Desperate Acts: Women and Suicide on the Fin-De-Siècle Scandinavian Stage

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Desperate Acts:
Women and Suicide on the Fin-de-Siècle Scandinavian Stage

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A Thesis in the Field of Dramatic Arts
For the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the treatment of suicide in three pivotal dramatic works of the same era – Victoria Benedictsson’s *Den bergtagna*, Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, and Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*. The study pays particular attention to the female protagonists, who each commit suicide at the conclusion of the narratives, and how their depiction might inform our understanding of gender issues and independence in nineteenth century Scandinavia. Particular weight is placed on an analysis of Benedictsson’s play, which was written in 1888 and has not been widely studied in the United States.

The following discourse examines the central male-female relationship in the plays and questions how the perspective of the female author differs from that of her male counterparts regarding the suicide of the principal character, uniquely articulating the despair that leads to utter self-destruction. Moreover, the function of suicide in each work is scrutinized in order to reflect a disparate conception of changing women’s roles and subsequent challenges.

I test the hypothesis that the male-female relationships in these plays bring to light the turn-of-the-century battle over what modern love is or how it is perceived. The façade of modernity gives the impression of a woman’s development of her essential self and sexuality; in reality, the woman must still conform to an ideal established by men. Benedictsson singularly treats her central character’s suicide as an intrepid act through which femininity is preserved. Benedictsson’s heroine alone acknowledges her failure to thrive in an environment that labels the new woman as, essentially, a new kind of man.
Dedication

This piece is dedicated to Shannon, my sister-in-law, who so effectively pursued her own destruction as I labored to find the exact meaning of this piece. With charm and aplomb, she hid unspeakable anguish behind a surfeit of words. I need also recognize her husband, George, who struggled with all his heart and against all odds to help Shannon achieve happiness. This work is also dedicated to George and Shannon’s daughter and my goddaughter, Giovanna Marie, in the hopes that she may find a way to use art as a mechanism for managing those moments in life when one must cope with inevitable—and seemingly insurmountable—loneliness and despair.

In memory of Shannon Johnson Snyder

02 April 1974- 27 February 2016
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge Will Severin, my husband, for his encouragement and support in every way imaginable and some beyond conception. You are an amazing partner in work and art, in love, and in life.

And then there is Dan, Dante, and especially Tereza Andersson who so enthusiastically joined me on my Copenhagen excursion, traipsing around Vestre Kierkegaard looking for Ernst Ahlgren’s final resting place (technically, Dan found it). It was Tereza who turned me on to my subject, helping me access materials, and fostering my enormous respect and very rudimentary understanding of the Swedish language.

Agnes Broomé, my most esteemed Thesis Director, along with Stephen Mitchell—I cannot begin to thank you enough. Please let it suffice to say that the knowledge and academic excellence that enveloped me during the manifestation of this thesis are beyond words, quantification, or gratitude. Agnes, your time and the access to your expertise can never be repaid. Your native proficiency with both English and Swedish was an indispensable boon. Talaya Delaney, I am very much in awe of and so appreciative of your equal measures of serenity and persistence, attention to detail, and your almost preternatural ability to hone in on the crux of the uncharted query. Denise Grey Snyder offered so much in the way of practical guidance. And I only learned of the Harvard Extension School through her.

Special recognition goes to Dr. Selma Nemer whose counsel and insights into the complexities of human nature unlocked my own emotional and intellectual obstructions,
while helping me understand Victoria Benedictsson’s dire need to create, to write, to define her own life.

Friends and family, my mother Lorraine Hansen, Dr. Patricia and Bill Snyder, cousin Pat Moore Theis, brother Harold V. Hansen, and Annie Delano (who was also marched around Copenhagen), thank you for your patience and support, while I buried myself alive in this work.
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Chapter I
Introduction

Playwrights Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg presented their generation with iconic heroines that continue to be investigated for their provocative and divisive legacies more than a century after the characters debuted on the Scandinavian stage. Whether for the strength of her idiosyncratic persona, her unconventional moral fiber, her ability to evoke disdain or empathy from the viewer, or to serve as an envoy of her creator’s contempt for the female gender, the namesakes of plays such as *Hedda Gabler* and *Fröken Julie (Miss Julie)* fascinated audiences and critics in the late eighteen hundreds and resonate into the present. The works of Ibsen and Strindberg have entered the canon of theatre far beyond Scandinavia and the two remain pioneering voices for naturalist drama and in the discussion of changing women’s roles at the turn of the century. Though several Scandinavian female playwrights of the same era had their work published and received theatrical production, none achieved similar lasting and international renown. This historical oversight is peculiar considering the emphasis placed on sexuality, suffrage, and gender equality in “The Morality Debate” and “The Woman Question” (also referred to as “The Woman Problem”), principal social issues that saturated the literature, art, and academic minds of fin-de-siècle Norway, Denmark and Sweden.¹

Women were indeed writing during this period of *sedlighetsfejd*, the publicly waged morality feud that challenged, for example, double standards and male dominance in marital and sexual relations, and the lack of vocational or other means of personal
fulfillment for women outside of their domestic situations. Among the female authors of the period was the Swedish novelist and playwright, Victoria Benedictsson. Benedictsson’s entire literary career spanned less than a decade, ending abruptly with her self-inflicted death in 1888. However, during that time Benedictsson’s work was circulating and receiving critical attention concurrently with Ibsen and Strindberg. She is esteemed as a principal contributor to Scandinavia’s Modern Breakthrough. She is also one of Sweden’s most highly regarded authors of the 1880s—second only to Strindberg.²

Victoria Benedictsson repeatedly expressed her abhorrence of gender limitations and rejection of even contemporary feminist notions of sexual equality.³ Nonetheless, her reply to “The Woman Question” has been largely overlooked, particularly in the non-Nordic countries.⁴ Her play, Den bergtagna,⁵ though not published until 1890—and then only with considerable revisions by collaborator Axel Lundegård—prefigures Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler and Strindberg’s Fröken Julie, hereinafter referred to by the English title, Miss Julie. Like Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie, Den bergtagna features a woman who enfranchises herself with her suicide when she perceives the hopelessness of her life.

There is a conspicuous dichotomy in Hedda Gabler, Miss Julie, and Den bergtagna between the principal females and their male counterparts, who are defined by their occupation, which exposes the women’s creative and vocational irrelevance in society. In each of the plays, romantic union is the woman’s most accessible means of self-valuation. And when their relationships fail, or come to an impasse of volition, the women consummate self-destruction. This is a construct of the contemporary mythology: suicide is an instrument of artistic expression, a substitute for a woman’s inability to actualize her potential as something other than wife, lover, or mother in society. By
casting the male lover as the embodiment of the creator and relegating the female protagonist to a model for the work of art, Benedictsson is particularly effective in representing amorous attachment as a surrogate for a woman’s artistic drive. The man mirrors her exiguous outlets for creativity, offering the sexual liaison as her operative platform. In contrast, the uniquely feminine distress call sounded by Den bertagna’s heroine, Louise, reflects Hedda and Julie’s frantic struggle to articulate their escalating disquietude. From these three plays, a new archetype is born: the unfulfilled woman, who realizes her ineffectual state, the impossibility of liberation from—or evolution within—her present environment, and elects voluntary death rather than to endure the consequential agony.

Several scholars suggest that Benedictsson and her sudden demise in 1888 inspired Ibsen and Strindberg’s subsequent dramatic works, specifically Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie. Critics then and since have challenged the legitimacy of Hedda and Julie’s suicides, casting their qualms as to whether Hedda and Julie had the emotional presence of mind to carry out such a deliberate act of self-immolation. Though Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie were written within two years of Den bertagna, with common themes, amidst the same swirling intellectual discourse, the Ibsen and Strindberg plays have yet to be examined alongside Benedictsson’s less conspicuous opus. A comparative evaluation grants access to a more comprehensive appreciation of Hedda and Julie’s path to their (mostly private) insurrection and death.

What follows in this thesis is an exploration of the mutual qualities and circumstances that make Hedda, Julie, and Louise compatriots, characteristics that originate with and then eclipse geography. Their childhoods, their parentage and lack
thereof, and the limited vocational opportunities available to their particular gender and class are all shared attributes. Additionally, each woman must cope with a sense of living in a place inherently foreign to her. Such are the elements that make up their introductory profile. Further complicating their disadvantaged state is the pervasive aura of social change taking place in Scandinavia at the turn of the century. Shifting gender ideals and the advent—or at least the outward show—of newfound liberties awaken a sense of new prospects for the women, but with still nebulous or nonexistent direction as to how such sovereignty may be secured and enjoyed.

The writers and dramatists of The Modern Breakthrough, Ibsen and Strindberg among the most iconic, delved into the vicissitude that attended the gender parity debate. Victoria Benedictsson, unlike her male colleagues, was subject to the real life trials and tribulations of being a woman inhabiting and working through this cultural revolution. She conspicuously wove into her narratives the details of her recurrent efforts to forge her own identity as a woman, an artist, and a lover. Ultimately, she sought to make herself a martyr of her empowering cause by taking her own life, thereby providing an additional layer of authenticity and perspective by which to understand the fictional casualties of the era, namely Hedda, Julie, and Louise.

As a de facto constituent of The Woman Problem, this study puts special emphasis on Victoria Benedictsson and her autobiographical material. Her diary, *Stora Boken (The Great Book)*, lends insight into her emotional state and her complex relationship with Georg Brandes, hallowed literary critic and proselytizer of The Modern Breakthrough. Her personal writing also forms the basis of *Den bergtagna*, in which Benedictsson reinvents herself as Louise, patently drawing upon her own experiences to
manage and appraise her private dilemmas, and work out an opposite ending for her existence.

Benedictsson borrowed details of her life and betrayed the confidences of intimate acquaintances, a practice that was a trademark and tool of the naturalists. This thesis shows how Ibsen and Strindberg also utilized this tactic in their intricate portrayals of their ill-fated heroines. In Ibsen and Strindberg’s case, the male playwrights manipulated their insecurities and surreptitiously invested Hedda and Julie with their most factious and antisocial qualities, using their female protagonists to die by proxy, purging themselves of their unwanted traits.

Along with the principles of naturalism, the ambient social theories and emerging philosophies of the fin-de-siècle era are considered in this study in service to a timely understanding of the plays and their characters. Friedrich Nietzsche’s provocative ideas, brought to the forefront of academic discussion by Georg Brandes, found their way into the thought processes of all three playwrights and are at times voiced by and embodied in the various characters, further demonstrating the interrelation of the plays and their creators. Émile Durkheim’s correlations between suicide and modernity are particularly relevant to Hedda, Julie, Louise, and Victoria Benedictsson’s sense of alienation. More recent psychological surveys and philosophical conceptions provide a retrospective, multifaceted comprehension of the suicidal mind.

Ibsen and Strindberg were fortunate enough to have their plays Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie published in their lifetime, the latter appended with an infamous Preface in an effort to ensure a specific reading of the playwright’s intentions. Den bergtagna, on the other hand, was not made available to the public until two years after Benedictsson’s
death. Axel Lundegård, Benedictsson’s erstwhile collaborator, confidante, and the posthumous handler of her literary works, issued versions of *Den bergtagna* that significantly alter, this thesis posits, the original author’s objectives. Subsequent editions by Clare Bayley and Verne Moberg rely on translations of the Lundegård texts. The original manuscripts, as printed by Atrium Förlag in 2008, of both the dramatic version and the specifically referenced prose draft as penned by Benedictsson aid immeasurably in uncovering the motivation, meaning, and desired effect of her nuanced and carefully worded compositions.

At the same time, close readings of the aforementioned plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Benedictsson, especially when considered collectively, invite an analysis of the hidden implications, obscured purposes, and latent messages to be found within all three plays. Ergo, the works are wrested from the clutches of their respective dramatists, offering auditors the possibility of an interpretation that heightens realism, giving dimension and animation to the characters that the confines of a single perspective—even Ibsen, Strindberg, or Benedictsson’s—may not afford.

From this multi-layered approach, Hedda, Julie, and Louise emerge as paradigms of a new breed of artist, desperately trying to communicate their unspeakable pain. With her complicated and disparate ideas of femininity and defiant approach to sexuality, each woman eventually forges a monument to her insufferable circumstances by the only means and material she perceives to be at hand in her time and place: the abolition of her life.
Chapter II

Miss Julie, Hedda Gabler, and Den Bergtagna’s Louise Strandberg: Three
Women on a Parallel Path to Destruction

In comparing Miss Julie, Hedda Gabler, and Den Bergtagna, patterns of behavior, neurosis, and correlative backgrounds coalesce. The women’s shared characteristics and experiences suggest that the heroines are more than aberrations. The radical behavior that compels the dramas moves beyond coincidence; Julie, Hedda, and Louise are three examples of an emerging female type, reacting to and emanating from their environs. The courses of their lives never merge and yet the protagonists eventually meet, but only after the curtain falls. The mounting discontent rendered in the male-female relationships cannot be reconciled within the extant social structure of the dramas. Their suicides serve as declarations of defiance, a final stand in the face of overwhelming forces outside of the heroines’ control.

Examined discretely, critics can and have attributed Julie’s and Hedda’s undoing to their idiosyncratic history and flaws. Joan Templeton issues an in-depth compilation of those who label Hedda as an unrealistic deviation from her peers (204-20). In his notorious Preface, Strindberg methodically and scrupulously lists the various peculiarities that drove Julie to suicide. While he allows for the establishment of her “type,” the only confederacy he authorizes is that of the reprobate, degenerate, would-be-male anathema (52-5). However, an aggregate assessment of the three contemporary heroines—penned
within three years of each other, all Scandinavian in origin—gives the impression of women operating with collective needs against mutual adversity.

Once the link is ascertained, the specific intentions of the playwrights surface. The dramas tender correlated scenarios of a modern epidemic, but when exhibited together and with Benedictsson’s Den bergtagna, each lends a distinct approach to a woman’s perception of her intolerable conditions. The three-way evaluation works to establish each playwright’s unique method of chronicling the gender and morality feud and the detrimental female condition in Scandinavia at the turn of the century. The rudiments of this crisis are represented through Hedda, Julie, and Louise’s corresponding challenges; their un-shepherded situation in a setting foreign to them, their irrelevance in the workforce, their inexperience with regards to the exigencies of womanhood, and their resistance to abide by the directives of the opposite sex all measure up to a formula for their annihilation, toward which Hedda and Julie—but not Den bergtagna’s Louise with her moment of revelation and premeditated action—seem to proceed with oblivion.

Displacement and the Absence of the Mother

What is made promptly apparent to the plays’ audiences is that all three women are in an environment that is not entirely familiar to them. The action of Miss Julie takes place in the servants’ quarters, the underworld of the aristocratic estate; Hedda is in her new marital home; Louise is in France, hundreds of miles from her native land in provincial Sweden. The settings are, technically, the residences of the respective heroines. And yet for various reasons, each woman is a stranger, a kind of alien, prompting an investigation into the link between this ostracism and the relative female
condition of turn-of-the-century Northern Europe, a plight regularly noted in academic research (Garton 106; Holm 6; Holtan 95; Carlson 63).

Even before Hedda makes her first entrance, her husband, his aunt, and the housekeeper have already discussed the many arrangements made, with the assistance of Judge Brack, for Hedda’s sake. The placement of furniture and flowers, the opening of windows, even the acquisition of the residence and its contents are all made in the spirit of making Hedda feel welcomed and at home. However, Hedda’s introductory comments disparage every decision carried out without her input (HG 23-6). According to Hedda, her new husband, Tesman, harbors the erroneous notion that she wanted the house. She admits to the family friend, Brack, that she initially admired the property in an awkward moment in order to make conversation with Tesman and afterward maintained her fondness for the villa expressly to preserve their tenuous connection. Their alliance is, therefore, predicated upon this domestic fallacy (115-9). This inside information provides context for Hedda’s reluctance to embrace her new surroundings; when Tesman tells Hedda, “…now you belong to the family,” her meaning is imbued with a definite lack of enthusiasm when she responds, “H’m – I am not perfectly sure” (41-2).

Julie cannot find a hospitable place, either upstairs in her domain or with the servants. She does not join her father on his familial visit because she is embarrassed by the recent termination of her engagement, fearing ostracism from her relatives and social circle (MJ 63). While asleep upstairs in her aristocratic bed, Julie dreams of climbing a tall pillar and can find “no peace…no rest” until she falls, but she seems incapable of making the leap (71). In the narrative, however, Julie seeks diversion and camaraderie down below in the abode of her father’s valet, Jean, which he shares with Kristine, the
cook. When she has finally made her descent, physically and socially, she wishes she had the wings to rise again (MJ 94). Perceiving antagonism from the servants, she retreats into Jean’s bedroom. She moves from one place to another until she has exhausted every prospective refuge.

For Louise, the rift exists not only in the distance from her home in Sweden, but within it. Den bergtagna stands apart from Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie when an entire act, however brief, transpires with Louise in her primary residence in rural Sweden. In a scene that evokes Hedda’s reception at the new Tesman household, Lundegård’s adaptation and Moberg’s corresponding translation have Louise barely acknowledging her aunt and the throng of well-wishers bringing bouquets and birthday greetings. She accounts for her aloof behavior by explaining, “I feel like a stranger, homeless here in my own home” (Spellbound 113, see also 103-14; Ahlgren 114-27). Benedictsson’s original rendition of the homecoming excludes the visitors, focusing instead on Louise’s malaise. She is disoriented by the weather and can’t even say for certain what day of the week it is. The housekeeper, Botilda, ponders, “I don’t know what has become of her since she returned from wretched Paris. She is not herself.” ‘Jag vet inte vad det går åt henne sedan hon kom från det olyckliga Paris. Hon är sig inte själv lik.’ (Db 135). 11 In her essay, “Spellbound and the Ballad,” Holm sums up Louise’s attempted escape from Paris and the object of her affection, Gustav Alland: “She takes her leave, but in both the novella and the drama the liberation fails. She no longer belongs at home” (6).

Estrangement from one’s intrinsic and/or indigenous environment, its corresponding social norms and the psychological balance such connection affords is a source of suicidal tendencies observed by Émile Durkheim, eminent sociologist of the
fin-de-siècle period, in his 1897 sociological study *Suicide* (249; Holtan 95). Expounding upon the self-destructive psyche, Durkheim may well explain the collective state of mind of all three heroines in the plays being investigated:

Social man\(^{12}\) necessarily presupposes a society which he expresses. If this dissolves, if we no longer feel it in existence and action about and above us, whatever is social in us is deprived of all objective foundation. All that remains is an artificial combination of illusory images, a phantasmagoria vanishing at the least reflection; that is, nothing which can be a goal for our action. Yet this social man is the essence of civilized man; he is the masterpiece of existence. Thus we are bereft of reasons for existence; for the only life to which we could cling no longer corresponds to anything actual; the only existence still based on reality no longer meets our needs. Because we have been initiated into a higher existence, the one which satisfies an animal or a child can satisfy us no more and the other itself fades and leaves us helpless. So there is nothing more for our efforts to lay hold of, and we feel them lose themselves in emptiness… No proof is needed that in such a state of confusion the least cause of discouragement may easily give birth to desperate resolutions. If life is not worth the trouble of being lived, everything becomes a pretext to rid ourselves of it. (213)

Durkheim elaborates on the connection the despondent individual may have to her environment when he asserts, “…individuals share too deeply in the life of society for it to be diseased without their suffering infection. What it suffers, they necessarily suffer” (213-214). Durkheim’s insights are a timely reflection on a dynamic period for Western civilization, during which long-neglected notions of civic iniquity were being tried in the theatres, journals, and lecture halls throughout Europe—Sweden, Norway, and Denmark being no exception. Hedda, Julie, and Louise are all confined to an ailing world, a disintegrating patriarchal order, which has communicated its malady to its constituents.

The sense of alienation transcends perceptible space. If fin-de-siècle Scandinavian contemporary society is, as Ibsen himself remarks in notes for *A Doll’s House*, “exclusively masculine” then woman is necessarily estranged (*Ibsen’s Workshop* 91;
Lowenthal 152-155). Firstly, she is not a man, and therefore immediately disempowered. And then, if she tries to live the life of a man, she risks disaffection from her own gender and traditional way of life. Such is the predicament of the heroine that critics have classified as “typical” of her era, as F.L. Lucas has designated Hedda (221).

Hedda, Julie, and Louise are at sea, heading into uncharted territory. To make matters worse, there is a conspicuous lack of female precedent for their voyage. Even if there existed asylum from their abject circumstances, they would not know how to locate it. Hedda’s mother is never mentioned and Hedda’s only parental figure is General Gabler, deceased but still unmistakably influential, omnipresent in the prominently displayed portrait, in his lethal weapons, and in the memories of those who credit him with Hedda’s “tremendously particular” nature (HG 8, 11, 92).

The same could be said for Julie’s father, who is treated as a deity by the staff of the Count’s estate and whose boots are always at hand, clearly visible, in anticipation of a polishing. In fact, Jean makes his first entrance carrying them, as if branded by his subservience to the Count. He instills fear, issuing commands upon which hang the livelihood of the servants. Kristine, the manor cook and Jean’s intended, determines that she “cannot respect the people we work for” when she learns of Jean and Julie’s tryst (MJ 92). Her disgust for Julie’s misconduct extends to Julie’s father, as if the daughter is but a branch of a larger divinity. Kristine sees her position in the household as not just a source of income, but as a standard by which to measure her lowliness and practice veneration. “If they’re no better, what do we have to strive for to better ourselves,” Kristine broods (MJ 92). Unable to maintain reverence, the social structure— the religion— falls apart.
Julie’s mother set a course for insurgency, but died without leaving any sort of map to assist her daughter on the path to sustainable independence from men. Julie promised her mother that she would “never be a slave to any man” (86). Now adrift and without instruction, she cannot fathom how to keep her oath. Julie decrees, “I don’t believe in anything anymore” (97-8), in order to express her world-weariness and universal misgivings.

Louise shares her family history with Alland, revealing that her parents are both deceased, her sister in a mental hospital, her brother married and travelling. Her closest relation is to her foster brother, Viggo, but he seems perpetually occupied by his own burgeoning career and romance. Louise has formed a close friendship with Erna, an artist who has cared for Louise throughout her incapacitating bout of typhus in Paris. It is Erna who is presented as the paradigm of the modern woman. A successful artist, financially independent, sexually liberated, Erna is a mother figure to her sister, Fanny, whom she refers to as “mitt hjärtebarn”, my heart – or spiritual—child (Db 86). Erna displays the maternal penchant for sheltering her child from a life of anguish and painful ordeals akin to those she herself has experienced on the path to emancipation. “Oh, when I think that Fanny could go through the same thing I did, it makes me crazy,” ‘När jag tänker på att Fanny skulle kunna få gå igenom det samma som jag, så kan jag bli aldeles tokig,’ she declares (87). Erna tries to warn Louise from heading down a similar road to heartache, but Erna’s discovery of the affair with Alland happens too late; he has already cast his spell and hypnotized Louise (153; Moberg, Spellbound 74). Erna exists as the feminine embodiment of the guide and mentor in this contemporary era, a character conspicuously absent from the Ibsen and Strindberg plays. Furthermore, she is Louise’s counterpart and
foil: hale and hearty, gregarious, self-possessed, a skilled craftswoman, and willing to terminate a destructive liaison— everything Louise is not. This dichotomy illustrates the divergence of fate; had either Louise’s fundamental constitution or her exploits been different, her destiny would have been altered, for better or for worse. Though Erna epitomizes the mother figure missing from *Miss Julie* and *Hedda Gabler*, her chief guidance evinces itself in a series of exercises in what-not-to-do. Her rapport with boyfriend Henrik is characterized as a dubious bond wracked with petty spitefulness, jealousy, and incessant quarrelling (*Db* 84-90). With regards to her former liaison with Alland, Erna copes with the dissolution by refusing to see him and only reluctantly disclosing their past alliance. She cautions Louise by inventing a “best friend” ‘bästa vän’ scenario: “He made her life hell, and then he threw her away like a rag.” ‘Han gjorde henne ett helvete, och så slängde han henne bort som en trasa’ (116). Erna has found a way to hold her head up in a society where affairs of the heart are transitory and insubstantial, but happiness still eludes her. Louise elects, mindfully or intuitively, not to follow her friend’s advice. She does, however, follow in Erna’s footsteps by getting romantically involved with Alland. And then she once again parts ways with Erna by pursuing a divergent resolution to the idolatrous plague known as Gustav Alland.

Hedda, Julie, and Louise have all lost their mothers. Erna acts as a kind of governess in *Den bergtagna*, but her counsel does not provide a sanctuary from the assailment of a shifting, foreign, and at times downright inhospitable gender climate. Nor does Erna serve as a sufficient damper for the escalating tensions within the woman in a state of flux.
Dearth of Vocation and Masculine Tendencies

Hedda and Julie are related by their similar upbringing. They were raised, to some extent, androgynously, insofar as they were accorded many of the liberties and opportunities traditionally reserved for males in 19th century Scandinavia. *Den bergtagna*’s Louise is not described in this way; the effect is that the character is more ambiguous. However, this personal background is not supplanted with another backstory. In the *Spellbound* novella as translated by Moberg, Louise defies the naturalistic practice of providing subtext for one’s nature:

> My earlier history is not important here. It could explain the development of my character, but then I would have to include too many persons and events. What is relevant for me is only to show why the world of the living is not my own.

> I'm not defending my life; I'm defending my death. (2)

> Min tidigare historia hör icke hit. Den skulle kunna förklara utvecklingen av min karaktär, men då skulle jag få ta för många personer och händelser med. Vad det gäller för mig är endast visa varför de levandes värld icke är min.

> Jag försvarar icke mitt liv; jag försvarar min död. (Db 24)

Louise, Hedda, and Julie, like Benedictsson herself, are all contemporary women in the throes of anguish and inner turmoil, seeking self-realization amid an atmosphere with an increasingly complicated standard of womanhood, a quandary recognized by scholars of Scandinavian literature, such as Lynn Wilkinson and Birgitta Thompson (“Feminism” 56-7; Thompson 140-1). Individually, the disconsolate heroines come to the same conclusion: the world of the living is no place for them. Strindberg professes to have justified Miss Julie’s suicide in his Preface (*MJ* 52), but what is missing from his
list of “multiplicity of motives” is a deficit that all three of the heroines share: the lack of meaningful industry.

Ross Shideler and Leonardo Lisi both call attention to the male-female dynamic that extends beyond the carnal liaison in *Miss Julie*. Shideler reminds us that Jean is able to regain a sense of balance by returning to his job as valet, whereas “Julie has nowhere to go” (68). Lisi outlines the many boundaries that separate Jean and Julie, some social, others gender-related, and points to Julie’s continuous but vain efforts to reach a state of egalitarianism and solidarity (251-5). Julie’s struggle is redolent of Victoria Benedictsson’s own unrelenting conflict, which as Thompson and Camilla Brudin Borg indicate, is to find equality in her personal relationships and achieve professional recognition as something other than a tendentious authoress (Thompson 150; Borg 23).

The non-existence of vocational opportunities for the plays’ heroines figures notably and frequently into their sense of hopelessness. Jean can always retreat into his work and the relative comfort of the status quo, his established role in the household (*MJ* 72, 79). When questioned about his assets, Jean responds by listing his proficiencies and experience (80). He is cognizant of his value in society and unequivocally classifies romance as less consequential than his trade: “Love is a game we play when we get time off from work” (89). The only hope Jean gives Julie, and only tentatively, is to run away with him and work behind the desk at a hotel, though her job description does not amount to more than being a pretty face and when she attempts to reiterate the business plan, she can offer no substantial input on the subject of commerce (78, 87-9, 97).

The overtly iterated occupation of each and every character that enters the Tesman household emphasizes Hedda’s lack thereof. Brack interrogates Hedda as to her
goals for the future, “Would you not, like most other women, form plans for a vocation, such as—?” Put to the question, it appears as though Hedda might actually have a plan. “It often seems that the only vocation I have in the world is for one single thing,” she dangles in front of her inquisitor. But in true Hedda style, she wriggles free of exposure and maintains her aloof exterior by appending, “To bore the life out of myself” (HG 122-3). The mere discussion of another’s profession intensifies her ennui (101-11). Bertha keeps the house, Aunt Julie has her sister-invalid and now the younger Tesmans to look after, Judge Brack is referred to by his official designation as a matter of course, and George Tesman and Ejlert Løvborg are both lauded for their academic erudition. Even Thea, Hedda’s former schoolmate, has been allowed to assist Løvborg in his writing. Though Thea exclaims, “Oh, if I had a home! But I have not one. Have never had one,” (60-1) she seems to have found agreeable shelter in the sense of purpose she derives as Løvborg’s tacit collaborator. It’s not that a woman can’t find work in turn-of-the-century Scandinavia, but in keeping with Miss Julie, Hedda Gabler, and Den bergtagna, emotional instability and romantic vulnerability ensue if her usefulness is assessed only on the basis of her social standing or appraisal as a sexual commodity. Sprinchnor points out that both Løvborg and Tesman discuss their disparate, high-minded ideas of the future in Hedda Gabler. Brack lays his version out for Hedda without embellishment (“Ibsen” 73). The sum total is a prospect in which Hedda has no contribution and which she cannot tolerate. Not only does she refuse to participate in their world-vision, she literally destroys Løvborg’s manuscript, which, according to Sprinchnorn, visualizes the evolving relations between men and women (74). For her part, Hedda can only appraise her worth as it is superficially regarded; she is preoccupied with how one is perceived by
others and on the ever-looming threat of scandal (*HG* 69, 152, 267). That a woman is defined by the men in her life is a concept ingrained in her consciousness. When Brack asked, “Is there no occupation you can turn to to make life interesting to you, Mrs. Hedda?” she could only imagine a life in which her husband’s career was more exciting to her, as if she by association would be employed in a preferable position, one that would confer residual influence and authority (118-9). She likewise attempts to manipulate Løvborg’s behavior, encouraging the reckless and rash aspects of his personality in order to mold Løvborg into the artist and “free man” she believes is a representation of his highest self (171-2). Her calling, the best she can arrive at in her current incarnation, is “to have power over the fate of a human being,” not control of her own destiny so much as the fate of another (172). Hedda’s will to live is ultimately extinguished by her inability to be of any appreciable service to the vital and important work the household engages in at the close of the narrative. “Is there nothing I can do to make myself useful to you two?” she inquires of her husband and Thea (270). Their rejection of her offer bolsters Hedda’s resolution to end her life.

Alland calls attention to Louise’s idleness and the scarcity of her prospects in their foremost conversation. He asks her, in an exchange that uncannily prefigures Brack’s query of Hedda, if she has any work, specifically inquiring about “lacemaking or embroidery or another business that women tend to refer to as work. I mean a job to devote yourself to” ‘knyppling eller broderi eller det som kvinnor brukar kalla arbete. Jag menar ett arbete att ägna er åt’ (*Db* 102). After initial incredulity at the question, she answers simply, “No.” Therefore, per Alland, her only option is to wed. He seems to think her gender precludes her from engaging in an art form he would consider worthy of
himself, despite her current residence in a Paris atelier, the interest she has shown in fine art, and his acquaintance with Erna, whose work appears to him to have been accomplished by a man\(^\text{15}\) (100-4). The opportunities for women in fin-de-siècle Scandinavian society are aggregated accordingly in the first act of a play set in France: live your insubordinate life on the fringe of patriarchal society as Erna does, fashion a solitary living out of respectable handicrafts, or get married.

Sexuality, Gender Roles, and the Façade of Modernity

All three protagonists are women classified by scholars either as products of their times or in mortal conflict with their era (Norseng 7-8; J. Templeton 207; A. Templeton 468; Martinus 122; Holtan 95). Hedda is “a daughter of the nineties” (Lucas 221). Strindberg, in the Preface to Miss Julie, identifies his protagonist as a character typical of her time. The Woman Problem, after all, was in full swing with no clear solution in sight (Sprinchnor “Ibsen” 59). Nevertheless, there are elements of each story that hark back to classical tragedies in which traditional female roles are heightened and upheld.

On the surface then, Den bergtagna, Miss Julie, and Hedda Gabler could be appraised as love stories gone terribly wrong, retellings of the allegory in which a woman’s passion either leaves her personally devastated or publicly ruined. Alice Templeton situates Miss Julie within this mythology, but only when the narrative is consigned to an affair of sexual transgression (475). Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler is denied inclusion in the realm of romantic lore by Mary Kay Norseng based on Hedda’s refusal to submit to seduction (8). However, Hedda’s frigidity has apparently no effect on how she is viewed by the men in her life who, as Joan Templeton charges, “treat her as a sexual
possession” (230-1). Templeton cites the modernist era’s renowned Danish critic and Benedictsson’s former companion Georg Brandes, who criticizes Hedda for being “unable to yield herself, body and soul, to the man she loves” (207; Brandes, Critical Studies). Brandes views this as one of the protagonist’s fatal flaws, neglecting to consider that she may be actively trying to create an identity for herself that deviates from either patriarchal ideals of femininity or, conversely, the “free love” maxim of cultural radicalism to which Brandes subscribed.

Though Shideler indicates that Julie’s lack of purpose deprives her of self-sustainability, he still maintains that sex and its aftermath are the primary motivation for her suicide (68). Alice Templeton, however, concludes that an interpretation of the play as a fundamentally sexual power struggle is inconsistent with Miss Julie’s intrinsic premise, the character’s quest for autonomy. Thus, she regards an emphasis on female sexuality as an encumbrance to a discussion of women’s emancipation, as if to imply that the two are mutually exclusive (480). However, Julie’s liaison with Jean is anything but conventional and can be read as one of several ways in which Julie tries to find fulfillment. Consequently, when Jean demoralizes Julie after intercourse, he reinforces traditional sex roles and patriarchal values, obstructing Julie’s attempt to pursue her own brand of erotic satisfaction. The romantic attachment may not be the root of the problem but instead, as Norseng posits in Hedda’s case, a manifestation of a more complicated crisis (11); either way, it is a component.

“How to control sexuality is really the main issue in [Miss Julie],” Margaretha Fahlgren submits, summoning readers and audiences to be mindful of the time period in which the play was written (29). For the turn-of-the-century male, the sprouting concept
of female sexuality was an artistic wellspring as well as the basis of scientific research, a newly uncovered mystery inciting fear and perplexity (25). Vis-à-vis the Ibsen-Strindberg-Benedictsson plays, the suggestive overtures made by the men serve as a twofold sublimation of male anxiety. Most immediately, the superficial endorsement of the non-procreative, extra-marital liaison appropriates female eroticism for male advantage, reclaiming the sex act as an articulation of the male urge. Secondly, the tragic outcome is an admonition of the newfound freedom. Hedda never takes Brack up on his innuendos, but their tête-à-têtes are, apparently, encouragement enough. For her, Julie, and Louise, an enterprise ostensibly designed to augur pleasure ends up being the genesis of insufferable torment. The candid, contemporary approach to sex has a tendency, in due course, to espouse more conservative values.

Evert Sprinchorn treats Strindberg’s entire drama as a metaphor for sex, “all climax and catastrophe” (Strindberg 36). He highlights the dynamic shift between Julie and Jean after their intimate encounter, affirming that a woman in Julie’s time loses control and human worth when she engages in sex. His contentions concur with Alice Templeton’s in that he construes the narrative as an examination of largely internal conflicts, ultimately culminating in disillusionment. For Sprinchorn, the play is literally a “game” that Julie loses when she steps out of her element, without a female role model or social precedent (37-40, 42). She is breaking new ground and she is ill-equipped to deal with the aftermath. What Julie sees as an opportunity to free herself is, in fact, a trap because she does not know how to disentangle herself from the male-dominated system. Jean labels her a “whore” and a “strumpet,” and Julie accepts his abuse wholesale. Defeated, she confesses, “You’re right… I don’t deserve any better. I’m worthless” (MJ
Sprinchorn wants us to see Julie as an undomesticated creature that chooses death over enslavement (*Strindberg* 40). This line of thought, of course, requires a significant degree of situational awareness on Julie’s part, significantly more than she affects.

*Den bergtagna* deals discernibly with submissive versus aggressive tendencies.

Birgitta Holm eschews categorization of Benedictsson’s work as instrument of calamity, choosing instead to showcase the on-going power struggles and inner conflicts:

> In Lundegård’s version the drama is subtitled “A Tragedy of Love.” But *Den bergtagna* is no simple love tragedy. It is an investigation of ambivalence, that of the woman between passivity in the external and activity in depth, and that of the man between apparent control and dependence on the deep. (8-9)

Her description of Alland’s conduct reads like the embodiment of Jean, the sexual “aristocrat” Strindberg seeks to effect in his Preface. Pursuant to Holm:

> …masculine domination techniques are well represented. They are found in the body language described, shifting between attentiveness and preoccupation. They are found in Alland’s manner of taking possession of the room as soon as he sets foot there, and they are found in his remarks, unconsciously belittling and insulting the female. (4)

Alland panders to Louise’s convalescence and repeatedly refers to her as a child, ordering her to sit still so that he may examine her features, always inspecting and assessing her (*Db* 96-9, 119, 157). He comments on and adjusts her hair and clothing (118-20). It is the pressure Alland puts on Louise to consummate their relationship that strikes her to her core. He derides her abstinence as perverted, unnatural. “Your friendship! That is what I cannot live without!” “Din vänskap! Jag kan inte leva utan den!” she pleads (121-5). He goes so far as to renounce her womanhood when he judges, “You are a strange creature. You're not a woman. You are not a child. You are nothing.” ‘Ni är en underlig varelse. Ni är ju inte en kvinna. Ni är inte barn. Ni är ingenting’ (129).
He proceeds to speak about his other conquests, past and potential, which Louise interprets as a dismissal of her innate relevance and initiates her retreat to her home in Sweden. Alland’s manner is the quintessence of the Nietzschean idol, a man feeling the fullness of his natural strength, and simultaneously revealed to be an implement of female disempowerment.

The role of tormentor is not restricted to men in Ibsen’s work, wherein Hedda blurs the line between protagonist and antagonist. Thomas F. Van Laan likens Hedda to the Nietzschean prototype, infatuated with the wielding of “power” ‘magt’ (285-7). She behaves thusly in an effort to simulate the male-oriented mantle of vigor and vitality. Joan Templeton broaches the popular topic of Hedda’s frigidity, which she insinuates may stem from Hedda’s disinclination to “give herself” to any of the three men in her life, addressing some unspoken stipulation that she had to have sex with at least one of the men available to her. Referencing psychiatrist Karl Stern, Templeton proffers an explanation for Hedda’s aversion: Hedda is a “phallic woman,” without the supposedly normal “desire to receive, to hold and to nourish” (207-20; Stern 28). Accordingly, Hedda’s contrasexuality is transmitted through assertive interactions with her acquaintances, women in particular. Perchance to compensate—as Stern would have it—for her lack of a penis, she disparages Aunt Julie’s wardrobe, criticizes the maid, and was a notorious bully to Thea in their school years (HG 31-3, 56-50). And she is famously obsessed with Thea’s hair (41, 56, 171, 227, 261, 267; Mayerson 131-4). Hedda’s interactions vacillate between riveted attention in order to gain confidence and blunt disinterest to mask her reluctance, for whatever reason, to converse or otherwise
commune. She thus secures her status as aggressor. Brandes contends that Hedda is “more manly than many men” (*Critical Studies* 107-8).

Nietzsche’s teachings had a substantial impact on the principals of Scandinavia’s Modern Breakthrough. Benedictsson’s link to Brandes, who was enthusiastically disseminating Nietzsche’s work through a well-publicized lecture series, put her in a key position to respond to and incorporate the German philosopher’s doctrine into her own work. Alland builds upon Nietzsche’s admonition of the slavish mentality when he observes,

>You know, have you never noticed, it's just people's self-interest that compels their preaching to each other to be good. The good will always be unhappy. But remember what I teach you: it is always wiser to kill a person than to love her.

>Ja, har ni aldrig märkt, att det är bara människornas egennytta, som gör att de predikar för varandra att vara goda. De goda blir alltid olyckliga. Men kom ihåg vad jag lär er: ni gör alltid klokare i att slå ihjäl en människa än i att älska henne. (*Db* 102)

Even in his seclusion, Ibsen was not immune to Nietzsche’s ascendant theories. Van Laan posits that, although Ibsen denied any contact, in print or in person, there are parallels between the two authors that demonstrate the contagious and permeating ideas of the age (294). Of the connection between the German and the Norwegian, Van Laan submits:

>In his first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* [Nietzsche] argued that at least one art form, tragedy, reveals the truth about human existence, and since Ibsen's created fictions, more often than not, belong to this category, it does not seem unreasonable to say that Ibsen was ultimately engaged in the same kind of work as Nietzsche. In any event, considering the two in relation to this art form that was of such great importance to both of them makes possible a deeper understanding of their relationship. (294)

Strindberg was, without a doubt, not a stranger to Nietzsche’s philosophy. The dramatist was by this time and his own admission pregnant with the theories of the
Übermensch (Superman)—courtesy of Brandes (SL 277, 283). Jean, the incarnation of the consecrated mortal, denigrates and condemns Julie, if we are to trust Strindberg, because he is a man. Jean, Strindberg acknowledges, shamelessly uses others to ascend the social stratum. Jean’s crippling impediment, his “sense of inferiority,” is attributed to the lowly circumstances of his birth. Strindberg does not afford Julie the same absolution on the basis of the repression she has experienced by being born a woman (MJ 52-6).

Despite the pursuit of the manifestation of Nietzsche’s Superman, the bravado demonstrated by Hedda, Jean, and Alland reveals itself to be parasitic in nature and a masculine affectation but not an exclusively male trait. The men try to promote a libertine and egalitarian agenda, trademarks of The Modern Breakthrough proponents, but the reform is still driven by the man’s self-interest, at the expense of the female.

True enough that each play manages to challenge the traditions of la pièce bien faite; not one of the three dramas ends with even a promise of a fruitful marriage. Hedda Gabler, to be sure, establishes Hedda’s recent marriage up front, but then quickly reveals its degeneration alongside the bride’s escalating apathy. The erotic liaison assumes a novel countenance in the naturalistic tragedies, but the change is still defined by men, who alternately demand sexual purity or condemn it, coerce intimate assignations or reject them, love or withhold affection. Ibsen’s notes from A Doll’s House allude to the predicament of women seeking to experience life in a way that deviates from patriarchal tenets:

There are two kinds of spiritual laws, two kinds of conscience, one in men and a quite different one in women. They do not understand each other; but in practical life the woman is judged according to the man’s law, as if she were not a woman but a man. (Ibsen’s Workshop 91)
Erna, Louise’s friend and neighbor, has resolved to love like a man in order to survive. Alland sketches a thinly veiled depiction of Erna, his one-time girlfriend:

But there are women who are so strong that they can withstand love. I mean resistant to it just as a man is, so that it is only an episode in their life, not life itself. I knew such a woman. She was a painter. She lived with one of my friends; they were colleagues, but she was younger and insignificant. Then it went as it always goes ...

Love is just a springtime flowering, that’s why it is so short-lived. My friend and his lover broke up. They had tired of each other.

Men det finns kvinnor, som är så starka, att de tål vid att älska. Jag menar tål vid det alldeles som en man, så att det blir endast en episod i deras liv, icke hela livet. Jag kände en. Hon var målarinna. Hon levde tillsammans med en av mina vänner; de arbetade som kamrater båda, men hon var yngre och obetydligare. Så gick det som det alltid går...

Kärleken är bara en blomningstid, därför är den så kort. Min vän och hans vännina bröt med varandra. De hade tröttnat båda. (103)

Apropos, Erna functions as an inverted Louise, a “liberated woman” who eventually comes to consider her lifestyle a concession that undermines her integrity.

Through antagonistic behavior and the retention of the dominant role in gender relations, the featured male roles (and the women who emulate them) operate as safe-keepers of conventional female subjugation. Though the dramas belong to an age that touted forward-thinking, the personifications of the era often produce intransigency.

Awareness of Desperation and the Aftermath

The audience encounters the protagonists of Miss Julie, Hedda Gabler, and Den bergtagna on occasions bursting with optimism. Julie is passionately dancing the night away on a festive Midsummer’s Eve. Hedda and Louise are cosseted by friends and family; Hedda is setting up house after her honeymoon and Louise rallies from a long illness. The drama arises irrespective of the propitious covenant revealed at the opening
of the action. We can only wonder what was transpiring in the minds of these women when their narratives convene.

Mary Kay Norseng outlines Hedda’s mental state: her recent wedding, her aversion to her new husband, separation from the comforts of her former domestic circumstances and social class, and the unsettling arrival of a once-and-future rival. But Norseng does not and cannot tell us whether Hedda was cognizant of these anomic factors (10-1). She is, as Norseng describes, “alienated not only from her surroundings but from herself” (20). Similarly, Alice Templeton takes us through the throngs of critical qualms about the plausibility of Julie’s suicide and her premeditation thereof. She infers that Julie has only just embarked on a path of self-awareness and empowerment, but without an outlet for expression or paradigm for effecting change, she was destined to fail in her pursuit. Her only means of rebellion is sex and when the subversive act does not deliver an alternative to her insufferable existence, when it proves to be a dead end rather than an open door, she is left with no alternative but to end her life. Thus Templeton highlights both the woman’s need to articulate her inner turmoil and the inaccessibility of any agency that would permit her to do so (478-80).

Sprinchorn compares Miss Julie with Hedda, suggesting that both suicides are triumphant feats, and then intimates that Ibsen’s hasty denouement deprives his heroine of appreciable resolve (Strindberg 40-1). Joan Templeton regards Hedda’s suicide as an act of feminist defiance (230-2). However, neither Julie nor Hedda displays the insight necessary to make her suicide a statement of premeditated resistance. Neither verbalized what she hoped to accomplish by taking her own life and audiences are left to ponder whether Hedda or Julie were fully aware of the solemnity and consequence of her self-
sacrifice. Norseng speculates that this skepticism derives from the protagonist’s inability to put into words—in any language—the very private and personal emotional despair that drives a person to suicide (5-9).

Only in Benedictsson’s *Den bertagna* is the voice of the heroine heard after death, via her suicide note. Louise’s foster brother, Viggo, who introduced Louise to her beloved sculptor, must read her words aloud:

Alland – forgive me.
You abhorred lies and I ensnared myself in a web of lies to be seen to be on the same social level as you, as your equal. I felt as though you would cast away the little clergyman's daughter otherwise. Forgive me this. This is the only thing I ask you to forgive. For your sake, I would have robbed a church - - I would have done anything. You were my whole world, everything else, and everything that could ever be, but it did not exist, for I knew that on the day you said, “Go away, I have wearied of you,” I would not be able to live. You said it from the beginning. You've never lied to me, never deceived.
Farewell, beloved.
I wish I could go on living, not cause you the least little sadness with my death; but I cannot. Do not blame yourself; but without you life is too heavy for me; I cannot bear it.
I knew it in advance. I acted accordingly.

Ålskade, farväl!
Jag skulle så gärna velat leva, för att inte göra dig ledsen, och för att inte min död skulle bli som en förebråelse till dig, men jag kan inte. Utan dig är livet för tungt: jag orkar inte bära det.
Jag visste det på förhand. Jag handlade därefter. (171)
The varied reactions of the people left behind to contemplate Louise’s sudden demise and grieve her loss give the audience an indication of the change such a drastic act can effect, albeit in the mind of a tormented and arguably irrational individual. Benedictsson’s ending thus most concretely endorses the notion that self-murder can be used to “manipulate [one’s] environment” (Rettersøl 75). Both Clare Bayley and Verne Moberg’s English adaptations deemphasize Louise’s last words, the former omitting them completely. In addition, Bayley alters the response of the characters in those key final moments. These revisions notably diminish Louise’s—and Benedictsson’s—objectives.

Notwithstanding commonalities in the action, Benedictsson’s central female character stands apart from Ibsen’s and Strindberg’s in that she is able to effect the change she seeks by taking her own life. Den bergtagna, as Benedictsson wrote it, is unique among the three plays in the disclosure of a suicide note and the response of the characters left behind at the close of the play. Through these revelations, Benedictsson’s Louise demonstrates a profound desperation and awareness of the events and factors that lead to her demise. Louise’s reflection on the essential features of her crisis is a speculum for the scourge that has ravished Hedda and Julie. Louise sees the impossibility of an actuality that is endurable, one in which she could guard her feminine ideals and love as she intuitively must. What’s more, her valediction speaks for Hedda and Julie again when Louise pledges that her “whole world” revolved around a man, announcing the deprivation of any other means of unearthing her role in this life.
Chapter III

Dramatic Suicide: Prophecy, Catharsis, or Conduit of Tragedy

Ibsen, Strindberg, and Benedictsson all express a suppressed, schismatic aspect of themselves within the works herein analyzed. Ibsen writes his neurotic and conflicted attitudes regarding sex, scandal, and bohemianism into the character of Hedda, who is one of many examples of Ibsen’s preoccupation with the suicidal individual. Strindberg’s Julie epitomizes his enunciated hatred and suspicion in tandem with his irrepressible longing for the opposite sex. In addition, Julie is capable of ending her suffering whereas Strindberg only privately contemplated such an exploit. Though the male playwrights are able to articulate their own proscribed attributes, the heroines they conceived fail to develop a language that would allow them to separate themselves from the environment and culture that has driven them to utter despondency. Benedictsson irrefutably fashions Louise out of the fabric of her own life, sometimes using nearly verbatim passages from her journal, Stora Boken, in Den bergtagna. Unlike Hedda and Julie, Louise does manage to emancipate herself, to candidly divorce herself from the egregious circumstances through her own autobiographical writing.

Ibsen and Strindberg reach catharsis through their surrogate protagonists by exposing and then systematically killing off this nonintegrated, censored facet of their persons. Benedictsson, conversely, is driven further into fragmentation of her gender and sexual identity. Her resolve to end her life is bolstered by her reflections and her proxy, this mirror she holds up to her life. Benedictsson and Louise collectively opt out of the
old and/or emerging social order mindful of what they hope to achieve with their suicides. Benedictsson and her Louise distinguish themselves effectively, literally, and profoundly from the other characters in the narrative, from Hedda and Julie, and often from Ibsen and Strindberg themselves; they are de facto agents of change making public statements of inner affliction, testimony that can and will be shared only after their deaths.

Writing Oneself “In”

Victoria Benedictsson, nee Victoria Maria Bruzelius, was born in 1850 in a provincial village in Skåne, Sweden. She began keeping a journal she called Stora Boken (The Great Book) in 1881, published a series of short stories about her small town upbringing entitled Från Skåne (From Scania) in 1884, and her first novel, Pengar (Money), in 1885. She was immediately regarded as a constituent of The Modern Breakthrough and purveyor of Swedish naturalism (Alas 130). She continued to write, eschewing her marital residence for a solitary life elsewhere in Sweden, Copenhagen, and Paris. She met Georg Brandes in 1886 and entered into a romantic relationship with him that became sexually intimate at the close of 1887 and quickly thereafter dissolved.

Benedictsson’s autobiographical writing and imminent suicide illustrate congruence, a converging emotional life, between Louise—the fictional heroine—and her corporeal author. They both hail from rural Sweden, and both fled their homes in search of restorative, invigorating experiences outside of their native land. Each becomes romantically attached to a man whose achievements she holds in high regard. Reciprocally, Benedictsson and Louise end their lives after the amorous relationships
deteriorate. Moreover, the similarities between the two transcend the points of superficial coherence. Extant in both Benedictsson’s autobiographical writing and her fictional prose and drama is the presence of the objectifying gaze. Lynn Wilkinson confronts the assumption that Benedictsson, like other female-centric writers of her time, approached the act of looking as an exercise in taking ownership and, effectively, a male ritual. In doing so, Wilkinson queries whether a man would be able to accurately convey the emotional life of a woman, “the gender specific experience of the author” ‘forfatterens kjønnspesifikke erfaring’ (Hindraker 58; qtd in. “Gender” 43-5). Benedictsson portrays the gaze as a phenomenon so strong that it has the power to entrap a person; one can become lost in or captured by a look. In her diary, Stora Boken, Benedictsson writes of her paramour, Georg Brandes:

I stood silent and grave and looked through the glass doors with this motionless gaze, as I so often do when he sees me. I figured he must find me a fool, but I did not care.

Jag stod tyst och allvarsam och såg ut genom glasdörrarne med denna orörliga blick, som jag så ofta får när han betraktar mig. Jag tänkte att han måste finna mig bra dum, men det brydde jag mig icke om. (III: 286)

In the immediate instance, both Benedictsson and Brandes are momentarily caught in a contest of wills. She is aware that he is formulating an impression of her, but she purports not to care; she has her own agenda.

In Den bertagna, the theme of visual expression is pervasive. Both male and female protagonist are aware of the potential in perceiving others, of being seen, and of seeing through the eyes of another. Love gives Louise a new outlook on life and she illustrates Paris, her temporal home, summoning up even mundane particulars with novel wonder, beholding commonplace objects with fresh perspective and in doing so she gives
new life to the city. “From the sun, the flowers, to the great gorgeous city, to the gray bridges, and the streetlamps reflected in the river. Oh, it is all so beautiful it takes my breath away.” ‘Åt sol, åt blommor, åt den stora vackra staden, åt de gråa broarna, och åt lyktorna, som speglar sig i floden. åh, det är så vackert alltsammans, att jag tycker kan förgå mig’ (119). Alland likewise concedes his captivation with his muses, who hold powerful sway over him (127). His visual assessment of Louise commences as soon as he enters her milieu, a tactic eliciting her timidity and childlike behavior (95-9).

In her study of 1880’s Scandinavian literature by women, Wilkinson remarks about the gaze that ensnared Benedictsson, which she could not “break the spell of” (“Gender” 432-36). The analogy with Den bergtagna is multilayered. Alland uses Louise as a model for his latest sculpture, capturing her image in stone for eternity. Moreover, Louise cannot separate herself from the sculptor’s objectifying gaze; if she cannot continue to be seen by him, then she may as well cease to exist.

However, just as Benedictsson represents herself as the subject in her narrative, she has in turn captured Georg Brandes as the artist/lover and King of the Mountain Trolls (SB III: 352). As Holm discerns:

Georg Brandes is not hard to recognize in the character of the drama’s sculptor Gustave (sic) Alland, and a great many lines in both novella and drama are the same as those accredited to Georg Brandes in her diary. But what she etches from her own heart is also that she is heading for death, for a suicide deeply rooted in her life. (3)

Benedictsson reveals a penchant for staring at a picture of her beloved (SB III: 323). Likewise, a portrait of Alland is displayed prominently in Louise’s studio in the prose draft of Den bergtagna, a detail that has been appropriated by Lundegård and translators in their adaptations of the drama for its blatant implications; Louise has done
her share of gazing and taken possession of an image of the lover that is suitable to her
(Enchantment 20; Lundegård 76; Db 49). When Alland suggests that Louise would no
longer love him if she could see him for the person he is, we are reminded that the eye of
the beholder is beset with artistic license and to love someone is to envisage one’s ideals
in another person. Alland then robs Louise of the singularity of her conception, taunting,
“Twenty women have loved me like you do. Think of that!” ‘Tjugu kvinnor har älskat
mig så, som du. Tänk på det!’ (157) Nevertheless, neither Louise nor Victoria
Benedictsson could sever her intense connection to the object of her passion. Bayley
translates that Louise sees herself as “the result of a spell [he] cast” (Enchantment 63).
Benedictsson has Louise tell her lover, “I am what you made me,” ‘Jag är vad du gjort
mig till,’ the manifest product of the Troll King’s magic potion (Db 140).

In point of fact, Benedictsson beseeched her coveted beau to see her. Despite
doubt cast as to the veracity of the affair by Brandes himself and later sustained by
Benedictsson scholar Ingrid Primander (116-7), Brandes’ letters to Benedictsson
repeatedly address her frustration at the unpredictability and infrequency of his visits
(Selected Letters 144-6, 150). Brandes spurned her not merely as a sensual and spiritual
partner, but as an intellectual equal as well. Her creative output was also devalued, and
with that her identity when, nearly six months before she confesses to being sexually
intimate with him, the renowned critic dismisses her newest oeuvre, Fru Marianne,
commenting that “I wish I could have liked Mrs. Marianne better than I do. I do not
reject the good sides of it, but it is to too great an extent a ladies’ novel” (SB III: 413; qtd.
in Borg 20). This unenthusiastic reception of her new work, offered to him with “fear and
trembling” and conceived of in part while she fretfully awaited their (still platonic)
rendezvous, amounted to emotional calamity for Benedictsson (SB III: 301). “The death sentence has been passed on my writings, perhaps on myself,” she notes in her almanac (413, qtd. in Sprinchorn 63). In *Stora Boken* she writes, “I can’t do it anymore. All of my work has been in vain. I'm too weak; I don’t have the will to live. I only suffer. I am afraid, I am a coward. God - if you exist - let it be quick.” ‘Jag kan icke mer. Allt mig arbete har varit förgäfves. Jag är för svag; jag duger icke att lefva. Jag endast lider. Jag är rädd, jag är feg. Gud - om du finnes - låt det gå fort’ (301).

Entries from Victoria Benedictsson’s own diary, *Stora Boken*, particularly those made in the months preceding her death, provide a novel and singular understanding of just how critical the fin-de-siècle era was for Scandinavian women and especially female artists. Within these accounts, Benedictsson unabashedly imparts a cardinal objective of her suicide: to stand as an impermeable statue of a woman who will not be molded by a man. Requisite to this iconic status is the formation and preservation of one’s own unique sense of self in a very public way. She craved visibility, strove to leave her brand upon Scandinavia’s Modern Breakthrough, its constitutional “Literature of Problems,” and specifically The Woman Problem. She sought to be read and understood. Intuitively, Benedictsson realized this feat would only be accomplished in death; she concedes that *Den bergtagna* is too explicit an autobiographical exposé to be published in her lifetime (385). Even with a blossoming liberal counter-culture, the threat of humiliation and disgrace in Scandinavia at the end of the nineteenth century was looming, alive and well.

“Free love” has poisoned my life- - - love? - - - what a name for such a thing! I must die, for I can not live. But I will not be hanged in silence. Shame and ignominy shall follow my death as in my life, but that shame shall be lifted high up on the scaffold over the heads of the multitude, where it will stand as a warning pillory and I will brazenly gnash my teeth
together during my disgrace for [my execution will deal a blow to the teachings I have always detested…]

“Fri kärlık” har förgiftat mitt liv - - - kärlék? - - - hvilket namn för en sådan sak! Jag måste dö, ty jag kan icke lefva.. Men jag skall icke bli hängd i tysthet. Skam och nesa skall det häfta vid min död som vid mitt liv, men den skammen skall lyftas upp på hög schavott öfver mängdens hufvud, der skall stå en varningens skampåle och jag skall fräckt bita tänderna samman under smäleken ty [min aflifning skall ge en stöt åt den lära jag alltid af skytt…] (294)

Sonia Wichmann proposes that this credo is Benedictsson’s effort to foster another of her personas, that of the martyr. The pageantry of the text unequivocally supports such a reading. The platform of her sacrifice, however, is compromised by Benedictsson’s record of shirking membership in any one faction in the debate on evolving ethics of sexuality (146,149; Thompson 146-7; Alas 132-3). She disclaims the designation of “moralist” and refutes ever writing anything deliberately tendentious (SB II: 305). Rather, she undertakes the construction of her own interpretation of romantic attachment:

The desire to be faithful unto death, to construct a magic circle round one’s beloved, distinguishing her forever from all others, from being placed on the same plane as all others, in fact, that is what makes love legitimate; whether or not the priest has blessed it.

Viljan att vara trofast ända in i döden, att draga som en trollring kring den älskade, skiljande henne för alltid från alla andra, från att ställas på samma plan som alla andra - menar jag, –se der hvad som gör kärleken legitim; presten må ha läst sin välsignelse deröver eller ej. (III: 294)

Thompson draws our attention to the similarities between the “trollring” Benedictsson utilized to espouse her idiosyncratic definition of love and the “trollcirkel” that surrounded the narrator-protagonist in Benedictsson’s prose version of Den bergtagna (146-7; Db 42).
Through his reluctance to see strangers with me, I was living a strange life. At the time I had only made a few new acquaintances in Paris and no one that I was attached to, so it was easy for me to eventually pull away altogether. And so I was always alone, closed as if within a magic circle, without any outside influence - alone in a crowd or alone with him.

Genom hans motvilja att se främmande männishor hos mig hade jag kommit att leva ett underligt liv. Då jag endast hade alldeles nya bekantskaper i Paris och icke en enda som jag var fäst vid, var det mig lätt att småningom dra mig aldeles undan. Och så blev jag alltid ensam, stängd liksom inom en trollcirkel, utan allt främmande inflytande - ensam i människovimlet eller ensam med honom. (42)

Benedictsson is revisiting terminology from an affable phase of her bond with Brandes and applying the sentiment to Louise’s memory of her consummate connection to Alland. The correlation supports Wichmann’s inference that Benedictsson grappled with a “dramatic and ‘literary’ model in her attempt to define and portray herself” (149-59). The details of Benedictsson’s life were transmutable, congruous material for her writing.

Wichmann blurs the delineation Benedictsson claimed to make between her own autobiographical material and fictional works. She depicts Benedictsson as a “highly self-aware” author whose diary “hovers between fact and fiction, private and public” (137-8). In her essay In Search of the Self, Wichmann points out that Benedictsson’s frequent use of masculine pseudonyms and aliases in Stora Boken expose conscious effort to enlist herself in a male-oriented profession where authorship and self-determination were inextricable. Contra-sexuality permeated Benedictsson’s recollection of her upbringing in which, just like Hedda and Julie, she was trained in activities normally reserved for boys. Benedictsson’s teacher was her temperamental father, whose daughter also credited him with bestowing his erratic nature upon her. Benedictsson regarded this changeability as both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand it gave her access to a great many personalities, all of which she drew upon for her naturalist writing. “I have as many
personalities as I need main characters in my works,” ‘jag har lika många karaktärer som jag behöfver huvudfigurer i mina arbeten’ Benedictsson allows (SB III:64; qtd. in Wichmann 141), thereby embracing an irregularity that had previously caused her anxiety: “I fear the changeability of my own character.” ‘Jag fruktar min egen karaktärs ombytlighet’ (SB II:259; qtd. in Wichmann 142). Benedictsson couldn’t shake the notion that she was a woman fated to do a man’s work, and yet doomed to a gender that she believed thwarted her potential (137-42). She divulges,

With increasingly calm desperation, I begin thinking about suicide. I'm unhappy. But I'm good-for-nothing. A writer without genius! A woman without a woman's calling! What shall I do in the world?


Try as she might, Benedictsson could not kill off the female part of herself within the context of her fiction.

Writing Oneself “Out”

In 1880s Scandinavia, the flourishing naturalist genre called for a fundamentally straightforward depiction of modern life, and a female author would ostensibly have more direct access to the feminine perspective (Wilkinson, “Gender” 435, 442; Johansson 48; Wichmann 143; Alas 134). Strindberg insisted that legitimate writing is necessarily autobiographical in nature; he meant this in no way to depreciate his own artistry—a man writing realistic female characters, but to include himself and his creative output decidedly within this tradition, what he described as “this wonderful turning inside out of the soul…which is the precondition of art” (SL I: 325; Robinson, Strindberg and
Autobiography 16). Strindberg maintained throughout his authorial life that the only way to write is to write oneself, catharsis being the ultimate aim and “greatest form of pleasure and comfort” (3; SL III: 41-2). Robinson interprets this enterprise as “releasing what is within” (3).

Göran Stockenström, in his essay “The Dilemma of Naturalistic Tragedy,” infers that the dilemma lies in part within Strindberg himself who intensely related to his heroine (50). Suicide was most certainly on Strindberg’s mind while Miss Julie was in her formative stage. In November of 1887, Strindberg revealed to Axel Lundegård, apparently the psychological custodian and confidant of Sweden’s highest profile writers, “There is a possibility I might relapse into romanticism and make off with myself.” Later in the same missive he persists, “I feel as if, probably quite soon, at a given moment… I shall collapse either into madness and remorse, or suicide” (SL I: 255). Such a precarious emotional state presages Strindberg’s insight in the play’s preamble: “The fact that the heroine arouses compassion is because we are too weak to resist the fear that the same fate could overtake us” (MJ 51). It is quite plausible that the playwright is speaking of his own fears in light of the fact that he has anticipated sympathy for his romantic protagonist. In the letter to Lundegård, Strindberg proceeds to liken his writing to his dormant subconscious:

Through my writing, my life has become a shadow life; I no longer feel as though I am walking the earth but floating weightless in an atmosphere not of air but darkness. If light enters this darkness, I shall drop down, crushed!

The strange thing is that in an often recurring dream at night, I feel I am weightless, which I find quite natural, as though all notions of right and wrong, true and false, have also ceased to exist for me, and that everything that happens, however strange, appears just as it ought to be.
Well, that’s no doubt the logical consequence of the new philosophy, indeterminism, and it’s possible I’m amazed and frightened because I’m unfamiliar with the new. (SL I: 255-6)

There are multiple junctures linking Strindberg’s visions and Julie’s, who defends her right to be peculiar, musing,

…everything is strange. Life, people, everything. Like floating scum, drifting on and on across the water, until it sinks down and down! That reminds me of a dream I have now and then. I’ve climbed up on top of a pillar. I sit there and see no way of getting down. I get dizzy when I look down, and I must get down, but I don’t have the courage to jump. I can’t hold on firmly, and I long to be able to fall, but I don’t fall. And yet I’ll have no peace until I get down, down on the ground! And if I did get down to the ground, I’d want to be under the earth. (71)

Aside from the rather obvious revisiting of the latent and subliminal self, both Strindberg and his Julie speak with detachment and objectivity of their worldview. Both recollections stem from an innate conviction that there is no normal, no single code of conduct or absolute fate. The inclination is to relate Julie’s impulse to descend as either an ensuing social plummet or a sexual indiscretion, both of which she affects over the course of the play, deeds at odds with contemporary mores. Instead, or in addition, perhaps the proposed shift is into gender neutrality. Julie is only “half-woman,” a third sex in Strindberg’s own words (MJ 54).

Alice Templeton proposes that it is possible to undertake “a feminist reading” of his work, Miss Julie specifically, if we view the Preface as Strindberg’s dogged effort to regulate the reading of his play. She suggests that it is what the play is capable of achieving in spite of the Preface that makes it “a work of art” and not just a case study in determinism and steely, scientific naturalism (470-1). Awareness of the disparity between what Strindberg wrote versus what he later tried to un-write or suppress makes it possible
to liberate Julie from her ascribed stereotypes. It further uncovers the playwright’s retrospective effort to protect himself by obscuring and severing his identification with his heroine and fellow victim of psychic (or soul) murder (*SL* 285). Margaretha Fahlgren, in her take on “Strindberg and the Woman Question” concurs that the playwright “projected on to [Julie] his own insecurity and vulnerability” (30). The effect is that Strindberg is not such a woman-hater in spite of himself. Even to Verner von Heidenstam, to whom Strindberg delivered some of his most biting male-chauvinistic commentary, often alongside fatalistic contemplations, he inquires, “Can you understand my misogyny? Which is only the reverse of a terrible desire for the other sex” (*SL* 277-9; 286-9). Both the irrepressible heterosexuality and gender bias are behaviors he imparts, in kind, to Julie (MJ 54). Thus, as Sprinchorn relates, Strindberg’s “…inner life becomes the outer life” (*Strindberg* 49). While Strindberg uses Jean as a tool to bring about the death of Julie, “suppressing… and twisting her revolutionary desire” (A. Templeton 475), Strindberg himself manages to purge some of his own unruly yearnings.

Sprinchorn, in his article “Ibsen and the Immoralists,” surmises an analogous transference of hidden urges on the part of Ibsen. To Sprinchorn, Hedda is “more than anyone else, Ibsen himself.” Hedda, he conjectures, shares Ibsen’s censored anarchical aspirations and his dread of ignominy. Sprinchorn connects Hedda’s unwillingness to pursue a physical relationship with Løvborg to Ibsen’s alleged forbearance of seductions in his own life (“Ibsen” 74-5). Brandes accuses Ibsen of being mired in dated dogmas leaguing abstinence with righteousness, a charge that endorses the Ibsen-Hedda parity (*Selected Letters* 152). Hedda’s infamously frigid, sexless character is candidly criticized by Brandes (*Critical Studies* 106; J. Templeton 207-9). Further, Brandes’ observations of
the Norwegian playwright validate Sprinchorn’s estimation of Hedda as a deputy for at least certain of Ibsen’s attributes. Playwright and heroine are practically interchangeable in Brandes’ “First Impression” of Ibsen, of which he records:

…when he directs his gaze towards his own time, it presents to his eye sheer misery and guilt, and shows him the discord between what ought to be and what is. In the second place, it makes him bitter; for when he turns his gaze on the ideal, he sees its destruction as inevitable, all higher living and striving as fruitless, and discord between what ought to be, and what is, attainable. (Critical Studies 3-4)

Of Hedda, Brandes detects an individual who “is a morally and spiritually unfruitful being, capable of nothing but ruining, destroying, and dying.” The comparison is not intended to prove that Brandes sees Ibsen as unproductive, but rather that Ibsen’s pessimistic attitude is a credible source of the protagonist’s antagonistic behavior. When Brandes remarks that Ibsen has vigorously depicted Hedda’s malice, he may well be saying that Ibsen has endowed the character with his own evil side (107).

Montrose J. Moses synopsizes the mature Ibsen’s life as one distinguished by aloofness and infallible restraint (1-2); Ibsen’s written correspondence confirms these careful qualities, especially when examined next to Strindberg’s. In Ibsen’s abstemious sensibilities we find a kinship to Hedda’s aversion to the “ridiculous” (HG 104, 241; Lucas 241). The Norwegian’s self-imposed exile from his native land from 1864 until 1891 is articulated in Hedda’s restlessness, her pacing, her clenched hands, her habit of looking outside as if peering from between the bars of a prison; Hedda, as several critics have made note, is a woman who will never be comfortable in her own home (HG 37-9, 113, 121, 132, 230; A. Templeton 214; Lucas 16-7, 241; Van Laan 283). William Archer instructs that, per Ibsen himself, all of the author’s fiction emanates from his life, not just
that which he has “experienced (oplevet),” but more accurately that which he has “lived through (gennemlevet)” (99).

The male playwrights assign dire aspects of their personalities— the hidden, the private, the destructive, the self-destructive, the socially unacceptable—to their central female characters, essentially purging themselves of the calamitous features. And what are the protagonists to do with their inherited encumbrances, afflictions, and millstones? Do they grasp the immensity of their burdens? Do they process?

The patterns of perception, so palpable in Benedictsson’s work, are present in Strindberg’s play as well. He unambiguously uses the literal connotation of being “spellbound” at the conclusion of *Miss Julie*. Jean is transformed in Julie’s eyes into a heat-producing device, the physical embodiment of his strong will. Børge Gedso Madsen proposes that Julie assumes this power as the courage to kill herself (71), as if what she sees is directly influencing her behavior, unbeknownst to her. She is transfixed and enraptured. Julie turns vision into verbiage to capture the energy and passion of the denouement; her sight undergoes a transmutation into language in an attempt to make sense of her disconnected, hypnotic delirium. She grasps “ecstatically” for words:

…The whole room is like smoke around me… and you look like an iron stove… shaped like a man in black, with a tall hat – and your eyes glow like coals when the fire is dying, like ashes—it’s so warm and good… and bright—and so peaceful. (*MJ* 101)

Jean, too, conveys the potency of the gaze early in the play when he asks Julie, “Do you want to know how the world looks from down below?” He proceeds to illustrate his growing fascination with her life and surroundings, which prompted his “longing to experience” it firsthand (73-4). Jean uses speech to challenge the stifling social order:
If it’s true that a thief can enter heaven and be with the angels, then why can’t a farmhand’s son here on God’s earth enter the manor house and play with the Count’s daughter? (74)

Julie, on the other hand, ends her story in lexis-limbo. She needs Jean to tell her whether she is among God’s first or last. She cannot extricate herself from her soul-numbing confinement. She must be expelled.

Hedda does manage to remove herself from the proceedings in the moments before her death, verbally and physically. However, her attempts at communication are consistently misunderstood and function contrary to her intended objectives. Her rhetoric banishes her further and further into slavery, servitude, and irrelevance. Hedda reads Brack’s plan for her—that she become his mistress—as a system of subjugation, and Brack sees her analysis as merely a brief interval on the way to acquiescence, where one “gets used to the inevitable” (HG 268). Hedda conjures up the image of Thea and Løvborg at work; Thea and Tesman interpret this as encouragement of their present venture. “Oh, goodness, if only I could inspire your husband in the same way,” Thea marvels, and Tesman purports that he already senses such a symbiotic relationship developing. Hedda’s last course of expression before picking up her gun is to play wildly at her piano. Her husband, curtailing his wife’s mortal pain, aggrandizes the dead and dying; the passing of Tesman’s ailing aunt and Løvborg’s imminent demise bookend the final act. “But, dearest Hedda—don’t play dance-music this evening. Just think of Aunt Rina. And of Ejlert too!” (270) “Oh, now she is fingering those pistols again,” and so her husband dismisses her final, voiceless tirade (272).

Anesthetized and incapacitated, grossly—if not intentionally—misunderstood, what do the heroines do with their legacy of problems? They die. Fahlgren demonstrates
how Jean “uses his mastery of language to make Julie commit suicide” (29). This is precisely what Strindberg does. He sentences her to death with the fortitude of his words, of which Julie is gradually divested. Stockenström contends, “the use of hypnotism and suggestion to make her suicide scientifically plausible denies her the opportunity to exert her free will and to make a choice” (52-3).

In Brandes’ evaluation of Ibsen, the latter believed that “neither uncompromising passion or uncompromising will can co-exist with existing society…and the drama of will ends in a martyrdom” (Critical Studies 3). But unlike Louise and Victoria Benedictsson, Hedda never betrays the knowledge that she suffers for any particular cause. Her death, as Norseng puts it, is “something not that Hedda wills but that she cannot unwill” (15).

Their creators obstruct Hedda’s and Julie’s pursuit of expression. Though there are affinities to be found on behalf of the writers, and keen resemblances between their emotional lives and the ones they have imparted to their progeny, the authors are able to send the women to their death precisely because they are not one and the same. Ibsen and Strindberg’s aristocratic spirits are reconciled within a world rife with Nietzschean Culture-Philistinism in which artistic, spiritual, and intellectual refinement are emasculated on behalf of the conventional and commonplace (Friedrich Nietzsche 12-4). They had conquered their cumbersome, earthly weaknesses and overcome myriad injustices to take their place among the Übermenschen. Ibsen and Strindberg had, for all intents and purposes, written themselves “out.”
Writing Oneself to Death

Through verbiage, Ibsen and Strindberg accomplished the coup that eluded Hedda and Julie in their narratives. Yet Sprinchorrn has allotted a “note of triumph” to Julie (Strindberg 40). Hedda crafts “a pitiful parody of the glorious self-assertion of which she had dreamed” (J. Templeton 123). Louise has, to her credit, an entire composition to underscore her death. Louise writes! Unlike Julie and Hedda who are only in the very early, perhaps even embryonic stages of “social and gender consciousness” (A. Templeton 480), Louise takes inventory of her existence and proceeds with deliberation to effect her end.

Her swan song, however, is only available posthumously. Otherwise, her suicide note, like a hollow threat and/or an indeterminant attempt, would equate to another program for assimilation and conformity into the current and offending social structure, where it would be deemed worthless or preposterous, and therefore a greater misfortune. We see the evidence of Louise’s victory in the last line of the play. Erna laments, “Why didn’t I do as she did. – Oh - Why didn’t I do as she did!” ‘Varför gjorde jag inte som hon. Åh - Varför gjorde jag inte som hon!’ (Db 172) This line of thinking satisfies one aspect of Nietzsche’s tragic philosophy that Brandes worked so hard to advance in Scandinavia: life and strife go hand-in-hand. Existence is "forfaerdelig" ‘horrible,’ to borrow with Van Laan an oft-used Ibsen descriptor, (298). Drama, therefore, has no greater purpose than to illustrate this appalling and insufferable reality, where the individual is at constant odds with the suffocating conventions of his (or in this case her) time (274, 294-8). So, too, is Strindberg known for his commentary on the terrors of
humanity, vividly depicted in *A Dream Play*, in which the ethereal protagonist effuses, “These poor people. I pity them” (*ADP* 217).\(^\text{19}\)

This is the crossroads of Nietzschean tragedy, some would argue the impasse of the genre when it is manipulated to co-exist with naturalism. Among the critics is George Bernard Shaw, who reasons:

> The tragedy of Hedda in real life is not that she commits suicide, but that she continues to live…The tragedy of modern life is that nothing happens, and that the resultant dullness does not kill…The moment the dramatist gives up accidents and catastrophes, and takes “slice of life” as his material, he finds himself committed to plays that have no endings. (*Three Plays by Brieux* xiv-v; qtd. in Gerould *Quick Change* 107)

What is overlooked in the Shavian quote is the possibility that the dramatist and the subject are indivisible, and the dramatist actually kills herself. *Den bergtagna* simulates an elaborate foretelling of imminent demise, and with that another rationale for withholding the divination until the prophecy has come to pass. Benedictsson’s death actually bolsters the realism of her play.

There is the outstanding facet of Nietzsche’s tragic philosophy that Ibsen and Strindberg both embraced in reality and declined in *Hedda Gabler* and *Miss Julie*. As pessimistic as Nietzsche’s outlook initially registers, an inexorable component of it is that greatness and powerful will is to endure in the face of horror. As such, suicide can be construed as resignation, the antithesis of heroism, and surrender to the “slave mentality” inveterate within Strindberg’s Preface (*MJ* 52-6; Van Laan 297-8). In lieu of their own deaths, Ibsen and Strindberg kill the female in order to wash their hands of the misery they have created for the women. By doing so, the artists mitigate the universal torture they, too, must abide.
Still pendent is Nietzsche’s view of tragic drama as a vehicle for expiation and rapprochement on behalf of the audience. In *Surviving Literary Suicide*, Jeffrey Berman refers to a “long mythic, religious, and literary tradition in which sacrificial death is linked to humanity’s rebirth” (92). If there is no end to the suffering that human beings must endure, then artists are charged with the ceaseless task of portraying “truth and beauty” and “the perfection of nature” as a kind of Dionysian-Apollonian ritual in which, in the footsteps of ancient Greek dramatic forms, the emotional and the rational are juxtaposed (*FN* 12-4; *Van Laan* 258-9, 264-5, 286-300). Daniel Haakonsen explains the process as “a liberation from chaos by letting chaos loose and building a new order out of that” (*Haakonsen* 167; qtd. in *Van Laan* 258), which could easily stand in as a definition of catharsis.

And so the dilemma of tragedy is perpetuated. It is progressively more credulous that Edmund Gosse, in the introduction to his translation of *Hedda Gabler*, finds at the crux of Ibsen’s social plays a mortal dilemma: “To be oneself is to slay oneself” (98). Or that Strindberg ruminates, “I hover between suicide and immortal life” (*SL* 288). Catharsis makes the horrors of life bearable. Likely, this is one of the lessons disseminated by the fervent Nietzsche proponent, Brandes, which Benedictsson sought to condemn. Erna feels no great relief when presented with the body and final note of her friend; on the contrary, she is dispossessed of reconciliation and longs for death herself, an articulation of the outcome Benedictsson craved, perhaps the parting gift of the truly self-destructive type who would, if she could, take the world with her. Alland verbalized it, but one hears the voice of the playwright, a woman who frequently postured fatalistically, when the character goads, “Only when one is standing at the precipice of
suicide or madness does one know whether or not he is capable of hate. You know nothing about yourself yet.” ‘Först när man stått vid branten av självmord eller vansinne vet man om man kan hata eller ej. Du vet ingenting om dig själv ännu’ (Db 122).
Chapter IV
Woman as Artist Emerges as New Archetype

Scholarly studies abound of Ibsen and Strindberg’s contribution to the canon of modern literature, which engendered a novel protagonist: the individual at odds with civilization at large. Either the general public has progressed in such a way as to provoke intransigency in or otherwise estrange certain of its constituents, or the solitary entity has developed beyond the bounds of a cumbersome and reactionary society and, therefore, seeks liberation. The “Woman Problem” in Scandinavia’s Modern Breakthrough confounds the literary and dramatic evolution by introducing a character that encounters both conflicts simultaneously; the modern woman must vie with a culture that is reluctant to sanction her emancipation while contending with a counter-culture that seeks to frame a standard for contemporary femininity without regard for the ipseity of the woman herself.

The critical ambivalence Victoria Benedictsson faced confirms that even those atypical women approaching creative expression in a still male-dominated profession faced challenges while exploring their own identities. Women’s issues written from a feminine perspective are tendentious, while a woman’s struggle depicted by a man is an avant-garde examination of emerging enlightenment. With limited options in the quest for self-awareness, the female must direct her creative proclivity to affairs of love. And when these channels prove to be obstructed by traditional mores and inhibited by the emergence of a new “liberated” but still male-driven approach to sex, the subjugated
woman is left with one avenue in the direction of autonomy and release: the disposition of her body. In fin-de-siècle fiction and in reality, suicide is a viable palette for the feminine artist in the dispirited, definitive effort to reclaim her selfhood and sexuality.

Unfulfilled Woman with Artistic Inclinations

Whether or not Victoria Benedictsson would have aligned herself with a “feminist” movement seems immaterial since Katrin Alas informs us that the Swedish equivalent of the word had not entered the lexicon until the 1890s, sometime after Benedictsson’s death (132). What has been established is that the turn-of-the-century author strove for recognition irrespective of her gender. And she was well aware of the negative impact a male-favored double standard and critical prejudice had upon a woman’s creative expression, impeding the process and reception of female artistry. As Erna avers in *Den bergtagna*, “I would have been [a Master] if I was a man.” ‘Jag skulle bli [en storhet] om jag vore en man’ (114). By the turn of the century, however, an unprecedented number of Scandinavian women (among them Anne Charlotte Leffler, Alfhild Algrell, and Ellen Key) were determined to make their voices heard (Alas 132-4). And what they had to say judiciously answered Georg Brandes’ call for, as Ross Shideler and Evert Sprinchorn accredit, a literature that broke through barriers and responded to a rapidly changing environment (Shideler 59; “Ibsen” 58-9, 68-9).

Narrative characters simulate the intentions of their authors, the natural corollary of dramatic work. Julie, Hedda and Louise, as protagonists and representatives of modernity, are enlisted in a program through which they challenge their ineluctable, congenital membership in a class or sex-based institution. When Julie despairs, “I don’t
have anything that’s my own” (MJ 100), she, per Leonardo F. Lisi, stresses with “the very negation of individual agency… the presence of a separate self that is not identical to the determining forces of society and gender” (252). Accordingly, the heroines are not exclusively the mouthpieces of their creators—they become artists themselves.

To Ibsen, Leo Lowenthal imputes the theme of preserving autonomy amidst powerful pressure to assimilate (148-9). Orley I. Holtan defines the “myth of the modern man” in an essay that spotlights Hedda Gabler among Ibsen’s other works:

The alienation, the rootlessness, the lack of purpose and direction that characterize Ellida Wangel and Hedda Gabler are very modern problems. Indeed, they form the basis of much of modern literature. This desperate condition of man has been implicit in most of the earlier plays, in Brand and Peer Gynt certainly, and especially in those beginning with The Wild Duck. In those which follow Hedda Gabler Ibsen makes it explicit, following his misfits, Solness, Borkman, and Rubek, through their frenzied attempts to realize themselves against the limitations of society and existence to their eventual and inevitable doom. (95-6)

Hedda is herein amalgamated into a list of predominantly male heroes in search of self-sovereignty, with death being the common end. This agonizing quest, to summon Lowenthal again, who himself evokes Brandes, is the main current of contemporary art (149). For Brandes, “the suicide-epidemic in literature is one of those symptoms of the emancipation of the individual” (MC I: 53).

Suicide represents the culmination of the woman’s pain, which Birgitta Thompson suggests is an essential element of Benedictsson’s creative process. Thompson notes the mythological connotations of Den bergtagna’s title and narrative, drawing a comparison between the female protagonist’s intense feelings for her artist-lover and the tremendous emphasis Benedictsson placed upon her literary accomplishments (145-6), interpreting Den bergtagna as a “triangular drama between the artist, the man, and the
woman” (148). Thompson explicitly links the lover’s unconditional devotion to the unrelenting demands of creativity and productivity in Benedictsson’s world. Creative work, love, and life are all imbued with equal meaning. “Desperation” is the artist’s plight (146). Romantic love is interchangeable with expressions of artistic aspiration and frustration, a correlation most apparent in Benedictsson’s journal *Stora Boken*, where the author oscillates between her value as a woman and as a writer within the same entry (III: 266-9). Love and art are inseparable, one acting as a metaphor for the other in a manner that mirrors Benedictsson’s own deep-rooted struggles. Sacrificing one’s life for art/love is a form of martyrdom, the ultimate display of devotion and a way in which the disenfranchised woman can leave her mark on posterity and, at the same time, communicate her despondency with immediacy.

As ubiquitous as the sensual scenarios and/or innuendos are in *Miss Julie*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Den bergtagna*, they are only one means of satisfying the creative urge. In Hedda’s case, procreative matters are to be avoided at all costs, making her something of a generative anomaly. Norseng calls Hedda a “perverted artist,” fixated on aesthetics, who endeavors to craft something beautiful first through orchestrating Ejlert Løvborg’s death and subsequently with her own (4,13, 17, 21-3). Joan Templeton made note of Hedda’s need to “put some meaning into her life” in her earlier investigation into Hedda’s atypical qualities (231-2). These assertions correspond with Ibsen’s reflections on the character as a desperately unhappy woman who cannot verbalize her raison d’être (*IW* 382-3). Likewise, Alice Templeton’s analysis of *Miss Julie* solicits pathos on behalf of a young woman whose private revolution has no apposite ammunition. Rather, she naively uses intercourse as a seditious resource (475, 80).
At times, Ibsen and Strindberg make Hedda’s and Julie’s artistic inclinations unmistakable. Hedda has brought her piano to the Tesman household, one of her rare possessions from premarital life, her penultimate instrument of transformation, the synthesis of pain and proof-of-life. In a Nietzschean homage, her “obsession with the god of wine…the passionate, expressive, overflowing force, the flood breaking through all restraint,” as Norseng depicts, is brought to fruition via a wild polka (17). And then there is the painting of her father, prominently displayed, an icon not of changeability but of Hedda Gabler’s integrity. The fatal-woman archetype shows signs of being, as Holtan proposes, the by-product of stymied creative energy (82, 94). Though Caroline Mayerson restricts Hedda’s thematic symbols to weaponry, such as fire and pistols (135), these are but two of the implements Hedda exploits in her mission, the latter discharged only when music fails to deliver.

From lights up, Julie is dancing with abandon as a means of rebellion. She’s “absolutely crazy,” Jean declares, a bold indictment of Julie’s disregard for propriety and convention (MJ 62). Julie’s ménage-à-trois fantasy in one of her concluding monologues is a work of virtuosic imagination. Extravagantly visual, Julie conjures up scenes of mountains and castles, bells and whistles, and trips to the theatre and opera, even a stop at the museum to take in the paintings of Rubens and Raphael (97). By the end of her sales pitch, one gets the impression that her creativity is a far more formidable force than her grasp on reality.

It is, therefore, theoretically viable to perceive an artist’s perspective and compulsion in Strindberg’s Julie and Ibsen’s Hedda. Victoria Benedictsson’s play, however, makes this association unambiguous. Louise’s relationship to the sculptor and
her role as avatar in the creative process are central to the storyline. *Den bergtagna’s* artistic triangle to which Thompson refers heightens and justifies the impression of the frustrated creative drive in each of the other ill-fated female protagonists. Julie and Hedda dabble in their appreciation, whereas art is, ironically, Louise’s salvation, her lifeline until meeting Alland. Her parents dead, her sister shut up in an asylum, her brother married and traveling abroad, herself recovering from typhus, Louise has come to Paris because she has “always harbored an interest in art” ‘alltid hyst intresse för konst’ (*Db* 100). Omitted from the translations, but present very early on in the original text is an exchange between Louise and Erna:

**LOUISE.** Do you know where they went?
**ERNA:** Sure, the Mairie du Louvre to see Bernard’s [Besnard’s] paintings, but they could well have done that by now. We had arranged to meet here.

**LOUISE.** Vet du inte vart de gått?
**ERNA:** Jo, till Mairie du Louvre för att se på Bernards målningar, men det kunde de väl ha gjort för länge sen. Vi hade stämt möte här. (85)

The snippet of dialogue, possibly disposed of in subsequent editions because it does little or nothing to propel the story, does efficiently set the locale and invoke the appeal of the city.

Alland concedes the reciprocal magnitude of artistry and autonomy when he comments on Erna’s achievements in Paris:

She had painted her self-portrait in her friend's studio. The self-portrait was a masterpiece of its kind, so bold, so powerful, so ruthlessly true. It earned her a medal at the Salon. It gave her what for an artist is more necessary than anything else: self-reliance.

**Hon hade målat sitt självsporträtt i vännens atelje. Det självsporträttet var ett mästerstycke i sitt slag, så djärvt, så kraftigt, så hänsynslöst sant. Det**
inbringade henne medalj på salongen. Det gav henne vad som för en
könstnär är nödvändigare än allt annat: självtillit. (104)

For Erna, self-empowerment made her a great painter, and attaining prominence provided
her with additional independence.

There can be no mistaking the emphasis placed on the artistic work when
considering Louise’s detailed chronicle of the sculpture she inspired:

To begin with, it dazzled my sight, but then I made out the silhouette and
it all became firm and clear. I will treasure it always. To my last moment!

…

“Fate.” That's what he calls it. The pedestal formed by a rough boulder
that at the left side rises upward and back seems to suggest the entrance to
a cave or gorge. The strong slope ahead, an edge of seaweed and some
tears of sea-grass give the perception of the ocean. You feel its very cold
air. He has tightly conducted the scene to provide an atmosphere of
proximity.

…

The main figure, of slightly larger stature than the other form, is a female
shape with strong limbs, head shrouded with a cascading pall, which the
storm tears at. With one hand she holds it together around her neck, so that
it partially covers her head and brow. With the other hand, she reaches out
as if to take the support of the trunk of the boulder. She is leaning forward
and her eyes look out sharply and icily into space, towards other invisible
targets. She seems to be in motion and has just taken a step forward over
the body, which is discarded on the ground.

…

Yes, a lifeless, naked female body. The feet and legs are down across the
hillside, facing the sea, the head has been supported against a rock at the
den's entrance, chin dropped against the chest, and arms resting limply and
heavily, tossed about with the waves. The whole body, its dead,
abandoned pose, is so pure, so simple, but so gracefully composed, so
admirably executed. It is powerlessness and helplessness, ennobled to the
supremacy of death’s quietude. And that face, as one looks in! Its
tranquility has something of unearthly equilibrium: the cool calm of she
for whom human desires and human suffering no longer exist - the holy
oblivion of all that which we call good and evil. This face, in which
death’s smile is solidified as an insoluble enigma, a prophetic work. That
is what death must be like.

…

As I stood there and watched, I was seized with fear, anxiety, admiration.
This master, this artist I had treated as an equal, this man that had been a
companion in my daily life; I had thought that he needed my comfort, my help, even. And he is a god of art!

Att börja med var det som om det bländat min syn, men så löste sig konturerna och de stod där fasta och klara. Jag skall minnas det alltid. I min sista stund.

…

Det var vad han kallar det. Ödet---Fotställningen bildas av ett skrovligt klippblock, som vid vänstra sidan höjer sig uppåt och som bakåt tycks antyda liksom ingången till en håla eller klyfta. Den starka slutningen framåt, en kant av sjögår och några revor av tång ger föreställningen om havet. Man känner själva dess kalla luft, så har han förstått att ge stämningen av dess närhet.

…

Huvudfiguren är av något mer än kroppstorlek; en kvinnoskepnad med starka lemmar, inhöjda i ett från huvudet nedföllande draperi, vari stormen sliter; med ena handen håller hon det samman omkring halsen, så att det delvis täcker huvudet och skuggar över pannan, andra handen sträcker hon ut, som för att ta stöd av klippblocket. Hållningen är framåtlutad och blicken spejar skarpt och kallt fram - ut i rymden, mot ett för andra osynligt mål. Hon tycks vara i gående och har just tagit ett steg framåt, över den kropp, som ligger hänkastad på marken.

…


…

När jag stod där och såg, då greps jag av bävan, ångest, beundran. Denne mästare, denne konstnär hade jag behandlat som en like, denne man hade varit kamraten i mitt dagliga liv; jag hade trott att han behövde min tröst, nästan min hjälp. Och han är en konstens storman! (149-50)

Louise herewith betrays her unmitigated adulation of the sculpture far more volubly than she ever praises the sculptor himself. Considering that she was giddy with anticipation at the prospect of meeting Gustav Alland based on his professional reputation (91-5), the
alpha and omega of Louise’s attachment to him stems from his capabilities as a craftsman, not as a lover.

Cultural enrichment was a part of Hedda, Julie, and Louise’s formative education; music, dancing, and fine art were evidently a customary if not compulsory facet of the nineteenth century young Scandinavian woman’s edification. But there is also an insidious, shadowy facet of artistry infused into all three texts. The discourse and action of the three plays, subsequent scholarly analysis thereof, as well as the personal correspondence and memoirs of Strindberg and Benedictsson in particular, contain references to vampirism and cannibalism, evidence of a kind of metaphysical violence, perhaps one of the symptoms of the artists’ impulsive aggression. As Wichmann and Thompson surmise, one may prove one’s existence either by inflicting pain on others or by exhibiting one’s own wounds (Wichmann 144-5; Thompson 146). Hedda has been so indicted. “Dolls emancipated can become vampires,” Lucas contends in his contrast of Ibsen characters Nora and Hedda. Julie and Hedda are described dually as sadists and masochists (Lucas 221, 367; Shideler 58). Benedictsson’s vernacular is filled with bouts of macabre-laced anguish. For example “…to live is to be torn and bleeding. How I have suffered!” ‘…att lefva är att slitas och blöda. Hur har jag icke lidit!’ (SB III: 300)

In chronicling the tormented psyche, Strindberg, Ibsen, and Benedictsson have observed and exemplified how a person may find sustenance in another’s suffering. It becomes the method by which the Scandinavian naturalist gathers inspiration and, quite literally, usurps life. We see it in Strindberg’s “expression of implacable, cannibal like interest without the slightest trace of human compassion” as he learned of Benedictsson’s prior suicide attempt (Lundegård 114-5; qtd. in Sprinchorn, “Ibsen” 65-6). Strindberg
perceived man-eaters all around him. Moralist writer and ex-ally Björnstjerne Björnson was a “spiritual cannibal who wanted to eat up all souls that came within reach” (qtd. in Prideaux 118). Rebecca from Ibsen’s Rosmerholm is, according to Strindberg, “an unconscious cannibal, who has devoured Mrs. Rosmer’s soul” (Psychic Murder 116).

Reidar Dittmann proposes that it was under Strindberg’s influence that Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting, previously entitled Love and Pain, came to be known as Vampire (91-2). Michael Robinson, in his study Strindberg and Autobiography, places Strindberg in the quandary of a naturalist who uses his own life for inspiration: “…the writer who preys upon himself and offers up his flesh for others to consume also battens upon those close to him and devours them like a cannibal or vampire” (137). Sarah Balkin discusses the presence of vampiric characters in Strindberg’s oeuvre and surmises that they subsist by “draining life and energy from people” (4). It’s difficult to determine whether Julie is truly a victim when a thoroughly flustered and stammering Jean, in the concluding speech, accuses Julie of “taking all my strength, making me a coward” (MJ 102). Jean tersely decapitates Julie’s bird when she contemplates taking it with them on their fanciful escapade. The sight of blood unleashes Julie’s tirade in which she proclaims, “I think I could drink from your skull! I’d like to bathe my feet in your open chest and eat your heart roasted whole!” (95)

A more discreet hunger for the essence of another being is there in Hedda’s early interactions with Thea Elvsted. Hedda draws closer to the other woman, gaining her confidence with kind words, intent and hanging on Thea’s every utterance, not out of any sense of sincere empathy, but to possess Thea’s secrets for her own purposes, as if to absorb Thea’s ability to integrate herself with men like Løvborg and undertake a man’s
work. So, too, does Benedictsson, in a moment of remarkable insight, confess her unabashed methods of summoning the muse as she listens to a companion share a story of attempted suicide: “I felt disgust and derision. I showed her sympathy… I made a toast, because I wanted more details. And I got them” (SB II: 143-5; Wichmann 142-144, 147-8). Sonia Wichmann substantiates Benedictsson’s professed awareness that a novelist, at least in the vein of naturalism, must behave as “a cannibal” and a “bloodsucker,” recollecting an episode in which a fellow writer accuses Benedictsson of “sucking people dry” in order to feed the muse (Wichmann 147; SB III: 55, 291; II: 232). By showing the appropriation of intimacy—channeled from one’s own life or procured from others—to be “a necessary tool for the realist writer,” Wichmann bridges a connection between aggression—masochistic or sadistic—and creativity (143, 147-8). The effrontery and invasiveness that had long been affiliated with the assertive and powerful male are reincarnated as a resource of the shrewd, astute modern artist, regardless of gender. Perhaps then Hedda’s infamous antagonism is not an offshoot of her pining for a penis so much as pen and paper, or paintbrush and canvas, a medium with which to work and a gallery for exhibition. Julie’s outburst following the murder of her bird is a transubstantiation of her anger and impotence, a dramatic vocalization of her chronic grief at its boiling point. Affliction is converted into art as the creator consumes the spiritual host. For Hedda, Julie, and Louise, death is the work of art, just as it became for Benedictsson in her last ditch effort to be read and understood.
Suicide as Masterpiece

On January 6, 1888, Benedictsson took an excessive amount of morphine and permitted her trusted friend Axel Lundegård to stay by her side as the drugs took effect. Lundegård eventually sought assistance from August Strindberg, who was staying with his family at the same hotel. Meanwhile, Benedictsson vomited up the overdose, taking days to recover (Sprinchorn, “Ibsen” 65-6). Five days later, Strindberg wrote to Lundegård requesting to borrow all the works of Benedictsson in his possession. As an afterthought, Strindberg asks, “How is Fru B?” In the summer of 1888, Benedictsson checked into Copenhagen’s Hotel Leopold and, armed with a razor and a mirror, guided by her reflection, she cut deep into her carotid artery whereby she bled out in the bathtub. In August, the month after this later, successful attempt on her life, Strindberg offered his publisher “the first Naturalistic Tragedy in Swedish Drama” (SL 261, 280). The play is Miss Julie and, despite Strindberg’s title, it was not the first naturalistic tragedy. Victoria Benedictsson had by the spring of 1888 already penned a draft of the play Den bergtagna, a naturalistic drama with a similarly tragic conclusion.

Strindberg admitted to using Benedictsson as a source for his work. Aside from Benedictsson, there are multiple theories about the origins of the characters of Julie and Hedda, especially with regards to their violent ends. Norseng points out the anagrammatical resemblance between “Gabler” and “Alberg,” the surname of an acquaintance of Ibsen who took her life with poison (14). And then there is the astonishing account of Adda Ravnkalde, a 21-year old aspiring Danish author, who ensured her suicide in 1883 with poison, by slitting her wrists, and then shooting herself.
in the head (Tjonneland 33-5; Norseng 14). Georg Brandes recounts his memory of Ravnkilde at a university event, a mere two hours before her death:

She looked to be in high spirits, lively, her eyes had an unusual sparkle, she smiled and laughed several times during the lecture. It didn’t occur to me that at that moment she deserved sympathy, and least of all did I think that at home she had already laid out all the instruments of suicide. (Tjonneland 35; qtd. in Norseng 14).

Brandes’ bewilderment is akin to that of the surviving characters in *Hedda Gabler* and *Den bergtagna*. One can almost hear him speaking, as the Judge declares at the discovery of Hedda’s body, “…people don’t *do* such things as that” (*HG* 272). One can almost envision Brandes in the Judge’s final stage direction of the play, “*half-fainting in the arm-chair*” (272) when Brandes writes to his brother of viewing Benedictsson’s remains: “The sight of her corpse was dreadful” (*Selected Letters* 160).

But how is an outsider to know the depths of suffering that are not made public? Quoting Camus and A. Alvarez’s *The Savage God*, Norseng sets out to justify how one “cannot know what is in the ‘heart’ of a woman who kills herself” (5). As Camus explains, suicide “is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art” (4; Norseng 17). And Alvarez’s postulation that suicidal individuals “must have brooded endlessly over the details, selecting, modifying, perfecting them like artists” (145) (Norseng 21) has definite resonance in the works presently investigated. It is not sufficient to infer that a suicide is not properly motivated solely because the perpetrator has not advertised her intentions.

Hence, Brandes’ doubts about the credibility of Julie’s and Hedda’s suicides also merit skepticism (*SL* 295-6, 428; *GB* 160; Norseng 7; Meyer 672). Sprinchorn does not breach the limits of the text with his charge that “Hedda’s decision to kill herself appears
impulsive, irrational, and capricious” (*Strindberg* 41). Sprinchorn does, however, give credence to Julie’s lethal melancholy and the critically pervasive oxymoron, Strindberg’s “Naturalistic Tragedy:”

The tragic catharsis results from seeing what lies beyond reason and reasoning beyond what is seen. The strict naturalist could not view life tragically because he limited himself to things he could explain, never venturing into the heart of darkness. He was satisfied to reason about what happened in the world by studying the facts. The tragedian wanted to explain the facts, which meant going beyond them. That is why Strindberg sought a higher naturalism. He was not content to reproduce reality as accurately as possible. He needed to create a second reality, an exaltation of life. (49)

If we are expected to embrace Julie, Hedda, and Louise as daughters of naturalism it is logical to expect that “what lies beyond what is seen” is even more reality. The fact that “the heart of darkness” cannot be perceived with the human eye does not mean that psychic pain is not a genuine malady, made visible through Strindbergian “vivisection” (*Psychic Murder* 113-8) and more recently through thanatology and derivative insights into the suicidal mind. Such methodical scrutiny demands bona fide cadavers, though as Edwin Shneidman counsels, slicing the brain will hardly explain the “psychache” (17-8; Norseng 5-6). Having real-world paradigms invites an audience to delve further into the emotional lives of quasi-fictional heroines, providing them with a case study in mental anguish.

By assimilating the consciousness of Victoria Benedictsson into her counterpart, Louise, we can more completely understand *Den bergtagna*’s protagonist as a virtual human being—not a narrative device, not a moralizing emblem, not a retelling of an antiquated fairy-tale, but an irrepressible person, animated in ways the playwright could never anticipate. Louise, in turn, animates and authenticates her contemporaneous sister-
protagonists. Julie transcends Strindberg’s best efforts to, as Børge Gedso Madsen asserts, “illustrate and ‘prove’ [her] creator’s pet physiological theories” (80). Julie is not Eve, a comparison Strindberg begets provocatively (MJ 73). Nor is she Pandora, another legendary woman whose trifling with a forbidden entity unleashes ruinous consequences.

Hedda is not Medea, a woman who would cause indescribable horrors to exercise her mounting rage, even commit filicide. Louise is none of the innumerable tragic heroines that have been cast in marble and stone, though the sight of herself represented as such enthralls her. Singularly, any one of the heroines could be classified as a resuscitation of a stock role from antiquity. In his preamble to Miss Julie, Strindberg traces the evolution of his “modern character”:

Not that the man-hating half-woman has not existed in all ages but…now that she has been discovered, she has come out into the open to make herself heard. (MJ 54)

Notwithstanding the dismissive platitude with which Strindberg begins his categorization, he foresees the debut of a species that is only just beginning to assume a definite form. Hedda, Julie, and Louise have more in common with each other than a few ambiguous plot points; their need to declare themselves is ground-breaking. Hedda and Julie, preceding Louise in her introduction to the naturalist genre, have broken the archaic mold. Louise takes up the banner and gives her caste enhanced definition and radical reinforcements when it comes to fluency, especially in the area of self-awareness. In concert the three heroines spawn a novel archetype: the female artist.

Seen within the context of their environment, as the genre stipulates, there is a plethora of reasons why the women would seek to escape their oppressive situations and write their own endings. With the advent of Den bergtagna, we bear witness to a woman
who seeks a resolution that brings both deliverance and self-salvation. Louise recognizes her likeness in Alland’s sculpture, a monument for which she serves as paragon. Alland may have carved the statue, but the subject is Louise. She sees herself in the body that has been cast away, but she is also the powerful figure, larger than life, that conquers mortality while maintaining unambiguous femininity. It is Louise who fully understands the implications of the statue, “Fate,” and with serene acquiescence she sheds frailty and fear in order to metamorphose into a divine version of herself. She then proceeds in the thick of a harsh and foreboding mise-en-scène to undertake her own destiny. With Louise as an exemplar, we can read Hedda and Julie as entities greater than casualties of circumstance or the prey of stronger-willed men. Hedda, who “has suicide on her mind when the drama commences” sends Løvborg to die as “the surrogate for herself,” an experimental coup de grâce, a rehearsal or first draft in ending oneself beautifully (Norseng 20-2). This is, in essence, what Benedictsson executed through Louise. Benedictsson, like Hedda, knew she would never be able to see the impact of her suicide, the glorious aftermath she imagined. Benedictsson exerts herself through Louise as Hedda maneuvers Løvborg, experimenting with the perfect application of a portentous death. Benedictsson’s plan was, of course, far more meticulous and, as a dry run, infinitely more effective. 22 Julie, too, has an accessory in the implementation of her ominous project. As Sprinchorn attests, she who “prefers to die rather than live in captivity,” is not driven to self-destruction, but proactively “orders Jean to order her to kill herself” (Strindberg 40). If she has been hypnotized, then the trance is “largely self-induced” (44). Linked by purpose and extremity of method, Hedda, Julie, and Louise’s
deaths are intentional and highly motivated, and as scholars such as Sprinchorn intuit from the chronicles of Julie and Hedda, they are palpably related.

Nils Rettersøl, in *Suicide: A European Perspective* explains, “Suicide attempts are often acts of impulse” (99). All three women employ determinant means to accomplish their aim; by gun, by razor, by calamitous plummet, they leave little or no chance for second thoughts or intervention from others. Hedda, in fact, shoots herself in the head, a technique used “almost exclusively by men” (92-3). Julie must slice deep into her neck, as Victoria Benedictsson did, in order to die, a scenario atypical of most self-inflicted “slashing” episodes, a method that “rarely constitutes a danger, but often alerts those around the person concerned” (99). The only one who sustains the characteristically female concern for safeguarding her appearance is Louise (92). Not coincidentally, hers is the only body brought onstage for viewing. Significantly, none of the ladies “try” to commit suicide. Rather, they elect to guarantee their deaths.

Yet, there is evidence to contradict the suicides as statements of purely personal resolve. Why does Hedda kill herself in such proximity to others? What compels Julie to extract permission from Jean to carry out an act that she is already set upon performing? Why should Louise ask forgiveness from Alland in taking something that never belonged to him in the first place? In making her death a public affair, in muddying the waters of free will, in ensuring that others will consider her final wishes, Julie, Hedda, and Louise—in that order—implicate others in their suicides. The message to their familiars is clear: *By cultivating bourgeois tyranny, you have made my life unbearable and are complicit in my demise. Now suffer the punishment.*
As Rettersøl reports, “It is striking to what extent people who take their own lives are obsessed by the consequences of doing so… A motive of revenge often plays a part” (101). Though Louise professes to assuage Alland’s guilt, her words do the opposite, pointing an indelible finger. She disclaims intending to cause him “the least little bit of sadness,” likely because she would rather see Alland in complete agony. Even Erna merits blameworthiness for her conscription in the à la mode standard of casual intimacy imposed by men. Thea is among those who are summoned to behold Hedda’s mutilated corpse; she does not escape culpability for her role as a silent partner in perpetuating erroneous notions of uniquely male genius. Any chance at a relationship between Thea and Tesman will be forever tarnished by his wife’s violent death, like Rosmersholm all over again. Poor Judge Brack, whose distress educes the priggish declaration, “But may God take pity on us, people don’t do such things as that,” and who probably meant women don’t do such things, must reevaluate everything he thought was good and true, not to mention formulate another plan for his evenings’ entertainment. Lastly, the imminent days at the Count’s estate are likely to be grueling ones in the wake of Julie’s sudden death. Jean, for his crimes, must return to an internment of his own making because he has rejected his only hope for spiritual and social liberation. Kristine must now face the grim prospect of a fiancé who has espied the happiness he dreamed of since boyhood and now summarily dismissed.

For all the latent vitriol, the women meet their ends with considerable serenity and conciliation. It is, for all three, among their most positive and euphoric moments in the narrative. For Julie, her decision to die is made “firmly” and approached “ecstatically” (101-2). Hedda surrounds herself with the objects that offer her the most comfort, her
piano and her pistols. Her concluding speech is delivered “clearly and firmly” (272). Her fervently played polka has the potential to resonate somewhere between unbridled, welcomed release and a self-administered, ritualistic final absolution. Louise testifies that she is calm and content with the way events have unfolded (158-9). She can at long last express herself, without fear of reproach or having her words twisted against her.

“You were my whole world, everything else, and everything that could ever be,” Louise tells Alland in the note read after her suicide. A vital distinguishing detail of Den bergtagna is that its heroine, Louise, leaves behind a letter with parting words. With these words, Louise dies loving on her own terms. She loved Alland absolutely, despite his insistence that love, like happiness, is fleeting and fickle, and that eternal, selfless devotion is an old-fashioned, artificial female fantasy. Alland defines love as passion, inseparable from erotica, which devours until it is full and makes no promises about the future. In Den bergtagna, Victoria Benedictsson has cast Alland as a bright star ascending from Brandes’ school of the Modern Breakthrough, which cast a spotlight on women of their era, but still only aesthetically, superficially. He views women as budding masterpieces to mold and derive inspiration from, and then, once the objet d’art is complete, and the man spiritually and sexually fulfilled, it is only natural to move on to the next project and/or amorous endeavor. Alland insists that a person cannot travel upwards from the apex of emotion and creative potential, and it is stifling to one’s essence to attempt to remain in one place. He is confident that his new image of Louise will unshackle her from her repressive conventionalism, as if his abandonment of her will draft another woman into the ranks of the “free love” movement. In his sculpture, the new and superior version of femininity steps forward over the old, expired form. Though
Alland offers his graphic— but still figurative— notion of progress, he is oddly ignorant of setting the stage for Louise’s actual demise.

Louise’s farewell message is, therefore, polysemous. She challenges Alland’s (anti)romantic manifesto on one hand and, on the other, decries her penury of an alternate means of establishing self-worth. Through Louise, Benedictsson expresses her perspective of the fin-de-siècle woman’s dilemma: love and art are compatible and inter-reliant, both having the capacity to bestow immortality. Without either, there is no raison d’être. The author, through her heroine, denies the existence of a zenith in any matter in which the human soul is engaged. Both love and art eclipse the ephemeral flesh and blood. Just as Alland’s pièce de résistance bestowed god-like status upon him, so too does Louise’s commitment to ardor in extremis.

Despite commonalities in the action, Benedictsson’s central female character stands apart from Ibsen’s and Strindberg’s in that Louise is able to affect the change she seeks by taking her own life. We are given entrée to the moments following her death and shown the effect the suicide had on others. Ibsen’s denouement comes close in that we get an initial response from the characters as each in quick succession encounters Hedda’s corpse, but their reactions do not move beyond shock. Strindberg’s Miss Julie ends with the heroine leaving the scene, weapon in hand, resolved to kill herself, but neither the audience nor any inhabitant of the manor house is witness to the finality of her death. It is clear that, for Hedda and Julie, their situations seem untenable, and their suicides are deliberate, but we do not know whether either woman has fully come to terms with the events and factors that set the course for her demise. Nor do we witness an effect on the collective mindset as a result of their suicides as we do in the final
moments of *Den bergtagna*. *Den bergtagna* imparts a cipher through which Julie and Hedda’s ineffable longing, angst, and objectives can finally be construed. Louise predicts sadness, guilt, and incredulity, apparently aware of the impact her death will have on those around her. It is a prophecy that comes to pass with customarily effusive Alland’s ensuing silence and shock and the compunction conveyed by Louise’s artist friend Erna that she did not chose the same fate. Hedda and Julie, it would seem, cannot withstand the fact that the men in their life will set the standards of intimacy, whereas Louise dies loving on her own terms.

When best efforts to generate a tolerable life fail, when all resources are exhausted, the autonomous being must sculpt with her last possession: her fate. Suicide is a work of art for Hedda, Julie and Louise, a magnum opus most fully realized in Victoria Benedictsson’s conception.
Chapter V
Summary and Conclusions

The preeminent contributors to the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough were aware of a female contingent, an increasingly vocal citizenry trying desperately to express themselves. In response, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg created protagonists that embodied this new wave of heroine-ism, which spoke specifically of their time. *Den bergtagna*, a play that anticipated *Hedda Gabler* and *Miss Julie* but reached the public eye only after the Ibsen and Strindberg plays, unlocks a more in-depth understanding of a period in Northern Europe when gender roles were shifting and still nebulous.

The central characters of the three naturalist works examined in this thesis react to and within their volatile, transitory society. Through their shared qualities, which included the non-existence of a mother figure, disaffection from their current surroundings, and the absence of occupational prospects, Hedda, Julie, and Louise form a bond which stresses the complex state of womanhood in the fin-de-siècle era in northern Europe. Ibsen and Strindberg constructed expositions of the quintessential late nineteenth century woman, one who is either unequipped or too irrepressible to thrive in the dynamic age. The male playwrights were, however, lacking a certain irreconcilably subjective quality: the experience of the woman herself. Victoria Benedictsson’s life and the likenesses imparted to her heroine, Louise, make moot the discussion of plausibility and beckon comparison with Julie and Hedda, who share certain traits with their
respective authors, but lived and died in widely divergent manners from the men who wrote them into the world. Through Benedictsson’s uniquely feminine perspective, one is able to see through the desperation channeled into the male-female relationships. These tenuous connections were the women’s only avenue of expression. Only through their contact with men could they communicate their worth or unutterable yearnings.

Even so, none of the women, not Hedda, not Julie, and not Louise, could perceive any constructive opportunity to articulate her spiritual or earthly dilemmas with either words or abstract language, although Louise sought to guarantee the particular statement of her suicide with a final written declaration. Their self-inflicted deaths were, in the women’s perception, their most accessible means of proclaiming their insufferable predicaments. Whereas Hedda and Julie show few indications of premeditation, Louise’s farewell missive and her interactions with others in the moments before her death betray a unique awareness. Louise interprets the play’s seminal opus, Alland’s sculpture, as the culmination of her love affair with him and a representation of her weaknesses and latent strength. In doing so, she makes yet another connection between art, love, and her life and its correlative ending, all intertwined and inseparable. Art becomes reality as Louise realizes she must die and for what purpose.

The verisimilitude of the intense human experience and the corresponding milieu became the paradigm for turn-of-the-century modern art. In *Den bergtagna*, art is a lifeline for the character of Erna. The creative masterpiece is the apogee Louise holds in high regard, but never considers herself capable of achieving of her own accord. Yet it was the wellspring of fulfillment. Louise was a devotee of Alland, who so egocentrically proclaimed,
It is strange. With the desire to work, there is also a thirst for ecstasy. Work begets romance or love begets work. I do not know which.


The bond between “work” and emotional, romantic attachment endures, however ambiguous.

The hallmark of Benedictsson’s work is the quest for self-identity, the impulse to establish one’s reason for living. So Sonia Wichmann tells us in her exposition of Benedictsson’s autobiographical writing. Benedictsson, she observes, “must kill off a part of herself in order to become a true artist” (148). The aspect that must perish is the female. This is the impasse of the female artist, and perhaps the fin-de-siècle New Woman by and large: to create in any capacity other than a wife and mother makes her “something of a man,” as Thompson cites one of Benedictsson’s many ruminations on herself as an author (148-9; *SB III: 350*).

The lasting contribution of the innovative works of the Modern Breakthrough, which exceed authorial expectations and design, is the re-appropriation of the creative urge as fundamentally female. Not only *can* a woman produce expressive compositions, she *must* in order to liberate herself from her oppressive circumstances. The adherence to a conventional system of gender identity leads to the continued deference to the male in matters of sexuality and individualistic exploits and, thus, inhibits a woman’s radical inclinations. Louise recognizes this with the revelation of the sculpture modeled after her, and proclaims her epiphany in the form of her martyrdom and her written rationalization thereof.
Benedictsson’s play is indeed a “feminist and theatrical missing link,” as one recent reviewer surmised (Benedict 49). *Hedda Gabler, Miss Julie,* and *Den bergtagna* are co-dependent factions of a unique strain of a budding genre that produced a new kind of heroine, one that breaks with the classical portrayal of the woman doomed by love. *Miss Julie, Hedda Gabler,* and *Den bergtagna* yielded astonishing and novel feminizations, grounded in their avant-garde epoch, a pioneering feat of Scandinavian naturalism. Benedictsson’s play patently submits the quandaries of The Woman Problem left unsettled, perhaps deliberately, by Ibsen and Strindberg. Hence, *Den bergtagna* is a crucial constituent of The Modern Breakthrough and an early, vital phase in the fruition of the female creative voice.
Endnotes

1 For a discussion of the far-reaching impact of Strindberg and Ibsen see Fahlgren 20-23; Marker 135; Hemmer 68-69; and Finney 91-93. Information on women writing and being produced and published in Scandinavia during the fin-de-siècle period is found in Rees 237; Johansson 48; Alas 134. For more background on “The Morality Debate” and “The Woman Question,” refer to Primander 119; Binding 18; Alas 132-4; Sprinchnorn, Ibsen 58-60; Finney 95-6; and Mayerson 132.

2 Details of women’s authorial perspective are available in Wilkinson’s “Feminism” 47-8, 50, 56; Johansson 48; Wichmann 143; Moberg, “Victoria Benedictsson” 379-80; Holm 4; Millard 38; Borg 17; Alas 128, 132-4. Scholars relating Strindberg’s work to Benedictsson’s include Primander 115, 119; Thompson 139, 152; Binding 18.

3 Benedictsson’s individualistic approach to the Woman Question is mentioned in Wichmann 140-1, 148; Wilkinson, “Feminism” 50; Thompson 146-7; Alas 132-3.

4 See Bayley’s version of Den bergtagna, The Enchantment, for an endorsement of Benedictsson’s relative obscurity internationally and historically (viii).

5 Den bergtagna is translated as The Enchantment or Spellbound.

6 For speculation and documentation of how Benedictsson’s life and death may have shaped Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler and Strindberg’s Miss Julie, consult Shideler 61-2; Moberg, “Victoria Benedictsson” 379; Benedict 49; Millard 38; Haakonsen 230-2; Norseng 14; Sprinchorn, “Ibsen” 58, 66. Michael Robinson, in a biographical introduction to Strindberg’s letters from October 1887 to March 1889, asserts that Benedictsson’s suicide would inform the creation Miss Julie, a contention justified by the
fact that Benedictsson and Strindberg moved in the same literary circles and were well aware of each other (SL 251; Shideler 61-2). Strindberg confessed that Benedictsson was, indeed, an inspiration for his writing, but was only willing to admit that she served as a prototype for Tekla from *Creditors*, a claim that Robinson perfunctorily dismisses (SL 251, 287, 425). With regards to the potential cross-influence of all three Scandinavian playwrights, Strindberg insists that Hedda is a composite of Strindberg’s own female characters (SL 345-6, 438, 472, 522) and Evert Sprinchorn supports the notion that *Hedda Gabler* is Ibsen’s reply to *Miss Julie* (Strindberg 40). Sprinchorn recognizes Georg Brandes and Harald Høffding, major players in Scandinavia’s morality debate, as the source for the characters Løvborg and Tesman (“Ibsen” 38-77).

7 See Norseng 7; Meyr 672; Madsen 71; J. Templeton 204-6 for arguments highlighting the paucity of Hedda and Julie’s intentional suicides.


9 The play’s exposition divulges a recent incident involving a riding crop, which Julie used to taunt her beau until he grabbed the whip, hit her with it, and broke both the implement of derision and his commitment to Julie.

Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical citations for the play *Den bergtagna* are abbreviated as *Db* and refer specifically to *Den bergtagna*. Ed. Jenny Berggren and Christo Burman. Umeå: Atrium, 2008. Print.

Whereas I have used existing translations of *Hedda Gabler* and *Miss Julie*, I have undertaken my own translations of *Den bergtagna* and *Stora Boken* unless otherwise noted, as no complete English translation was found of either manuscript.

The assumed pronouns used in this translation are masculine. However, Durkheim refers to both the suicidal male and female.

“Lilly” in the Lundegård version and subsequent translations.

Here I have used Moberg’s translation, but have followed up with a direct quote of Benedictsson’s original text from the prose version of *Den bergtagna*.

“And if I didn’t know better, I would swear a man’s hand created them.” ‘Och om jag inte visste bättre, så skulle jag svära på att en mans hand utfört dem’ (*Db* 104).

The intellectual and ethical conflict approached a climax in 1887 and persisted with Brandes’ lecture series promoting Friedrich Nietzsche (Larsson 327; Sprinchorn, “Ibsen” 59). Benedictsson was in attendance for at least two of the talks (68). Ibsen followed developments through the newspapers (*Letters of Henrik Ibsen* 420).

The appellation, “King of the Mountain Trolls,” is a character in Scandinavian folklore from whence the play’s title derives—*Den bergtagna* is one “taken by the mountain” (Holm 4). In the tale, a young woman walks through an enchanted part of the forest, where she encounters a magical and ominous king and is charmed by his powers. She forsakes her family and betrothed to live with him in his fairy-tale realm.

For more notes on Benedictsson’s reaction to Brandes’ criticism of *Fru Marianne*, see Wichmann 149; Borg 20; Böök 200-1; Sprinchorn, “Ibsen” 63.


Wichmann’s translations.

Albeit for Tekla from *Creditors* (*SL* 287).

Despite Hedda’s coaching, Løvborg accidentally shoots himself in the entrails and dies a presumably hideous and agonizing death.

The *Rosmersholm* storyline revolves around the suicide of Rosmer’s wife. Rosmer is romantically and emotionally attached to Rebecca, but the union is doomed by the revelation that Rebecca was circuitously complicit in his wife’s death.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


