



# Set Text Guide: Hedda Gabler

**AS and A Level Drama and Theatre**

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**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

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**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in  
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

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# **GCE Drama 2016: Hedda Gabler**

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## **Contents**

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Characters</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Social, cultural and historical background</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Themes</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Resources</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Practical exploration activities</b>	<b>11</b>

## Summary

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### Act One

*The Tesmans' large, elegant and well furnished drawing room. A smaller room lies beyond. It is autumn, 1890. The morning. The setting is this same room throughout the play.*

George Tesman's Aunt Juju is in her nephew's new house with Berthe, the maid. George has just returned from a long honeymoon with Hedda, his new wife. The two women speak fondly of George, revealing that he is now being referred to as 'Doctor', having been given the title in Germany. Berthe is clearly not Hedda's biggest fan, and is rather appalled that she used to ride out with a feather in her hat like the Queen of Sheba. The scene establishes a picture of the world in which Hedda is trapped, and gives a first insight into society's constraints, particularly on women.

George enters. The close bond with his Aunt Juju is obvious. He talks with great passion about his studies. Before we even meet Hedda, we see that her new husband seems more excited about the studies he did on honeymoon than the time he spent with her. We discover through Aunt Juju that Aunt Rena is dying and that Juju is caring for her. She probes George for 'news', hinting heavily at a potential pregnancy; George does not take the hint. Instead, he announces that he could soon be a professor. We learn that George and Hedda have acquired the expensive property with help towards a mortgage from his aunt's trust fund, and the negotiations of Judge Brack. We see now that this grandiose lifestyle is based on the expectation that George will get a professorship, and therefore a higher salary. George exclaims that Hedda is the best thing in his life. He often refers to her having put on weight on honeymoon. It becomes apparent through the play that Hedda is pregnant. Right on cue, she enters.

Hedda is curt, almost to the point of rudeness. She offends Aunt Juju by accusing Berthe of leaving her old hat on the chair, when in fact the hat belongs to Juju. It is worth remembering that Hedda is from the aristocracy, holds very high standards, and is not shy of speaking her mind, no matter who she may offend.

Aunt Juju leaves. Hedda appears agitated and irritable. Compassion seems to be a chore for her, though she does agree to be nice to Aunt Juju, while she will only go as far as to call her 'Aunt', to the disappointment of her husband. They have received some flowers from Mrs Elvsted, an old flame of George's. We learn that she moved to a small northern province – the same one as Eilert Loevborg, remarks Hedda. As they discuss her, her arrival is announced.

Thea Elvsted is very nervous around Hedda. We learn that Eilert Loevborg, George's peer and potential literary rival, is in town, and that he had been tutor to Thea's stepchildren. Thea is worried that though he is a reformed alcoholic, he may be tempted back into his debauched lifestyle now he is back here. She asks the Tesmans to look out for him. Hedda sends George into the other room to write a letter to invite him round.

As soon as George has left the room, Hedda cosies up to Thea and probes her for more information on her relationship with Eilert; Hedda does not miss a thing. Initially, Thea is wary of confiding in Hedda, who used to bully her at school. Hedda wheedles her way in anyway, and eventually gets the answer she has been looking for: Thea is love with Eilert, and she has come looking for him without her husband's knowledge. She explains how she helped him to write his latest book. At the time it would have been a bold gesture, to have sufficient respect for a woman's intellect to write a book with her. She is terrified for his well-being, and says that there is an ex-lover of his in town – a 'performer', as she puts it – who wants to kill him.

George returns with the letter, curtailing the women's secret gossiping. Then Berthe announces the arrival of Judge Brack, who is introduced to Thea before Hedda shows her out. Brack reminds Tesman that the two men are meant to be dining together this evening, but there is clearly something else that he wants to say. Eventually, he reveals

that Eilert Loevborg is in town, and due to the recent success of his book, will likely be applying for the same professorship as Tesman.

Brack leaves, and George paces the room, clearly distressed by the news. Hedda antagonises him by asking whether this means they can't get a butler or a horse. It is often unclear whether she is being facetious when she speaks like this, perhaps because her contrived manners can be taken as sport.

## Act Two

*The same. Evening.*

Hedda, now wearing an evening gown, welcomes Brack again. He enters from the garden, via the back of the house, and Hedda threatens to shoot him with one of her father's old pistols. Though this is apparently in jest, she does in fact shoot the gun into the air, much to the understandable terror of Judge Brack. The introduction here of the guns, and the fact that Hedda is willing to shoot them, raises the stakes. Suddenly, the guns bring the threat of violence and the possibility of death. It may be worth exploring with the actors how tension levels may change because of this.

The fact that Brack has entered from the back of the house might be viewed as rather suspicious behaviour, especially for a judge. He and Hedda engage in somewhat conspiratorial chat. Brack clearly likes Hedda, and though she joins in, she may simply be leading him on for her own amusement. She reveals to him how bored she was on her honeymoon, due to having to spend the whole six months with George. She appears despondent at her choice of husband. The judge tries to seduce Hedda into what he describes as a 'domestic triangle'. Though nothing overtly sexual is intimated, their discourse does seem fraught with innuendo, though this is never followed through. It could be that Hedda is simply glad of the game, and the agreed arrangement that Brack will be a frequent visitor to the house.

Tesman returns with numerous books, one of which is Loevborg's. He is impressed by what he has read of it so far, and goes to get ready for Brack's all-male party. Before he goes, he informs Hedda that Aunt Juju will not be visiting her tonight as Aunt Rena is ill.

After he has left, Hedda reveals to the judge that she does not and has never liked the house, despite her apparent interest in it being the reason George acquired it. She had merely pretended to like it for 'fun'. She is immensely bored, and it is almost as though she is self-destructive simply in order to feel something. She says she has considered getting George into politics. Brack alludes to Hedda eventually having children, but she immediately quashes all talk on the subject.

George re-enters the room, dressed for the party. He says that Aunt Juju has told him that it is just a rumour that Loevborg is in line for the same job as him.

Shortly after, Eilert Loevborg arrives. He quickly plays down his book, saying that he only wrote it to please people, and that his latest, as yet unpublished work is his genuine voice. He has the manuscript with him. It is revolutionary for the time, in that it is concerned with the future. Tesman is very impressed. Brack invites Loevborg to the party, but he hastily declines. At this, Hedda asks him to stay and have dinner with her and Thea, to which he agrees. To George's delight and relief, Loevborg reveals that he is more interested in fame and will not stand in his way for the professorship. They drink. Hedda offers a glass to Eilert, but he quickly declines. The other men retreat to the back room to drink, leaving Hedda alone with Loevborg.

Eilert cannot get used to calling Hedda 'Tesman'; instead he calls her by her maiden name: Gabler. She urges him to stop. At intervals, George returns to the room, at which point Hedda immediately slips into conversation about their honeymoon, flicking through a photo album. She is an excellent liar. Loevborg goes on calling her 'darling': they have a shared history of intimacy. Though Hedda denies having loved him, she does admit that she found it thrilling to share secrets with him. She ended the relationship when it threatened to become more serious, and threatened to shoot him, though a fear of scandal prevented her. She then teases that not shooting him wasn't the most cowardly

thing she did. Eilert assumes that she wanted to tell him she had a passion for life, which she denies, before they are cut short by the entrance of Thea Elvsted.

Hedda presses Loevborg to have a drink – it is as though she is testing the extent of her power over him. She uses increasingly manipulative tactics, eventually humiliating Thea by revealing that she was there this morning, worried about Loevborg's safety. This betrayal of trust infuriates him: he drinks while Thea sobs. Now Hedda stops him from drinking too much at once, reminding him that he has a dinner party to go to. Again, everything has been a game for Hedda.

Brack and Tesman return to the room, ready to leave. They are delighted at Loevborg's change of heart. Eilert tells Hedda that he will come to take Thea home at ten o'clock.

Once they have left, Thea asks Hedda what will happen. She says that Eilert will return with 'vine leaves in his hair'. This seems to be a reference to the fact that he will be intoxicated with wine, and therefore seeking further pleasure. Thea asks why she is doing this, unsure of her motives and no doubt her sanity. Hedda states that she wants to control a man's fate. She suddenly throws her arms around Thea and tells her she may set her hair on fire. Thea is terrified and wishes to leave, but Hedda calls her an idiot and tells her to have something to eat while they wait for Eilert to return.

### **Act Three**

*The same. Dawn the next day.*

Hedda and Thea are asleep on the drawing room furniture. Berthe enters with a letter for George from Aunt Juju. It becomes clear that the men never came home. Hedda has slept, whereas Thea has not, therefore Hedda encourages her to go to the bedroom to get some sleep.

Tesman creeps in, hoping to not be discovered. He is, by his openly unconcerned wife. He tells her that Eilert read his new book to the men at Brack's party the night before, and that it is one of the greatest things ever written. He says that Eilert was drunk, and talked about the woman who inspired his work. He then reveals that the staggering Loevborg had dropped his manuscript, and that he had picked it up and has it with him now. He has already admitted to being jealous of the work, and now Hedda – and the audience – are suspicious as to why he now has it. He claims to have kept it because of Eilert was drunk, and says he will take it back to him once he has sobered up. Hedda snatches at it, asking that she read it first, but her husband insists he cannot let her. She asks whether it could be rewritten, but George thinks it could not. At this point, she gives him the letter from his Aunt Juju. He reads it to find that Aunt Rena is dying. He asks Hedda to come with him to see her, but she declines, saying she loathes 'illness and death'. Just as he is about to leave, the arrival of Judge Brack is announced. They both panic about the manuscript, and Hedda quickly puts it on a bookshelf as Brack enters and Tesman hastily exits.

The judge and Hedda are alone again. He tells her that Eilert, in his intoxicated state, had gone to a soiree at Mademoiselle Diana's and had got in a fight about some lost parcel – the manuscript – and that Hedda and George should shut their door to him. He doesn't want another to interfere with the 'triangle'. Hedda says that he wants to be the only 'cock in the yard', that he is a 'dangerous man' and how she is 'pleased he has no hold over her'. This foreshadows what will later transpire.

He leaves, via the garden, and Hedda goes over to the manuscript and locks it in the desk. Suddenly, Loevborg bursts in, wild. She admonishes him for not coming to pick up Thea, and he apologises. She acts coy when he asks what she knows about the previous night – lying comes very easily to Hedda. Thea runs in and Loevborg tells her that he is finished and that it is over between them. She is distraught. Then he tells her that he has torn their manuscript into a thousand pieces. They use the metaphor of him killing their baby, and Thea leaves in a state of complete shock.

Once they are alone, Eilert tells Hedda what she already knows: he didn't tear up the manuscript. He says it would have been worse to say that he had lost it. He tells her he

is going to end it all. She does not try to dissuade him; far from it, she asks him to make it 'beautiful'. Just as he goes to leave, she runs over to the desk. The tension levels are extremely high here, as Hedda could save his life, but instead of giving him the manuscript, she gives him the pistol she once aimed at him.

He leaves, and Hedda burns the manuscript while sadistically exclaiming to herself that she is 'burning the baby'.

## Act Four

*The same. Evening. An atmosphere of mourning.*

Hedda is with Aunt Juju, who is mourning the death of Aunt Rena. George enters, claiming to be confused because of his grief. Aunt Juju insists he must find joy in the sadness. She leaves, unaware that this is not the actual cause of George's bewilderment. He tells Hedda that he ran into Thea and she told him about Eilert tearing up the manuscript. He asks Hedda hastily for the manuscript, but she coldly tells him that she has burnt it. He is incensed. She smiles almost imperceptibly and assures him that she did it for him. Tesman is amazed, and says he never realised that she loved him that much. She then has to spell out for him the innuendo that she is pregnant. George is overjoyed, almost manic in his joy.

Thea runs in with terrible rumours regarding Loevborg being in hospital, though she doesn't know the details. Judge Brack enters with more definite news: Loevborg has been taken to hospital, and doesn't have long to live. He says it was suicide and that he shot himself through the heart. Hedda checks that he didn't shoot himself in the head, and decides that it is indeed beautiful.

Thea tells George that she kept Loevborg's notes on the book. Together they head off into the back room with great enthusiasm to begin piecing the notes together, to see what they can salvage. The judge tells Hedda that he bent the truth slightly for Thea's benefit: Loevborg is already dead, and it was not suicide, but he was shot in the groin at Mademoiselle Diana's. Brack also recognised the gun as Hedda's and assumes it was stolen. Hedda is disgusted at the lack of beauty in Loevborg's death.

George and Thea move back into the drawing room, complaining of bad light. Hedda clears her desk for them. In hushed voices, she and Brack continue to discuss the suicide. Hedda realises that as the pistol can be traced to her, and the judge knows, she is now his slave. She goes over and strokes Thea's hair, insisting that Thea will inspire George one day as she did Eilert. She then goes into the other room and begins to play the piano loudly. They tell her to stop. She does. Then finally, while telling the judge that he will be the cock of the walk, she shoots herself dead.

## Characters

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### Hedda Tesman

The 29-year-old daughter of General Gabler. She has grown up with an aristocratic lifestyle. She is intelligent, bored, witty, manipulative, depressed, playful. A fascinating character, she is unafraid to lie, and is in a constant battle for control over her own life and the lives of others. Ultimately, she takes control of her own life by ending it.

### George Tesman

Hedda's husband, aged 33. An orphan, he was brought up by his Aunt Juliana. Despite being an intellectual and a hard-working academic, he is naïve in his attempts to please his wife. He cannot match her intelligence and wit.

### Juliana Tesman / Aunt Juju

George's aunt, aged 65. She has raised George, the orphaned son of her brother; she dotes on him, and supports him financially. She has used her trust fund to secure the house for him and his wife, ready for their return from honeymoon.

### Judge Brack

A circuit judge, aged 45. He is a friend of the Tesmans, and manages to work his way into the household as the third point of a 'triangle'. He seems to enjoy meddling in the affairs of others. He is not a model of morality for the justice system.

### Eilert Loevborg

A writer, aged 33. He is George's rival. Although he was formerly destitute and addicted to women and alcohol, his fortunes have recently turned around and his latest book was a well-received success. Thea is in love with him, though he is in love with Hedda.

### Thea Elvsted

The 26-year-old wife of a high sheriff. An old flame of George's, she is in love with Eilert Loevborg, and has followed him here without her husband knowing. She is timid, especially around Hedda, who bullied her at school. She is intelligent and passionate too.

### Berthe

The maid, aged 55. She tries hard to please Hedda, but this seems to be futile.

## Social, cultural and historical context

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Born in Norway in 1828, Henrik Ibsen is often considered to be the father of modern theatre. Another title often accredited to him is the father of realism.

He was the eldest of five siblings. His family were affluent merchants for shipping timber, in the port town of Skien, but his father was bankrupted and became an alcoholic. Throughout the early part of his life, Ibsen was depressed. Forced to leave school at 15, Ibsen worked at a pharmacy for six years. In 1850, he moved to Oslo. He couldn't gain entry to the university to study, so decided to concentrate on his writing. Much of his early work went unnoticed, though he stuck at it and his perseverance would eventually pay off.

Disappointed with life in Norway, and facing financial difficulties, he moved with his wife and son to Italy. He remained there for 27 years. He finally began to have more success, and went on to write famous plays such as *Peer Gynt* (1867) and *A Doll's House* (1879). He wrote *Hedda Gabler* in 1890, and returned to Norway a year later as a famous playwright. He died in 1906 at the age of 78.

*Hedda Gabler* was written in 1890, when Ibsen was in his 60s. It was originally written in Norwegian, as were all Ibsen's plays, and much of the wordplay is untranslatable.

The play presents a detailed view of society as seen through the prism of experience. Having such a controversial woman as the lead character would have been shocking when the play was written. It is society's oppression of women that has shaped Hedda into the character that she is.

It is important to appreciate the constraints that existed in European society in the 19th century. It is certainly advisable to read Richard Eyre's foreword in his translation, where he eloquently describes how although many of Hedda's traits were likely taken from a young girl named Emilie who Ibsen had fallen in love with, she also is based on Ibsen himself. His fear of scandal presents itself strongly in Hedda, along with his apparent repulsion to the reality of sex, and a yearning for emotional freedom.

## Themes

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### Women and sexuality

Hedda might be said to be trapped by her gender. The play was written in the Victorian era, and gender roles were starkly contrasting. We see this convention both followed (the men retire to the back room to drink and smoke) and broken (Eilert writes his latest work in collaboration with Thea). Hedda also uses her sexuality as a weapon, though in many ways she is also sexless, resigned to her loveless marriage for fear of scandal.

### Manipulation and control

Hedda is an excellent liar. The way she plays the other characters against each other becomes almost farcical. She wants to feel she is in control of her life, as well as the lives of others. Ultimately, she seizes control of her own life by taking it.

### Money and class

Hedda has grown up with a luxurious lifestyle – you might say she is spoilt. Money has little value to her, and she even allows George to buy a house which is beyond their means, simply for 'fun'.

### Reputation and scandal

Hedda is terrified of scandal, just as Ibsen himself was. Loevborg was at one time in disgrace, but due to the success of his latest book and his sobriety he has re-established his reputation in society. After he has been seen going drunk to the soir e, however, the Tesmans do not wish him to come to their house for fear of scandal.

### Alcoholism

Loevborg's fortunes turn the moment Hedda persuades him to have a drink. The other men seem more than happy to have a drink together, but are not so keen on the ugliness that drunkenness can create.

### Jealousy

There is clearly a rivalry between Tesman and Loevborg, and even though Tesman is full of praise for Loevborg's success, he eventually admits that he is jealous of his work. Hedda is fiercely jealous of Thea's relationship with Eilert, and even goes as far as 'burning the baby'.

## Resources

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### Recommended edition

*Hedda Gabler*: Henrik Ibsen (In a new version by Richard Eyre)

ISBN: 978-1-85459-842-4

### Further reading

*Ibsen, Henrik. Four Major Plays* by Rick Davis and Brian Johnston, trans. Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1995.

*Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays* by Rolf Fjelde, ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965.

*Ibsen: A Critical Study* by John Northram. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

### Online resources

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/mar/17/theatre>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/mar/05/theatre>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3638874/Sexy-and-electrifying-Hedda-Gabler-lives.html>

### Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

*Danse Macabre* by Saint-Saens

Some of the classical music released in 1890:

- Ferruccio Busoni – Violin Sonata No. 1, Opus 29
- Ernest Chausson – *Chansons de Shakespeare*
- Antonín Dvořák – *Requiem*, Symphony No. 8
- Alexander Glazunov – Symphony No. 3, Opus 33
- Armas Järnefelt – *Ouverture Lyrique*
- Carl Nielsen – String Quartet No. 2 in F minor
- Hans Pfitzner – Sonata in F-sharp minor for cello and piano
- Alexander Scriabin – Romance for Horn and Piano
- Jean Sibelius – Piano Quintet in G minor
- Johann Strauss II – *Rathausball-Tänze*
- Sergei Taneyev – String Quartet No. 1 Opus 4

## Practical exploration activities

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### Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Hedda Gabler*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

**Off-text improvisation** is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments from the play that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- Aunt Juju nursing Aunt Rena with George present
- Thea and George together when they were younger
- Hedda pointing a gun at Eilert
- Eilert and Thea writing the manuscript together
- Hedda's funeral
- Thea and George writing, piecing together the notes again after the funeral.

**Hot-seating** is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude, and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered.

**Exploring accent and dialect** can also help actors to consider character choices. Though the play was written in Norway, this is an English translation. How might different accents indicate class? For example, there were differences within the upper classes of Britain in the Victorian period. RP (received pronunciation) is often used to represent a higher social class, but there is also Heightened RP, which is even more clipped. There is often a difference in the way those with a military background speak (Hedda is the daughter of a general). A great place to start is YouTube, where there are many examples of different accents.

**Non-verbal communication** is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how different characters behave when they are on their own. Does this differ from how they behave when they are around other characters? How?

### Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** and then trying it in an alternative style. Tension plays a key role in the narrative of *Hedda Gabler*. Try to find numerous pivotal moments in the play where the tension might change. For example, the moment Loevborg enters, and the audience know that the gun is in the desk.

Experiment with **different levels of tension in the bodies of the actors**. These don't have to be the same for everyone on stage. For example, Loevborg may be extremely tense, but if Hedda is more relaxed this will give the scene conflict, and may make Hedda appear cold and callous. There is no right or wrong way of doing this, so explore different possibilities, and don't jump to conclusions before trying things out. Jacques Le Coq's 7 levels of tension is a useful shorthand for different levels of tension in the body:

- 1: Exhausted or catatonic – (there can hardly be any movement here)
- 2: Laid back
- 3: Neutral
- 4: Alert or curious
- 5: Suspense or reactive (Is there a bomb?)
- 6: Passionate (There is a bomb!)
- 7: Tragic (The bomb is going off!) – (there should hardly be any movement here either, as the body is completely petrified)

## Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Hedda Gabler*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

**Creating a model box of a potential set design** is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. The set layout is quite specific for *Hedda Gabler*, in that all the action happens in the same set, and there is a drawing room and a back room. However, there can often be a lot of creativity within set borders.

**Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes** is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea of theme. There is a piano in the play. How might the sound of a piano be used in the sound design? When developing a sound design, don't just think in terms of music – tonal noises can be used to create tension.

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? **Look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles. (Safety first!) Again, although the play is set in one place, think about how light might change the space, not only literally in terms of the time of day, but also metaphorically as the climax of the play approaches. The playwright gives us clues as to time of day and the time of year (it is autumn). Explore how light casts into rooms at different times of the day during the autumn months.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their

## **GCE Drama 2016: Hedda Gabler**

costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? Again, there are clues in the text, but don't feel married to the exact details, as there are infinite possible routes your design might take.

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