

21M.710 Script Analysis

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### The Wild Duck

The “wild duck” in the play *The Wild Duck*, written by Henrik Ibsen, is both physical and metaphorical. On the one hand, it refers to a specific duck that fell into the river after being injured by Old Werle, and chose to grip onto the weed in the depths of the river. The duck was then brought back to the surface by a clever dog and nurtured to health under the care of the Ekdal family. Simultaneously, the duck also symbolizes one who has his head buried in the sand, holding onto certain perceptions of reality, unable to live without some illusion. In this context, the dog then represents the enlightened one who appears to drag the “wild duck” out of its delusional state.

The play parallels the story of the wild duck and makes great use of the associated imagery. The foundation for the play lies in past events between two families, which we learn about through conversations between characters Gregers, his father Old Werle and his good friend Hjalmar. Through Greger’s confrontations with Old Werle, we learn that a long time ago, Old Werle and his business partner Old Ekdal had been involved in a deal that went awry; Old Ekdal alone had gotten arrested for a crime they were involved in together. Later, Werle, who was married to Greger’s mother, also had an affair with and impregnated one of his own housemaids, Gina. In an attempt to compensate for the mistakes he made, Werle encouraged Gina and Ekdal’s son, Hjalmar, to get married. He also continued to grant monetary support to

Ekdal's family, which Hjalmar greatly benefited from, in order to have access to Gina's house. However, neither Werle nor Gina ever revealed to Hjalmar the true motives for Ekdal's actions.

Unaware of these previous agreements, Hjalmar builds a life with Gina and the girl he believes to be his daughter, Hedvig. He is comfortable with his lifestyle, knowing that he has some monetary ties to Old Ekdal but fully believing that he is the one his family looks up to and depends on. Upon learning of the illusions that had been cast on Hjalmar by his father Old Werle, Gregers is furious and sets out to enlighten Hjalmar on these familial affairs from the past, beginning by moving into the Ekdals' home. During this process he comments that he would like to play the "wild dog" that saves the "wild ducks" -- Hjalmar, and his family -- that were harmed by Old Werle.

As noble as Greger's original intentions, this creates all sorts of problems. This is because at the core, all the characters in the play seek their sense of purpose and identity on what they perceive to be truths; this concept forms the spine of the play. They are constantly in pursuit of some kind of dignity in the face of reality. When Gregers decides to burst the bubble to Hjalmar, the truths Hjalmar and his family had assumed to be permanent are turned upside down, and along with it, a sense of who they are.

From the beginning of the play we see that each of the characters have something they seem completely certain about in their lives and take great pride in. On one end we have Hjalmar, who knows he is the breadwinner of his family; for him, this is his identity. He understands that he depends somewhat on Werle for his family's income, but he works really hard to break that dependence. He does not doubt for a second that his family relies on him; after all, why wouldn't they? In fact, he believes that his family owes a significant portion of the

quality of their lives to him -- for example, he introduces his wife to Gregers as the lady who was “not entirely without culture”, as a consequence of her “associating with (himself) every day”. As we later learn, this pride stems from the fact that he was always the center of attention and was greatly admired in his earlier days.

Though Hjalmar complains that the expectations of being the breadwinner are high when he forgets to bring candy home to Hedvig as promised, deep down he understands that this is part of this role he chose to assume. At the very least, he asserts it constantly to the people around him. He also insists on doing things himself, without his family’s help. This in itself is quite ironic, because throughout the entire play we see again and again that Hjalmar can hardly survive without Gina.

With these beliefs firmly established in his mind, he works on an invention. As we later learn, he pursues his inventing career with a “breadwinner’s dream” -- to make a lot of money and then pass away, leaving Gina to be the breadwinner’s widow. From Hjalmar’s point of view, this would make Gina dependent on him for all of her life, as he assumes that Gina would not be in a position to make a living on her own. In addition, he fully believes that Hedvig, the daughter of the house, admires him and believes in his work, and this is what fuels his feeling of purpose.

Hedvig bears many similarities to Hjalmar. Hjalmar has not told her that she was taken out of school because she is going blind, so she believes that taking care of the wild duck is her purpose in life, and has little interest in the “real” world. As with Hjalmar, she is proud of this reality and constantly feels a need to assert her identity; we see this when she claims the wild duck as her own, over and over, throughout the play -- not her father’s, or her family’s, but her

very own, because she takes care of it. This is her truth, and to her, part of living a truthful life is making sure people do not misinterpret her reality.

On the other side we have Gregers, the character who drives all of the unravelling action and disillusionment in the play. Because he witnessed his mother's misery due to Werle's affair with Gina when he was younger, Gregers is convinced that a truthful marriage lies in beginning with a clean slate with no deception. He begins to believe it is his responsibility to correct the wrongs that the Werle family inflicted on Ekdal's family, to "establish a true marriage" in which there are no secrets between Hjalmar and Gina.

In the first half of the play Gregers gradually solidifies this identity and clarifies his mission for himself. At the beginning of the second half of the play, the conflict and event of the play arises when Gregers decides to act on this purpose in a way that directly shatters Hjalmar's perceived reality.

When Gregers informs Hjalmar about the history between his own family and Ekdal's, Hjalmar realizes that the people around him had never depended on him as much he had thought, and the foundation to support all of his previous actions disappears. Suddenly, this boy who had been admired greatly since his early days learns that he is not the center of attention anymore.

The unravelling gains in intensity as Hjalmar confronts Gina, his wife. What complicates matters, of course, is that Gina has a different interpretation to Hjalmar of what living a truthful life entails in terms of how the past factors into the reality of the present, and how important the *whole* truth is in relation to things like happiness and love. Gina knows that she loves Hjalmar deeply and only wants to do what's best for him; in order to accomplish this, she believes that whatever happened in the past with Werle should stay in the past. What's noteworthy, however, is

that Gina never outright lies to him, and confesses to the matter when prompted. Meanwhile, she finds her purpose and dignity in devoting herself to Hjalmar selflessly. Hjalmar, however, can't get over the fact that Gina and Hedvig did not depend on him as much as he had believed. He lets it be known that he now hates the wild duck, because it had been Werle's property at one point in time.

When Hjalmar also verifies that Hedvig may not be his child, he breaks completely. Having lost his identity as breadwinner, combined with his idealistic and absolute notions of love, he can't understand how anyone could possibly love him. Losing faith in Hedvig's adoration, he also loses the reason to pursue his invention. Just like the duck who had a hard time adjusting to life after being saved by the dog, Hjalmar has a very hard time adjusting to this lack of definition and certain truth in his life, and he decides that he must leave the house.

However, as we see in a highly comical scene near the end of the play, he has a very difficult time with that, too. First he makes a big show of not being able to stand living in the house, but then he realizes how harsh it would be to move out and tries very hard to find a graceful way to stay. He understands he can no longer rely on old truths, but doesn't yet have the courage to seek new ones. What we witness is his indecisiveness played out in drama-queen style, particularly when he tells to Gina to "Pack, and get the room ready!". In the midst of all this Hjalmar can't bear the sight of Hedvig, because he believes that she is the fundamental cause of all his suffering.

Of course, of all of the characters Hjalmar could have chosen to take the blame, Hedvig is the one innocent character in the play that is completely free from deceit. She hardly understands what is going on, though she tries very hard to interpret it. Hjalmar mentions that he wished that

he could shoot the duck, but would not, because of Hedvig. As mentioned already, Hedvig's understanding of her purpose in life is to take care of the wild duck; however, that is shattered when she realizes her father cares neither about the wild duck nor about her. As Hedvig gradually senses that her father is leaving her, she feels the pressing need to make sure people understand her. Her ultimate sacrifice could be regarded as the biggest display of truth and dignity in the play. Unable to comprehend her dad's actions, she finds a way to express her love for her father -- by killing herself.

What's surprising is how quickly Hjalmar calms down and gains a sense of security the instant he learns that Hedvig died because of her love for him. In that moment, he finds an inkling of truth to support his original purpose, and decides not to leave after all. Just like the duck had a hard time adjusting after being saved until it is brought under domesticity in the Ekdal household, it is another perceived truth that Hjalmar can latch to that reaffirms his purpose in life.

The results, of course, are tragic. Hedvig is dead. The result of Gregers' pure intentions are hardly favorable. The case in the play that contrasts this, where lack of deceit results in a favorable outcome is in Old Werle's new marriage, which is mentioned briefly. In that case, Mrs. Sorby decides to let Old Werle in on all of the gossip in her life, and both of them are able to make peace with the past. What is different about their case is that no one else is involved besides Werle and Mrs. Sorby. The stakes don't involve a teenage girl who is trying to figure out her life.

While the disillusionment of Hjalmar and Hedvig engages us emotionally, the playwright engages us intellectually through the character of Dr. Relling. He, too, has his own notions of

truth and his purpose. In the same way that Gregers feels it necessary to spread his ideas about what it means to live a truthful life, Dr Relling feels it is his responsibility as a doctor to give people what he coins a “life-illusion” when it is called for. One of his most famous lines in the play is “Take away a person’s vital life-lie, and you deprive them of happiness.” According to Dr. Relling, a person’s “life-lie” and sense of purpose are intimately related, and it is this sense of purpose that keeps a person happy. When explaining the concept to Gregers, he refers to it exactly as he sees it -- as a lie, and not an ideal.

For example, he convinces Hjalmar that he has talent at inventing something photography-related. What’s interesting is that although we see Hjalmar content toiling at this invention day after day, we never get to know what this mysterious invention is. This makes his pursuit of this invention seem illusory to us because it never really takes on a tangible form. It is also evident that Dr. Relling only partially believes in the likelihood that Hjalmar would actually succeed in this mission.

At first glance, spreading lies doesn’t seem to suggest that the truth is important to Dr. Relling. However, through his interactions with everyone else we realize that he is the most disillusioned character of them all; perhaps he accepts the fact that everyone needs a life-lie as the truth. Coincidentally, he also appears to be one of the least happy characters in the play, which we see when he speaks about his job as a doctor. In a sense, he finds purpose in and deals with reality he accepts by taking care of the people around him in the same way that Hedvig protects the duck from the wild. He provides shelter to others from the truth.

Most significantly, Dr. Relling acknowledges the full complexity of Ekdal’s family situation, especially with regards to the Hedvig, who he firmly believes has no part in the deceit

and should not have to pay for the consequences. Dr. Relling exhibits the most concern for the child's well-being throughout the entire ordeal; in stark contrast, Gregers sees Hedvig as the completely innocent and hence perfect hero to save the family. He suggests that Hedvig commit self-sacrifice by shooting the duck that her father suddenly hates so much.

At first, Gregers appears to be the mindful puppeteer, calculating ways to cause destruction; however, upon closer reading we see that what drives him isn't that different from what drives the other characters in the play. Gregers, unlike Dr. Relling, is simply insensitive to the nuances of the situation in the Ekdal household; his idealized concepts of truth and a "truthful marriage" do not incorporate these ideas. In a way, he is just as delusional as the people he is trying to save. Even after Hjalmar's life crumbles, Gregers insists that his friend is now a happier and a greater man, and when Hedvig dies, he is convinced that this tragedy brings out the greatness in Hjalmar. After all, it is only in this way that he can stay dignified. Hence, Dr. Relling would probably say that it is a "life-lie" that supports the purpose Gregers enacts for himself: the illusion that he could bring out the greatness in people by making them see the complete truth. This is further illuminated at the end of the play: Gregers realizes that life isn't worth living when he is informed by Dr. Relling that Hjalmar could never be the hero that Gregers wishes he would become.

As we witness this struggle between Relling and Gregers, and how Greger's choices affect the Ekdal family, I think the question the author ultimately asks us, in simple terms, is: should the dog have saved the duck? It is this question that lies under the conflict of the play, and sheds light on the spine -- the pursuit of some kind of purpose and dignity in the face of truth. The ending of the *Wild Duck* seems to suggest that sometimes, the wild duck may not wish or

need to be saved. Even more, sometimes the dog may be in fact a “duck”, just of a different kind -- the kind that holds onto unrealistic ideals and illusions of greatness.

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