



## Hedda Gabler

by Henrik Ibsen

### In a Nutshell

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[Henrik Ibsen](#) is kind of a big deal. After [William Shakespeare](#), he's the most widely produced dramatist in history. (Wow, right?) A Norwegian playwright writing in the last half of the 19th century, Ibsen is known as "the father of modern drama." Because he wrote in a then new realist style - covering everyday topics and everyday people - he set the stage for many realist writers to come, among them the very famous [Anton Chekhov](#). Ibsen proved that with very realistic settings, characters, and scenarios, you could still comment on big abstract ideas. He was also a bit scandalous, always raising eyebrows with his unflattering portrayals of [Victorian](#) values.

Translator [Rolf Fjelde](#) comments that Ibsen's career can be divided into two halves, and that the second reflects a more uniform style and substance that suited the playwright best. This second half began with [A Doll House](#) - the play that made Ibsen famous (commercially and critically) in 1879. Eleven years later, in 1890, came *Hedda Gabler*.

*Hedda* tells the story of the original [desperate housewife](#) - and [Eva Longoria Parker](#) has got nothing on this lady. Hedda, once the best catch in town, is a woman restricted by Victorian values and trapped in a loveless marriage with a boring, boring man. Her only solace is manipulating others, which she does for about, oh, 94% of the play. It could have been that Norway wasn't ready for a leading woman of the femme fatale variety, because *Hedda* initially received negative reviews in the early 1890s. But she won the critics over - gradually - in the course of a decade; reviews steadily improved until a 1902 [Broadway](#) production set it firmly in the dramatic canon. To this day, Hedda is one of the most talked about fictional women in all of drama. Known as "the female Hamlet," she is also one of the most difficult roles for an actress to play. Even modern feminism can't get a grip on this woman, whose motivations seem to defy categorization or easy interpretation.

### Why Should I Care?

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Man, life was tough for a woman in [Victorian](#) Norway. Social confines, gender roles, restrictions on activities, friends, and language, and a constant worry over reputation ruled the day.

It's no wonder Hedda Gabler is miserable.  
Just look at her angst-ridden monologue:

"Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so I can be considered a lady? I'm the Marcia [...] Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself."

OK, fine, so that's not Hedda Gabler speaking.  
(You caught us being sneaky.) It's actually [Sarah Michelle Gellar](#) in *Cruel Intentions*. But the more we think about it, the more we're convinced that someone was channeling Ibsen through the 1999 film that rocked that year's MTV movie awards.  
Gellar's character suffers from the same issues as Hedda, but more interestingly, she *so/ves* them the same way: by screwing with other people.  
("You're just a toy, [Sebastian](#). A little toy I like to play with.")

Yes, that's right.  
Hedda is the story of cruel machinations designed to entertain.  
Like so many great stories, sex has a lot to do with it.  
Both women use what they've got to get what they want.  
While both of these femme fatales dominate men, they both partner with (or live through, as Freudians would say) one man in particular who ends up captivated by a kinder, sweeter, more feminine version of the female sex.  
The turf battle begins, in this general fashion: "Do you honestly believe you've done a complete 180 in the few days you've known her? Well let me tell you something, people don't change overnight.  
You and I are two of a kind."

We could go on and on about the position of women in the world today, what's changed since the 19th century and what hasn't, and how the heck a man created this pistol of a character (pun intended) all the way back in 1890.  
But we think it's more fun for you to 1) read *Hedda Gabler*, 2) watch *Cruel Intentions*, and 3) let us know what *you* think.  
In the meantime, we'll still be wondering, to borrow another thematically relevant line, "How can someone so charming be so manipulative?"