The Pistols In Henrik Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler

Henrik Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler is situated in the late nineteenth century of Norway, where firearms and ammunition were starting to get great advancements, as there were major development that revolutionised the industry. Bullets were only developed in the early nineteenth century, by Henri-gustave Delvigne. One significant image in the play “Hedda Gabler” is General Gabler’s pistols. The pistols, unlike any other object play, are not just symbols of ammunition, but have an important plot function (Mayerson, 1950) . Ibsen uses the pistols to symbolize Hedda’s yearning for freedom, her desire for power over others, and serve as a symbol of Hedda’s own character.

The pistols were first introduced in the end of Act One, where Hedda concludes the act wearily (“with a concealed scorn”) (page 33) , “My pistols, George darling” and smiles coldly at her husband. The stage direction of concealing a scorn, gives an impression to the reader that she has disdain for her own husband, despite the smile juxtaposed with it. From this subtle entrance, we can see that the pistols left by Hedda’s father represent the trait he has passed down to her, which is to show control and power over others like a General over his soldiers. The pistols also give Hedda a symbol of power, and her act of taking it out at the end of the Act, shows that Hedda is ready to take action and already exerting her power in the play.

The pistols are a symbol of Hedda’s yearning for freedom. She has only “one thing left to amuse (herself) with” (page 33), which apparently are her pistols. This “one thing” brings a contrast to the reader telling that there is nothing else that can please her besides these pistols. Hedda sounds cold and passive in this line, as if she thinks nothing pleases her in this world. Later on, when Judge Brack comes in, she was “just shooting at the sky” (page 35) and also says, “well, what on earth an I to do?” (page 36). This clearly indicates that Hedda was getting bored to death, and her shooting at the sky seems like an act of expressing her boredom, and at the same time, her yearning for freedom. The act of firing a bullet itself represents freedom, where a bullet that was once trapped in the magazine of the gun, was finally fired out and not inside or part of the gun anymore, as if it was a complete release. The pistol can fire a few shots, as the magazine has the capacity to hold a number of bullets, till it runs outs. This can parallel Hedda’s few attempts to be free as a live bullet, where she gets only a few ‘shots’ at doing that, eventually failing in the end, as seen in her suicide where it was her “last shot” in Act Four. Just before Hedda moves to the rear room, and draws the curtains, then kills herself, she says, “from now on I’ll be quiet” (page 103). This happened after George Tesman tells her to stop playing “dance music” (page 103) on the piano. The silence from Hedda is alike to a pistol that was just fired, and silent afterwards. Pistols are always silent when they are not in use, and only make a loud “bang” when fired. The sound of the pistol also emphasizes the impact Hedda’s one and final move in her own plot. The play ending with the sound of the gunshot, shows the final blow of Hedda, reminding the audience that she is finally free from the society which holds her back.

The pistols are an image of Hedda’s desire for power over others. During the time period of the play, women were not associated to owning ammunitions, and not even earning the same amount of respect as men. Ibsen goes against the stigma of women being the inferior gender, that do not have equal rights as men, by characterising Hedda Gabler to be a woman here,

handling a dangerous weapon that typically men were allowed to hold, and were only associated with men. As such, the pistols can also be an image of the male gender. When Hedda fires the pistols, she is in total control of it, as if she was in control of men at the same time. At the opening of Act Two, when Judge Brack enters, she was “raising the pistol and took aim” (page 35) at him, and says “I am going to shoot you” (page 35). These words by Hedda sound as if she boasts with confidence, and was the one in control here because she has the gun, and it was situated in the walls of her home. She was dominant at this point of the play, but Judge brack unfortunately “takes the pistol gently from her hand” (page 36), as if removing her power over the situation, and also foreshadowing the ultimatum blackmail move he made over her. Another scene where Hedda was manipulator of the situation was the end of Act Three, where she advises Eilert Lovborg to commit suicide. She hands Eilert on of her pistols, and tells him to “use it” (page 84), as if she were the one commanding him, and telling him what to do. By sending him out to die, she not only hopes to inspire him to an act of aristocratic heroism; she also ensures that he will no longer have any relations to Thea Elvsted. After Lovborg dies, she does not show any feelings at all. She keeps asking Lovborg to die “beautifully” (page 84), showing that she sees death more as a performance, rather than the end of life, and she enjoys the fact that she is directing the whole situation. The gun in this scene is a symbol of aggressive control of life and death. The pistols job’s are to destroy, and by doing this, its is as if Hedda ‘destroyed’ Eilert Lovborg to please herself. Ironically, the death of Lovborg is ultimately accidental, but Hedda plots it as if it was on purpose. George Tesman, who is clueless in matters concerning Hedda Gabler, has a narrow minded worry that she would hurt herself playing with her pistols. Hedda being aware that firearms make her husband uneasy, she taunts him by saying she would amuse herself with them. Although Hedda never physically threaten her husband with the guns, she uses them to create a cognitive distance between the two of them, and stir some guilt over his failure to provide her with the life she wants.

The pistols, are like Hedda herself, being able to destroy. The cool exterior and fiery interior is a metaphor for Hedda herself. Hedda is described as a woman with a “distinguished aristocratic face and figure” (page 10) with a “complexion of pale and opalescent”(page 10). This is then contrasted with her cold eyes of “steel grey” (page 10), once again emphasizing on the cold metallic elements of a weapon. Her hair is of a “handsome auburn colour” (page 10), which demonstrates a heated and masculine description of Hedda, and at the same time, giving her a facade of goddess. The association of Hedda with metallic colours already emphasises her tough character, given that metal is a strong material, using it to describe a female in the Victorian era emphasises the feminist aspects Ibsen asserted into this play. Despite abandoning feminine values and not being the submissive, she fails to be in the same place as men. The image of a man traditionally includes audacity and vigor. Sadly, Hedda lacks such qualities and instead possesses the opposite; cowardice, dreading a scandal, and an appetite to achieving her goals through her intrigues rather than speaking openly. In the final moments of the play, she fires the final pistol at herself, pulling an act of suicide, rather than self-defense. When Hedda said she “would rather die” (page 101) in Act Four, shortly after hiding her pistol case from Judge Brack, he undermines Hedda by saying “people say that, they never do it” (page 101). She however, takes control of her own situation and puts an end to everything. By taking her own life away, she spares herself from being implicated in Lovborg’s death. Readers and the audience may see this act as a form of cowardice, but its is one of defiance, as she cannot accept the fact that she will be in Judge Brack’s manipulation to avoid scandal, Her well-plotted death shows the audience that she is under her own control, and is willing to do whatever it take to not get held back, even if it is to the extent of killing herself. Hedda is indeed like she the pistols she owns, destructive and powerful.

In conclusion, the pistols are an important part of the play, both as a symbol and a plot function. being the material twins of Hedda Gabler, representing her manipulation over others, and also her desire for freedom.