

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**HEDDA***Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Hedda Gabler** (in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, 1891) **emotional**

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

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

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

**Illustrative moments**

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

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

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

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

### **Discussion questions**

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

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

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