The Birth Of The New Woman In Far From The Madding Crowd By Thomas Hardy And Hedda Gabler By Henrik Ibsen

Michelle Elizabeth Tusan (1997) argued, that 'The New Woman represented the feminists utopian vision of the model social reformer'. From a modern perspective, this suggests that the 'The New Woman' demonstrates a persistent desire for female rebellion, in order to obtain liberation and independence. Women during the nineteenth century, were explicitly viewed as only capable of domesticated and passive roles in society. It could be argued, that the definition of a 'model social reformer' is constantly developing alongside the changing expectations of women both during the nineteenth century and today.

Both 'Far from The Madding Crowd'(1874) by Thomas Hardy and 'Hedda Gabler'(1891) by Henrik Ibsen, arguably portray this ideal from a nineteenth century perspective, through their female protagonists, Bathsheba and Hedda. This can be seen through the depiction of these women as rebelling against the confines of their marriages with Oak and Tesman. This implicates that they were transgressive protagonists for their time period, due to the expectation that women should remain submissive to their husbands. Furthermore, this sense of liberation, could also be interpreted through the presentation of the protagonist's sexual autonomy and dominance within their relationships. Alternatively, their attempt to 'reform' society via their rebellion of gendered expectations, could be perceived as personally 'destructive'. This is shown at the end of both play and novel through Hedda's suicide, and Bathsheba's acceptance of marriage.

In 'Hedda Gabler', it could be viewed that Ibsen's representation of 'The New Woman', is evident through the authority Hedda claims over her sexuality. This is suggested, mainly through her relationship with Brack as he seeks to exploit her sexual nature. This is conveyed in his line, 'One jumps out… one stretches one's legs'. This could be interpreted as a metaphor for her leaving her marriage with Tesman, in order to satisfy Brack. The verb 'jump' highlights the quick and sudden nature of her possible escape, to please another man. Walter Houghton, during the nineteenth century, wrote of female sexual acts as 'being associated with duty', suggesting that women were expected to remain compliant to all male demands and wishes, as sex was viewed as mainly for male pleasure. Hedda's rejection of this Victorian belief could be viewed through her declarative response: 'I won't jump out'. This suggests her complete autonomy as she attempts to claim full control over her sexuality. The dramatic irony used by Ibsen, foreshadows her suicide, revealed at the end of the play. This is perhaps symbolic of society's rejection of her sexual control. Similarly, Hardy demonstrates Bathsheba's assertive attitudes through her relationship with Oak at the beginning of 'Far from the Madding Crowd' she tells him; 'You may have my hand again', suggesting that she has control over her body.

Both Hardy and Ibsen, convey the female protagonists as initially representative of the authoritative 'New Woman'. William Acton observed that, 'As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself.' In the opening of Hardy's novel, Bathsheba is introduced as 'improper' and vain: 'the sun lighted up a scarlet glow of the crimson jacket she wore, and painted a soft lustre upon her bright face and dark hair'. Hardy describes her as

‘on seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more’ arguably clarifying her desire to be admired for her beauty, but also to be valued sexually. She appears to take pride in the merit of her aesthetics, despite the disregard for narcissism in a hugely zealous era perhaps reinforcing her depiction as ‘The New Woman’. Furthermore, Hedda’s ‘sexual gratification for herself’ could be viewed in the play through Ibsen’s presentation of her playful attitudes towards handling her father’s pistols as she states: ‘Your honour, I’m going to shoot you’. From a psychoanalytical perspective, this could be viewed as a phallic weapon, suggesting her complete control over her sexuality as she claims this ‘masculine’ object for her own use.

Both Hedda and Bathsheba’s actions transgress against the distinct, chaste and gentle female roles, suggesting that they’re representative of ‘The New Woman’. Nevertheless, it could also be viewed that the protagonists’ initial, sexual liberation, inevitably leads to the destruction of their dominance and control. This can be viewed after Hardy’s depiction of Bathsheba’s sexual experience with Troy: ‘she felt like one who had sinned a great sin’. The repetition of ‘sin’ could be indicative of the critical opinions during the nineteenth century of women having sexual experiences outside of or before marriage. This links to the idea of ‘The Fallen Woman’, used to define a woman who did this. Alfred Phillips Ryder wrote of this ‘fallenness’ as ‘associated with a downward spiral that began with sex and led to a loss of social position’. This is shown as after their marriage, as Hardy states that ‘Bathsheba remained a voluntary prisoner’ whilst with Troy. This metaphor demonstrates her entrapment resulting from her attempt at sexual liberation. This highlights her loss of ‘social position’ that she previously claimed through having individual control over her property. Arguably, this prevents her from being able to consistently embody the independent ‘New Woman’. It suggests the destruction of her transgressive behaviour arising from Troy’s success in ‘taming’ her. In contrast, Hedda’s ownership over her father’s pistols conveys her representation as ‘The New Woman’, as opposed to Bathsheba, who is subject to the power of Troy’s sword. Hardy portrays Troy as being in complete control over the ‘phallic’ object of his sword in his relationship with Bathsheba. This is made most evident in his ‘sword exercise’, used on their second encounter. This could be perceived as sexually dominating Bathsheba by seducing and corrupting her attempt at liberation. Troy’s authority is suggested as Hardy states that his sword; ‘Seemed everywhere at once, and yet nowhere especially’.

Hardy’s religious reference suggests the ubiquity and omnipotent characteristics of Troy’s sexual dominance over Bathsheba. Hardy’s sensual imagery highlights Bathsheba’s vulnerability in her relationship with Troy as the sun ‘sweeps the tips of the fern with its long, luxurious rays’. The lateral, fricative sounds reflect intensify the sensuality of their relationship and perhaps are indicative of Troy’s real intentions behind his seduction of Bathsheba: power and control. This false sense of serenity arguably symbolises the physical destruction of the idyllic, pastoral setting by Troy’s motives. Furthemore, Hardy uses this extended metaphor to suggest the rape and destruction of not just Bathsheba but the ‘old ways’, mirrored in the conclusion of his sexual conquest: ‘He had kissed her’. The separate pronouns highlight Bathsheba’s passivity with Troy, especially physically. Hardy depicts her as ‘powerless to withstand or deny him’, suggesting the damaging impact of her initially believing she could successfully embody ‘The New Woman’s’ liberated sexuality. The ‘destructive’ nature of female sexuality during the nineteenth century is highlighted in ‘Hedda Gabler’, as, despite her autonomy, she is portrayed to have, ‘Shot herself! In the temple! Shot herself!’. Her sexuality could be viewed as her tragic flaw, through her suicide being presented as a way of escaping, becoming Brack’s ‘slave’.

Aristotle depicts a tragic hero as one who has the ability to ‘incite pity and fear’. This is highlighted through her constant use of ‘General Gabler’s pistols’. This prop creates tension and ‘terror’ during the play, due to the constant possibility of a gunshot taking place. Despite this, it is ultimately used by Hedda to escape Brack’s control over her sexuality, shown at the end of the play when she expresses her fear of being ‘still in your power. At your disposal. A slave’. The repetition of declarative, short sentences highlights her awareness, and panic towards the possibility of her entrapment. The level of subjugation during this line rapidly increases from being in his ‘power’ to becoming a ‘slave’. This intensified emotion highlights her fear towards losing control, both sexually and emotionally. This moment could be viewed as the peripeteia of the plot, reinforcing the idea of her sexuality as her tragic flaw as this forebodes her suicide.

Both Ibsen and Hardy portray the protagonists as initially representative of ‘The New Woman’ through their transgressive attempt at sexual liberation; however, it could be viewed that this results in their destruction, shown through Hedda’s suicide, and Bathsheba’s suppressed passions and entrapment whilst married to Troy. It could be viewed, that both Ibsen and Hardy present the female protagonists as representative of ‘The New Woman’ through their attempt to emancipate themselves from patriarchal restrictions; explored through their mutual disobedience against their domesticated settings.

The dominant ideology of ‘separate spheres’ during the nineteenth century depicted women as excluded from the ‘public sphere’, that involved paid, physical ‘masculine’ work. Hardy depicts Bathsheba’s ability to involve herself in this public domain through her ability to run her farm independently: ‘I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be afield before you are up; and I shall have breakfasted before you are afield. In short, I shall astonish you all’. The repetition of the modal verb ‘shall’, highlights the extent of the control she has over her farm and her self-belief. This goes against the female expectation during the nineteenth century, to embody the ‘darling’ type, by embracing traditional values of being ‘committed to their duties as devoted wives and mothers’.

Bathsheba is portrayed as rebelling against this, as she takes control in a work environment regardless of gendered social expectations that suggested a women should be confined within the realms of the home. Her power is intensified through the personal pronouns used, highlighting her independence whilst doing this and suggestive of transgressive behaviour. Similarly, Ibsen portrays Hedda as isolating herself from the domesticated setting of ‘The Drawing Room’. Ibsen presents this through the tensions created between Aunt Julia and Hedda: ‘Look. Here on this chair. She’s left her old hat’. Ibsen’s letter to the 1891 director describing the relationship between the Aunty and Hedda states that: ‘For Hedda they appear as an inimical and alien power directed against her fundamental nature’. This suggests her emancipation from society, shown through the clash between the two types of women. Her critical opinion of the aunt highlights her refusal to conform with the old way of living, symbolised by the two types of women: ‘As it happens, this is the first time I’ve worn it.

The very first time.’ Ibsen’s stage directions stating that the setting has ‘Thick carpets in both rooms’, evokes a sense of inescapable luxury in this ‘alien society’. The setting over the course of the play progressively gets more claustrophobic as more characters enter Hedda’s space, highlighting the difficulty to emancipate herself from the Victorian domestic environment. Similarly, Hardy initially introduces Bathsheba within a ‘feminine’ setting: ‘A small swing looking glass was disclosed, in which she proceeded to survey herself attentively’. The

sibilance used, conveys a peaceful image, and reinforces her possible vulnerability to male authority and dominance. Despite this, Hardy later presents the reader with a plethora of settings that surround Bathsheba, such as ‘The Village of Weatherbury’ and ‘Norcombe Hill’, symbolic of her ability to obtain more spatial freedom. This greatly contrasts to the confined presentation of the ‘drawing room’ in ‘Hedda Gabler’.

Ibsen and Hardy, portray their female protagonists as pariahs within their Victorian environments, proving that they’re representative of the defiant and nonconforming ‘New Woman’ of the nineteenth century. Alternatively, it could also be viewed that Ibsen and Hardy present the female protagonists as unable to completely emancipate themselves from male expectations. This can be seen through Hardy’s emphasis on Bathsheba’s beauty. She is portrayed as being unable to escape from men trying to ‘tame’ her, through the constant depiction of her at the mercy of ‘the male gaze’. This is made most evident in her first encounter with Oak when ‘Her position was almost beneath his eye so that he saw her in a bird’s eye aerial’, suggesting her vulnerability and his physical power over her. Furthermore, Linda M Shires argued that in ‘Far from The Madding Crowd’, ‘Bathsheba is trapped by the regard of her suitors’. This suggests that Oak presents a great degree of control and dominance, foreshadowing Bathsheba’s inevitable ‘entrapment’ by him at the end of the novel. This is enhanced through Hardy’s metaphor describing it as when ‘Satan first saw paradise’. This links to ‘Paradise Lost’, a biblical story, depicting Satan’s attempt to destroy the idyllic Garden of Eden. This bleak image highlights the consequential impact of her beauty and vanity, increasing her difficulty to fully embody the emancipated ‘New Woman’. This is shown through Hardy’s depiction of Bathsheba’s freedom and liberation, arguably suppressed through her acceptance of Oak, at the end of the novel.

Contrastingly, it could be viewed that Ibsen’s presentation of Hedda challenges the idea of ‘the male gaze’ through the stage directions: ‘From the rear door, Hedda looks at him (Tesman) with scorn’. This glare highlights Hedda’s anger towards restriction and her inability to escape from her aristocratic background. This is intensified through the recurrence throughout the play of ‘the portrait of a handsome elderly man in a general’s uniform’. This image is symbolic of the prevalent control her father has over her way of life: financially, emotionally and sexually. In contrast to Hardy, Ibsen suggests that instead of being ‘objectified’ by her suitor, Tesman, she is mainly restricted by societal expectations. Both Hedda and Bathsheba are presented as vulnerable and considered socially inferior to male figures, due to self-admiration, restricting them from being able to completely emancipate themselves and represent ‘The New Woman’. It could be viewed, that both Hedda and Bathsheba represent ‘The New Woman’ through their rejection of the Victorian ideal of embodying ‘The Angel In The House’ within marriage. This was the expectation for wives to be predominantly devoted and submissive to their husbands.

Their sense of disobedience is presented by Ibsen in ‘Hedda Gabler’, mainly through Hedda’s playing of the piano prior to her suicide: ‘After a moment, we hear her playing wild dance music on the piano.’ This could be interpreted, as her defiance against the calm and soft nature expected of women, suggestive of her representation as ‘The New Woman’. This arguably light-hearted music juxtaposes the tragic atmosphere that followed Lovborg’s suicide. Her actions suggest her dissociation from her duties as a sympathetic and compassionate wife. Similarly, Bathsheba portrays this through her dismissive attitudes towards marriage as she states, ‘I would hate to be thought men’s property in that way’. Her declarative tone suggests her rebellion against Victorian restrictions, associated with marriage. This is also shown by Ibsen as Hedda expresses to Brack: ‘I’m boring myself to death’. The hyperbolic statement

highlights her inability to conform to the ‘Angel in the House’, due to her passionate and therefore, transgressive nature. This is later proved ‘destructive’ by her suicide, suggesting the consequences of rebelling against Victorian ideals of marriage. Alternatively, the more modern Selma Dimitrijevic’s 2017 adaptation of ‘Hedda Gabler’, presents Hedda as visibly tearing off her corset following her suicide. Shortly after this, she fires the gun at her abandoned costume on the floor. Her death is presented as a metaphorical death of an old way of living and is perhaps symbolic of the birth of ‘The New Woman’. This highlights the success of her revolt. In contrast, Ibsen wrote of her suicide happening offstage as she ‘draws the curtains closed behind her’. This suggests a contemporary audience’s view of her suicide as a ‘defeat’, dismissed and ignored by society compared to a modern translation.

Both Hardy and Ibsen’s protagonists demonstrate the conflicting nature of embodying this ‘model social reformer’, whilst they are effectively contained within the restrictions of their marriages. This is shown through Bathsheba’s jealousy towards Fanny, highlighted through her reaction to Troy’s keeping of Fanny’s ‘pretty hair’, as she pleads: ‘You’ll burn it won’t you Frank?’. This could be interpreted as symbolic of Fanny’s fertility and beauty, suggesting Bathsheba’s passionate hatred towards the expectations of women in marriage. Similarly, Hedda’s jealousy is suggested through her burning of Thea’s ‘child’: ‘(whispering to herself) Look, Thea I’m burning your baby’. This highlights her anger towards her metaphorical child with Lovborg that she has been able to produce as a result of her being without a husband. The dramatic monologue suggests a degree of mental instability and uncontrollable anger towards patriarchal restrictions of the nineteenth century. This is further reinforced through the image of her whispering, suggesting her want to conceal her vindictive intentions from society. This is mirrored in ‘Far from The Madding Crowd’ as Hardy states that Troy had ‘driven her to bitterness’, suggesting similar feelings of anger towards the confinements of marriage. Both protagonists are presented as actively rebelling against their marriages, suggesting their representation of ‘The New Woman’.

Overall, it can be viewed that both Hedda and Bathsheba represent the transgressive ideals of ‘The New Woman’ through their attempts to rebel against nineteenth century gender expectations. Ibsen and Hardy present the women as attempting to claim authority in their marriages alongside their unwillingness to be sexually passive. Furthermore, Gail Finney (1989) argued that ‘The New Woman tends to be well-educated and to read a great deal’. From the perspective of a modern audience, it could be viewed, that in ‘Hedda Gabler’, Ibsen presents Thea as demonstrating a greater sense of liberation than Hedda. This is highlighted through her prevalent education shown at the end of the play as she works alongside Tesman, suggesting her embodiment of the ‘well-educated’ ‘New Woman’. Despite Hedda’s attempt to transgress, her death symbolises her inability to feel completely liberated in a Victorian society. This is also reflected in ‘Far from The Madding Crowd’ through Bathsheba’s ‘death’ of control and independence evident when she chooses to marry Oak. This highlights the suppression of her initial power and transgressive behaviour, apparent throughout the novel in her rejection of suitors and individual ownership of her property. Arguably, both Ibsen and Hardy depict Hedda and Bathsheba as representative of the struggle to become ‘The New Woman’ within the patriarchal confines of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, it could be argued that this disobedience ‘defeats’ them both physically and emotionally, resulting in an unsatisfactory climax for the ‘birth’ of ‘The New Woman’.