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## The Attic: An Existential Reading of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

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### Abstract:

Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* is the first play in which we find the traces of Kierkegaardian philosophy of Existentialism. In this paper I shall try to analyse Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* in the light of existentialism. The characters in this play are continuously suffering from a kind of agony and pain. It's a kind of dual existence; one where the characters are living and other where they want to live. In this play the characters like Hjalmar, Old Ekdal are leading a life where they exist between an illusion and reality. Here Gregers is the person who comes from a self-imposed exile to attain his chief aim of idealizing the Ekdal family. Therefore, some characters are on a self-made mission and some are in search of one. This kind of existential crisis pervades the whole play. Here, in this paper, I shall focus on those existential crisis in this play and will also bring out the politics of the attic involved in constructing the identities of the characters. Finally, I have analyzed the suicide of Hedvig through Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaardian, Existentialism, illusion, identity, politics.

Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* portrays a number of characters held in moments of crisis. The realistic nature of the play gives the character an opportunity to shape themselves by their will power. This condition is similar to that of Sartre's idea of existentialism. Sartre assumes that the humans, from the point of their birth in this world, is in a kind of mud and has the choice to remain their or to move on. In both the cases their decision shapes the identity of the character. Likewise in this play the same situation can be observed.

The characters are portrayed in this play in such a light that at the outset it becomes clear of their intentions and their mission of life. Gregers Werle, who is the son of a wealthy merchant and industrialist Håkon Werle, comes from his self-imposed exile to his home. He, on getting the information that his former friend Hjalmar has got married to Gina, goes to meet with Hjalmar. Gregers decides to rent the spare room in the apartment. The next day, he begins to realize that there are more lies hanging over the Ekdals than Gina's affair with his father, Håkon Werle. He discovers that Hedvig has the problem of eyesight like Håkon Werle and draws the conclusion that Hedvig is the daughter of Håkon. From this point the character involves himself on a self-made mission to convey the truth to Hjalmar. But chief objective of Gregers (i.e. to convey the truth to Hjalmar) can be seen from the viewpoint of existential crisis; because Gregers' mother had a cold relationship with Håkon Werle and she died in believing that Gina and her husband had carried on an affair.

The existential crisis in the character of Hjalmar is from another perspective. Whereas Gregers has already fixed his aim in life, Hjalmar is still struggling to achieve that point. Though he is with his family, he spends much of his time alone inventing something. Later when we got to know that the invention is nothing but a “Life-lie” we can understand his loneliness and his existential crisis in not relating his identity with that of his family. He is living his life with a false identity.

The figure of Old Ekdal is also very pitiful. He represents a socially ‘Other’ person who has been cheated and thereby deprived from the opportunities he would have got. In the whole play Old Ekdal hardly takes part in any of the conversations. He is alone and isolated from the world and thereby tries to create a false sense of identity and lives with it.

These three characters, therefore, suffers from acute agony and existential crisis, Gregers, for getting an extremely un-pleasurable or hurtful experience of his mother’s death; and both Hjalmar and Old Ekdal for living a totally isolated life in their family.

### **The Politics of the Attic:**

Symbolism constitutes the very integral part of the play *The Wild Duck*. The attic, as an inanimate object, plays a manifold symbolic role in the life of the Ekdal household. Most of the acts in the play were being enacted in the attic. It is the house of the Ekdal family, a studio, a place of refuge from reality, a Christian paradise and a space beyond the reach of time. Thus, from the very beginning the playwright has projected a great value to the attic. The environment of the attic spells a magical charm on the characters and they make a romantic escape through it. It becomes a place of romance where we hear an elegiac tempo from Hjalmar’s flute with an emotional emphasis. The attic becomes a space where the characters can practice their illusion to sustain their real life.

The attic, due to the object that are kept in there, is a place where time stands still, refuting the reality of the moment. It is the place where the characters having existential crisis hides themselves. In this realistic play the characters are constantly trying to come out of the situation to which they are forced by the society to live in. The attic bears the symbol of permanence in the Ekdal household. The broken clock in the attic becomes a mouthpiece to symbolize the stillness of the time. The books represent freedom outside daily life, the possibilities and opportunities that are not offered to Hedvig. There is the wounded wild duck that ‘had a charge of shot in her body and who’s been held in the jaws of a dog.’ The duck, therefore, signifies someone just escaped from the jaws of death and has taken refuge in the attic. Therefore, it symbolizes Old Ekdal this time.

The attic becomes an illusion of reality for Old Ekdal when it becomes a microcosm of Hoidal hunting ground. The attic is the place where the old man can wear his ‘old fashioned officer’s cap’ and his ‘uniform’ of lieutenant. He says—“I don’t need anyone’s permission to wear it in the home” – the uniform gives the old man some power or we can say illusion of power, a power that he cannot practice outside due to the ideological threat. So, the attic stands for the old man an enclosed space where he can live his life in illusion. So the attic stands for him a ‘life-lie’.

The attic also becomes a site of light and darkness. There are shatters in the attic, therefore, sun and moonbeam can enter into the Attic. It gives the Ekdal household a romantic atmosphere but at the same time stands for a grotesque realism. F.L. Lucas has brilliantly interpreted the imagery of light and darkness played inside the Attic. Lucas depicts it in Act II as follows—

“The wild duck’s garret is open ‘clear moonbeams’ shine in on some parts of the ‘great room’. The happy hunting ground of illusion is vast and shadowy: and lit by the beguiling magic of moonshine.” (Lucas, 191)

Though the room is small in terms of space, he refers it as ‘great’ as forest because of the fantasy and illusion of the moonlight.

The lives of the characters portrayed in this play are so meaningless that illusion becomes a necessary part to live their own life. The attic here bears the symbolism of the whole world for the Ekdal family and without it they cannot even lead their simple life. It becomes a space where they must continue their quest to exist.

The attic becomes a major symbol when we know about Hedvig’s game named as “House on fire”. The revelation of the truth about Hedvig’s parentage breaks the romantic atmosphere of the attic and the setting becomes realistic. That’s why Gina said—“I am often afraid she will really set the house on fire”.

After knowing the reality about the Hedvig’s parentage, Hjalmar decides to leave the attic, but to leave the attic means to take “life-lie” from them. It means the taking away of Old Ekdal’s hunting ground and Hjalmar’s illusion of invention. That’s why Dr. Relling said to Gregers—“Take the life-lie away from average people and you take the happiness away the same time.”

The attic and its settings give a Christian story analogously. I quote from Robert Ralph’s essay “*Illusion and Reality in Ibsen’s The Wild Duck*”.

“Hedvig and her grandfather approach their world with a devotion and ritual akin to religious reverence, for the attic with the duck and other treasures may be considered a metaphor for the Christian paradise: it performs in their lives exactly the same function as does a traditional church for many people. Existing on the top floor of the Ekdal microcosm, the attic is the *summum bonum* in their lives; it provides them, just like heaven, with a world of pure value, a realm of nearly perfect orientation. The Ekdals keep returning to this private religion for sustenance just as people do with any traditional illusion that is sacred to them.” (Ralph, 121)

In this play *The Wild Duck* the roll of the attic is complex and multi-layered which constitute it a complex symbol. It becomes a life-lie for most of the family member and gives them an identity. It becomes a paradise where they can get shelter, comfort and pleasure denied by the realistic society.

## Reality versus Life-lie:

Another important dimension has been added to this play by the contrasting ideal of Reality and Life-lie. Gregers comes to the Ekdal household to convey the reality behind the relationship of Hjalmar and Gina's. To tell Hjalmar that Gina was the former mistress of his father and to explain that Hedvig is not Hjalmar's own daughter. The Gregers is trying to confront the reality to the Ekdals, whereas Hjalmar and his family are leading a common life with their "Life-lie(s)".

Here Gregers' idealism towards truth and Ekdals' 'Life-lie' both can be interpreted through the existential philosophy. Gregers' idealism is subscribing to the Kierkegaardian notion of existentialism. For Kierkegaard it's only through God and in God man can find freedom from tension and discontent and therefore find peace of mind and spiritual serenity. Kierkegaardian existentialism glorifies God, truth and spiritualism. Here Gregers by conveying the truth of Hedvig's parentage tries to achieve his aims and objectives to give Ekdals' a happy life. He does it so that the Ekdals' can attain a spiritual life free from falsity. In other hand if we follow Sartre's vision then we can identify Hjalmar in a kind of void (*le néant*), a mud (*le visqueux*) where he remains passive and suffers from despair.

## Hedvig's Death: A Question if We Can End Existential Crisis by Suicide-- Reading *The Wild Duck* through Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus questions the very existence of life asking the necessity of suicide to understand the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. Or to say otherwise; is it really meaningful to suicide to end the existential crisis? Here the death of Hedvig at the end of the play also addresses the same question. When Gregers suggests Hedvig to sacrifice the wild duck to win her father's love, she agrees to have her grandfather shoot the duck. Here Gregers by killing the wild duck wants to free the debts of Håkon Werle because the duck in the attic symbolizes Hakon's intervention in the Ekdal household. Here, Hedvig, by her suicide proves her love to her father. But this sacrifice fails to end the entire crisis at once. For Camus, to understand the absurdity of the human condition suicide is unnecessary. So, Hedvig's suicide cannot be considered as fruitful. The journey which Hjalmar and Gina continue can be identical with that of Sisyphus'. The play, therefore, brings out the message identical with that of Camus' essay.

So, Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* being analyzed from viewpoint of Existentialism brings out the existential crisis in the major characters. It opens up the space to look at the characters from psychological as well from psychoanalytical viewpoint. The attic as a major symbol also gives identity to the characters living in it. Finally, by connecting Hedvig's suicide with Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* we get towards the conclusion that it's not in suicide but in the absurdity of life remains the meaning of human existence.

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