REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SUICIDE IN THE THEATRE OF HENRIK IBSEN

DOI: 10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.3.26.2025.art.6

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the representations of suicide among female characters in Henrik Ibsen's drama, exploring the ways in which voluntary death becomes a form of response to social and moral pressures. Trapped within patriarchal structures experienced by female figures as suffocating, these heroines undergo an intense inner trajectory that culminates in suicide — a symbolic protest against the impossibility of constructing a personal identity within a rigid social universe. Departing from the premise that these suicides cannot be reduced to purely psychological or sociological explanations, the article argues that the death of female characters is a complex phenomenon that constitutes a symbolic rupture from the discursive order that confines women to pre-established roles — as wives, muses, mothers, or idealized daughters. Focusing on the plays Hedda Gabler and Rosmersholm, the study highlights the idea that female suicide is not the consequence of personal failure or emotional breakdown, but an extreme response to the constraints imposed upon female identity and upon the normative expectations of what a woman should be — regardless of her individual desire. The female characters who choose death do so within symbolic structures shaped by patriarchal expectations, religious consciousness, aesthetic ideals, and more — perceiving voluntary death as a powerful manifestation of their radical refusal to accept an imposed and predetermined identity. At the same time, this extreme gesture functions as a narrative act that expresses the impossibility of being for female figures suspended between the domestic sphere, the silence enforced by masculine social scripts, and the irreducible will to selfhood.*
Keywords: *female suicide; social pressures; identity; death; Ibsen*

1. Introduction

In modern literature, few dramatic works have explored the crisis of feminine identity with the same depth and intensity as Henrik Ibsen's theatre. His plays mark a pivotal transformation in the history of drama, shifting the classical external conflict toward a psychological, inner conflict, articulated as a drama of conscience. Recognized as the father of modern drama, Ibsen created emblematic female characters for world literature — figures that have sparked significant critical controversy, women riddled with weaknesses and ambitions, consumed to the point of self-destruction by their intense inner conflicts. „Modern drama arises from the awareness that the world can no longer be represented as a closed system, and that the characters' inner lives have become the true space of action"[1].

By the end of the nineteenth century, Europe was experiencing profound social, political, and cultural transformations. Modernity brought about the crisis of traditional values, the rise of individualism, and a radical reevaluation of gender

[1] Peter Szondi, *Theory of Modern Drama*, ed. Michael Hays, Polity Press, 1987, p. 10.

roles, developments reflected intensely in literature and philosophy. In this context, theatre ceased to be mere entertainment and became a privileged space for moral, political, and psychological debate. Ibsen's plays emerged at a time when the feminist movement began to systematically contest patriarchal structures. In Norway, as in the rest of Europe, women were excluded from political, economic, and educational spheres, with marriage and motherhood considered their inevitable destinies.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that woman is socially "constructed", systematically reduced to the notion of the "Other" her existence derived from that of the male subject: „One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[2]. From this perspective, Ibsen's female characters — far from being mere victims of their social context — internalize their marginalization to the point where they can no longer conceive of existence except through external imperatives, as all other options are invalidated by social, moral, and psychological constraints. Thus, Ibsen constructs heroines whose struggle for independence exposes patriarchal structures that suffocate feminine subjectivity, denying women the possibility of choice, integration, or emancipation. „Ibsen is not a feminist in the sense of promoting any specific political program for women's liberation, but his work is a profound investigation of what it means to be a human subject in the context of gender and social constraint"[3].

Ibsen redefined realist theatre by concentrating life not in external actions but within the character's inner world. His plays are analytical, placing the past in the foreground as an obsessive and shaping force of destinies. His characters — human beings turned into masks — are compelled to contemplate their historical and moral conditions, perpetually confronting the past. Self-questioning and the lucid analysis of life's experiences become essential for shaping identity.

His dramatic narratives condense action within 24, 48, or 72 hours, compressing destiny into a concentrated timeframe in which the Ibsenian character embarks on an intense, precipitate reflexive journey that inevitably leads to collapse. The principal conflict manifests as a struggle between past and present, between what was and what might be. Unlike classical theatre, where the character is thrown into action, modern drama centers on self-analysis: the human being becomes the object of scrutiny, and introspection the core of the drama. „Tragedy in the modern sense reveals not a fall from divine grace, but an estrangement from oneself and from meaning"[4]. Ibsen's protagonists face authentic dilemmas, deeply rooted in their existential realities, plagued by unanswered questions and defining moral conflicts. Though the female suicides in Ibsen's plays are not heroines in the classical sense, neither are they passive victims; rather, they are women determined, consciously or unconsciously, to expose the mechanisms through which society, art, or religion construct and deconstruct feminine identity. But, „the

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, vol. I, Vintage Books, 1989, p. 267.
[3] Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 17.
[4] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, Yale University Press, 1980, p. 322.

woman who claims the right to desire and self-definition inevitably faces annihilation"[5].

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2. Hedda Gabler – The Woman of Refusal

Hedda Gabler (1890) is one of Henrik Ibsen's most celebrated and controversial plays. Its protagonist, Hedda, is the daughter of a deceased general, raised within an aristocratic ethos, yet trapped in a passionless marriage to the academic Jørgen Tesman. She lives in a bourgeois world that provides her with status, but not content, autonomy, or any existential purpose. From this disjunction between her social origins and her conjugal reality emerges a pervasive discomfort — an empty existence, devoid of love, creativity, and freedom.

The society that forms the background of Hedda's destiny is a patriarchal one, where a woman's value is determined by motherhood and submission. By refusing the traditional roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper — roles attributed to women by the prevailing social norms — Hedda seeks refuge in her own imagination. The characters surrounding her — her husband, Miss Tesman, Lövborg, Mrs. Elvsted, and Judge Brack — directly or indirectly contribute to her ultimate decision.

Hedda appears on stage not only as a protagonist but as a destabilizing presence within a world pretending to be stable. Thus, the tragic subtext of the character becomes evident from the beginning. Even before she appears physically, Tesman and Aunt Julle discuss "dear Hedda"[6] and the atmosphere in the house is somewhat tense due to the others' attempts to adapt her to the domestic space. Ibsen's choice of her stage entrance encapsulates the character's essence: "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. She is dressed in a tasteful, somewhat loose-fitting morning gown"[7]. She is an elegant woman, but emotionally cold. The newly furnished house, full of beautiful things from Miss Tesman's perspective, is, for Hedda, a meaningless residence rather than a home.

The fundamental myth of Ibsen's creative universe is again represented by the imprint of the past, interpreted as a destiny that constantly and inevitably influences character development. Throughout the play, Hedda Gabler embodies a figure caught between two worlds: on one hand, her aristocratic heritage symbolized by her father's name (General Gabler); on the other, the bourgeois domestic present represented by her marriage to Jørgen Tesman. Her maiden name,

[5] Toril Moi, *Op. cit.*, 2006, p. 83.
[6] Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*, trans. Edmund Gosse and William Archer, the Pennsylvania State University, 2010, p. 22.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

preserved in the title, is not a decorative detail but a symbolic choice by the playwright: it annuls the husband's authority and highlights the tension between an inherited (masculine, military, authoritarian) identity and an imposed (feminine, submissive, passive) one.

Her marriage, monotonous and devoid of passion, functions from the outset as an alliance of convenience in which Hedda feels like a social and aesthetic pawn — a woman "suitable" for a man on a professional ascent: "So you see it was this enthusiasm for Secretary Falk's villa that first constituted a bond of sympathy between George Tesman and me. From that came our engagement and our marriage, and our wedding journey, and all the rest of it"[8]. Although she is educated, intelligent, and refined, Hedda holds no real power beyond the domestic sphere, which, from her perspective, lacks any genuine meaning. She plays the role of wife, but beneath the veneer of politeness lies an inner void: "HEDDA. [Hears him coming and says in an indifferent tone.] And this is a view from the Val d'Ampezzo, Mr. Lovborg. Just look at these peaks! [Looks affectionately up at TESMAN.] What's the name of these curious peaks, dear?"[9].

Deprived of a professional life or a socially accepted vocation, the woman is unavoidably reduced to the status of wife and mother — roles Hedda rejects with an almost nihilistic ostentation. She cannot, does not want to, and does not know how to be a housekeeper. When Miss Tesman affectionately suggests that a little new life might appear, Hedda's reaction is abrupt and categorical, revealing her refusal to adopt the traditional feminine role. She rejects not only the child but also what the child symbolizes: to become a mother would be to definitively close off any space of freedom. Nevertheless, Hedda is tormented by her own mediocrity: she does not write, she does not create, she does not participate in public life, remaining merely a spectator to her own stagnation, haunted by the thought that any daring initiative would anyway be denied to her within the social universe she inhabits.

Her relationships with the other characters are governed by an unstable mixture of fascination, repulsion, and manipulation. She refuses any form of intimacy: she does not love, she does not approach, she does not offer herself. A confession reveals the motor of her entire drama: "Hedda: I want for once in my life to have power to mould a human destiny"[10]. She does not seek love or safety but power, in a perverse and negative form.

Her entire attitude towards Thea Elvsted — the sensitive, devoted, maternal woman — is one of disdain. Hedda despises Thea not only for her femininity but also for the influence she has over a creative man — something Hedda herself has failed to achieve: "I think I must burn your hair off after all"[11].

She rekindles her connection with Lövborg not out of love, but to play a central role in a beautiful story she imagines, unable to bear the thought that Thea,

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 61.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 72.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 85.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 85.

and not she, is the one inspiring his creative efforts: "It is a sort of child-murder. MRS. ELVSTED: How could you, then—! Did not the child belong to me too?"[12]. The manuscript represents the symbolic child of both Lövborg and Thea. In literary terms, the two women are constructed antithetically: Thea embodies the conformist feminine ideal, while Hedda represents a cold, ungraspable femininity.

Hedda realizes that even though she cannot create, she can destroy the creations of others. Driven by this logic and the desire to control both the man and his destiny, she throws the manuscript into the fire: "HEDDA: [Throws one of the quires into the fire and whispers to herself.] Now I am burning your child, Thea! — Burning it, curlylocks! [Throwing one or two more quires into the stove.] Your child and Eilert Lovborg's. [Throws the rest in.] I am burning—I am burning your child"[13]. She then gives Lövborg the pistol to commit suicide, orchestrating his death as an aesthetic act: "HEDDA: Take it—and do you use it now. LOVBORG: [Puts the pistol in his breast pocket.] Thanks! HEDDA: And beautifully, Eilert Lovborg. Promise me that!"[14], and admires him for his courage: "Eilert Lovborg has himself made up his account with life. He has had the courage to do—the one right thing"[15]; "It gives me a sense of freedom to know that a deed of deliberate courage is still possible in this world — a deed of spontaneous beauty"[16].

When she learns that Lövborg shot himself accidentally in a tavern, Hedda is deeply disappointed: "[Looks up at him with an expression of loathing.] That too! Oh, what curse is it that makes everything I touch turn ludicrous and mean?"[17]. She is not revolted by death itself but by the absence of style and aesthetic sense. For Hedda, death must carry artistic significance; otherwise, it is merely vulgar. When Brack blackmails her over Ejlert's death, Hedda realizes that every space of freedom has been closed off: no material, social, or moral escape remains. The only act left to her is suicide, as the ultimate form of self-control: "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!"[18].

Yet Hedda does not commit suicide merely because she is blackmailed or bored. She does so because she feels that all valuable options for existence have been confiscated from her, and the life she is permitted is one she deems banal, degrading, and unacceptable. She dies not from weakness but from the firm conviction that only death can free her from the vulgarity of a world that has dissolved and forbidden her identity. The play ends with a memorable line from Judge Brack: "BRACK: [Half-fainting in the arm-chair.] Good God! — people don't do such things"[19]. This is not just a reaction of horror but an expression of astonishment at the violation of an unwritten code: a woman who has dared to

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 106.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 110.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 109.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 121.
[16] *Ibidem*, p. 124.
[17] *Ibidem*, p. 126.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 130.
[19] *Ibidem*, p. 131.

decide her own end, without permission, without justification, without a "feminine" motive such as unrequited love, betrayal, or maternity.

Hedda's suicide thus destabilizes the canonical expectations of the era: she does not die for a man, for love, or for an unborn child — she dies because she refuses a mode of existence imposed upon her. In a world where women are condemned either to submission or disappearance, Hedda chooses death. Symbolically, through the manner of her death, she reconnects to a masculine, heroic, aristocratic identity: for her, the pistol is not just a weapon, but her father's, General Gabler's, a banner of nostalgia for a "great" destiny and an honor code that domestic reality destroys and social reality utterly denies her.

3. Beata Rosmer – The Silent Woman

Rosmersholm (1886) is another of Ibsen's plays that intimately incorporates the theme of self-destruction, built upon the tension between the ideal of moral purification and the overwhelming power of a past that refuses to die. The Rosmer house is not merely a dwelling; it becomes a living character, a space contaminated by the memory of death, a moral mausoleum that entraps all who inhabit it. In such a setting, suicide no longer betrays despair but becomes the inevitable consequence of existing in a space haunted by guilt, remorse, and memories — an act of acknowledging a culpability that can only be purified through death. The conflict is not external but is transferred to the characters' consciousness.

Beata Rosmer, the first wife of John Rosmer, commits suicide before the beginning of the play by throwing herself into the river. Yet her memory remains vividly alive in the consciousness of the other characters, persisting as a moral and psychological echo meant to disturb the peace and relationships among them. As the house represents a site of patriarchal authority, where ideals of morality, purity, and order are elevated to the status of ontological destiny, death too is imbued with another kind of vision: to die means to cleanse the sin, to restore order, even at the cost of the self.

Though physically absent, Beata's voice is reconstructed through the testimonies of others, such that her figure and her extreme gesture structure the entire play. Her death constitutes the pillar of the tragedy, what Gérard Genette would term a "hypodiegetic paradigm"[20], whereby an anterior event radically shapes the present narrative. Beata is described as a delicate woman, a "poor soul, was so sadly in need of care and sympathetic companionship"[21]. Kroll harshly encapsulates the truth: "There is one thing, at any rate, that 1 can tell you now, and that is that your poor tortured and overwrought Beata put an end to her own life in order that yours might be happy — and that you might be free to live as you

[20] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cornell University Press, 1980.
[21] Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, translated by R. Farquharson Sharp, J. M. Dent & Sons Limited London, Dutton & Co. Inc. New York, 1938, p. 249.

pleased"[22]. She thus becomes a collateral victim of a male ideal. Although she does not participate in the moral purification project, she silently bears its consequences.

Helpless in the face of another woman increasingly present in her husband's life, she chooses to withdraw: "Rebekka: Yes — it was like a fight for life between Beata and me at that time"[23]; "I have not much time left; for John must marry Rebecca immediately now"[24]. Between Rosmer, the man of abstract ideals, and Rebekka, the active woman, Beata remains the docile woman, deprived of discourse, isolated in a position without reply: "Kroll: She said she meant to stand out of the way[25]. Rebekka admits: "Whit I wanted was that we two should go forward together on the road towards freedom — always forward, and further forward! But there was that gloomy, insurmountable barrier between you and a full, complete emancipation"[26]. She dies to make space, yet that space remains contaminated.

Domesticated to the point of exhaustion, a mute woman, voiceless, Beata embodies the conventional model of the wife who cannot exist outside her traditional definition. Her retreat is marked by a silent gesture, typical of her entire existence: she does not scream, she leaves no explosive letters, she accuses no one. Though she dies quietly, her gesture reveals rebellion: "she threw herself from the footbridge into the mill-race"[27]. Beata does not die from madness but from the lack of an alternative space of existence: she is no longer loved, no longer desired as a wife, and cannot become anyone else. Her suicide expresses an exasperated fragility, torn by the silent pressures of a house where Rosmer's reformist ideals become suffocating and toxic.

Yet she does not disappear; instead, she haunts the others' consciences. She has no lines, but she possesses power, for her death does not free the space but transforms it into a mausoleum. Beata becomes a kind of "a dead body on the back"[28] of the Rosmer–Rebekka couple, eroding every attempt at regeneration.

4. **Rebekka – The Woman of Initiative**

If Beata dies out of helplessness and docility, Rebekka dies because of her own strength, becoming the voice that gives language to tragedy: Rosmer: "You are not like Beata. You are not under the influence of a distorted view of life"[29]. She is a modern character, an intelligent and emancipated woman, yet ultimately contaminated by guilt, fully aware of her indirect role in triggering the chain of events that led to Beata's suicide.

Initially, Rebekka appears as a strong woman, endowed with a reformist moral discourse, willing to help Pastor Rosmer break the chains of suffocating traditions by proposing a form of love free from the rules of traditional marriage:

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 262.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 304.
[24] *Ibidem*, p. 263.
[25] *Ibidem*, p. 263.
[26] *Ibidem*, p. 296.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 263.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 279.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 314.

"an apostate man and an *emancipated* woman living together"[30]. Since Rebekka seeks to be Rosmer's equal partner, their relationship seems to promise a kind of spiritual renewal. Yet here too, the past is the instance that blocks any attempt at regeneration, for the death of Rosmer's wife, Beata, looms as an unspoken guilt.

In a harrowing confession, Rebekka admits: "It was I that lured — that ended by luring — Beata into the tortuous path — … Into the path that — led to the mill-race. Now you know it, both of you"[31]. Thus, she becomes a living corpse, bearing a diffuse sin — that of thought, suggestion, and moral pressure: "Rebecca (impetuously): Oh, don't talk about Beata! Don't think about Beata anymore! She is dead, and you seemed at last to have been able to get away from the thought of her"[32]. When Rosmer asks if they can still be saved, Rebekka suggests that the only possible purification is death: "I — after this I should only be like some sea-sprite hanging on to the barque you are striving to sail forward in, and hampering its progress. I must go overboard. Do you think I could go through the world bearing the burden of a spoiled life — brooding for ever over the happiness which I have forfeited by my past? I must throw up the game, John"[33]. Water, symbolizing both purification and death, closes the tragic loop.

Despite her efforts to reconfigure the domestically preordained role, Rebekka ends up in the same walls that killed Beata, becoming the very victim she sought to replace: "I shall go the way Beata went"[34]. Rebekka does not despise life; she is simply lucid enough to recognize that she has always lived in the shadow of death: "I am under the influence of the Rosmersholm view of life — now"[35]. Unlike Beata, she confesses, negotiates, provokes dilemmas, but in the end, she realizes that no matter how much she tries to become a new type of woman, outside the house, she is pulled back by everything that Rosmersholm symbolizes. She attempts to define her own freedom but finds no acceptable framework to exercise it.

Ibsen shows once again that the woman who assumes desire becomes a monster in the eyes of men and of society. Even Rosmer, who loves her, judges her. The play concludes with the couple's suicide by drowning, in the same river where Beata perished — projecting death as a form of deliverance: "Rebecca. Yes. We are one now. Come! We can go gladly now. (They go out, hand in hand, through the hall, and are seen to turn to the left)[36]. Like Hedda, Rebekka chooses death not to disappear but to end her story with dignity.

The suicides of Beata and Rebekka demonstrate the same conclusion: in Ibsen's world, the conscious woman finds no space for affirmation except through an extreme exit. The silent woman dies alone, while the woman of initiative is forced to vanish. The woman who cannot speak and the woman who has spoken

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 264.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 296.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 274.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 314.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 280.
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 314.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 315.

too much meet in the same water, a symbol of memory and void. For both, death becomes the only form of liberation from a house that, symbolically, is a moral prison — an embodiment of a universe dominated by convention and the sin of transgressing it.

5. Conclusions

Ibsen creates conscious women, torn by the impossibility of reconciling their own freedom with the order imposed from the outside — women whose tragedy arises precisely from the lucidity of their consciousness. If Hedda dies to demonstrate her independence, Beata dies because she cannot remain, and Rebekka because she cannot go on. Thus, Ibsen's female characters are not mere victims of patriarchy, passive or resigned, but are portrayed as conscious, intelligent, cultivated beings, engaged in an obsessive search for the meaning of their existence and their autonomy — even at the cost of their own lives.

Far from being a simple narrative event or a melodramatic conclusion, self-annihilation in Ibsen's theatre acquires a profound symbolic function: it becomes a final attempt at asserting the will, standing as a personal, tragic, yet deliberate decision — a means of expressing the failure of emancipation and the collapse of femininity in the face of a limited social universe. Positioned at the center of moments of maximal dramatic intensity, voluntary death marks a definitive rupture from the oppressive reality of existence, expressing an ontologically impossible stance: that of being a free and autonomous woman in a society that fundamentally denies her these dimensions.

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