

# ***Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen**

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## **In Brief**

An exploration of domestic setting as both realistic and symbolic

## **Purpose**

Hedda Gabler, one of the great tragic heroines of modern drama, found herself trapped inside a marriage and a dream house that she supposedly wanted. Ibsen used newly-innovated production techniques to deliver information about its titular character quickly and effectively. This exercise will help clarify the central conflict that Hedda Gabler experiences based on the information found in Ibsen's realistic setting.

## **Time Length**

45 minutes.

## **Advanced Preparation**

While students do not need to have read they play ahead of time, they should have the opening stage directions in front of them and come to class with a mental image of their "dream home." An alternative exercise would ask them to create a collage of their dream home on paper, using images from the internet or magazines, but this is not necessary.

Instructors wishing to do Exercise One (optional) should create two stacks; one of words, and the other of corresponding images of valuable material items associated with wealth and luxury, e.g. mansion, money, tuxedo, jewelry, yacht, golfing/tennis equipment or other item. These images can come from magazine advertisements or clip art/ Google Image search.

## **Materials / Technology**

Paper for students to draw on

## **Class Size**

This exercise can be done with almost any group, as the exercise itself is mostly individual, with some group reflection in conclusion.

## **Nuts and Bolts**

### **Exercise One (optional)**

Studies, like those done by Lightspeed Research, show that images carry the same amount of meaning faster than text, thus the importance of a well-designed set. This point is easily demonstrated in action.

1. Ask for two volunteers to come to the front of the class. Give one student a marker and a numbered list of words; give the other an ordered stack of printed images of material items (see above, Advanced Preparation)
2. When you say “Go,” it’s a race: the first student writes the first word, while the second reveals the first image. Tell the class that they are to call out both the term associated with the image/written word they see as soon as they understand it and any connotative terms associated with the image/word. See which method is most effective at generating associations.
3. Repeat this with the other words/images.

## Exercise Two

1. Supply each student with a piece of blank paper on which they should draw a schematic design of a house – or photocopy this design ahead of time.
2. Invite students to close their eyes for a moment to picture their “dream home.”
3. Inside this design, they should create their dream house. They could draw the items they wish to possess inside the home, or simply write the words where the item should be (e.g. sub-zero refrigerator, plasma TV, Jacuzzi, etc.). Give them 5-10 minutes to complete this. Encourage them to achieve the highest level of detail possible; but remind them this activity is designed to reveal their vision of a “dream home,” not test their artistic ability.
4. Taking another piece of paper, ask students to rip it into scraps of 20 – 25 and to write on each piece of paper one of their current hobbies, interests, and future aspirations.
5. In the style of a mosaic, have students rearrange the pieces of paper with into the form of their “dream home.” Ask them to determine which hobby or aspiration should be inside of the home and which one should be outside. Tell them that they are only to use the domestic scraps to build their homes. So, for example, “painting, video-game playing, hanging out with friends, cooking” would be inside the house, but “travel, X-country running, work” would be outside the home.
6. Finally, ask the students to consider the following hypothetical: if they could have anything they ever wanted in their dream home at the cost of never being able to leave it, would they agree to this condition?

## Putting it Together:

Before the onset of theatre technology in the mid-19th Century, theatre-makers relied mostly on textual descriptions to figuratively paint a scene. All changed, however, when the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and his Meiningen Ensemble developed methods for creating intricate, realistic settings for the stage, allowing playwrights to dive into the psychology of the characters within the stage space. Ibsen’s later works were influenced by these productions, as the Ensemble toured thirty-five European countries during the 1880’s. As such, productions of *Hedda Gabler* would have centered around hyper-realistic

depictions of luxurious Nordic lifestyles, most notably the house itself, which served as Hedda's prison and only expressive outlet. The effect of this technology on Ibsen's text is apparent.

Explain to the students that the constant background image of the play carries very specific information about its titular character. Encourage the students to suggest the insights such a setting could reveal about Hedda, as well as any other aspects of her character revealed during their reading. Read the opening stage directions aloud and write on the board the list of decorative items, such as the piano, the curtains, and the painting of General Gabbler. Examples include: her wealth, her attention to detail, her willingness to devote time to such decoration, her protectiveness of belongings; but also her romantic desires, her potential career aspirations, her urge to travel. In the play, Hedda is unable to express herself or exercise control of anything but her home, mostly due to the constraints of her gender and societal expectations. Essentially, the setting represents Hedda's identity, the Victorian social restrictions in her day, as well as the material goods she was conditioned to want. The setting is a short-hand device to represent "her."

Ask the students about their own experience creating their "dream homes" and the shortcomings and sacrifices involved. How big was the unused pile of scraps that remained outside of the home compared to the usable pile? Similarly, in the confines of her perfect home, a large portion of Hedda's identity atrophied from disuse. Once the students start reading the play, you may wish to ask them how the exercise impacted their understanding of Hedda, who initially appears to be a mean-spirited character. Are they more or less sympathetic to her? Do they feel closer to her struggle?

Encourage students to then discuss any additional ways in which the intricate setting can help inform their understanding of the play, the conflicts therein, or the characters. Read aloud, for example, the scene in Act II, where Tesman and Brack discuss Tesman's home. How does this understanding of Hedda inspire our understanding of Tesman? Ejlert? Or, perhaps most intriguingly, Mrs. Elvsted? Exploring *Hedda Gabler* as more than a piece of text will help students new to dramatic analysis appreciate the depths this play gains in performance, and will serve as a stepping stone for future analysis.

## Resources

Brantley, Ben. "Hedda's Terrible, Horrible, No-Good Very Bad Day." Review of *Hedda Gabler*, directed by Ian Rickson. *New York Times*, 25 Jan. 2009.

"Broadway Beat Sneak Peek at *Hedda Gabler*. *Broadway World TV*, edited by Craig Brockman. 26 Jan. 2009.

Eckersley, Mark. "The Meiningen Theatre, Antoine, Brahm and the Birth of Realism in Theatre." *A Matter of Style*, 30 Oct. 2014

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Kildahl, Erling E. "The 'Social Conditions and Principles' of 'Hedda Gabler.'" *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1961, pp. 207–213.

Lehman, Susan Beth. *Directors: from Stage to Screen and Back Again*. Intellect, 2013, pp. xxii. (Available online via Google Books.)

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