

ANNOTATED PASSAGES FROM

HEDDA GABLER

See *Literature for Senior Students*, Chapter 8, VCE Literature examination, p.207

Notes by Robert Beardwood

This document includes the three passages from *Hedda Gabler* on which the sample exam response in *Literature for Senior Students* is based (pp.226–9). The annotations show some of the key elements and features of these passages that could be drawn on in such a response.

For detailed notes on how to prepare for and write high-level responses in the final VCE Literature exam, see Chapter 8 of *Literature for Senior Students* (Insight, 2006).

Acknowledgment

Insight Publications thanks Penguin Books for permission to publish extracts from *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays* (trans. Una Ellis-Fermor, Penguin, 1961).

1.

[She goes out by the hall door. Tesman goes with her, leaving the door half open. He can be heard repeating his messages to Aunt Rina and thanking her for the shoes. In the meanwhile Hedda crosses the room, raising her arms and clenching her hands, as if in fury. Then she pulls back the curtains from the glass door and stands there looking out. After a moment Tesman comes in again, shutting the door behind him.]

TESMAN *[picking up the slippers from the floor]*. What are you looking at, Hedda?

HEDDA *[calm and controlled again]*. I'm just looking at the leaves. They're so yellow, and so withered.

TESMAN *[wrapping up the shoes and putting them on the table]*. Well, after all, we're well on in September now.

HEDDA *[disturbed again]*. Yes, just think. We're already in – in September.

TESMAN. Don't you think Aunt Julle was rather unlike herself, my dear? A little bit – almost formal? Whatever do you think was the matter? Eh?

HEDDA. I hardly know her, you see. Isn't she like that as a rule?

TESMAN. No, not like she was today.

HEDDA *[moving away from the glass door]*. Do you think she was really upset about that business with the hat?

TESMAN. Oh, not much. Perhaps a little, just at the moment.

HEDDA. But what extraordinary manners! To throw her hat down here in the drawing-room. One doesn't do that kind of thing.

TESMAN. Well, you can be sure Aunt Julle won't do it again.

HEDDA. Anyway, I'll make it all right with her.

TESMAN. That's sweet of you, Hedda dear! If you would!

Very detailed and significant **stage direction**: Hedda expresses her feelings physically rather than verbally. Note the important role of the **set**: the glass door could be seen as symbolic of the social and material barriers that keep Hedda unhappily inside the domestic realm.

Language use – repetition of 'in' and 'September' draws attention to the significance of this month: it signifies not merely a time of year, but a phase of life at the beginning of a decline from youthful vigour and optimism.

Characterisation: Tesman is portrayed as methodical, orderly, and not very perceptive – he seems oblivious to Hedda's mood and does not quite grasp the sources of the tension between Hedda and Aunt Julle.

Narrative structure: 'One doesn't do ...' – anticipates the last words of the play (spoken by Brack in response to Hedda's suicide).

2.

MRS ELVSTED [*who has got up and is wandering restlessly about the room*]. Hedda, Hedda, where is all this going to end?

Stage direction: Mrs Elvsted's movements reflect and convey her agitated state of mind.

Very unusual **image:** conveys Hedda's romantic and unconventional view of Lövborg. Also reflects her longing for relief from her orderly, predictable existence – for the wild rather than the domesticated. This links with her looking out the glass door in passage 1; also links with notion of 'beauty' in passage 3.

HEDDA. Ten o'clock – then he will come. I can see him.
→ With vineleaves in his hair. Flushed and confident.

MRS ELVSTED. Yes, if only it would be like that.

HEDDA. And then, you see, then he'll have got control of himself again. Then he will be a free man for the rest of his days.

Language use: 'a free man' is an odd expression here – what does it mean in the context of the play? Is anyone really 'free' in this society? The **idea** of freedom could link/contrast with Hedda's sense of entrapment in passage 1.

MRS ELVSTED. Heavens, yes. If only he would come like that. As you see him.

HEDDA. He'll come like that – 'so and no otherwise'. [*Getting up and going nearer.*] Go on doubting him as long as you like. I believe in him. And now we'll try ...

MRS ELVSTED. There's something behind all this, Hedda.

HEDDA. True; there is. I want, for once in my life, to have
→ power over a human being's fate.

Central idea: Hedda's desire for power, which is related to how powerless she feels – and perhaps to her aristocratic background.

MRS ELVSTED. But haven't you got that?

HEDDA. I have not. And never have had.

MRS ELVSTED. Not over your husband's?

HEDDA. That *would* be worth having, wouldn't it? Ah, if you could only realize how poor I am. And here are you, offered such riches! [*Throwing her arms passionately round her.*] I think I shall burn your hair off, after all.

Hedda sees herself as poor not due to material wants but emotional wants: this suggests a set of **values** quite different from those of her family and friends. Of course, Hedda's material wants are largely satisfied – so how sympathetically are we asked to view Hedda at this point?

MRS ELVSTED. Let go! Let go! I'm frightened of you, Hedda!

BERTE [*in the doorway between the rooms*]. Tea's laid in the dining-room, ma'am.

HEDDA. Good. We're coming.

MRS ELVSTED. No, no, no! I'd rather go home alone. At once!

Language use – Hedda's use of the diminutive 'little goose' – and the following **stage direction** convey Hedda's power over Mrs Elvsted, expressed both verbally and physically.

HEDDA. Nonsense! You must have tea first, you little goose.
→ And then, at ten o'clock, Ejlert Lövborg will come – with vineleaves in his hair.

→ [*She pulls Mrs Elvsted, almost by force, towards the doorway.*]

3.

Characterisation through *what* Hedda says and *how* she says it (tone indicated by stage direction). Hedda's inappropriate response to Lövborg's death reflects her boredom with her monotonous existence, but also displays her lack of compassion and sympathy.

Language use: 'beauty' is a very unusual word to use in this situation, and draws our attention to the strange way in which Hedda views other people. Also, beauty is **valued** by Hedda – whereas the others attach little or no importance to it.

Tesman and Mrs Elvsted cannot understand Hedda, showing their very different sets of **values**. Hedda rationalises Lövborg's 'suicide', whereas the others view suicide as inherently *irrational*.

Narrative structure: Hedda's remark anticipates her own suicide.

Language use: repetition of 'a moment of madness' reflects Mrs Elvsted's desire to excuse the man she had loved. Moreover, the repetition draws our attention to the role of madness in the play: who might really be considered to be acting with 'madness'? Perhaps it is Hedda's actions that are best viewed in this light?

Characterisation: Tesman acknowledges to Hedda that he is complicit in the actions that have led to Lövborg's death, yet he shows no real remorse; his instincts are for self-preservation, not for justice – the text does not endorse his **values** any more than it does Hedda's.

Characterisation: Mrs Elvsted is reliable and rational; she devises a practical plan of action. Here she is not intimidated by Hedda – contrast with passage 2.

HEDDA [*in a ringing voice*]. Something done, at last!

TESMAN [*horrified*]. Good heavens! What are you saying, Hedda?

HEDDA. That there is an element of beauty in this.

BRACK. Hm. Mrs Tesman –

TESMAN. Of beauty! Fancy that!

MRS ELVSTED. Oh, Hedda, how can you talk of beauty in a thing like that!

HEDDA. Ejlerd Lövborg has balanced his account with himself. He has had the courage to do ... what had to be done.

MRS ELVSTED. No, don't ever believe that it happened in that way. What he has done was done in a moment of madness.

TESMAN. Done in despair.

HEDDA. It was not. Of that I am certain.

MRS ELVSTED. Yes, it was. In a moment of madness. Just as when he tore up our manuscript.

BRACK [*in surprise*]. Manuscript? The book, do you mean? Has he torn that up?

MRS ELVSTED. Yes, he did it last night.

TESMAN [*whispering softly*]. Oh, Hedda, we shall never get clear of this business.

BRACK. Hm. That was odd.

TESMAN [*walking about the room*]. Fancy Ejlerd going out of the world like that! And not even leaving behind him the book that would have made his name immortal.

MRS ELVSTED. Oh, if only it could be put together again!

TESMAN. Yes, just think if it could! I don't know what I wouldn't give –

MRS ELVSTED. Perhaps it can, Mr Tesman.

TESMAN. What do you mean?

MRS ELVSTED [*looking in her handbag*]. Look here. I have kept the loose notes that he used for dictating from.

HEDDA [*a step nearer*]. Ah!

TESMAN. You've kept them, Mrs Elvsted! Eh?

MRS ELVSTED. Yes, I have them here. I took them with me when I came away, and here they've been, lying in my handbag.

TESMAN. Just let me see them!

MRS ELVSTED [*passes him a stack of small sheets*]. But they're in such a muddle. All mixed up together.

TESMAN. Fancy, if we could get it straight, though! Perhaps if we help each other –

MRS ELVSTED. Oh yes! Let's try, at any rate!

TESMAN. It *shall* be done! It *must!* I will give my life to this.

→ HEDDA. You, Jörgen? Your life?

TESMAN. Yes. Or, rather, all my spare time. My own stuff must wait for the present. You understand, Hedda? Eh? It's something I owe to Ejlert's memory.

HEDDA. Perhaps it is.

Characterisation: Hedda's scepticism shows both her accurate knowledge of, and disdain for, her husband. It is also **ironic:** *she* is the one who will 'give her life'.

Language use: a very interesting expression – 'All mixed up together' could also apply to the characters' intertwined relationships. As the sheets are sorted, so are relationships re-aligned: Tesman and Mrs Elvsted; Hedda and Brack.

Characterisation: the project appeals to Tesman's methodical nature – link with passage 1; perhaps his sense of guilt is also involved?

About the author

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