

# The Intermedial Play of Classical Paintings in Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the amalgamation of multiple epochs which rejuvenates the purpose of intermediality. It is based on classical artworks selected from different periods, presented in a modern play that can reignite the concept of sexual awakening. Frank Wedekind's popular modern drama *Spring Awakening* (1891) infuses multiple artworks to envision the fragility of innocence among children; youngsters being exposed to sexual adolescent temptations, social taboos, and desires that led to tragic events due to the demands of a moral conventional society. We will mainly focus on Wedekind's choice of classical paintings in his play *Spring Awakening*, which conveys the nuanced concept of scopophilia, sexual naivety, and the power of nudity among young pupils in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Why were these classical paintings presented in the play? What were the alluding reasons? Such questions were left unexamined. Thus, we will explore three selected paintings to unravel the depths of Wedekind's subtle interpretations regarding the inevitability of human instinctiveness among the young characters. First, we will study the initial inspiration of Edward Burne-Jone's *The Blessed Damozel* (1898) based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem of the same name to explore the multitude of love and its dynamics in both the play and the painting. Second, we will scrutinise the concept of women's vulnerability by depicting the context behind the painting *Susanna and The Elders* – a legacy from *Mademoiselle Angelique*, and lastly, we will decipher the characteristics of the goddess, *Venus*, in Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus and Adonis* (1634-1636) which was inspired by the mythological characters in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* correlated with Frank's characters and plot in the play. Hence, we will vicariously live through three paintings with its given background, to understand why Frank Wedekind's applied it in his play *Spring Awakening*.

**Keywords:** Spring Awakening, intermediality, classical paintings, sexual awakening, innocence, social conventions, women's vulnerability

## 1. Introduction

Within the narrative of *Spring Awakening* (1891), the youthful characters emerge as victims in the hands of a conventional society that rigorously prohibits the imparting of knowledge about copulation and intimacy to the younger generation. This oppressive environment imposes upon them an internalized sense of guilt and impurity, albeit they are experiencing the natural tendency of puberty, however, they ultimately became the catalyst for their downfall. The narrative deftly navigates the consequences of societal taboos, portraying how the suppression of essential knowledge contributes to the tragic events of these characters. It is important to note that during Wedekind's modern time, in the mid nineteenth century, Germany, the aspect of a man regarding his instinctual desires was considered repugnant; expected to be suppressed and buried. However, what Wedekind is pointing out here is the psychological disruption that arises from such oppressive environment and how it could lead to the perversion between nudity and innocence. Thus, idealised modesty and sexual restraint were the moral code of German cultural conventions, echoing the conservative, obsequious, and inconspicuous values akin to the Victorian ethos.

Frank Wedekind utilised the element of intermediality to explore the relationship between art mediums, such as classical paintings, and literature. Intermediality, which surpasses the confines of individual media forms, facilitates a deeper understanding between text and various art forms. As Eric Méchoulan defined intermediality in his article "Intermediality: An Introduction to the Arts of Transmission" (2015), "intermediality has become a fashionable concept: it appears whenever we speak about what we once referred to easily as the medium or media, of systems and apparatuses, *misses en scène* and structures" (p. 3). It fosters complex collaborations, creating new modes of expression and

meaning, "in some cases it holds the potential to redefine the purpose of an art or a specific medium" (p. 3). In a sense, intermediality resembles intertextuality but diverges by implementing real-life mediums as references or symbols to innovate or forge new avenues of expression. As Lars Elleström argued in *Media Borders, Multimodality, and Intermediality* (2010):

Intermediality cannot fully be understood without grasping the fundamental conditions of every single medium and these conditions constitute a complex network of both tangible qualities of media and various perceptual and interpretive operations performed by the recipients of media. (p. 13)

This intermedial interplay between art and literature, whether through music, painting, or film, transcends storytelling, enabling narratives to extend beyond mere words and imaginations. It grants readers a deeper and tangible experience of the beauty of art itself—its origins, creators, inspirations—and the author's deliberate use in incorporating such art into their text as a form of 'self-referential' device. Per the words of Werner Wolf et al. in *Metareference across Media: Theory on Case Studies* (2019):

Intertextuality and intermedial reference are all self-referential devices that – like most generally self-referential forms – have a potential for metareference...the affinity between general forms of self-reference and metareference at any rate justifies once again the fact that both are classified under one and the same umbrella term, 'self-reference'. (p. 63)

Which is why it is quite interesting to discuss the copies of classical paintings that Hans Rilow secretly owned, either acquired by stealing from his father's secret desk or even from

his brother's college book. Despite knowing that Hans used these copies to secretly fulfil the nature of his adolescent desires, there are still profound implications that foreshadows the upcoming events correlated to the selected paintings presented in the play. Moreover, each painting encapsulates significant elements, serving as an intermedial conduit between the children's world and the classical realm depicted in the artworks. Therefore, this paper aims to capture the key factors of selected paintings, namely Edward Burne-Jone's *The Blessed Damozel*, *Susanna* and *The Elders* – a legacy from Mademoiselle Angélique, and Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus and Adonis*, in order to explore the fundamental depths of these artworks merged in Frank Wedekind's modern drama *Spring Awakening: A Children's Tragedy*, while examining the intermedial intersections between visual art and theatrical expression. Through the lens of intermediality, which emphasizes the interplay between painting and drama, this study uncovers the ways in which Wedekind's play draws upon the imagery, themes, and aesthetic sensibilities of these renowned artworks. In light of this, the goal is to enrich a revitalized understanding of both the paintings themselves and the dramatic text they inspire during the modern age.

### **Burne-Jone's *The Blessed Damozel* (1898): Hans' Metaphorical Lovers**

Edward Burne-Jones, a renowned artist of the mid-nineteenth century associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, embraced both the aesthetic manifestations of the medieval period and the altar-like compositions reminiscent of Renaissance paintings. Initially, Burne-Jone's *The Blessed Damozel* (1898) draws inspiration from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem of the same title. The narrative behind the artwork revolves around a woman who passed away and now awaits her lover above in the Heaven. She is described as beautiful and enticing, which is why Burne-Jone complements the perception of the depicted poem with such intricate details—her flowing hair, her elegant attire, and graceful body posture, leaning over the edge of the heaven to observe her lover's whereabouts. Hence, the palpable yearning for their reunion, as articulated in the poem, is visually intensified by the artist's judicious use of a vibrant and transcendental palette, effectively imbuing the painting with a thematic resonance of divinity. Notably, the golden robe adorning the damozel symbolically conveys her celestial status, accentuating the separation between the realms of heaven and earth, as well as between the divine damozel and her mortal lover.

In the context of the modern drama *Spring Awakening*, in scene three, the character Hans was mentioning all his former "wives" (which are painting copies). Six of them have been metaphorically "murdered," alluding to the demise of each lover, only to be replaced by another art piece. Hans then mournfully narrates the upcoming tragic fate of his current lover, Desdemona (referring to the reproduction of the *Venus of Palma Vecchio*), "you stir me up but your flesh can't move" (Wedekind, p. 41). Like the ones before her, she is destined to be murdered (tossed out) due to her unreciprocated "inhumane" (inanimate), cold affections towards him. Furthermore, Hans was mulling over the idea to replace her with Burne-Jone's *The Blessed Damozel*, in hopes of finding solace and recovery. Interestingly, the story behind Damozel is about a woman who is longing for her lover as mentioned

above; however, its presence in Wedekind's modern play underlines a bond between Hans and his former lovers who were metaphorically deceased by him. One could infer that the primary reason he opted for *The Blessed Damozel*, might anticipate his final decision to resort to a modest and virtues partner, such as Damozel, since she stands out as the sole female figure among all the other figures in his previous paintings that did not appear bare and nude, but rather emanating a sense of modesty and coy charm. However, it is more evident to interpret that it reflects on his aching fantasy that his lovers are, one way or another, waiting for him in the heavens while he, a mortal, must endure the absence of their affections, "it is not the sins that you have to die for, but mine" (Wedekind, p. 41). In employing the art form of the Blessed Damozel, it can be denoted that Wedekind skilfully crafted a distinct yet an implicit narrative style of intermediality, as it is known for its capacity to interweave aesthetics into new forms of expression. As noted by Jørgen Bruhn in his work *The Intermediality of Narrative Literature* (2016):

[T]he word "intermediality" is still used more or less synonymously with inter-aesthetic research or 'interart' studies. As compared to interart studies, the term intermediality designates a broader aesthetic and technological field of investigation, instead of focusing only on the conventional art (music, the arts, literature), thus opening the investigation to other contemporary aesthetic forms like performance art, digital poetry, or non-aesthetic medialities. (p. 14)

This perspective underscores the evolving nature of artistic inquiry, expanding beyond traditional boundaries to embrace the multifaceted intersections of modern expression. In light of this, such intermedial symbolism may represent the impact of Hans' inner void, signifying the pent-up frustrations regarding the lack of warmth and intimacy that are enforced to remain repressed by the social norms of his time. Just like what Sterling Fishman explicated in his journal article "The History of Childhood Sexuality" (1982), in the nineteenth century, the concept of childhood sexuality, especially with regards to "masturbation" were considered a "social evil" and "a threat to the policy as whole... necessary to eradicate it" (p. 270). Thus, religious moralist defied the sinful deed of children attempting any act of sexual tendencies. For that reason, as Helen O. Borowitz emphasised in her article "Youth as Metaphor and Image in Wedekind, Kokoschka, and Schiele" (1974), "The major theme of his [Wedekind's] dramas was the conflict between man's instinctual life and the demands of society" (p. 219). According to Helen, Wedekind "aligned himself with youth" he wanted readers to acknowledge the centre problem of his play, in which "the transition from childhood to adulthood" were awkwardly avoided in his society. Thus, the topic of children hitting puberty was considered sordid in the German bourgeois society, but what Wedekind concludes in his play is the fact that the war between "natural instincts and civilization," always ends "in the defeat of natural sexuality" (p. 220).

### **Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and The Elders* (1610): Women's Innocence**

It is noteworthy that the painter of *Susanna and The Elders* is not explicitly mentioned in the play, except for the reference to "Mademoiselle Angélique," a name that remains

unrecognizable in any historical context. However, the prominent painting of *Susanna and The Elders* (1610), is attributed to the celebrated Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi, a seventeen-year-old artist, who was herself, a victim to attempted rape by her father's acquaintance, Agostino Tassi. The exploration of such sexual harassment can unfold through the painting, the historical context of the title, and the modern play *Spring Awakening*. As it delves into the collision of three worlds highlighting the concept of female's vulnerability and innocence, brought up in a world exploited by men.

Artemisia Gentileschi is an Italian painter of the Baroque period, emerged in an era that valued the aesthetic portrayal of biblical narratives and themes closely tied to the Catholic Church. Her very first masterpiece is that of *Susanna and The Elders* (1610), which is a nuanced reflection to her unfortunate incident with Agostino Tassi; not fulfilling his promise to marry her after his attempted assault, she was brought in for trial and subjected to torture to extract evidence supporting the alleged claims. Likewise, the initial biblical story of Susanna, is depicted in the Book of Daniel, from the Old Testament. The storyline centres around a young girl named Susanna, who is bathing innocently but is being spied by two elder men. Despite her chastity, the elders were preying on her captivating virtuousness, and as the narratives unravels, the elders coerced her into committing adultery with them. While she was evidently unwilling to attempt any sexual act with them, they blackmailed her with the false accusations of infidelity. Artemisia's painting implements such narrative, as she vividly portrays the emotions of Susanna in her painting. Through meticulous detail, Susanna's eyes and mouth are demonstrated as half-closed and her arms convey a powerful gesture of resistance against the intrusive male gaze. This portrayal effectively conveys a sense of startled vulnerability whilst the elders are rendered with dark tones, embodying a predatory presence. The deliberate choice of palette further underlines the thematic division between light and dark, good and evil, vice and virtue, adding layers of symbolism to the composition.

In the context of *Spring Awakening* (1891), the presence of the painting *Susanna and The Elders* (1610), can be a foreshadowing intermedial element in the upcoming scenes. As scene three concludes, the subsequent scene portrays Wendla ascending a ladder to meet Melchior. Innocently attempting to persuade him to abandon the hay due to an impending storm, Wendla finds herself in a vulnerable situation. Unfortunately, Melchior seizes this moment to engage in physical misconduct, while she was repeatedly refusing to accept it. In such a manner, a profound link transpires, not only between the painting and the play's plot but also a compelling correlation between the Italian artist, Gentileschi, and the character Wendla. Such intermediality conveys a deploring triad that illustrates the lamentable theme of men taking advantage of women's innocence and vulnerability. Drawing intermedial parallels with historical cases like those of the Italian painter Artemisia and the biblical figure Susanna. Wendla, too, meets a tragic fate as an unwitting victim of pregnancy. What intensifies the tragedy is her profound lack of understanding about intercourse, a consequence of inadequate sex education—knowledge averse to her society. She naively believes that to become pregnant,

she must "love – love" someone and marry them. The crux of the matter lies in Wendla's mother dodging her inquiries about how children were made, thereby perpetuating a cycle of ignorance that ended in Wendla's tragic death, a fatal abortion. Which is why Wedekind, with subtle mastery, intertwines intermediality into his play, seamlessly blending theatrical performance with artworks references to modern literature and societal critiques. Through this interplay, two major themes emerge—the imperative need for comprehensive sex education and the inherent vulnerability of womanhood. The narrative becomes a critical commentary on German societal negligence in the mid-late nineteenth century, urging reflection on the dire consequences that arise when essential knowledge is withheld, particularly from young women navigating the complexities of their own bodies and relationships.

### **Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus and Adonis* (1634–1636): A Children's Tragic Love Story**

Another admirable figure from the Baroque era, is a Flemish artist, known as Peter Paul Rubens. He, too, was an inspired painter that embraced the union of classical influences, for instance Renaissance aesthetics and ancient mythology, by adding his exquisite touch rooted in the Baroque's characteristics, such as powerful emotions, intense ebullience, and strong contrast. Rubens played a prominent role in his time, encapsulating the essence of his intellect and creativity within his artworks. Such talents can be depicted in one of his masterpieces, *Venus and Adonis* (1634-1636), as he was inspired by Ovid's mythical epic, *Metamorphosis* (8 AD), regarding the tragic love story of Venus and Adonis. Rubens' ability to demonstrate the despondent scene in which the insouciant Adonis chose to disregard Venus's cautions to stay away from the wild animals is evident. Rubens scrupulously portrayed the body language of both characters; we can see Venus' deific nudity as she holds onto Adonis' arms to stop him from departing. The sharp choice of palette and shadows captures the palpable tension of their emotions. Venus's expression reflects her desperation and fear of losing the mortal whom Cupid made her fell in love with, while Adonis, the mortal, demonstrates his oblivion and indifference to such warnings. We know that after such depicted scene, Adonis will confront his demise and be stabbed by a wild boar—lamenting Venus' tragic love story. Thus, Rubens' skilful hands, illustrates the powerful emotions deduced in his painting by employing the tangible sorrow and despair faced by Venus.

In the context of the modern play *Spring Awakening* (1891), the presence of Peter Rubens' *Venus and Adonis* in scene three, underlines another foreshadowing element in the upcoming plot. As discussed above, the mythical story behind 'Venus and Adonis' indirectly reflects on the impending tragic incident between Ilse and Mortiz. In scene seven, Mortiz found himself unhinged as he was emotionally strained due to the bottled-up pressure of his parents' expectations for academic success and his challenging adolescent state of sexual awakening. Upon encountering Ilse, he inevitably felt the natural, instinctual desires towards her, even though Ilse reciprocated mutual tendencies as she was luring him with phrases such as, "I'll curl your hair and hang a little bell around your neck" (Wedekind, p. 51). Mortiz's, however, with embedded guilt and shame, instilled by his strict,

repressive society, ultimately drove him to take his own life. Similar to the tragic love story of Venus and Adonis, Ilse was tenaciously persuading him to stay with her, much like the goddess Venus — the goddess of love, desire, and fertility — who desperately tried to protect her beloved Adonis. However, the indifference of Adonis, who insisted on departing from Venus to go hunting, foreshadowed the same doom as Mortiz. He succumbed to his stirred-up frustrations, escaped from Ilse, and tragically committed suicide. “Lost souls – shooting stars. No more light in the sky. The grass has gone. Black. The night. I’ll never be home again” (Wedekind, p. 52). It could be argued that Wedekind, once again, implicitly exerted such tragedy to criticize the social pressure of attaining the ideal convention of morality among the younger generation. As Peter Jelavich stated in his article “Art and Mammon in Wilhelmine Germany: The Case of Frank Wedekind” (1979), Wedekind was not concerned about the political conflicts or social status, “but rather with the struggle of the human individual against the restrictive structure of the modern world” (p. 209). Emphasis on “restrictive,” Wedekind believes that sexuality is essential for a man to maintain the balance of his mental development, he desired a “moral revolution” which can surpass “the Christian (and bourgeois) tradition of frugality and self-denial and replace it with a pagan enjoyment of bodily pleasures” (p. 210).

## 2. Conclusion

Upon the initial reading of Wedekind's modern play *Spring Awakening* (1891), one might easily overlook the seemingly innocent art pieces presented in scene three. However, with closer scrutiny, each painting reveals multiple layers of concealed meanings, foreshadowed elements, and symbolic characteristics that can be intricately connected to the unfolding plot. Therefore, it is worth arguing that Wedekind mastered the subtle art of infusing multiple hidden intermedial elements by carefully selecting classical paintings relevant for his play, allowing visual art to speak for itself. Consequently, each art piece carries significant attributes associated with the young characters, and each art piece conveys shaded elements of tragedies. This contributes to the amalgamation of multiple dimensions within the young characters' world, plausible through the powerful lens of intermediality.

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