Hedda Gabler

BY HENRIK IBSEN
TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEIGAN BY PAUL WALSH
DIRECTED BY RICHARD E. T. WHITE
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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N 126
by Edvard Munch

I would far rather be an outcast
upon the bosom of the great world
than be an accomplice to
a moral nothingness
rather a bloody spark that
no hand will shield
that glows wildly and is extinguished
and obliterated with no trace
than glow as a lamp
with a calm measured flame
evening after evening
in that eternal sitting-room
where the canary slumbers
in its blanket-covered cage
and time is slowly counted out
by the old sitting-room clock
no the spark has the ability
to light the fire
and to know that it was responsible
for the sound of the fire siren
to know it was responsible
for the sea of flames
that broke with tradition
and turned the hourglass upside down.

Munch in His Own Words,
by Poul Erik Tojner
(Prestel Publishing, 2001)

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OPPOSITE Inger Munch, by Edvard Munch (woodcut,
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CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

HEDDA GABLER

Hedda Gabler, first published in 1890, premiered in Munich, Germany, on January 31, 1891. Its first performance in English took place in London on April 20, 1891. The translation by Paul Walsh produced by A.C.T. is revised from his translation commissioned by the Hidden Theater in Minneapolis, where it premiered in August 1998.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

JORGEN TESMAN, a scholar of cultural history  
HEDDA TESMAN, his wife  
MISS JULIANE TESMAN, his aunt  
MRS. THEA ELVSTED  
COMMISSIONER BRACK  
EJLERT LOVBORG  
BERTE, the Tesman’s housekeeper

Anthony Fusco  
René Augesen  
Sharon Lockwood  
Finnerty Steeves  
Jack Willis  
Stephen Barker Turner  
Barbara Oliver

THE SETTING

The Tesman villa in the western part of Christiania, Norway, 1890.

SYNOPSIS

Prologue: Hedda stands alone in her new home, contemplating her radically altered circumstances.

ACT I: Early morning. Miss Juliane Tesman visits the new villa of her nephew, Jorgen Tesman, who returned the night before from a six-month honeymoon with his new wife, Hedda (née Gabler). Berte and Miss Tesman discuss the new mistress of the house, the stylish and demanding daughter of the late General Gabler.

Tesman comes down to greet his aunt. He mentions the wonderful honeymoon and they discuss the failing health of his Aunt Rina (Juliane’s sister) and the envy his marriage will inspire among his wife’s old suitors. Miss Tesman hopes for news of Hedda’s possible pregnancy, but Tesman fails to take the hint and talks only of a professorship he is expecting to receive. Tesman admits that he has placed himself deeply in debt to pay for the long, expensive honeymoon and all the things he has bought to secure Hedda’s happiness,
including the expensive villa. Miss Tesman tells her nephew that even she and her sister have put up money to support his new married lifestyle, using their pensions as collateral against the couple’s new carpets and furniture. Miss Tesman reminds her nephew that he soon will have the salary from the professorship, now that the competition for the post has all but evaporated with the disgrace of his old rival, Ejler Lovborg.

Tesman and his aunt are sharing delight over his good fortune when Hedda comes down from her bedroom, brusquely commenting on Miss Tesman’s early visit. After a few pleasantries, Miss Tesman presents her nephew with a pair of his cherished slippers, which his Aunt Rina has embroidered, in which Hedda refuses to take any interest. As Tesman is seeing his aunt out, they remark on how healthy and “filled-out” Hedda is looking, giving his aunt more reason than ever to suspect a pregnancy. Alone in the room Hedda paces with clenched fists, quietly showing her frustration and rage.

When Tesman returns, he begs Hedda to open her heart to his aunt and make her feel welcome. As she restlessly moves about the room, Hedda discovers flowers sent by their friend Mrs. Elvsted, whom they both knew in school. Mrs. Elvsted suddenly enters in a nervous state. She confesses that Lovborg has returned to town from her own place in the North, where for the past three years he has served as tutor to her children. Lovborg and Mrs. Elvsted have become quite close: she helped him to reform his once destructive, debauched ways and to write a book that has been very well received. Mrs. Elvsted pleads with Tesman and Hedda to welcome him into their home and community. Hedda sends Tesman off to write an invitation to Lovborg, while she pushes Mrs. Elvsted into confessing that she has left her husband and children to follow Lovborg, her soulmate. Lovborg, however, has not encouraged her feelings, as he is still in love with an unnamed woman from his past who once threatened to shoot him.

Tesman returns with a letter to Lovborg. Berte announces the arrival of Commissioner Brack. After introductions are made all around, Hedda leaves to walk her friend out. She returns to find the men talking about Lovborg, his new book, and his supposed moral reclamation. Brack confesses to Tesman that the professorship, which had been all but certain to go to Tesman, is now subject to competition from Lovborg in the wake of his recent rehabilitation and success. Brack reminds Tesman about the party he is hosting that evening and promises to return later to collect Tesman.

After Brack leaves, Tesman confesses to Hedda that with his appointment now up in the air, she will have to wait to purchase certain things he has promised her. Although disappointed, she reminds him that she will always take comfort in her most treasured possession: her father’s revolvers.
Act II: Later that afternoon. Hedda welcomes Commissioner Brack to the house by taking aim and firing her pistol into the garden, admonishing him for coming in the back way. Once in the house, he takes the pistol from her and begins an innuendo-filled conversation about how much they enjoy each other’s company. Hedda confesses that Tesman bores her and that she only married him because she was “danced out” and thought he was a solid choice with respectable prospects, and not because she loves him. Brack is alluding to the special friendship he would like to cultivate with Hedda when Tesman returns.

He has picked up some scholarly writings, including Lovborg’s new book, which he thinks is brilliant. After he leaves to get ready for Brack’s party, Hedda confesses to Brack that she is unhappy. Although Tesman is giving her everything she wants, including what he thought to be the house of her dreams, she never really cared for the house at all but only admired it offhandedly one night when Tesman was at a loss for conversation. She tells Brack that she has dreams of Tesman going into politics, which he laughs off, telling her that she will soon enough have other things to concern herself with, suggesting motherhood, which Hedda fervently denies.

Tesman returns and Lovborg arrives for a visit. They discuss Lovborg’s newly published book, which he decries as mere pandering compared to the brand-new manuscript he has only just finished and brought for Tesman to read. Tesman invites Lovborg to join them at Brack’s party so he can read an excerpt to Tesman at the party himself. When Lovborg seems hesitant to go to the party, Hedda invites him to stay for tea with her and Mrs. Elvsted. Lovborg indicates to Tesman that he will not stand in the way of his professorship, which brings relief to Tesman and prompts Hedda to bring in refreshments.

Lovborg stays with Hedda for a private conversation while the other men attend to their drinks. He recalls the intimacy of their former relationship and calls her by her maiden name, Hedda Gabler. Hedda remains cold, however, saying that she merely enjoyed the power she used to have over him and reminding him that she broke off their friendship when he made inappropriate advances. He asks her why she didn’t shoot him when she had the chance, and then calls her a coward for fearing the scandal that would have followed if she had gone through with her threat. He also reveals that he has not told Mrs. Elvsted about his love for Hedda, believing that she would never understand it.

Mrs. Elvsted arrives and boasts to Hedda about her happy role in Lovborg’s moral and professional reform. Hedda suggests that he may not be entirely secure in his newfound convictions, as he apparently doubts his own ability to resist the carousing likely to take place at Brack’s party. When Mrs. Elvsted tries to defend him, Hedda betrays her trust and reveals that Mrs. Elvsted has told her that she is afraid of what Lovborg might do when
away from her prudent influence. Lovborg, hearing how little his dear friend trusts him, begins to drink. When Brack comes in to say his goodbyes, Lovborg announces that he will attend the party after all but will return to escort Mrs. Elvsted home later that night.

The men leave Hedda triumphant and Mrs. Elvsted worried. Hedda is convinced that Lovborg will return in a drunken state and confesses that all she desires is to have power over another person’s life. Mrs. Elvsted remains to await the return of Lovborg.

**INTERMISSION**

**ACT III:** Early the next morning. The men have not yet returned; Hedda rests on the couch while Mrs. Elvsted paces distractedly. Berte enters with a letter for Tesman, waking Hedda, who sends Mrs. Elvsted off to get some sleep.

Tesman finally comes home. He tells Hedda about the evening: Lovborg did read from his brilliant new manuscript and then proceeded to drink to excess, ending the evening completely out of control. As they were walking him home, Lovborg dropped the manuscript, which Tesman recovered, unseen by the rest of the party. By the time Tesman caught up with them, Lovborg had disappeared. Tesman tells Hedda that he intends to return the manuscript to Lovborg immediately, but Hedda asks to read it first. She then presents Tesman with the letter from his aunts, which reveals that his Aunt Rina is near death, and Tesman readies himself to visit her. As he leaves, Berte announces Commissioner Brack and Hedda hastily hides the manuscript.

Brack provides more details of Lovborg’s evening, including the fact that Lovborg ended up at a party of a more “lively” nature at Miss Diana’s salon. Lovborg then accused Miss Diana and her guests of stealing from him and was arrested for his violent behavior. Brack tells Hedda not to allow Lovborg into the house again or to provide a place for Lovborg to meet with Mrs. Elvsted, a married woman, which would damage Hedda and Tesman’s own reputations. Hedda wonders aloud whether Brack isn’t interested in keeping Lovborg away from her house for some other reason and remarks that she is glad he has no hold on her, for fear of what he might do. Brack leaves through the garden, while Hedda takes a moment alone to look through the manuscript.

Lovborg bursts in unannounced, asking for Mrs. Elvsted and Tesman. Mrs. Elvsted, hearing his voice, comes in, and Lovborg tells her that the manuscript will never be published because he tore it up and threw it into the water in his drunken state; she must return to her husband and leave him alone in his misery and shame. After Mrs. Elvsted goes, Lovborg confesses to Hedda that he has not torn up the manuscript; he has actually lost it. In a desperate state he tells Hedda that he does not feel he can live anymore.
sends him away with a memento: her father’s pistol, the same one she pointed at him years before. As he leaves, she charges him to use it beautifully. When she is alone, she takes the manuscript from its hiding place and feeds it, page by page, into the fire.

**Act IV: Evening.** Miss Tesman and Hedda are discussing the sad passing of Aunt Rina when Tesman arrives. Miss Tesman leaves to prepare for her sister’s funeral, and Tesman tells Hedda that the possession of Lovborg’s manuscript is weighing heavily on his mind. Hedda confesses that she has burned the manuscript. When he reacts with horror, she explains that she did it for her husband and his career advancement. She also hints that she is indeed pregnant. Both of these revelations convince Tesman that his wife truly loves him and would do anything for him.

Mrs. Elvsted arrives, having overheard gossip that Lovborg has been taken to the hospital. The rumors are confirmed when Brack arrives to tell them that Lovborg has attempted suicide by shooting himself in the chest, news that disappoints Hedda, as she was expecting him to shoot himself “beautifully” in the temple. Told by Brack that Lovborg is not expected to live, and believing that Lovborg shot himself out of grief over his destroyed manuscript, Mrs. Elvsted suggests that the manuscript could be recreated from the notes he kept while working with Lovborg. Tesman agrees to make it his life’s work to help her, and they immediately sit down to begin rewriting Lovborg’s masterwork.

Left alone with Hedda, Brack reveals that Lovborg is in fact already dead. The truth is that he returned to Miss Diana’s establishment that afternoon to demand the return of his stolen possessions, and the gun went off in his pocket accidentally during the confrontation. Brack also tells Hedda that he recognized the pistol Lovborg used as one of her own.

Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted return to work at Hedda’s desk, which she clears for them, hiding the case with the remaining pistol under sheet music, which she places on her piano. While Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted are absorbed in their work, Brack tells Hedda that the police have her pistol but are unlikely to identify the owner—unless he should disclose what he knows, which would cause a disastrous scandal for the Tesmans. She realizes that her fear of scandal puts her completely in Brack’s power, a position he mockingly assures her he will not abuse.

Hedda sits down to play frenzied piano. Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted decide that it would be better to work at his aunt’s home in the evenings, leaving Hedda in the company of Commissioner Brack, who is agreeable, knowing he can take sexual advantage of the situation. A gunshot is heard. The men rush to discover the lifeless body of Hedda Gabler Tesman, who has shot herself in the temple. Brack, astonished, comments that “such things just aren’t done.”
THOUGHTS ON *HEDDA GABLER*

BY RICHARD E. T. WHITE

WHY OR IN WHAT WAYS IS *HEDDA GABLER* STILL RELEVANT?

Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler* in part as a response to a situation not unlike the one his title character faces: he fell in love with an engaging, charismatic young woman, a relationship that promised to change his life utterly. It was a commitment he was unable to make: his own fear, his desire to remain in a zone of comfort in his life and for stability and respect, constrained him. One reason Hedda stays with us as a character, why we return to her, is that we all face those moments in our life when the possibility presents itself of mutating, evolving into something rich and strange, into the person we are meant to be perhaps—and what do we do? Ibsen has presented Hedda (and the other fierce and complicated characters in this play) with a set of substantive choices: we participate with them in the struggle to make the right choice.

It’s also interesting that the title is *Hedda Gabler*, not *Hedda Tesman* or just *Hedda*. What resonates from that is how we trap ourselves with our own pasts: how the preconceptions we have built up around the theatricality of our own identities become cages. Hedda is presented with a vivid contrast to this in Thea—a young woman without any of Hedda’s social advantages, who is determined to remake her identity, to define a new self, a new life in service to ideas that are greater than herself.

I am also attracted to this play because I think one thing we’re dealing with in contemporary society is the death by strangling of the middle-class dream. What Hedda hopes for—a sophisticated social life in a big new house, supported by her husband the prestigious educator—is built of sand; it blows away almost as soon as it is attained. What she discovers is that the big new house—which she asked for on impulse—is a kind of prison, with adamantine bars of debt and social obligations.

Ibsen asks us: How do we attain power over our own lives? And more pointedly, over the lives of others? Hedda, like all great dramatic characters, is instinctually aware of the theatricalism of her own existence—to her, the big drawing room is her opportunity to stage her own plays, her salons of elegant people performing for her. When that dream is compromised by harsh economic reality, she turns to manipulating the lives of those closest to her, creating more intimate passion plays. As for the others, Thea seeks to reform Lovborg, to validate herself through his redemption and ascendancy. Lovborg finds his path to power by blowing up outmoded ideas; Brack by insinuating himself into elegant
sexual triangles, through the accumulation of social debts; Tesman by minute academic specialization; Aunt Juliane by nursing and comforting. Everyone in this play has more than a touch of the predatory animal about them.

I love Ibsen because I think he writes moral thrillers: I see in his writing the seeds of favorite writers like Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, and the thorniest of Hitchcock’s movies, like *Vertigo*, *Suspicion*, and *Notorious*. The suspense comes from how clearly and compellingly he sets up the stakes for the characters, how powerful the choices are, how immediate and overwhelming the consequences are. One mark of Ibsen’s greatness is how completely he subsumes himself creatively into his female characters, and how smart, dangerous, and original they are.

**WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO IN TERMS OF WORKING WITH RENÉ AUGESEN AS HEDDA?**

First of all, René brings an incredible range and level of skills as a highly accomplished classical actress, and she has a peerless work ethic. Beyond that René is an enormously empathic stage presence. Her work is characterized by an innate warmth and emotional accessibility. This is an extraordinarily useful layer to bring to a character like Hedda, whose actions can seem at times to be cruel and narcissistic; it gives us access to her inner life. René also brings a welcome sense of athleticism to the role. Hedda is, after all, a horsewoman, and her greatest disappointment is that Tesman will not be able to provide her with a riding horse; as the general’s daughter, she rode often (what man in the play can compare to the erotic charge of a fast gallop on a powerful stallion?) and danced, as well. I look forward to collaborating with René on the physical dynamism of the character, a wild mare trapped in a gilded corral, pounding her hooves on the doors of her married existence. ■
IN REHEARSAL THE OTHER DAY, YOU SPOKE ABOUT HEDDA’S RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE, AND THE EFFECT OF THAT RELATIONSHIP ON THE DESIGN OF THIS PRODUCTION. COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

I was thinking recently about the fact that, to women, Hedda may be the ultimate role, as Hamlet may be to men. Hamlet is fascinating perhaps because he is fundamentally reflective; there are those moments when he stops and he pauses and he questions himself. Hedda, however, does not do that; she acts compulsively and instinctually. She just plunges ahead. So our challenge is to create for the audience a dramatic situation that allows us to see and participate in the choices she makes along the way.

One of the things that’s interesting about Hedda is that Ibsen has created a sense of her as a character who is simultaneously claustrophobic and agoraphobic. She’s trapped in a way that’s almost an existentially absurd in-between, in this house with its middle-class confines that are too small to contain her spirit. Yet she has come into this place by her own choice, and we never see her go outside. She relates to the windows and doors of the house three times: In the first act, she says, “Close the door, I don’t want the light coming in”—there’s a sense of not being willing to consort with nature. Later we see her shooting her gun out the door, suggesting a hostile relationship to nature. And finally, in Act III, it’s morning, and she thinks she has changed Ejlert Lovborg’s life; it’s a kind of “top of the world” moment. She opens the window and says, “Let’s let some light in this room.” But that’s only after she feels that she’s had the power to affect another’s destiny. She’s closed to the idea that she can affect her own destiny, and tied to the idea that the only way she can achieve destiny is by affecting other people.

On some level, without getting into nongermane psychologizing about her, this has to do with the fact that Hedda is a general’s daughter. She comes from a military background. She’s a samurai, essentially. And as such, she’s used to the sense that power is authoritarian, that personal power is the power to command. But she find herself in a situation in which she is denied her regiment. What do you do when your entire sense of power is based on an authoritarian, paternal model? And she’s being moved into a maternal model. She’s suddenly pregnant and realizes, “There’s this life growing inside of me!” Hedda is deeply concerned with the control of invasiveness. In her house, and her body, she is trying to set up a controlled environment, but she is denied the ability to do that.
We wanted to get a sense of what the nature around Hedda might be. Of course, the first thing you think of when you think of Norway is fjords and glaciers, and the harshness and beauty of the landscape. We started generally talking about that, and looking at pictures of glaciers, and pretty soon this idea emerged that if the house is on a hill above town, then perhaps they are close to something like that. Pretty soon there was a glacier outside.

You mentioned that you were inspired by Jerry Uelsmann’s photos, which juxtapose objects with nature.

We looked at his book, yes. And then, of course, when you think of Ibsen, you also think of [Norwegian painter Edvard] Munch, the great radical artist who was a contemporary of Ibsen. More out of instinct than anything, I started prowling through my collection of books of Edvard Munch, and I found that incredible woodcut of his sister Inger, and that series of paintings and lithographs. There was something wonderful about the power of that face, the starkness and roiling energy of the woodcut. It just seemed to me to boil down the essence of what I thought this play should be: it should be spare and fierce and indelible.

I was having conversations at the time with [translator] Paul [Walsh] about the language of the play, about the bluntness of Norwegian, and Ibsen’s development as a writer, that he moved more and more away from a kind of poetics of expression to a very, very
spare form in which there’s not a wasted word. That quality seemed to get carried over to the designers. I was also thinking at the time about the other writers this play reminds me of, in particular Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, who invented the jazz of the American language, writing in a very spare, spare way. By the time you get to *The Glass Key*, Hammett has absolutely boiled it down to all he needs to tell the story. There’s nothing wasted. There’s no fat. I didn’t want to take a film noir approach to this production, however, because the play’s too original for that. It would cheapen the play, I think, to do it in a “style.” The play creates its own style. But we did want to filter out the things that were extraneous, to use only what’s necessary and build on that. So [Munch’s] woodcut led us to the idea of the rope walls [that form the rear wall of the house onstage], because they remind us of the deep scoring in the background of the woodcut of Inger. The rope walls also allow us to keep the presence of nature there continuously throughout the play, as we need it, because you know that that glacier is always there, visible through the rope.

Of course, what I’m hoping, as you always do, is that the audience will neither know nor care that all this came from a woodcut by Munch. All of our rapping on about Munch is worthless if it doesn’t boil down to an aesthetic that delivers the play as fiercely as possible. But he’s the soul and inspiration of the production because we felt that there’s a process of distillation in his work. And the same thing is true of Ibsen. Particularly in the late, great period, you start with *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, and you move on to *Hedda*, and you just feel him stripping away everything but what is absolutely necessary to make the action happen. We wanted to honor that in the way that we create the environment for the play.

And then, within that simplicity, an enormous complexity of emotion takes place, because every character in the play is complicated. Everybody is continually experiencing contradictory reactions. As soon as you think you’ve pegged a character, they show a completely different side. What is fascinating about Hedda is how complex she really is. She does things that, if we sit back, we can judge as right or wrong, but hopefully she’s a complicated enough creature that, by showing her choices along the way we can make the audience feel, at least for her, how this all comes about, so that she’s not dismissable, like she was to those early critics, who called her “a fiend,” etc. If she is, well, then she’s a fascinating fiend, anyway.

I think it is less interesting to look at this play now as representing a world that does not allow Hedda to make other choices, than to see how *Hedda* does not allow Hedda to make choices. It is the pure existentialism of it that fascinates me. Hedda has the imagination to make other choices; what makes her tragic is that, given the imagination to make the choices to make herself a free and powerful human being, she doesn’t make them.
HER CHOICES SEEM INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO MANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE WRITTEN ABOUT THE PLAY, BUT THEY MAKE PERFECT SENSE FOR HER. I THINK THE TRAGEDY IS THAT ONCE SHE’S MADE THOSE CHOICES, THERE’S NO GOING BACK FROM THEM.

[Jean-Paul] Sartre wrote [in the essay “For a Theatre of Situations”]: “The most moving thing the theater can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life.” I like that, because he adds a sense of moral code, the sense that we are responsible for creating our own ethical structure for our lives, and how we operate within that structure is really important. It’s very germane to Hedda, because Hedda has a very rigorous set of ethics that are . . . yes, they are very situational, and they allow her to do appalling things, but then there are other things that she will simply not allow to happen.

And my belief in the power of metaphor is that, if we can see her making those choices, then maybe we can see her as a metaphor for ourselves.

WHY DO YOU THINK HEDDA MAKES THE CHOICES THAT SHE DOES? HAVE YOU DECIDED THAT ALREADY, OR ARE YOU EXPLORING THAT AS YOU GO ALONG IN REHEARSAL?

We’re still learning that. Ibsen once said, about writing plays, “Finally, in my last draft, I reach the limit of my knowledge of the characters.” Well, we haven’t come close to that. It’s still too early. It would do a disservice to the character to go into the process with a specific preconception. There is no definitive Hedda Gabler. Like all great characters, Hedda is a template. She becomes a litmus test for the artists who work on her, and that’s true of all the plays. Who is the Hedda Gabler inside me? Who is the Hedda Gabler inside René Augesen? We as a group of artists have to agree fundamentally on the story we want to tell, and then we’re going to tell that story. People should only be so lucky as to see six, seven, eight different versions of Hedda Gabler, so they can see how this piece can refract the meaning of itself in so many different ways as the light of different artists hits it. It’s a prism; it’s going to break up in different colors each time.

One of the other things we’ve been talking about is how compressed this play is. Yesterday, we started working on Lovborg’s first scene, and Stephen Barker Turner stopped and said, “It’s so lean! There’s no ‘getting to know you’ about this. He just launches right in to what he wants to do.” Stephen was seeing that as something that’s frustrating, because he is used to the smooth takeoff, but this play takes off more like a VTOL [Vertical Take Off and Landing aircraft]. There is a tremendous sense of compression. The action starts around ten in the morning on one day, and ends around ten in the evening on the
next. There is this sense of, Gee, if they’d taken a little more time, maybe they could have
gotten used to the situation; but no, it all happens so quickly. And that comes from a sense
of urgency and crisis in the characters. Ibsen writes at a fever pitch. The dialogue just races
along; conversations are like machine gunfire. He makes sure all the motives are in place;
our job is to provide the sense of pace that allows it all to happen.

It was interesting watching *The Circle* again last night and seeing how much effort [W.
Somerset] Maugham put into his beautiful lapidary lines. There isn’t any of that sense
here. What Ibsen is concerned with is the sweeping arc of thought, and the pointed
impulse that takes you there. These are people dealing with appetite and impulse.

**WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THE “UNDER-CONSTRUCTION” QUALITY OF
THE SET? I UNDERSTAND YOU’RE USING ACTUAL CONSTRUCTION SCAFFOLDING.**
The scaffolding came out of the idea that this is an unfinished house. This is Hedda and
Tesman’s first day back from their honeymoon; they’re just moving in. When has your
house ever been ready for you when you moved in? They talk about the sale of the house
having just come through, so there is a sense in the text of the house still being under con-
struction. I was thinking about how many houses in my neighborhood [in Seattle] are
beautiful old Craftsman houses that are being bought up and rehabbed. Everywhere I go,
there’s painters’ scaffolding. That was one of our earliest images for the set.

A kind of metaphorical space then became available to us, where characters could be
when they’re not taking part in the action, as ghosts, or as memories lurking, watching.
Perhaps Lovborg is there watching in Act 1, even though we don’t meet him until Act 11.
For Hedda, this house is her theater. She is a performance artist. She views her construc-
tion and deconstruction of Lovborg as her ultimate piece of performance art. So we
wanted to provide a sense of theatricalism about the environment, always being clear that
on some level we’re making a piece of theater, just as Hedda does within that framework.

**WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO EXPRESS WITH THE MUSIC IN THIS PRODUCTION?**
We decided early on that we weren’t going to internally score the show, but I did want a
musical voice to accompany the play. Although I’ve said that this isn’t a poetic text, it’s
actually a different kind of poetic text; it’s a rigorous poetry, a theatrical poetry. I wanted
to underscore that essentially theatrical and poetic nature of the text with a musical voice
that can somehow take the audience into the subtextual world of the play. There’s much in
the play that is unsaid. There are currents of emotion on which everybody is constructing
and desperately trying to hold together their little life rafts. The music allows us a chance
to explore some of those currents, to swim in those currents of emotion. There’s also a
sense of possibly using music to tap into the yearning and terror that are only hinted at in the text.

One of the things that [composer] John [Gromada] and I hooked into as a musical metaphor very early on was a sense of Hedda as a wild mare. The image of Hedda as a horsewoman was very appealing to me, and so, as we pursued that idea, John created this music with the percussiveness of a galloping horse underneath it, which perhaps gives us an instinctual sense of Hedda as a wild spirit.

YOU’VE ALSO MENTIONED DERIVING INSPIRATION FROM BERNARD HERRMANN’S MUSIC FOR HITCHCOCK’S FILMS.
This play is a thriller; there is so much mystery in it. Ibsen wrote beautifully constructed thrillers. His methodology is all about ratcheting up suspense, adding elements that raise the stakes continuously for the characters and force on them huge, life-changing choices. Music is a great way to do that. And then there are these transcendent moments in the play, where something is happening that goes beyond the bounds of rational behavior; music is a useful tool to help with those moments.

“RAZOR DANCE”
Written by Richard Thompson

After the death of a thousand kisses
Comes the catacomb of tongues
Who can spit the meanest venom
From the poison of their lungs
Cruelest dance is the razor dance
Circle in and circle around
He said, she said, she said, he said
Thrill to put the other one down
The razor dance, the razor dance
This time, gone too far
This time, can’t heal the scar
I want to break out of this spin
But gravity’s pulling me in
The razor dance, the razor dance
What flies straighter than an arrow
What cuts deeper than a lance
Your wit may shine on the withering line
Cruelest dance is the razor dance
The razor dance, the razor dance
Blood boils, tears burn
Some people never learn
If time could crawl back in its shell
And mischievous tongues could untell
But that’s not the meaning of Hell
Take your partners for the razor dance
Take your partners for the razor dance
Take your partners for the razor dance
The razor dance
The razor dance, the razor dance

Born in 1828 to a prominent merchant family in the shipping town of Skien, south of modern-day Oslo on the east coast of Norway, Henrik Ibsen was the eldest of five children. When he was eight, however, his father’s business failed and he was left to his own devices. At sixteen he became an apothecary’s apprentice and dreamed of going to university. While he never did attend university, he did start writing plays: nationalist romantic history plays in the grand style popular at the time.

In 1850 Ibsen moved to Christiania (now Oslo), where he met the famous violinist and nationalist Ole Bull, who brought him to the west coast city of Bergen to work in Bull’s Norwegian national theater as playwright-in-residence and stage manager. Ibsen owes his education in the craft of the theater to the years he spent working for Bull and later as
artistic director of the Norwegian Theater in Christiania, a position he held from 1857 to 1862 with limited success. During these years he met, courted, and married the spirited Suzannah Thoresen and enjoyed his first modest successes as a playwright.

In 1864, Ibsen left Norway for the European continent, where he stayed for 27 years, living in Germany and Italy. By all accounts, his life was pretty uneventful. He was a private man who lived quietly with his family and kept to himself. He read little and almost never went to the theater. Instead he spent his time contemplating life. And every two years or so he sent a startling new play to his publisher in Norway.

From abroad, Ibsen focused on Norwegian provincial life, recreating his abandoned home in his mind, turning it over and examining it in all its stifling detail. Out of this obsession with a place on the far reaches of modernity, he created the modern drama. All but two of his plays are set in Norway, and they are an impressive collection: the philosophical verse drama Brand (1866), the picaresque Peer Gynt (1867), and the world historical drama Emperor and Galilean (1873) about Julian the Apostate, were followed by plays of contemporary life: The League of Youth (1869), Pillars of Society (1877), and the “problem plays” that incited such public outcry, including A Doll's House (1879), Ghosts (1881), and An Enemy of the People (1882). As he was vilified in the press for attacking the sanctity of marriage and the family, Ibsen grew in stature and importance, becoming the most famous Scandinavian of his day.

Contemporary accounts give the impression of a man of meticulous temperament—elegant, finicky, and punctilious in his habits, with a surprising ability to empathize with strangers. It is this quality that suffuses his writing. Even as he saw the shortcomings and guessed at the hidden contradictions in the hearts of those he met on the street, he was able to feel their humanity and give expression to it. In doing so, Ibsen created a style that still strikes us today as direct, fresh, and surprisingly conversational. His characters sound like real people facing real problems; his language is dramatically supple and rich with emotional complexity and ambiguity. Behind a strikingly modern façade of bravado and evasion lurk subtle intimations of doubt and self-loathing. This is the third of Ibsen's plays of modern life that I have had the opportunity to translate. In each case, my task in translating Ibsen's plays for the contemporary stage has been to find the same freshness and emotional directness in English that these plays have in Norwegian and to allow these surprisingly modern characters to once again give voice to contemporary issues without losing sight of the contradictions inherent in modern life.

By locating the great moral questions of his day square in the center of the middle-class drawing room and daring to delve into the individual psyche of moral creatures drowning in a morass of social lies and self-deceptions, Ibsen brought metaphysical profundity to the
domestic drama. In this he fathered not only the new drama but also a new morality of individual freedom and desire. But even as these characters speak for change, they find themselves caught in a web of duties and obligations. This is what makes these plays dramatic rather than didactic. Speaking out can destroy as well as liberate; often the rewards of self-discovery are less tangible than the suffering it causes. In plays like *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Ibsen dug deep into the troubled psyche of the modern world, uncovering its propensity for easy truths and deadly deceptions, diagnosing the crisis of individual faith, and staring unflinchingly at the despair of contemporary guilt.

In 1891 Ibsen returned to Norway after nearly three decades abroad. Here he wrote his final four plays—*The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)—pushing beyond the limits of stage realism and the problems of social life into a dark and tormented realm of psychological anguish and isolation precipitated by the terror of his own failing creative energy. As a new century dawned, he fell ill and never really recovered. He died in 1906.

**HEDDA GABLER: MOMENTS OF CHOICE**

In 1880, Ibsen wrote: “Everything I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through inwardly—even if I have not experienced it outwardly. In every new poem or play I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and purification—for no man can escape the responsibilities and the guilt of the society to which he belongs.” Ibsen was to put that statement into practice less than a decade later, when he—by then 61 years old and a famous author—met and fell in love with the engaging, charismatic, 18-year-old Emilie Bardach while visiting the small Tyrolean town of Gossensass. Over the course of several weeks in the summer of 1889, Ibsen and Emilie spent countless hours in conversation together, as Ibsen questioned her endlessly about her hopes and dreams and apparently found in her a revitalizing inspiration for his own work. Although Emilie told an interviewer many years later that Ibsen never so much as kissed her, the ardor of their emotional and intellectual connection, as described in her personal journal and their letters to each other, was obviously profound. Ibsen even talked to Emilie about divorcing his wife to travel the world with her, but both were painfully aware of the constraints placed on them by Ibsen’s family obligations and their conventional social environment. Emilie wrote in her journal at the time: “Passion has come when it cannot lead to anything, when both of us are bound by so many ties. Eternal obstacles! Are they in my will? Or are they in the circumstances?”
The frustrating affair came to a head in September in a particularly explosive encounter, after which Bardach described Ibsen as a “volcano, so terribly beautiful”: “Oh, the words! If only they could have stamped themselves on my heart more deeply and distinctly! All that has been offered me before was only the pretence at love. This is the true love, the ideal, he says, to which unknowingly he gave himself in his art. At last he is a true poet through pain and renunciation. And yet he is glad of having known me—the most beautiful! the wonderful! Too late!”

Whether it was the difference in their ages, concern for his sickly, aging wife, or his own desire for comfort and stability and fear of scandal, carrying out his passionate desire to run away with his young mistress was ultimately a commitment Ibsen was unable to make. Emilie departed Gossensass a week later. Soon after, Ibsen returned to Munich, and his letters to Emilie grew increasingly cool. He eventually broke off the correspondence and they never saw each other again. She died still unmarried and unaccomplished in 1955.

According to Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer, the intensity of Ibsen’s failed relationship with Emilie was to bring “a new glory, but also a new darkness” into his work. The theme of finding the courage to go against accepted norms of behavior, to “commit a madness,” can be found in Rosmersholm and The Lady from the Sea, as well as the two plays he wrote soon after meeting Emilie, Hedda Gabler and The Master Builder: “Who has not, when standing with someone by an abyss or high up on a tower, had a sudden impulse to push the other over?” wrote Ibsen at the time. “And how is it that we hurt those we love although we know that remorse will follow? Our whole being is nothing but a fight against the dark forces within ourselves.”

Many have seen the character of Hedda Gabler as Ibsen’s attempt to wrestle with his own failure of will in choosing to reject Emilie. “One reason Hedda stays with us as a character,” says director Richard E. T. White, “why we return to her, is that each of us faces those moments in our life when the possibility presents itself of mutating, evolving into something rich and strange, into the person we are meant to be perhaps—and what do we do? Ibsen has presented Hedda (and the other fierce and complicated characters in this play) with a set of substantive choices: we participate with them in the struggle to make the right choice.”

—Elizabeth Brodersen
IBSEN AS REVOLUTIONARY

BY MICHAEL PALLER

In 1884, six years before *Hedda Gabler*, Henrik Ibsen wrote to a young poet, “I do not believe any of us can do anything other or anything better than realize ourselves in truth and spirit.” A radical notion, that—that each person’s highest duty was to become his own authentic self. It was radical in conservative late-19th century Europe, and, in the largely reactionary theater of the day, revolutionary.

It’s still a radical notion. But then Ibsen, in almost every way, was a theatrical radical, even if a century of calling him a classic has distanced some of us from that truth. This was a man who, in a poem called “To My Friend Who Talks of Revolutions,” calls for wiping the human slate clean with a new Flood: “You unleash the waters to make your mark. / I set a torpedo under the Ark.” Mere political revolutions he had no use for: “What’s really wanted,” he wrote, “is a revolution of the spirit of man.” Ibsen fought his own revolution to break free from much of the conventional moral thought of his time; this forced him to reject conventional dramatic thought, as well. He looked at the dominant dramatic forms of his day (and he was intimately familiar with them, having spent a decade running two Norwegian theaters) and turned them from occasions for the display of expert playwriting craft into vessels deep and flexible enough to contain art.

When Ibsen turned from poetic plays such as *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* in the mid 1870s to writing exclusively in prose, two forms of drama dominated Europe: melodrama and the well-made play. Melodrama, popular since the beginning of the 19th century, posited a simple universe consisting of two types of people: the Virtuous and the Evil. The Virtuous were good at the beginning of the play, the middle of the play, and the end; the Evil were similarly unchanging. Since characters never changed, all the conflict between the Virtuous and the Evil was external; the attraction for the audience lay in the deliciously visceral shocks to their nervous systems as the villain menaced the heroine or the hero was falsely accused of a heinous crime. The clichés we know from silent films or from their parodies, of virtuous characters about to be sliced in half by the advancing buzzsaw or the onrushing locomotive only to be rescued at the last moment by their beloved, were exact recreations of the thrills of 19th century melodrama.

Melodrama also insisted that the universe was just: the Virtuous were always rewarded, the Evil always punished. Although the great novelists of the era knew this to be manifestly absurd, the soothing falsehood, “Just be Good and you’ll be rewarded, in heaven if
not on earth,” predominated in the theater. It was no coincidence that tyrannical governments across Europe loved melodrama and its soporific, conservative message.

The other form of popular theater was the well-made play. As a reaction against the Romantic drama that preceded it with its emphasis on character above plots that were often daringly and proudly incoherent, well-made plays stressed plausibility and structural coherence. By Ibsen’s time, characters in these plays were so subservient to the plot, so thin that they barely existed in two dimensions, let alone three. They were there to move the plot along and not to interfere with it; their function was that of a cog in a mechanism, not a human being in the world. Indeed, the less messy human psychology they displayed the better. Nothing was meant to disturb the smooth ticking of the plot machine. Nor was anything meant to upset the ideas or prejudices of the audience. By the time Ibsen embarked on his great cycle of prose plays, the well-made play, like the melodrama, pre-
sented the image of a static world in which there was one correct way to behave and believe, to be—the way upheld by the majority—and any antisocial behavior would be rooted out and punished.

This was possible because well-made plays tended to revolve around the revelation of a secret. As the themes in these plays grew more conservative, reflecting the increased political and social conservatism in Europe, the secret became darker and more sinful. When it was inevitably revealed, there would be no forgiveness and the character harboring it would be in one way or another removed from the world. Often, this character was a woman, and her secret a sexual one: she had given birth to an illegitimate child, or had been secretly married and divorced before marrying the man who in the play is her husband. In any event, her sin was a transgression of the moral law as understood by the community, and to atone for her sin either she would kill herself or die a painful tubercular death; with her sacrifice, the community’s health and balance would be restored.

The community’s moral law was usually represented by a male character in a respected profession. He was a doctor, a lawyer, or a political figure who, through advice and behavior, demonstrated to people on both sides of the proscenium the best, most moral way to live. He was the model citizen; as the ironic title of an Ibsen play puts it, he was one of The Pillars of the Community.

Ibsen took melodrama and the well-made play and turned them on their heads. Where they showed a simple moral universe he insisted that the world was complex. If their moral was that social conformity was every person’s duty, he would show that the goal was to become the person you truly are, regardless of what the community thought. For a character like Nora in A Doll’s House, there is more than one way to realize one’s humanity; for Doctor Stockmann, the community’s way is not only the wrong way, it’s literally the way to death: so he becomes An Enemy of the People. The tragedy for someone like Hedda Tesman (née Gabler) is that she lacks the courage to become her own authentic self. She is smothered by the community’s narrowness and lack of imagination and by her own inability to defy its restraints and make a place for herself in the world as wild and as large as her dreams had been.

The model citizen of her community is Commissioner Brack: a known and respected figure in the town—but whom we come to see as an opportunistic, lecherous blackmailer. That is what Ibsen does to these male exemplars of civic virtue: he kicks them off their pedestals and shows us that no one, not even the most respected pillar of society, has the inherent moral authority to tell another person how to live. In A Doll’s House, the traditional model citizen is Dr. Rank. Doctors were popular in these roles: they had good reason to be constantly at the main characters’ house (a seemingly good middle-class house
in which the moral rot has yet to be exposed), their knowledge and good deeds were admired, and the medical metaphor was obvious. Dr. Rank, however, is in love with another man’s wife, and worse (according to the mores of the day), he tells her. Worse still, he carries within him venereal a disease that will kill him soon after the play is over. While audiences were outraged by the sight of a sane middle-class woman leaving her husband and children, many were just as shocked by the notion of a venerated community figure—and the values he represented—so fatally compromised.

Ibsen paid for his boldness by seeing his plays banned across Europe. For many years, only the small “private” theaters, which played just to their members (and thus operated beneath the censorship to which all public European theaters were subject) could produce his plays. When *Ghosts* was produced by such a theater in London in 1891, one paper declared it “as foul and filthy a concoction as has ever been allowed to disgrace the boards of an English theatre.”

Yet, in his last years, when he returned from self-imposed exile to Norway, Ibsen was showered with medals and honors (some of which he eagerly solicited), and by World War II he had become one of the most frequently performed playwrights in Europe. As his prose plays became increasingly familiar, he became known as a writer of realistic plays about social problems, which he never considered himself to be.

In fact, Ibsen was the first major playwright since the Romantics to champion individuals over their community—but then, Ibsen, despite the realistic trappings of his prose plays, always remained the Romantic visionary of his early poetic ones. Ibsen showed that even within a single play there was more than one way to be, for in his work, realism is forever bumping up against poetic imagery that resonates beyond our ability to give it a simple meaning. He also invented subtext—the idea that a line of dialogue could have one meaning to the person speaking it, another to the person hearing it and a third one, contradicting the other two, to the audience. In doing so, he exposed the deep gulf between the words we utter and the ones we actually mean. Now irony is perhaps too much with us, a cheap and easy tool for playwrights who lack the confidence to affirm anything. When Ibsen employed it, however, it was like so much else that he brought to theater: it was revolutionary.
AN IBSEN TIMELINE
COMPiled BY CAROLYN JOY LENsKE

IBSEN’S LIFE AND WORKS

1828 Henrik Johan Ibsen, the first of five children, is born March 20 in Skien, a small coastal town in southeastern Norway, to Knud Ibsen, a wealthy merchant with a general store and a schnapps distillery, and Marichen Altenberg Ibsen, a theater enthusiast.

1834–35 Knud Ibsen loses his fortune, and the newly impoverished family is forced to sell their stately home in Skien and move to a small farmhouse in the rural community of Venstøp.

1844 Henrik Ibsen leaves for Grimstad, a tiny fishing port, to begin an apprenticeship to an apothecary. He remains for six years.

1846 Else Sofie Jensdatter, the apothecary’s servant, bears Ibsen a son. For the next 15 years, he contributes financial support to the child.

LITERARY AND WORLD EVENTS

1792 Mary Wollstonecraft, called a “hyena in petticoats” by her critics, writes the scandalous *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in Britain. Wollstonecraft calls marriage “legal prostitution” and says that women “may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.” She argues that men’s and women’s rights are identical.

1814 Norway gains independence from Denmark but is immediately gifted by Britain and Russia to Sweden as compensation for Swedish aide in defeating Napoleon. Previously Norway and Denmark had been united as twin kingdoms, the government and cultural institutions of which had been controlled from the Danish capital, Copenhagen.

1835 Hans Christian Andersen publishes his first children’s stories.

1841 Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is published.

1842 Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish moralist, writes *Either/Or.*

1848 Riots and revolutions erupt in western and central Europe. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish their *Communist Manifesto.*
1849 Ibsen writes his first play, *Catiline*, in verse, while he is supposed to be studying for his medical school entrance exams.

1850 Ibsen leaves Grimstad for Christiania (now Oslo) to study medicine at the university, but he fails the Greek and mathematics portions of the exam. His verse play *The Warrior’s Barrow* is staged in Christiania.

1851 Ibsen writes occasional poems and criticism for magazines. He is engaged as playwright-in-residence at the Norwegian Theater in Bergen.

1852 Ibsen becomes the stage manager at the Norwegian Theater.

1857 Ibsen is appointed artistic director of the Norwegian Theater in Christiania.

1858 Ibsen marries Suzannah Thorensen. His play *The Vikings of Helgeland* is produced at the Norwegian Theater.

1859 Suzannah bears a son, Sigurd, named after the hero of *The Vikings of Helgeland*. Ibsen and his friend, the writer and nationalist Bjørnstjerne Bjornson, create The Norwegian Society to establish a Norwegian national identity through art.

1862 The Norwegian Theater goes bankrupt and is forced to close, leaving Ibsen without a steady income for two years. He takes a field trip to collect folklore in the Norwegian countryside, with the (never-realized) intention of publishing it.

1848 cont. The first Seneca Falls Convention is organized in New York State to discuss the “condition and rights of women.” The Married Women’s Property Act gives New York women the right to maintain independent assets.

1851 A Prussian law denies women, the mentally ill, schoolchildren, and apprentices the right to participate in political activities and discussions.

1854 Camilla Collett, “Norway’s first feminist,” writes *The District Governor’s Daughter*, which attacks marriage as loveless and dismissive of women’s feelings. (Ibsen admired Collett and stated that her ideas had a marked influence on his work.) Norwegian women gain the right to inherit property.

1859 Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and John Stuart Mills’s *On Liberty* are published.

1864 Prussia and Austria declare war on Denmark over the Danish-controlled territories of Schleswig and Holstein. Despite promising support for their Scandinavian neighbor, Sweden and Norway refuse to enter the war, and the German states achieve an easy victory and annex Schleswig and Holstein. (Ibsen was appalled by Norway and Sweden’s passivity and isolationism in the face of German aggression against Denmark, and his great disillusionment with his countrymen played a part in his decision to move to Rome.)
1864 Ibsen leaves Norway for Rome on a government-issued artist’s stipend. Except for brief visits to his homeland, he will live abroad with his family in self-imposed exile for the next 27 years.

1865 *Brand*, a dramatic poem in verse, is Ibsen’s first great success. *Brand*, according to Ibsen, explores the idea of drama meant to be read, rather than performed. Riding the wave of *Brand*’s popularity, the king of Norway grants Ibsen a modest annual stipend.

1867 Ibsen writes *Peer Gynt*, another play in verse.

1869 Ibsen moves from Rome to Dresden.

1872 Ibsen completes *Emperor and Galilean*, his first prose drama.

1874 When Ibsen returns to Norway for a brief visit, he is honored with a torchlight parade marking his new celebrity in his homeland.

1875 Ibsen moves to Munich and begins to write *The Pillars of Society*, the first of his 12 great social dramas.

1878 Ibsen returns to Rome, where his son, Sigurd, enters university.

1865 John Stuart Mill is elected to British Parliament on a platform of women’s suffrage, but his reforms are defeated.

1869 The territory of Wyoming grants women equal voting rights. Unmarried, property-holding British women are allowed to vote in local, but not national, elections because, it is argued, local elections concern “domestic” issues, such as education and charity work, to which women can relate.

1870 The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) brings about the defeat of Napoleon III, the unification of German states, and the founding of the German Empire. John Stuart Mill writes *On the Subjection of Women*. The territory of Utah gives women the vote, but the u.s. Congress repeals the law in 1887.

1873 In *Bradwell v. Illinois*, the u.s. Supreme Court decides that states may bar women from practicing any profession if “family harmony” and “the law of the Creator” are in danger. In response to a growing debate on coeducation, Professor Edward H. Clarke of Harvard Medical School declares in his book *Sex in Education, or A Fair Chance for Our Girls*, that education is responsible for female infertility because it produces women with “monstrous brains and puny bodies.” Dr. Clarke is acclaimed and quoted for years, and his book goes through 17 editions.

1876 Leo Tolstoy writes *Anna Karenina*. 
1879 Ibsen proposes to the Scandinavian Club in Rome that female members be allowed to hold the position of paid librarian, and that they be granted equal voting rights in club meetings. The former proposal passes, but the latter is narrowly rejected. Ibsen writes *A Doll's House* in Rome and Amalfi and then returns to Dresden. When the play is published later in the year, all 8,000 copies sell out within two weeks. In the next three months, two more editions are published. *A Doll's House* opens December 21 at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

1880 Ibsen returns to Italy for five more years. *A Doll's House* is performed in Stockholm, Christiania, Bergen, and throughout Germany. Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, a leading German actress, refuses to play the part of Nora as written because, she says, “I would never leave my children!” With no copyright laws to prevent his script from being changed without his consent, Ibsen writes his own alternative ending to *A Doll's House*, in which Nora sinks to the floor at the door to her children’s bedroom and cries. “Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them” as the curtain falls. Ibsen calls his own new ending a “barbaric outrage,” but he would rather commit the adulteration himself than leave it to “less tender and competent hands.” The German producers ignore Ibsen’s new ending, however, and a fourth act is added in which Nora returns to her husband after several months, carrying a “baby Helmer.”
1881 Ibsen writes *Ghosts*.

1883 *A Child Wife*, the first American adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, restyled with a happy ending, premieres in Milwaukee.

1884 Ibsen writes *The Wild Duck* in Rome and Gossensass, a resort town in the Italian Alps. In a barely recognizable English adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, called *Breaking a Butterfly*, Nora, now “Flora,” happily reconciles with her husband, “Humphrey Goddard.” The Norwegian Women’s Rights League is founded. Ibsen, Bjørnson, Jonas Lie, and Alexander Kielland write a letter to the Norwegian parliament, endorsing a proposed bill that would give married women separate property rights. (The bill passed four years later, in 1888.)

1886 After settling in Munich, Ibsen writes *Rosmersholm*. Eleanor Marx, Karl Marx’s daughter, organizes an amateur English reading of *A Doll’s House* (then called *Nora*) in London. George Bernard Shaw reads the part of Krogstad.

1888 *The Lady from the Sea* is published.

1882 Norwegian women gain the right to attend university.

1883 Friedrich Nietzsche writes *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 
1889 Ibsen, now 61, falls in love with 18-year-old Emilie Bardach, an Austrian girl he meets in Gossensass. He maintains an avid, romantic correspondence with both Emilie and her friend Helene Raff, while remaining devoted to his wife. (According to biographer Michael Meyer, Ibsen seemed to draw energy and inspiration from his young female friends.) The first credible English performance of *A Doll's House* appears at London's Variety Theatre. Actress Beatrice Cameron performs a faithful translation of *A Doll's House*—the first American production using Ibsen's original ending—on tour in New York, Boston, and Chicago.

1890 Ibsen writes *Hedda Gabler*.

1891 Ibsen finally returns to Norway to live in Christiania.

1892 *The Master Builder* is published.

1894 *Little Eyolf* is published.

1896 *John Gabriel Borkman* is published.

1899 Ibsen writes *When We Dead Awaken*.

1900 Ibsen suffers his first stroke.

1901 Ibsen is partially paralyzed by a second stroke and cannot walk or write.

1906 Ibsen dies in Christiania at the age of 78. Twelve thousand mourners attend the funeral.

1891 George Bernard Shaw writes *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.

1893 New Zealand becomes the first nation to give women voting rights in national elections.

1892 George Bernard Shaw writes *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

1895 Anton Chekhov writes *The Seagull*, and Oscar Wilde writes *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1903 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson wins the Nobel Prize for literature.

1906 Finland is the first European nation to allow women to vote in national elections.

1913 Norwegian women get the vote.

1918 British women are granted equal voting rights.

1920 American women are granted full voting rights by the 19th Amendment.

1923 The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is proposed by American activist Alice Paul. It stipulates that the “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” It will be presented at every session of Congress until it passes in 1972. The ERA will never be ratified by the minimum of 38 states required to amend the Constitution, however, and its deadline for ratification will expire in 1982.
When Hedda Gabler appeared, Danish author Herman Bang commented that it was greeted with such consternation because “here was a play about an egotistical woman.” The non-nurturing Hedda is a misfit in a bevy of servers. Thea lives to serve men; “Then what will I do with my life?” she frantically asks when Lovborg announces their separation, but she quickly attaches herself to his old rival. Miss Tesman also lives only to serve, as does Berte, a servant by occupation. The selfless paragons Miss Tesman and Thea Elvsted have no self; sentimentalists who have absorbed their culture’s ideal of woman as servant, they are domestic angels to Hedda’s devil. The service of the two offstage women, representing the two female polar identities saint and whore—pure Aunt Rina, uncomplaining invalid and embroiderer of slippers, and debauched Diana, entertainer and prostitute—frames that of the women in the play. Only Hedda will not serve. She does not want to live for a man, but like one, i.e., for herself. “She really wants,” Ibsen wrote in a working note, “to live the whole life of a man.”

Ibsen masculinizes Hedda by giving her Amazon tastes for horses and weapons, a penchant for irony, and a disdain for feminine occupations. His explanation that he called his protagonist Hedda Gabler to indicate that she “is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than as her husband’s wife” is well known. Ibsen reverses traditional masculine and feminine qualities in Mr. and Mrs. Tesman more strongly than in any other of his couples; Tesman loves to wait on Hedda, fears her pistols, cannot understand her irony, and adores slippered domesticity. Ibsen separates female biology from psychology as relentlessly as in the third act of A Doll’s House; Hedda is pregnant, but not motherly, while the childless Thea is maternal. Characteristically, Ibsen takes his conception to its extreme: Hedda refuses motherhood both as her natural vocation in life and as a compensatory identity for her marriage, and in rejecting a woman’s raison d’être, she rejects womanhood.

Like Hedda’s life, her death does not respect the norms of proper feminine behavior. Myths of female suicide have traditionally focused on two themes—defeated love and ruined chastity—in keeping with the normative assumption that women live for love, men for themselves. The two most famous female suicides of 19th-century fiction—Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary—reinscribe this tradition, as do the suicides of the numerous “ruined maidens” and “fallen women” of the 19th-century stage, from Hebbel’s Maria Magdalena (1844) to Strindberg’s Miss Julie (1888). But Hedda does not destroy herself because she has failed to satisfy a patriarchal norm, but because she refuses to. Being Mrs. Tesman, living with the
“eternal aunts,” bearing and then living for a child—all this sickens her. The men she knows
treat her as a sexual possession as blatantly as Torvald Helmer treats Nora: Tesman thinks she
burns with love for him, Brack believes she will become his ardent mistress, and Lovborg
cannot forgive her for not sleeping with him. Both the assumption and the presumption are
enormous, as intolerable as those of the aunt’s view of her as the Tesman matrice. Hedda frees
herself from them all, thumbing her nose at “Auntie Julie. And all the rest of them.”

The most striking thing about Hedda, remarked [critic Georg] Brandes, is that her “evil
side is represented with so much force.” Hedda exhibits to the end the abrasive irony that
has made her so odious or enigmatic to her commentators. Relishing what Ibsen termed the
“burlesque touch” of Thea and Tesman devoting themselves to Lovborg’s manuscript,
Hedda bids a condescending farewell to the new couple, biting the Tesman—“Well?
Getting on with it, George? Uh?”—and commenting on Thea’s easy transfer of her services:
“Here you are, sitting now beside Tesman—just as you used to sit with Eilert Lovborg.” As
oblivious to irony as her new master, and with Lovborg scarcely cold, Thea yearns to serve
another man: “Oh, if I could only inspire your husband in the same way.” Hedda’s derisive
retort—“Oh, that will surely come—in time”—underestimates Tesman’s readiness for flattery:
“Yes, you know what, Hedda—I really think I’m beginning to feel something of the
kind.” It is not really surprising that Hedda prefers death to life with such a man.

Elizabeth Robins, the American actress who produced the first English Hedda Gabler
and played the title role, relates in her fine book Ibsen and the Actress how she was deter-
mined not to make Hedda “what is conventionally known as sympathetic” because her
“corrosive qualities” are what make her a great character: “the revolt against her common-
place surroundings that the bookworm she had married thought so elegant; her
unashamed selfishness; her scorn of so-called ‘womanly’ qualities; above all, her strong
need to put some meaning into her life, even at the cost of borrowing it, or stealing the
meaning out of someone else’s.” Hedda refuses life on terms that two kinds of women
would find acceptable: “the simplest sort would have made a comfortable humdrum life
with Tesman. Behind Tesman’s back the slavish-minded would have led an accidenté exis-
tence with Judge Brack and his successors.”

Hedda’s death and Ibsen’s play challenge what Elizabeth Ermarth has called “the liter-
ary convention of consensus,” the old critical assumption that “we live in a world of com-
mon agreements.” It is this world that Brack speaks for in the famous last line of the play:
“People don’t do such things!” In doing what “people don’t do,” deviant Hedda dies acclaim-
ing her difference, the pistol shot her final “Non Serviam.”

The man who has finally won her is homely as a person, but is an honorable, gifted, and liberal-minded academic.

Hedda speaks of how she felt herself set aside, bit by bit, when her father was no longer in favor, and when he resigned and died without leaving her anything—It then dawned on her in her bitterness that she had been groomed only for his sake.—And then she was between 25 and 26 already. Soon to become an old maid.

Hedda’s despair is a belief that life offers so many chances for happiness, but that she can’t catch hold of any of them. It is the lack of a life’s goal that torments her. . . . Hedda feels herself demonically attracted by the tendencies of the age. But she lacks courage. It all remains theoretical, and idle fantasies. The play will be about “the insuperable,” the aspiration to and striving after something [that] defies convention, goes against what is accepted into consciousness,—Hedda’s consciousness as well.

A woman’s imagination is not actively and independently creative as is a man’s. It needs a little bit of reality to help it along.

With Hedda, there is deep poetry at the foundation. But her situation frightens her. Imagine it, to make oneself ridiculous!

It becomes clear to Hedda that she, even more than Thea, has left her husband.

Hedda is the quintessence of a lady in her social position and with her personality. One marries Tesman, but one fantasizes about Ejlert Lovborg. One reclines in the chair, closes one’s eyes, and imagines his adventures.—Here is the enormous difference: Mrs. Elvsted “labors for his moral regeneration.” For Hedda he is the object of frightening, alluring fantasies. In real life he lacks nerve for such things.

Hedda is right about this: There is no love on Tesman’s side. Nor on the aunt’s either. However loving she may be.

There is something beautiful in working for an objective. Even if it is a mistaken one. She cannot do so. Can’t take part in the others’. And then she shoots herself.

Tesman is certainly losing his mind. All his academic work is meaningless. New thoughts! New visions! A new world! And then the two of them [Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted] sit there trying to puzzle it out. Can’t make any sense of it.—
The great pity of the world is that so many have nothing to do but to chase after happiness without being able to find it.

The common hate of women. Women have no power over external state matters. They therefore they strive for influence over the soul. And then many of them have no aim in life.

Men and women don’t belong in the same century—A huge prejudice, this: that one only loves one person!

Hedda’s diabolical side: She wants to have power over others—If she achieves it, she despises them—The manuscript?

The turning point of the play comes in the big conversation between Hedda and E. L. He: How pitiful to toe the line to the morality of the day. The ideal would be if a present-day man could live the life of the future.

For Hedda life turns out to be a farce not “worth seeing through to the end.”

1. They are not all made to be mothers.
2. They are passionate but they are afraid of scandal.
3. They perceive that the times are full of missions worth devoting one’s life to, but they cannot discover them.

Life is not tragic. Life is ridiculous, and that can not be borne.

The men—in the most indescribable situations they are ridiculous.

“Subterranean forces and powers” are what it is about. Woman as a mine-worker. Nihilism. Father and mother belonging to different historical periods. The subterranean revolution in woman’s thoughts. Outwardly, the slave-fear of the external world.

Why should I follow a social morality that I know cannot last another half generation. When I am licentious, as they call it, it is a flight from the present. Not because I get any pleasure out of licentiousness. I am too strongly rooted in this age for that. Thea, that little idiot, doesn't understand anything about it. But she’s delicious all the same. There is an unconscious futurity in her.

Hedda’s fundamental demand is: I must know everything, but keep myself untainted!
TESMAN, LOVBORG, AND ACADEMIA

BY MARTY SCHWARTZ

PROFESSORSHIP: WHY IT MATTERS TO TESMAN

As Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer points out, the germ of the academic conflict between Tesman and Lovborg stems from an historical incident: A few years before Hedda Gabler was written, in a small Norwegian town, there had been a rivalry between two capable and adamant scholars over a professor’s chair. To settle the dispute, the town actually called a formal competition: a rare method of determining academic promotion, but probably not without historical precedent. Now, while it may strike us as a bit improbable that an entire city, or even an entire family, should be crossing their fingers and holding their breath for an academic appointment such as in Tesman’s case, in 19th-century Scandinavia, professorship was very serious business indeed. The academic structure of Norwegian universities, including the University of Oslo (or the Royal Frederick University, as it was called in Hedda’s day), was explicitly planned on the German model, which differs distinctly from the English and North American systems in its strict academic hierarchy. While professors in the United States may be promoted based on performance alone, a German (or Norwegian) academic can in most cases only receive the title—and the generous, lifelong income it promises—by assuming a vacant chair at the university. A shortage of available chairs could well portend conflict and tension between qualified and eager applicants like Tesman and Lovborg.

As the heightened restraints on who can and cannot be a professor might suggest, academic titles (and those who hold them) in the European academy traditionally command a much higher degree of respect than their American counterparts. Even Sigmund Freud, universally recognized as a great man long before his death, spent decades lustling after a professorship—a title he would not be granted until late middle age. The power of professorship in the Germanic imagination comes into vivid relief in the section of Freud’s magnum opus, The Interpretation of Dreams, on “Dream Distortion.” In this chapter, Freud penetratingly exposes one of his own dreams as insulting two of his close friends who had been denied a professor’s chair, calling one a moron and the other a criminal, simply in order to keep his own hope for the promotion alive. For Hedda herself then, Tesman’s appointment to a chaired professorship would return her to a position of social prestige she hasn’t enjoyed since her father’s death.
WHO WAS LOVBORG?

Theories abound, naturally, as to whom, exactly, or what Ibsen had in mind when he was crafting the character of Ejlert Lovborg: Does Lovborg illustrate an ideal figure? Hegel? Or perhaps Ibsen himself? As to the external specifics, however, of Lovborg’s character—young, brilliant, forceful, literary, addicted to drink and debauchery—experts agree that the playwright modeled him on a young expatriate Dane by the name of Julius Hoffory. Though remarkably learned (Meyer notes that Hoffory translated *The Lady from the Sea* into German and served as a professor of Scandinavian philology and phonetics at the University of Berlin), Hoffory “mixed freely with women of low repute and had once lost the manuscript of a book during a nocturnal orgy.”

William Archer, Ibsen’s first English translator and his staunchest early ally in the English-speaking world, writes the following about Ibsen’s relationship with Hoffory in his introduction to *Hedda Gabler*:

For the character of Eilert Lovborg, again, Ibsen seems unquestionably to have borrowed several traits from a definite original. A young Danish man of letters . . . was an enthusiastic admirer of Ibsen, and came to be on very friendly terms with him. One day Ibsen was astonished to receive, in Munich, a parcel addressed from Berlin by this young man, containing, without a word of explanation, a packet of his (Ibsen’s) letters, and a photograph which he had presented to [Hoffory]. Ibsen brooded and brooded over the incident, and at last came to the conclusion that the young man had intended to return her letters and photograph to a young lady to whom he was known to be attached, and had in a fit of aberration mixed up the two objects of his worship. Some time after, [Hoffory] appeared at Ibsen’s rooms. He talked quite rationally, but professed to have no knowledge whatever of the letter-incident, though he admitted the truth of Ibsen’s conjecture that the “belle dame sans merci” had demanded the return of her letters and portrait. Ibsen was determined to get at the root of the mystery; and a little inquiry into his young friend’s habits revealed the fact that he broke his fast on a bottle of port wine, consumed a bottle of Rhine wine at lunch, of Burgundy at dinner, and finished off the evening with one or two more bottles of port. Then he heard, too, how, in the course of a night’s carouse, [Hoffory] had lost the manuscript of a book; and in these traits he saw the outline of the figure of Eilert Lovborg.
Everything that I have written has had the closest possible relation to what I have experienced inwardly, even if I have not actually lived through it outwardly. In every new play or poem I have aimed at my own spiritual liberation and catharsis, for every man shares the guilt and responsibility of the society to which he belongs. That is why I once prefaced a copy of one of my books with the following dedication:

To live is to war with
the trolls in heart and soul.
To write is to sit in
judgment on oneself.

Henrik Ibsen, letter to Ludwig Passarge, June 16, 1880

Before I write down one word, I have to have the character in mind through and through. I must penetrate into the last wrinkle of his soul. I always proceed from the individual; the stage setting, the dramatic ensemble, all of that comes naturally and does not cause me any worry, as soon as I am certain of the individual in every aspect of his humanity. But I have to have his exterior in mind also, down to the last button, how he stands and walks, how he conducts himself, what his voice sounds like. Then I do not let him go until his fate is fulfilled. As a rule, I make three drafts of my dramas which differ very much from each other in characterization, not in action. When I proceed to the first sketch of the material I feel as though I had the degree of acquaintance with my characters that one acquires on a railway journey; one has met and chatted about this or that. With the next draft I see everything more clearly, I know characters just about as one would know them after a few weeks’ stay in a spa; I have learned the fundamental traits in their characters as well as their little peculiarities; yet it is not impossible that I might make an error in some essential matter. In the last draft, finally, I stand at the limit of knowledge; I know my people from close and long association—they are my intimate friends, who will not disappoint me in any way; in the manner in which I see them now, I shall always see them.

Henrik Ibsen

To ask is my vocation, not to answer.

Henrik Ibsen
It is . . . as if he touches a hidden spring in the human soul, a spring most human beings are not ever aware of. A little room, strangely dark and secretive, appears—the innermost. There may be only a narrow line between that room and what we see expressed as people’s everyday thoughts and actions. Perhaps life’s own tragic conflicts have brought most of us, at least once, quite close to this small, dark room in the soul. But the spring remained untouched, we stopped in time, or there was something outside that stopped us—and nothing extraordinary happened.

Ibsen touches that spring—the innermost room is seen—the chain of consequences runs its course—the last bit of will is driven forth in a moment of spiritual tension—and the act is completed.

That is why Ibsen’s humans do what people usually don’t do: Hedvig in *The Wild Duck* shoots herself, Rebekka and Rosmer throw themselves in the river, Nora slams the door behind her, the lady from the sea risks everything in her “either—or,” and Hedda Gabler burns Eilert Lovborg’s manuscript, then places her old toy, General Gabler’s pistol, against her temple and pulls the trigger.

Hanna Andresen Butenschon, 1891

Whether or no Henrik Ibsen be a master of his art, he had . . . the rarer privilege and honor of acting as a sort of register of the critical atmosphere, a barometer of the intellectual weather. Interesting or not in himself . . . he has sounded in our literary life a singularly interesting hour. . . . He has cleared up the air we breathe and set a copy to our renunciation; has made things wonderfully plain and quite mapped out the prospect. . . . Illusions are sweet to the dreamer, but not so to the observer, who has a horror of a fool’s paradise. Henrik Ibsen will have led him inexorably into the rougher road. Such recording and illuminating agents are precious; they tell us where we are in the thickening fog of life and we feel for them much of the grateful respect excited in us at sea, in dim weather, by the exhibition of the mysterious instrument with which the captain takes an observation.


[Ibsen’s] name has gone abroad through the length and breadth of two continents, and has provoked more discussion and criticism than that of any other living man. He has been upheld as a religious reformer, a social reformer, a Semitic lover of righteousness, and as a great dramatist. He has been rigorously denounced as a meddlesome intruder, a defective artist, an incomprehensible mystic, and, in the eloquent words of a certain English critic, “a muck-ferreting dog.” Through the perplexities of such diverse criticism, the great genius
of the man is day by day coming out as a hero comes out amid the earthly trials. The dissonant cries are fainter and more distant, the random praises are rising in steadier and more choral chant. . . . It may be questioned whether any man has held so firm an empire over the thinking world in modern times. Not Rousseau; not Emerson; not Carlyle; not any of those giants of whom almost all have passed out of human ken.

James Joyce, *Fortnightly Review*, 1900

A master-poet—that term sums up the real Ibsen. He is a great creator of men and women, a great explorer of the human heart, a great teller of stories, a great inventor and manipulator of those “situations,” those conjunctures and crises in which human nature throws off its conventional integuments and expresses itself at its highest potency. He is more of a seer than a thinker. He has flashes of intense insight into the foundations of things; but it is none of his business to build up an ordered, symmetrical, closely-mortised edifice of thought. Truth is to him many-sided; and he looks at it from this side today, from that side tomorrow. The people who seek to construct a “gospel,” a consistent body of doctrine, from his works, are spinning ropes of sand . . . neither an aristocrat nor a democrat, neither an optimist nor a pessimist. He is simply a dramatist, looking with piercing eyes at the world of men and women, and translating into poetry this episode and that from the inexhaustible pageant. Poetry,—poetry: that is the first word and the last of any true appreciation of Ibsen.


Ibsen has sincerity and logic beyond any writer of our time, and we are all seeking to learn them at his hands.

W. B. Yeats, *Plays and Controversies*, 1923

No dramatist has ever meant so much to the woman of the stage as Henrik Ibsen.

Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress*, 1928

A room to [Ibsen] is a room, a writing table a writing table, and a waste paper basket, a waste paper basket. At the same time, the paraphernalia of reality have at certain times become the veil through which we see infinity.

Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth*, 1942

The Ibsen hero . . . neither knows his own place, nor has much reason to. The laws still exist, but their beautifully articulated order has broken apart; and he must discover or fail
to discover, at his own cost, their various workings deep in his human nature. . . . For the pressing question of the self and what to make of it, of which the theme of vocation is the most obvious expression, is simply the inward dimension of the objective predicament confronting the late-19th century man . . . namely, that at the very moment he needs it most, his cultural inheritance proves itself not enough to live on: that his age and his civilization no longer transmit to him the hard currency of an adequate schema of values; and that, morally and intellectually insolvent, he finds himself being propelled into political, economic, social, and hence psychological changes that are unprecedented in all the centuries since the emergence of the bourgeoisie on the historic scene.


To me he was a reincarnation of the Greek dramatic spirit, especially its obsessive fascination with past transgressions as the seeds of current catastrophe. In this slow unfolding was wonder, even god. Past and present were drawn into a single continuity, and thus a secret moral order was being limned. . . . Present dilemma was simply the face that the past had left visible.


When liberal-minded men want to bring about some improvement in the position of women in society, they first inquire whether public opinion—men—will approve. It is the same as asking wolves whether they favor new measures for the protection of sheep. . . . Women artists and business women try to conceal their sex. On their pictures, their nameplates, etc., they put only the initial of their first name so that people will think they are men.


These women of the modern age, mistreated as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated in accordance with their talents, debarred from following their real mission, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in mind—these are the ones who supply the mothers for the next generation. What will result from this?

Henrik Ibsen, *Notes on Ghosts*, 1890s, quoted in James McFarlane’s introduction to *Four Major Plays*

Ibsen’s message to you is—if you are a member of society, defy it; if you have a duty, violate it; if you have a sacred tie, break it; if you have a religion, stand on it instead of crouching under it; if you have bound yourself by a promise or an oath, cast them to the
winds; if the lust of self-sacrifice seizes you, wrestle with it as with the devil; and if, in spite of all, you cannot resist the temptation to be virtuous, go drown yourself before you have time to waste the lives of all about you with the infection of that fell disease. Here at last is a call to arms with some hope in it!

George Bernard Shaw, “Fabian Society Lecture on Ibsen,” 1890, which he later turned into the influential study *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*

[Ibsen] underlined that women’s will in particular tends to remain undeveloped; we dream and wait for something unknown that will give our lives meaning. As a result of this women’s emotional lives are unhealthy, and they fall victims to disappointment.

Emilie Bardach, describing a meeting with Ibsen in her diary; quoted in *Ibsen: A Biography*, by Michael Meyer

Ibsen’s knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes one by his painful introspection; he seems to know them better than they know themselves. Indeed, if one may say so of an eminently virile man, there is a curious admixture of the woman in his nature.

James Joyce, 1900

“ARE WE EQUAL YET?”

Although I am not one of those who attach any high degree of importance to the possession of great intellectual endowments in woman, because I believe such natural gifts to have proved much more frequently her bane, than her blessing, and because they are not the qualifications of female character which conduce most to her own happiness, or the happiness of those around her; yet if there be any case in which a woman might be forgiven for entertaining an honest pride in the superiority of her own talent, it would be where she regarded it only as a means of doing higher homage to her husband, and bringing greater ability to bear upon the advancement of his intellectual and moral good.

Indeed, what is the possession of talent to a woman, when considered in her own character, separately, and alone?—The possession of a dangerous heritage—a jewel which cannot with propriety be worn—a mine of wealth, which has no legitimate channel for the expenditure of its vast resources.

In the case of a highly gifted woman, even where there is an equal or superior degree of talent possessed by her husband, nothing can be more injudicious, or more fatal to her happiness, than an exhibition even of the least disposition to presume upon such gifts. Let her husband be once subjected to a feeling of jealousy of her importance, which, without the
strictest watchfulness, will be liable to arise, and her peace of mind and her free agency are alike destroyed for the remainder of her life; or at any rate, until she can convince him afresh, by a long continuance of the most scrupulous conduct, that the injury committed against him was purely accidental, and foreign alike to her feelings and her inclinations.


In the 1890s one jested about the revolt of the daughters, and of the wives who slammed the front door like Nora. At present the revolt has become so general that even the feeblest and oldest after-dinner jesters dare no longer keep Votes for Women on their list of stale pleasantries about mothers-in-law, rational dress, and mixed bathing. Men are waking up to the perception that in killing women’s souls they have killed their own. . . .

[I]t is only two days since an eminent bacteriologist filled three columns of the *Times* with a wild Strindbergian letter in which he declared that women must be politically and professionally secluded and indeed excluded, because their presence and influence inflict on men an obsession so disabling and dangerous that men and women can work together or legislate together only on the same conditions as horses and mares: that is, by the surgical destruction of the male’s sex. The *Times* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* gravely accept this outburst as “scientific,” and heartily endorse it. . . .

The domestic career is no more natural to all women than the military career is natural to all men; and although in a population emergency it might become necessary to every able-bodied woman to risk her life in childbed just as it might become necessary in a military emergency for every man to risk his life in the battlefield, yet even then it would by no means follow that the childbearing would endow the mother with domestic aptitudes and capacities as it would endow her with milk. It is of course quite true that the majority of women are kind to children and prefer their own to other people’s. But exactly the same thing is true of the majority of men, who nevertheless do not consider that their proper sphere is the nursery. . . .

The sum of the matter is that unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself. . . . In that repudiation lies her freedom; for it is false to say that Woman is now directly the slave of Man: she is the immediate slave of duty; and as man’s path to freedom is strewn with the wreckage of the duties and ideals he has trampled on, so much hers be.

George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1891
Are we equal yet? Are we dead yet? Have the frontlash and the backlash met, grappled, and twisted themselves together like a pair of mating snakes? More than 150 years after the Seneca Falls Convention, when American women first met to demand full legal, political, and social equality, including the right to vote, the position of women continues to provoke furious argument. . . . Some of the same ambivalence marks even the attempt to evaluate how powerful women are. On the one hand, we read constantly that women aren’t interested in feminism, that it doesn’t work, can’t work, even our genes are against it: Men are programmed to dominate and spread seed widely among the young and fertile, women to nest and preen and cuddle up to wealth and power. . . . Feminists have rewritten the age-old contract between the sexes—she gives sex in return for support—and in the process have revamped law, politics, religion, education, and the literary canon. Why women have been able to fly in the face of nature is never explained, much less why they would even have the desire to do so or, most mysterious of all, why men have cooperated with this mad plan. After all, men are still firmly in charge of all the institutions accused of excessive kowtowing to feminists—the courts, the legislatures, the corporations, the schools and universities and publishing houses and seminaries.

Katha Pollit, introduction to Subject to Debate, 2001

HEDDA GABLER
The title of the play is Hedda Gabler. My intention in giving it this name was to indicate that Hedda as a personality is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than as her husband’s wife.

It was not really my intention to deal in this play with so-called problems. What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions, and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day. When you have read the whole, my fundamental idea will be clearer to you than I can make it by entering into further explanations.

Henrik Ibsen, letter to Moritz Prozor, December 4, 1890

Hedda must be viewed within the constellation of the supplementary characters that Ibsen supplied with more calculation than may be suspected. Judge Brack is her male counterpart and may serve to remind us that Hedda draws her frailties not merely from woman but from the human race. . . . That Hedda married a Tesman instead of joining her fate to the Dionysian Lovborg is surely indicative of fundamental Philistinism. Like so many of her sisters, she plays safe. Hedda’s situation stems from her character, a fact Ibsen forces upon us by drawing her opposite in Mrs. Elvsted. The sophisticated Hedda is cowardly
whereas the unemancipated, feminine Mrs. Elvsted behaves like a brave “new woman,” leaving her husband and children in order to protect the man she saved from drink and despair. Because she has inner resources, she can continue to live after Lovborg’s suicide. Hedda can only die. Women like Hedda fail more usually, as well as more crushingly, by hanging on to life and avenging their frustration on others. The tragedy of a Hedda in real life, Bernard Shaw remarked, is not that she commits suicide but that she continues to live!


Ibsen created a masterpiece in *Hedda Gabler*, a crystal-clear example of a maladjusted woman. She has sisters in every city, for she belongs to the widely dispersed sorority of moderately comfortable women whose restlessness and envy arise from their false standards of happiness, as well as from their egotism and uselessness. No doubt she existed in the past, but her specific type is undeniably modern. Unlike the women of the older middle class who had their noses to the grindstone of the hearth, who reared children and ran their home, the Heddas described by Ibsen are rootless. Ibsen had envisaged emancipated women who could erect the home on new foundations, who would rear a generation of broad-minded individuals, and who would achieve economic independence if necessary. Hedda and her kind were of a different breed, since they were relieved of the old responsibilities without assuming new ones and were endowed with desires for a richer life without having learned that it must be won strenuously.

John Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*

**SOME CRITICAL REACTIONS TO EARLY PRODUCTIONS**

So specious is the dramatist; so subtle is his skill in misrepresentation, so fatal is his power of persuasion that for a moment we believe Hedda Gabler is a noble heroine, and not a fiend, and that Lovborg is deserving of our pity and not our execration.

Clement Scott, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1891

Ibsen’s greatest play, and the most interesting woman that he has created—she is compact with all the vices, she is instinct with all the virtues, of womanhood.


Hideous nightmare of pessimism... The play is simply a bad escape of moral sewage-gas. ... Hedda’s soul is a-crawl with the foulest passions of humanity.

*Pictorial World*, 1891
Mrs. Fiske’s production of *Hedda* at the Manhattan has triumphed along many lines. It is packing the house nightly to the doors . . . they go to see Ibsen because they like it. It is a sight to bring disquiet to those reactionary folk who so long ago proclaimed that they had sealed the mausoleum of Ibsen, and have been resealing it ever since . . . the occasion has struck a hard blow at the ancient superstition that all those who go to see Ibsen are neurotic aesthetics with long hair.

*The Times*, New York, October 10, 1903

What a hopeless specimen of degeneracy is Hedda Gabler! A vicious, heartless, cowardly, immoral, mischief-making vixen.

*The Ledger*, Philadelphia, February 13, 1904

What a marvel of stupidity and nonsense the author did produce in this play! It is incredible to think that only a score of years ago the audience sat seriously before its precious dullness.

*New York Sun*, April 18, 1918

There is not one of Ibsen’s characters who is not, in the old phrase, the temple of the Holy Ghost, and who does not move you at moments by the sense of that mystery.

G. B. Shaw

That Hedda is a victim (tragic or not) of her gender and social conditions—and of her own self-destructiveness—is unquestionable, and it’s quite reasonable to conscript her to the ranks of fighters for the freedom of women while characterising the men in her life as her oppressors; in short, to argue that the play is “about” feminism and patriarchy.

But part of what is so alluring—and daring—about *Hedda Gabler* is its wit, its unexpected lack of solemnity, its defiance of an audience’s expectations, its reluctance to conform to reductive theory. Is there any other dramatic heroine who possesses such an extraordinary confection of characteristics as Hedda? She’s feisty, droll, and intelligent, yet fatally ignorant of the world and herself. She’s snobbish, mean-spirited, small-minded, conservative, cold, bored, vicious. She’s sexually eager but terrified of sex; ambitious to be bohemian but frightened of scandal; a desperate romantic fantasist but unable to sustain any loving relationship with anyone, including herself. And yet, in spite of all this, she mesmerises us and compels our pity.

Richard Eyre, “Femme Fatale: Richard Eyre Would Like to Apologise to Ibsen for Doubting the Greatness of *Hedda Gabler*,” *The Guardian*, March 5, 2005
Edvard Munch (1863–1944) was never a part of the establishment of Norwegian painters of his own time, and beyond his youth he had very few close friends within his own professional group. He did, however, establish a multitude of mutually inspiring contacts with artists from other professions, especially within literature. His perhaps most profound preoccupation was with the work of fellow Norwegian Henrik Ibsen. Beginning with a drawing of a scene from *The Pretenders*, made when he was 14 years old, Munch produced roughly 400 works inspired by Ibsen plays throughout his artistic career.

In 1892, the ageing Ibsen had recently re-emigrated to Norway after more than 20 years of exile in Germany, when the young, controversial “anarchist” Edvard Munch inaugurated his own exile with his so-called “scandal exhibition” in Berlin, which instantly gained him notoriety in Germany. The exhibition, which had first been shown in Christiania (Oslo), was a summing up of all that Munch had worked on after he had embarked on his artistic career at the age of 18, and it comprised works reflecting the whole range of current art trends, from naturalism through impressionism to symbolism and synthetism. The same artistic development, from naturalism to symbolism, had also been reflected in Ibsen’s works of the same period, from a fatalistic, “anarchistic” naturalism in *Ghosts* through a sort of purification-mysticism in *Rosmersholm* to pure symbolism in *The Lady from the Sea*.

The ceremonious opening of the exhibition culminated in strong indignation when the public were confronted with Munch’s pictures, and the management of the Art Society in Berlin, who had solemnly invited Munch to show his exhibition there, demanded its immediate closure. Ibsen’s *Ghosts* had received a similar hostility when it was refused by all the permanent stages in Europe and was referred to independent theater companies. Munch may be said to have followed Ibsen’s pattern when he subsequently sent his exhibition on a tour to smaller exhibition venues in several German cities, and after that also to Copenhagen.

As a part of this tour Munch reopened the Berlin exhibition a couple of months after it had closed down. A photograph from the gallery reveals that Munch has added a portrait of another important contemporary dramatist, August Strindberg, who at this time became Munch’s close friend. The wealthy German translator of Ibsen’s works, Julius Elias, acquired a Munch painting and asked Munch to give his respects to Ibsen back in
Norway. Munch took the note to Ibsen's home in Arbiensgate in Christiania, and Ibsen in return honored Munch by approaching him at the Grand Café and exchanging a few polite phrases with him.

About a year after the production of *Ghosts* at the Møllergaten Theater, Munch wrote to a friend about the Autumn Exhibition in Christiania that year: “No picture has left an impression equal to a few pages from an Ibsen drama.” The parallel between his own art and Ibsen's work, however, was expressed in the advance reviews of the scandal exhibition in Berlin, which in the press was referred to as “the Munch Case,” and where it was said that Munch's pictures represented “Ibsenian moods.”

In the late winter of 1894, Munch exhibited his works in Stockholm. The current sceptical attitude to Munch's powerful artistic expression and modern motifs was here partly drowned by several enthusiastic critics. A few days after the opening, the established French theater manager Lugné-Poë premiered Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* as part of a Scandinavian tour. Munch was soon thereafter invited to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in Paris to create an authentic Norwegian revitalization of its productions of Ibsen's works. Before Munch went to Paris in 1896, however, he organized a larger exhibition at the Blomqvist Gallery in Christiania; his first exhibition in Norway after the “scandal exhibition” of 1892. The fact that Ibsen attended Munch's exhibition, and was shown around by an enthusiastic Munch, who explained every motif to him in detail, was properly reported in the literary journal *La Revue Blanche*.

Munch was commissioned to contribute to decorations and the playbill for the production of *Peer Gynt* at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in Paris in 1896, and, subsequently, to the playbill for *John Gabriel Borkman*, which was performed the following year. Munch must also have contributed, in some capacity or other, to the *Peer Gynt* decorations, which coincidentally were painted by a relative of his, the popular painter Fritz Thaulow, who had settled in Paris. In any case, the press created the impression that the two Norwegian artists collaborated.

In the winter of 1898–99 Munch painted an idea-portrait of Ibsen at his regular table in the small reading room at the Grand Hotel, which was actually reserved for the hotel's guests. This symbolistic portrait, in which Ibsen's head emerges almost luminously from the dark background, analogous to the portrait of the suffering Christ on the sudarium, probably originates from their final meeting at the Grand Hotel. Some time during this winter, when Munch had booked into the hotel as a guest because he felt unwell and did not want to sleep in his cold studio in Stortingsgaten, he invited his Norwegian Lithographic printers to a meeting at the hotel, which took place in the very same small reading room where Ibsen had his regular table. When Munch was about to pay he asked
for the bill to be charged to his room, as was customary. When the waiter refused, the somewhat inebriated Munch walked over to Ibsen to complain and ask for moral support. Ibsen, who had a reputation for behaving fiercely towards friends as well as enemies, answered rather curtly: “You should do as I do, I always pay,” and tossed a coin on the table. Munch was deeply offended and answered agitatedly, according to his own notes: “Well, Ibsen,’ I said, ‘we will not be seeing each other again.” And they never did. Shortly afterwards, Ibsen became ill and disappeared from the city scene until his death.

Otto Brahm had prepared the ground for his career as a theater man with his production of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* as the opening performance of Berlin’s Freie Bühne in 1889. This was Germany’s first “intimate stage,” purpose-built for performing modern drama for a more select audience. In this context he launched the naturalistic style of acting in Germany, in which the actors were to aim at expressing the feelings of their role in a natural manner of speech and with unaffected movements. All theatrical effects were banned. Brahm’s great achievement as the Nestor of modern German drama was, according to his successor as manager of the Deutsches Theater, Max Reinhardt, that Brahm had brought Ibsen closer to the German people. Like Brahm, the new theater manager wanted a revitalization of modern drama at the intimate stage, and like Brahm, he chose to define his own style with a production of *Ghosts*.

The symbolistic acting style, which had marked the French intimate stages around the turn of the century, had not gained a foothold on German stages. Max Reinhardt, who took over the management of the Deutsches Theater in 1905, brought this large stage to a leading position in European theater. He immediately created an intimate stage as a supplement to the main stage, the Kammerspiele, which opened in 1906, the year Ibsen died. Ibsen’s *Ghosts* was selected as the opening performance of the theater, with Munch’s decorations, and stage design and direction inspired by Munch’s “atmospheric sketches.” Fifteen of these sketches were exhibited in the theater lobby as an introduction to the performance.

Incidentally, the Kammerspiele was dedicated to Henrik Ibsen. This was marked by the permanent display of a bust of Ibsen by Carl Max Kruse in the lobby, the only work of art on display besides Munch’s work. Edvard Munch’s connection with the Kammerspiele was further reinforced by a commission for a painted frieze of elegiac love motifs on the walls of the theater’s interval areas. Munch was also commissioned for the stage design of the theater’s subsequent Ibsen production, *Hedda Gabler*. Munch’s studio in the theater’s basement became a hectic workplace for him during this period.

In his atmospheric sketches for the individual scenes, Munch kept fairly strictly to Ibsen’s stage directions, but seen through his own eyes and with reference to interiors in
his art with motifs from illness and death. With these sketches, Edvard Munch’s task was to create the right atmosphere of colors for the play. The wall color of the stage room was chosen to suggest a feeling of “sick gums.” Moreover, the sketches would provide guidelines during the staging and inspire the actors: literally put them in the right mood, suggest a common body language as if they were all weighed down by an unavoidable destiny, and give them the experience of being accompanied by long, suggestive shadows.

Concurrent with his work on Ghosts, Munch was also working on the staging of Hedda Gabler. For this production Munch chose to let the plot unfold in a Norwegian Art Nouveau–inspired “dragon style” environment, which may be said to illustrate the artificial nature of Hedda’s marriage. Only the sketches which represent her alone or together with Thea Elvsted are atmospheric sketches in analogy to what Munch created for the production of Ghosts.

The hard life, intense work, and excessive night life would inevitably lead to a breakdown. Munch ended up at Dr. Daniel Jacobson’s nerve clinic in Copenhagen, where he restored himself to health during eight productive months. He prepared his return to Norway by reading, among other works, Peer Gynt, which he read as if it were about himself; Peer does indeed return to Norway in Act V. Munch’s re-emigration was, as was the case with Ibsen in 1891, commonly recognised as a homecoming from exile for Norway’s greatest artist in his field.

In a letter from Munch to Max Reinhardt from Norway in the autumn of 1909, Munch writes: “I have often thought about our plans—sketches for Peer Gynt—Rosmersholm and other plays by Ibsen. Wonderful motifs.—It is just possible that I may some day do something like that.” Munch may therefore have had the Kammerspiele or the Deutsches Theater in mind when he later prepared a series of sketches for John Gabriel Borkman, Peer Gynt, and When We Dead Awaken. However, with the exception of the sketches for When We Dead Awaken, which follow Ibsen’s stage directions closely, these sketches and drafts are more in the nature of being spontaneous representations of pictures created in the mind during reading. The individual motifs therefore refer both to Ibsen’s text and to Munch’s own personal associations.

Excerpted and adapted from the essay accompanying the Munch Museum’s Internet exhibition of Ibsen-related works, http://www.munch.museum.no/munch_ibsen/english/eindex1.ht.
A BRIEF PRODUCTION HISTORY OF HEDDA GABLER

compiled by ljubisa matic

Henrik Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler was first published in 1890 and premiered the following year in Munich, Germany, at the Königliches Residenz-Theater, with Clara Heese in the title role. The first British performance was at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, on April 20, 1891, starring Elizabeth Robins as Hedda and Marion Lea as Thea Elvsted, and directed by both women. Robins also played Hedda in the first U.S. production, which opened March 30, 1898, at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York. A 1902 production starring Minnie Maddern Fiske was a major sensation on Broadway and following its initial limited run was revived with the actress the following year.

Many popular actresses have played the role of Hedda over the past century, including Eleanora Duse, Alla Nazimova, Asta Nielsen, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Eva Le Gallienne (who not only played Hedda six times, but became one of the play’s many translators and adapters), Greta Garbo, Anne Meacham, Ingrid Bergman, Jill Bennett, Janet Suzman, Claire Bloom, Delphine Seyrig, Diana Rigg, Dianne Wiest, Kelly McGillis, Fiona Shaw, Annette Bening, Judy Davis, Cate Blanchett, Kate Burton, and many others.

The play has been filmed a number of times, from silent movies onwards, and in many languages. In 1975, Glenda Jackson was nominated for an Academy Award for her role in a British film adaptation, simply titled Hedda. A more recent American film version (2004) relocated the story to a community of young academics in Washington State. In addition to making Hedda sing in Claudia Legare, a 1970s commission by the New York City Opera, Robert Ward also Americanized the play by setting it in post–Civil War South Carolina.

The German director Peter Zadek (1979, Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, Germany) treated Hedda (played by Rosel Zech) as a mythical character, the femme fatale who castrates and destroys men.

Colin McColl (1990, Downstage Theatre, Wellington, New Zealand) set the play in New Zealand in the 1950s, with a portrait of General Gabler in his World War II uniform. As played by Christine Wilkin, Hedda became the stage director, stopping scenes to play them again with different emotions and requiring the other actors to try different blockings and emphases.

Introduced by the opening of Janácek’s First String Quartet, Nicholas Martin’s production (2000, Bay Street Theatre, Sag Harbor, and Williamstown Theatre Festival) turned Ibsen’s drama into a drawing room comedy. When Kate Burton’s Hedda—fascinated with Lovborg’s life as a libertine—arrived onstage in an elegant peignoir and coffee cup in hand,
she became “the life of the party, reveling in Ibsen’s staccato dialogue and glancing wit” (American Theatre).

Bologna’s Teatrino Clandestino created a version of Hedda Gabler (2000, directed by Pietro Babina and featuring Fiorenza Menni) with video projections of closeups of the actors’ faces. Video images were superimposed and synchronized with the flesh-and-blood actors who, reduced to the size and muteness of puppets, replayed the on-screen action on a platform behind the screens.

In Doug Hughes’s 2001 version at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre, Martha Plimpton, clad in a rumpled white-linen dressing gown, entered alone by running up the aisle and darting from wall to wall like a trapped rat in an oversize maze. “Her wheedlings and plottings loom[ed] as an ever more desperate search for an exit” (The New York Times).

Robert Prior and his Fabulous Monsters presented their all-male spoof Speed Hedda, set in a 1950s Camelot, in 2002. Mark Brey played Hedda as a tall, angular, mambo-mad suburbanite perpetually high on amphetamines.

Cate Blanchett strode fiercely and fussed sinuously about the confines of the stage, tirelessly picking up and tossing about pillow cushions, curtains, pieces of furniture, bunches of flowers, and even small actresses in Robyn Nevin’s 2004 production for Sydney Theatre Company.

In Ivo Van Hove’s audacious and trippy modernization (2004, New York Theatre Workshop) the characters carried on like spoiled brats making funny voices, throwing temper tantrums (e.g., stapling flowers to the walls and throwing vases to the sounds of Joni Mitchell’s “Blue”), and flinging themselves on the floor. “One hundred fifteen years after Hedda’s premiere,” a critic observed, “we’ve learned to read most of repression’s secrets” (The Village Voice).

In Richard Eyre’s 2005 production at the Almeida Theatre in London, Eve Best’s earthy, cruelly rude, and vindictive Hedda offered “not a po-faced piece about female victimization but a savage comedy about a woman with an endless capacity for ironic contempt” (The Guardian).

French actress Isabelle Huppert and director Eric Lacascade (2005, Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe, Paris) showed Hedda as a solitaire diamond in a hyperaestheticized scenic geometry.

As a “sequel” to his sensational production of Ibsen’s Nora, Thomas Ostermeier (2005, Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Berlin) presented Hedda Gabler in a similarly trendy contemporary setting: a monstrously modern luxury apartment (all concrete, glass, and mirrors), Lovborg’s manuscript as a file in a laptop computer, and short urban interludes with the Beach Boys singing “God only knows what I’d be without you.” Apparently cool and
laid back, Katharina Schüttler’s Hedda lives here in a constant fear of social downfall. No one in Ostermeier’s thriller notices when this small, lithe, and pallid girl blows her brains out all over her husband’s post-it notes: the stage revolve keeps turning and “life goes on like a broken record” (*The Guardian*).

In director Peter Langdal’s *Hedda: An Erotic Road to Death* (2006, Betty Nansen Teatret, Copenhagen), the general’s daughter, played by Sonja Richter, has been transferred from an unhappy marriage in the velvety salons of the 1880s to a lesbian marriage in 2006. Still, Hedda’s partner, Tessa, is a working girl with no time for love, and Hedda ends up finding loneliness instead of happiness.

One of the most enthusiastic responses to the 2006 centenary of Ibsen’s death came from China, which offered one of the most exotic Ibsen performances ever: *Hedda Gabler* as a Yue opera (Hangzhuo Yue Opera, Hangzhou, China; directed by Jun Hou and Tao Zhi, starring Yu Jun Zhou), set in an ancient China, with song, dance, spectacular costumes, and swords instead of pistols. All of the characters in Yue (Shaoxin) opera are played by women.

One of the latest Norwegian interpretations of *Hedda Gabler*, in the Nationalteatret of Oslo (2005, directed by Runar Hodne, starring Liv Bernhoft Osa), begins after Hedda commits suicide. The question remains of what happens to the women left behind. The focus of *After Hedda*, by Liv Heløe, is Berte, the maid: What will be her destiny? What is her potential?
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are the themes of Hedda Gabler? Are these themes universal? Does the play have a message or moral? What is it?

2. How does each of the characters in the play define success and failure? How do the terms of success change throughout the course of the play? Does anyone in the play get what they desire? Why or why not?

3. Ibsen said of the play’s title, “My intention . . . was to indicate that Hedda as a personality is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than her husband’s wife.” What is he trying to say about who Hedda is in relation to her past, present, and future? What does it mean to be General Gabler’s daughter? How is that different from Mrs. Jorgen Tesman?

4. The character of Hedda has been described by critics as “vicious,” “heartless,” “cowardly,” “undeniably modern,” a “noble heroine,” and “the most interesting woman that [Ibsen] has created.” How would you describe her? What is her moral code?

5. What role do sex and sexuality play in Hedda Gabler? Is this a feminist play?

6. Compare and contrast the women in this play. How are Hedda and Thea Elvsted similar and how are they different? What about the women in Tesman’s life: Aunt Juliane, Aunt Rina, and Berte? What about Miss Diana? How do each of these women relate to each other and the world around them? How do they each relate to the men in their lives?

7. Compare and contrast the men in this play. How are Tesman, Lovborg, and Brack similar and how are they different? How do they each engage with success and ambition? How do they relate to the women in the play, as nurturers, as partners, as sexual objects?

8. Who is the villain in this play? Why?

9. Discuss the scenic design for this production. How is it realistic? How is it symbolic? What does it say about transition, privacy, and the sense of something being unfinished or unrealized? How would the play be different on a more realistic set? What does this design tell you about Hedda? About Tesman?

10. Who has power over whom in Hedda Gabler? How does that power shift during the play? How do things like guilt, insecurity, fear, and history inform those relationships?

11. Why does Hedda make the choices that she does? Does she have alternatives? What are they? What would her life be like after the end of the play if she remained alive? What would you do in her place, time, and situation?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .


**WEB SITES OF INTEREST**


http://www.heddagabler.net/

http://www.ibsen.net

http://www.ibsensociety.liu.edu/