A Doll's House Study Guide

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

A *Doll's House* was published on December 4, 1879, and first performed in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879. The work was considered a publishing event and the play's initial printing of 8,000 copies quickly sold out. The play was so controversial that Ibsen was forced to write a second ending that he called "a barbaric outrage" to be used only when necessary. The controversy centered around Nora's decision to abandon her children, and in the second ending she decides that the children need her more than she needs her freedom. Ibsen believed that women were best suited to be mothers and wives, but at the same time, he had an eye for injustice and Helmer's demeaning treatment of Nora was a common problem. Although he would later be embraced by feminists, Ibsen was no champion of women's rights; he only dealt with the problem of women's rights as a facet of the realism within his play. His intention was not to solve this issue but to illuminate it. Although Ibsen's depiction of Nora realistically illustrates the issues facing women, his decision in Act HI to have her abandon her marriage and children was lambasted by critics as unrealistic, since, according to them, no "real" woman would ever make that choice. That Ibsen offered no real solution to Nora's dilemma inflamed critics and readers alike who were then left to debate the ending ceaselessly. This play established a new genre of modern drama; prior to A *Doll's House*, contemporary plays were usually historical romances or contrived comedy of manners. Ibsen is known as the "father of modern drama" because he elevated theatre from entertainment to a forum for exposing social problems. Ibsen broke away from the romantic tradition with his realistic portrayals of individual characters and his focus on psychological concerns as he sought to portray the real world, especially the position of women in society.

Author Biography

Ibsen was born March 20,1828, in Skien, Norway, a lumbering town south ofChristiania, now Oslo. He was the second son in a wealthy family that included five other siblings. In 1835, financial problems forced the family to move to a smaller house in Venstop outside Skien. After eight years the family moved back to Skein, and Ibsen moved to Grimstad to study as an apothecary's assistant. He applied to and was rejected at Christiania University. During the winter of 1848 Ibsen wrote his first play, *Catiline*, which was rejected by the Christiania Theatre; it was finally published in 1850 under the pseudonym Brynjolf Bjarme and generated little interest. Ibsen's second play. *The Burial Mound*, was also written under the pseudonym Brynjolf Bjarme, and became (he first Ibsen play to be performed when it was presented on September 26, 1850, at the Christiania Theatre.

In 1851 Ibsen accepted an appointment as an assistant stage manager at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen. He was also expected to assist the theatre as a dramatic author, and during his tenure at Bergen, Ibsen wrote *Lady Inger* (\ 855), *The Feast at Solhoug* (1856), and *Otaf Liljekrans* (1857). These early plays were written in verse and drawn from Norse folklore and myths. In 1857 Ibsen was released from his contract at Bergen and accepted a position at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania. While there, Ibsen published *The Vikings at Helgetand* and married Suzannah Thoresen in 1858. The couple's only child, Sigurd, was born the following year.

By 1860, Ibsen was under attack in the press for a lack of productivity although he had published a few poems during this period. When the Christiania Theatre went bankrupt in 1862, Ibsen was left with no regular income except a temporary position as a literary advisor to the reorganized Christiania Theatre. Due to a series of small government grants, by 1863 Ibsen was able to travel in Europe and begin what became an intense period of creativity. During this period, Ibsen completed *The Pretenders* (1863) and a dramatic epic poem, "Brand" (1866), which achieved critical notice; these works were soon followed by *Peter Cynt* (1867). The first of Ibsen's prose dramas, *The League of Youth*, published in 1869, was also the first of his plays to demonstrate a shift from an emphasis on plot to one of interpersonal relationships. This was followed by *Emperor and Galilean* (1873), Ibsen's first work to be translated into English, and *Pillars of Society* (1877). A *Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) are among the last plays included in Ibsen's realism period. Ibsen continued to write of modern realistic themes in his next plays, but he also relied increasingly on metaphor and symbolism in *The Wild Duck* (1884) *undHeddaGabler* (1890).

A shift from social concerns to the isolation of the individual marks the next phase of Ibsen's work. *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) all treat the conflicts that arise between art and life, between creativity and social expectations, and between personal contentment and self deception. These last works are considered by many critics to be autobiographical. In 1900, Ibsen suffered his first of several strokes. Ill health ended his writing career, and he died May 23, 1906.

Although Ibsen's audiences may have debated the social problems he depicted, modern critics are more often interested in the philosophical and psychological elements depicted in his plays and the ideological debates they generated.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens on the day before Christmas. Nora returns home from shopping; although her husband is anticipating a promotion and raise, he still chides her excessive spending. In response, Nora flirts, pouts, and cajoles her husband as a child might, and, indeed, Torvald addresses her as he might a child. He hands her more money but only after having berating her spending. Their relationship parallels that of a daughter and father and, indeed, is exactly like the relationship Nora had with her father. Early in this act the audience is aware that the relationship between the Helmers is based on dishonesty when Nora denies that she has eaten macaroons, knowing that her husband has forbidden her to do so.

Nora is visited by an old friend, Kristine Linde. Mrs. Linde tells Nora that she has had some difficult problems and is seeking employment. Nora confesses to Mrs. Linde that she, too, has been desperate and recounts that she had been forced to borrow money several years earlier when her husband was ill. The money was necessary to finance a trip that saved her husband's life, but Nora forged her father's signature to secure the loan and lied to Torvald that her father had given them the money. Thus, she has been deceiving her husband for years as she worked to repay the loan. She tells this story to Mrs. Linde to demonstrate that she is an adult who is capable of both caring for her family and conducting business. Unfortunately, Nora's secret is shared by Krogstad, an employee at Torvald's bank. After a confrontation with Krogstad, Torvald decides to fire Krogstad and hire Mrs. Linde in his place.

Krogstad threatens Nora, telling her that if he loses his job he will reveal her earlier dishonesty. Krogstad fails to understand that Nora has no influence with her husband, nor does he appreciate the level of dishonesty that characterizes the Helmer marriage. For her part, Nora cannot believe that forging her father's signature-an act that saved her husband's life-could lead to a serious punishment. She cannot conceive that she could be held accountable and has an unrealistic appreciation for how the law and society functions. Still, she is concerned enough to plead Krogstad's cause with Torvald. Torvald refuses to reconsider firing Krogstad and forbids Nora to even mention his name.

Act II

Mrs. Linde stops by to help Nora prepare for a costume ball. Nora explains to Mrs. Linde that Krogstad is blackmailing her about the earlier loan. After Nora again begs Torvald not to fire Krogstad, her husband sends Krogstad an immediate notice of his dismissal. Nora is desperate and decides to ask help of Dr. Rank, a family friend. Before she can ask him for his help, Dr. Rank makes it obvious that he is in love with her and Nora determines that because of this it would be unwise to ask his help. Krogstad visits

Nora once again and this time leaves a letter for Torvald in which Nora's dishonesty is revealed. To divert Torvald's attention from the mailbox, Nora elicits his help with her practice of the dance she is to perform, the tarantella. Finally, Nora asks Torvald to promise that he will not read the mail until after the party.

Act III

Krogstad had years earlier been in love with Mrs. Linde. At the beginning of this act they agree to marry, and Krogstad offers to retrieve his letter from Torvald. However, Mrs. Linde disagrees and thinks that it is time that Nora is forced to confront the dishonesty in her marriage. After the party, the Helmers return home and Torvald reads the letter from Krogstad. While Torvald reads in his study, Nora pictures herself as dead, having committed suicide by drowning in the icy river. Torvald interrupts her fantasy by demanding that she explain her deception. However, he refuses to listen and is only concerned with the damage to his own reputation. Torvald's focus on his own life and his lack of appreciation for the suffering undergone by Nora serve to open her eyes to her husband's faults. She had been expecting Torvald to rescue her and protect her, and instead he only condemns her and insists that she is not a fit mother to their children. At that moment another letter arrives from Krogstad telling the Helmers that he will not take legal action against Nora. Torvald is immediately appeased and is willing to forget the entire episode. But having seen her husband revealed as a self-centered, selfish, hypocrite, Nora tells him that she can no longer live as a doll and expresses her intention to leave the house immediately. Torvald begs her to stay, but the play ends with Nora leaving the house, her husband, and her children.

Act 1 Part 1

Act 1 Part 1 Summary

Nora arrives home from an afternoon of Christmas shopping. As she nibbles on some macaroons and takes off her coat, her husband Torvald calls out to her from his study. She calls back to him, asking him to come in and see what she's bought and then quickly hides the macaroons.

Torvald comes in, and in teasing language that refers to Nora as a little bird, a little squirrel and a "featherbrain," tries to convince her to not spend quite so much money. Nora says now that he's got a good job at the bank, they've got a little more money to spend, and this Christmas can be happier than last year. She shows him all the things she's bought for the children and the servants, but when he asks whether she stopped in at the sweet shop, she lies and says she didn't. She adds that she would never do anything that he doesn't want her to. He then gives her some extra money to meet the extra Christmas expenses, and they talk about how Nora's spending habits are the same as her father's. They make plans for decorating the tree that evening, and Nora asks Torvald whether he invited Dr. Rank to stop by. Torvald tells her that Rank doesn't need inviting because he's so much a part of the family and adds that he'll be there for dinner as usual. They talk again about how wonderful it is to have enough money to make Christmas happy, and Torvald mentions the previous Christmas, when Nora shut herself away and made Christmas gifts, only to have the cat destroy them.

The doorbell rings, and a servant announces two visitors, Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank. Torvald asks whether Rank has gone straight into his office. When the servant says he has, Torvald goes into his office to meet him. The servant then shows Mrs. Linde in.

Act 1 Part 1 Analysis

Two significant dramatic and thematic elements are introduced in this scene. Most importantly, the relationship between Nora and Torvald is established, and we see clearly in both his words and actions that Torvald thinks of Nora as a kind of pet, or toy, or plaything. Because Nora refers to herself in the same way that Torvald refers to her, it's clear that Nora sees herself only in terms of her husband. This self-perception, for the most, part continues through two-thirds of the play and establishes the symbolic meaning of the title. Nora is clearly living a doll's life in a doll's house. From her doll's house, Nora starts her journey towards awareness and independence. The dramatic action of the play charts her discovery of how empty and false her self-perceptions are, and it becomes essential for her to leave.

The second significant element introduced in this scene is money. Money plays a defining role in every significant relationship in the play, particularly that of Nora and Torvald. Her need for money and his reaction to how she gets and spends it are the

principal catalysts for the dramatic action and for Nora's movement along her journey towards self-awareness. Meanwhile, Torvald's attempts to control Nora's spending are another manifestation of his desire to control her, while her spending habits indicate her burgeoning desire to be free of that control.

Nora's lie to Torvald also indicates an as-yet-unconscious desire to be free and also foreshadows the many other lies she will tell him. Her constant lying suggests that somewhere inside she knows that her living situation is false and can only be sustained through creating other falsehoods. Only at the end of the play, when she's determined to live an honest life, is it possible for her to be completely honest with her husband.

Other important conversations include the discussions about what Nora was doing last Christmas, the frequency of Dr. Rank's visits, and Nora's father, all of which foreshadow more lies and painful revelations.

Act 1 Part 2

Act 1 Part 2 Summary

For a moment, Nora doesn't recognize Mrs. Linde, but then she suddenly remembers her from their days together at school. Their conversation reveals that they haven't seen each other in ten years. In that time Mrs. Linde was married, but soon after her wedding she was left a widow without children or family. Nora asks Mrs. Linde to tell her everything, but then Nora talks about how things have changed for her and Torvald. She explains that things had been very difficult for them for a long time, that Torvald had had to work long hours and that she'd had to supplement their income by doing sewing and needlework. As a result, Torvald became ill, and the doctors said his only hope of a cure was to spend time in Italy. It cost a huge amount of money, but Nora managed to get it from her father, who died around that time. She concludes by apologizing for talking about herself, and then asks Mrs. Linde to tell her about her life. Mrs. Linde explains that since she's been a widow she's really had to struggle to make ends meet and adds that when she heard about Torvald's good fortune, she was extremely happy for them and for herself. Nora understands her to mean that she wants Torvald to give her a job, and Mrs. Linde confesses that that's the case. Nora promises that she'll do what she can, and Mrs. Linde says she's very grateful, adding that Nora's gesture is especially generous since she doesn't really know how difficult life can be.

Nora comments that Mrs. Linde is just like everybody else, thinking that she isn't very bright and can't do anything worthwhile. She goes on to tell Mrs. Linde that her father had nothing to do with the money for the trip to Italy. When Mrs. Linde asks where it came from, Nora hints that it may have been a gift from an admirer. Then, Nora tells Mrs. Linde that she lied that the money came from her father because Torvald would never have accepted it otherwise. Nora says he didn't believe the doctors who said the trip would cure him, and that he thought the trip was another of Nora's frivolous desires. She explains that she borrowed the money and has been paying it back ever since. Last Christmas she was lucky enough to get a lot of copying work, and she locked herself into her room for hours at a time so she could get it all done. She mentions how difficult it can be to keep track of how much money has been paid back and how much she still owes. She concludes by talking happily about how wonderful it is to be free and alive, to play with the children and look forward to another trip. Just then the doorbell rings again.

The maid shows in Krogstad, who explains that he's an employee at Torvald's bank and has come on business. At the sound of his voice, Mrs. Linde becomes nervous and withdraws into a corner. Nora tells Krogstad to go see Torvald in his office, and Krogstad goes out. Nora explains to Mrs. Linde that Krogstad is a widower and has to take care of several children. Mrs. Linde tries to talk further about him, but Nora insists upon changing the subject.

Rank comes in, having left Torvald and Krogstad talking business. He, Nora and Mrs. Linde chat about how people are always saying "they must live." Rank says that it doesn't matter how awful he feels, he wants to keep on living as long as possible. He adds that many of his patients, no matter how ill they are, feel the same way. He goes on to say that that was what he heard Krogstad said to Torvald before he (Rank) left the room- that he "must live." Nora laughs to herself, and when Rank asks what she's laughing at she refuses to tell him, offering him some macaroons. Rank says that he thought she wasn't allowed to have them anymore, but Nora lies and says that Mrs. Linde brought them.

Torvald comes in, saying that Krogstad has just left. Nora introduces him to Mrs. Linde, and then asks whether he can give her a job. He asks Mrs. Linde a couple of questions, finds out that she does have business experience, and then says that she can definitely have a job. As Nora laughs happily, Torvald says he has to go out. Mrs. Linde and Rank leave with him.

Act 1 Part 2 Analysis

Nora clearly thinks she's very clever for having gotten the money in the way she did and keeping it all a secret from Torvald. Even though she takes pride in what she sees as independence of thought and action, her actions were in support of her husband, not for herself. She lives by the belief that her role in life is to support her husband and ensure that he lives his life in the way he must, even if she has to lie to him.

In other words, Nora's wants and needs are secondary to her husband's. While contemporary audiences might find it difficult to accept that Nora has no difficulties with this situation and actually rejoices in it, in the society of the time, the late 1800s, this was the general attitude towards women and marriage. When the play was first seen by the public, Nora's journey towards self-awareness and independence was revolutionary and extremely controversial both in the theater and in society at large.

Nora's casual discussion of her work as a copyist last Christmas indicates again that she's been lying to Torvald. This is the first revelation of truth that plays out the foreshadowing in the first scene. The foundation for more lies and revelations is reinforced at this point, and again when Nora lies about where the macaroons came from.

Rank's comments about people who say they "must live" function on a couple of levels. Firstly, his opinions are ironic, in that when he offers them he knows he's ill and is probably going to die soon. Secondly, the fact that he suspects he's dying suggests that his comments are encouragement to both Nora and Mrs. Linde to live life actively and fully no matter what happens to them. Mrs. Linde clearly needs such encouragement, since she's so obviously struggling. Nora doesn't seem to need it at this point in the play, since she's so obliviously happy about the direction her life has taken. Rank's comments, however, and the encouragement contained in them, play an important role for her later. One of the reasons that Nora decides to leave her marriage and her doll-

like existence is because she "must live" a more fully realized life. The connection between these comments and Nora's choice isn't made overtly; the play does not state it outright. It is nevertheless an important piece of subtext, or emotional information that exists underneath the level of dialogue or action.

Act 1 Part 3

Act 1 Part 3 Summary

Once Mrs. Linde and Rank have left, Nora plays for a while with the children, but her game is interrupted by the return of Krogstad. Nora sends the children to their Nanny, and then asks Krogstad what he wants. Their conversation reveals that he knows Mrs. Linde, that he knows Torvald from their days as students together and that he's just been dismissed because Torvald has discovered some shady dealings that Krogstad had been part of. It also becomes clear that Krogstad lent Nora the money for the trip to Italy. He wants her to convince Torvald to give him his job back or else he'll tell him the truth about where the money came from. At first Nora refuses, but then Krogstad reveals that he knows that she forged her father's signature on the loan agreement he drew up. Nora insists that Krogstad will soon get all his money back. Krogstad, however, tells her that the money isn't the point. He wants his job, and this is the only way he knows how to get it. Nora insists that she has a right to do what she needs to do to save her husband's life and that the law will support her. Krogstad, a lawyer, tells her that the law will see what she's done as a crime and that she and her husband will both be ruined. With that, he leaves.

Nora tells the children, who have been frightened by Krogstad, that they're not to tell their father Krogstad was there. The maid brings in the Christmas tree, and Nora decorates it as Torvald enters and asks whether Krogstad was just there. At first Nora lies and says he wasn't, but then Torvald says he saw Krogstad coming out the gate. Torvald asks whether Krogstad was asking Nora to put in a good word for him. When Nora says he was, Torvald tells her that she should have nothing more to do with him. She agrees, and he sits down to look at some papers from the bank.

As Nora continues decorating the tree, she asks Torvald to help her decide what to wear for a party they're attending in a day or two. He agrees, and then she asks him what crime Krogstad committed. Torvald tells her that he forged a signature, and then later when confronted with the truth, Krogstad tried to manipulate his way out of it. Torvald says that he could forgive someone who admitted their crimes but then talks about how dishonest people and liars are corrupting influences on children and should be kept away from them. He makes Nora promise to stay away from Krogstad and then goes out into his study. Nanny asks whether she can bring the children in to see Nora, but Nora refuses to see them, thinking to herself that she must be the same awful kind of influence as Krogstad.

Act 1 Part 3 Analysis

Torvald's reaction to Krogstad, who has done exactly what Nora has done, combine with Torvald's comments about the effects of actions like Krogstad's on children to make Nora at least begin to realize the consequences of her lies and choices. This is the first

step on her journey toward seeing that the way she had been living her life, doing anything she must to sustain her role as a devoted and idealized servant to a self-centered husband, is not good. Cracks are starting to appear in the walls of Nora's happy, secure and socially approved doll's house.

The Christmas tree, with all its connotations of joy, salvation and happiness, represents Nora's lingering satisfaction with her life, her position, her marriage and her children. It's symbolically important that she spends the final moments of this act busily decorating it, an action that illustrates the way in which she's struggling to maintain her happiness and, above all, her illusions. Stage directions at the top of Act 2 indicate that the tree has been stripped of its decorations. This suggests that Nora's dreams and ideals have been stripped from her as well, and she's starting to face the truth more clearly.

Act 2 Part 1

Act 2 Part 1 Summary

It's Christmas Day. Nora paces nervously, worried that Krogstad is going to follow through on his threat to reveal all to Torvald. Nanny comes in and tells Nora that the children miss her, accustomed as they are to being with her all the time. Their conversation reveals that Nanny gave up a child of her own for adoption and that the child is very happy. Nora wonders whether her children would be happy if she left them for good. She then tells herself she's talking nonsense, and Nanny goes out.

Nora fusses with the costume she will wear to the party but stops when Mrs. Linde comes in. Nora asks for her help in repairing the costume, and Mrs. Linde sits down and starts sewing. They talk about Dr. Rank, and Nora reveals that he's dying of an illness in his spine. Mrs. Linde cautions Nora about Rank's visits, saying that it might not look right to have a single man coming by all the time. She also says that because Nora mentioned getting the money for the Italy trip from an "admirer," she (Mrs. Linde) believes that Nora got it from Rank, which Nora denies. Nora says it's easier for a man to sort things out than it is for a woman and asks Mrs. Linde whether it's true that once a debt is paid off, the note of agreement for repayment of the debt is destroyed. Before the conversation can go any further, Torvald returns, and Nora hurries Mrs. Linde off into another room, saying that he can't stand seeing anybody sewing. Mrs. Linde goes out, promising to get to the bottom of the conversation about the money when Torvald is gone.

Torvald is about to go into his office and do some work when Nora stops him and asks him again to give Krogstad back his job. Their conversation reveals that they talked about it that morning, and Torvald says again that he can't. He offers several reasons, including that he can't be seen to be influenced by his wife and that he can't have Krogstad's over-familiarity, which exists because of their time together at school, undermine his position of authority at the bank. Nora reminds him that Krogstad has connections with a disreputable newspaper and that he can have anything he wants published. This reminds Torvald of Nora's father, whose career was almost ruined by similar articles in similar newspapers. Nora says that the situation is no different, but Torvald reminds her that her father's reputation was not above reproach, while his is. Nora again insists that Torvald reconsider. This makes Torvald lose his temper, and he sends one of the servants out with orders to put Krogstad's letter of dismissal into the mail immediately. Nora pleads with him to call the servant back, saying that he doesn't know the effect that Krogstad's dismissal will have on the family. Torvald says his mind is made up, tells her she should rehearse her dance for the party the next night and goes into his office.

Act 2 Part 1 Analysis

Nora's conversation with Nanny about the children foreshadows her ultimate decision to leave. When she suddenly changes the subject, it indicates that, while the idea of going away has crossed her mind, she's not yet ready to take it seriously. Nora is changing, but in small steps.

The party costume is an important symbol of the state of Nora's marriage. On one level, it reflects the way that Nora's whole life is essentially a costume, an artificial and empty way of being and relating to other people. This is reinforced by the fact that Torvald chooses the costume and by his instruction for her to practice the dance that she'll be performing while wearing it. The dance itself represents the metaphorical dance Nora is doing to keep the truth from Torvald and therefore preserve her marriage. On another level, the fact that the costume needs repair represents that the marriage is flawed and foreshadows that it will be torn apart by the revelations of Nora's behavior and her decision to leave.

The revelation that Nora's father was guilty of never-defined improprieties suggests that Nora's ways of spending money weren't all that she inherited from him. It is ironic that Nora forges her father's signature, since Nora's father was redeemed by Torvald, but Torvald could be destroyed by him - or rather, a representation of him.

Act 2 Part 2

Act 2 Part 2 Summary

Rank arrives, and Nora notices immediately there's something wrong with him. He confesses to her that his suspicions have been confirmed and that he's dying. She protests that it's not possible, but he tells her that all his tests have confirmed it. He's got one last test to perform and when it's done he'll know how much time he's got left. He and Nora comment on how his illness was passed down from his father, something that Nora attributes to bad food and Rank attributes to his father's "amusements" as a young soldier. Rank tells her that when he's started his final deterioration, he'll stop coming to visit but will send her a card with a black cross on it so she'll know. She protests that neither she nor Torvald will be able to do without him, but Rank tells her that the dead are quickly forgotten, hinting that Mrs. Linde will soon take his place as principal family friend. He starts talking negatively about Mrs. Linde, but Nora warns him to be quiet, saying she's in the next room.

Nora then tries to cheer Rank up by showing him her costume for the party, but he becomes sad about having to leave her and their friendship behind. Nora begins to ask him for a favor, but before she can complete her request Rank reveals that the reason he's visited so often is because of his deep feelings for her. Nora reacts with shock and asks him to not talk about it any further. Rank can't help going on about how he imagined she was with him rather than Torvald. Nora talks about how there are people that one loves and people that one should be with. She loved her father but enjoyed being with the servants more. Just as she's comparing being with her father to being with Torvald, a servant comes in and whispers to Nora that someone is at the door. When Nora reacts nervously, Rank asks her if there's something wrong. Nora lies and tells him a new dress has arrived and she doesn't want Torvald to know that she's spent some more money. She tells Rank to go into Torvald's office, and he leaves.

Act 2 Part 2 Analysis

Rank's illness and impending death is symbolically important for two reasons. Firstly, the illness itself and the fact that it's been passed down from Rank's father symbolizes the way in which Nora has inherited her own father's capacity for lying and crooked behavior. It's never made clear what Rank's illness actually is, but the implication from his comments about his father's "amusements" is that it's some kind of inherited STD, possibly syphilis. If this is the case, the implication is that Nora's inherited capacity for dishonesty is morally equivalent to dying from syphilis, which at the time carried as much negative stigma as dying from AIDS in contemporary society.

Additionally, Rank's deterioration and death both represent and foreshadow the eventual end of Nora and Torvald's marriage. This idea is reinforced by the way that

Rank communicates his situation. He will tell Nora of his impending death through the mail, the same way that Krogstad communicates his marriage-ending information.

Nora's reaction to Rank's confession of love is a contradiction in her character. On the one hand, she's unscrupulous about telling the truth, but at the same time, she's extremely scrupulous about fidelity. Her desire to show Rank her costume, which represents her marriage and her role in it, illustrates this sense of devotion. At the same time, her comments about loving someone versus being with someone suggest that she might care for Rank as he cares for her. Her sense of propriety is so strong that any hope she had of assistance from him in the matter of the money is dashed. She cannot admit any feelings for him, and she cannot ask for money. As a result, she's left to dance to the dangerous music of Krogstad's desperation.

Act 2 Part 3

Act 2 Part 3 Summary

Krogstad comes in and tells Nora that he's been dismissed. He adds that he's never going to give her back the deed, even if she does pay back all the money. He taunts her by saying there's no way she can end his threat by trying to leave and implies that even killing herself wouldn't do any good. He accuses her of lacking the courage to try either escape route. He then tells her that even if she did get away, he's written a letter to Torvald telling him everything. Now, he doesn't just want his old job back but instead wants a better job and, eventually, to run Torvald's bank. When Nora says that will never happen, Krogstad tells her that he expects to hear from Torvald as soon as he reads the letter. Krogstad goes out, sliding the letter into their letterbox.

Mrs. Linde comes back in, having finished repairing the costume. Nora confesses everything to her, asking her to remember that whatever happens when the truth is revealed, Nora alone is responsible. Mrs. Linde says she will try to talk to Krogstad, saying that there was once a time he would have done anything for her. Nora worries about the letter, and Mrs. Linde remembers that Torvald has the only key to the letterbox. Torvald calls out from his office and asks what's going on, and Nora tells him that she's just trying on her costume. Torvald says he'll be out in a minute to see how she looks. Mrs. Linde goes out to see Krogstad, instructing Nora to keep Torvald's attention away from the letterbox.

Torvald and Rank come in. Nora asks Torvald to help her with her dance for the party. He says he will after he checks the mail. Nora pulls him away from the letterbox, saying she needs so much help that she needs him to concentrate only on her for the next twenty-four hours. Torvald realizes she's concerned about hearing from Krogstad and agrees to do as she asks. As Rank plays the piano, Nora shows Torvald her dance, deliberately dancing frantically and badly. Torvald comments that she's forgotten everything he taught her. As a maid announces dinner, Mrs. Linde returns. Torvald and Rank go into the dining room, and Mrs. Linde tells Nora that Krogstad has gone out of town. He won't be back until late the next night. Mrs. Linde goes into the dining room, and Nora comments to herself that she's only got a short time to live. Torvald calls her to join them, and she gaily goes in.

Act 2 Part 3 Analysis

The pressure on Nora builds rapidly and intensely in this section, the climax of the second act. Krogstad raises the stakes considerably by blackmailing Nora for a better job and then actually leaving his letter in the letterbox where she can see it but not get at it, a looming and lingering symbol of her doom. His comment about the futility of her trying to leave foreshadows her eventual departure, while his reference to her lack of courage is another subtextual element influencing her decision to go. In other words,

when she goes out the door Nora is proving to Krogstad and all the people who think of her as a pretty featherbrain that she does, in fact, have courage and strength. We begin to see this courage, along with a vivid sense of responsibility, in Nora's insistence that she and only she is to blame for whatever destruction might result from her actions. This is another step along her journey toward self-awareness and independence.

Nora's dance at the end of the act not only serves to distract Torvald from the letterbox. It also functions on two symbolic levels. Her dance is a tarantella, a Spanish dance portraying the death spasms of someone who's been poisoned by the bite of a tarantula. This represents the way that Nora's marriage is dying as the result of a poisonous "bite" from Krogstad. Also, as previously mentioned, her dance represents the way that she's metaphorically dancing to try to keep her marriage alive and safe. Meanwhile, Torvald's comment that she's forgotten everything he taught her is ironic since she, and we, know that she's already done a great deal that goes against what her husband taught her, or at the very least what he'd like her to be.

Nora's final comment foreshadows both the end of her marriage and her decision to leave. Up to now, her marriage has been her life. If she leaves her marriage, she effectively ends that life, a life she once enjoyed and celebrated.

Act 3 Part 1

Act 3 Part 1 Summary

Mrs. Linde sits listening, waiting for Krogstad. She hears footsteps on the stairs and lets him in before he can ring the doorbell. Their conversation reveals that they were emotionally involved in the past. Mrs. Linde left him, and Krogstad has been bitter about it ever since. They talk about renewing their relationship. Mrs. Linde says that she's lonely and needs people to care for and reminds Krogstad that he's lonely too. His three children need a mother. Krogstad is at first reluctant to listen to her, saying that he's got a bad reputation, but Mrs. Linde says she trusts him. Krogstad admits he still cares for her and agrees to her proposal, saying that by marrying her he'll be able to put himself right with the world. He asks her whether she wants him to get his letter back from Torvald, but Mrs. Linde tells him not to. She has realized that, for the marriage between Torvald and Nora to be a good one, they must have complete honesty, and everything must come out into the open. Krogstad reluctantly agrees with her but says there's still one thing he can do. He goes out to do it.

Torvald and Nora return from the costume party. Nora still wears her costume, and she is breathless after performing her dance. They're surprised to see Mrs. Linde, but she tells them that she had to stay to see Nora in her costume. Nora repeatedly tries to go back to the party, saying she wants just a little more time, but Torvald insists that they're done. He tells Mrs. Linde how well Nora danced and how dramatic their exit was. As he goes out to light some candles in his office, Mrs. Linde whispers to Nora that she saw Krogstad. Nora has nothing to fear from him, but she must still tell Torvald everything. As Nora unhappily accepts this news, Torvald returns. He spies Mrs. Linde's knitting and tells her she should do embroidery instead. He demonstrates how much prettier it is than knitting and then shows her out the door.

When Mrs. Linde is gone, Torvald comments on how boring she is. He tells Nora how beautiful she is in her costume and how attracted he is to her. Nora tries to get him to stop talking, but Torvald is clearly in a romantic mood. Nora tries to discourage him. Rank comes in from the party. He comments on how good the wine was and what a good time everyone was having, which leads Nora to comment on how much champagne Torvald has drunk. Rank says champagne is perfect when one is celebrating and reveals that he was celebrating the results of his medical tests, which have left him certain of his future. Nora changes the subject and asks what Rank thinks they'll wear to the next costume party. Rank says she'll go as a mascot and will wear what she wears every day, while he will be invisible. He asks for a cigar. Nora gives him a light, and Rank leaves. Nora tells him to "sleep well," and Rank wishes her the same.

Act 3 Part 1 Analysis

Several elements of the action in this section are revealed by implication rather than by outright discussion. The conversation between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad is fairly straightforward. On the other hand, when Nora and Torvald come in and we see Nora trying desperately to get back to the party, we understand without being explicitly told that she's trying to delay Torvald's discovery of the letter as long as possible. Then, Torvald's comments about embroidery and knitting suggest that it's important to him for all women to be seen as pretty, not just Nora. Also, Torvald never actually comes out and says that he wants to be intimate with Nora, but the nature of his comments and the way Nora phrases her rejection make it very clear that he's initiating some kind of sexual activity.

Another implied piece of information comes in Rank's conversation. He reveals without actually saying so that the final medical test has been performed and that he has no doubt left that he's dying. Finally, Rank's suggestion that Nora should go to the next party as a "mascot" is a pointed comment on just how subservient he knows Nora is to Torvald. Nora's final wish for him to "sleep well" acknowledges that this is the last time they will see each other, and she is wishing him the peaceful sleep of death. Rank's wish for Nora to sleep well suggests that he knows that something about her is dying. Given his feelings for her and his comments about her being a mascot, the inference is that he sees her current situation as a kind of death and wishes her peace. This is possibly another subtextual influence on Nora in terms of her decision to leave.

Several elements of this play have echoes in other works by Ibsen. Mrs. Linde's comment that Nora and Torvald's marriage must have full honesty echoes the main action of *The Wild Duck*. In that play, a central character ensures that secrets in a marriage come out in the open, which results in the destruction of a marriage. The emergence of honesty in the marriage in *A Doll's House* has similar consequences. Also, the earlier implication that syphilis may be the cause of Rank's death and the associated idea that the parent's sins have consequences in the lives of their children are both key elements in the play *Ghosts*. The relationship between mother and son in that play is poisoned by both syphilis and the misdeeds of the father. Finally, Nora's struggle for independence echoes the struggle of another female Ibsen character, *Hedda Gabler*.

Act 3 Part 2

Act 3 Part 2 Summary

Torvald goes out to collect the mail and discovers that someone has been trying to break the lock with a hairpin. Nora blames the children, and Torvald tells her that she must make sure it never happens again. On top of the stack of letters is a card with a black cross, which Nora says is Rank announcing his own death. Torvald grieves for him for a moment, saying that Rank's sorrow was the cloud against which his and Nora's happiness shone. He tries to get comfort out of holding Nora, but she moves away from him. He says that their mutual grief over Rank is keeping them apart and that until they're both recovered from their grief they must stay apart. He goes into his office to read his letters.

Left alone, Nora panics, realizing that even at that moment he's reading Krogstad's letter. Just as she's imagining what it will be like to throw herself into the freezing river, Torvald returns, furious after reading Krogstad's letter. He asks her whether she realizes what she's done. He tells her she's just like her father, shiftless and dishonest, and goes on at length about how she's completely destroyed his career and his life. Nora remains very still and very quiet as Torvald frantically plans how to appease Krogstad and keep him quiet. He says that Nora must still live in the house to keep up appearances but will not be allowed to raise the children.

The front doorbell rings, and a maid brings in a letter for Nora. Torvald grabs it. The letter is from Krogstad, and when Torvald reads it, he suddenly changes his attitude completely. He reveals that Krogstad has returned the bond. Krogstad writes that Nora has paid off the debt completely over the last three days. As Nora comments that the last three days have been extremely difficult for her, Torvald repeatedly comments on how they're saved. They can put the whole business behind them and be happy again. He announces that he forgives Nora and tells her he's no less fond of her because she's been revealed as not knowing how to think for herself. He promises from now on he'll do all the thinking and she'll be the perfect, pretty, feminine little wife.

Nora goes out to take off her costume. While she's out of the room, Torvald expresses how wonderful it feels for a man to forgive his wife. He happily relates how great it is for a man to realize that a woman has become both his wife and child, and from that moment on he's going to be both her will and her conscience.

Act 3 Part 2 Analysis

Once the action moves past the implication that Nora has desperately tried to break the lock and retrieve Krogstad's letter, the main focus of this scene is the revelation of Torvald's character. His explosion of anger is perhaps understandable, since we've clearly seen how important integrity and his own reputation are to him. As we see more

of his response, however, we get a clear picture of his selfishness and insensitivity. He doesn't give Nora the chance to explain herself. Instead, he leaps to the conclusion that the only reason she did what she did was because she was as inherently dishonest as her father.

Torvald's forgiveness when he reads the second letter is incredibly patronizing and controlling. His shift in mood seems extremely sudden and jarring, but it becomes less so when we realize that this is Torvald's relief at being free. In other words, when the pressure's off, he can be nice to Nora. It's very clear that if that pressure hadn't been taken off, Torvald would have made Nora's life miserable, and the critical point at this stage is that Nora knows it.

For the first time, Nora sees very clearly the kind of man she's married to and the kind of marriage she's been forced to endure. She doesn't like it one bit. This is the next to last step in her journey towards freedom and independence. She realizes exactly what it is she needs to be free and independent of. She takes the final steps in the confrontation with Torvald that follows.

Act 3 Part 3

Act 3 Part 3 Summary

Nora comes back in, having changed into everyday clothes. She sits Torvald down for a long talk. She begins by commenting on how this is the first time they've ever sat down together and tried to talk something through. She tells him that she's come to realize that her life with him is exactly the same as her life with her father. In both cases, she thought what they wanted her to think, acted the way they wanted her to act and believed what they wanted her to believe. She has been like a doll to both of them, and she says it's time for her to learn who she is on her own. As Torvald repeatedly tries to convince her to stay, she says that she's unable to be a good parent to her children. The only thing she can teach them is to be the kind of doll she became, and she won't do that.

Torvald comments that Nora can't possibly survive on her own because she doesn't know anything about how the world works. She says that's exactly why she has to leave, so she can learn about the world and about herself. She then tells him that for the entire eight years they were married, she hoped for a miracle, that Torvald would see her as someone other than a toy. Instead, she says, she discovered because of his reaction to Krogstad's letter that he was never going to think of her as more than a possession. She says she hoped for a miracle, that he would tell Krogstad to go ahead and publish his claims because his wife's love meant more to him. Torvald says that would mean sacrificing his honor and that a man would never do that. Nora comments that that's exactly what thousands of women have done. She admits she doesn't love him anymore and says she won't stay with him as just "brother and sister," which is a possibility he suggests. She gives him her ring back and asks him to give her his ring. He does, and after she tells him that she'll be staying with Mrs. Linde, who'll come by to pick up her things the next day. She tells him not to write to her and prepares to leave. She says that for them to get back together would take another miracle and that she doesn't believe in miracles anymore. She goes out. Torvald sits alone in disbelief. A door slams offstage.

Act 3 Part 3 Analysis

The confrontation between Torvald and Nora is the play's dramatic and thematic climax. Nora takes the final steps on her journey toward independence of thought and spirit. She takes off her costume before starting the conversation. This symbolizes that she's casting off the image that both her father and her husband have forced her to inhabit. The image of the doll's house reinforces Nora's new understanding that she's been the plaything of two men. Her repeated references to her children, and her refusal to pass on to them the kind of life that has been forced on her, indicates that she's breaking the cycle represented by her relationship with her father and Rank's relationship with his. Finally, her pointed remark about the sacrifices made by thousands of women suggests

that she knows more about the world than she thinks she does. Once freed from Torvald's control, she may in fact discover a fuller wisdom that's only now beginning to awaken.

The final moment in the play is the slamming of the door, an extremely potent symbol of emancipation and determination. It's a powerful example of how a play's story can be sustained until its final moments, since right up until the very last second, Nora has the choice to stay. This moment, and the play as a whole, caused a social and political sensation from its first production. While it might be an overstatement to say that *A Doll's House* marked the beginning of the movement towards women's suffrage (the right to vote) and the ongoing process of emancipation, it certainly raised the possibility in the mind of the public that women were perhaps more than what society allowed them to be. Whatever the play's influence, at its core it is still the story of a human being struggling to be free, a story with which men and women alike, of whatever historical era, can deeply identify.

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Characters

Nora Helmer

Nora is the "doll" wife of Torvald. She is sensitive, sensible, and completely unaware of her own worth until the last act of the play. She initially appears flighty and excitable. Nora is most concerned with charming her husband and being the perfect wife; she is also secretive and hides her thoughts and actions from her husband even when there is no real benefit in doing so. Rather, deception appears to be almost a habit for Nora. Her husband constantly refers to her with pet names, such as "singing lark," "little squirrel," and "little spendthrift." He pats her on the head much as one would a favorite puppy. She forges her father's signature on a loan, lies to her husband about the source of the money, lies about how she spends the household accounts, and lies about odd jobs she takes to earn extra money. She is viewed as an object, a toy, a child, but never an equal. Her problem is that she is totally dependent upon her husband for all her needs; or she deceives herself into thinking so until the end of the play.

Torvald Helmer

Torvald is a smug lawyer and bank manager who represents a social structure that has decreed an inferior position for women. He is a symbol of society: male dominated, authoritative, and autocratic. He establishes rules for his wife, Nora. Some of the rules, such as no eating of macaroons, are petty and demeaning. He refers to his wife in the diminutive. She is always little, a plaything, a doll thai must be occasionally indulged. He treats Nora just as her father did. Torvald has established a system of reward for Nora that responds to her subservient and childlike behaviors. If she flirts and wheedles and begs, he rewards her with whatever she asks. Torvald is critical of Nora when she practices her dance because he wants to keep her passion under control and he is concerned with propriety. He is completely unaware that Nora is capable of making serious decisions and is baffled at the play's conclusion when she announces that she is leaving him. He has failed to consider that she might have any serious needs or that her desires may contradict his own. Torvald is not a Neanderthal or a villain, but he often presents a challenge to students who can find little that is positive in his characterization.

Nils Krogstad

Krogstad is desperate and so initially he appears to be a villain; in fact, he has been trying to remake his life after having made earlier mistakes. He has also been disappointed in love and is bitter. His threats to Nora reflect his anger at being denied the opportunity to start over and his concerns about supporting his dependent children. Accordingly, he is not the unfeeling blackmailer he is presented as in the first act. Once

he is reunited with his lost love, Mrs. Linde, he recants and attempts to rectify his earlier actions.

Kristine Linde

Mrs. Linde is a childhood friend of Nora's. She functions as the primary means by which the audience learns of Nora's secret. Mrs. Linde is a widow and quite desperate for work- At one time she was in love with Krogstad, but chose to marry for money so that she could provide support for her mother and younger brothers. At the end of the play, she and Krogstad are reconciled, but it is Mrs. Lmde who decides that Nora and Torvald must face their problems. Thus, she stops Krogstad from retrieving his letter and moves the play toward its conclusion.

Dr. Rank

Dr. Rank is a family friend of the Helmers, who is secretly in love with Nora. Dr. Rank has been affected by his father's corruption; he suffers from syphilis inherited from his father and he is dying. When Nora finally realizes that Rank loves her, she decides that she cannot ask him for help. Rank's treatment of Nora contrasts sharply with Torvald's. Rank always treats Nora like an adult. He listens to her and affords her a dignity missing in Torvald's treatment. He tells Nora that when he is near death he will send her a card. It arrives in the same mail as Krogstad's letter and receives little attention in the ensuing melee.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

On the surface, Nora Helmer appears to be the ideal wife her husband desires. Torvald sees a woman who is under his control; he defines her every behavior and establishes rules that govern everything from what she eats to what she buys. The reality is that Nora has been maintaining a secret life for seven years, and that Torvald and Nora maintain a marriage that is a fiction of suitability and trust. Torvald has a public persona to maintain and he views his marriage as an element of that public need. When the fiction is stripped away at the play's conclusion, both partners must confront the reality of their marriage.

Betrayal

Betrayal becomes a theme of this play in several ways. Nora has betrayed her husband's trust in several instances. She has lied about borrowing money, and to repay the money she must lie about how she spends her household accounts and she must lie about taking odd jobs to earn extra money. But she also chooses to lie about eating sweets her husband has forbidden her. However, Nora trusts in Torvald to be loyal to her and, in the end, he betrays that trust when he rejects her pleas for understanding. Torvald's betrayal of her love is the impetus that Nora requires to finally awaken to her own needs.

Deception

Deception is an important theme in A *Doll's House* because it motivates Nora's behavior, and through her, the behavior of every other character in the play. Because Nora lied when she borrowed money from Krogstad, she must continue lying to repay the money. But, Nora thinks she must also lie to protect Torvald. Her deception makes her vulnerable to Krogstad's blackmail and casts him in the role of villain. And although Nora does not he to Mrs, Linde, it is Mrs. Linde who forces Nora to confront her deceptions. Dr. Rank has been deceiving both Nora and Torvald for years about the depth of his feelings for Nora. Only when she attempts to seek his help does Nora finally see beneath the surface to the doctor's real feelings. Torvald, who has been deceived throughout most of the play, is finally revealed in the final act to have been the one guiltiest of deception, since he has deceived Nora into believing that he loved and cherished her, while all the while he had regarded her as little more than his property.

Growth and Development

In Act I, Nora is little more than a child playing a role; she is a "doll" occupying a *Doll's House*, a child who has exchanged a father for a husband without changing or maturing

in any way. Nevertheless, through the course of the play she is finally forced to confront the reality of the life she is living. Nora realizes in the final act *of A Doll's House* that if she wants the opportunity to develop an identity as an adult that she must leave her husband's home. When Nora finally gives up her dream for a miracle and, instead, accepts the reality of her husband's failings, she finally takes her first steps toward maturity.

Honor

Honor is of overwhelming importance to Torvald; it is what motivates his behavior. Early in the play, Torvald's insistence on the importance of honor is the reason he offers for firing Krogstad, asserting that because he once displayed a lack of honor means that Krogstad is forever dishonored. When he learns of his wife's mistake, Torvald's first and foremost concern is for his honor. He cannot appreciate the torment or sacrifice that Nora has made for him because he can only focus on how society will react to his family's shame. For Torvald, honor is more important than family and far more important than love; he simply cannot conceive of anyone placing love before honor. This issue exemplifies the crucial difference between Nora and Torvald.

Identity and Search for Self

In the final act of A *Doll's House*, Nora is forced to acknowledge that she has no identity separate from that of her husband. This parallels the reality of nineteenth century Europe where a wife was regarded as property rather than partner. Torvald owns Nora just as he owns their home or any other possession. Her realization of this in the play's final act provides the motivation she needs to leave her husband. When Nora realizes the inequity of her situation, she also recognizes her own self worth. Her decision to leave is a daring one that indicates the seriousness of Nora's desire to find and create her own identity.

Pride

Like honor, pride is an important element in how Torvald defines himself. He is proud of Nora in the same way one is proud of an expensive or rare possession. When her failing threatens to become public knowledge, Torvald is primarily concerned with the loss of public pride. Nora's error reflects on his own sense of perfection and indicates to him an inability to control his wife. Rather than accept Nora as less than perfect, Torvald instead rejects her when she is most in need of his support. His pride in himself and in his possessions blinds him to Nora's worth. Because she has always believed in Torvald's perfection, Nora is at first also unaware of her own strengths. Only when she has made the decision to leave Torvald can Nora begin to develop pride in herself

Sexism

Sexism as a theme is reflected in the disparate lives represented in this play. Nora's problems arise because as a woman she cannot conduct business without the authority of either her father or her husband. When her father is dying, she must forge his signature to secure a loan to save her husband's life. That she is a responsible person is demonstrated when she repays the loan at great personal sacrifice. In the nineteenth century women's rives were limited to socially prescribed behaviors, and women were considered to be little more than property; Nora embodies the issues that confronted women during this period. Torvald's injustice cannot be ignored and Nora's sympathetic loss of innocence is too poignant to be forgotten. Thus, the controversy surrounding sexual equality becomes an important part of the play.

Style

Acts

Acts comprise the major divisions within a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama were signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to the Romans, and to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action; they are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Ibsen combined some of the acts. A *Doll's House* is a three act play; the exposition and complication are combined in the first act when the audience learns of both Nora's deception and of the threat Krogstad represents. The climax occurs in the second act when Krogstad again confronts Nora and leaves the letter for Torvald to read. The falling action and catastrophe are combined in Act Three when Mrs. Linde and Krogstad are reconciled but Mrs. Linde decides to let the drama play itself out and Torvald reads and reacts to the letter with disastrous results.

Naturalism

Naturalism was a literary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and is the application of scientific principles to literature. For instance, in nature behavior is determined by environmental pressures or internal factors, none of which can be controlled or even clearly understood. There is a clear cause and effect association: either the indifference of nature or biological determinism influences behavior. In either case, there is no human responsibility for the actions of the individual. European Naturalism emphasized biological determinism, while American Naturalism emphasized environmental influences. Thus, Torvald's accusation that all of her father's weakest moral values are displayed in Nora is based on an understanding that she has inherited those traits from him.

Realism

Realism is a nineteenth century literary term that identifies an author's attempt to portray characters, events, and settings in a realistic way. Simply put, realism is attention to detail, with description intended to be honest and frank at all levels. There is an emphasis on character, especially behavior. Thus, in A *Doll's House*, the events of the Helmers's marriage are easily recognizable as realistic to the audience. These are events, people, and a home that might be familiar to any person in the audience. The sitting room is similar to one found in any other home. Nora is similar to any other wife in nineteenth-century Norway, and the problems she encounters in her marriage are similar to those confronted by other married women

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for A *Doll's House* is an unnamed city in nineteenth-century Norway. The action begins just before Christmas and concludes the next evening, and all three acts take place in the same sitting room at the Helmers's residence. The Helmers have been married for eight years; Nora is a wife and mother, and her husband, Torvald, is a newly promoted lawyer and bank manager. They live in comfortable circumstances during a period that finds women suppressed by a social system that equates males with success in the public sphere and females with domestic chores in the private sphere. But this is also a period of turmoil as women demand greater educational opportunities and greater equality in the business world. Accordingly, A *Doll's House* illuminates many of the conflicts and questions being debated in nineteenth-century Europe.

Historical Context

Women's Rights

In 1888, married women in Norway were finally given control over their own money, but the Norway of Ibsen's play pre-dates this change and provides a more restrictive environment for women such as Nora Helmer. In 1879, a wife was not legally permitted to borrow money without her husband's consent, and so Nora must resort to deception to borrow the money she so desperately needs. Ibsen always denied that he believed in women's rights, stating instead that he believed in human rights.

The issue of women's rights was already a force in Norway several years before Ibsen focused on the issue, and women had been the force behind several changes. Norway was a newly liberated country in the nineteenth century, having been freed from Danish control in 1814; therefore, it is understandable that issues involving freedom both political and personal freedom were important in the minds of Norwegians. Poverty had already forced women into the workplace early in the nineteenth century, and the Norwegian government had passed laws protecting and governing women's employment nearly five decades before Ibsen's play. By the middle of the century women were granted the same legal protection as that provided to male children. Women were permitted inheritance rights and were to be successful in petitioning for the right to a university education only three years after the first performance of A *Doll's House*. But many of the protections provided to women were aimed at the lower economic classes. Employment opportunities for women were limited to low-paying domestic jobs, teaching, or clerical work. Middle-class women, such as Nora, noticed few of these new advantages. It was the institution of marriage itself that restricted the freedom of mid-die-class women. Although divorce was available and inexpensive, it was still socially stigmatized and available only if both partners agreed. The play's ending makes clear that Torvald would object to divorce and so Nora's alienation from society would be even greater There was no organized feminist movement operating in Norway in 1879. Thus Nora's exodus at the play's conclusion is a particularly brave and dangerous act. There was no army of feminist revolutionaries to protect and guide her; she was completely alone in trying to establish a new life for herself.

Christmas Celebrations

Christmas was an important family holiday in Norway and was viewed as a time of family unity and celebration. Thus it is ironic that the play opens on Christmas Eve and that the Helmer family unity disintegrates on Christmas Day. Christmas Day and the days following were traditionally reserved for socializing and visiting with neighbors and friends. Costume parties such as the one Nora and Torvald attend were common, and the dance Nora performs, the tarantella, is a dance for couples or for a line of partners. That Nora dances it alone signifies her isolation both within her marriage and in the community.

Sources

Nora's forgery is similar to one that occurred earlier in Norway and one with which Ibsen was personally connected. A woman with whom Ibsen was friendly, Laura Kieler, borrowed money to finance a trip that would repair her husband's health. When the loan came due, Kieler was unable to repay it. She tried to raise money by selling a manuscript she had written and Ibsen, feeling the manuscript was inferior, declined to help her get it published. In desperation, Kieler forged a check, was caught, and was rejected by her husband who then sought to gain custody of their children and have his wife committed to an asylum. After her release, Kieler pleaded with her husband to take her back, which he did rather unwillingly. Ibsen provides Nora with greater resilience and ingenuity than that evidenced by Kieler. Nora is able to earn the money to repay the loan, and her forgery is of her father's signature on a promissory note and not of a check. Lastly, Nora is saved by Krogstad's withdrawal of legal threats and so is not cast out by her husband. Instead, she becomes stronger and her husband is placed in the position of the marital partner who must plead for a second chance. Ibsen provides a careful reversal of the original story that strengthens the character of the "doll" wife.

Critical Overview

In Norway, A *Doll's House* was published two weeks before its first performance. The initial 8,000 copies of the play sold out immediately and so the audience for the play was both informed, excited, and eagerly anticipating the play's first production. The play elicited much debate, most of it centered on Nora's decision to leave her marriage at the play's conclusion. Reaction in Germany was similar to that in Norway. Ibsen was forced to provide an alternative ending by the management of its first German production, since even the actress playing Nora refused to portray a mother leaving her children in such a manner. Ibsen called the new ending, which had Nora abandoning her plans to leave upon seeing her children once last time, "a barbaric outrage to be used only in emergencies." The debate was focused not on women's rights or other feminist issues such as subordination or male dominance; instead, people were consumed with the question, "What kind of a wife and mother would walk out on her family as Nora does?" The play's reception elsewhere in Europe mirrored that of Norway and Germany with the debate still focused largely on social issues and not on the play's challenge to dramatic style.

Another issue for early reviewers was Nora's transformation. Many critics simply did not accept the idea that the seemingly submissive, flighty woman of the first two acts could display so much resolve and strength in the third act. According to Enrol Durbach in A *Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*, one review of the period stated that Ibsen had disgusted his audience by "violating the unconventional." Many reviewers just could not visualize any woman displaying the kind of behavior demonstrated by Nora. It was beyond their comprehenskm that a woman would voluntarily choose to sacrifice her children in order to seek her own identity. Durbach argued that the audience and the critics were accustomed to social problem plays, but that Ibsen's play presented a problem without the benefit of a ready or acceptable solution, In fact, the critics identified with Torvald and saw his choice of so unstable a wife as Nora as his only real flaw. In 1879 Europe, A *Doll's House* was a problem play, but not the one Ibsen envisioned. Instead, the problem resided with the critics who were so consumed with the issue of Nora's decision that they ignored the deeper complexities of the play. Early in the first act it becomes clear that Nora has a strength and determination that even she cannot acknowledge. When her eyes are opened in Act HI, it is not so much a metamorphosis as it is an awakening.

In England, the play was embraced by Marxists who envisioned an egalitarian mating without the hierarchy of marriage and an end to serfdom when wives ceased to be property. But many other Englishmen were more interested in the aesthetics of the play than in its social content. Bernard Shaw embraced Ibsen's dramatic poetry and championed the playwright's work. Since the first performance of A *Doll's House* in England occurred ten years after its debut in Norway, the English were provided with more time to absorb the ideas presented in the play. Thus the reviews of the period lacked the vehemence of those in Norway and Germany. Rather, according to Durbach, Ibsen was transformed into a liberal championed by English critics more interested in his dramatic poetry than the nature of his argument. In her 1919 book, Ibsen in England,

Miriam Alice Franc declared that Ibsen "swept from the stage the false sentimentality and moral shams that had reigned there. He emancipated the theatre from the thraldom of convention."

Initial responses in America were even less enthusiastic then in Europe. Many critics dismissed Ibsen as gloomy and pessimistic and as representing the "old world." But by 1905, a production starring Ethel Bauymore was embraced by early feminists. Durbach noted that Barrymore's performance occurred within the context of the American woman's efforts at emancipation, and Ibsen became an "Interpreter of American Life." In his introduction to The Collected Works ofHenrik Ibsen, which was published between 1906 and 1912, William Archer remarked: "It is with A *Doll's House* that Ibsen enters upon his kingdom as a world-poet." Archer added that this play was the work that would carry Ibsen's name beyond Norway. In a 1986 performance review, New York Times contributor Walter Goodman declared that A *Doll's House* is "a great document of feminism, and Nora is an icon of women's liberation."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is an adjunct professor at Embry-Riddle University. In this essay she discusses Ibsen's contributions to drama as a forum for social issues.

Henrik Ibsen elevated theatre from mere entertainment to a forum for exposing social problems. Prior to Ibsen, contemporary theatre consisted of historical romance or contrived behavior plays. But with A *Doll's House*, Ibsen turned drama into a respectable genre for the examination of social issues: in exposing the flaws in the Helmer marriage, he made the private public and provided an advocacy for women. In Act III, when Nora slams the door as she leaves, she is opening a door into the hidden world of the ideal Victorian marriage. In allowing Nora the right to satisfy her need for an identity separate from that of wife and mother, Ibsen is perceived as endorsing the growing "women question." And although the play ends without offering any solutions, Ibsen has offered possibilities. To his contemporaries, it was a frightening prospect.

Bjorn Hemmer, in an essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, declared that Ibsen used A *Doll's House* and his other realistic dramas to focus a "searchlight" on Victorian society with its "false morality and its manipulation of public opinion." Indeed, Torvald exemplifies this kind of community. Of this society, Hemmer noted: "The people who live in such a society know the weight of 'public opinion' and of all those agencies which keep watch over society's 'law and order': the norms, the conventions and the traditions which in essence belong to the past but which continue into the present and there thwart individual liberty in a variety of ways." It is the weight of public opinion that Torvald cannot defy. And it is the weight of public opinion that condemns the Helmer's marriage. Because Torvald views his public persona as more important that his private, he is unable to understand or appreciate the suffering of his wife. His reaction to the threat of public exposure is centered on himself. It is his social stature, his professional image, and not his private life which concern him most. For Nora to emerge as an individual she must reject the life that society mandates. To do so, she must assume control over her life; yet in the nineteenth century, women had no power. Power resides with the establishment, and as abanker and lawyer, Torvald clearly represents the establishment.

Deception, which lies at the heart of A *Doll's House*, also provides the cornerstone of Victorian life, according to Hemmer. Hemmer maintained that it is the contrasts between reality and fiction that motivated Ibsen to tackle such social problems as marriage. Victorian society, Hemmer stated, offered a "clear dichotomy between ideology and practice." The facade of individuality was buried in the Victorian ideal of economics. In the hundred years since the French Revolution, economic power had replaced the quest for individual liberty, and a married woman had the least amount of economic power. When Nora rejects her marriage, she is also rejecting bourgeois middle-class values. In this embracing of uncertainty rather than the economic guarantee of her husband's protection, Nora represents the individual, who, Hemmer asserted, Ibsen wanted to make "the sustaining element in society and [who would] dethrone the bourgeois family as the central institution of society." Nora's rebellion at the play's

conclusion is a necessary element of that revolution; it is little wonder that Ibsen was no disgusted at the second conclusion he was forced to write. In making Nora subordinate her desires as an individual to the greater need of motherhood, Ibsen is denying his reason for creating the conflict and for writing the play.

The question of women's rights and feminist equality is an important aspect of understanding A *Doll's House*. Ibsen himself stated that for him the issue was more complex than just women's rights and that he hoped to illuminate the problem of human rights. Yet women have continued to champion both Ibsen and his heroine, Nora. Social reform was closely linked to feminism. In her discussion of the role Ibsen played in nineteenth-century thought, which appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Gail Finney explained: "The most prominent socialist thinkers of the day, male and female, saw that true sexual equality necessitates fundamental changes in the structure of society." Thus, in embracing women's equality in A *Doll's House*, Ibsen is really arguing for social justice. Ibsen supported economic reform that would protect women's property and befriended a number of notable Scandinavian feminists. Finney argued that Ibsen's feminist wife, Suzannah, provided the model for Nora as a strong-willed heroine.

Finney devoted part of her essay to the feminist reception of early stage productions of A *Doll's House*, which Finney maintained, "opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement." Nineteenth-century feminists praised Ibsen's work and "saw it as a warning of what would happen when women in general woke up to the injustices that had been committed against them," according to Fmney. Finney indicated that in Ibsen's own notes for this play the playwright asserted that "a mother in modern society is 'like certain insects who go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race.'" That the prevailing view is that women have little worth when their usefulness as mothers has ended is clear in Torvald's repudiation of Nora when he discovers her deception; she can be of no use to her children if her reputation is stained. That he wants her to remain under his roof though separate from the family defines his own need to protect his reputation within the community. Her use, though, as a mother is at an end. Until, that is, Torvald discovers that the threat has been removed. If Nora wants to define her worth, she can only do so by turning away from her children and husband.

Finney refutes early critical arguments that Nora's transformation in Act EH is unbelievable or too sudden. Nora's childlike response to Torvald in which she states "I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to" and "I never get anywhere without your help" contrast sharply with the reality of her situation, which is that she has forged a signature and saved her husband's life and has also shown herself capable of earning the money necessary to repay the loan. Thus Nora's submissiveness is as much a part of the deception as other elements of Nora's personality. Finney also argued that Nora's repeated exclamations of how happy she is in Act I and her out-of-control practice of the tarantella are indicative of a woman bordering on hysteria. This hysteria further demonstrates that Nora is a more complicated woman than the childlike doll introduced at the beginning of Act I, Finney noted that Ibsen stated late in his life that "it is the women who are to solve the social problem. As mothers they are to do it. And only as such can they do it." Finney posited that rather than arguing that women

are suited only for motherhood, Ibsen really saw motherhood as a vocation that women perform best when it is offered as a choice. When Nora states that she must leave to find her identity because she is of no use to her children as she is, she is giving voice to Ibsen's premise: Nora must have the right to choose motherhood and she cannot do that until she has the freedom to choose.

Errol Durbach was also concerned with Nora's role of mother. In a discussion in his *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation* that focuses on the critical reception that greeted Nora's decision to leave her children, Durbach offered the review of Clement Scott, an Ibsen contemporary. Scott held that Nora "committed an unnatural offense unworthy of even the lower animals: 'A cat or dog would tear anyone who separated it from its offspring, but the socialistic Nora, the apostle of the new creed of humanity, leaves her children without a pang.'" But Durbach maintained that for Nora to subordinate her own needs to the function of motherhood would be a greater offense, and cited Ibsen's own words to support his claim: "These women of the modern age, mistreated as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated in accordance with their talents, debarred from following their mission, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in mind these are the ones who supply the mothers for the new generation. What will be the result?" Nora's decision, then, can be described not as an offense, but as a display of strength. Rather than take the easy path, she recognizes that to be a good mother requires more than her presence in the home; she cannot be a model for her children, especially her daughter, if she cannot claim an identity as an individual. Clearly this principle exemplifies Ibsen's stated position that if women are to be mothers of a new generation, they must first achieve a measure of equality as human beings.

Of Ibsen's approach to marriage, Durbach asserted it would be a mistake to read A *Doll's House* and extrapolate from the play that Ibsen was striking a "militant blow against the institution of marriage." For although Nora slams the door on marriage, Kristine opens the same door. In the same way that a mirror reverses a reflection, Kristine reflects the opposite of Nora. Kristine has already suffered in marriage and has been provided with a second opportunity with the death of her husband. She has the freedom that Nora now seeks. Where Nora has known security and happiness, Kristine has known deprivation and a loveless mamage. As Durbach illustrated, Kristine is clearly a non-doll to Nora's doll. Durbach argued that if feminists want to embrace Ibsen's Nora as a symbol for women's equality, they must also address the problem of Kristine; her choice is the opposite of Nora's and coming to terms with that choice only reveals the complexities of Ibsen's play. As nineteenth-century critics noted, Ibsen presents no solutions, only questions.

Source: Sheri Metzger, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Simonds calls A Doll's House "one of the strongest plays that Ibsen has produced," praising the playwright's ability to create a narrative that grows in intensity and captivates its audience. Simonds also examines the pivotal role of Nora Helmer in communicating the play's themes and tone to the audience.

The *Doll's House* is one of the strongest plays that Ibsen has produced. In the way of character-painting, and artful and artistic handling of the situations, he has done nothing better. It is a pity that we could not have had *The Enemy of Society*, with its strong autobiographic suggestiveness, first; but there is no more characteristic play upon the list, nor one more indicative of the author's mind and power if only it be read with fairness and appreciation, than the one selected. The heroine of The *Doll's House* is its light-hearted pretty little mistress, Nora Helmer. She has been eight years the wife of Torvald Helmer, and is the mother of three bright vigorous children. She is her husband's doll. Torvald Helmer calls her his little lark, his squirrel, provides for her every fancy, hugely enjoys her charms of person, forgets that she has a soul and is sure he loves her most devotedly. Nora has always been a child; her father, a man of easy conscience, has brought her up entirely unsophisticated. She knows nothing of the serious side of life, of its privileges, its real opportunities nothing of the duties of the individual in a world of action. Nora is passive, she submits to be fondled and kissed. She is happy in her "doll-house," and apparently knows nothing outside her home, her husband, and her children. Nora loves her family with an ideal love. Love, in her thought, is an affection which has a nght to demand sacrifices; and in turn is willing to offer up its own treasures, whether life, honor, or even its soul, be the stake. She is not merely ready for such a sacrifice poor sentimental Nora! she has already, though in part ignorantly, made it, and has committed a crime to save her husband's life.

There is much machinery to carry on the plot; but in spite of the abstract nature of the theme, the episodes are so dramatic and the dialogue so brisk and natural that the drama moves without perceptible jar, and our interest intensifies and the suspense increases until the *denouement* occurs, Herein lies the secret of the success of this and all the other of Ibsen's kindred dramas. Along with the poet's insight and the cold clear logic of the philosopher, he possesses in an eminent degree the secret of the playwright's art, and knows well how to clothe his abstract dialogue on themes philosophical or psychological, so that the observer follows every incident and every word with an interest that grows more and more intense.

It is impossible to tell all of Nora's story here. Miss [Henrietta Frances] Lord's translation will do that best, if only curiosity may be aroused concerning it. Suffice it to say that the catastrophe falls in a situation characteristically dramatic. The curtain descends just as Nora, the wife and mother, turns her back upon husband and children, and passes, by her own free choice, nay, in accord with her relentless insistence, out from her doll-home into the night, and whither? This is the question that all the hosts of Ibsen's censors are repeating. Whither? And did she do right to leave her children and her husband? And what a revolutionary old firebrand Ibsen must be to teach such a moral,

and proclaim the doctrine that all those unfortunate mismated women who find themselves bound to unsympathetic lords may, and should, turn their back on the home and abandon their offspring to the mercies of strangers! But alack! this isn't the moral of Nora Helmer's story. It was the doll-marriage and the relation between Torvald Helmer and his doll-wife that was at fault. Nora's abandonment was an accidental, though a necessary, episode. It is the *denouement* of the play, to be sure; but the end is not yet. There is an epilogue as well as a prologue to the drama, though both are left to the reader's imagination to perfect. "A hope inspires" Helmer as he hears the door close after Nora's departure; and he whisperingly repeats her words " the greatest of all miracles!"

This particular phase of wedded life and perhaps it is becoming not so very infrequent a phase even on this side the water is a problem which confronts us in society. Is this your idea of marriage? demands Ibsen. Is it a marriage at all? No; he declares bluntly. It is a cohabitation; it is a partnership in sensuality in which one of the parties is an innocent, it may be an unconscious, victim.

Nora goes forth, but we feel she will one day return; her children will bring her back. Neither she nor Torvald could have learned the bitter lesson had Nora remained at home. It is the wife at last who makes the sacrifice. How strange it is that so many of the critics fail to see that Nora's act is not selfishness after all! There is promise of a splendid womanliness in that "emancipated individuality" that Ibsen's enemies are ridiculing. There will be an ideal home after the mutual chastening is accomplished: an ideal home not ideal people necessarily, but a home, a family, where there is complete community, a perfect love.

Source: W E Simonds, "Henrik Ibsen" in the Dial, Vol. X, No. 119, March, 1890, pp. 301-03.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Gosse speculates that A Doll's House aroused controversy because the play features a female protagonist seeking individuality.

Gosse was a prominent English man of letters during the late nineteenth century. A prolific literary historian, biographer, and critic, he is best knownforhis work Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments (1907), an account of his childhood that is considered among the most distinguished examples ofVictorian spiritual autobiography. Gosse was also a major translator and critic of Scandinavian literature, and his importance as a critic is due primarily to his introduction of Ibsen to an English-speaking audience.

No work of Ibsen's, not even his beautiful Puritan opera *of Brand*, has excited so much controversy as A *Doll's House*. This was, no doubt, to a very great extent caused by its novel presentment of the mission of woman in modern society. In the dramas and romances of modern Scandinavia, and especially in those of Ibsen and Bjornson, the function of woman had been clearly defined. She was to be the helper, the comforter, the inspirer, the guerdon of man in his struggle towards loftier forms of existence. When man fell on the upward path, woman's hand was to be stretched to raise him; when man went wandering away on ill and savage courses, woman was to wait patiently over her spinning-wheel, ready to welcome and to pardon the returning prodigal; when the eyes of man grew weary in watching for the morning-star, its rays were to flash through the crystal tears of woman. But in A *Doll's House* he confronted his audience with a new conception. Woman was no longer to be the shadow following man, or if you will, a *skin-leka* attending man, but an independent entity, with purposes and moral functions of her own. Ibsen's favourite theory of the domination of the individual had hitherto been confined to one sex; here he carries it over boldly to the other. The heroine of A *Doll's House*, the puppet in that establishment *pour rlre* ["not to be taken seriously"], is Nora Helmer, the wife of a Christiania barrister. The character is drawn upon childish lines, which often may remind the English reader of Dora in *David Copperfield*. She has, however, passed beyond the Dora stage when the play opens. She is the mother of children, she has been a wife for half a dozen years. But the spoiling of injudicious parents has been succeeded by the spoiling of a weak and silly husband. Nora remains childish, irrational, concentrated on tiny cares and empty interests, without self-control or self-respect. Her doctor and her husband have told her not to give way to her passion for "candy" in any of its seductive forms; but she is introduced to us greedily eating macaroons on the sly, and denying that she has touched one when suspicion is aroused.

Here, then in Nora Helmer, the poet starts with the figure of a woman in whom the results of the dominant will of man, stultifying the powers and gifts of womanhood, are seen in their extreme development. Environed by selfish kindness, petted and spoiled for thirty years of dwarfed existence, this pretty, playful, amiable, and apparently happy little wife is really a tragical victim of masculine egotism. A nature exorbitantly desirous of leaning on a stronger will has been seized, condemned, absorbed by the natures of

her father and her husband. She lives in them and by them, without moral instincts of her own, or any law but their pleasure. The result of this weakness this, as Ibsen conceives, criminal subordination of the individuality is that when Nora is suddenly placed in a responsible position, when circumstances demand from her a moral judgment, she has none to give; the safety, even the comfort, of the man she loves precede all other considerations, and with a light heart she forges a document to shield her father or to preserve her husband's name. She sacrifices honour for love, her conscience being still in too rudimentary a state to understand that there can be any honour that is distinguishable from love. Thus Dora would have acted, if we can conceive Dora as ever thrown into circumstances which would permit her to use the pens she was so patient in holding. But Nora Helmer has capacities of undeveloped character which make her far more interesting than the, to say the truth, slightly fabulous Dora. Her insipidity, her dollishness, come from the incessant repression of her family life. She is buried, as it were, in cottonwool, swung into artificial sleep by the egotistical fondling of the men on whom she depends for emotional existence. But when once she tears the wrappings away, and leaps from the pillowed hammock of her indolence, she rapidly develops an energy of her own, and the genius of the dramatist is displayed in the rare skill with which he makes us witness the various stages of this awaking. At last, in an extraordinary scene, she declares that she can no longer live in her *Doll's House*; husband and wife sit down at opposite ends of a table, and argue out the situation in a dialogue which covers sixteen pages, and Nora dashes out into the city, into the night; while the curtain falls as the front door bangs behind her.

The world is always ready to discuss the problem of marriage, and this very fresh and odd version of *L'ecole des Femmes [The School for Wives]* excited the greatest possible interest throughout the north of Europe. The close of the play, in particular, was a riddle hard to be deciphered. Nora, it was said, might feel that the only way to develop her own individuality was to leave her husband, but why should she leave her children? The poet evidently held the relation he had described to be such an immoral one, in the deepest and broadest sense, that the only way out of the difficulty was to cut the Gordian knot, children or no children. In almost Nora's very last reply, moreover, there is a glimmer of relenting. The most wonderful of things may happen, she confesses; the reunion of a developed wife to a reformed husband is not, she hints, beyond the range of what is possible. We are left with the conviction that it rests with him, with Helmer, to allow himself to be led through the fires of affliction to the feet of a Nora who shall no longer be a doll, (pp. 113-15)

Source: Edmund Gosse, "Ibsen's Social Dramas" in the *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. XLV, No CCLXV, January 1, 1989, pp. 107-21

Adaptations

A *Doll's House* was adapted for television for the first time in 1959. The adaptation starred Julie Harris, Christopher Plummer, Jason Robards, Hume Cronyn, Eileen Heckart, and Richard Thomas. Sonny Fox Productions. Available on videotape through MGM/UA Home Video, black and white, 89 minutes.

A *Doll's House* was adapted for film for the second time in 1973. This version stars Jane Fonda, Edward Fox, Trevor Howard, and David Warner. The screenplay was by David Mercer. World Film services. Available on videotape through Prism Entertainment/Starmaker Entertainment, color, 98 minutes.

A *Doll's House* was adapted for film again in 1977. This film stars Claire Bloom. Paramount Pictures.

A *Doll's House* was adapted for film again in a 1989 Canadian production. Starring Claire Bloom, Anthony Hopkins, Ralph Richardson, Denholm Elliott, Anna Massey, and Edith Evans, this is considered a superior adaptation of the play. Elkins Productions Limited. Available on videotape through Hemdale Home Video, color, 96 minutes.

A *Doll's House* was adapted for film most recently in 1991. This cast includes Juliet Stevenson, Trevor Eve, Geraldine James, Patrick Malahide, and David Calder. This is an excellent adaptation with some insightful commentaries by Alistair Cooke. PBS and BBC.

In A *Doll's House, Part 1: The Destruction of Illusion*, Norris Houghton helps the audience explore the subsurface tensions of the play. Bn-tannica Films, 1968.

In A *Doll's House, Pan II: Ibsen's Themes*, Norris Houghton examines the characters and the themes of the play. Bntannica Films, 1968.

A *Doll's House*, audio recording, 3 cassettes. With Claire Bloom and Donald Madden. Caedmon/Harper Audio.

Topics for Further Study

Feminists are often bothered by the reconciliation between Kristine and Krogstad. Just as Nora Is breaking free of the confines of her marriage, Kristine is embracing marriage. Do you agree with some feminists critics that Kristine's decision to reunite with Krogstad negates Nora's flight to personal freedom? Investigate the role of women in late nineteenth-century marriage and compare the two different ways that Nora and Kristine seek to define their identity within the social convention of marital life.

In a second ending that Ibsen was forced to write, Nora looks at her sleeping children and realizes that she cannot leave them. Instead of seeking her freedom and discovering her identity, she decides to remain in the marriage. Compare the two endings offered for this play. Given the social and cultural context in which the play is set, which ending do you think best reflects the realities of nineteenth-century European life?

The Helmer's marriage can best be described as a marriage of deception. Torvald has no idea who Nora really is and is in love with the wife he thinks he possesses. Nora is also in love with a vision rather than reality. During the course of the play, these deceptions are stripped away and each sees the other as if for the first time. The audience also sees the reality of Victorian life. The ideal family and house, the decorated tree and the festivities of the holidays also perpetuate the Victorian myth; but is it a myth? Investigate the economic and social conditions of the nineteenth century. Charles Dickens's view of this society predates Ibsen's by less than half a century, and yetDickens's view of the social condition is often regarded as especially bleak and pessimistic. Would you agree or is the artificiality of the Helmer household just as bleak as that outlined in any Dickens novel?

Compare and Contrast

1879: Congress gives women the right to practice law before the United States Supreme Court.

Today: Women attorneys are as common as men in all areas of the law. Acceptance for women in the upper echelons of corporate law proved to be a bigger hurdle than practicing before the Supreme Court. Despite all of the advances made in the area of gender equality, women still earn less than seventy cents for every dollar earned by men.

1879: Edison announces the success of his incandescent light bulb, certain that it will burn for 100 hours. Arc-lights are installed as streetlights in San Francisco and Cleveland.

Today: Electric lights illuminate theatres, businesses, and homes in all areas of the industrialized world and have become a part of the human environment that is so accepted as to go largely unnoticed and often unappreciated.

1879: In Berlin, electricity drives a railroad locomotive for the first time. George Seldon files for a patent for a road vehicle to be powered by an internal combustion engine.

Today: Transportation based on the earlier combustion engine has been greatly refined and is easy, accessible, and fast. But it is only now that electricity is being researched seriously as a power source for more ecologically prudent transportation.

1879: A woman's college, Radcliffe, is founded by Elizabeth Gary Agassiz in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Today: The opportunity for an education has ceased to be a novelty for women in the United States and most of Europe. Yet even in the late 1990s legal battles are waged over a woman's right to enter a male-only federally subsidized school, the Citadel

1879: The multiple switchboard invented by Leroy B. Firman is invented; it will help make the telephone a commercial success and dramatically increase the number of telephone subscribers.

Today: Telephone lines are no longer used only for transmitting conversations, as communications have expanded to include computers and multimedia technology. The video phone and computers that permit visual connection in addition to vocal are now a reality and will likely become common and more affordable for much of the industrialized world.

What Do I Read Next?

Joyce Carol Oates's short story, "The Lady With The Pet Dog," offers an interesting contrast to the way Nora chooses to deal with her marriage. This is the retelling of the Ibsen story, only from the woman's point of view. The theme of deception is also important in this story, since Anna chooses to keep secret important events in her life. Her efforts to escape her marriage and establish a new identity are different from Nora's because she internalizes the changes and so is not forced to confront her husband in the same manner that Nora must.

In both William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Henrik Ibsen's A *Doll's House*, there is a huge disparity between image and reality. If a character is known by what he/she says or he/she does or by what others say about him/her, then both these plays offer interesting opportunities to compare how the differing perspectives of personality affect the outcome of each play.

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* was written almost forty years after A *Doll's House*, In Glaspell's play, the relationship between men and women is certainly as oppressive as in Ibsen's. The differences in setting, notably the dirt and poverty of the Wrights' home, serve as an interesting contrast to the decor of the Helmers'. Still, the female inhabitants face similar struggles and Mrs. Wright's chosen method of escape offers an interesting opposition to Nora's.

James Joyce's short story "The Dead" can be compared to Ibsen's A *Doll's House*. Both depict a woman's struggle to become emotionally independent of the husband who seeks to control her. In both cases, there are secrets and deception involved in the wife's past. Both also feature Christmas as a background for some of the play's events.

In Ibsen's *Ghosts*, the author further explores the ramifications of a father's actions on his family. As in A *Doll's House*, this play embraces naturalism as an explanation for human behavior. In the play, the sins of the father become manifest in the son when the son discovers he has inherited his father's venereal disease and that he is in love with his illegitimate half-sister. In A *Doll's House*, Dr. Rank, too, inherits the venereal disease of his father.

Further Study

Magill, Frank N., editor *Masterpieces of World Literature*, Harper & Row, 1989, pp. 203-206.

This book compresses literary works into easily understood summaries In addition to plot summaries and character reviews, the editor also addresses historical context and critical interpretations The Magill compilations provide a reliable, accessible means for students to review texts

Meyer, Michael, editor. *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, 4th Edition, St Martin's Press, 1996, pp 1128-1136.

This anthology encapsulates several brief approaches to the study of this play. Excerpts from psychological, Marxist, and feminists readings are provided to assist students with a comparison of the different critical readings possible.

Rickert, Blandine M, editor. *Major Modem Dramatists*, Volume 2, pp. 1-32.

This work provides an introduction to Ibsen drawn from reviews and critical interpretations of his work. Excerpts date from late in the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century Compiling this information allows students of Ibsen to see how his plays have influenced succeeding generations

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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