



# WORLD LITERATURE II (ENG 252)

## *Hedda Gabler* Study Guide

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### IBSEN

Ibsen was born in Norway in 1828. His family was poor and he was sent off at sixteen to work as a pharmacist's apprentice. At twenty-two he went to Oslo and entered the university for a short while and then went to Bergen, where he was a playwright and assistant stage manager at the newly founded Norwegian Theater.

At twenty-six, disgusted with Norway's politics, Ibsen left for near permanent exile. He wandered around Europe for most of the rest of his life, writing intensely Norwegian plays while in exile. He did not return to Norway permanently until 1891, the year after he completed *Hedda Gabler*.

In his time, Ibsen was a radical critic of middle class society. According to Lyon, Ibsen's "discussions of incest, venereal disease, sexual exploitation, and illegitimacy... shocked his audiences and made him an infamous international celebrity. (Lyons, 8)

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### DRAMATIC REALISM

Dramatic realism was rooted in the late nineteenth century's fascination with examining human behavior as a story of cause and effect, analogous to scientific studies of cause and effect. The basic idea was to understand how the effects of the past--heredity and experience--as well as the social and economic conditions of the present, affected the behavior of the individual and the group. These social and psychological "causes" replaced the roles of the gods and fates in classical theater.

Dramatic realism was, above all, familiar. The settings and actions on stage looked just like the lives of the contemporary audience. The details of furnishings, dress, speech and action were all familiar, making the events seem intensely "real" to the audience.

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### CLASS

The characters in *Hedda Gabler* represent the upper and middle European bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century. Brack, Hedda and Eilert Lovborg are from the upper bourgeoisie while the other characters are from the middle bourgeoisie. (Lyons, 63) This bourgeoisie was quite different from our ideas about the middle class in America; their wealth was inherited and their social customs extremely restricted.

Hedda and Eilert have both lost their status in the upper bourgeoisie, Hedda, because she had no money, while Eilert destroyed his reputation through unacceptable social behavior and throwing away his money on debauchery. (Lyons, 63)

Although poor, Hedda clearly considers herself a member of the upper bourgeoisie, and feels she's married into a lower social class which she despises. (Lyons, 62-63)

Despite the pretensions of both the upper and middle bourgeoisie, all of the characters in the play except Brack are at risk of poverty. Hedda and Thea both married for financial security. Thea risks both her social and financial security when she leaves her husband to follow Eilert Lovborg. Tesman's finances are threatened by the prospect of not getting the professorship, and his aunts have mortgaged their annuity to help him buy his new house. So we see that this apparently rock-solid bourgeoisie is actually fragile and vulnerable to loss of wealth and status.

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## SOCIAL CONTROL/REPRESSION

The restricted social behavior of the upper bourgeoisie provided serious penalties for any individuality or creativity. The life of a non-conformist was difficult, if not impossible in this social class. The restrictions this behavior placed on the freedom, integrity and fulfillment of the individual provide a major issue in Ibsen's dramas. (Lowenthal, 149)

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## OPTIONS FOR WOMEN

A woman of Hedda's social class can not really understand what freedom and fulfillment might be or how to attain them. This is understandable, since she is a member of a very restrictive class, and a woman. Women of this class and time could only be wives, mothers or daughters, not separate human beings. Hedda clings to the glamour of being General Gabler's daughter, but she is a coward, not a heroic soldier. She thinks Eilert Lovborg dying with "vine leaves" in his hair is romantic and does not understand or care about the creative, healing possibilities of genius at work. (Mayerston, 132)

Hedda is a coward about any action that could cause a scandal. She clearly desired Eilert Lovborg, but rejected him because she would not break a social taboo. She is wretched and destructive because she refuses to live according to her own feelings, and chooses to live according to the rigid forms of a dull, stagnant social order. (Clurman, 165-6)

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## THE STORY

Act I. The play opens in the drawing room of Hedda and George Tesman's house. Aunt Juliana and the maid, Bertha, talk about Hedda and George who have just returned from a six month honeymoon trip.

George enters and admires his aunt's new hat, which he places on the sofa. They discuss invalid Aunt Rena, George's researches while abroad, and the house, which had been acquired while he and Hedda were abroad; the aunts had mortgaged their annuity to help finance it.

They also mention that Eilert Lovborg has recently published a book.

Enter Hedda. She is cool and remarks meanly about the maid's hat on the sofa, knowing it belongs to Aunt Juliana. The contrast between the warm affection of George and his aunt and the cool meanness of Hedda is clear right from the start.

Innuendos about Hedda being pregnant are made by Aunt Juliana, but George is oblivious to, and Hedda is repelled by the suggestions.

Thea Elvsted comes calling. She is a former girlfriend of George's and an ex-schoolmate of Hedda's. She has been living for some years in the north, married to a much older man who hired Eilert Lovborg as a tutor to his children from a former marriage.

Thea is upset and explains that Eilert has come to town; she is worried about him and begs George to keep an eye on him. Hedda sends George into the other room to write a note to Eilert, and she then grills Thea. Thea is afraid of Hedda, who had been cruel to her in school.

Thea has left her husband and followed Eilert into the city. Hedda is amazed by Thea's boldness and clearly jealous of the nurturing, creative relationship Thea had developed with Eilert. Thea says only one thing stands between her and Eilert, a woman "he's never been able to forget." Thea does not know who the woman is, only that "when he left her she tried to shoot him with a pistol."

Hedda's response is "What nonsense. People don't do such things. The kind of people we know." [But this is exactly what Hedda does at the end, shooting herself. And of course, she was the woman who tried to shoot Eilert years ago, but she doesn't admit it.]

Judge Brack enters. Brack tells George that there will be a competition with Eilert Lovborg for the Professorship George had been counting on to finance his life with Hedda. George had promised Hedda they could enter society and entertain lavishly, but now they will not be able to, at least not right away. Hedda says that at least she still has "one thing left to amuse myself with....My pistols....General Gabler's pistols."

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## ■ HEDDA'S CHARACTER

In the 1950s, Joseph Wood Krutch thought that Hedda Gabler was an evil woman. However, more recent critics explain her behavior in terms of the restrictive social conditions of nineteenth century Norway.

This view is well presented by Caroline Mayerson:

"...Hedda is a woman, not a monster; neurotic, but not psychotic. Thus she may be held accountable for her behavior. But she is spiritually sterile. Her yearning for self-realization through exercise of her natural endowments is in conflict with her enslavement to a narrow standard of conduct."(132)

Unfortunately, Hedda never does understand the reality of her situation, nor does her death "prove" anything. Mayerson goes on to explain that Hedda:

"...dies to escape a sordid situation that is largely of her own making; she will not face reality nor assume responsibility for the consequences of her acts. The pistols, having descended to a coward and a cheat, bring only death without honor."(137)

We realize how cowardly Hedda is by her contrast to Thea, who is a brave woman and is willing to be cast out by respectable society in order to follow the man she loves and the dictates of her conscience.

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## ■ HEDDA/THEA

Hedda and Thea are presented as not only opponents for the soul and genius of Eilert Lovborg, but as contrasts in sterility and fertility. Although Hedda is pregnant and Thea has no children, Thea is fertile and Hedda is sterile. Hedda rejects even the idea of her own pregnancy, while Thea works with Eilert Lovborg, and later with George Tesman, to bring the book "child" of Eilert and herself to birth.

Mayerson points out that:

"Ibsen uses Thea...to indicate a way to freedom which Hedda never apprehends. Through her ability to extend herself in comradeship with Lovborg, Thea not only brings about the rebirth of his creative powers, but merges her own best self with his to produce a prophecy of the future." (132-3)

This notion of a woman fulfilling herself by inspiring a man is rather dated, but Ibsen clearly approved of Thea's nurturing femininity.

Thea, despite her totally feminine nature, is able to break with the social standards of her culture to leave her husband and follow Eilert Lovborg. Of all the characters in Hedda Gabler, Thea is the most able to act from her own conscience and convictions, despite the disapproval of society.

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## ■ SYMBOLS IN *HEDDA GABLER*

Mayerson points out that three items in the play are especially developed as symbols:

- Lovborg's manuscript about the future as the "child" of himself and Thea;
- Thea's hair and the fertility it represents;
- General Gabler's pistols. (131)

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## ■ Manuscript/Child/Hair

Mayerson comments that:

"The manuscript is Lovborg's and Thea's 'child,' the idea of progress born of a union between individuals who have freed themselves from the preconceptions of their environment. This manuscript the sterile Hedda throws into the fire at the climax of her vindictive passion. Her impulse to annihilate by burning is directed both toward Thea's "child" and toward Thea's hair and calls attention to the relationship between them....Ibsen was using hair as a symbol of fertility ..." (133)

According to the Ibsen's stage directions, Hedda has "not especially abundant" auburn hair, while Thea's "hair is...exceptionally wavy and abundant." Hedda has evidently been jealous of it since their days at school. Thea remembers that she was frightened of Hedda in school, because:

Whenever you met me on the staircase you used to pull my hair.

Hedda. No, did I?

Thea. Yes. And once you said you'd burn it all off.

Hedda is jealous of Thea's hair which represents both her femininity and her fertility.

Consequently, Hedda attacks both Thea's femininity and her fertility, destroying her relationship with Eilert Lovborg and destroying the manuscript, the "child" of Thea and Eilert. However, Thea's abundant fertility conquers even this, and as the play draws to an end, she is working with Tesman to reconstruct the manuscript/child.

While Thea is able to create and recreate, brilliant Hedda can only destroy. She destroys the manuscript, destroys Eilert Lovborg, and finally, destroys herself. She is, ultimately, an ignorant, highly romantic woman, trapped in the rigid bourgeois society of 19th century Norway.

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## ■ Pistols/General/Sexual Dishonesty

The other major symbol in the play is the pistols of General Gabler, which, along with his portrait, seem to be all Hedda has inherited from him. Hedda uses the pistols throughout the play to assert her identity as her father's daughter. (Mayerson, 135) This role is the most glamorous one available to Hedda in her limited world.

Such pistols traditionally belong to an officer who cherishes a code of bravery and honor. Hedda's trifling use of them mocks this traditional role. She threatened Eilert Lovborg with her pistols before he left town years ago, and she playfully shoots at Judge Brack as he approaches her house through the back door. This is a mockery of protecting her "honor," especially since she is so dishonest in her sexual relationships with the men in her life. She sent away Lovborg, whom she evidently desired, married George Tesman whom she does not like, let alone love, in order to be supported comfortably, and flirts with Brack, despite her marriage. (Mayerson, 136)

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## WOMEN

Modern criticism of *Hedda Gabler* rests on the idea that a male dominated society repressed and limited Hedda's brilliance. (Lyons, 19)

Ibsen studied the repressed conditions of women in many of his plays; however his own view of women was limited by his "celebration of their primary role as the nurturing mothers whose mission is to educate the young." (Lyons, 24) No wonder there is no solution for Hedda but suicide. She clearly would never make a good mother, and there was nothing else for such a woman to do unless she could nurture a man's genius, as Thea did. Nurturing genius, however, was clearly not Hedda's gift. General Gabler's pistols were, finally, the only option for his daughter.

*Hedda Gabler* is set about thirty years earlier than when it was written. Clurman writes that:

"It was a period, Ibsen once remarked, when women were not allowed to play any role apart from marriage and motherhood. The "protection" they enjoyed separated them from the realities of life. Hedda shuns everything painful and ugly; she cannot tolerate the sight of sickness or death. She is already pregnant when the play opens, but mention of it is abhorrent to her....Small wonder then that she admits that all she is good for is boring herself to death."(164)

And yet Thea breaks out of this sheltered life. Hedda is a victim, but she is also a coward.

Both George Tesman and Eilert Lovborg develop their identities through their professions. They compete for fame and position through training, effort and intellect. Hedda, however, has no profession, nor does she care about anything. She has no interest in what Eilert writes, only in his potential fame and glamour, and in his rivalry with her husband. She can only compete with Thea for control of a man, not to develop a personal identity. Worse, Hedda's control is destructive, while Thea's is healing and creative. Hedda married George Tesman to establish a social life as the wife of a professor; she wanted to control Eilert Lovborg destructively to rival Thea's constructive control as the inspiring force behind his genius.

Hedda's only stable identity is as General Gabler's daughter. She has no life of her own, no projects of her own. Although she envies Eilert Lovborg's freedom and wildness, she shows no interest at all in the content of his writing, nor is she willing to risk scandal personally. She cooperates, in short, with the extremely limited role offered by her social condition (Lyons, 20)

Both the play and Hedda herself are limited to what can be said and done around a lady. As Lyons points out, The world beyond Hedda's house includes:

"...drunkenness, prostitution, financial recklessness...the exploitation of women, and the threat of poverty....[Lovborg]...dies from an accidental gunshot wound in an apartment that functions, at least temporarily, as a brothel...." (128)

The respectable Judge Brack is obviously familiar with Mademoiselle Danielle, the prostitute in whose rooms Eilert died. Further, Brack tries to use his knowledge that Eilert used Hedda's revolver to blackmail Hedda into having an adulterous affair with him. Brack has evidently enjoyed a series of such adulterous relationships with other respectable women. Even the respectable, scandal-fearing Hedda, is clearly fascinated by hearing about the disreputable goings-on at Mademoiselle Danielle's. (Lyons, 128-9)

Hedda's fascination with the forbidden male world of freedom and excess draws her to both Lovborg and Brack, and finally leads to her destruction. (Lyons, 128-129)

Hedda's gender, class, and loathing of everything ugly limit what she is able or willing to hear about the outside world. Events are reported to the house, but only in terms acceptable to Hedda. Such restraint is imposed by society, as well as by Hedda's wishes.

Her lack of knowledge of the outside world probably is a major factor in her romantic idealization of Lovborg's wildness and lack of self-control. She has never seen him drunk or in sordid surroundings; she only heard his stories about his escapades and imagines him carousing as a Dionysian god with vine-leaves in his hair instead of as a stumbling drunk frequenting brothels. Hedda does not even understand the concept of Dionysios correctly. She just is aware of the carousing and freedom of the god, not of his creative inspiration and potential for creating social cohesion.

Her questioning of Lovborg years earlier showed her desire for information about this forbidden male world. But, ultimately, Hedda is determined not to break the taboos of her society and when she felt she had to choose between Lovborg and following the rules, she chose the rules and a loveless marriage to Tesman. (Lyons, 129-130)

Ultimately, Hedda never does understand the creative genius which Thea is able to nurture in Eilert Lovborg. Hedda romanticizes his weaknesses, confusing his lack of self-control with god-like courage. She idealizes his death as noble instead of a sordid accident, and when she is trapped by Brack's blackmail, she chooses the coward's way out--suicide--to escape from a situation largely of her own making. (Mayerson, 136-7)

I would like to believe that Hedda is a creature of the nineteenth century, and that her romantic ignorance of what matters and what is real would not occur today. However, it would be foolish to deny that there are plenty of people, now and always, who dislike the petty limitations of real life and take refuge in their fantasies, confusing rebellion with creativity, self-indulgence with freedom and destruction with fulfillment.

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