

Social power in hedda gabler



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of the central themes in Henrik Ibsen's tragic play, Hedda Gabler is the illusion of power among the social classes. To expose this theme, Ibsen creates a powerful and socially privileged character whom he titles Hedda. She represents the social and cultural freedom that was believed to be possessed by those of higher class within bourgeois of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Ibsen also presents other middle class and less powerful characters, such as Auntie Juju, Thea Elvsted and Eilert Loevborg. These characters contrast Hedda's powerful and often offensively privileged character, demonstrating the costs of social acceptance and control. As the plot evolves, Hedda exploits and manipulates the characters. She exerts these behaviors in order to maintain the social power and prestige as one of higher class. Throughout most of the play her deceptive actions towards power are successful as people submit without question. This perversion twists and wounds Hedda as she comes to realize that she does not have the social power to control those who are inferior to her. Disillusionment of the social system unravels as the reader recognizes that the power lies not among the individuals of the higher class, but within the social order itself. Our first impression of Hedda is not favorable. Although she appears to be a woman of great beauty and exceptional social standing, her personality condemns almost every woman that comes into contact with her. After returning from her honeymoon into a new house, Hedda automatically presses her social domination upon those nearby. Her first reaction ranges from disapproval to actual offense as she casts insults against the early arrival of Auntie Juju and the homely look of her hat (1253-1254). The attacks invoke fear and awe in the social standing that Hedda holds as one from affluence. Hedda further propels her social power upon the other

characters in the play through manipulation and deception. Her husband, George Tesman, bends to her every demand and dismisses her baneful remarks. The reader assumes that Tesman was not born into a prosperous family since he has little wealth and is in great debt. It is understandable as to why he is delighted to be fortunate enough to have “won” such a favorable bride (1250). This is why he is only able to see how “pretty and charming” (1254) she is. He is unable to see how uncaring she is as she does not mourn the death of his Aunt Rena (1295). Tesman is blind to the way that she manipulates him with the announcement of her pregnancy so that he may forget that she has taken away the power from Loevborg by burning his manuscript (1296-1297). Like Tesman, Thea Elvsted and Eilert Loevborg fall into her snare as she further exploits them to maintain her social power. Hedda uses her social position and her seemingly comforting demeanor to coerce Thea into telling the story of her marriage to Elvsted and her subsequent relationship with Loevborg (1260-1262). Her social standing, which generally puts her above reproach, lends itself to her overall believability and supports her manipulations. Hedda’s power over Loevborg developed prior to her encounter with him in the play. As he was one of Hedda’s suitors before she was married, she made him fall in love with her and through this love she was able to control him. When Loevborg encounters her later in the play she still holds some portion of his love and power. With the knowledge that she gained from Thea, Hedda is able to undermine Thea and Loevborg’s relationship, allowing Hedda to regain back his full admiration and power over him. Hedda assumed that with her marriage to Tesman he would soon become an esteemed professor. With his appointment she would be able to climb back up on the rung of the social

ladder that she used to stand on while her father was alive. Loevborg poses a threat to Hedda's social growth as he unexpectedly became a contender for her husband's position in an academic post (1265). This fear brought Hedda to impose her power over Loevborg as she manipulated him into drinking (1280). In his drunkenness, Loevborg brought upon himself his own ruin and lost the only item that was to advance him socially, his manuscript. When Loevborg comes to her, distressed at the loss of his new book, Hedda does not tell him that she possesses it. Instead she uses it as a means to control the outcome of Tesman's competition against Loevborg for the position of professor and her path to a higher social power. Eilert Loevborg's apparent suicide is the result of Hedda's manipulation of the truth and misuse of her social power. This is demonstrated in the way in which she reacts to this appalling turn of events. The other characters show concern and feelings for the actions taken by Loevborg, even his competitor, Tesman. But Hedda apparently feels no remorse and does not sense her role in his actions (1298). Instead she is capable only of recognizing the social benefits and power that her husband's position will allow her. When Hedda discovers that Loevborg's death was an accident rather than a result of her manipulation, the perception of her own intentional control shifts. In the final pages of the play, Hedda's life of power, social control and personal order appear to unravel. She loses her ability to perceive herself as the determinant in social actions, and instead becomes a useless social pawn. No longer does she control the life of her husband or the actions of Loevborg. Rather than risk the loss of her social perception and her propriety, Hedda takes her own life in a final monumental act of social order. Unfortunately for Hedda, the same social status that supported her life as a seemingly

powerful woman also determined her downfall. Her social elevation made those around her believe that she was superior to them, giving her power to manipulate and direct them. Hedda herself, along with all of the elevated class of the bourgeois, accepted this role. To all the people in society, the upper middle class assumes control of the social order. With Hedda's folly, the reader is able to see that social standing does not possess the control that society deems it to have. Through the character of Hedda, Ibsen portrays the illusion of power retained by the different classes within the social system. He takes deep schisms and acute problems that afflicted the bourgeois society and place them on the stage. On the surface, the middle-class homes gave an impression of success and appeared to reflect a picture of a healthy and stable society. But Ibsen dramatizes in Hedda Gabler, the hidden conflicts in this society by opening the doors to the private and secret rooms of the bourgeois homes. He shows what can be hiding behind the beautiful façades: moral duplicity, confinement, betrayal, manipulation, and not to mention a constant insecurity. Works Cited Ibsen, Henrik. Hedda Gabler. The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces. Ed. Maynard Mack. Expanded ed. Vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1995. 1247-1304.