



# EDUQAS: A Level Drama – Component 3 – Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen

## About the Play

The play revolves around the main character, Hedda; an upper middle-class woman trapped in a conventional marriage with an uninspiring husband. She reacts against the constraints this brings with it and her violent actions are both tragic and appalling. The play swings between tragedy and comedy. Light is made of people's tragedy for Hedda's amusement.

## Context

This play shocked audiences and critics when first performed in 1891. It focused on taking apart the dysfunction of the middle classes to an audience who were almost exclusively middle class. Its combination of tragedy and comedy and the behaviour of the central female role was shocking to the society of the time. This play was in a naturalistic style of theatre that included natural dialogue and language, more simple plots, location, set and props, costume, and which focused on everyday life. This had the effect of drawing the audience in to the action. The influence of the theatre practitioner, Konstantin Stanislavski, and his system of acting led to professional performers spending long rehearsal times developing and building a character. This had the effect of actors moving from demonstrating a type of character to being able to convey the complexities of a role they inhabited.

## The Characters

**Hedda Tesman** - Intelligent but bored.  
**George Tesman** - An academic with more simple material tastes and expectations than his wife.  
**Judge Brack** - He has high status in society and is old friends with the Tesmans. He desires control over Hedda.  
**Thea Elvsted** - A victim of Hedda's bullying and manipulation. An admirer of Løvborg.  
**Eilert Løvborg** - Academic rival of Tesman, troubled by his addiction to alcohol and vulnerable to Hedda's manipulation.  
**Bertha** – the maid that has a long history with the Tesman household

## Historical Context

Set in 1890, Norway. Old women conditioned to be the domestic housewife with no intention of career progression or a life outside of the home. New women pushing against the limits.

## Interpretation

As well as making the plot (story) clear to an audience, a director may also wish to explore certain themes or ideas. For example, Hedda Gabler is about a woman who is unhappy in her marriage, but also explores how people live their lives and the way in which their choices impact their own life and that of others

## Setting

This includes time period and geographical location. In this production of Hedda Gabler, the play is set in modern day and could be located in any city in the world. It is set in the Tesmans living room, September.

## Mood and Atmosphere

Hedda lives in a world that she finds very claustrophobic. She is surrounded by people who threaten her own sense of self and threaten to take away the little freedom that she does have. As well as the scripted dialogue, the director and the production team have many different methods to create a range emotions and atmospheres at their disposal.

## Period and Style

**19th century** Norway: This time period is known as the Victorian era which is largely characterised for its peace, prosperity and social reform  
  
Realism, Drama, Psychological Thriller, Tragedy

## Intention

A director will have strong ideas about how they want the audience to respond to certain characters and certain moments in the play. Most directors want to elicit an emotional and intellectual response, perhaps wishing to create sympathy for one character and strong dislike for another. There may be moments of great pathos (sadness) but this can be quickly followed by moments of comedy.

## Sound

Ivo van Hove's choice of Joni Mitchell's song 'Blue' is important. He explains this choice, saying that it is 'really about the scars of life; the scars of love, not being satisfied with life, the longing and desire. All of these things are in this very beautiful song that accompanies Hedda almost as a chorus through the whole production'. Research the lyrics of the song: how do you think they can be applied to an interpretation of Hedda as a character? How does the instrumentation in the song also help to create a sense of melancholy?

Hedda's piano is the focal point of the set in the opening scene, with Hedda seated in front of it, and it is clearly important to her. Hedda even uses it later in the play to express her frustration when words cannot. When the piano is played live, however, it is out of tune. Why do you think this has been done? What does it represent to you?

Nina Simone's 'Wild is the Wind' accompanies the final moments of the play. Not only does the piano music echo the style of 'Blue', it reflects the tragic mood created by Hedda's suicide. Research the lyrics to 'Wild is the Wind'. How do they influence your understanding of, or response to, Hedda Gabler as a character and as a play?

## Set and Lights

Patrick Marber's script describes the set as, 'A large, almost empty room. A piano, a fire, an old sofa, flowers.' Compare this with the more traditional stage directions for Act One of Hedda Gabler which describe

a cluttered but more luxurious setting. Jan Versweyveld (set and lighting designer) explains that in this production, the design concept is based on seeing the apartment from Hedda's point of view – in her own mind. In reality, it might be fully furnished. The furniture is ugly and mismatched, as if it has been found and placed there without much thought. Although it is obviously ugly, all of the people who visit the apartment tell Hedda how nice it is. Hedda is accustomed to living a very comfortable life, surrounded by beautiful possessions. However, in this production nothing is pretty or comfortable. Even the flowers are placed in large buckets on the floor rather than in vases on tables or shelves. Hedda's surroundings seem to be functional, rather than decorative and only serve to remind her that she is unlikely to be able to live the life that she wants. The large patio doors (stage right) represent the outside world. Hedda is the only character who does not leave the apartment during the play and although she approaches the window, she never goes out into the garden. She is trapped within her own home. Consider the choices made in having this window that is rarely used. Versweyveld also says, 'Out of the window is nothing, just darkness and occasional light'. Look carefully at how lighting is used through this window. The blinds are sometimes open, sometimes closed. The shadow cast by the blind occasionally suggests the image of prison bars. At what point does this happen in the play? Why might it be particularly relevant at that point? Consider what Versweyveld says about the apartment and the lack of exits for Hedda: 'For her it's like a jail, a tomb, a grave nearly'. How is that evident in the way that the set is used throughout the production?

## Costume

The costume design for this production is modern – 21st century. As you watch the performance, consider the following ideas:

Hedda is the only character who is not dressed to go outdoors. The fabric and fit of the chemise and robe give a sense of her being exposed, whilst all of the other characters have a layer of 'armour' because they are fully dressed and are also able to go outside and interact with the world.

How does that make us feel towards Hedda? Do you think her costume makes her appear vulnerable?

Are there any moments when you think the way she is dressed actually makes her seem powerful or manipulative?

Tesman is fairly casually dressed and is sometimes barefoot. This allows him to appear much more comfortable in his own home, putting his feet on the furniture and even the walls. Compare his costume to those worn by Lovborg and Brack. Are the characters the same age? What evidence do you have that can support your answer?

Compare Mrs Elvsted's costume to that worn by Hedda. What comparisons does the contrast in costume help you make between the two characters?

Consider the shape and style of Mrs Elvsted's costume, her choice of footwear and how her costume might help her maintain status in her interactions with characters other than Hedda.

Judge Brack is a powerful and influential man in society, as well as in his relationship with Hedda. How do you think his costume reveals this throughout the production?

## London Production

Lyttelton Theatre, 12 December 2016 . UK tour - October 2017.



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## Staging the Production

With regard to staging, many interpretations have been explored. Some, like Meyerhold’s production in 1906, focused on an expressionistic or stylised portrayal of the action and set. The aim was to present a symbolic representation of the play and its set design reflected this. A large armchair was downstage and served as a throne for Hedda. The upstage wall reflected colours to convey Hedda’s inner moods. It would be useful for learners to explore which stage shape is best for a production of Hedda Gabler and how different acting styles might influence the response to the play by an audience.

The production of Hedda Gabler at the Salisbury Playhouse in 2016, directed by Gareth Machin and designed by James Button, returned to a more naturalistic style. The set designer incorporated Ibsen’s original intentions evident in the stage directions. On a proscenium arch stage, smaller seating areas were created within the main room so that the audience could see all the different areas of action at once and see the juxtaposition of the scenes at a glance. For example, when Brack and Tesman went to have a drink and smoke in Act Two (p. 58), they withdrew to the inner room and the audience could see this action whilst Hedda remained with Thea and Lovborg. This established a tense atmosphere, as Kirsty Bushell playing Hedda tempted Lovborg to have a drink. The anticipation that someone could walk in on this was palpable and highlighted how Hedda manipulates the use of the space throughout.

In the final scene Hedda has no control over her space any more. She can’t even play her piano without disrupting Thea and Tesman. In this production the actress walked around restlessly, not able to sit by the cosy fire, as Judge Brack was there. At this part of the play he has trapped her in her own lie and is blackmailing her. The movement of the actress around this space created the intense feeling of entrapment and led ultimately to her suicide. This appeared to be her only way to escape – the trap that had been sprung. The designer had considered carefully the playwright’s intentions, with his use of large French windows that could be opened to bring in light but then closed firmly to create a prison, where Hedda scratched at the windows as if trying to escape.

## Original Production

Ibsen was appalled by the first interpretation of the character of Hedda. He thought Clare Heese’s acting style was too exclamatory and as a result, the subtlety and playfulness of Hedda was lost. This might have contributed to some of the damning reviews. However, over time, the main character has been interpreted in many ways, showing her complexities and such performances have earned the play new respect.

## Symbols

There are **six symbols** found in Hedda Gabler. They are **hat, old piano, fire in the stove, General Gabler's portrait, manuscript, and pistols**. Each of them has a special meaning toward the main character

The piano symbolizes how out of place Hedda is in the life she has with her husband George Tesman. The piano is not valued in the environment it is placed in and, like the piano, Hedda feels as though she does not belong.

Later, in Act 2, she says to Judge Brack that these flowers have “an odour of death”. These constant references to her not liking light and flowers – which closely bring an image of life and happiness with them – gives us a sense that Hedda has an inherent dislike of life.

The excessive consumption of alcohol in the world of *Hedda Gabler* is a privilege enjoyed only by men, and so alcohol itself comes to symbolize, among other things, the social freedom accessible to men

While General Gabler's pistols and alcohol are destructive temptations launched from characters' pasts into their presents, Lövborg and Thea Elvsted manuscript symbolizes creation, the redemption of the past, and hope for the future (the manuscript itself, after all, takes the future for its subject matter).

The stove and its fire, then, symbolize destruction—and how domestication can conceal but not contain destruction’s powers. It should also be pointed out that when Hedda destroys Lövborg and Thea’s manuscript, she refers to it as their “child.” The image Ibsen is evoking here is that of child sacrifice, specifically the ancient pagan practice of making children go into a furnace where they would be burned to death in honor of the god Moloch. The peoples who practiced this form of sacrifice must have been despairing indeed, to think that their god was so cruel as to require this act of them—and Hedda, it would seem, is similarly despairing.

Hedda inherited her pistols from her father, the great General Gabler, and her intimacy with them suggests the extent to which Hedda is so much more her father’s daughter than her husband’s wife.

The slippers in "Hedda Gabler" are important because they symbolize Tesman's life and family. Hedda's complete disregard for her husband's slippers reveal her indifference towards Tesman's feelings and what he cares about.

The reference of ‘vine leaves’ symbolise Heddas unexpected rebellion against society





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## Key Themes

### Social themes seen throughout the play:

Bourgeois vs. Aristocracy

Social Class

Public Image

Scandal

Gender Sexuality

### Major theme 1 – Individual's 'crowing for life' Vs. Stultifying empty social norms:

Through the character of Hedda, Ibsen portrayed the nineteenth century social milieu in which the individual is bound to follow the social norms of society.

- Child of her father
- Caught into the stuffy Bourgeois Environment
- Manipulation as a consequence
- Suicide – the only way out for Hedda

### Major theme 2 – The plight of the woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century or Gender discrimination:

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Norwegian society, women had no power.

The male domination in 19<sup>th</sup> century has been represented by the attitudes of various male characters.

### Major theme 3 – Class Conflicts:

Through the character of Hedda, Ibsen portrays the illusion of power retained by different classes within the social system. But Ibsen dramatizes in Hedda Gabler, the hidden conflicts in this society. He shows what can be hiding behind the beautiful facades:

Moral Duplicity, Confinement, Betrayal, Manipulation, Constant insecurity

### Minor Theme 1. Theme of female and feminism

In the late 1800s, women were restricted by Victorian Values  
Prevented from having any real lives of their own  
Exist only in relation to men  
Emptiness and malaise are common factors

### Minor Theme 3. Theme of respect and reputation

Society's rules are often more important than human life.  
The threat of public scandal hangs constantly over the characters' heads, threatening to ruin social status.  
Reputation is far more important than human life in Hedda Gabler.

### Minor Theme 5. Theme of Self-Liberation and Self-Renunciation

Hedda believes that the power to determine when and how one dies is the ultimate freedom, and is perhaps the only real control that an individual has in life.

### Minor Theme 7. Theme of sex vs. sterility

The "notorious" female character is dramatic works of literature is frequently a firebrand, fully in control of her sexuality and conscious of her power over men but it is opposite in case of Hedda.

### Minor Theme 2. Theme of wealth

A marriage between an aristocratic woman and a seemingly middle-class man  
Wealth is a constant barrier between them, not only as far as money is concerned but also regarding class.  
Interests, mannerisms, even personalities and friendships, are all tied to class.

### Minor Theme 4. Theme of appearances

Beauty is power  
Aesthetics are important to the play as well: the aristocratic class, more so than the middle class, is obsessed with appearances.  
All black, feathers, atop a horse – these all paint the portrait of the reserved, wealthy, powerful, and cold Hedda Gabler

### Minor Theme 6. Theme of dreams, hopes and desires

If Hedda Gabler teaches one lesson, it is that dreams cannot be relied upon. In this play, all plans for the future are predicated upon falsities, lies, misunderstanding, or miscommunication. Whether it be marriage, friendship, babies, professional pursuits, or economic risk, nothing is a sure thing.

### Minor Theme 8. Theme of drugs and alcohol

Hedda Gabler features a recovering alcoholic as one of its main characters. The play draws a connection between the idea of courage and the idea of drinking.  
Alcoholism is interpreted as the mark of a free spirit, rather than a disease which needs to be treated