

The Three-Dimensional Heroine: The Intertextual Relationship between *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler*

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In one of the earliest books to use the title “modern drama,” Emma Goldman writes of great dramatists who “know that society has gone beyond the stage of patching up, and that man must throw off the dead weight of the past, with all its ghosts and spooks, if he is to go free of foot to meet the future” (qtd. Innes, *NT* 60). This, Goldman maintains, is the main difference between modernist drama and art for art’s sake—that is, the drama of the past. Modern drama is, instead, “the dynamite which undermines superstition, shakes the social pillars, and prepares men and women for the reconstruction” (60).¹ By 1914, the date of Goldman’s book, the great dramatists of the naturalist school—Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and George Bernard Shaw—had already had their heyday. Yet the seeds that were sown by their experimentation with dramatic theory and practice continue to bear fruit, and they still influence how plays are written, staged, and interpreted in the present day.

Among these playwrights, Chekhov has enjoyed unwavering favor with the public, both in his native Russia and abroad.² Although his works are clearly period dramas of late nineteenth-century Russia, audiences are still able to relate to and identify with the characters and feelings expressed in the plays. Returning Chekhov’s dramas to their historical context, however, provides new ways of understanding characters and their motivations in his works. In particular, Chekhov’s plays take on new meaning when compared with those of Ibsen. One could argue, for example, that *Ghosts* [*Gengangere*, 1881] was the inspiration for, or at least an influence on, Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* [*Tri sestry*, 1900].³ Some critics, like Knut Brunhildvoll, draw comparisons between *Three Sisters* and the Norwegian playwright’s earlier drama *Lady from the Sea* [*Fruen fra havet*, 1888], because the two seemingly echo each other in their heroines’ repeated cries of “To Moscow!” and “To the sea!” (Brunhildvoll 113). Despite these fertile comparisons, no one has ever written a comprehensive account of the complex relationship

between the works of Chekhov and Ibsen, and very few scholars have even explored the numerous commonalities between *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler* (1890).⁴

In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between Chekhov and Ibsen by analyzing the textual communication between the plays *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler*. I will outline the history and critical reception of the two plays and provide an analysis of the dialogue between them. Although the two plays appear dissimilar on the surface, I propose that *Three Sisters* is in fact a transformed *Hedda Gabler*, reconceived and recreated by Chekhov. To support this claim, I will discuss similarities and contrast differences between the plays. I will then suggest some hypotheses to postulate Chekhov's motivations for using *Hedda Gabler* as a basis for his play, *Three Sisters*.

Although Chekhov is widely read today, and, some might claim, has achieved more fame worldwide than Ibsen, in late nineteenth-century Europe Ibsen was indisputably considered the greater playwright.⁵ Henry James called Ibsen "a sort of register of the critical atmosphere, a barometer of the intellectual weather" (Marker ix). This "intellectual weather" was reflected in the mixture of social issues and philosophical concerns which, combined with his naturalist depiction of the banality of everyday life and his ability to simultaneously evoke tragedy and comedy, established Ibsen as a great playwright and set the standard for dramatic theatre in the late nineteenth century.

While Chekhov and Ibsen are considered to be dramatists of the same naturalist school, their relationship to each other is complex. On one hand, Chekhov admired Ibsen and was fascinated by his dramatic methods. In a 1903 letter he writes: "As I am coming soon to Moscow, please keep a ticket for me for *The Pillars of Society*. I want to see this marvelous Norwegian acting [...]. You know Ibsen is my favorite writer ..." (Innes, NT 21). In spite of this high praise, however, Chekhov was also known for his harsh criticism of Ibsen's plays. In particular, he wrote to friends that *Ghosts* was "a rotten play" (Simmons 624) and that *The Wild Duck* [*Vildanden*, 1884] was "sluggish, uninteresting, and weak" (Ibid 669). Olga Knipper, in her memoirs, wrote that: "К Ибсену Антон Павлович относился как-то недоверчиво и с улыбкой, [Ибсен] казался ему сложным, непростым и умствующим" (Federova 680).⁶

Regardless of Chekhov's opinion of Ibsen's plays, they did have a demonstrable impact on Chekhov's dramatic writing. Perhaps the most obvious case of Ibsen's influence appears in the correlation be-

tween *The Wild Duck* and Chekhov's *The Seagull* [*Chaika*, 1895]. As many scholars have shown, the two plays are closely related, both in their methodology and in their use of a bird symbol in relationship to a young girl character.⁷ Ibsen was the first playwright to begin experimenting with symbols in an attempt to enhance meaning and foreshadow action in naturalistic drama (Innes, *NT* 225). Chekhov learned Ibsen's lesson well, even though the former playwright clearly parodies symbolism with his "play within a play," or *mise en en abyme*, in *The Seagull*. The influence of Ibsen becomes apparent in Chekhov's use of several models from *The Wild Duck*, including the presence of the eponymous waterfowl and a timely offstage gunshot, which would establish for the audience an immediate link between *The Seagull* and Ibsen's precursor (Wachtel). Despite these obvious similarities, however, the dialogue between Chekhov and Ibsen is more complex, which will be exemplified by the relationship between *Hedda Gabler* and *Three Sisters*.

Written in 1890 and first performed in 1891, *Hedda Gabler* is one of Ibsen's least understood plays. The work marks a turning point in Ibsen's writing career, when he was moving from pure naturalist dramas to more psychologically charged symbolist texts. While the depiction of a woman asserting herself in a struggle of wills—the central plot of *Hedda Gabler*—has since become a classic of the stage, audiences left theaters generally confused about content of the play. Although the play's 1891 London Vaudeville Theatre debut was noted by the majority of sources to be the "most successful" production in the nineteenth century, reviews were unfavorable and sometimes revealed particular hostility towards the character of Hedda. *Lloyds News* said of the play: "It is not, possibly, so utterly repulsive as others that have been seen, but, nevertheless, it is offensive" (qtd. Innes, *NT* 116). The theater critic from the journal *London* reported: "The more I see of Ibsen, the more disgusted I am with his alleged dramas" (ibid). Another review in *Pictorial World* more specifically aimed at Hedda noted: "Hideous nightmare of pessimism ... The play is simply a bad escape of moral sewage-gas ... Hedda's soul is a-crawl with the foulest passions of humanity" (ibid).⁸

The overwhelmingly initial negative reaction to Ibsen's heroine is surprising because Hedda, a strong female character who scandalously commits suicide, is not unique in literature. Her predecessors in the European tradition include Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and even Rebekka West from Ibsen's own *Rosmersholm* (1886). Hedda Ga-

bler's "unfeminine" machinations and suicide do not set her apart from her literary cohorts, nor do her petty concerns or her *ennui*. While the deaths of Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and even Rebekka West ultimately acquire some transcendent meaning, Hedda's suicide resolves nothing and only reveals Ibsen's single-minded goal in writing the play: to show the viewer the truth of the sentiment. "Life is not tragic—Life is ridiculous—And that cannot be borne" (Marker 162). The appalling death and sensationalist themes, intended to bring public attention to Ibsen's *Weltanschauung*, succeeded mainly in confusing viewers.

At the Moscow Art Theatre, as elsewhere in Europe, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* was poorly received. The February 1899 production was badly reviewed and was seen as a failure for the company, both by the public and by the theatre itself. According to Stanislavsky, the Moscow Art Theatre company was unable to bring Ibsen faithfully to the stage because the players did not understand the motivations of his characters as they understood Chekhov's.⁹ Viewers reacted with confusion and disapproval towards the play. Stanislavsky notes in his memoirs that after watching the rehearsals for the 1899 production Chekhov made the remark, "Ibsen is no playwright!" (Nilsson 224).¹⁰

During the same year, in the fall of 1899, the Moscow Art Theatre commissioned Chekhov to write a new play. Chekhov reported that he already had a theme,¹¹ but wanted to wait awhile before beginning in earnest, finally beginning to write in 1900. The play *Three Sisters* became part of the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre in the summer of 1901.¹² Although some critics labeled the work as pessimistic and negative,¹³ *Three Sisters* was generally well received. Leonid Andreev wrote of the 1901 Moscow Art Theatre production that the drama's "basic tragic melody is a mighty longing to live, an urgent call to life, freedom and happiness" (McVay 88). Eventually, the play became so beloved that Moscow theatre goers would say that they were going to "pay a call on the Prozorovs" instead of saying that they were going to see the production (Senelick 105).

Three Sisters and *Hedda Gabler* share many common elements: structural, technical, and textual. The most obvious similarity is the correlation between the title characters. Hedda Gabler and the three sisters are young women, bored or dissatisfied by their lives. All are daughters of generals and yearn to return to the perceived freedom of life they experienced before their fathers' deaths. In Hedda's case, this earlier lifestyle is characterized by the freedom to go out and do

what she likes: shoot pistols, ride horses, and live the life of an important society woman. For the three sisters, the earlier lifestyle is equated with the glittering life of Moscow, and evoked merely by the perpetual cry of “To Moscow!” All four women are, in a sense, trapped in a closed community, and forced to remain there by male relatives: Olga, Masha, and Irina in a provincial Russian town with their brother, Andrei, and Hedda in a small neighborhood of Christiania with her husband, Tesman. In both cases, the house and related expenses, which embody the oppression felt by the title characters, are cited as one of the excuses for the male characters’ inability to move into greater society.

Other points of correlation between the two plays are revealed in their respective structures. The most obvious of these similarities is the fact that both plays open, and close, with gunshots.¹⁴ Another connection linking the two is the fact that in Acts I, II, and III, the settings are virtually the same for both plays. The plays closely resemble each other in this respect, from lighting instructions to furniture placement, from character blocking to basic stage set construction plans.¹⁵

The fire scene in Act III of each also serves as a common element. In *Hedda Gabler*, the scene in which Hedda burns the manuscript, the “child” of Løvborg and Thea, is more subtle than the fire scene in *Three Sisters*. The functional difference of the fire scene in *Hedda Gabler* and *Three Sisters* can be glimpsed in the different roles the female protagonists assume; the three sisters are passive observers while Hedda is the active cause of the fire. Following this fire scene, not only does Hedda lose hope, but she also becomes partially responsible for Løvborg’s accidental death, as well as for her own hopeless situation (the burning of the manuscript is, for her, symbolically linked to the process of self-alienation). On the other hand, as scholar Laurence Senelick notes, “in *Three Sisters*, the fire leaves the sisters unpurified, although their world is rapidly being consumed; amid the desolation, they are simply charred” (Senelick 114). Despite these differences, however, both fire scenes set the tone for the resolution of their respective plays: Olga, Masha and Irina continue to exist in spite of the fire, whereas Hedda is consumed, just like the manuscript. The fire scenes in each play, therefore, accomplish the same task.

According to the theory put forth by Renate Lachmann in *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism* (1997), a series of readily identifiable similarities between two texts serves as a “signal,”

or attention marker, which tells the reader to examine the connection between the works more closely (31-5). The similarities described above between the titular characters of *Hedda Gabler* and *Three Sisters* can be seen as “signals” inviting a closer look. Such an examination of the two plays reveals “intertextual nodes,” Lachmann’s term for points within the text of each play where a connection between the two becomes apparent. By reading the “nodes” the careful reader is able to discern the intertext, which can then be analyzed in order to uncover a new, and sometimes unintended, meaning. If the “nodes” between Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* reveal the intertext, then the dialogue between the two literary works lies in their differences—that is, in Chekhov’s creative “corrections” to Ibsen’s original.

There are several major differences between *Hedda Gabler* and *Three Sisters*, the most obvious of which is the fact that Hedda Gabler is one character, whereas the three sisters, although they are seen as a cohesive unit, and are introduced and exit as a single unit, are in fact three separate characters, each with her own motivations, personality, and character traits. Hedda Gabler and the three sisters share the same features of the non-conformist character type who contrasts with the world in which they live. If we analyze the separate characteristics of each of the three sisters and compare them to Hedda’s own characteristics, an intriguing set of parallels and contrasts can be made. Each of the three sisters embodies in a unique way certain aspects of Hedda’s character. The three together, acting as a solid unit throughout the course of *Three Sisters*, emerge from the fourth act of the play as a single heroine, who can be read as a Chekhovian reinterpretation of Ibsen’s Hedda.¹⁶

Masha is the Prozorov sister closest in temperament to Hedda Gabler. Disappointed and bored by her life, Masha, like Hedda, is an angry character.¹⁷ This anger, combined with her strong will, make Masha the most emotionally strong of the three sisters. Masha’s situation, too, is similar to Hedda’s. As a young girl, Masha marries Kulygin, a man she perceives to be extremely intelligent with a promising future before him, in order to escape the stagnation of small town life. She quickly becomes disillusioned with marriage as she realizes that her husband is an imbecile and allows herself to be propositioned into an affair by Vershinin. Vershinin’s character function is very similar to Judge Brack’s in *Hedda Gabler*. A significant difference between the two, however, is that Hedda sees Brack as an

enemy, set to deprive her of her precious freedom and exercise power over her, whereas Masha sees Vershinin as a happy alternative to her disappointing marriage with Kulygin and a source of the freedom for which she yearns.¹⁸

If Masha is a mirror of Hedda's disposition and mood during the action of *Hedda Gabler*, then Irina represents Hedda's disposition and mood when she was young and unmarried, before she became disillusioned in her hopes and began controlling others. Irina is the most sweet-tempered of the three sisters and has the most suitors, just as Hedda, apparently had many suitors before her surprising marriage to Tesman. Irina feels compelled to marry the Baron, Tuzenbakh, for reasons similar to those Hedda cited in the explanation of her marriage to Tesman: she is bored, her father's recent death left her wanting security, she wants to rejoin society, and perceives marriage to a man with social prospects as the best way to accomplish these goals. Like Hedda, Irina feels no love for her intended husband, but, like Hedda before her marriage, Irina is hopeful that the marriage will be a success and will save her from provincial stagnation.

Another aspect of Hedda's reflection in Irina is her role as catalyst for the duel between Solëny and Tuzenbakh in Act IV. The physical duel echoes the implied duel of power between Hedda and Løvborg, in which Hedda acts as catalyst by suggesting suicide and supplying the weapon. Both duels end in a lost final chance for the heroine. The discrepancy between the characters' reactions to the destructions of their plans gives the viewer added insight into the motivations and temperaments of the characters. Hedda appears to be unnatural, manipulative, selfish, and cruel, but, when contrasted with Irina, Hedda's personality can be seen in the context of its origin and development. The suggestion that Hedda's personality was once girlish, hopeful, and innocent gives the viewer a framework by which to interpret Hedda's personality and fate in the play.

The oldest sister, Olga, represents Hedda's hopelessness, regrets, and despair, but not those of the Hedda that appears in *Hedda Gabler*. Olga represents the regrets and despair of a *potential* Hedda who is always latently present in the play—the woman who would have emerged had Hedda never married Tesman. Olga has realized that she will grow old in the stagnant society of the small town, and, although she once enjoyed her job as a teacher, continually remarks that her life would have been better had she married. Although she admits that she sought love in matrimony in her younger days, Olga

confesses that she would be content to be married even in a sterile partnership with no mutual love or understanding. Still, Olga is the sister who ultimately imparts the peaceful message that life itself is most important, and that one must strive for happiness and peace, regardless of disappointed hopes.

The re-conceptualization of the three sisters as a splintered Hedda Gabler is further reinforced by their reactions to the central symbol of their unhappiness. The same object, the family house, represents a source of oppression for both Hedda and the three sisters. The struggle to maintain power as the mistress of the house, however, plays a different role in the lives of the titular heroines of each play. In the beginning of both plays, the house mistress is clearly defined. Hedda, as a new bride, presides over her own home. She is able to poke fun at the fashion sense of her guest, Aunt Julle, and move furniture around to her heart's content. As the play progresses, however, Hedda loses control over the home; Aunt Julle begins to direct her in matters pertaining to the coming baby, such as the establishment of a nursery in the house and Hedda's health. Eventually, Hedda feels displaced by the collaboration of Thea and Tesman, and, in the final scene, appears separated from the rest of the house and its inhabitants by a curtain. Similarly, Irina, Masha, and Olga are the mistresses of the Prozorov house until their brother's marriage. Their control is evident in Act I when they preside over the festivities of Irina's name day, are able to insult the fashion sense of their guest, Natasha, and can invite anyone they wish. As the play progresses, however, they lose control over the home, are ordered around by Natasha, and are gradually displaced from the home by Natasha and Andrei's ever increasing brood of children. This situation culminates in the three sisters' complete isolation from the home; the act is set outdoors, and they have been, in essence, displaced. The power shift within the house, the passing of power from Hedda to Julle and from the sisters to Natasha, essentially isolates the heroine, until, at the end of each play, she is discarded and alienated.

Hedda, constantly in a power struggle with some other character, tries to dominate everyone with whom she comes in contact. The domination of Løvborg challenges Hedda more than that of any other character, and yet, when she thinks she has triumphed by forcing his suicide, she realizes that her power to dominate him was not as extensive as she had supposed. At the end of the play, Hedda comes to the realization that the only life she has control over is her own, shown in

her “triumphant” suicide by means of a bullet through the temple--the “brave” way to die that she urged Løvborg to try. Similarly, in the beginning of their play, the three sisters are the strongest people in the household. Unlike Hedda, Olga, Masha, and Irina do not try to dominate others. Instead, the sisters are themselves dominated, pushed out of their bedrooms, and, in Olga’s case, pushed out of the house itself. By the end of the play, the three lose the house but come to the understanding that they must control their own lives, an idea they vocalize in their last monologues.

The three sisters are better able to cope with the vicissitudes of life than Hedda. Feeling trapped, with no hope of accomplishing their goals, the three sisters formulate new aspirations. They agree that they must live; this is the most important thing. Their final triangular monologue stresses these convictions and, when the curtain closes, we leave the three sisters as one cohesive unit, alive and still striving for the elusive happiness and fulfillment they are certain must be due to them. On the other hand, when Hedda’s goals fail, when her hope is gone,¹⁹ she is unable to rejuvenate herself or find renewed hope, and so she shoots herself. Hedda’s suicide, which removes her from the physical world and occurs within her curtained separation from the rest of the house, serves the same function as the setting of Act IV of *Three Sisters*, which denotes the sisters’ isolation from the oppression of the house through an outdoor setting. In both plays, the titular characters are, in a sense, freed from oppression metaphorically, if not in reality. Although *Hedda Gabler* and *Three Sisters* project different models for dealing with similar situations, their endings essentially accomplish the same task.

If Chekhov indeed splintered Hedda Gabler’s personality into three separate characters, one question remains: Why split one personality into three? The difference between the heroines, perhaps, lies in perspective. The three sisters are able to feed off of each other’s strengths and weaknesses and can see the world from the simultaneous perspectives of the idealist, the cynic, and the resigned, which allows Chekhov to expand the limited view afforded by the perspective of only one character. Hedda Gabler, however, is trapped in her one-sided perspective. She is unable to reconcile the failure of her power struggle with life, because her life is completely consumed and characterized by the struggle for power during the time frame of the play.

In recreating Hedda’s personality by infusing three different characters with her various traits, Chekhov is making a statement

about Ibsen's heroine—one that echoes critics' and theatergoers' previous complaints about *Hedda Gabler*. Chekhov agrees that Hedda is too intense, too psychological, too symbolically charged. In order to temper Hedda's responses to the world, and thus "correct" Ibsen's drama, Chekhov turns the conflicted heroine into three diluted heroines, who are thus better able to function both in society and in isolation. Chekhov gives each sister an aspect of Hedda's personality in order to make Hedda understandable and to separate traits that, when united, made Ibsen's Hedda volatile and reprehensible to nineteenth-century audiences.²⁰

The intertext, as seen in the similarities and differences between *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler*, demonstrates the innate differences between Chekhov's theory of drama and Ibsen's theory of drama. Ibsen's theory is built on the idea that drama should realistically show man's struggle with society, competing for power, either social or psychological (*Letters* 297). Despite its negative reception, *Hedda Gabler* is a play that Ibsen firmly defended as a creative product of his own dramatic theories and philosophy of the time. He wrote about the work: "It was not really my intention to deal in this play with so-called problems. What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions, and human destinies, upon groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day" (297). These basic social conditions and principles, for Ibsen are firmly grounded in the theories of, for example, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The nihilism inherent in the period is reflected in one of Ibsen's most telling notes on the original manuscript of *Hedda Gabler*, "The greatest misery in the world is that so many have nothing to do but pursue happiness without being able to find it.... The life of reality isn't livable" (Innes *NT* 102).

In opposition to Ibsen's theory, Chekhov's view on the "new dramatic theory" of naturalism is that the author should put forth characters and a scenario for the viewer to contemplate, without passing explicit judgment. Less steeped in western European philosophy and politics and more interested in depicting the stagnant situation of the Russian intelligentsia not actively involved in the anarchism and radicalism in the cities, Chekhov's play provides viewers with a more complete look at life in Russian society at the time than Ibsen's does of life in Norwegian society in the late nineteenth century. Commenting on the role of the author, Chekhov wrote: "It is not the writer's job to solve such problems as god, pessimism, etc. His job is merely

to record who, under what conditions, said or thought what about god or pessimism. The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness" (*Letters* 138). In another letter, in 1892, Chekhov again ruminates on this subject: "All good writers have one highly important trait in common, they're moving towards something definite and beckon you to follow ... the best of them are realistic and describe life as it is, but because each line is saturated with the consciousness of a goal, you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is" (313).

Repelled by what he perceived to be the pessimistic point of view and unsympathetic situations put forth in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, in *Three Sisters* Chekhov set out to write a drama which, although in the naturalist style, provides an alternative conclusion, a less pessimistic one. Although Chekhov had little faith in the intelligentsia and its philosophies and theories, he did have a vision of hope for individual lives. As he wrote in an 1899 letter:

As long as our boys and girls are still students, they're honest and good, they're Russia's future; but as soon as those students have to stand up on their own and grow up, our hope and Russia's future go up in smoke [...] I have no faith in our intelligentsia; it is hypocritical, dishonest, hysterical, ill-bred and lazy. I have no faith in it even when it suffers and complains, for its oppressors emerge from its own midst. I see salvation in individuals, scattered here and there, all over Russia, be they peasants or intellectuals; in them is strength, although they are few.
(Innes, *NT* 165)²¹

Ibsen's and Chekhov's respective brands of naturalism differ, perhaps not surprisingly, in motivation—in the worldview and interests of each playwright. Ibsen was initiated into playwriting as a fervent campaigner for Norwegian nationalism. Through his plays, he helped to garner support for this cause and he went on to become directly involved with other political movements in Europe, including his famous involvement in the movement for women's rights. References to social and political debates gave his plays a decidedly philosophical and psychological emphasis. In this vein, the shot which decided Hedda Gabler's fate symbolized much more than her death. That shot meant the death of a prototype, the death of the old woman to make way for the new—an old woman whose life was wasted merely

because of misunderstanding and a faulty upbringing.

Ibsen's play challenged Chekhov to save the poor abused heroine and create for her a possible future, as seen in *Three Sisters*. Chekhov scholar Francis Ferguson, comparing Ibsen and Chekhov, noted:

Chekhov does not demand the intellectual scope, the meanings which Ibsen demanded, and to some critics Chekhov does not look like a real dramatist but merely an overdeveloped mime, a stage virtuoso. But the theater of modern realism did not afford what Ibsen demanded, and Chekhov is much the more perfect master of its little scene. (Ferguson 160)

The lack of emphasis on universal meaning or larger intellectual scope in Chekhov's dramas and his focus on depicting characters with whom his audience viewers could sympathize produced period dramas without political context. Today's viewer does not need to understand the intricacies of the suffrage movement of the late nineteenth century, nor does he need to have a good grasp of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and other thinkers of that period to understand Chekhov, whereas Ibsen's dramas, while emotionally moving, lose much of their meaning when lifted out of their historical context.

Although their hopes of escape from the provincial town are dashed, in the final scene of *Three Sisters* the trio vows to remain active; this instills in the viewer a sense of teleology and stability. This reaction, quite different from the confused despair that Hedda Gabler's last gunshot evokes from the viewer, precisely highlights Chekhov's main theoretical divergence from Ibsen. Caught up in nationalistic fervor, European politics, and sociology, Ibsen was ultimately unable to fulfill Emile Zola's 1881 call for "new dramatists":

Our theatre desperately needs a new man who will scour the debased boards and bring about a rebirth in an art degraded by its practitioners to the simple-minded requirements of the crowd. Yes, it would take a powerful personality, an innovator's mind, to overthrow the accepted conventions and finally install the real human drama in place of the ridiculous untruths that are on display today. I picture this creator scorning the tricks of the clever hack, smashing the imposed patterns, remaking the stage until it is continuous with the auditorium, giving a

shiver of life to the painted trees, letting in through the backcloth the great, free air of reality. (Innes, NT 47)

In *Three Sisters*, Chekhov answers this challenge and succeeds in creating a dramatic work more subtle, more optimistic, and more in touch with the nuances of day to day life that he found lacking in Ibsen's work. In reinventing Hedda Gabler, Chekhov russifies her, and this, for Chekhov, strengthens her and infuses Ibsen's original storyline with optimism. Olga, Masha, and Irina do not commit suicide in the face of a stifling environment; instead, their circumstances, so similar to Hedda's, force them to acknowledge and address their hardships, with their utopian vow to work towards a bright future. For Chekhov's three sisters, perhaps that bright future will never come, but at least the hope of one remains.

Notes

1. See Goldman, Emma. *The Social Significance of Modern Drama*. Boston: R.G. Badger, 1914. This passage contains references to Ibsen's plays *Pillars of Society* [*Samfundets stotter*, 1877] and *Ghosts* [*Gengangere*, 1881], which, one should note, which serve as evidence of Ibsen's importance for late nineteenth and early twentieth century drama.
2. During the 2004-5 theatre season in Chicago, for example, four Chekhov plays were produced by major theatres. This number may not seem so great, until compared with the number of plays by other dramatists. During the same period, the only playwright with a greater number of plays in Chicago theaters was Shakespeare, with six. Only two plays by Ibsen were produced, and none by either Shaw or Strindberg (Vibbert).
3. In Act III, both plays have an important fire scene, which marks a turning point in the plot; Ibsen's conflagration, however, has a direct impact on the characters, whereas Chekhov's serves as a backdrop to the other events unfolding. This key difference also highlights the major difference between Chekhov and Ibsen as dramatists, one could argue. Chekhov's style is more subtle and draws more from the Realist school of Tolstoy. In Chekhov a fire can be just a fire, with no additional meaning.
4. Martin Nag wrote a brief paragraph comparing the two in the second part of his longer work, *Ibsen/Tsjekhov; En studie i intertekstualitet* (134), but he did not develop his ideas in any later works. Critic Jovan Hristic, another scholar to remark on these similarities, noted that, the three sisters are "true spiritual sisters of Hedda Gabler, who corrupt everything around them by dint of thinking themselves superior" (Senelick 107).

5. His plays were performed more than any other playwright's; in 1891 London, for example, no fewer than five different Ibsen plays were simultaneously played at five different theaters (McFarlane 51).
6. ["To Ibsen Anton Pavlovich reacted somehow suspiciously and with a smile, [Ibsen] seemed to him complex and irrational."]
7. For more information, see Kataev (186) Rayfield's *Understanding Chekhov* (144), among others.
8. Although *Hedda Gabler* has become one of Ibsen's most popular and beloved plays, its initial reception was rocky. According to scholars, the success of the 1893 London production, cited as the most successful late nineteenth-century production of the play, was solely due to the lead actress's unique interpretation of the role of Hedda (Innes NT 117-121). Instead of a naturalistic performance, actress Elizabeth Robins played the role impressionistically, not as a portrait of a woman, but as a portrait of a nervous condition (Marker 165). Because she was so emotional in her performance, her Hedda did not stand for feminism, rather for a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Her performance was seen by Henry James, who wrote a review of it championing Ibsen's creation, noting: "Her motives are simply her passions" (Innes, NT 118). Henry James's essay held such influence that this interpretation of the character became the standard interpretation; it softened the edges of the character that English society had found so distasteful and made her into a tragic feminine heroine instead of the strong feminist creature embroiled in Nietzschean struggles for will that Ibsen originally conceived her as.
9. Stanislavsky notes: "We portrayed [Ibsen] with care, but that was due to the fact that Nemirovich-Danchenko was a great student of Ibsen and knew how to interpret, explain, express and feel him. The rest of us were merely echoes" (345).
10. Later in Stanislavsky's memoirs Chekhov is quoted as saying "Послушайте же, Ибсен не знает жизни. В жизни так не бывает" (Fedorova 390). ["Listen, Ibsen doesn't know life. In life such things don't happen."]
11. Although there is documented evidence that Chekhov conceived the idea of writing the new play after attending a Moscow Art Theatre performance of Gerhardt Hauptmann's *Lonely People* [*Einsame Menschen*, 1890], in the titular chapter of his book, *If Only We Could Know!* (2002), Vladimir Kataev goes on to note that Chekhov had clearly been thinking about the themes which emerged in *Three Sisters* since his earliest plays, *Ivanov* [*Ivanov*, 1887] and *Uncle Vanya* [*Diadia Vania*, 1899] (Kataev 245). Given Chekhov's recorded reaction to Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* shortly before he began to write *Three Sisters*, I believe it is safe to say that *Hedda Gabler* also could have had considerable impact on the play.

12. The finished play was seen as a triumph of the ensemble approach to drama. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote in 1914, “In its ensemble work, its unity of execution, and its maturity of form, *Three Sisters* was always regarded in the theatre as our best production of a Chekhov play” (qtd. McVay 102).
13. Such themes in critical responses to the work were especially prevalent around the time of the 1905 revolution.
14. *Hedda Gabler* opens with Hedda’s foreshadowing shot with her father’s pistol, and then closes with Hedda’s own fatal shot. In *Three Sisters* the opening and closing shots are not so blatant, but, nonetheless, appear in the text. In Olga’s first speech, she remembers the gun salute at her father’s funeral, and at the end of the play, a faint gunshot announces the result of the duel between Solöny and Tuzenbakh, the gunshots echoed by Chebutykin’s onomatopoeic singing of “Ta - ra ra bumbiia” during the final scene.
15. Of course, many plays of the nineteenth century dealing with upper class life are set in drawing rooms; this is not unusual. Ibsen, however, left detailed instructions for the set—up of the drawing room, the drapes and placement of various pieces of furniture, the basic layout of the Tesman house, etc. Chekhov also left detailed descriptions of the stage set-up and a good deal of his correspondence with the Moscow Art Theatre during the rehearsal period of *Three Sisters* deals with this topic. Chekhov’s vision of the Prozorovs’ drawing room is nearly identical to the Tesmans’ drawing room in *Hedda Gabler*, perhaps not in the sense of furniture, but in the general layout. A large table that unifies all of the action is set center stage. A view out to the garden can be seen by the audience through windows. A reception room in the background is separated from the main room by columns in *Three Sisters* and by curtains in *Hedda Gabler*. Chekhov is renowned for the simplicity of his vision and for the subtlety of his presentation, unlike Ibsen, who is more known for meticulous detail. Arnold Aronson writes that, “for all the specificity of Ibsen’s stage descriptions, no single item has the resonance or necessity of ... the dining table in *Three Sisters*,” which, it is implied, fulfills the role of the Tesmans’ entire drawing room stuffed full of furniture (Allain 134). Chekhov does place his table in the stage directions in the same location as Ibsen’s, but the other crowded pieces of furniture are conspicuously missing. The play, though, conveys a sense of a properly furnished room with parsimony of objects. Because the audience expects a drawing room full of typical late nineteenth-century gentry accoutrements, that is what the audience assumes, whether all the furniture is there or only a table. In both plays, Act II has the same setting as Act I. Act III of *Hedda Gabler* is set in the same drawing room, in which Hedda and Thea have slept in chairs all night waiting for Løvborg to return. The lighting is the same, with a low fire and candlelight. The

time is the same, early morning. In *Three Sisters*, Act III is set in Olga and Irina's bedroom, Olga on a sofa in front of the fireplace, with candles lit. Everyone is awake because of the fire alarm bells ringing in the village. Between Acts II and III in both plays a group of male characters goes on a gambling and drinking spree. A supporting male character appears drunk and wild in both plays during Act III.

16. For the purposes of this paper, Chekhov's written statement to Gorky of 16 October 1900 will be used to determine the heroine count: "Ужасно трудно было писать «Трех сестер». Ведь *три героини*, каждая должна быть на свой образец, и все три – генеральские дочери" (emphasis mine) (Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 695). ["It was extremely difficult to write *Three Sisters*, because there are *three heroines*, each of which has to be unique, and all three are general's daughters!"] Other scholars, and, indeed, Chekhov himself in later correspondence, have claimed that Natasha is a fourth heroine in the play. This statement to Gorky, however, written when Chekhov had just finished writing *Three Sisters* and coming within a year of his exposure to the Moscow Art Theatre production of *Hedda Gabler*, seems to imply the parallel between Hedda and the three heroines and leaves Natasha out entirely. Natasha's role in *Three Sisters* closely resembles that of Aunt Julle in *Hedda Gabler*, which may be one reason she is not considered as a fourth heroine.
17. Chekhov wrote to Olga Knipper, playing Masha in the 1901 production, to play her with anger, not sadness, because it is more true to her character (Benedetti 89).
18. In an earlier draft of *Three Sisters*, another similarity between the two heroines arises: Masha commits suicide in the end by poisoning herself. Notes to the 1963 *Sobranie sochinenii* seem to suggest that this event was a direct result of Chekhov's inability to understand the character. In a letter to Olga Knipper dated 8 September 1900, Chekhov remarked: "Что – то у меня захромала одна из героинь, ничего с ней не поделаю и злюсь!" (Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 695). ["I am having problems with one of my heroines, there's nothing I can do about her, and I am angry because of it!"] Sincere thanks to Dr. Maria Ignatieva for her kind help in finding this information.
19. Hedda, for Ibsen, was a character driven to her demise by circumstances she perceived as stifling. Describing this situation, Ibsen wrote: "George Tesman, his old aunts, and the faithful servant Berta together form a picture of complete unity. They think alike, they share the same memories and have the same outlook on life. To Hedda they appear like a strange and hostile power, aimed at her very being" (Templeton 211). Hedda's attitude and obsession with controlling others can then be seen as a defensive instinct, a reading missed by almost all of the viewing public of the late nineteenth century. Although Hedda's motivations

may have been clear to her creator, to viewers and critics, they remained confusing and obscure.

20. The strange mixture of naturalistic elements combined with the manifest psychological aspects of *Hedda Gabler* came as a shock to an audience more accustomed to the more subtle psychology and critical messages imbued in Ibsen's earlier dramas, even in *Rosmersholm*. William Archer, a major Ibsen critic, pointed out in a 1901 article that "a primary source of misunderstanding for Ibsen's plays in general is the facile hero—worship of those who saw in *A Doll's House* (*Et dukkehjem*, 1879) a sort of Women's Rights manifesto, and hailed Ibsen as the preacher of a social, one might almost say a social—democratic, gospel" (Innes *Hedda* 42). A summary of this problem is perhaps best expressed by critic Charles Lyons:

While *Hedda Gabler* clearly relates to the realistic texts that precede it, the work refuses to yield the biographical detail that informs the spectator's image of the protagonist in the earlier plays from *Ghosts* onward. Because the public view of both Ibsenian drama and Ibsenism remained tied to the style and content of these plays, Ibsen's experimentation in *Hedda Gabler* puzzled its initial audiences and readers. The play disturbed these spectators who found its female protagonist to be eccentric, abnormal, and disturbingly disconnected from any counterpart in reality (15).

In addition to this reading, there are other readings of the work claiming to show why it was so disturbing to late Victorian audiences. One such reading, by Chris Innes, for example, interprets a different aspect of the play's position in Ibsen's body of works. Innes notes that, although the play depicts a cold and nearly demonic woman, critics and the public had come, by 1890, to expect a more obvious social critique in Ibsen's plays, especially given Ibsen's reputation as a major supporter of the Women's Rights movement. The symbols in *Hedda Gabler*—the general's pistols and portrait, the house, Tesman's slippers—are all personal, directly relating to one or two characters, but with little meaning for the viewing public outside the frame of the play. Then, perhaps the most obvious reason for distaste, there is also the vulgar nature of the play. Although the final tableau showcases the tragedy of spiritual nihilism, as popularized by the writings of Nietzsche, any meaning this might hold for the viewer is lost in the scene's blatantly sensationalist manner of presentation.

21. [“Пока это еще студенты и курсистки - это честный, хороший народ, это надежда наша, это будущее России, но стоит только студентам и курсисткам выйти самостоятельно на дорогу, стать взрослыми, как и надежда наша и будущее России обращается в

дым [...] Я не верю в нашу интеллигенцию, лицемерную, фальшивую, истеричную, невоспитанную, ленивую, не верю даже, когда она страдает и жалуется, ибо ее притеснители выходят из ее же недр. Я верую в отдельных людей, я вижу спасение в отдельных личностях, разбросанных по всей России там и сям - интеллигенты они или мужики, - в них сила, хотя их и мало (Chekhov, 22 Feb. 1899 99-101).]

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