



# HEDDA GABLER

by Henrik Ibsen

## Study Guide



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Directed by Hal Cropp

Stage Manager	.....	Jason Underferth
Set Designer	.....	Lisa Kudas
Lighting Designer	.....	Jason Underferth
Costume Designer	.....	A. Emily Heaney
Sound Designer	.....	Stan Peal
Props Designer	.....	Troy Iverson
ASL Interpreter	.....	Gail Deveraux

(May 3 Performance)

### Cast (in order of appearance)

George Tesman, <i>a research fellow</i>	.....	Scott Dixon
Hedda Gabler, <i>his wife</i>	.....	Adrienne Sweeney
Miss Julie Tesman, <i>his aunt</i>	.....	Nancy Carruthers Husienga
Thea Elvsted	.....	Stef Dickens
Judge Brack	.....	Hal Cropp
Eilert Lovborg	.....	Jerome Yorke
Berte, <i>the housekeeper</i>	.....	Kimberly Maas

## SETTING

The drawing room in the home of George Tesman and Hedda Gabler, 1865

## THE STORY

At the start of the play, **Aunt Julie** arrives at the home of her nephew, **George Tesman** and his new bride, **Hedda Gabler**. The couple has returned to Norway only the night before after their honeymoon voyage, which the academic Tesman combined with research for a new book on cultural history.

The return of the newlyweds inspires a series of visits, including **Judge Brack** (a friend of the family) and **Thea Elvsted** (a former schoolmate of Hedda's and old flame of Tesman's). Conversations turn to current events, including the latest news about **Eilert Lovborg**. Lovborg as a young man was considered quite bright and promising as an academic, but had a scandalous wild streak in him. Now, however, Thea brings word that Lovborg has made an effort to change his ways and has published a new book – similar in topic to the one Tesman has been working on. The book has made such an impression, in fact, that Lovborg is now being considered a candidate for a university appointment that Tesman had assumed would be his.

Later that day, Judge Brack returns to call on Hedda alone and Hedda reveals that while Tesman makes for a very safe choice as a husband, he is hardly an exciting one. Brack teases her with images of a future life as “Mrs. Tesman” – tedious and predictable – but he goes too far when he mentions the likelihood of her becoming a mother, a prospect Hedda finds utterly revolting. Just then, Lovborg arrives to call on the house and brings news that he has no intention of competing with Tesman for the university job. Lovborg and Hedda steal some time alone, and we learn that several years earlier they were involved in a passionate affair and still have a powerful attraction for each other. Hedda, however, accuses Lovborg of having transferred his feelings from her to Thea and when Thea arrives (at Hedda's previous invitation), Hedda goads Lovborg into going out with Tesman and the Judge, seemingly to prove the strength of his recent reform.

In the next act, Hedda and Thea have been waiting all night for the men to return. After Hedda sends Thea to rest in another room, Tesman finally comes home with the story of the men's wild night. The three of them engaged in an evening of drinking which left Lovborg rather the worse for wear and somewhere along the line, Lovborg lost possession of the manuscript of his new book. Tesman picked it up and intended to return it when Lovborg was again in command of his senses.

## NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR

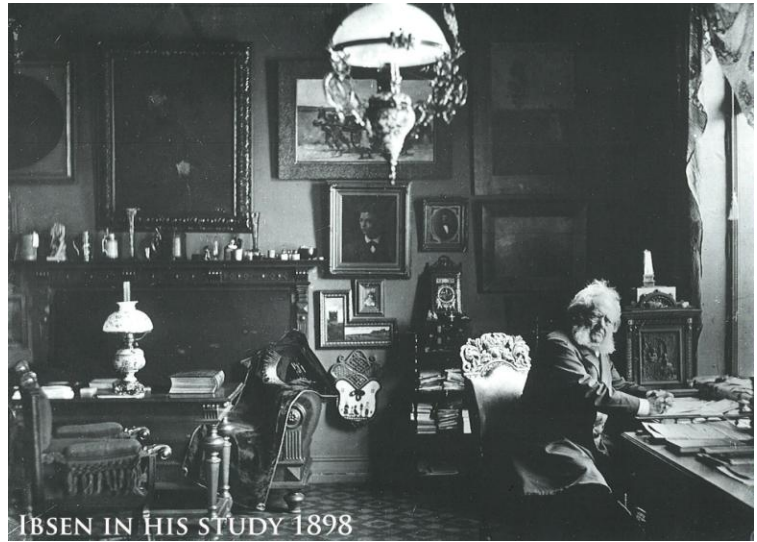
In choosing to revisit this masterwork by Henrik Ibsen, I have been intrigued by two distinct yet connected areas of investigation. I've always been struck by Ibsen's highly ironic sense of humor. The best theatre, for me, mixes the comedy of human existence with the deep questions that keep us awake at night. In working on this play, we have been investigating the balance between that ironic sense of humor and the reality that the story demands. I'm also struck by the way in which our own personal myths hinder our ability to function in the reality that the world presents to us. Whether Aunt Julie's dream of the perfect family unit, Lovborg's image of the successful artist's life style, Brack's understanding of how society “should” function, or most famously Hedda's belief about what her life, as the general's daughter, should be, these myths become huge stumbling blocks for the participants. What then to make of this story of an incredibly talented, gifted individual who, because of the status of her sex in society, is unable to realize personal fulfillment? Is Hedda a villain? A victim? You decide.

~ Hal Cropp

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828 in Skien, Norway. At the time of his birth, his father was a prosperous merchant. But in 1834 the authorities ordered the closing of his father's distillery. Ibsen's father never regained his prosperity and became embittered. Ibsen's upbringing was lonely and unhappy. On December 27, 1843, Ibsen sailed to Grimstad to begin work as an apothecary's assistant.

During his years in Grimstad, he worked hard at the apothecary shop, spending what little free time he had in reading, painting, and writing poetry. In 1846, he fathered a child by the twenty-eight-year-old housemaid. By the age of twenty, Ibsen had already become a freethinker in matters of religion and politics. At the beginning of 1849, he wrote *Catiline*, his first play, a blank-verse drama reminiscent of Shakespeare.



In 1850, Ibsen moved to Christiania (now Oslo), Norway's capital, where he failed his university matriculation examinations, and in 1851, he was offered a job by the classical violinist and theatrical manager Ole Bull. For the next six years, at the theater in Bergen, Norway, he became involved in every aspect of play production except acting. Early in 1856, Ibsen met a young woman named Suzannah Thoresen; they were married on June 18, 1858. Both his wife and their son Sigurd (born on December 23, 1859) would devote themselves totally to his personal and professional well-being. Ibsen left the Bergen Theater in 1857 to head the Norwegian Theater in Christiania. This enterprise failed in 1862. In 1864, he moved his family to Rome, where he would live until 1891, except for a ten-year period in Germany beginning in 1868.

Ibsen's career as a playwright took off with the plays written while in exile. In *The Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *Enemy of the People* (1882), he moved from verse to prose drama and founded his stories in social issues of the day: a wife's role, religious hypocrisy, and the role of the individual in safeguarding society. What these plays are really concerned with, however, is the subtle analysis of human character and motivation, and the often tortuous nature of relationships. For all that Ibsen crusaded against institutionalized hypocrisy and its attendant cruelties, it is a mark of the complexity of his moral and psychological vision that in *The Wild Duck* (1884) he shows how, in unstable and misguided hands, "truth" can be as destructive as hypocrisy and lies--as can the search for personal freedom in a stifling society, as demonstrated in *Hedda Gabler* (1890).

After his return to Norway at the height of his fame in 1891, Ibsen turned, in his last four plays, to a series of moody, symbolic dramas, whose protagonists look back unhappily over their lives and the choices they have made. Critics have professed to find submerged autobiographical themes in these works, especially *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), Ibsen's last play, in which the sculptor Rubek comes to feel that his single-minded artistic dedication has exacted too great a price in human terms. In 1900, Ibsen suffered the first of a series of apoplectic strokes that would affect him both mentally and physically until his death on May 23, 1906, at the age of seventy-eight. The Norwegian government granted him a state funeral.

## VILLAIN OR VICTIM?

Ibsen was already an international celebrity by the time he wrote *Hedda Gabler*, although the premiere of the play (first in Berlin, then Paris, then London) fell into a familiar pattern. It started with the critics despising it. “There they all are,” wrote Clement Scott in London’s *Daily Telegraph*, “false men, wicked women, deceitful friends, sensualist egoists, piled up in a heap. What a horrible story! What a hideous play!” With such reviews, audiences naturally went to the theatre in droves to see this “hideous play” for themselves and began cementing *Hedda Gabler*’s place among the masterworks of world literature.

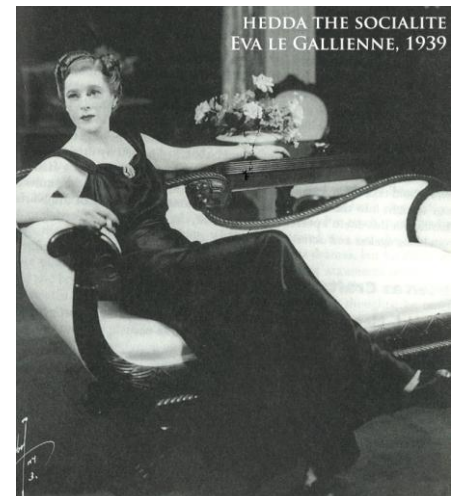
Perhaps *Hedda* has earned her seat at the table precisely because she has always stirred such powerful and contrary reactions. Along Nora Helmer from *A Doll’s House*, she has been held up as powerful voice for women’s rights and social hypocrisy, yet also seen as manipulative, dangerous, and cruel. As a dramatic character, she has been called “the female Hamlet” for her

psychological complexity and is considered by most scholars to be the most autobiographical of all Ibsen’s creations. Written in 1890, audiences, artists and critics have made themselves dizzy debating the merits of Hedda as villain or victim.

Perhaps, as is the case with most debates, the truth lies somewhere in the middle of the extremes. On one hand, Hedda’s predicament is quite familiar among Ibsen’s protagonists (male and female) – caught between what she wants to accomplish and what she is allowed to accomplish. Her past affair with Lovborg was certainly a relationship of her own choosing, but one she abandoned in the face of censure from her family (and, presumably, society in general) – an act Hedda herself admits this was cowardly. Tesman represents a safe and respectable choice for a match, but Hedda’s very soul rebels against the model of domesticity that role attempts to impose on her. Ibsen himself noted the difference between titling the play *Hedda Gabler* as opposed to *Hedda Tesman* as a strong indication of the source of Hedda’s sense of identity.

Yet no one would deny that Hedda has the ability to choose cruel and destructive courses of action – from the sidarmed insult of Aunt Julie’s new hat to her Machiavellian influence

over Lovborg. But do we forgive Hedda because she’s understandably lashing out against the pressures and frustrations of her life, or do we condemn her for violating social and ethical codes of behavior? Is she genuinely a despicable person, or a natural force unnaturally caged in the Tesman home?



Ultimately the enduring genius of Ibsen may very well lie in the fact that he provides no definitive, black-and-white world view as his melodramatic predecessors would have done. Instead he gives us the gift of questions – the best known antidote to complacency. Indeed, the most potent issue of the play may be this: do we treat Hedda Gabler as “The Other”, or “The Exception”, or is she one of our own?

**Sources**

*Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*, Robert Ferguson, Dorset Press, 1996

*Ibsen: A Biography*, Michael Meyer, Doubleday & Co Inc, 1971

## SELECTED EVENTS IN WOMEN'S HISTORY

1792..... *Vindication of the Rights of Women* by English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (mother of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley), 33, is a blunt attack on conventions.



1851..... U.S. social reformer Amelia Jenks Bloomer, 33, urges reform of women's clothing in her magazine *The Lily*. She will be ridiculed for wearing full-cut trousers ("bloomers") under a short skirt in public.

1854..... Norwegian daughters given equal inheritance rights previously extended only to male heirs.

1866..... Norwegian law amended to allow women to earn and keep their own money independent of husbands, fathers or other male relatives.

1879..... Congress gives women the right to practice law before the U.S. Supreme Court. Nora, the lead character in

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* creates a stir when, at the play's end, she leaves her husband and family -- an act which one reviewer called "the door slam heard 'round the world."

1884..... A petition to guard married women's property rights is promoted by -- Henrik Ibsen.

1907..... Norwegian women are granted the right to vote, the first European state to do so. England follows in 1918 and America in 1920.

## THINGS TO LOOK FOR / TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Hedda Gabler has been seen by some critics as a “reckless fiend” and by others as a trapped and frustrated woman, made powerless by society. Defend one of these points of view, supported by examples from the performance.

**“I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose. It is incidentally desirable to solve the problem of women, but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings.”**

2. The relationships people have with each other influence almost everything about their daily lives. What are some of the dynamic relationships in this play? How has the nature of those past relationships influence how the characters interact now?
3. Ibsen makes much use of symbolism in this deeply psychological play. For example, the play is set in the autumn where (in Norway) the days become much shorter and darker than here in the US. What might this represent? Discuss what you think might be represented by the following: Thea's hair, Lovborg's manuscript, Hedda's pistols, vine leaves.
4. The term "Chekhov's gun" refers to an object (or detail) introduced early in a story which at first appears to be insignificant, but then later proves vital to the narrative. Can you find an example of this literary technique in the play? If so, describe how it is used.
5. What is Hedda most afraid of? What are some of the things she does (or doesn't do) because of this fear?
6. Social status has a huge impact on the lives of all the characters in this play. What are some specific examples of social status affecting decisions the characters make throughout the story? Where do the character relationships act in harmony with, and then in violation of, the social structure of the day?
7. Why does Lovborg lie about what happened to his manuscript the night of the party? Why does Hedda destroy it after he leaves?
8. Hedda Gabler is often described as a manipulator of other people's lives. If so, then at what point does she lose control of her "puppets"? What is her most important mistake?
9. Technical aspects of plays can be used to add new levels of storytelling. Notice the way the design of the set, lights, costumes and props create the world of the play. What impact do these choices have on you as an audience member? How do they help the telling of the story?
10. Many people today compare Ibsen's plays to modern soap operas. Do you think they are similar? In what ways? Are they different? In what ways?