



## Sample answer on Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*

The sample response below is based on three passages from *Hedda Gabler*, which you can find at [www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au). *Detailed annotations are also included.*

The three passages are:

- ✦ in Act One, from the stage direction: 'She goes out by the hall door. Tesman goes with her ...' to Tesman: 'That's sweet of you, Hedda dear! If you would!'
- ✦ in Act Two, from Mrs Elvsted: 'Hedda, Hedda, when is all this going to end?' to the stage direction: 'She pulls Mrs Elvsted, almost by force, towards the doorway.'
- ✦ in Act Four, from Hedda: 'Something done, at last!' to Hedda: 'Perhaps it is'.

### Introduction

The response opens with a quotation from the third passage, which signals one of the main concerns to be discussed: Hedda's interest in beauty. This is linked to several other aspects of the play – Hedda's social context, her sense of entrapment and limitation, the characters' responses to Lövborg's death – connections which can be further explored in the body paragraphs. The introduction ends with a *views and values* comment.

'... there is an element of beauty in this.'

Throughout *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda longs for a moment, or a vision, of beauty that will break the tedious monotony of existence – that will render life stimulating and provocative, rather than an endless series of meaningless moments. Yet beauty always lies just beyond Hedda's grasp. She thinks, however perversely, that she glimpses it in Lövborg's presumed suicide; Lövborg's death, though, is in fact a sordid and messy affair, quite remote in reality from Hedda's romantic vision. Marriage, domestic life and middle-class society all fail to satisfy – indeed, they intensify – Hedda's longing for transcendence. Moreover, her friends and family do not share or understand her vision: for Mrs Elvsted, Lövborg's suicide can only be comprehended as the result of 'a moment of madness'. Ultimately, our view of Hedda is of a tormented character, trapped by her material and social circumstances but also by her own distorted perspective, which prevents her from experiencing any compassion for, or understanding of, those around her.

### Paragraph 2

Material from passage 1, including the detailed stage direction that begins it, is used to develop the discussion of Hedda's longing for freedom/feeling of being trapped. This indicates a link between passages 1 and 3 as well as allowing the discussion to develop *coherently*. Language use, setting and characterisation are *features of the text* used to develop the interpretation.

Hedda's yearning to be free is a sign both of the limitations of her life and of the complex nature of her own personality. Throughout the play we see her standing at thresholds – looking through the glass doors, pausing at doorways – as if she longs to leave but is unwilling to abandon the safety and relative security of her home. As she talks to her husband she looks through the glass doors at the autumn foliage; yet, rather than finding the leaves a source of beauty, she sees them as signs of death and decay, 'so yellow, and so withered'. If her interior, domestic setting offers few opportunities for pleasure, the outside world is even less inviting to Hedda. The changing leaves seem to remind her of the inexorable passage of time in her own life; summer has passed and winter approaches, just as her own youthful freedoms have been left behind. The word 'September' is repeated by Hedda, making its metaphorical significance as a marker of change clearer both to herself and to the audience. Hedda's frustration is also evident in her actions as she crosses the room, 'raising her arms and clenching her hands, as if in fury'. She contains her emotion, just as she feels contained within a world she has no desire to remain in, but cannot bring herself to leave.

Language use (repetition) is discussed and its effect and meaning explained.

Reference to stage directions to support assertions about Hedda's psychological state.

### Paragraph 3

The response moves to a more thorough discussion of the *views and values* presented by the play, in relation to the social context it depicts. Tesman and Mrs Elvsted are considered as embodying aspects of their social class, which the play subtly critiques through their contrast with the more dynamic Hedda. Passage 2 is drawn on for the discussion of Mrs Elvsted.

Just as the everyday thresholds of doors and windows signal Hedda's frustrations and yearnings, they also symbolise the mundane ordinariness of suburban middle-class society, which Ibsen's late plays so often hold up to scrutiny. It is not so much that Ibsen seeks to strongly condemn the conventions and attitudes of this social class, as to expose the many ways in which they limit both the behaviour and the imaginations of those within it. Tesman and Mrs Elvsted are, in many ways, exemplary members of their social context: they cultivate respectability, quietness, conscientiousness and moderation. Of these qualities, only the first is also desired by Hedda – the others are diametrically opposed to the kind of life Hedda aspires to lead. A more complex side to Mrs Elvsted's personality is suggested by the fact that she has left a loveless marriage and her children; she is not, it seems,

Gives a sense of the playwright crafting the text for certain effects and responses.

Brief reference to another part of the text to show understanding of character complexity.

entirely willing to live without passion. Her emotional commitment to Lövborg – ‘I believe in him’ – and her willingness to share Hedda’s vision of Lövborg with ‘vineleaves in his hair’ also indicate a romantic dimension to her personality. However, this scene between Hedda and Mrs Elvsted ends by marking the differences, rather than the similarities, between them. Hedda is strong and dominating – ‘throwing her arms passionately’ around the younger woman and cajoling her with the diminutive ‘little goose’; Mrs Elvsted, though ‘frightened’, submits meekly to Hedda’s demands.

### Paragraph 4

The discussion of Ibsen’s treatment of middle-class *views and values* continues from the previous paragraph, with a shift in focus to Tesman and to evidence from passage 3.

What finally draws Mrs Elvsted and Tesman together is their shared excitement at the prospect of restoring Lövborg’s manuscript and their pleasure at being able to ‘help each other’. It is companionship, after all, that is most desirable to them both. The project is worthy, but effectively concedes that the creative vision of a dead man is greater than their own. As Tesman suggests, it comprises a kind of memorial ‘to Ejler’s memory’, and such a goal is entirely consistent with Tesman’s world view: he prefers to consolidate and preserve an object from the past rather than create something entirely new and unpredictable in the future. In this way, the narrowness of Tesman’s outlook – which is also, by extension, that of the social class whose values he exemplifies – is exposed: its focus is inward rather than outward; it attends methodically to the fine details, but lacks the vision to comprehensively grasp the wider picture.

Use of textual detail (direct quotes).

Discusses the wider view of the text.

### Paragraph 5

This paragraph continues the analysis of passage 3. The discussion of how this passage anticipates the tragic ending engages with the structure of the play, and explains why this *key passage contributes to an interpretation* of the text as a whole.

The contrast between the perspectives of Hedda and Tesman is nowhere more evident than when she challenges his declaration that he will ‘give [his] life to this’. Hedda would never say such a thing without meaning to accomplish it literally, but she knows that Tesman is incapable of acting in this way. Tesman admits that his statement is merely a rhetorical flourish,

a commitment that will amount to no more than spending his 'spare time' on reconstructing Lövborg's book. In contrast, Hedda imagines the devotion of one's life to a grand cause as heroic and uplifting, prefiguring her own actions at the end of the play. Her words for Lövborg's death – at least while she still thinks of it as a suicide – convey her admiration for such a sacrifice: she regards it as containing an 'element of beauty' and displaying great 'courage', neither of which qualities she associates with her husband. However, the more openly Hedda shows her disdain for Tesman, the more marginalised and isolated she becomes in her own home. Her romantic idealism is regarded sceptically by both Mrs Elvsted and Tesman, who propose 'madness' or 'despair' as much more rational explanations for Lövborg's actions. Indeed, Hedda increasingly appears prone to her own 'moment[s] of madness'; her perverse exclamation 'Something done, at last!' in 'a ringing voice' when she learns of Lövborg's death reveals how distorted her perspective has become – and how little she has come to value life.

Moves back in to close analysis of passage 3 to support the argument that Hedda is increasingly marginalised.

## Paragraph 6: conclusion

The conclusion draws together the various concerns of the discussion, including the idea of thresholds, Hedda's feeling of being contained and her yearning for beauty and transcendence. It refers to the end of the play in order to generate a sense of closure and to affirm the dual sense that Hedda is both victim of her circumstances and responsible for her own destiny – consolidating the interpretation developed throughout.

Like Lövborg's death, Hedda's suicide is less an act of courage than 'done in despair', the result of a kind of 'madness' in which life is regarded as having less intrinsic value than death. She is trapped in circumstances she has little capacity to change; she yearns to cross a threshold into freedom, but knows that the only physical thresholds available to her are the doorways of her own house, beyond which there are few prospects for an improved situation. As limiting as her circumstances are, Hedda's longing for ideas and experiences that transcend the everyday further exacerbates her sense of entrapment. Finally, the only beauty she can imagine is the pure, unchanging state of death; Hedda is driven to take her own life in an effort not merely to be free, but to create her tragic vision of 'beauty' in a scene completely of her own making. It is also – and this is perhaps the real tragedy of *Hedda Gabler* – a vision that no-one amongst her family or friends is able, or even desires, to share or understand.

(1200 words)

Opening sentence of conclusion links with ideas and quotes from previous paragraph to ensure continuity.

Links back to material from introduction and second paragraph.

## Assessor comments

This response shows a perceptive understanding of the text and develops a plausible, detailed and coherent interpretation through reference to the set passages. The argument unfolds logically throughout the response.

The writing is expressive and sophisticated; vocabulary such as 'rhetorical flourish', 'exacerbates' and 'transcendence' allows complex ideas to be expressed succinctly.

The response makes good use of textual details from the passages to support the interpretation, integrating quotations smoothly and eloquently.

The discussion shows an understanding of how views and values are aligned with particular characters who are contrasted and/or linked, and of how the text presents a viewpoint, which is sometimes complex, on these characters.

Features of the text such as characterisation, structure and aspects of staging and performance are analysed in terms of how they contribute to the play's meaning. Stage directions are discussed in addition to dialogue, showing an awareness of the text's form and audience.

The response would receive an A–A+ grade.

## FINAL CHECKLIST

- ✓ Use your reading time well: read the passages *carefully*.
- ✓ Once you can write, choose the text for your first response and spend 5 minutes highlighting key words and quotes in two or three of the passages.
- ✓ Write a brief plan: include the main points you will make, which passage/s they come from, and the order in which you will make them.
- ✓ Write on texts from *two different sections* of the exam.
- ✓ Write on *at least two passages* for each text.
- ✓ Focus on the writer's *use of language*.
- ✓ Always explain the *effect* of language features.
- ✓ Make *links* between the passages and with the wider text or (for a poet or short story writer) the other set texts.
- ✓ Try to write at least 900 words for each response.
- ✓ Don't leave the exam early – you will need to write two *substantial* and *well-written* responses to score well.
- ✓ If you have time, edit your work: check sentences are properly constructed and word choices are varied and precise.
- ✓ Convey your flair for language and thorough knowledge of these texts to your examiners: they are looking to be persuaded, compelled and beguiled by your writing!