans. & Ed.). London: Ardent Media.
- Ibsen, H. (2005). *Hedda Gabler*. E. Gosse and W. Archer, (Eds.). San Diego: ICON Group International, Inc.
- Mayerson, C. W. (1950). Thematic symbols in Hedda Gabler. *Scandinavian Studies*, 22(4), 151-160.
- Moi, T. (2013). Hedda’s silences: Beauty and despair in Hedda Gabler. *Modern Drama*, 56(4), 434-456.
- Spacks, P. M. (1962). The world of Hedda Gabler. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 7(1), 155-164.
- Templeton, J. (1997). *Ibsen’s women*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Xu, Y. H. (2000). The feminist perspective of Hedda Gabler. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (1), 39-43.
- Yan, F. F. (2015). Wandering between fear and yearning for freedom—On the Character and tragic fate of Hedda Gabler. *Masterpieces Review*, (18), 159-161+164.
- Zucker, W. M. (1969). The demonic: From Aeschylus to Tillich. *Theology Today*, 26(1), 34-50.