# *Hedda Gabler* (1890)

Full text available at:

<https://www.fulltextarchive.com/pdfs/Hedda-Gabler.pdf> OR

<https://www.slps.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=22453&dataid=14688&FileName=hedda-gabler.pdf>

Additional web links:

<https://www.visitnorway.com/things-to-do/art-culture/literature/henrik-ibsen/>

The playwright who changed the theatre.

<http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/_pdf/first_folio/folio_enemy_about.pdf>

Useful background, with some good pictures.

Wikipedia page:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedda_Gabler>

Points to be aware of:

1. Nationality
2. Period
3. Status in theatre studies: innovation and impact
4. Representation of women
5. Realism
6. Symbolism

And an aside:

**Chekhov's gun** ([Russian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language): Чеховское ружьё) is a [dramatic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drama) principle that states that every element in a story must be necessary, and irrelevant elements should be removed. Elements should not appear to make "false promises" by never coming into play. The statement is recorded in letters by [Anton Chekhov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Chekhov) several times, with some variation:[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-1)[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-2)[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-marble-3)

* "Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there."[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-marble-3)[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-4)
* "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." Chekhov, letter to Aleksandr Semenovich Lazarev (pseudonym of A. S. Gruzinsky), 1 November 1889.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-5)[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-6)[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-7) Here the "gun" is a monologue that Chekhov deemed superfluous and unrelated to the rest of the play.
* "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." From Gurlyand's *Reminiscences of A. P. Chekhov*, in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 1904, No. 28, 11 July, p. 521.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun#cite_note-8)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun>

Website accessed 14/08/2020 14h54

## Worksheet on *Hedda Gabler*

## Character

1. After your first reading of the play, make (your own !!) brief character sketches of the following characters, also indicating what their relationships are to Hedda:

* Hedda Gabler
* Jürgen Tesman
* Juliane Tesman
* Judge Brack
* Ejlert Lövborg
* Mrs Elvsted
* Berte
* Aunt Rina

## Events

1. In what way/s are character and relationship revealed through the following events:

* The arrival of Mrs Elvsted
* Drinking punch
* The death of Aunt Rina
* Handing over the pistol
* Burning of the manuscript
* Committing suicide

## Setting

1. Briefly describe the spatial setting in which most of the action happens. Why is there need for two rooms, do you think?

* How does this setting influence the ways in which characters interact?
* How does this setting change from act to act? At different times of day?
* What is visible from this setting outside? (And what does this enable Hedda to do?)

1. What other settings are referred to in the course of the action?

* What significant actions take place in these other settings?

## Symbolism

1. Comment on the significance of each of these objects. Say what happens to them, and what this shows about the characters with whom they are associated, and the interaction that arises around them.

* The flowers
* The suitcases
* Aunt Julie’s hat
* The piano
* Letters
* Hair
* The pistols
* The manuscript

## Relationships

In a page or two, compare and contrast the relationships Hedda has with men and with women.

## Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)

*Petri Liukkonen (author) & Ari Pesonen. 2008-2017*

Norwegian playwright, one of "the four great ones" with Alexander Kielland, Jonas Lie and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson of the 19th-century Norwegian literature. Ibsen is generally acknowledged as the founder of modern prose drama. He moved away from the Romantic style, unmasking the romantic hero, and brought the problems and ideas of the day onto his stage.

... And what does it mean, then to be a poet? It was a long time before I realized that to be a poet means essentially to see, but mark well, to see in such a way that whatever is seen is perceived by the audience just as the poet saw it. But only what has been lived through can be seen in that way and accepted in that way. And the secret of modern literature lies precisely in this matter of experiences that are lived through. All that I have written these last ten years, I have lived through spiritually. ('Speech to the Norwegian Students, September 10, 1874, from *Speeches and New Letters*, 1910)

Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien, a tiny coastal town. His father was a prosperous merchant, whose financial failure changed the family's social position. Poverty interrupted Ibsen's education and it gave Ibsen a strong distrust of society. At the age of 16 he was for a time apprenticed to a pharmacist in Grimstad. In 1846 he was compelled to support an illegitimate child born to a servant girl. In 1848 a revolution swept Europe and Ibsen adopted the new ideas of personal freedom.

In 1850 Ibsen moved to Christiania (now Oslo). He attended Heltberg's 'student factory' for university candidates, and occasionally earned from his journalistic writings. In the same year he wrote two plays, Catilina, a tragedy, which reflected the atmosphere of the revolutionary year of 1848, and The Burial Mound. Ibsen hoped to become a physician but after failing university entrance examinations, he was appointed in 1851 as 'stage poet' of Den Nationale Scene, a small theater in Bergen. He wrote there four plays based on Norwegian folklore and history, notably Lady Inger of Ostrat (1855), dealing with the liberation of medieval Norway. In 1852 his theater sent him on a study tour to Denmark and Germany.

Ibsen returned in 1857 to Christiania to become artistic director of the new Norwegian (Norske) Theatre. In 1858 he married Suzannah Thoresen, the stepchild of the novelist Magdalene Thoresen. Their only child, Sigurd, was born next year. After many productions, the theater went bankrupt, and Ibsen was appointed to the Christiania Theatre. To this period belong The Vikings of Helgoland (1858) and The Pretenders (1864), both historical sagas, and Love's Comedy (1862), a satire. Several of Ibsen's plays failed to attract audience and these public humiliations became a burden for him.

In 1864 Ibsen received an award for foreign travel from the government, and also had financial help from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. He left Norway for Italy in April, and traveled abroad for the next 27 years, returning to Norway only for brief visits. During this time, when he lived in Rome, Munich and Dresden, Ibsen wrote most of his best-known works, among others *Brand* (1866), a symbolic tragedy about a priest, who follows his high principles. Its theme, an individual with his God-given mission pitted against society, reflected deeply the feelings of young liberals. Brand's firm belief is "No compromise!" and at the end he dies, in an avalache. *Peer Gynt* (1867) was a satiric fantasy about a boastful egoist, irresponsible Peer, a figure from Norwegian folklore. Peer is saved by the love of a woman, Solveig. In both of these works the romantic hero is destroyed and their 'ideal demands' are crushed. No doubt the themes also rose from Ibsen's disillusionment with his countrymen. In 1865 he wrote to Björnson: "If I were to tell at this moment what has been the chief result of my stay abroad, I should say that it consisted in my having driven out of myself the aestheticism which had a great power over me - an isolated aestheticism with a claim to independent existence. Aestheticism of this kind seem to me now as a great curse to poetry as theology is to religion."

Ibsen himself considered *The Emperor and the Galilean* (1873) his most important play. However, this heavy drama about Christianity and paganism in generally not included among his most important achievements. *Pillars of Society* (1877) dealt with a wealthy and hypocritical businessman, whose perilous course almost results in the death of his son. *A Doll´s House* (1879) was a social drama on marriage, in which a woman refuses to obey her husband and walks out from her apparently perfect marriage. The work caused a sensation and toured Europe and America. *In An Enemy of the People* (1882) Ibsen attacked "the compact liberal majority" and the conformity of mass opinion. *Ghosts* (1881) touched the forbidden subject of hereditary venereal disease and attacked social conventions as destroyers of life and happiness. *The London Daily Telegraph* called the play "an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly; a lazar house wit all its doors and windows open."

*Hedda Gabler* (1890) was a study of a neurotic woman. Oscar Wilde, after attending the play, wrote: "I felt pity and terror, as though the play had been Greek." Hedda, twenty-nine years old, has married down, is pregnant with an unwanted child, and bored by her husband. Before marriage she has flirted with the drunken poet Loevborg, a portrait of the playwright Strindberg, who hated Ibsen. She plots to the ruin of Loevborg by burning his manuscript on the future of civilization. Judge Brack, who lusts after Hedda, discovers that Hedda has instigated Loevborg's accidental suicide - he has died in a bordello. Hedda cries: "Oh, why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous? It's like a curse!" Brack gives her the choice either of public exposure or of becoming his mistress. But Hedda chooses suicide when she falls into his power.

In 1866 Ibsen received poet's annual stipend. He also had royalties from his dramatic poem *Brand*. This secured his financial position. With the receipt of a new grant, he visited Stockholm, dined with the King, and later represented Norway at the opening of the Suez Canal. In the 1870s he worked with composer Edward Grieg on the premiere of Peer Gynt. When he spent a couple months in Norway during the summer of 1874, Norwegian students marched in procession to Ibsen's home to greet the writer. In reply Ibsen said: "For a student has essentially the same task as the poet: to make clear to himself, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions which are astir in the age and in the community to which he belongs." (from *Speches and New Letters*)

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 and continued to write until a stroke in 1900. His marriage was joyless, but a few episodes of friendship with young women broke the austerity of his life. In 1898 Ibsen received the world's homage on the occasion of his 70th birthday. George Bernard Shaw called him the greatest living dramatist in a lecture entitled 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism'. Ibsen's son married Bjørnson's daughter Bergliot. The marriage builded a bridge of friendship between the two writer, who had a break in relationship after Ibsen's play *The League of Youth* (1869), where the central character resembled Bjørnson. Ibsen died in Christiania on May 23, 1906. The last years of his life were clouded by mental illness.

"A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." (from Ibsen's *Workshop*, 1912)

In his plays Ibsen focused on character rather situations and created realistic dramas of psychological conflict. His central theme was the duty of the individual towards himself. In the task of self-realization his characters faced the out-of-date conventions of bourgeois society. "I have really never had a strong feeling for solidarity," Ibsen wrote to Brandes in 1871. Ibsen's anarchistic individualism made a deep impression on the younger generation outside Norway, where he was considered a progressive writer. In his home country, however, Ibsen was seen as a moral preacher and more conservative than Björnson. Ibsen's only real discipline or successor, George Bernard Shaw, shared his intellectualism and method of teaching - dramatizing generally accepted ideas into uncompromising plays.

<http://authorscalendar.info/ibsen.htm>

Website accessed 14/08/2020, 11h12

## Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)

Fletcher Bellinger, Martha.

IN the entire history of literature, there are few figures like Ibsen. Practically his whole life and energies were devoted to the theater; and his offerings, medicinal and bitter, have changed the history of the stage. The story of his life -- his birth March 20, 1828, in the little Norwegian village of Skien, the change in family circumstances from prosperity to poverty when the boy was eight years old, his studious and non-athletic boyhood, his apprenticeship to an apothecary in Grimstad, and his early attempts at dramatic composition -- all these items are well known. His spare hours were spent in preparation for entrance to Christiania University, where, at about the age of twenty, he formed a friendship with Björnson. About 1851 the violinist Ole Bull gave Ibsen the position of "theater poet" at the newly built National Theater in Bergen – a post which he held for six years. In 1857 he became director of the Norwegian Theater in Christiania; and in 1862, with *Love's Comedy*, became known in his own country as a playwright of promise. Seven years later, discouraged with the reception given to his work and out of sympathy with the social and intellectual ideals of his country, he left Norway, not to return for a period of nearly thirty years. He established himself first at Rome, later in Munich. Late in life he returned to Christiania, where he died May 23, 1906.

**IBSEN'S PLAYS**

The productive life of Ibsen is conveniently divided into three periods: the first ending in 1877 with the successful appearance of *The Pillars of Society*; the second covering the years in which he wrote most of the dramas of protest against social conditions, such as *Ghosts*; and the third marked by the symbolic plays, *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*. The first of the prose plays, *Love's Comedy* (1862) made an impression in Norway, and drew the eyes of thoughtful people to the new dramatist, though its satirical, mocking tone brought upon its author the charge of being a cynic and an athiest. The three historical plays, or dramatic poems, *Brand*, *Emperor and Galilean*, and *Peer Gynt*, written between 1866 and 1873, form a monumental epic. These compositions cannot be considered wholly or primarily for the stage; they are the poetic record of a long intellectual and spiritual struggle. In Brand there is the picture of the man who has not found the means of adjustment between the mechanical routine of daily living and the deeper claims of the soul; in *Emperor and Galilean* is a portrayal of the noblest type of pagan philosophy and manhood, illustrated in the Emperor Julian, set off against the ideals of the Jewish Christ; and in *Peer Gynt* is a picture of the war within the soul of a man in whom are no roots of loyalty, faith, or steadfastness.

When *The Young Men's League* was produced, the occasion, like the first appearance of Hernani, became locally historic. The play deals with political theories, ideas of liberty and social justice; and in its presentation likenesses to living people were discovered, and fierce resentments were aroused. The tumult of hissing and applauding during the performance was so great that the authorities interfered. *The Pillars of Society*, Ibsen's fifteenth play, was the first to have a hearing throughout Europe. It was written in Munich, where it was performed in the summer of 1877. In the autumn it was enacted in all the theaters of Scandinavia, whence within a few months it spread over the continent, appearing in London before the end of the year. The late James Huneker, one of the most acute critics of the Norwegian seer, said: "The Northern Aristophanes, who never smiles as he lays on the lash, exposes in *The Pillars of Society* a varied row of white sepulchres. . . . There is no mercy in Ibsen, and his breast has never harbored the milk of human kindness. This remote, objective art does not throw out tentacles of sympathy. It is too disdainful to make the slightest concession, hence the difficulty in convincing an audience that the poet is genuinely humain."

*The Pillars of Society* proved, once and for all, Ibsen's emancipation, first, from the thrall of romanticism, which he had pushed aside as of no more worth than a toy; and, secondly, from the domination of French technique, which he had mastered and surpassed. In the plays of the second period there are evident Ibsen's most mature gifts as a craftsman as well as that peculiar philosophy which made him the Jeremiah of the modern social world. In *An Enemy of the People* the struggle is between hypocrisy and greed on one side, and the ideal of personal honor on the other; in *Ghosts* there is an exposition of a fate-tragedy darker and more searching even than in *Oedipus*; and in each of the social dramas there is exposed, as under the pitiless lens of the microscope, some moral cancer. Ibsen forced his characters to scrutinize their past, the conditions of the society to which they belonged, and the methods by which they had gained their own petty ambitions, in order that they might pronounce judgment upon themselves. The action is still for the most part concerned with men's deeds and outward lives, in connection with society and the world; and his themes have largely to do with the moral and ethical relations of man with man.

In the third period the arena of conflict has changed to the realm of the spirit; and the action illustrates some effort at self-realization, self-conquest, or self-annihilation. *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken* must explain themselves, if they are to be explained at all; for they are meaningless if they do not light, in the mind of the reader or spectator, a spark of some clairvoyant insight with which they were written. In them are characters which, like certain living men and women, challenge and mystify even their closest friends and admirers. Throughout all the plays there are symbols -- the wild duck, the mill race, the tower, or the open sea -- which are but the external tokens of something less familiar and more important; and the dialogue often has a secondary meaning, not with the witty double entendre of the French school, but with suggestions of a world in which the spirit, ill at ease in material surroundings, will find its home.

It is significant that Ibsen should arrive, by his own route, at the very principles adopted by Sophocles and commended by Aristotle -- namely, the unities of time, place and action, with only the culminating events of the tragedy placed before the spectator. After the first period he wrote in prose, abolishing all such ancient and serviceable contrivances as servants discussing their masters' affairs, comic relief, asides and soliloquies. The characters in his later dramas are few, and there are no "veils of poetic imagery."

**IBSEN'S MORAL IDEALS**

The principles of Ibsen's teaching, his moral ethic, was that honesty in facing facts is the first requisite of a decent life. Human nature has dark recesses which must be explored and illuminated; life has pitfalls which must be recognized to be avoided; and society has humbugs, hypocrisies, and obscure diseases which must be revealed before they can be cured. To recognize these facts is not pessimism; it is the moral obligation laid upon intelligent people. To face the problems thus exposed, however, requires courage, honesty, and faith in the ultimate worth of the human soul. Man must be educated until he is not only intelligent enough, but courageous enough to work out his salvation through patient endurance and nobler ideals. Democracy, as a cure-all, is just as much a failure as any other form of government; since the majority in politics, society, or religion is always torpid and content with easy measures. It is the intelligent and morally heroic minority which has always led, and always will lead, the human family on its upward march. Nevertheless, we alone can help ourselves; no help can come from without. Furthermore -- and this is a vital point in understanding Ibsen -- experience and life are a happiness in themselves, not merely a means to happiness; and in the end good must prevail. Such are some of the ideas that can be distilled from the substance of Ibsen's plays.

On the plane of practical methods Ibsen preached the emancipation of the individual, especially of woman. He laid great stress upon the principle of heredity. He made many studies of disordered minds, and analyzed relentlessly the common relationships -- sister and brother, husband and wife, father and son. There is much in these relationships, he seems to say, that is based on sentimentalism, on a desire to dominate, on hypocrisy and lies. He pictured the unscrupulous financier, the artist who gives up love for the fancied demands of his art, the unmarried woman who has been the drudge and the unthanked burden-bearer -- all with a cool detachment which cloaks, but does not conceal, the passionate moralist.

From the seventh decade of the last century to his last play in 1899, the storm of criticism, resentment, and denunciation scarcely ceased. On the other hand, the prophet and artist which were united in Ibsen's nature found many champions and friends. In Germany he was hailed as the leader of the new era; in England his champion, William Archer, fought many a battle for him; but in the end no one could escape his example. Young playwrights learned from him, reformers adopted his ideas, and moralists quoted from him as from a sacred book. His plays scorched, but they fascinated the rising generation, and they stuck to the boards. Psychologists discovered a depth of meaning and of human understanding in his delineation of character. He did not found a school, for every school became his debtor. He did not have followers, for every succeeding playwright was forced in a measure to learn from him.

Article originally published in *A Short History of the Drama*. Martha Fletcher Bellinger. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1927. pp. 317-22.

<http://www.theatredatabase.com/19th_century/henrik_ibsen_001.html>

Website accessed 14/08/2020 11h17.

## Ibsen, H. The Task of the Poet (1874)

...And what does it mean, then, to be a poet? It was a long time before I realized that to be a poet means essentially to see, but mark well, to see in such a way that whatever is seen is perceived by the audience just as the poet saw it. But only what has been lived through can be seen in that way and accepted in that way. And the secret of modern literature lies precisely in this matter of experiences that are lived through. All that I have written these last ten years, I have lived through spiritually. But no poet lives through anything in isolation. What he lives through all of his countrymen live through with him. If that were not so, what would bridge the gap between the producing and the receiving minds?

And what is it, then, that I have lived through and that has inspired me? The range has been large. In part I have been inspired by something which only rarely and only in my best moments has stirred vividly within me as something great and beautiful. I have been inspired by that which, so to speak, has stood higher than my everyday self, and I have been inspired by this because I wanted to confront it and make it part of myself.

But I have also been inspired by the opposite, by what appears on introspection as the dregs and sediments of one's own nature. Writing has in this case been to me like a bath from which I have risen feeling cleaner, healthier, and freer. Yes, gentlemen, nobody can picture poetically anything for which he himself has not to a certain degree and at least at times served as a model. And who is the man among us who has not now and then felt and recognized within himself a contradiction between word and deed, between will and duty, between life and theory in general? Or who is there among us who has not, at least at times, been egoistically sufficient unto himself, and half unconsciously, half in good faith, sought to extenuate his conduct both to others and to himself?

I believe that in saying all this to you, to the students, my remarks have found exactly the right audience. You will understand them as they are meant to be understood. For a student has essentially the same task as the poet: to make clear to himself, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions which are astir in the age and in the community to which he belongs.

In this respect I dare to say of myself that I have endeavored to be a good student during my stay abroad. A poet is by nature farsighted. Never have I seen my homeland and the true life of my homeland so fully, so clearly, and at such close range, as I did in my absence when I was far away from it.

And now, my dear countrymen, in conclusion a few words which are also related to something I have lived through. When Emperor Julian stands at the end of his career, and everything collapses around him, there is nothing which makes him so despondent as the thought that all he has gained was this: to be remembered by cool and clear heads with respectful admiration, while his opponents live on, rich in the love of warm, living hearts. This thought was the result of much that I had lived through; it had its origin in a question that I had sometimes asked myself, down there in my solitude. Now the young people of Norway have come to me here tonight and given me my answer in word and song, have given me my answer more warmly and clearly than I had ever expected to hear it. I shall take this answer with me as the richest reward of my visit with my countrymen at home, and it is my hope and my belief that what I experience tonight will be an experience to "live through" which will sometime be reflected in a work of mine. And if this happens, if sometime I shall send such a book home, then I ask that the students receive it as a handshake and a thanks for this meeting. I ask you to receive it as the ones who had a share in the making of it.

Excerpt from "Speech to the Norwegian Students, September 10, 1874," *Speeches and New Letters*, translated by Arne Kildal (Boston. Richard G. Badger, 1910), pp. 49-52.

<http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc5w1.htm>

website accessed 14/08/2020 13h11.

## The Father of Modern Drama

Kennedy, Bobby.

**Henrik Ibsen is famously known as the Father of Modern Drama, and it is worth recognizing how literal an assessment that is.**

The Norwegian playwright was not merely one of a wave of new writers to experiment with dramatic form, nor did he make small improvements that were built upon by successors. Rather, Ibsen himself conceived of how the theatre should evolve, and, against great adversity, fulfilled his vision.

“The standing of the theater in the 1850s was at its lowest, in both Europe and the United States,” supplies Ibsen scholar Brian Johnston. “In Britain, for example, the last new play of any significance to appear until the arrival of A Doll’s House in London in 1889 was Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The School for Scandal (1777). During one of the most prolific periods of English-speaking literature, which saw the full flowering of the Romantic movement in poetry and the arts and the rise of the realistic novel as a major literary genre, not a single drama of major significance appeared. It was the period, in fiction, of Austen, the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Melville, James, Wharton; in poetry, of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman. **No other period has been at once so rich in literature and so barren in drama.**” Adding to the obstacles was the fact that Ibsen hailed from Norway, a country with almost no dramatic tradition of its own. Because Denmark had ruled Norway for the previous 500 years, most theatre was performed in Danish, by Danish companies.

Ibsen rose to prominence in large part because of his refusal to follow the rules of theatre at the time. His determination to forge his own style of drama coincided with a rising demand by the new intelligentsia for a serious “thinking” theatre, contrary to the frivolous entertainment on mainstream stages. Ibsen’s realist plays, such as A Doll’s House, Ghosts, and An Enemy of the People, were championed by this class of society upon their publication.

New theatres were formed in Berlin, Paris and London for the sole purpose of performing Ibsen’s plays, since no commercial mainstream theatre would consider it. “Within an astonishingly short time,” summarizes Johnston, “the theatre, through Ibsen, had shaken off its insignificance and disrepute to become a major, and highly controversial, force in modern culture.”

The playwright deviated from the theatrical norm in a variety of ways, most importantly, according to biographer Michael Mayer, by combining the three key innovations of “colloquial dialogue, objectivity, and tightness of plot.” His creation of settings, characters and narratives that were recognizable and relatable to his audiences was a monumental breakthrough. The plays, categorized as “Realism,” tapped into the intelligentsia’s discomfort with the hypocrisy between conventional moral values and the foundations and consequences of a post-Darwin, industrial-capitalist society. James Joyce summed up the groundswell of praise for Ibsen when he wrote: **“It may be questioned whether any man has held so firm an empire over the thinking world in modern times.”**

Ibsen’s major breakthrough in the English-speaking world came the year before he wrote [**Hedda Gabler**](http://www.writerstheatre.org/hedda-gabler). The June 1889 production of A Doll’s House at London’s Novelty Theatre, starring Janet Achurch as Nora, launched the playwright into public consciousness. London critics savaged the play in their reviews, but the show proved so popular the run had to be extended. The influential London actor-manager Harley Granville Barker (who would go on to stage and star in many of Bernard Shaw’s plays) remarked “The play was talked of and written about—mainly abusively, it is true— as no other play had been for years.”

Although A Doll’s House was new to the English-speaking public, the play was ten years old by the time it was performed in London in 1889. As a result, when [**Hedda Gabler**](http://www.writerstheatre.org/hedda-gabler) opened at London’s Vaudeville Theatre in April 1891, only two years later, theatregoers were surprised at the direction Ibsen’s playwriting had evolved in what seemed like such a short time. In the intervening years, the playwright completed two plays similar in style to A Doll’s House (Ghosts in 1881 and An Enemy of the People in 1882). Ghosts, with a plot touching upon venereal disease and incestuous relationships, was widely banned. Ibsen then continued to delve into darker and more psychologically complex depictions. Reviews of his next plays, The Wild Duck (1884), Rosmersholm (1887), and The Lady from the Sea (1888) were mixed when first published, but acclaim for Ibsen and his work continued to mount. [**Hedda Gabler**](http://www.writerstheatre.org/hedda-gabler) would continue this trend.

<https://www.writerstheatre.org/blog/father-modern-drama/>

Website accessed 14/09/2020 14h39

## Realism and naturalism: Theatre conventions

Cash, Justin. Published March 3, 2014, updated May 28, 2020.

One of the more confusing aspects of theatre history and performance styles for teachers and students is the differences between realism and naturalism.

The two schools of thought and subsequent movements in the theatre were distinct and separate, though blurred with historical time lines and similarities in style. As a result, the move towards a more authentic form of drama on the stage in the mid to late 19th century is often considered one period. If realism and naturalism in the theatre were two movements, which one came first? Well, that depends on who you read. One thing is for sure though; the over-the-top melodramas full of spectacle in the early to mid-19th century were to be no more.

In terms of style, the words realism and naturalism are frustratingly used interchangeably to mean the same, yet they are not. They are similar, yes, but have many differences. Some scholars refer to Stanislavski’s system as the premise for naturalistic acting, while others refer to this as a system for realistic acting. Naturalistic acting in naturalistic dramas is different to realistic acting in realistic plays. They have different demands on the actor with characterisation, the designers with sets, properties and costumes, and the subject matter often differs, too.

### Realism

* characters are believable, everyday types
* costumes are authentic
* the realist movement in the theatre and subsequent performance style have greatly influenced 20th century theatre and cinema and its effects are still being felt today
* triggered by Stanislavski’s system of realistic acting at the turn of the 20th century, America grabbed hold of its own brand of this performance style (American realism) and acting (method acting) in the 1930s, 40s and 50s (The Group Theatre, The Actors Studio)
* stage settings (locations) and props are often indoors and believable
* the ‘box set’ is normally used for realistic dramas on stage, consisting of three walls and an invisible ‘fourth wall’ facing the audience
* settings for realistic plays are often bland (deliberately ordinary), dialogue is not heightened for effect, but that of everyday speech (vernacular)
* the drama is typically psychologically driven, where the plot is secondary and primary focus is placed on the interior lives of characters, their motives, the reactions of others etc.
* realistic plays often see the protagonist (main character) rise up against the odds to assert him/herself against an injustice of some kind (eg. Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House)
* realistic dramas quickly gained popularity because the everyday person in the audience could identify with the situations and characters on stage
* Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (A Doll’s House, Hedda Gabler) is considered the father of modern realism in the theatre

**Naturalism**

* in terms of style, naturalism is an extreme or heightened form of realism
* as a theatrical movement and performance style, naturalism was short-lived
* stage time equals real time – eg. three hours in the theatre equals three hours for the characters in the world of the play
* costumes, sets and props are historically accurate and very detailed, attempting to offer a photographic reproduction of reality (‘slice of life’)
* as with realism, settings for naturalistic dramas are often bland and ordinary
* naturalistic dramas normally follow rules set out by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, known as ‘the three unities’ (of time, place and action)
* the action of the play takes place in a single location over the time frame of a single day
* jumps in time and/or place between acts or scenes is not allowed
* playwrights were influenced by naturalist manifestos written by French novelist and playwright Emile Zola in the preface to Therese Raquin (1867 novel, 1873 play) and Swedish playwright August Strindberg in the preface to Miss Julie (1888)
* naturalism explores the concept of scientific determinism (spawning from Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution) – characters in the play are shaped by their circumstances and controlled by external forces such as hereditary or their social and economic environment
* often characters in naturalistic plays are considered victims of their own circumstance and this is why they behave in certain ways (they are seen as helpless products of their environment)
* characters are often working class/lower class (as opposed to the mostly middle class characters of realistic dramas)
* naturalistic plays regularly explore sordid subject matter previously considered taboo on the stage in any serious manner (eg suicide, poverty, prostitution)

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## Realism

Trumbull, Eric W.

In Norway: [**Henrik Ibsen**](http://aol.bartleby.com/65/ib/Ibsen-He.html) (1828-1906) is considered to be the father of modern realistic drama. His plays attacked society’s values and dealt with unconventional subjects within the form of the well-made play (causally related).

Ibsen perfected the well-made play formula; and by using a familiar formula made his plays, with a very shocking subject matter, acceptable. He discarded soliloquies, asides, etc. Exposition in the plays was motivated, there were causally related scenes, inner psychological motivation was emphasized, the environment had an influence on characters’ personalities, and all the things characters did and all of things the characters used revealed their socio-economic milieu. He became a model for later realistic writers.

Among the subjects addressed by Ibsen in his plays are: *euthanasia*, *the role of women*, *war and business*, and *syphilis*.

**Some of Ibsen's Plays:**

*Ghosts*—1881—dealt with the concept of the sins of the father transferring to the son, resulting in syphilis.

*Pillars of Society*– 1877 – dealt with war and business.

*Hedda Gabbler –*1890 – a powerful woman takes her life at the end of the play to get away from her boredom with society.

*A Doll’s House* – 1879 – Nora leaves her husband Torvald and her children at the end of the play; often considered "the slam heard around the world," Nora’s action must have been very shocking to the Victorian audience.

Later in life, Ibsen turned to more symbolic and abstract dramas; but his "realism" affected others, and helped lead to realistic theatre, which has become, despite variations and rejections against it, the predominant form of theatre even today.

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## Hedda Gabler: An illlustration of symbolism

Lee, Jeanette.

On the surface Hedda Gabler is as unlike as possible to Nora Helmer. From the moment she appears on the scene she moves with deadly precision. Yet there is about her, at times, a curious irresponsibility that harmonizes oddly with her direct intensity of movement. It allies her, by some subterranean process of thought, with the flitting, restless, inconsequent Nora. Her nature, like Nora's, apart from its symbol is inconsistent and incomprehensible. Lighted by it, as it is in every moment of the play from beginning to end, it stands out, simple, clear-cut, and comprehensible.

No two plays of Ibsen have been more discussed as to their meaning than *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House*. Their obscurity lies, not in the depth of thought involved, but in the apparently perplexing character of the two women with whom they deal. Nora Helmer, as a light-headed daring, irresponsible, self-sacrificing, immoral, devoted wife, holds the interest but eludes the understanding. The same woman, lighted by the flare of the tarantelle, is comprehensible to the minutest shade of character. Hedda Gabler, the cold, straight, shining, passionless, explosive woman, fascinates the imagination, but does not satisfy it. Flashed upon by the symbol of the play, she becomes a living soul.

When the scene opens upon Tesman and Aunt Julie, who has assisted in planning and making ready the house for Hedda, it at once becomes evident that Hedda has had no voice in the arrangement. Everything has been prepared for her as absolutely as a case for its jewel. She is to occupy it, to fill it.

TESMAN: (Embraces her) Oh, yes, yet, Aunt Julie! Hedda--she is the loveliest part of it all! (Looks toward the doorway) I think she's coming now--eh?

(Hedda approaches from the left through the back room. She is a lady of twenty-nine. Face and figure dignified and distinguished. The color of the skin uniformly pallid. The eyes steel-grey, with a cold, open expression of serenity. The hair an agreeable brown of medium tint, but not very thick.)

From the moment of her entrance her indifference is clear. She moves about the room with irresponsible touches, complains of the excess of light and looks on with relief while her husband draws the curtain across the windows, shutting out the sun. She has but two interests in life: negatively, that she shall not be bored; and positively, that something exciting may occur. As the play progresses, two relations in her past life are revealed--one with Judge Brack, a man of the world, and one with Ejlert Lövborg, a poet. She had parted from Lövborg holding a pistol to his head and threatening him. But he still attracts and interests her. Judge Brack she no longer cares for. She is, however, watchful of him. He alone of the men she comes in contact with understands her, knows how to handle her. The poet, when he comes upon the scene, is drawn to her. Her student husband is puzzled by her. All three men are alike fascinated. The women of the play, Mrs. Elvsted and Aunt Julie, are also fascinated, but with a shrinking fascination. Mrs. Elvsted--a former schoolmate of Hedda's, now Lövborg's helper and his inspiration in his work--draws back from her even while she is helplessly attracted.

HEDDA: But to me, dear--! Goodness, we went to the same school together.

MRS. ELVSTED: Yes, but you were in the class above me! Oh, how fearfully afraid of you I was then!

HEDDA: Were you afraid of me?

MRS. ELVSTED: Yes, fearfully afraid. Because when we met on the stairs you always used to pull my hair.

HEDDA: No--did I really?

MRS. ELVSTED: Yes, and once you said you would scorch it off my head.

HEDDA: Oh, that was only nonsense, you know.

Throughout the scene the woman is in her power, yielding her secret inch by inch.

HEDDA: (Leans on the arm of the chair) Thea--poor, sweet Thea!--now you must tell me everything,--just as it is.

MRS. ELVSTED: Well, then you must ask me questions.

HEDDA puts them to her, as at the point of a pistol--short, sharp, searching. Nothing can escape her. With the men she does not intimidate. She fascinates.

The sheer art of the play lies, perhaps, in the fact that she is as fascinating to us as she is to the people of her own world. We do not pity her, nor love her, nor scorn her. She fascinates. One follows her cool, quiet, unprophetic movements with breathless interest. The explosion comes and sets the nerves a-tingle and the wits to work. Why has she done this? What will she do next? There is no *why*, no calculable *what*. The spark touches the powder and it explodes. It is easy to understand her now--a pistol, deadly, simple, passionless, and straight. But she still fascinates--like a dangerous thing come upon unawares, on the library table in a quiet home. One picks it up, examines it gingerly, peers into the barrel, lifts the trigger a hair, lays it down softly, and goes away. But he never forgets that it is there--lying behind his back, silent and straight and deadly. He comes back to it again.

Hedda bears re-reading.

One may, or may not, resent Ibsen's method. He may be interested, or amused, at the idea of presenting the heroine of a play as a pistol, or he may characterize it as inartistic and absurd. But, once suggested, he cannot escape the conviction that this is what Ibsen has done and what he deliberately intended to do. The whole play centers about Hedda, about her movements--past, present, and to come; and it is only when she is recognized as a human pistol walking about the stage that these movements become explicable.

The first description reveals the conception: "The color of the skin uniformly pallid. The eyes steel-grey, with a cold, open expression of serenity." The action carries out the conception. She is born of a soldier, cares nothing for ordinary interests. But if worst comes to worst--

TESMAN: (Beaming with joy) Oh! God be praised and thanked for that! And what may that be, Hedda--eh?

HEDDA: (At the doorway, looks at him with suppressed scorn) My pistols, George.

TESMAN: (In an agony) The pistols!

HEDDA: (With cold eyes) General Gabler's pistols. (She goes through the back of the room out to the left)

TESMAN: (Runs to the door and shouts after her) No, for goodness' sake, dearest Hedda, don't touch the dangerous things! For my sake, Hedda--eh?

In the scene between Brack, Tesman, and Hedda, when they discuss the probability of Tesman's election to the professorship:

TESMAN: No, but Judge Brack--that would show the most incredible want of consideration for me! (Gesticulating) Yes, for consider, I am a married man! We married on my prospects, Hedda and I. Gone off and spent a lot of money. Borrowed money from Aunt Julie too. For, Good Lord! I had as good as a promise of the appointment--eh?

BRACK: Well, well, well! You will get the appointment all the same. But there will be a contest first.

HEDDA: (MOtionless in the arm-chair) Think, Tesman, it will be almost like a kind of game.

TESMAN: But, dearest Hedda, how can you sit there and be so calm about it?

HEDDA: (As before) I am not doing so at all. I am perfectly excited about it.

The reader, the spectator, feels the excitement underneath. At any moment, at a touch, she may explode, and the event that sets her off is apparently no more important, no more irritating than hundreds that have preceded it. She is incalculable, mysterious, deadly. Yet there seems to be no intent in her death-dealing power. She fires into the air, at random, to kill time,--out of the open window.

BRACK: (Still outside) Don't play such silly tricks!

HEDDA: Then come in, Judge.

(Judge Brack, in morning dress, comes in through the glass door. He carries a light overcoat on his arm.)

BRACK: What the devil are you doing with that revolver? What are you shooting?

HEDDA: Oh, I was only standing and shooting up into the blue sky.

BRACK: (Takes the pistol gently out of her hand) Allow me, Mrs. Tesman. (Looks at it) Ah! I know this well. (Looks around) Where is the case? Ah, yes! (Puts the pistol into it and closes it) For we are not going to have any more of that tomfoolery to-day.

HEDDA: Well, what in the name of goodness would you have me do to amuse myself?

She never plans, never schemes, but woe to the thing that comes in her range, whether Lövborg or Lövborg's manuscript! Both are doomed. She will annihilate him, body and soul.

She longs for nothing so much as courage, physical courage, to pit herself and her power against, courage that will face and defy her and meet the moment without shrinking. She has seen only cowardice in men. They have paled before her, shrunk from danger. She seeks a man who will defy her and whom, in his defiance, she will destroy--a foe worthy of her mettle. The poet is the only man who has faced her with courage in his heart. She remembers it with longing. It is the only thing that can win her admiration, subdue her. The man of the world can handle her, coerce her. But the poet has faced her down with courage. He, with his passionate heart, is the only one capable of appealing to her explosive nature; and even he fascinates her only that she may destroy him. She cares nothing for him physically or spiritually--only to cast her spell over him, and annihilate him.

He attracts her, in spite of herself, but he is not bold enough, vital enough, tempestuous. He will not dare. She wants him to confront her, to sweep her off her feet with excitement. She could understand that. She spurs him on to drink, she dares him. He shall come back to her with "vine leaves in his hair." To Lövborg and to Thea they are the crown of the poet; but to Hedda they are Bacchus, the wild revel, and daring. Then, when he has "the courage of life, the defiance of life," he will need *her*.

MRS. ELVSTED: There is something mysterious about you, Hedda.

HEDDA: Yes, there is. I wish for once in my life to have power over the fate of a human being.

MRS. ELVSTED: Have you not got that?

HEDDA: Haven't--and never had.

MRS. ELVSTED: But not over your husband?

HEDDA: Oh, that would be worth taking a lot of trouble about! Oh, if you could only know how poor I am! And you are allowed to be so rich. (Throws her arms passionately around her) I believe I shall scorch your hair off, after all.

MRS. ELVSTED: Let me go! Let me go! I am afraid of you, Hedda.

At the supreme moment of the play she has her wish.

LÖVBORG: Good-bye, Mrs. Tesman. And give a message to George Tesman for me--from me.

HEDDA: No, wait! You shall take a keepsake from me.

(She goes to the writing-table and opens the drawer and pistol case. Comes back to Lövborg with one of the pistols.)

LÖVBORG: (Looking at her) This--is *this* the keepsake?

HEDDA: (Nods slowly) Do you recollect it? It was aimed at you once.

LÖVBORG: You should have used it then.

HEDDA: Look here! *You* use it now.

LÖVBORG: (Puts the pistol into his breast pocket) Thanks.

HEDDA: And do it beautifully, Ejlert Lövborg. Only promise me that!

LÖVBORG: Good-bye, Hedda Gabler.

(He goes out through the hall door. Hedda listens awhile at the door. She then goes to the writing-table and takes out the packet with the manuscript, peeps into the envelope, pulls one or two of the leaves half out and glances at them. She then takes the whole of it and sits down in the arm-chair by the stove. She holds the packet in her lap. After a pause she opens the door of the stove, and then the packet also.)

HEDDA: (Throws one of the sheets into the fire and whispers to herself) Now I am burning your child, Thea! You, with your curly hair! (Throws several sheets into the fire.) Your child and Ejlert Lövborg's child. (Throws the rest in) Now I am burning--am burning the child.

It is significant that she does not tear the manuscript. There is no rage, no rejoicing, no passionate emotion in the scene. She burns it, leaf by leaf, in the fire. But there is no heat--only cold, explosive intensity.

Side by side with Hedda Gabler in the portrayal of her destruction of Ejlert Lövborg, are Thea--the spiritual woman, the goddess, who strives to win him to his best self--and, more casually, Diana, the woman who would degrade him and in whose boudoir he is at last found dead with Hedda Gabler's pistol in his pocket.

The inner meaning of the play, the symbol within the symbol, indicated by these three women and their appeal to the poet, must be left for a later [discussion], as must also the details of the symbol, the double symbolism of the play, and the question as to the artistic value of a play that can only be spiritually understood when it is perceived, through the mechanical structure of the play, that the chief character is not a mere woman, but a slim, straight, shining, deadly weapon.

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