

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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HEDDA GABLER

Henrik Ibsen

(1891)

Overview

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright—he wrote in Danish, the culture language of Norway at the time—who spent most of his adult life living in Germany and Italy. He is widely considered the modern world's finest social dramatist, after Shakespeare; his courageous look at the social world of his time, in the 'new Europe,' woke consciousnesses, and continues to do so, having won him, in his time, the title of the 'Founder of Modernism.' His ground breaking plays—'A Doll's House,' 'Peer Gynt,' 'Hedda Gabler,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'The Master-Builder,' 'Pillars of Society'—a dozen in all—exercised an intense influence on European cultural consciousness, and, though dealing in social and familial 'scandals' which might seem dated today, continue to raise global theatrical consciousness. Corruption, in society and in the family, has never been more fascinatingly exposed.

Story

Like *A Doll's House* (1879), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) closely investigates an instance of fateful female psychology. Nora, unsatisfied with her materialistic husband, puts obstacles in her own way—incurring debts she cannot pay for—out of indirect compensation for the frustrations of her 'doll-like' life. (Freud's influence, very individually tweaked, makes a strong appearance in Ibsen's work.) In *Hedda Gabler* the protagonist is a passionate middle class woman—an academic wife—with a past, who finds herself, as did Nora, married to a loser, and unable to compromise with the hand marriage has dealt her.

In Act One we are introduced to the circle of acquaintances who will form Hedda's social environment—she has just reentered this milieu as a newly wed, after many years absence and a long honeymoon with her academic husband, Tesman. Hedda is rather rude to her husband, who appears to bore her, and to her husband's aunt, who has just arrived to visit. What piques Hedda's interest is Mrs. Elvsted, who arrives bringing news that Eilert Loevborg is back in town, that this academic rival of Hedda's own husband, Tesman, has recovered from his serious drinking problems, and that he is back into his brilliant academic work. (Hedda herself has in the past been the lover of Eilert, and is vengeful toward Mrs. Elvsted, who has left her own husband, to care for Eilert.) Judge Brack arrives as Mrs. Elvsted leaves—we are in small town mode, where Ibsen usually places us—to reinforce the comments on Loevberg, and to inform the company that Eilert is set to compete for the same professorship that interests Tesman. Hedda is of course all ears. At the end of the act Tesman himself addresses Hedda, mumbling that their own finances are low, and that they are going to have to cut back on expenditures.

In Act 2, Judge Brack returns, finding Hedda playing with her guns; the two are confidential with each other, clearly sharing an intimate past. Eilert Loevberg arrives not much later, and talks confidentially with Hedda—she has known him well, in the past—then Mrs. Elvsted returns, checking on Eilert, whose drinking problem she is determined to keep under control. At the end of the act the men—provoked to it by Hedda-- go off to a drinking party, and leave Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted at home.

Act 3. Mrs. Elvsted's love for Eilert manifests itself; she is appalled to learn he has been arrested on his evening sortie, that he has been drinking heavily, and that, as he proclaims, he has lost the

precious manuscript, of his new and groundbreaking book, on the way back from the party. Eilert confesses the manuscript loss to Hedda, who does not tell him the truth, that in fact Tesman had recovered the text and brought it home with him. Though Hedda has found and possesses the manuscript now, she is crushed when Eilert tells her he wants to kill himself. She gives him her pistol, and tells him to go and enjoy a beautiful death. Subsequently Hedda, whose twisted psyche is displaying itself to us, burns Eilert's manuscript to ashes. Her vengefulness toward Mrs. Elvsted has powerful consequences.

With Act 4 this somber play takes its somber last bow. We learn from Judge Brack that Eilert has in fact shot himself and is dead. Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted immediately sit down to try to reconstruct Eilert's academic text. Hedda leaves the room, plays the piano for a few minutes in the next room, then shoots herself.

Themes

Marriage. Marriage comes off as a painful institution in *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda herself cannot stand her husband, and Mrs. Elvsted has left her husband so she can look after Eilert.

Society. As depicted in this portrait of small city life in 19th century Norway, society is a hot bed of local jealousies, passions, rivalries, and gossip streams.

Character

Hedda. Hedda is scornful of her husband, has a longtime crush on Eilert Loevberg, and cannot tolerate Mrs. Elvsted's devotion to Eilert and to saving him from the bottle. Hedda takes out her jealousy by offering Eilert the pistols he needs to solve his personal problems. She is avenging herself both on Eilert and on Mrs. Elvsted. And even on her own husband?

Eilert. Eilert Loevberg is the prototype of the brilliant writer-scholar with a self-destructive drinking problem. A magnet for the ladies, he cannot take advantage of them, for he is fatally self-infatuated.

Mrs. Elvsted. Mrs. Elvsted is a devoted lover of Eilert, for whom she has left her own husband, without his permission. Her morality bar is low.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Hedda Gabler (Emotional)

Character Hedda Gabler enters the play as a strikingly handsome twenty nine year old, who has just returned from a six month honeymoon tour, with her husband George, an academic somewhat older than she, who is interested in his research studies as much as in her. Having shown her scorn for the domestic set up she inherits, as a young bride, Hedda quickly makes apparent her desire for flamboyant independence. It so happens that both she and her husband are brought into sharp contact with a brilliant but dissolute scholar, Eilert, who is both a writer and scholarly competitor of her husband, and her own former lover. The tragic finale of the play sees both Eilert—disillusioned at his own work—and Hedda--seeing no future for herself--committing suicide.

Parallels Hedda Gabler is a dangerous woman, with a taste for subversive romance, a desire to be admired, and a fascination for shiny pistols. She is also a glamor gal, with a past that charms her, and a husband that bores her. She at least partially resembles many different kinds of *ill-married literary women*: in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* Dorothea (1872) is fed up with a scholarly husband, whose idea of a honeymoon is a day in the archives of the Vatican Museum; Lady MacBeth, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), who in *Macbeth* creates a woman who wears the pants in the family, and carries an uzzi too; while long ago Aeschylus, in his *Agamemnon*,

creates a lady of the house who has taken a lover, loathes her husband, and gets herself strangled, before she has a chance to commit suicide.

Illustrative moments

Confession Hedda's return to her new marital home puts her once again in contact with Judge Brack, a sympathetic man around town and libertine, to whom she is quick to reveal her relative boredom with her husband George, whom she has in fact married for fear that her prime is almost passed, and action is required. The two old buddies gather to shmooze, and Hedda confides to the Judge that she has often been bored on her railway carriage rides with her husband, and has wished for a third party to be present to liven up the company. Do you wish someone to be around, to 'look at your ankles,' queries the Judge, to which Hedda replies 'precisely.'

Bitchy Hedda is not charmed by her husband's ever present, too loving old aunt, Miss Tesman—as Hedda is not fascinated by all the memorabilia of her husband's childhood, which lie coyly around their living quarters. One mini episode makes the point. Miss Tesman, eager to impress the new bride, has bought a new bonnet, which she has left on display for Hedda to admire. Hedda tells the Judge how she handled the aunt's ploy: 'She had laid down her bonnet on the chair there'—(looks at him and smiles)—'and I pretended to think it was the servant's.'

Dissimulating Having resumed her old, and previously sentimental relation, with Eilert Lovberg, Hedda is drawn to share with him, as she had with the Judge, her disenchantment with her husband, the professor. Hedda is enjoying an intimate tete a tete with Lovberg when she hears her husband coming. She immediately adopts 'an indifferent tone,' and directs her attention to an album of pictures of her and George's honeymoon trip. 'What's the name of these curious peaks, dear?', she asks her husband, attempting to draw attention away from her romantic involvement, and from her indifference toward George. George, innocently replying 'The Dolomites,' goes as far as she wishes, toward reassuring Hedda that her husband is not in the loop.

Vengeful Hedda has been consumed with jealousy toward Thea Elvsted, an old flame of Eilert, and a huge admirer of the man. (Thea has herself targeted Eilert as the sole reason for her to return to the city where the play takes place.) Hedda gets her hands on the manuscript of Eilert's new work, brilliant and visionary as all say, and upon Eilert's leaving her one evening, after an intense tete a tete, she takes the text to the fire, and whispers to herself: 'Now I am burning your child, Thea!' (Throwing one or two more quires into the stove.) 'Your child and Eilert Lovberg's!' (Throws the rest in.) 'I am burning, I am burning your child!'

Discussion questions

Has Hedda Gabler some virtues? Is she witty? Gracious? Does Ibsen like her?

When Hedda burns up Eilert's manuscript, is she attempting to protect her husband's career? Or is she only trying to get back at Thea?

Ibsen is widely celebrated for his portrait of a 'liberated woman' in *A Doll's House*. Is Hedda Gabler a 'liberated woman?' Or she an old fashioned *femme fatale*?