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From Narcissism to Empathy: Ibsen's Plays in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The digital revolution has produced many new forms of communication that present us with the risk of losing touch with one another. As our society increasingly relies on technology as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, there is a tendency among people to form online social groups that reinforce their existing biases and exclude alternative points of view. As a result, social networks—though designed perhaps to cultivate connections—may in fact be producing a more narcissistic society. Empathy, in contradistinction to narcissism, allows us to understand the thoughts and feelings of someone else. Literature (including film and drama), by allowing readers and/or viewers to imaginatively identify with characters different from themselves, fosters empathy and offsets narcissism. This could be precisely why the Humanities have played such a significant role in cultural reform throughout history. In this context, by exploring Henrik Ibsen's drama, we confront our own selfishness, narcissism, desire for control over others, and fear that they may gain control over us. *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* examine individual freedom from a female perspective, and show us how narcissism—especially in conjunction with intolerance—acts as a corrosive agent to human empathy and compassion.

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From Narcissism to Empathy: Ibsen's Plays in the Digital Age

The digital revolution has produced new forms of communication that present us with the risk of losing touch with otherness. As people increasingly rely on technology as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, there is a tendency among them to form online social groups that reinforce their existing biases and exclude alternative points of view. As a result, social networks—though designed perhaps to cultivate connections—may in fact be promoting a more narcissistic society. In his essay, “Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is the Key to Empathy,” P.J. Manney stresses that if “accelerating technology means our own species and its interactions continue to gain in complexity, then by necessity, we must increase our levels of empathy to follow suit. If we don’t, we may become unfit to continue as a species and bring about our own demise” (Manney 52). Manney points to fiction as a practical and valuable method of counteracting this potential consequence, contending that if “you regularly place yourself in the shoes of different characters and experience empathy for them, this recurring behavior cannot but help open up your view of the world and create a more empathetic personality” (Manney 53). Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter are all conducive to self-aggrandizement and exclusion of otherness. While these social networks are potential tools for democracy, they tend more often to rally like-minded individuals around social interests and political causes they already support. As Craig Condella writes in his article, “Democracy, Narcissism, and the World Wide Web,” the Web is a “double-edged sword that enhances the possibilities of both political change and narcissistic self-absorption” and social networks “more often than not reinforce what we already believe, often in ways hitherto unseen...if a hundred, a thousand, or even a million people are of a like mind, how can they—or I—be wrong?” (Condella 270). By limiting exposure to otherness and creating a virtual existence in which each user is the center of his or her own universe, social networks encourage a narcissistic, less empathetic society.

Seeing another person behave in a way that I have behaved allows me to empathize even with

inconsiderate, immoral, or destructive behavior. Ideally, if I recognize in another person selfish, morally irresponsible behavior that I myself have engaged in, the identification acts as a sort of mirror in which I might see at least some elements of myself clearly and then alter my behavior accordingly. In his essay, “See the Play, Read the Book,” Howard Mancing argues that, while we experience novels and other written works only through “mediated” perception, theatre and film are art forms that we experience through direct perception (Mancing 192). That is, our perception of theatre and film is akin to our perception of events in everyday life. In film, however, cinematography manipulates our perception; the camera determines a viewer’s focal point. Theatre, generally speaking, involves the verbal and physical interaction of actual people; each actor is a ‘body among bodies.’ Given its three-dimensional quality, its lack of a fixed visual focal point, and the element of humans in live performance, theatre can, more closely than film, approximate life. Assuming, then, that theatre is unique in its ability to present us with perceptive experiences very similar to those of our everyday interactions with others, it is also unique in its ability to show us our own behavior and foster empathy through the recognition of ourselves in characters on stage. Works within the aesthetic realm of realism and naturalism further enhance this recognition by attempting to render artistically our lived experience in all its nuanced complexity. According to Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, his own plays “make people uncomfortable because when they see them they have to think, and most people want to be effortlessly entertained, not to be told unpleasant truths.... But I find that people’s eyes can be opened as well from the stage as from a pulpit. Especially as so many people no longer go to church” (qtd. in Meyer 471). In his often bleak works of realism, Ibsen brings us face to face with our own selfishness, narcissism, desire for control over others, and fear that others may gain control over us. *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* examine individual freedom from a female perspective, and show us how narcissism—especially in conjunction with intolerance—acts as a corrosive agent to human empathy and compassion.

While narcissistic personality is a specific clinical diagnosis that describes a very particular condition, it is helpful to understand how narcissism more broadly applies to people who privilege the self and dismiss, to varying degrees, the needs of the other. It is unsurprising, therefore, that narcissism impairs one's capacity for empathy. A narcissistic dismissal of "the other" can manifest on a cultural level. Rejection of a collective "other"—be it an ethnic group, gender, or sexual-orientation group—can stem from what Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare regard as "entitlement" and "a sense of superiority over others" (Babiak & Hare 124). Societies that legislate and enforce institutionalized racism or misogyny are clearly motivated by revulsion toward—and a desire to marginalize—otherness, and a culture that organizes itself with such socio-political asymmetry exhibits an intolerant worldview that privileges sameness (whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, for example) and actively oppresses otherness.

For the purposes of this paper, I will not confine my use of the word "narcissism" to the parameters of its definition as a psychological disorder. And, since "narcissism" functions as a blanket term used to mean everything from self-admiration to sexual attraction to oneself, establishing a working definition here is crucial. To this end, I look to Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, co-authors of the 2009 book *The Narcissism Epidemic*, for whom the "myth of Narcissus captures the tragedy of self-admiration, because Narcissus becomes frozen by his self-admiration and unable to connect with anyone outside himself—and his narcissism harms other people.... The legend reflects real life, with the most serious consequences of narcissism falling upon others in society" (Twenge & Campbell 19). This points to narcissism as a socially destructive force; much larger than a few inflated egos. The positive feelings and high regard a narcissist has for himself do not extend outward to others, as narcissists "lack emotionally warm, caring, and loving relationships" (Twenge & Campbell 19). While there are certainly other relevant views on narcissism, the ideas provided by Twenge and Campbell highlight a clear link between narcissism and Patrick Hogan's "ethics of disgust."

According to Hogan, one of the most influential voices in the field of cognitive cultural studies, while an

"ethics of attachment" emphasizes "such virtues as nurturance, kindness, corporal works of mercy, and so forth," an "ethics of disgust" leads to intolerance and exclusion (Hogan 240). "Some of us," writes Hogan, "are much more likely to respond to disgust-provoking components of situations or actions; others are more likely to respond to attachment-based needs" (Hogan 241). Racism, homophobia, and sexism can all be linked to feelings of revulsion toward otherness. Narcissism can, and often does, act as a catalyst for feelings of disgust and hatred toward people who do not conform to the worldview—or cater to the aggrandizement—of oneself. Since narcissists "don't value warm or caring relationships," it follows that they have little use for genuine compassion and tend to view others as "tools to make themselves look and feel good" (Twenge & Campbell 19). Hogan asserts that, "as a moral emotion, disgust leads us to emphasize cleanliness and shame" and, in "the case of cleanliness, the physical virtue is extended to a moral virtue...chastity in both deed and thought is a prime case of moral 'cleanliness'" (Hogan 240). The notion of moral cleanliness is so pervasive it may go unnoticed by many people. From relatively harmless linguistic metaphors like 'dirty' jokes to fundamentally destructive ones like racial 'purity,' we associate words like 'impure' and 'unclean' with moral inferiority. For the narcissist who is perpetually concerned about maintaining an appearance of superiority to others, association with those who fall outside the narcissist's standards of 'moral virtue' or 'moral cleanliness' would be disadvantageous. It is important here to say the narcissist's standards, grounded in desire for self-aggrandizement, do not necessarily include preoccupation with societal norms of moral cleanliness. A narcissist could just as easily revel in debauchery and maintain an inflated sense of self according to almost any standard. Anyone deviant from the narcissist's moral standards (whatever they may be), or anyone who challenges or contradicts said standards, is almost necessarily undesirable; an object of disgust.

The problem of narcissism extends well beyond the self-centered individual. In patriarchal societies, for instance, the limited worldview of the individual male becomes the reigning cultural attitude. As it manifests in both Ibsen's plays and the 'real world,' patriarchy is fundamentally narcissistic in that it essentially

establishes a positive feedback loop among men that reinforces intolerance of otherness and the reduction of women to servants of various kinds. In a sense, women in patriarchal societies—or just marriages based on patriarchy—are subservient to their husbands' narcissism. They serve their husbands' various egocentric needs, sexual and otherwise.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir presents us with the notion that, due to the existence of a number of pervasive myths surrounding femininity, the actual personalities of women have long been muted in the eyes of society and, in particular, men. The woman who wants to exist, be known by those around her, and ultimately respected as a flawed, idiosyncratic, utterly human self, is trapped behind a wall of clichés regarding the 'true nature' of women. As the "contrary facts of experience are impotent against the myth," a woman is likely to experience great difficulty in, for example, a heterosexual relationship; her individuality will constantly fail to fit within the conceptual framework of the myth, to the frustration and confusion of her husband or lover (not to mention herself) (Beauvoir 253). "If the definition provided for [the Eternal Feminine] is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine" (Beauvoir 253). The women who are 'not feminine,' then, potentially become undesirable others to their husbands or lovers. They fall outside societal standards of moral virtue and may become objects of disgust to their narcissistic mates. The inadequacy of any myth or ideal to accurately depict an actual human being is overlooked in favor of a focus on the inadequacy of a human being to actually embody an ideal. The 'mysteriousness' of women is a catch-all for characteristics of actual women that fly in the face of the ideal because "the categories in which men think of the world are established *from their point of view, as absolute*... a mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence" (Beauvoir 257).

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Torvald Helmer not only believes in an ideal of femininity, his entire married life with Nora absolutely depends upon the appearance of false conceptual notions as 'the truth.' Nora is Beauvoir's "slave" who "deliberately disassembles her objective actuality" (Beauvoir 259). She

depends upon "the caprices of a master" and so has "learned to turn toward him a changeless smile or an enigmatic impassivity" while carefully hiding her real sentiments, her actual being (Beauvoir 259). Torvald has developed all sorts of habits and rituals that feed his idealized conception of Nora (not to mention his ego). When, toward the end of the play, he reveals to her that this conception includes viewing her as stupid and inferior, she sees the situation for what it is, and not only breaks free from the marriage, but also disabuses him of at least some of his delusions about their relationship. *A Doll's House* allows us to see the workings of a relationship that is based on ideals rather than concrete experience, and in doing so, cultivate empathy for women in situations similar to Nora's. As Ibsen biographer and translator Michael Meyer describes the play's impact on society, "No play had ever before contributed so momentarily to the social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matters" (Meyer 454).

When Torvald calls Nora "my most treasured possession," adding "all this wonderful beauty that's mine, mine alone, all mine," we get the sense that he does not care at all for Nora as an individual, only as something he owns that pleases him and increases his self-admiration and feelings of superiority to others (Ibsen 87). This is but one of many instances throughout the play in which Torvald embodies the sort of narcissism described by Twenge and Campbell. Perhaps the most significant and certainly one of the most memorable of these instances occurs during the climactic scene, in which, after cursing Nora for having forged her father's signature in order to take a loan from Krogstad, he then offers her forgiveness. After displaying disgust toward his wife: "Wretched woman... a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal... no religion, no morals, no sense of duties..." he then insists that their marriage continue only in appearance as he no longer wishes for her companionship and dares "no longer entrust" the children to her care (Ibsen 93-94). After receiving word that Krogstad is returning the I.O.U. and the threat of blackmail is extinguished, it doesn't occur to Torvald to ask his wife's forgiveness for verbally abusing her and demanding that she remain in the house as, essentially, a prisoner. The threat to his ego is gone, and the only

possibility he even considers is that Nora is afraid he won't forgive her. This scene makes a strong case for Torvald as a man nearly devoid of empathy, concerned only with controlling and arranging people in ways that best serve his needs. When we consider this scene alongside the tarantella scene toward the end of Act Two, in which Nora begins to dance passionately, exclaiming, "Oh Christine, we're having such fun," Torvald grows frantic and tells Rank to stop playing the piano immediately; a clear picture emerges of the Helmers' marriage as one dominated by the controlling impulses of a pathological narcissist (Ibsen 77).

Since, for much of the play, Nora—as far as Torvald knows—is, indeed, subservient to his narcissism, his disgust with her only occasionally surfaces, as in the two moments described above. Torvald's relation to an ethics of disgust is most readily apparent in his attitude toward the two other major male characters in the play, Krogstad and Rank. When Torvald tells Nora that Krogstad has "forged someone else's name," he goes on to say, "Just think how a man with that load on his conscience must always be lying and cheating and dissembling—how he must wear a mask even in the presence of those who are dearest to him, even his own wife and children" (Ibsen 53). Torvald's self-righteous condemnation of Krogstad here is ironic in one sense because Torvald essentially owes his life to a forged signature, and in another sense because Torvald disguises his true intentions and manipulates his own wife and children. He's expressing moral outrage toward someone for engaging in behavior he himself has engaged in; this hypocrisy on Torvald's part also functions as part of an ethics of disgust. As he goes on, his disgust with Krogstad becomes more apparent: "every breath that children draw in such a house [as Krogstad's] contains the germs of evil...I literally feel physically ill in the presence of a man like that" (Ibsen 54).

Torvald allows Rank to visit with Nora because he views the sickly man as a non-entity who poses no sexual threat to his marriage. Torvald likely enjoys feeling superior to him and inspiring jealousy in him. In Act Two, an interesting exchange takes place between Nora and Rank in which Rank informs her that he's going to die soon, and shortly after insists that Torvald not come to visit him in the hospital. At first, he pretends this is out of respect for Torvald, whom he

calls a "sensitive chap," adding, "I know how he hates anything ugly" (Ibsen 65). This indicates awareness of Torvald's potential aversion to seeing him on his sickbed, but then Rank seems to express *fear*, refusing to allow Torvald into his hospital room should he attempt to visit. The precise nature of his fear is unclear, but it seems that Rank is horrified at the thought of Torvald being near him when he's dying, feeling superior and perhaps enjoying a feeling of power as he observes Rank's own weakness and powerlessness. A chilling aura of sadism pervades this moment of the play. Torvald's remark that Rank's "suffering and loneliness seemed to provide a kind of dark background to the happy sunlight of our marriage" reveals part of the way in which he used the man to serve his narcissistic desires (Ibsen 91). He expresses no wish to see Rank in the hospital; it is consistent with an ethics of disgust that he should want to keep terminal illness, and the bodily decay associated with it, at arm's length.

At the end of the play, as Nora stares at the possibility of self-discovery and individual freedom, she is also breaking away from Torvald's narcissistic control. Her parting words are not bitter, and her eagerness to experience life outside of her home, whatever that may entail, points toward an ethics of attachment. Arguably, the only other significant moment in the play filled with genuine compassion occurs in the beginning of Act Three, when Krogstad and Mrs. Linde meet. What has all the makings of a loveless partnership resulting from a desperate act on the part of Mrs. Linde begins to transform when she asks, "Nils, suppose we two shipwrecked souls could join hands?" (Ibsen 82). As Mrs. Linde exclaims, "What a change! Oh, what a change! Someone to work for—to live for! A home to bring joy into!" we sense that the connection that takes place between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad has converted a potentially bleak situation into an embodiment of Hogan's ethics of attachment (Ibsen 84).

In *Hedda Gabler*, the lines between just and unjust, freedom and oppression, control and dominance, narcissism and self-actualization, are much more blurry, much closer to the gnarled intricacy of their real-world counterparts than in *A Doll's House*. Hedda herself is a more nuanced, complex, unstable, and unpredictable character than Nora. The plot is somewhat predictable;

for instance, we can easily guess, based on the conspicuous introduction of General Gabler's pistols early in the play, that things will take a violent turn for Hedda. Hedda's moment-to-moment behavior, though, is such that she won't yield to interpretation as readily as Nora. In *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience*, Rhonda Blair writes, "To box Hedda and her cohort up in a tidily psychologized, overly determined package diminishes the power of the work. We must strive for an experience of the *felt* meaning of the play, even if we cannot name it, using language to reach beyond language and toward experience" (Blair 12). If Nora is a slave who takes the first step toward freedom at the end of the play, Hedda is Nora years down the road, when the idealism and hope for a better life, the dream of self-actualization, have long since deteriorated into empty self-obsession. Hedda embodies the concept of narcissistic disgust as a corrosive agent, eating into anyone with whom she comes in contact. In sharp contrast to Nora, who, at the end of *A Doll's House*, freely admits to not understanding how society works, Hedda understands almost *exactly* how society works and despises it almost entirely. She sees that to obtain the fulfillment she craves would require scandal, and so retreats into marriage with a man for whom she can barely muster contempt, a sort of disinterested dismissal of him as a person. She is neither intellectually nor emotionally tethered to the societal notion that she ought to have a husband and bear his children, and does not believe that submission to the will of a man will bring her happiness; but she can see no path that offers her the freedom and control she so desperately wants without the threat of 'falling from grace' in the eyes of her peers. She has, in a sense, freedom of mind, but there's nothing for her to *do* with it, no way for her to embody the ideals that she has. As a result, she has, by the start of the play, long since grown bitter and developed disgust toward herself and those around her.

If not for the same reasons as Torvald, then certainly to at least the same extent, Hedda tries to control the lives of those around her. Like Torvald, she seems to feel completely entitled to do so where possible. It seems to be largely because of Hedda's lack of power over her own life that she seeks to control the lives of those around her. In the end, she is able to exercise a great deal of control over her husband's rival,

Eilert, and her old friend, Thea, only to realize that, in doing so, she has put herself at the mercy of Judge Brack and her husband. When she kills herself, she is exercising what she views as the only form of control still available to her. Despite her intense dissatisfaction with life and eventual suicide, it would be inaccurate to say Hedda suffers from a low self-opinion. She is preoccupied with selfish interests; and her concern with her own appearance in the eyes of others ultimately prevents her from pursuing the freedom that Thea has obtained. When, in Act Two, she responds to Brack's suggestion that she find something to occupy her time and help counteract her boredom with "I was thinking, if I could persuade Tesman to go into politics..." as though it's something she has genuinely considered and has some amount of enthusiasm for, this reveals that even a *tiny* amount of control over a person is infinitely more interesting to her than an actual relationship (Ibsen 281). Hedda tells Brack that she is married to Tesman because, essentially, she "felt sorry for the great scholar" when he was awkwardly trying to find something to talk about as he walked Hedda home from a party (Ibsen 280). She told him "quite frivolously" that she'd love to live in the house they were walking past (Ibsen 281). In consequence, she and Tesman got engaged, got married, went on their honeymoon, and moved into the house in question. According to this description at least, there never was any honeymoon period during which Hedda and George Tesman were deeply enamored of one another. There has only ever been boredom and, on Hedda's part, disgust.

An ethics of disgust characterizes Hedda's attitude toward Tesman, herself, and the circumstances of her life. Her disgust with each of these is evident in comments she makes to Brack regarding childbirth: "I've no leanings in that direction, Judge. I don't want any—responsibilities...I often think there's only one thing for which I have any natural talent...For boring myself to death...Talking of boring, here comes [Tesman]" (Ibsen 282). A case could be made that these comments have more to do with withdrawal from and utter indifference toward life than any particular attitude, but Hedda's subsequent vicious actions and eventual suicide strongly support the argument for narcissistic disgust. Regarding Tesman, she seems—somewhat understandably—repulsed by his childish

relationship with his aunts. His seeming indifference and/or obliviousness to her actual feelings and his utterly unappealing personality contribute to Hedda's view of Tesman as the 'other' and her disgust with his otherness.

Aside from Tesman's relationship to his aunts, the only relationship in *Hedda Gabler* that seems rooted in an ethics of attachment is the one between Eilert Loevborg and Thea. The conversation between Hedda, Loevborg, and Thea toward the end of Act Two is a pivotal point in the play. When Loevborg tells Hedda that Thea has "the courage of her convictions," we begin to see how deeply Hedda envies their relationship (Ibsen 294). Hedda's reply, "Yes. Courage. Yes. If only one had that...One might be able to live. In spite of everything," reveals that, on some level, she views herself as cowardly for failing to take the sort of chance that Thea has by running away with Loevborg (Ibsen 294). This conversation sets in motion a streak of cruelty on Hedda's part that ultimately results in both Loevborg's death and her own. Hedda's suicide is a reaction to the horror of knowing someone else has power over her for the foreseeable future. As she says to Brack just before shooting herself, "From now on, you've got your hold over me...I'm in your power. Dependent on your will, and your demands. Not free. Still not free! No. I couldn't bear that. No" (Ibsen 332).

While Ibsen's plays are the work of a man writing within European culture in the late nineteenth century, the truths they lay bare remain powerful tools for change. Both *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* manage to generate empathy for their main characters, allowing audiences to imaginatively identify with characters who are mainly narcissistic and operate from within an ethics of disgust, and ones who are compassionate and empathetic and embody an ethics of attachment. In doing so, these plays challenge us to look beyond our own narcissism and self-centered behaviors as they present us with new ways of seeing and understanding the world. In this sense, rather than act as a barrier, the antiquated language and cultural situations found in the two works may—because of their unfamiliarity to twenty-first century Americans—further encourage empathy by asking audiences to look beyond their received notions of these elements as well. Ibsen's plays encourage us to reject narcissism and expose the ethical problems embedded in prevailing ideology. As empathy

for those unlike oneself becomes important in new ways, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* are as relevant as they have ever been.

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