

## Research Article

# Unwinding the Entwined Strands of Symbolism in “The Wild Duck” by Henrik Ibsen

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**Abstract:** Amongst various literary devices, symbolism is the use of different symbols with the aim to signify the ideas and various qualities. In this use the ideas and qualities are given symbolic meanings which are different from their literal meaning and sense. The present study analyzes use of symbolism in the drama, “The Wild Duck” written by Henrik Ibsen (1884). The drama is analyzed thoroughly to find out various symbols used by the author for the purpose of signifying various ideas and qualities. The paper concludes that “The Wild Duck” contains several symbols that have been successfully used by the writer to achieve his desired results.

**Key words:** The Wild Duck, Henrik Ibsen, Symbolism, Literary Devices, Hjalmar, Ekdal, Gregers, Werle

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Amongst various literary devices, symbolism is the use of different symbols with the aim to signify the ideas and various qualities. In this use the ideas and qualities are given symbolic meanings which are different from their literal meaning and sense [2,6]. “The Wild Duck” by Henrik Ibsen is set in the eighth decade of 1800 with a feast thrown by a rich Werle who is a rich businessman of Norway. Gregers, his son, along with his school friend Hjalmar Ekdal is also there and meeting after fifteen years. Hjalmar is married and has a daughter named Hedwig. Hjalmar is a photographer, owns a studio, and apparently is doing well. He has not completed his studies due to financial problems and his father’s imprisonment, who is a former companion of Werle. Werle helped Hjalmar giving money for his studio equipment, which Gregers suspects to be due to Hjalmar’s wife Gina, former housekeeper at Werle’s house. Gregers announces that he breaks up with his father

and reveal the truth to Hjalmar. He visits Ekdal’s apartment cum a pavilion studio, situated on the attic floor. There, he finds that Gina maintains the photo studio and also looks after the senior Ekdal who is broken after his imprisonment. He also comes to know there that Hedvig would soon go blind. Moreover, Hjalmar is a parasite but pretends working tirelessly on some invention which would “restore well-being and the good name of his family[3].”

Gregers is provided a suitable room in Ekdal’s house because he is the son of their benefactor despite Gina’s resistance. The next day, Werle meets him there because he wants to know what sort of plotting his son is planning against him. When he comes to know about Gregers’ goal, he ridicules him and informs him about getting disappointed in Hjalmar. Dr. Relling, who is a regular visitor in the Ekdal family, also opines that opening Hjalmar’s eyes would bring trouble and disaster for the family. However, Gregers tells everything to Hjalmar who announces to his wife that he no

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longer trusts her and from now onward, he will himself look after the studio and home accounts. Gina does not deny her past relationship with Werle but she admits that she is not guilty of cheating Mrs. Werle because everything between her and Mr. Werle happened after Mrs. Werle died. Hjalmar somewhat calms down. Doctor Relling, being present there, sends Gregers heartily to the hell. Suddenly, Werle's housekeeper comes to her to say goodbye, because she is getting married to the host and leaving for Mountain Valleys. She informs that Werle is to become blind soon and hands over a gift certificate to Hedvig from Werle. \*The fact that Werle and Hedvig are suffering from the same eye disease surprises and hurts Hjalmar to his heart.

Hjalmar decides to leave this house but Gina soothes him. She further persuades him to stay with them. He, however, persistently ignores Hedvig, who was very dear to her earlier and was warmly loved by him as a daughter. Hedvig is despair therefore Gregers advises her how to win Hjalmar's love back. According to Gregers, if she performs an act which impresses Hjalmar, he will start loving her again considering that his daughter loves her a lot. Hjalmar has always disliked the wild duck living in their home, because it came to the family from Werle. Hedvig is convinced that she would prove her love if she sacrifices that wild duck. She, therefore, tries to convince senior Ekdal, her grandfather to shoot that duck [4].

The next day, Hedvig tries hiding in the attic because Hjalmar does not want to see her. He is talking and trying to convince Gregers that Hedvig would leave them eventually because her real father Werle has enticed her with his wealth. They suddenly hear a shot in the attic which makes Gregers rejoice believing that that the old Ekdal might have shot the wild duck as Hedvig requested. However, when they go to the attic, they find Hedvig deliberately, or accidentally, having shot herself. The blame of her act and death is laid on Gregers as he tried to impose his mortal ideal requirements on her and it is thought that life on earth is bearable without these ideal requirements [3].

### 1.1. Symbolism in "The Wild Duck:"

"The Wild Duck" is filled with symbolism which relates to the settings, questions, character sketching, and portrayed circumstances [10,11]. Actually, the symbolism present in its title makes it exceptionally a basic part of this play, therefore, understanding the symbolism in this play makes the reader understand the play itself. On the other hand, the symbolism presented in the play is not very significant to its plot. There

is now a terrible story and is not completely important to make the play work. Symbolism just converts the play into a philosophical escapade, maybe giving the play more investment. This change transforms the fundamental plot into Henrik Ibsen's forte: the well-made play, where all the components intricately interweave to eventually structure a concordant, yet irritating, entirety. The most ideal approach to comprehend this entire is by unwinding the entwined strands one by one – for this situation, those needing to do with the symbols utilized within the play.

### 1.2. The wild duck

The duck of the play is itself a symbol and definitely the most important one. It is as important a character than any other main characters because it plays an important role "The Wild Duck." It symbolizes two major characters, Hedvig and Senior Ekdal as those who are hurt and forced to live in a particular way. Around the symbol of wild duck this play is built. An actually wild duck also lives in their house, in the Ekdal's attic but the symbolic wild ducks are much more important than this actual duck. Werle on his hunting adventure shoots a wild duck with an intent to only wound it. This duck is later given to senior Ekdal who takes it home and takes care of it in the garret. His son Hjalmar and granddaughter Hedvig both help him in taking care of the duck. His granddaughter Hedvig who is fond of this duck, also resembles it because she is also a victim of the strife going on in her family [12]. Others people in the family have also been the wounded victims of the crucial circumstances, so they also are symbolized by the duck. Werle alludes to the duck when he tells Gregers, "There are people in the world who dive to the bottom the moment they get a couple of slugs in their body, and never come to the surface again" [7]. Hedvig's observation in Act III indicates that her parentage is also symbolized by the wild duck, the confusion about her real father. She tells Gregers: "[T]here is so much that is strange about the wild duck. Nobody knows her, and nobody knows where she came from either" [1,7,9,12].

### 1.3. Photographs

Gina and Hjalmar work together as photographers sustain themselves and their family. Their profession of photography is also symbolic because of linking with the idea of altering the reality. They change the reality in which a person lives in and edit their own realities also. They choose to live sheltered and hidden from the outside world, accepting the lie they have built around and feeling content

\*According to it, Hedvig is to be paid a monthly allowance, amounting to one hundred crowns.

over this lie. This symbolizes that profession is their willingness to lie to themselves, so that they can feel comfortable with the life they have [10,11].

#### 1.4. Unlucky number

In the first act of the play, in the party hosted by the Werle family, Hjalmar notices that he is the thirteenth person to arrive as a guest. This makes him feel superstitiously that something bad is going to happen with him. This superstition persists throughout the play becoming a recurrent motif. He continues to apprehend that the doom is hanging over his head [10].

#### 1.5. Darkness and light

Symbols of darkness and light have been used to enhance the themes and motifs in the play. Darkness or dim light generally occurs in those scenes where a character is attempting to escape the reality and is trying to preserve illusions. The garret is always dim and shadowy. The sloping panes in the studio, are half-covered with blue curtains. These descriptions of darkness or lack of light highlight the fact that the Ekdals are leading an illusory life.

On the other hand, light, fire, and brightness, occur in the scenes where a character is revealing, or planning to reveal some hidden truth or the harshness of reality to another character. For instance, the conversation near the fireplace with a "glowing coal fire" Ibsen, reveals that Hjalmar is ignorant of the qualities of wines [7]. At the same fireplace, Gregers questions his friend Hjalmar to reveal to him the truth about the relationship between Werle and Ekdals. The conversation between Gregers and Werle also takes place in front of this fireplace discussing about the ugly truths about Werle's past. The smoky fire, built by Gregers and then extinguishing it with water. This water which covers the floor, also foreshadows the revealing of the truth that will eventually mess up with the lives of Ekdals.

The light as a symbol of reality also shows Ibsen's consistency in making the scenery and the content parallel to each other. "Afternoon light; the sun is going down; a little later the scene begins to grow dark," [7]. Here the setting sun is a symbol of hidden reality and the symbol of fantasy, illusion and dreams, which is the moon, also not shining. This makes it clear that there is no source of light as the setting of the scene is dim and shaded making the mood of the story further deteriorated. The plot follows with a darkening setting and this exhibits the Ibsen's flow of decline throughout the story.

A "cold gray morning light" [7] with "wet snow" [7] lying "on the big panes of the skylight" [7] makes it the last scene

of the play [7]. The sunshine is grey and is foreshadowing a tragedy. Further gloom is added to the scene with the snow and the cold weather. The tragedy of the suicide of Hedvig thus made parallel to this ugly illustrated setting. Death of Hedvig on the date of her birthday also suggests that she was the perfect person because she lived a life of exact number of years. Her death at this young age is only due the fate of her father, Hjalmar, "the thirteenth man at the table" [7] at Werle's party.

Ibsen carefully uses green to form two plots in the play. At the first place, the green color symbolizes the affair between Werle and Gina, through eye trouble. Green in the garret also represents the sad and illusionary life of senior Ekdal who has a habit of living in his past. In the last four acts, the setting correspond to the contents of the story through moon symbolizing the happiness and the daylight parallel to the reality of life. The scenes where there is a scarcity of light, it is symbolic to the darkness. Finally, grey sunlight, where coldness and snow are also present, symbolizes the death happened to Hedvig. In this way, certain attributes to the happenings are applied through light in order to assemble the plots and enhance the continuously changing mood of the play.

#### 1.6. Lies

The play is based on the themes of lies. Most of the characters live through lies which are built on for and by every one of them. This theme of lie emerges from the very first scene, when Gregers finds that his friend Hjalmar is married to a woman who was rumored to be his father's mistress. Hjalmar's love for his daughter Hedvig is another lie because she may not even be his real daughter. As the story advances, more lies come to surface. In fact, the whole of the Ekdal family is surrounded with lies pretending to live a normal life. They have hidden the reality of Hedvig's illness and parenthood from her and in this way, she is kept isolated from the outside world. Senior Ekdal also lives in a lie, spending most of his time inside his attic transformed into a fake forest, living in an illusion and in reminiscence of his glorious past [10].

#### 1.7. Borrowed overcoat

Hjalmar while attending Werle's party is wearing a fashionable overcoat. This is a borrowed coat which appears as a symbol to Hjalmar's habit of using people for the sake of fulfilling his goals or to enhance his image. For instance, he uses Werle's money in his photography business. Moreover the photo studio is actually maintained by Gina so the talent of his wife is used in making his modest living. Doctor Relling

explains that in his college days, Hjalmar had a “talent for declaiming other people’s verses and other people’s thoughts” [5,7,8].

### 1.8. Garret

Garret is a dark room, with sliding doors, where the senior Ekdal spends his time. He hunts in the garret which has an imaginary “forest.” Ekdals have built this forest with old Christmas trees [7]. This room has been stocked by him and Hjalmar with rabbits which serve senior Ekdal as bears to be shot during hunting expeditions. Hjalmar facilitates his father in maintaining the patch of “wilderness,” [7]. The garret also has pigeons, hens, and the wild duck to give a further look of a forest. Old Ekdal also has an illusion of thinking himself a great hunter, which is symbolized by this garret [10,11].

### 1.9. Party room & Gregers Werle’s smoky room

There is also a contrast between the room where the Werle’s party is going on and the room and attic in Ekdal’s house where they spend most of their time and feel safe. The Werle’s room is described in a way that suggests light and happiness. On the other hand, the room and the attic in Ekdal’s home symbolize the status of the family in society. After getting a room on rent from Ekdals, Gregers builds the fire that fills the room with the smoke. Then tries to extinguish the fire by throwing water and subsequently leaves a puddle on the floor. He messes up with the condition of the room and this makes the room look like the messed life of Ekdals foreshadowing the mess Gregers would create in Ekdals’ life. Therefore, these rooms serve symbolic purposes and have a symbolic meanings.

### 1.10. The invention

Hjalmar is working on an invention but it is unfinished. This unfinished invention symbolizes his illusionary thoughts. He thinks that he is a great man. He believes that working on this invention will one day enable him to get his heroic vision of himself materialized. When he will finish it, he will expose it to the world which thinks that he has the mediocre quality of ideas [5,8].

## 2. CONCLUSION

Amongst various literary devices, symbolism is the use of different symbols with the aim to signify the ideas and various qualities. In this use, the ideas and qualities are given symbolic meanings which are different from their literal meaning and sense. “The Wild Duck” written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1884), contains several symbols that

have been successfully used by the writer to achieve his desired results. It is a play filled with symbolism which relates the settings, questions, characters, and circumstances so understanding the symbolism helps in the comprehension of the play itself. However, this symbolism is not significant to its plot rather it just converts the play into a philosophical escapade, maybe giving the play more investment. This change transforms the fundamental plot into Henrik Ibsen’s forte: the well-made play, where all the components intricately interweave to eventually structure a concordant, yet irritating, entirety. The analysis concludes that the most ideal approach to comprehend this entirety is unwinding the entwined strands of elements one by one.

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