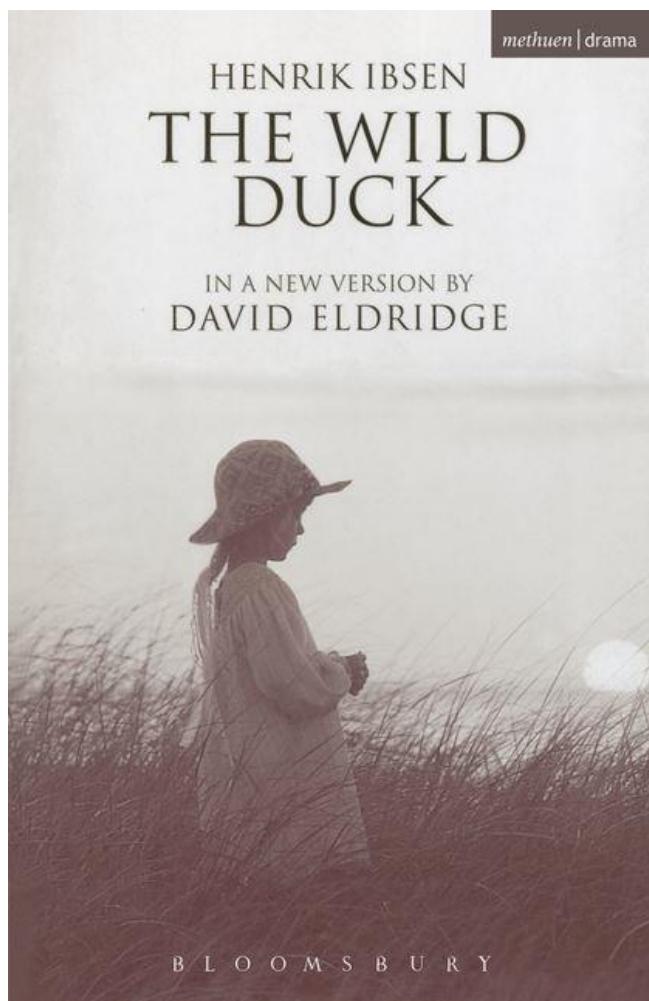


## **Exploration of Human Psyche in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck***

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Ibsen has been described as a dramatist of ideas. His work is basically linked with the circumstances of his life. During his life time, he was an honoured writer who changed the direction of the modern stage. His realism and treatment of contemporary social problems have influenced such dramatists as George Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, Harold Pinter, Arthur

Miller, and Edward Bond. Ibsen, has a profound effect on the drama both of his own time and in the twentieth century. Realism is an approach to scientific enquiry that sees the world as made up of events, together with mechanisms and structures. It is the depiction of subjects as they appear in everyday life, without interpretation. The term also describes works of art, which reveal a truth that may emphasize the ugly or sordid. Ibsen is one of the pioneers in writing realistic plays in revolt against both the romantic drama as well as the ‘well-made plays’. Ibsen was more interested in the social realities of life than in romantic themes and melodramatic plots of the ‘well-made plays’. The plot-devices of the ‘well-made play’ are employed by Ibsen to suit his realistic aims.

The chief point to note about Ibsen’s portrayal of characters is its realism. He was a great master in the art of character portrayal. His characters appear lively in his plays. He shows a philosophical knowledge of human nature in his description of characters. Ibsen has also made use of symbolism in his plays. Although Ibsen had used symbolism in some of his earlier plays, it was in *The Wild Duck*, written in 1884, that he made use of this device on an elaborate manner. The chief symbol in this play is the wild duck, which the Ekdal family had received from Mr. Werle, who had shot at, and wounded the bird. The first reference to the wild duck comes in an indirect manner in a speech by Mr. Werle in Act-I, though this reference is later made by old Ekdal, when he describes the behaviour of a wounded duck to Gregers in Act-II. Mr. Werle in Act-I says that there are people in this world who dive to the bottom, the moment they are wounded and never come up again. In Mr. Werle’s opinion old Ekdal belongs to this category of people. This kind of people occurs again when old Ekdal describes to Gregers about the behaviour of a wounded duck in Act-II. *The Wild Duck* is a play held together by symbols, as though the wild duck serves as a magnet and the characters in the play are like so many iron filings held together to it. In this play the symbol is a physical authenticity on the stage and suggests the actual presence.

Gregers points out that Hjalmar hides himself from the reality of life just as the wild duck, by diving to the bottom and holding fast to the weeds, tries to hide itself from the real life living above the surface. Gregers knows that Hjalmar’s wife been seduced by Mr. Werle before she marries Hjalmar. But Hjalmar does not know this fact. Gregers feels sorry that Hjalmar should have remained in the dark about Gina’s past life all these years. Gregers compares Hjalmar to the wild duck and himself to the dog which is capable of bringing the wounded duck back to the surface. The wild duck thus becomes a symbol of Hjalmar’s life of ignorance and illusion.

Hjalmar leads this incomplete and unsatisfactory life because of his ignorance of Gina’s past. Thus, the wild duck, which is lame and has a damaged wing also symbolizes Hjalmar’s incomplete life. Gregers does not want that Hjalmar should continue with his illusion and thus continue to live in the center of dishonesty. Ibsen gives a full description of the wild duck:

**GREGERS.** I was just looking at her. One of her wing seems to me to droop a bit.

**HEDVIG.** Well, no wonder; her wing was broken, you know.

**GREGERS.** And she trails one foot a little. Isn’t that so?

**HJALMAR.** Perhaps a very little bit (Act-III, 59).

The wild duck symbolizes Hedvig too. The wild duck is an alien in the garret; nobody knows where it has come from. All that is known about it is that it was wounded by Mr. Werle when he enjoyed the sport of shooting birds. Hedvig is an alien in this household. Hedvig is a product of Mr. Werle's sport of making love to any woman who attracted him. Mr. Werle had forced himself upon Gina and Gina had, as a consequence of Mr. Werle's passionate adventure with her, given birth to Hedvig, though Hjalmar has all these years been thinking her to be his own daughter.

Thus, there is much in common between the wild duck and Hedvig: both are products of Mr. Werle's sporting nature. The wild duck, is lame, has a damaged wing, and leads an incomplete and unsatisfactory life, shut within the four walls of a dark garret. Hedvig too leads a narrow, limited life, partly because she has weak eyesight and would soon become blind and partly because she had no ambition to travel out to see the world. To Hedvig, her house, her father, her mother, and the wild duck constitute the whole world. Hedvig leads a frustrated life like that of the wild duck.

The wild duck symbolizes old Ekdal's life also. At one-time, old Ekdal lived at Hoidal, in the open air, and used to go into the forest nearby in order to hunt wild animals. He was in those days as free as the wild duck was, before it was shot at by Mr. Werle. But now old Ekdal lives in a small house situated in a crammed, crowded city, far away from open, spaces and open air. Thus, old Ekdal hides himself from the reality of life, and in his case also Gregers wants to act as a saviour like the clever dog which can bring a wounded duck to the surface again. Old Ekdal's present life is equivalent to the present life of the wild duck.

At the same time, the wild duck has three specific significance within the play, it reflects Ibsen's impression of himself when he wrote the play. It represents Ibsen's own reforming and moralizing spirit. Ibsen wants the reader to understand that he has now forgotten what it meant to live a wild life; he has now, like the wild duck, grown up desirable and trained and satisfied with his limited life. Both Hjalmar and Gregers represent different aspects of Ibsen: on the one hand the evader of reality, and on the other the optimistic idealist who bothers mankind with his claims of the ideal because he has a sick conscience.

The wild duck is also a symbol of Werle's seduction of Gina before she got married to Hjalmar. After learning from Gregers the secret of Gina's past life, Hjalmar feels like wringing the neck of the wild duck. The very sight of the wild duck now reminds him of the man from whom the bird had been received and who had played a trick upon Hjalmar by getting the seduced Gina married to him." The wild duck represents the social castaways in the play: the outcast Gregers, the exaggerated Hjalmar, the play-hunter Old Ekdal, the washed-out Doctor Relling and the alcoholic theology student Molvik. The dark Garret in the play symbolizes the thick forest where old Ekdal used to hunt wild animals. It is a symbol of protective fantasy for old Ekdal. This is an illusion which old Ekdal has built up for himself. To Hedvig, the garret symbolizes the depth of the ocean. The first description of the garret gives the symbol of the imaginative world of old Ekdal with its warmth as strange as its shadows.

Ibsen has beautifully employed the symbol of light. The impact of light in the garret is different in the daylight and in the moon light. Taking the garret as human life, the daylight symbolizes reality and the moonlight, illusion. The life looks beautiful and relaxed in moonlight which is an illusion of life. In *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen begins the play by emphasizing the value of colour and light. He uses the theme of light to contrast Old Werle, a stingy rich man, with Old Ekdal, a poor helpless man. Ibsen connects the colour green with the loss of eyesight of Old Werle. A possible affair between Old Werle and Gina, Hedvig's mother, suggests the cause of Hedvig's loss of sight. By using sun and moon, Ibsen establishes the atmosphere of the scene. In Ibsen employs the symbol of light to portray certain characteristics in order to construct the plot and to adjust the mood of the scene.

F.L. Lucas analyzes the opening arrangement and writes "In the outer room the lamps are dimmed, with green shades, in contrast to the brilliance of the room behind" (Lucas, 190). This means that the outer room, lit with soft and shaded light, implies poverty, whereas the inner room, illuminated with bright candles, expresses wealth. The darkened room, insinuating poverty, is the office in which the poor Old Ekdal 'does some extra copying,' and in return receives a small income. The inside room, representing wealth, is Old Werle's dining room where he was hosting a party. The distinctions of these two rooms contrast Old Ekdal and Old Werle. "In contrast to Werle's party, the lighting is of comparative poverty 'on the table a lighted lamp'" (Lucas, 190),<sup>s</sup> Unlike Old Werle's expensive and exquisite illumination, a small inexpensive lamp lights the Ekdals home, displaying poverty. This dissimilarity shows another significant distinction between Old Werle and Old Ekdal.

Old Ekdal explains that green is known to be the most helpful coloured shade to prevent blindness. This lighting early in the play hints that Old Werle is going blind which relates him to Hedvig, where there is every probability that she will lose her eyesight. Further, green is the colour of romantic unreality-the world of the wild duck caught in the seaweed below the waters of the fjord.

The colour green, a symbol of fantasy, is comparable to the world of the wild duck, which the characters use to wander themselves from reality. The shade green is a link of two plots of the play. The colour green hints to the loss of sight which suggests an affair between Old Werle and Hedvig's mother, Gina. Another explanation of the green display is to show a relationship of fantasy with the wild duck. The green colour also reflects Old Ekdal who is an angry man living in the past on the hunting grounds of the duck. The first explanation of green results in Hedvig committing suicide because of her anger. Hjalmar finding out that Hedvig is not his daughter, disregards Hedvig; this provokes her suicide. Green colour, symbolizing anger, hints two separate plots which end in fury. In each scene the light conditions decrease, as does the plot. In the firs, the gorgeous moon illuminates the stage and in the following scene the sun rises and reality of the affair nears. The last scene of the play describes a cold snowy day, in which the suicide of Hedvig occurs (Cervi, 160-61). Lucas depicts act two as follows: "The wild duck's garret is opened clear with moonbeams shine on some parts of the great room. This happy hunting ground of illusion is vast and shadowy; and lit by the beguiling magic of moonshine"(Lucas, 191).

Old Ekdal's hunting ground fantasy is satisfied by the illuminating illusion of the moon. Not only the settings of this scene significant, so are the contents of this Act. He introduces the wild duck in this scene and so is the story of the 'clever dog' that 'went down and got the duck up' from 'the grasses and roots and weeds.' This is an example of how Ibsen sets the mood of the scene and expresses primary themes through the display of light. The daylight falls through the large windows in the slanting roof.' Cold reality approaches.

Ibsen carefully uses the colour green to enable two implications. One implication of the colour green is the affair between Old Werle and Gina, through eye trouble. The second one is the sad life of Old Ekdal living in his past. In the last four Acts Ibsen makes the setting correspond to the contents, the moon with happiness and daylight parallel to reality. The lack of light is analogous to darkness in the scene. Finally, grey sunlight, along with coldness and snow, correspond to Hedvig's death.

Old Ekdal's splitting and breaking speech is also symbolic. It symbolizes the incomplete and damaged life of old Ekdal, and the impact of forests on his life. Thus, in his speech he says:

**EKDAL.** (With a large gesture): Not that I'm afraid, you know; but – (Act-II, 38).

Old Ekdal's Lieutenant Uniform is also symbolic. He is not entitled any more to wear it but puts it on to recall his past way of living, the days when he was a lieutenant. He lives in a world of illusion, created by himself in which he finds sufficient satisfaction. This can be clearly seen in the following dialogue:

**GREGERS.** You were a great sportsmen.

**EKDAL.** So I was, I don't deny it you're looking at my uniform cap. I don't ask anybody's leave to wear it in the house. So I longer I don't – go out in the streets with it – (Act-II, 38).

In Act-II Greger saying himself as a clever dog is also symbolic. He thinks himself to be a great saviour and a great helper for the Ekdal family by taking the Ekdal family from ignorance to the light, but this absurd insight leads them to disastrous consequences. In the words of Gregers:

**GREGERS.** If I should choose, I should like best to be a clever dog.

**GINA.** A dog! (Act-II, 45).

In Act-III Hedvig says that the clock in the menageries is still and doesn't go anymore. It is symbolic as it is concerned with the wild duck. Time has no value for the wild duck because his life has confined to this menagerie. There is also a picture about the death of a girl. It is symbolic to the approaching death of Hedvig.

Alcohol also stands as a symbol. Alcohol for Molvik is symbolic because it is an illusion for him which gives him a kind of escape from his dull life. Art of photography too is symbolic. It is a symbol of reality but not the true reality. Here Ibsen gives importance to the necessity of illusive life.

Hjalmar's proposed invention symbolizes 'a saving lie' for him. This is a hope for Hjalmar towards a better future for him. He says:

**HJALMAR.** I wonder you have not asked that question sooner. But perhaps you haven't heard of the invention?

**GREGERS.** The invention? No. (Act-III, 60).

Hjalmar's unfinished invention symbolizes his illusion of himself as a great man. Working on it enables him to entertain his heroic vision of himself, finishing it would force him to expose to the world, the mediocre quality of his ideas.

Hjalmar wears a fashionable overcoat which he borrowed from Molvik in order to attend Werle's dinner party. The borrowed coat appears to symbolize Hjalmar's use of others to advance his goals or enhance his image. For example, in his photography business, he uses Werle's money and the talents of his wife to make his modest living. When he was in college, Doctor Relling notes, he had a "talent for declaiming other people's verses and other people's thoughts" (Act-V).

Gregers's smoky room is also symbolic. After renting a room from Hjalmar, Werle builds a fire in the stove and smokes up the room. Then he throws water on the fire, leaving a puddle on the floor. The mess he has made of the room appears to symbolize and foreshadow the mess he will make the Ekdal family's life. Characters in the play are also symbolic, representing average human beings, and illusion for them is an important thing on which their whole life is built. The house of Ekdals symbolizes the whole society which needs a saving lie. There are also Christian symbols in the play. Gina and Hjalmar symbolize Eve and Adam, living in their paradise and whose comfort is disturbed by the intrusion of the devil, the Gregers. They have to face a hope loss in the shape of the death of Hedvig. Gregers exclaims:

**GREGERS.** What do you mean?

**WERLE.** We were thirteen at table.

**GREGERS.** Indeed? Were there thirteen of us?

**WERLE.** (Glances toward HJALMAR EKDAL): Our usual party is twelve (To the others). This way gentlemen!

**HJALMAR.** (who has overheard the conversation): You ought not to have invited the Gregers (Act-I, 6).

The thirteenth person of the party is also a Christian symbol. Judas was the thirteenth who betrayed Jesus Christ, and here Gregers plays the role of Judas. The Christmas tree is symbolic from the Christian point of view. It symbolizes family security, fertility, and happiness. In Act-I Ibsen beautifully employs symbolism to make sure the requirement of illusion in the life of average human beings. In Act-III Gergers says that the wild duck is the most important of all the things there. The wild duck is the most important symbol which makes the play one of the greatest plays of Ibsen.

*The Wild Duck* illustrates in a most striking manner Ibsen's use of symbolism. The play is very skillfully written, and it shows the elaboration of Ibsen's methods at this period in Ibsen's career most successfully. *The Wild Duck* is a beautiful play depicting disrespect for moralistic annoying persons in people's lives, and also a wealth of understanding for weak human beings represented by Ekdal. Apart from the fact that Mr. Werle makes his wife miserable by his adulterous relationships, he also plays a trick upon Hjalmar by having Gina married to him. She had already become pregnant by her illicit union with Mr. Werle himself. Likewise, Greger's grievances against his father on the ground of his father's misdeeds are perfectly justified; Gregers feels so strongly about his father's evil doing, in the treatment of his wife and his business partner and his business partner's son, that he decides to leave his father's home altogether.

Greger's feeling forced by his passion for truth, reveals to Hjalmar the fact that Gina had been seduced by Mr. Werle before she married Hjalmar. Hjalmar is shocked to hear this disclosure. He first asks Gina what her relationship with Mr. Werle had been and, when Gina confirms that Mr. Werle had seduced her before marriage, Hjalmar feels deeply grieved and distressed. He scolds Gina for having kept him in the dark about it. He tells her that she has been guilty of deceit in her relations with him. Now, all this is also perfectly realistic. Hjalmar's reaction to Mr. Werle's letter, handed over to Hedvig by Mrs. Scorby as a birthday present for the girl, is also perfectly natural. This letter contains Mr. Werle's offer of a monthly allowance of five pounds to Old Ekdal for life and to Hedvig after the death of old Ekdal. This offer of money from Mr. Werle to Old Ekdal, and more particularly to Hedvig, gives rise to a suspicion in Hjalmar's mind. Only a little before he learnt that Mr. Werle would soon be going blind. He knows that Hedvig too would go blind in course of time and that her eye-ailment is hereditary. Now he actually begins to think that Hedvig is not his own daughter but Mr. Werle's. Hjalmar now cannot even bear to look at Hedvig and, when she comes near him, he roughly asks her to get out of his sight. He also declares his intention to leave his house and go elsewhere taking his father with him. Gregers thought that Hjalmar would be able to re-adjust himself to his family life. But Hjalmar's reaction is totally different from Greger's thinking. Only a very tough man, a man of an exceptional intellectual caliber and with exceptional moral courage would be able to adjust himself after knowing such bitter truths.

Hjalmar suddenly takes a turn over. Instead of leaving his home, he stays behind and then suddenly begins to talk about Hedvig in a most sentimental manner. He tells Gregers that he has always loved Hedvig deeply and then the girl also had great faith in him and in his invention. He says that now he fears that Hedvig might be taken away from him by Mr. Werle with the help of Mrs. Sorby and with Gina's involvement. Hjalmar who, a moment ago, had been expressing his hatred for Hedvig, now reveals his thought that Hedvig might be taken away from him. Hjalmar has discovered that his love for Hedvig is so deep that, whether she might be his daughter or some other man's daughter, he thinks that he cannot live without her.

Hedvig has been feeling depressed at Hjalmar's rejection of her. She simply cannot understand what has gone wrong. She is confused by the great change in Hjalmar's attitude towards her, from deep love to deep hatred. At first, in accordance with Greger's advice, she gets ready to kill the wild duck as a sacrifice to please her father; but soon afterwards she changes her mind and shoots herself, obviously the girl could not resolve herself to the change in Hjalmar's attitude

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towards her, she thought that her life would be meaningless. There is an element of morbidity in the girl, and in her state of despair at Hjalmar's changed attitude towards her. So she kills herself.

Mr. Werle is a perfectly credible person, one who has already taken a look at his past, misdeeds and found them convincing. It is natural also for Mr. Werle to decide to marry his housekeeper, Mrs. Sorby. Mr. Werle has become old; he can no longer lead a gay life and he would soon go blind. Under these circumstances he can find comfort only in another marriage. It is natural also for Mr. Werle to feel a slight twinge of remorse about his past misdeeds and to offer a monthly allowance to Old Ekdal. His advice to Gregers to desist from revealing to Hjalmar the true facts about Gina is also perfectly believable.

Gregers too is a credible person, though he is an unusual kind of man. Gregers is by nature a truth-seeker. He is almost ruthless in his insistence on the claims of the ideal. He goes ahead with his plan to reveal the true facts to Hjalmar in spite of the fact that first his father and then Dr. Relling tries his utmost to dissuade him from doing so. It is because of his obsession with the claims of the ideal that his father says that Gregers has a sick conscience inherited from his mother, and it is because of this obsession that Relling says that Gregers is suffering from an inflammation of the conscience. Gregers has noble motives, but what he lacks is a judgment of character. He does not realize the shortcomings and limitations of a man like Hjalmar.

The portrayal of Hjalmar too is perfectly realistic. He is a lazy, weak-minded and vacillating type of person. He avoids doing his work as a photographer on the plea that he has to meditate upon his proposed invention. He hardly does any work connected with his profession as a photographer but is all the time complaining that he is over-worked. He also keeps saying that he will continue to work as long as there is any strength left in him. All this is very funny of course. He has lived for fifteen years in a state of beneficent illusion, but this illusion is destroyed by a compulsive busy body (Gregers); and thereafter Hjalmar knows no peace. His desire to get away from Gina and Hedvig is natural, but he cannot leave them because he cannot live without such a competent life as Gina, and also, he is emotionally too involved with Hedvig. Hjalmar, as Relling well knows and as Gregers does not understand, is not a hero at all; he is an average man who simply cannot face the bitter truths of his life.

Relling is a realist to the core. Relling offers a contrast to Gregers. Gregers is an incorrigible idealist. Relling has truly understood the character of Hjalmar, and he can clearly see the blunder which Gregers would commit by revealing to Hjalmar the secret of Gina's past life. He warns Gregers against meddling with the life of Hjalmar and Gina, and also warns them against the damage done to Hedvig. Relling believes that the average man needs 'a saving lie' (Act-V, 81) in his life. He also believes that old Ekdal survives because of a saving lie in his life. "Take away the saving lie from the life of an average man, and you take away his happiness too" says Relling (Act-V, 81). Relling holds the view that it is very necessary to allow 'the saving lie' to remain intact in an average man because it is the stimulating principle of life. It was Relling's attempt to keep up 'the saving lie' in Hjalmar but Gregers has taken away that 'saving lie'. The 'saving lie' in the case of Old Ekdal is that, when he shoots a rabbit in the dark garret, he thinks that he has shot a wild bear in the thick forest of Hoidal.

Gina too is a realist, she is thoroughly practical and earth-bound like any practical woman, and she never thinks it necessary to reveal her husband the facts about her life before marriage. Being busy with routine household duties she completely forgets her past life and never bothers about what she did before her marriage. Mrs. Sorby is another practical woman. After the death of her husband, Relling wants to marry her but she is not certain whether Relling would be the right kind of husband for her especially because the experience of her first marriage which resulted in unhappiness. Now she plans to make herself useful to her employer, Mr. Werle, who begins to look upon her as being indispensable to him. There is no doubt that Mrs. Sorby would be very happy with Mr. Werle because Mrs. Sorby would make herself even more useful to Mr. Werle when Mr. Werle goes blind.

The dialogue throughout the play is perfectly realistic. The language employed is extremely simple. There is no artifice employed by the author in writing the dialogue. All the speeches are natural, spontaneous, and simple. The opening dialogue between the servants, the conversation among the guests at the lunch, the dialogue between Mr. Werle and his son Gregers, the dialogue between Gina and Hedvig, about the mounting expenses and their anxiety about Hjalmar, the dialogue between Gregers and Hedvig, with Hedvig talking about the miscellaneous articles which lie in the garret, the dialogue between Mrs. Sorby and those whom she meets at Gine's place, and the final dialogue between Gregers and Relling-all these have an authentic stamp. Everybody in the play speaks as people who speak in real life.

Ibsen in this play as in his other plays is a dramatist of social realities. In this play he has depicted in a most realistic manner the relations between a father and his son, the relations between an employer and his housekeeper, a husband and his wife, a father, and his daughter, and a friend with a friend. He has depicted paternal love, filial love, conjugal life, and fraternal relations. He has in no way tried to distort the kind of life which he has chosen for treatment in this play. In depicting the ordinary people like Hjalmar, Gina, and Old Ekdal, Ibsen shows an acute perception of realities.

There is the presence of the camera, a neutral, inadequate recorder of reality. Each character in the play sees reality from a unique point of view, voiced in old Ekdal's superstitions, Hjalmar's sentimentalism, Gina's literalism, Relling's cynicism, and Gregers's mystical idealism. These competing voices surround Hedvig, whose tragedy is as much provoked by this Babel of voices and views as by any other cause. The realistic art of *The Wild Duck* dictates its scale and type of action; the characters' social class, the furniture, and costumes, the stage directions for the actors' gestures and even the pitch of their voices. A typical Ibsenian play is not so much an unfolding of a plot as a revelation of character. Ibsen's emphasis is not on incident and action but on human psychology. Ibsen excels in depicting human relationships, and his depiction is always real. His message takes the form as plays which have a great impact in the minds of people since it was created. Thus, Ibsen is on the threshold of the new naturalistic style of playwriting.

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