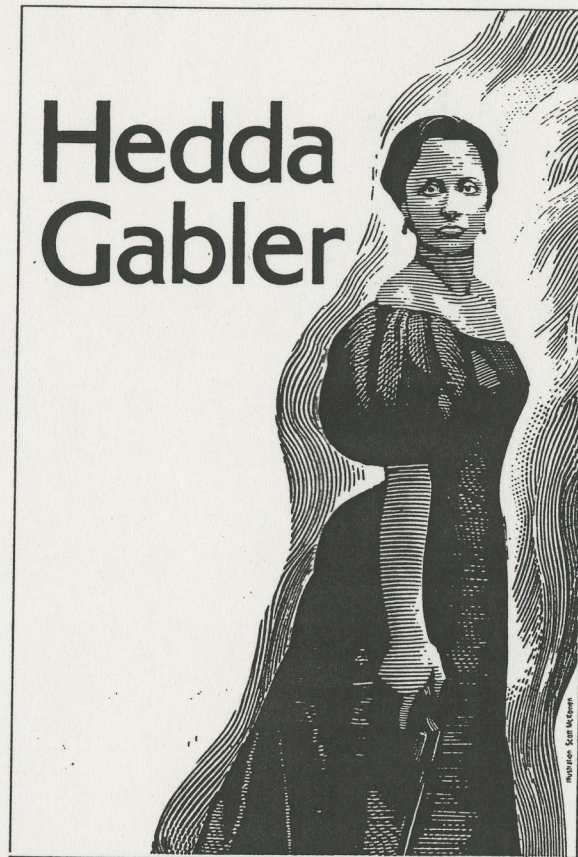


Roundabout Theatre Company



by
Henrik Ibsen

Study Guide

Hedda Gabler

by

Henrik Ibsen

text by Deborah Pope
Arts in Education Consultant

Synopsis by
David Olivenbaum

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WHAT IS A CLASSIC?

The dictionary defines a classic as "belonging to the highest rank or class" and/or "having lasting significance or worth; enduring." The definition is actually quite long and also includes this statement, "Serving as the established model or standard."

As you know there are classic cars, classic clothes, classic hair styles, there is even a "Classic Coca-Cola." But not everyone likes classic styles or even Classic Coke. So if not everyone likes the "classic" version, how can we know when something is a classic? Good question. Usually, it is the "enduring significance" that marks something as a classic form. Everyone doesn't have to like a car style, hair style or soda in order for it to be recognized as a classic. But if that car, hairdo or soda flavor keeps turning up as an important reference point for both historical and current thinking, then you can bet it's a classic.

The second part of the definition, "serving as the established model," is also a critical feature to remember. Once a classic has established itself as something that people are going to continue to refer back to year after year after year, then that classic becomes the measuring stick against which all other models in the field will be held against. For instance, *Rocky* was a classic. *Rocky II*, *Rocky III*, *Rocky IV* and *Rocky V* were all measured against the first version. It's interesting that most people still think that the first *Rocky*, the classic, is still the best.

It's important to understand that while everyone doesn't have to like every classic (hairdo, car or even play) it is a

smart idea to know what those classics are about so that you know what the high standard in the field is considered to be. Here is an example. If you are going to design a car, it would be good for you to know what the classic models in the past had going for them, even if you didn't particularly like the styles. Then you might be able to avoid some of the mistakes made by the people who are still considered the leaders of the field.

Why is it important for you to see a classic play when you have no intention of ever becoming a playwright, or even an actor? Another good question. Everyone in our society goes to the movies, watches television, and even occasionally goes to the theatre. Almost all the stories used for all these movies and plays have been used before. Very often the movies you see in theaters and on TV are copies of stories, or parts of stories, from classic originals, sometimes they are better. But for you to develop your own solid standard for what you like and don't like, it's almost necessary to see the material that is considered the highest in artistic quality. Then, if you don't like the classic, you know what you are rejecting, and you know why you are rejecting it. And when you see movies that lift ideas from the "classic," you'll be the one to know if the copy works better than the original.

Unfortunately, when many people hear the word "classic" attached to the name of a play or a book, they immediately think that the play or book is going to be boring. This is not the truth. *Beauty and The Beast* is a classic story and quite a few people still seem to find it enjoyable. The music of the Beatles is

considered classic and still has a very large audience.

Classic plays are often wonderful and they are always a surprise to each generation wishing to discover the riches left to them by their cultural ancestors.

Hedda Gabler is considered a classic play. Written by Henrik Ibsen in 1891, just over one hundred years ago, it is an exciting picture of how men and women struggle with their fears and with society's expectations. The play is filled with illicit passion, love triangles, broken homes, cold-blooded murder and suicide. Perhaps this doesn't seem like the standard material for a "classic" play. Actually many classic center around fairly racy material. The added attraction in the Roundabout production of *Hedda Gabler* is in the modifications being made by the director, Sarah Pia Anderson. Instead of placing the action in the 1890's, as Ibsen originally intended, Ms. Anderson has moved the story into the 1950's. This modification, and a few of the others that will strike you as you're seeing the play, do a great deal to show how relevant and alive the issues and characters of this one-hundred year old play remain today.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Hedda Gabler

Hedda Gabler - a woman of approximately twenty-nine, Hedda is quite striking in appearance. Her eyes are cold and calm and she carries herself with an aristocratic bearing. Hedda always dresses well and in complete

style. Hedda Gabler is her maiden name. She has been recently married to Jorgen Tesman. As soon as she enters a room she is noticed for her cold reserve and her image of control. She is a very strong woman and yet she is very unhappy. She is extremely intelligent and has never found anything or anyone who successfully takes her mind off her lack of purpose. Never having had to work for her livelihood, Hedda was brought up in a very wealthy home and looks down on almost everyone in the town in which she was born. At the same time she cannot bear to be away from that town. She has no respect for the rules of her society and yet she is terrified of breaking any of those rules and causing any kind of scandal. Hedda is a strange combination of conformism and non-conformism. She gets a great deal of joy from controlling the actions of others and feels no remorse when she hurts someone. In fact, Hedda often goes out of her way to hurt the people in her immediate circle. Sometimes she has a spiteful reason to lash out and sometimes she doesn't even understand why she is being destructive. Hedda did not marry Jorgen Tesman out of love. She married him out of boredom. He happened to be the one to ask for her hand at the right moment and she could make him do whatever she wanted of him. She spends more money than Jorgen earns and expects him to live a social life to which he is totally unsuited. Hedda is a "femme fatale," a woman who destroys. But in the end, her destructive nature backfires on her.

Jorgen Tesman - a man of about thirty, average in height, weight and general appearance, Jorgen Tesman is the new husband of the beautiful Hedda Gabler.

He dresses casually, as if clothes are not important except in that they should be clean, neat and comfortable. Jorgen was raised by his aunts, Julle and Rina, and their maid, Berte (who now lives with Jorgen and Hedda in their new home). Jorgen was worshipped by his aunts. As the beloved son, Jorgen grew up to be a sweet, yet unexciting sort of fellow. He is shy and rather innocent with women and totally out of his league with Hedda. Jorgen worships Hedda and does not understand her at all. Ironically, it is because he does not understand her that he can be married to her. If he did understand her true nature he might not have been able to like, let alone, love her. Jorgen is under the mistaken impression that Hedda cares for him and that she is basically a good and loving woman. Jorgen is the nice boy next door who thinks more about his books than women, and who everyone likes because he threatens no one.

Thea Elvsted - a small energetic woman who is a few years younger than Hedda. Thea, Mrs. Elvsted, dresses in good taste but not in the latest fashion. She has a timid though determined nature. She and Hedda were in school together and Hedda bullied Thea, threatening to burn Thea's beautiful hair off for no apparent reason. Thea was not rich and had to go to work after school to help support her family. She took a job as the live-in governess (teacher) for the children of Mr. and Mrs. Elvsted, who lived in a small town in a secluded part of the country. The work was hard and her employers cold but she needed the money. When the first Mrs. Elvsted died, Mr. Elvsted married Thea because she was a help around the house and not expensive to support. The marriage is

totally without love and Mr. Elvsted travels a great deal for his work. Thea has fallen in love with Eilert Lovborg, the man who came to tutor the Elvsted children when Thea could no longer handle the household work by herself. The strength of Thea's love for Eilert and the value of the work they are able to accomplish together raise her spirits above the misery and coldness of her life with Mr. Elvsted. Thea is able to do something that Hedda, with all her strength, intelligence and originality, would never have the courage to do. Out of love and self-sacrifice Thea has left her husband and publicly followed Eilert to help him in his life as a scholar. Thea has rebelled against the system that would condemn a woman who would leave her husband. Unlike Hedda, Thea has a purpose to her life; she can love another and she gains her strength from this ability.

Eilert Lovborg - is the same age as Jorgen Tesman, but even though they are both thirty, Lovborg looks somewhat older and more wasted. He dresses elegantly in clothes that appear to be new. For the past three or four years, Eilert Lovborg has been living a life of sober productivity, under the steady influence of Thea Elvsted. As the teacher for her step-children, Eilert has seen Thea almost every day of those years. Eilert and Thea have formed a close and intense bond through which Eilert has been able to give up his addiction to alcohol and to the self-destructive behaviors that kept him from realizing his enormous intellectual potential. In his youth Eilert had been recognized as one of the most brilliant minds in the area, with the chance of becoming a world-famous leader of

historical theory. But because of his drink and his emotional obsession with certain women, his reputation was destroyed and it became impossible for him to get a job with any type of future. The position as teacher for the Elvsted children would have been a dead end for Eilert had he not met Thea, and with her written a book that saves his reputation professionally, and also establishes him once again as a leader in his field. But his new strength has been protected and nurtured in the country by Thea, far away from the influences of the town where Eilert had formed his destructive habits. It is to this town that Eilert must return to complete his triumph. The question is whether or not he will be able to maintain his sobriety and his devotion to Thea when faced with the temptations of drink and the "woman that stands between" his and Thea's complete emotional union. And what part has Hedda played in Eilert's past? What part does she play in his future?

Judge Brack - a man of approximately forty-five, who dresses with elegance and in a style perhaps a little too youthful for his age. He looks quite dashing and his moderate good looks are enhanced by the humor and intelligence that shine from his eyes. He always knows the correct thing to say and do and is quite successful in all his business and social transactions. Judge Brack is the type of person you like and trust despite the fact that he seems a bit too smooth and too much in control. Someone like Jorgen Tesman would only expect the most honorable behavior from Judge Brack toward Hedda. It would never occur to Jorgen that the Judge might have ulterior motives in his attentions to the young, attractive Mrs. Tesman. Jorgen Tesman

is wrong about Judge Brack. The Judge is similar in some ways to Hedda. He is also very concerned with maintaining the appearance of moral behavior and not breaking and of the society's rules. He would never allow any hint of scandal to be associated with his name and yet he feels totally comfortable bending all the rules in private. The Judge can often be heard saying, "Well, people simply don't do that sort of thing.", whenever he hears about an action that doesn't fit the public social mold. In some ways, the Judge is Hedda's mirror; he reflects the reality of her actions and her thoughts back onto her. It is through her relationship to the Judge that Hedda finally sees the path she must take to escape from the world in which she feels trapped.

Miss Julle Tesman - a woman of about sixty-five, Miss Tesman has a good and kind appearance, dressing simply and neatly. Miss Tesman has devoted her life to the care of her invalid sister Rina and her dear nephew Jorgen Tesman. This woman does not have a malicious, spiteful or negative bone in her body. She is happy to give to others and does not even recognize selfishness when she encounters it in others. Miss Tesman is the soul of generosity and asks for almost nothing in return for her attentions. She understands that her need to give to others makes her life worthwhile.

Berte - the maid of the Tesman household, Berte has worked for Miss Julle Tesman since she was a young woman. Now Berte is getting on in years but she continues in her devotion to the young man, Jorgen Tesman, whom she helped to raise. Berte is from the country and lacks some of the polish a city person might have but she is a solid

and reliable worker. She is happy in her work and she truly loves the entire Tesman family, although she has some difficulty understanding the ways of Hedda Gabler.

Henrik Ibsen's HEDDA GABLER:

Play Synopsis

Hedda Gabler is the story of a fiery woman in a stifling existence. She and the people around her find themselves engulfed by adulterous passions, vicious rivalries, murder threats, and the shadow of suicide. They all struggle to give some meaning to their lives, even if it's a violent one that ends up destroying other people -- or themselves.

Act 1: George Tesman and his bride, Hedda, have just returned from a long wedding trip. Tesman, a meek historian, is greeted by his beloved aunt, and they await Hedda's appearance nervously. Even before we see her, it's obvious that Hedda demands to be treated very well, and that Tesman is spending more on her than he can afford. When Hedda comes in, she is openly disdainful of her husband and his aunt.

Then a childhood friend of hers, Thea Elvsted, arrives. Thea is desperate and feels that Hedda and Tesman are the only ones she can turn to. She has come to town in search of a man named Eilert Lovborg, her stepchildren's tutor. Lovborg, who had left this town to escape his bad reputation, had dealings with the Tesmans as well: he had been a professional rival of George's and a lover of Hedda's. Thea, too, has a personal interest in him. She confesses to Hedda that in following Lovborg to town she

has left her husband. Thea is slavishly devoted to Lovborg; she has helped him in his work and believes her support has led him to reform himself. Lovborg has just published an acclaimed book that may lift him out of disgrace and make him a rival for Tesman once again. The Tesmans' friend Judge Brack arrives. He warns that Lovborg may also be competing for the professorship that Tesman has been counting on -- the job that would provide the income he needs to support his extravagant wife.

Act 2: Hedda, bored and reckless, is playing with a set of pistols, and pretends to shoot at Judge Brack as he comes for a visit. Hedda can speak honestly with Brack, as she can't with her husband. He has been one of her admirers and suggests that even now, Hedda can relieve her boredom by continuing their relationship. She tells him she married the dull, plodding Tesman because she needed to leave her wild life behind. Tesman was stable and wanted to take care of her -- a safe choice. She tells of her lack of interest in anything in her life.

Brack is about to hold a bachelor party for Tesman. When Lovborg arrives at the Tesmans' house with the manuscript of his next book, the book he considers his masterpiece, the men invite him to the party. In his new virtuous mode, he declines; instead, he will stay for dinner with Hedda and Thea. But Hedda -- seeing a twisted kind of "mission" in manipulating other people -- taunts her guests by describing how hysterically worried Thea had been over Lovborg. Exploding at this sign of her mistrust, Lovborg gulps down a drink and leaves for the party after all. Thea is terrified, but Hedda assures her that his will be

Lovborg's true test, leading him to triumph over his weaknesses. Does Hedda mean this? Or does she simply believe that compared with her static existence, *any* bold action -- even a grand failure -- is admirable?

Act 3: Hedda and Thea have waited all night for the men to return. When Tesman finally comes in, he tells Hedda how drunk Lovborg got -- so drunk that he dropped his precious manuscript on the street; Tesman has brought it home. What Tesman doesn't know, but what Brack tells Hedda, is that Lovborg ended up in a brothel, where he got into a fight and was taken away by the police. In a single night, he has revived all his old ways. Then Lovborg appears. Feeling that his life is in ruins, he harshly announces that he destroyed the manuscript. In private, he admits to Hedda that he has lost it. Through all this, she says nothing about its real whereabouts. Instead, urging him that whatever he chooses to do must be done "beautifully," she gives him one of her pistols. Once she is alone, she burns the manuscript.

Act 4: Hedda admits to Tesman what she has done with the manuscript, claiming it was an act of love for him, since he felt envious of Lovborg. Brack arrives to say that Lovborg has shot himself. Hedda is excited by the "beauty" and daring of his action, until Brack explains that it wasn't the glamorous suicide she imagines. Lovborg had gone back to the brothel, and may have actually been shot by someone else in an argument there -- a much more pathetic, meaningless death. What's more, Brack knows it was Hedda's gun that Lovborg used, and that

she could be implicated in the whole affair if Brack reveals this fact.

Feeling herself in his power, Hedda feels trapped more than ever. Visions of glory and freedom have succumbed to a claustrophobic reality. Thea reveals that she has saved the notes for Lovborg's lost masterpiece, and she and Tesman sit down to the grind of trying to reconstruct it. Hedda slips into the next room with the remaining pistol and shoots herself.

--David Olivenbaum

VOCABULARY

Following is a brief list of words from the Roundabout version of Henrik Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler*. As you know, it is helpful to understand the words used by the various characters to describe their opinions and perceptions of the world. As in earlier guides, we have offered you definitions* for most of these words and left a few for you to look up for yourself. Perhaps you will be surprised by how many words you know!

archives - a place or collection containing records, documents, or other materials of historical interest.

doctorate - the degree or status of a doctor (not in this case a doctor of medicine) as conferred by a university.

superlative

* The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992.

capital - wealth in form of property or money

hinder - to be or to get in the way of.

astray

Barbantian - having to do with a region and former duchy (territory ruled by a duke) of the Netherlands.

abode - a dwelling place, a home.

parasol

Tyrol - a region of the eastern Alps in western Austria and northern Italy.

petit bourgeois - the lower middle class.

parchment

vocation - a regular occupation, especially one for which a person is particularly suited. An inclination, as if in response to a summons, to undertake a certain kind of work.

ludicrous - laughable or hilarious because of obvious absurdity or incongruity.

constable - a peace officer with less authority and smaller jurisdiction than a sheriff, empowered to serve warrants and make arrests.