Apollonian And Dionysian Dichotomy In The Character Of Hedda In Ibsen’s Play Hedda Gabler

To what extent does Apollonian and Dionysian Dichotomy present itself in the Character of Hedda in Ibsen’s play ‘Hedda Gabler’?

Henrik Ibsen’s ‘Hedda Gabler’, set in the early 1890s, can be considered as an examination of the influences of a Victorian society on the philosophical mindset of young women. Various allusions to Greek Mythology throughout the play contribute to Ibsen’s illustration of Apollonian and Dionysian Dichotomy which aligns with the attributes of Hedda Gabler. First conceptualised by Nietzsche in his ‘The Birth of Tragedy’ in 1872, these forces are based on the Pagan Gods Apollo and Dionysus and act together to ‘anticipate a broader Will to Power operating in nature’. Although the two Traditionally, Apollo is the god of rational thinking and order and generally appeals to logic whereas Dionysus is the god of irrationality and chaos and appeals to emotions and instincts. Ibsen’s characterisation of Hedda demonstrates her natural alignment with Apollonian culture, specifically through her gravitation towards military-like methods portrayed by the symbol of pistols in the play. Furthermore, her refusal to both sexual and spiritual fertility demonstrate these Apollonian interests. However, Ibsen implements the symbolism of vine leaves, as well as Hedda’s manipulative relations with Loevborg, to illustrate Hedda’s aspirations to appeal, rather than natural appeal to Dionysian cultism. In this essay, I will argue that Apollonian and Dionysian Dichotomy is demonstrated to a great extent in the character of Hedda, but with the Apollonian mindset clearly has a more influential effect.

The pagan god Apollo embodies instinctive inclination to order and form, both which are represented in Ibsen’s play through his characterisation of Hedda and her appeal to military methods. Hedda’s military status is portrayed through Ms Tesman’s revering tone when stating ‘Well, you can’t wonder at that – General Gabler’s daughter!’, suggesting a communal consciousness of the distinction between the original class of Hedda and the lower class of Tesman. This also links to the intent behind Hedda’s manipulative relations with her husband Tesman, stemming from her will to austere control and respect for the higher status that she belongs to compared to Tesman. Ibsen highlights her feelings of inadequacy as a result of her marriage to Tesman as whilst conversing with Judge Brack, Hedda asks ‘Can you imagine spending six months and not meeting a single person of your class? Not one person you can talk to?’ The rhetorical questions in these lines amount to the severity of Hedda’s anguish as the thought of succumbing to a life below her worth does not align with her sense of order. She feels that she can push him around, despite being a woman in the oppressive context of the 1890s, as he is of lower social class. In the second act, Hedda suddenly presents her pistols in front of the Judge, threatening him with her authority. Her pistols symbolise her yearning for military status and power. Clearly exhilarated by his discomposure, she states ‘I am going to shoot you, your honour -’ and then fires the gun. Her fixation with regimental values becomes apparent here, bounded to her attachment to her father’s military methods. Apollonianism is also mirrored through Hedda’s gravitation towards maintaining authority and control. Later, Hedda states ‘For once in my life, I want to control a man’s fate.’ reiterating her very desire for control. Similarly, Ibsen portrays her distaste for being controlled through ‘No longer free! No! That’s a thought that I’ll never endure! Never’. The repetition of the superlative ‘never’ in this phrase convey her sheer unwillingness to submit to the Judge. Therefore, Apollonian instinct is

mirrored through Hedda’s gravitation towards maintain authority and control over those around her.

Hedda’s desire to be disassociated with both sexual and spiritual fertility is portrayed through visual imagery in the play, aligning with Apollonian views. Ibsen characterises Hedda in this way by illustrating her denying of her pregnancy. This idea is first introduced when Tesman states that she is ‘not pink and healthy and putting on weight’. The colour pink connotes delicacy, happiness and femininity as well as certainty in this situation. By associating it with health, Ibsen implies Hedda’s lack of qualities of the sort given the circumstances of her supposed pregnancy. Hedda replies with ‘you can’t testify to anything’ defensively protecting her image as if she is embarrassed. Ibsen demonstrates her dissatisfaction and emphasises that Hedda views her sexual fertility as a fall from the idea of elegance and by consequence, rejects reproduction as a women’s purpose in life. This idea is more broadly explored through flower imagery in the play. As she enters the room in act 1, Hedda exclaims ‘Yes, fresh air, that’s what we need in here… all these frightful flowers’. The powerful fricatives in this phrase create an interrupting effect, contrasting with the natural connotations of flowers, setting Hedda’s Apollonian intentions apart from the typical emotional driven reaction. She later states that ‘The leaves. They are yellow. And withered.’ clarifying the feelings of distress that typical signs of life bring to her. The dull colour yellow coupled with the image of withering creates an inert atmosphere, depicting Hedda’s disassociation with life. The short syntax in these phrases also creates a blunt and impolite tone, evoking Hedda’s both her repugnance of the connotations of flowers but also, her indifference towards their existence.

Amongst his other attributes, Dionysus is the god of winemaking and grape cultivation. In the play, Ibsen uses vine leaves to symbolise instinctive, chaotic behaviour which he associates with the character of Loevborg. Hedda Gabler sees Loevborg as a true Dionysian, a man full of creative ideas and free from orders and disciplines, contrasting to the inherent apollonian policies within herself. She intends to use him to bring out the Dionysian in herself, this being her motive for manipulating him. In the second act, Hedda visualises Loevborg returning ‘at ten o’clock like Bacchus with vine leaves in his hair, wild and heady and confident’.