

The Falk Villa: The Haunted Bird Cage

In *Hedda Gabler*, the action takes place solely in Hedda and Jørgen Tesman's new home, the Falk Villa. Although the house interior is standard in Ibsen's prose plays, the text seems to indicate that there is something unique about the Falk Villa. If we take a closer look at the villa's name, its description, and its meaning for the play's characters, we see definite connections with two earlier Ibsen plays—*Gengangere* and *Kjærlighedens Komedie*—and their themes, respectively, of haunting ghosts and a poetic spirit confined in a mundane world.

It has been pointed out that General Gabler's ghost haunts the Tesman home. There have even been productions in which the general is dressed in white and haunts the characters by following them across the stage. I suggest that the fact that the Tesman home is the "Falk Villa" makes it haunted by more ghosts than General Gabler's. Ibsen very rarely uses the same name twice. His use of the name Falk indicates a clear connection with the poet Falk in *Love's Comedy*. Falk, like a falcon, a wild bird of prey, has a wild and free spirit and he speaks of soaring on his poetic wings high into the air, on into freedom. Falk's characteristics are similar to Hedda's, especially when we consider that in his notes for the play, Ibsen writes: "Hos Hedda ligger dyb poesi på bunden" (*Samlede Verker* 11: 501). [Within Hedda lies deep poetry at the base.] Falk's high ideals and lofty thinking make him deride the society that surrounds him. Similarly, Hedda's ideals and disdain for her surroundings make her a misfit in the world of the Tesmans. While Hedda would seem to be a fit inhabitant of "Falcon House," she finds that the villa is meant to be a nest for motherhood and a cage to tame and train her. But

although she is held captive, her memories of the past cannot be forgotten and they involuntarily haunt her.

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard's "A" describes the process of recollection as an essential part of living aesthetically and a method of transforming a past experience from a memory into a recollection. It is as if a person is reliving the experience in a new way. "A" suggests a connection between a negative recollection and the haunting of a ghost:

Nyder man frisk væk indtil det Sidste, tager man bestandig det Høieste med, som Nydelsen kan give, saa vil man hverken være istand til at erindre eller til at glemme. Man har da nemlig intet Andet at erindre end en Overmæthed, som man kun ønsker at glemme, men som nu plager med en ufrivillig Erindring (270-271).

If one enjoys indiscriminately to the very end, if one continually takes the utmost that enjoyment can give, one will be unable either to recollect or to forget. That is, one has nothing else to recollect than a satiation that one only wishes to forget but that now torments with an involuntary recollection (Hong 293).

Losing the ability to forget or recollect comes from continually re-living the same experience, which results in a person becoming haunted by involuntary recollections. Kierkegaard's notion sheds light on the "ghosts" that haunt the Falk Villa in Hedda Gabler, including those from *Love's Comedy*.

As we learn progressively about the past of the Falk Villa, the house becomes a kind of character in the play, a physical, tactile presence. Like Rosenvold, Mrs. Alving's home in *Gengangere*, the villa is haunted by its prior inhabitants. Although ghosts are not explicitly spoken of in *Hedda Gabler*, their presence is suggested right from the beginning of the play. Ibsen's scene directions indicate "a portrait of a handsome, elderly man in a general's uniform" hanging on the wall, and as the curtain rises, the audience is immediately made aware of General Gabler's presence (Fjelde, *The Major Prose Plays*, 695). In scene one, as Aunt Julle speaks to Berte and Tesman, she refers to Hedda as

“General Gabler’s daughter” and to Tesman as “Joachim’s son.” In this way, both Hedda and Tesman are introduced as embodiments of the ghosts of their fathers. This “introduction” to Hedda and Tesman suggests that *Hedda Gabler* draws on the theme of *Gengangere*: the children cannot escape their parental inheritance. Just as Oswald and Regina of *Gengangere* are haunted by the ghosts of Captain Alving and Johanna, Tesman and Hedda are haunted by their fathers. And here, as in *Gengangere*, the inheritance is all encompassing:

Men jeg tror næsten, vi er gengangere allesammen, pastor Manders. Det er ikke bare det, vi har arvet fra far og mor, som går igen i os. Det er alleslags gamle afdøde meninger og alskens gammel afdød tro og sligt noget. Det er ikke levende i os; men det sidder i alligevel og vi kan ikke bli' det kvit. Bare jeg tar en avis og læser i, er det ligesom jeg så gengangere smyge imellem linjerne. Der må leve gengangere hele landet udover. Der må være så tykt af dem som sand, synes jeg (SV 9: 92).

But I almost believe we *are* ghosts, all of us, Pastor. It’s not only what we inherit from our fathers and mothers that keeps on returning in us. It’s all kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs, that sort of thing. They aren’t alive in us; but they hang on all the same, and we can’t get rid of them. I just have to pick up a newspaper, and it’s as if I could see the ghosts slipping between the lines. They must be haunting our whole country, ghosts everywhere – so many and thick, they’re like grains of sand” (Fjelde 238).

When Tesman and Hedda move into the villa they bring with them their own ghosts of dead doctrines, opinions, and beliefs into a Falk Villa that is already haunted before their arrival. The villa takes its name from the previous owners of the villa, the late Mr. and Mrs. Falk. In Act II Hedda and Brack note that Mrs. Falk’s ghost is still lingering and that they can still smell the perfume of old lavender, a reminder of dead convention. We learn that Mr. Falk was a member of parliament. His position of power and influence to create laws and regulations is left behind like that of dead doctrines. In the Falk Villa, these doctrines are now embodied in Judge Brack (hypocritically) and

Aunt Julle. Their notions of respectability serve as the bars of Hedda's cage to keep her confined in her bird nest of motherhood.

What takes place inside the Falk Villa in *Hedda Gabler* seems a continuation of the action of *Love's Comedy*. Many of Hedda's thoughts and actions seem to be a recollected version of those of both Falk and Svanhild. While some scholars have suggested a similarity between Hedda and Svanhild, I suggest that the character of Hedda is also haunted by Falk. While Svanhild's spirit can be seen in Hedda's outer struggle with society's demands, Falk's spirit haunts Hedda's inner artistic and poetic side. Major themes of *Love's Comedy* are the conflict between the ideal of love and the institution of marriage and the conflict between marriage and the artistic life. These two conflicts are so much a part of the action of *Hedda Gabler* that it is as if Falk's free, artistic, and poetic spirit lives on in the villa within Hedda. Hedda's marriage was an economic decision. She married Tesman because her "time was up" and she had no better offers. She describes marriage as an endless train trip where one must be forever and always with the same person. In *Love's Comedy*, Falk declares that his goal is to fight against societal restrictions that put an end to love and poetry and especially against the lie that marriage and love are irrevocably joined.

O ja – jeg ved, der drives jo et Døgn –
Koketteri med Huslighedens Tanke;
Det er et Rodskud af den store Løgn,
Der gror i Højden, lig en Humleranke.
Jeg tar ærbødig Hatten af, min Frue,
For «Balheltinden»; hun er Skjønheds Barn, -
Og Idealet spænder gyldne Garn
I Ballets Sal, men knapt i Ammens Stue. (SV 4: 206).

Oh yes...I know that people like to flirt
with the idea of domesticity;
another rank growth, rooting in the lie,

shooting up like a beanstalk to the sky.
I take my hat off to the ballroom belle,
dear madam; she's a beau-ideal of beauty;...
and the embodiment of an ideal
is worth a bushel of domestic duty! (McFarlane, *The Oxford Ibsen*, 160).

Here Falk praises the ballroom belle—what Hedda was in her dancing days—and declares that this image of woman is much more beautiful and full of love than the husfru burdened with domestic duty. Yet when Falk pursues a relationship with Svanhild, she tells him that he is like two different people who cannot agree. Falk responds:

Grunden? Jo, fordi jeg hader
At gaa omkring med frækt udringet Sjæl,
Som Godtfolks Kjærlighed i alle Gader, -
At gaa omkring med blottet Hjertevarme,
Som unge Kvinder gaar med nøgne Arme! (SV 4: 162).

Why? Because I hate
to wear my soul indecently exposed,
like courting couples who parade their love
in every street, to show my naked heart
like a young lady with uncovered arms! (McFarlane 117).

Falk's image of a young lady with uncovered arms haunts Hedda's statement about not wanting others to see her legs if she were to step out of the marriage train, the wish to keep herself covered, prevent a scandal, and maintaining control over her emotions. Falk explains that his dual appearance results from the conflict between love and the potential loss of his poetic ability:

Jeg staar som Æslet, snørt i Valgets Baand;
Tilvenstre har jeg Kjød, tilhøire Aand;
Hvad var vel visest her at vælge først. (SV 4: 152).

I'm like a donkey in the fable;
I'm paralyzed between two alternatives.
Flesh on the one hand; on the other spirit;
Which one would it be wisest to choose first? (McFarlane 107).

In a purely Kierkegaardian fashion, Falk describes his choice between flesh or spirit. If he chooses the love relationship, his ability to write poetry will disappear. Falk's struggle with this either/or choice runs as a theme through *Love's Comedy* and, paradoxically, is a struggle that Falk needs in order to pursue his art of writing. He describes the need to feel pain and suffering in order to gain creativity:

Skaff mig, om blot en Maanedstid paa Borg,
En Kval, en knusende, en Kjæmpesorg,
Saa skal jeg synge Livets Jubel ud. (SV 4: 150).

Give me – if only for a month loan,
a harrowing, overwhelming, crushing sorrow,
and all my poems would palpitate with joy. (McFarlane 106).

We see Hedda re-experiencing Falk's conflict in her relationship with Ejlert Løvborg. Although Ejlert believes that Hedda's reason for breaking off the relationship is her cowardice in submitting to her sexual desires, the real reason is her desire to live poetically, or aesthetically, like Falk. Hedda explains that her decision to break off the relationship came when there was a danger that "reality" would come into the relationship. The problem with reality in a relationship is that if it is deeply felt, it becomes unforgettable. This reality suggests repetition, a forward looking view that belongs to Kierkegaard's "ethical" stage of life. Repetition would mean the forfeit of the ability to live freely and poetically and the forfeit, also, of control over forgetting and recollecting. If Hedda were to give into love, she would lose her ideal image of love and risk being brought down by a scandal that would destroy her place in society. Instead of accepting intimacy, Hedda maintains her self-control, strength, and independence by threatening Ejlert and chasing him away. The loss of their relationship adds to Hedda's artistic inner pain, but she is unable either to forget or recollect their relationship.

At the end of *Love's Comedy*, Falk declares that he has no home and we are left with the impression that he will now become a wandering poetic soul. As he leaves he says that he will give up "recollection" for "remembering," pursue his ideals, and become a poet of action. By giving up recollection, he means that he will move into the ethical stage of life, and through his action of arranging for Svanhild and Guldstad's marriage of convenience he essentially creates a home for Svanhild. This is his own "Falk Villa" that he promises to return, "pollen-laden, back to the hive and his undying queen" (McFarlane 200). The "queen" can be applied to Hedda as well as to Svanhild. And in fact, Falk's name and spirit return after the honeymoon of a second marriage of convenience which is the beginning of *Hedda Gabler*. Yet here, Falk's Villa becomes a nest of motherhood and an ethical cage that Hedda had no intention to be a part of, a cage that restricts her from controlling her own life. She attempts to escape from her cage through memories of her younger days, but she is unsuccessful in limiting her thoughts of the past and is therefore unable to live in the present or the future. She becomes haunted by involuntary recollections that combine with the ghosts of the Falk villa to keep her locked in the cage. The unwanted pregnancy, the repugnant husband, and the historical pressure of General Gabler do battle with the poetic spirit of Falk. When Hedda realizes that she will never escape from the battles, restrictions, and demands of her cage, she refuses to move into the ethical stage of life. But through her final act of suicide, she becomes a poet of action and escapes the ghosts of the Falk Villa.

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