Study Guide: *Hedda Gabler*

**BY:** Henrik Ibsen

**A NEW ADAPTATION BY:** Jon Robin Baitz

**FROM A LITERAL TRANSLATION BY:**
Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey

**DIRECTED BY:** Jennifer Tarver

A Necessary Angel production
in association with Canadian Stage

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A LETTER TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS:

Study Guide: Hedda Gabler

A letter to teachers and students

Education is a vital part of what we do at Canadian Stage. We are committed to sharing material with our audiences that will challenge, enrich and deepen their perspectives while diversifying conversations. Henrik Ibsen’s seminal works are consistently effective in achieving this. Ibsen has been dubbed “the father of modern drama” for his ability to explore characters’ psychological and emotional tensions within relatively uncomplicated narratives. The author’s unique representation of complex, often female, protagonists contributes to the universality of his plays and defines the significance of this work to a North American audience today.

In Hedda Gabler, Ibsen’s most commonly produced play, a recently married woman finds herself negotiating her new identity influenced by the constraints dictated by society. Throughout, Hedda is determined to live her own independence ultimately destroying many relationships trying. The outcome is an incredible study of psychology, gender roles, and a rich demonstration of clever manipulation. This production in association with Necessary Angel and directed by Jennifer Tarver features a stellar cast that will surely create an engaging version of the 19th century play for a 21st century audience. Tarver’s approach to the work as a complete representation of society within the “container” of the Tesman home will surely highlight the text’s complexities. Her choice to set the work in the 1950s, a moment in history when roles and aesthetics are firmly defined just before the reformations in societal trends and behaviours associated with the 1960s, further establishes the significance of the impact rules and expectations has on an individual, a group, and how these patterns reform and evolve over time.

Based on the text adapted by Jon Robin Baitz, this document is meant to provide an overview of Hedda Gabler including its theatrical context and highlighting some thoughtful themes found in the work. The information included in this document should be used as a starting point from which to delve deeper into certain aspects of the text and production. In addition to this Study Guide, we are pleased to offer bespoke Student Workshops either in your classroom or at the theatre to supplement attending a performance with a student group. I welcome you to contact me to further discuss the suitability of this production and supplementary workshop opportunities for your students.

I look forward to seeing you and your students at the theatre!

Cheers,

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CURRICULUM

THE ARTS (DRAMA)

ENGLISH (READING AND LITERATURE STUDIES, MEDIA STUDIES)

SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES (FOUNDATIONS, GENDER ISSUES AND GENDER RELATED-POLICY IN CONTEXT)

CHARACTERS

Hedda Tesman née Gabler – a vital young woman of 29, the daughter of General Gabler
Juliana Tesman – a single lady of 65 of pleasant appearance, George Tesman’s aunt
Berthe – an older maid, large and plain looking
George Tesman – Hedda’s husband, an academic
Thea Elvsted – a younger schoolmate of Hedda and an acquaintance of Tesman
Judge Brack – a prominent public figure and unscrupulous friend of the Tesmans
Eilert Lovborg – a disgraced alcoholic and colleague of Tesman’s, Hedda’s former lover

THE STORY

Hedda Gabler tells the story of a recently married woman as she navigates her new identity as wife among several close relatives and peers as well as through the constraints placed on her by society. Hedda is considered to be one of the great dramatic roles in theatre, and one of the first fully developed neurotic female protagonists in literature. The play is told in four acts. The entire play takes place in the Tesmans’ drawing room as characters flit in and out. Throughout, a portrait of Hedda’s father, General Gabler, is visible on stage.

In acts one and two, Hedda is established as intelligent, manipulative, and bored. Hedda and her husband, George Tesman, have returned from their honeymoon. Tesman is an aspiring, but not particularly brilliant, academic. It is almost immediately clear that Hedda never loved Tesman. Furthermore, there are suggestions that she is pregnant. The couple is greeted by Tesman’s maid, Berthe, and his aunt Juliana, both of whom Hedda intentionally insults within moments of meeting them for the first time.

Thea Elvsted, Hedda’s childhood acquaintance, and Eilert Lovborg, Tesman’s academic rival and Hedda’s one-time lover, arrive at the house. Hedda learns that Thea has acted as a muse to Lovborg as he completed the manuscript of his book, his chef-d’oeuvre, and becomes jealous. Hedda encourages Lovborg, a recovering alcoholic, to attend a bacchanal with Tesman. The celebration is hosted by Judge Brack, an unscrupulous friend of the Tesmans.

In acts three and four the story unravels at the hands of Hedda. Tesman reveals that Lovborg dropped the manuscript of his book while drunk. Unbeknownst to Lovborg, Tesman recovered the document.
the meantime, in an attempt to cover up his carelessness, Lovborg tells Thea that he tore up his manuscript. Thea leaves the house in despair. Hedda gives Lovborg one of her father’s pistols and encourages him to commit suicide. After he departs, Hedda burns the manuscript.

The play concludes as Judge Brack arrives bearing the news of Lovborg’s suicide. Brack tells Hedda that he knows the origins of the pistol. Hedda reacts by going into the next room where she shoots herself.

This adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* by Jon Robin Baitz strips away the Victorian-isms for the 21st century audience. It is shaped by contemporary feminism and theatrical tradition, while preserving the essential character at the core of this story.

### THEATRICAL CONTEXT

#### ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: HENRIK IBSEN

Henrik Ibsen is a Norwegian playwright. He is often dubbed “the father of modern drama.” Ibsen spent the majority of his life in Germany and Italy, though most of his plays, including *Hedda Gabler*, are based in Norway. He is the most produced playwright after Shakespeare, and *Hedda Gabler* is likely the most performed of his plays. Ibsen focused on realism through introspective drama and explored psychological conflicts, moving away from the typical melodrama that was popular in the late 19th century.

*Further Reading*


#### ABOUT THE ADAPTATION:

The adaptation used for this production was written by Jon Robin Baitz. Baitz is an American playwright, screenwriter, and television producer. Baitz’s translation is described as “bracing [and] fleeting... [a] contemporary English rendering of a text written in another language in another century” (*The New York Times*). His translation was well received by critics, as it stripped away the stuffy 19th century language, leaving a crisper, modern Hedda for today’s theatre-goer.

Among the other translations of *Hedda Gabler* that one may find is a particularly polarizing adaptation created by Canada’s beloved playwright, Judith Thompson. Originally staged at the Shaw Festival in 1991, and revisited for Toronto audiences in 2005, her version sets the first two acts in 19th century Norway, and the second two in 21st century Toronto. A further distinction that informs this unique adaptation is the emphasis on the assumption that Hedda had been a victim of rape at the hand of her father, context that informs all of Hedda’s behaviours according to Thompson.
Further Reading


Ibsen, Henrik, adapted by Judith Thompson, Hedda Gabler, (Shaw Festival Collective (University of Guelph): 1991).


CRITICAL EXPLORATION

GENDER

During the 19th century, a woman’s role was defined by those around her as a mother and a caretaker of the home. Hedda is far from the quintessential housewife as she shirks the idea of raising a family, despite being pregnant herself. Hedda is framed as her father’s daughter rather than her husband’s wife, and has a “masculine” outlook, preferring pistols and horses to cooking and sewing. This maternal indifference is contrasted by Aunt Juliana’s affection towards Tesman, whom she raised as her own child. Hedda’s anti-maternal nature is further illustrated when she cries “I’m burning it! I’m burning the child!” (Ibsen, 85) as she gleefully destroys Lovborg’s manuscript. Despite Hedda’s strong anti-domesticate sentiments, the entire play takes place in the confines of the Tesman home.

When it debuted in 1891, Hedda Gabler “challenged audiences to think about the way power functions within the domestic world” (Sydney Morning Herald). Never before had theatre-goers experienced such a close examination of middle-class married women, carrying the undertones of women’s demand for
autonomy and the expansion of women’s rights. These complex issues are embodied by Hedda, despite Ibsen’s rejection of the idea himself. In his response to the Norwegian Society for Women’s Rights, he wrote:

“"I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose. I thank you for your toast, but must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for women’s rights. I am not even quite sure what women’s rights really are. To me, it has been a question of human’s rights.”

— Henrik Ibsen

**Further Reading**


**MANIPULATION AND CONTROL**

Throughout the play, Hedda is constantly manipulating those around her and fighting for control. Most notably, she vies to gain control of Lovborg by encouraging him to “have a tiny wee drink” (Ibsen, 58) despite the fact that he is a recovering alcoholic. She manipulates Tesman into giving her Lovborg’s manuscript only to later destroy it, claiming she “did it for [Tesman’s] sake” (Ibsen, 91).

The Hartford Stage Educator’s Resource for this play equates Hedda to the Urban Dictionary definition of a Mean Girl:

1) **Girls who are bullies and use "girl aggression" (nasty comments, trickery, deceit, excluding people from events, spreading rumors, stealing boyfriends, etc.).** These girls are often popular because everyone is either afraid of them or wants to be like them. They tend to have armies of followers ("friends"/wannabees) comprising their clique. However, few people actually like them for who they are.

Art, in several forms, also serves as a force within the script. A portrait of General Gabler looms over the stage and Ibsen defines Hedda within the first few lines of the play as “General Gabler’s daughter” (Ibsen, 2). A second example of a piece of art that shapes the unfolding events is found in Lovborg’s manuscript. Hedda’s destruction of the manuscript, Lovborg’s great creative project and life’s work, results in the rift between Thea and Lovborg, Hedda’s subjugation to Judge Brack, and to Hedda and Lovborg’s suicides.
**Mental Health**

Interpretations of Hedda have always varied—is she a victim oppressed by her position in society, or a puppet master determined to destroy the lives of those around her? Her motivations are left unclear, and even when Judge Brack asks her, it seems as if she herself does not know, or cannot explain it:

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**Brack:** Hedda, why would you want to hurt that nice old lady?

**Hedda:** I know. I can’t help it. Something just comes over me and I can’t stop myself. *(She pushes Brack’s chair back into its proper place at the table.)* I can’t explain it. It just happens.

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Ibsen, 41

There have been many connections drawn between *Hedda Gabler* and Freud’s theories. Though the play was written prior to Freud’s main works on psychoanalysis, it is speculated that Ibsen was interested in mental science. Freud’s theories about neuroses can help illuminate Hedda’s motivations and actions. Freud highlighted the importance of unconscious mental forces particularly on shaping personality, or in Hedda’s case, her inability to adapt to her changing environment and develop a more complex personality.

**Further Reading**


Is Hedda Gabler a tragedy, evoking the condition of human suffering? Does the audience sympathize with her and her reasons for pulling the trigger? While the play has the structure of a tragedy, many have argued that Hedda Gabler is in fact an anti-tragedy. Hedda’s inflated sense of ego leads to a skewed perception of the glory of death, apparent when she encourages Lovborg to kill himself after he believes he has lost the manuscript. She encourages him to “do it gloriously. Do it right!” (Ibsen, 84) She believes that death offers the individual liberation from the chains of society, but the reality of her own death seems small and insignificant. The smallness of it is highlighted by Tesman’s instant reaction to the gunshot, “There she goes, playing with her pistols again” (Ibsen, 105), almost chiding her like a naughty child playing tricks.

Further Reading


CURRICULUM-RELEVANT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE ARTS (DRAMA)

B1. The Critical Analysis Process

use the critical analysis process to reflect on and evaluate their own and others’ drama works

EG: What was most memorable about this production? What makes this script seminal and relevant to diverse audiences including a contemporary viewer?
B2. Drama and Society

demonstrate an understanding of how societies present and past use or have used drama, and of how creating and viewing drama can benefit individuals, groups, and communities

EG: What makes Ibsen the grandfather of contemporary theatre? Why do companies around the world continue to produce Hedda Gabler? How is HG relevant to a present-day Toronto audience? How has the significance of this play evolved since its original production in 1891?

B3. Connections Beyond the Classroom

identify knowledge and skills they have acquired through drama activities, and demonstrate an understanding of ways in which they can apply this learning in personal, social, and career contexts

EG: What are the main themes presented in Hedda Gabler? How can the behaviours of the characters within this play be interpreted as appropriate or inappropriate conduct based on modern etiquette?

ENGLISH (READING AND LITERATURE STUDIES, MEDIA STUDIES)

1.5 Reading and Literature Studies: Extending Understanding of Texts
extend understanding of texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by making appropriate and increasingly rich connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them

EG: How is Hedda Gabler relevant today? Can you think of any modern day parallels or connections between Hedda’s struggle and the women of today? Why or why not?

1.8 Reading and Literature Studies: Critical Literacy

identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, commenting with growing understanding on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power

EG: Ibsen stated that “I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose. I ... must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for women’s rights.” Having seen Hedda Gabler, do you think Ibsen was a 19th century feminist? How does seeing the play contradict or confirm Ibsen’s statement?

1.4 Media Studies: Audience Response

explain why the same media text might prompt different responses from different audiences

EG: How did you feel after Hedda killed herself? Did you empathize with her, or sympathize with her? Did her death achieve what she had intended? Was her death tragic or anti-tragic?
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES (FOUNDATIONS, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT, GENDER ISSUES AND GENDER)

B2.1 Foundations: Power Relations, Sex, and Gender

*analyse the ways in which power and privilege are unequally distributed between and among males and females in homes, schools, workplaces, and community settings*

EG: How is power distributed among the characters in *Hedda Gabler*? Consider especially less focal characters such as Berthe, Brack and Juliana. How does the setting and staging of the play impact the power dynamic? How is or isn’t this consistent with the 19th century male-female interactions?

B1.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Development: Individual Development

describe individual development throughout the lifespan, according to a variety of theoretical perspectives on development

EG: How do the characters in *Hedda Gabler* develop over the duration of the events of the play? How does this character development or lack thereof, reflect Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis?

C1.1 Gender Issues and Gender Related Policy in Context: Securing Rights and Social Supports

describe the relevant social context of and issues of concern to contemporary and historical women’s movements

EG: What elements of 19th century feminism are still present in this adaptation? What elements of 20th century feminism are present in the adaptation? How has historical context versus modern perception informed your viewing of *Hedda Gabler*?

WORKS CITED


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Please feel free to contact me or an Advisor from your own board to discuss productions and further education opportunities at Canadian Stage.

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