

Unyielding Idealism of Gregers Werle in Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

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Abstract:

The Wild Duck written in 1884 by Norwegian playwright Ibsen Henrik is one of the most realistic plays. It is widely regarded as one of Ibsen's most significant works and an early example of modern realism. This five-act drama which centers around the Ekdal family, particularly Gregers Werle and Hjalmar Ekdal explores themes of truth, illusion, family dynamics, and self-deception. This paper examines how the revelation of hidden truths affects their lives. Both Hjalmar and Gregers possess mental disorders which are seen in their behavior. Gregers, idealistic and obsessed with uncovering the truth, disrupts the fragile peace of the Ekdal household by exposing past secrets. The present paper is a small venture to study flaws in Gregers Werle whose over-idealistic views and intrusion unravel the delicate balance the Hjalmar's family has maintained, leading to dramatic and tragic consequences.

Keywords: realistic play, idealism, lack of empathy, tragedy

Introduction

Idealism is a general term that means to see or hope for things in a way that is free from flaw or imperfection. In literature idealism is defined as presenting the events or situations in the best way. In the context of the play *The Wild Duck* Gregers Werle is a character who keeps strong belief that an absolute truth should be brought out. He sees life in black and white failing to appreciate the gray areas where people find comfort and meaning.

In *The Wild Duck* the main characters are the members of Werle and Ekdal family. The Werles and the Ekdals have been in long term in familial relations. Hakon Werle and old Ekdal were business partners but ended up accounting to a scandal. Gregers Werle and Hjalmar Ekdal are close friends. Gregers believes in idealist approach to life while Hjalmar keeps family values first and dreams of good and prosperous family.

The play opens with a scene at Werle's home on a party for the come-back of Gregers Werle after fifteen years from his job at mines. Hjalmar who is invited, feels low at the lavish party surrounded with people rolling in money. When his nearly blind father old Ekdal stumbles in the party, he again gets the feeling of awkwardness. At the party as two old friends Gregers and Hjalmar are meeting after a long time they exchange a deep conversation. Gregers who believes in idealism is bothered that he must tell Hjalmar about his wife Gina's past with her master Hakon Werle who is also Gregers' father.

Hjalmar was once helped by old Werle to get a career in photography. At Hjalmar's studio, the Ekdals appear to live the perfect image of domesticity: Gina takes care of the family's finances and sews and Hjalmar runs his studio. Hedvig is their daughter who loves both of them unconditionally. She is fourteen years old but slowly going blind. Thus Hjalmar remarks that their daughter is the biggest joy and greatest sorrow as well.

Idealism in Gregers

Ibsen's use of complex characters and moral ambiguity makes *The Wild Duck* a profound exploration of human nature. The play centers around the Ekdal family, particularly Gregers Werle and Hjalmar Ekdal, and examines how the revelation of hidden truths affects their lives.

Gregers', idealistic and being obsessed with uncovering the truth of Gina's past cause a disastrous turmoil in the Ekdals family.

In the play Gregers Werle serves as a vivid embodiment of unyielding idealism, that drives the central conflicts and ultimate tragedy of the play. Gregers is consumed by a rigid belief in the supremacy of truth and moral purity, viewing these ideals as universal principles that must be upheld regardless of the consequences. He enters the lives of Hjalmar Ekdal and his family with a self-proclaimed mission to liberate them from the illusions he perceives as imprisoning their lives. For Gregers, uncovering hidden realities and confronting uncomfortable truths are not just noble acts but necessary steps toward achieving moral redemption and authenticity.

However Gregers' perspective is profoundly disconnected from the emotional complexities and practical needs of human relationships. His idealism blinds him to the value of compromise, the protective role of illusions, and the fragile equilibrium many people rely on to maintain their happiness. He cannot accept that individuals like the Ekdal family might find meaning and comfort in a shared delusion, such as the symbolic significance of the wild duck. Instead, Gregers relentlessly seeks to impose his ideals, assuming that others will embrace truth as he does, failing to consider the harm that such revelations might cause.

Through Gregers' character, Ibsen explores the destructive potential of moral absolutism when applied without empathy or understanding. Gregers' idealism is both his strength and his flaw; while it is rooted in genuine conviction; it is so rigid and uncompromising that it ultimately becomes harmful. His inability to adapt his principles to the messy realities of human life leads to conflict, emotional devastation, and tragedy, particularly in the case of Hedvig, whose death serves as a chilling consequence of his actions.

His belief that Hjalmar Ekdal's life is based on lies and that exposing these lies shows his lack of empathy instead he takes it as his moral duty. He insists that Hjalmar must know the truth about Gina's past relationship with his father, Werle, and the questionable motives behind Werle's support for Hjalmar's family. Gregers sees this as a way to achieve "moral awakening" for Hjalmar, disregarding the potential damage such revelations might cause.

Gregers cannot accept that people like the Ekdals need illusions to maintain their sense of purpose. The Ekdal family finds solace in the rituals surrounding the wild duck, a symbol of their shared emotional refuge. Gregers views these illusions as falsehoods to be eradicated rather than coping mechanisms that sustain their fragile existence.

Ultimately Gregers' idealism becomes destructive because it leaves no room for compromise or understanding of others' needs. His insistence on bringing "the claim of the ideal" to Hjalmar's life directly leads to the unraveling of the Ekdal family. This culminates in the tragedy of Hedvig's death, an unintended but devastating consequence of Gregers' refusal to let others live according to their own terms.

Thus Gregers' unyielding idealism represents his inability to recognize that life's imperfections and illusions are often essential for human happiness. His relentless pursuit of an ideal world, where truth reigns supreme, reveals the dangers of rigid moral principles when they are disconnected from compassion and reality.

Conclusion

In Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, Gregers Werle embodies the concept of unyielding idealism, a characteristic that defines his actions and shapes the tragic arc of the play. Driven by a rigid belief in truth and moral purity, Gregers views the world through the lens of his personal ideals,

believing that exposing hidden realities will lead to enlightenment and redemption. However, his inability to reconcile these lofty principles with the complexities of human emotions and relationships creates conflict and ultimately leads to devastating consequences. Gregers' unrelenting pursuit of truth, at the expense of empathy and practicality, illustrates the dangers of imposing idealistic values on others without understanding their needs, desires, or vulnerabilities. Through this character, Ibsen critiques the destructive potential of moral absolutism when it collides with the fragile fabric of human life.

In this way, Gregers Werle's unyielding idealism serves as a powerful critique of moral dogmatism. Ibsen suggests that ideals, however noble in theory, must be tempered by compassion, flexibility, and an understanding of human frailty. Without these qualities, the pursuit of truth can destroy the very lives it seeks to improve, as seen in the tragic unraveling of the Ekdal family. The interplay between reality and illusion serves as a commentary on the human tendency to cling to comforting falsehoods rather than confront painful truths.

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