

HENRIK IBSEN'S *HEDDA GABLER*: A STUDY GUIDE

The Significance of Ibsen's Title

Is it significant that Ibsen called his play *Hedda Gabler*? Why not, for instance, call it *Mrs. Tesman* or *Hedda Tesman*? The original title of the play was simply *Hedda*; why might Ibsen have changed the name?

The name Hedda means "strife" (*strife* is competition, struggle, or conflict); is this an appropriate name for her?

What Does Hedda Want?

Freud once asked, "What do women want?" (We women are sometimes an unmanageable lot and don't accept the roles society assigns us; I've always felt Freud was exasperated when he asked this question.)

Freud's question might be rephrased and asked about Hedda Gabler—what does she want? Ibsen said, in his notes about the play, "Hedda's fundamental demand is: I want to know everything but keep myself untainted" (*untainted* means untouched by disgrace or uncontaminated).

Do you agree with Ibsen's statement about Hedda? Do not assume that his statement is necessarily true. Sometimes the point writers think they are making is not what the work itself says. D.H. Lawrence said that writers lie about what their writings say; he advises the reader to listen to what the work says, not what the author says about the work; in other words, the reader should trust the work, not the author.

Also, Ibsen may have changed his mind about Hedda after writing this note. And even if this statement does express his final intention about Hedda, that is no guarantee that he succeeded in carrying out his intention in the play.

So, based on your reading of the play, what do you think Hedda wants? Or do you think the question that needs to be asked about Hedda is really, "What's wrong with Hedda?"

Characterizing George Tesman

Most readers and playgoers see George Tesman as a decent, kind human being. But there are some minority opinions.

Elizabeth Hardwick finds him "much more of a girl" than Hedda is. An explanation for this might be that he was brought up by aunts, while she was raised by a general.

Joan Templeton not only thinks he is a comic character but even calls him "one of Ibsen's most successful comic creations." She goes on to call him "an infantile adult."

How would you describe or evaluate Tesman? What kind of person is he? Do you agree with any of these assessments? Why or why not? (They are not mutually exclusive; you may find him a combination of positive and negative traits.)

(over)

Hedda—wild or tame?

Lou Salome makes what I think is an interesting comment about Hedda: "through her weakness she is condemned to remain a tame Hedda with wild urges." What do you think of his comment?

The Right Man for Hedda,

Many readers believe that Hedda would have been happy if only she married Lovborg instead of Tesman. Do you feel the answer to Hedda's unhappiness is marriage to the Right Man? Would Lovborg be the Right Man? Is there a Right Man for Hedda, or is the thought of Mr. Right conventional sentimentalizing? Is Hedda capable of love? She herself responds to Brack's suggestion of her love for Tesman, "Faugh—don't use that sickening word!" (p. 27).

Hedda and Society

Helge Ronnig states, "Hedda Gabler's tragedy lies in the fact that freedom cannot be realized within the framework of the society she is part of." The barrier may be class and/or it may be sexism. Do you agree with Ronnig? If so, you might consider why the lack of freedom does not affect Thea and Miss Tesman, or does it affect one or both of them differently?

Lovborg's Meaning for Hedda

Hedda envisions Lovborg as returning from Judge Brack's party with "vine-leaves in his hair—flushed and fearless—." She explains, "he will have regained control over himself. Then he will be a free man for all his days" (p. 44). Why does Brack's description of Lovborg's actions after his party upset Hedda?

When Hedda gives Lovborg the gun, she tells him she no longer believes in vine leaves but wants him to commit suicide beautifully. Why does she give him the gun? What does she mean by dying beautifully? Does his suicide have other meaning(s) for her? When she first hears of Lovborg's death, she exclaims, "I only know that Eilert Lovborg has had the courage to live his life after his own fashion. And then—the last great act, with its beauty! Ah! that he should have the will and the strength to turn away from the banquet of life—so early" (p. 68). When Brack tells her the details of Lovborg's actual death, why is she upset?

What meaning or meanings does Hedda attribute to Lovborg? Remember, her view of him may have little or no connection to who or what he really is. Her view may be generated by her own desires and needs; in other words, she may be projecting her feelings and views onto him.

Acting Hedda Gabler

If you were directing a production of *Hedda Gabler*, how would you have the actor play Hedda Gabler? Should Hedda be played sympathetically, or should she be acted unsympathetically, perhaps as monstrous or psychologically unbalanced? Why?

Hedda's Motivation

Many readers and audiences find Hedda Gabler inexplicable because her actions seem unmotivated. Are they unmotivated or merely expressed covertly?