



# Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House

## CONTEXT

### Ibsen's life

- Born in Norway 2 years before Rossetti
- His family life was drastically affected by financial difficulties, some of their property was seized for payment of debts
- His father never regained financial respectability, being ultimately categorised as a 'pauper'
- Had an illegitimate son
- His earlier works were unsuccessful, and he failed his matriculation meaning he could not graduate from university
- He married Suzannah Thoreson, became engaged to her within a month
- Ibsen was at some point so poor that he had to borrow from moneylenders, government rejected his application for financial support, he was also appalled and ashamed that the Norwegian government did not come to the aid of Denmark in resisting Prussia
- The release of Ghosts provoked great controversy, booksellers returned copies to the publisher, no Scandinavian theatre would accept the play for production, sales of his other plays were adversely affected

### Realism, individualism and free will

- Characters in a realist play were meant to depict everyday life and the subject matter was meant to have more in common with the lives of the audience
- Rather than create individualised characters, reliance on stock types whom actors and audience could immediately recognise
- Strong believer in individualism
- Michael Meyer "the theme of A Doll's House was the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is, and to strive to become that person"
- 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed increasing concern about liberty and free will
- Play's conclusion implies that individuals need to be responsible for themselves and exercise free will

### First reactions and alternative ending

- Delayed performance in London due to controversy
- Caused moral outrage and generated interest in social issues
- German ending where Nora did not leave the home was an amendment that Ibsen later described as "a barbaric outrage"

## CRITICAL OPINION AND INTERPRETATIONS

- Hans Neuenfels' production showed characters as moving like puppets with invisible strings and turning to the audience rather than to each other, shows lack of communication in the marriage and how they acting as puppets of society's expectations rather than living as their true selves
- UNESCO Nora is a "role model"
- Hattie Morahan who played Nora in a 2013 production said that the issues in the play were "universal anxieties"
- David Thomas argues that "Torvald is as much a victim as Nora"

- Robert Brustein said that Ibsen “was completely indifferent to [the woman question] except as a metaphor for individual freedom”
- Joan Templeton says that a dismissal of women’s rights as a subject of the play is a “gentlemanly backlash, a refusal to acknowledge the existence of a tiresome reality”
- Early critics claimed that A Doll’s House did not have to be taken as a serious statement about women’s rights because Nora’s transformation between act 2 and 3 is unbelievably drastic, “this reasoning provided an ideal way to dismiss Nora altogether” – Joan Templeton
- James Joyce says that this play “offers us a theatre of monstrous epiphany”
- Eleanor Marx says “women are the creatures of an organised tyranny of men”
- Marxist interpretation
  - o exploitation of the weak and poor by the strong and rich
  - o Nora’s way of thinking is dominated by her desire for material wealth
  - o does not concern about the strangers from whom she would have borrowed money
  - o from, concentrates only on what she can take from others

## DRAMATIC DEVICES

- Final curtain is not final, leaves audience to contemplate likely outcome of Nora’s act of rebellion

### Foreshadowing

- Act 2 Mrs Linde: “But, tell me – is Dr Rank always in such low spirits as he was yesterday? – foreshadowing Dr Rank’s death
- Act 2 Nora “But it’s so petty” – whilst only a minor criticism of Torvald, shows that Nora is beginning to be able to stand up and oppose Torvald, foreshadowing her eventual confidence to leave Torvald in the final act
- “You don’t realise what this may do to us all!” – Nora speaking to Torvald when he is about to post the letter to Krogstad, foreshadows the climatic moment in the next act when Torvald realises what Nora has done which could ruin his reputation and that this reveal has meant the falling apart of the Helmer’s marriage

## SYMBOLS & MOTIFS

### Tarantella – motif for sexuality

- depicts Nora as almost promiscuous in her lack of adherence to the restrictions surrounding female appearance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- motif for female sexuality and repression

### Costume – acts as a mask to the truth about Nora

- Nora’s costume reflects her need and desire to hide her true self and pretend to be something she is not
- Playing the role of the doll
- Distract Torvald from the secret, emphasises her sexuality
  - When the dress is torn and ripped to shreds in act 2, it could symbolise the Helmers’ flawed state of marriage
  - “I wish I could tear them into a million pieces”, Nora grows weary of ‘dressing up’ for Torvald and acting as his doll
  - Nora fears that she could be “no longer pretty” to Torvald, focus on appearance
  - When Nora tells Torvald that she will leave him, she has removed her fancy dress and put on everyday clothes, there are no illusions left
  - The dress mending by Mrs Linde acts as a last attempt to hide behind the mask of make-believe



## Door

- Play opens with door opening and ends with door slamming
- Door imagery throughout relates to themes of caged and free animals, open and closed possibilities and potentiality for change
- The door slamming represents the shattering of the romantic masquerade that had been the Helmers' life
- Brian Johnston said the door that leads to Torvald's study "represents security, authority, patriarchal power", the door that leads to the outside world becomes a door of liberation for Nora and the door that leads to the nursery and bedroom represents the shared sexuality of Torvald and Nora



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the door that leads to the outside represents "the door of liberation" for Nora



The door that leads to the nursery and bedroom represents the "shared sexuality of Torvald and Nora"

## Letterbox and the key



- Represents Torvald's absolute control over the household
- Nora's contact with the outside world can be restricted by Torvald as he holds the key

## Christmas tree

- Representation of Nora and her mental state
- Tree as serving a decorative purpose, Nora as a decorative object to Torvald
- When she brings it in in act 1, Christmas tree marks renewal of life and family happiness
- She asks the maid to move it into the centre of the room when she feels threatened by Krogstad's visit, the centre of the room is the focal point in theatrical terms, here the tree represents family security
- When the tree is "is stripped and dishevelled" in act 2, represents her distressed state, she is no longer decorating the tree and concerned with surface appearances



## New Year's Day

- A new beginning for Nora and Torvald

## Hereditary corruption

- Women as the main source of corruption for children
- Dr Rank's syphilis serving as a brutal and physical reminder of the consequences of sin
- Connection between illness and sexual activity

- Nora having inherited her spendthrift ways “all your father’s reckless and instability he has handed on to you!”

### Nora’s moral sickness

- Reference to corrupt behaviour e.g Nora forging her father’s signature
- Leaving her children as a continuation of moral sickness
- Lectures Nora about “mothers who are constitutional liars” who infect the children

### Macaroons – symbol for Nora’s deceit & deception and Torvald being a control freak

- Represents Nora’s “frivolity and impulsive nature” says Tony Garland
- Acts as the first hint that Nora is capable of surface resistance to Torvald, this is visible from the very start, foreshadowing Nora leaving at the end
- Nora hiding the macaroons in Act 1 from Torvald expresses her childlike nature
- When Nora hides the macaroons as Torvald enters, it shows that she is not yet as daring as she would like to be at this point in the play



### Self-sacrifice as a criticism of marriage

- Act 3, pg 102 “I would gladly work for you night and day, and endure sorrow and hardship for your sake. But no man can be expected to sacrifice his honour, even for the person he loves” -> “Millions of women have done it”
- Women often sacrifice themselves for men but men care too much about their honour and reputation to do the same for women, criticism that marriage roles are unequal
- Mrs Linde sacrifices herself to marry an older richer man in order to support her mother and two brothers and abandon her true love: Krogstad
- Anne-Marie also sacrifices herself by abandoning her own child to work as a nanny
- Contextual link, Laura Kieler sacrificed herself to save her husband Victor but then is sent to an asylum, perhaps to say that women’s self-sacrifice is not always recognised

### The miracle + religion

- The miracle changes, at the start of the play, the Helmers’ approaching prosperity is almost like a miracle as it will release her from her debt -> Torvald taking responsibility
- When the miracle does not happen, Nora is forced to acknowledge what she has concealed in her subconscious, that she no longer loves Torvald
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### Dolls, doll’s house and Nora’s children

- Object to be controlled
- Plaything for Torvald, he wants her to remain dependent on him
- Torvald infantilising her
- The children are Nora’s dolls, important function in showing Nora’s role as a mother
- Alternative ending, Nora does not leave her children when she sees them sleeping soundly, sacrifices herself for her children “though it is a sin against myself, I cannot leave them”
- Doll’s house acts as a make-believe world where children make their dolls perform social roles
- Acts as a microcosm for wider society
- “I’ve been your doll-wife, just as I used to be papa’s doll-child”



## Nature

### The Norwegian cold



- The window allows a glimpse of the Scandinavian winter
- The stove is a refuge from the winter which is equated with the bleakness of human interaction in the world of business
- When Krogstad enters, brings cold with him

### Sea storms



- Krogstad and Mrs Linde described as “castaways”
- “two shipwrecked souls”

### Forest animals – Squirrel/ skylark/ songbird

- “little bird” and “skylark”, these animals have difficulty surviving in a world where nature seems, in Tennyson’s words, “red in tooth and claw”
- Caged bird, trapped, restricted, unable to act on its natural impulses of pursuing flight, symbol of female entrapment
- Historical association, Mary Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Woman, compares women to caged birds
- Evidently, Torvald does not see Nora as his equal
- Squirrels, songbirds and skylarks are all wild animals that do not belong in a cage
- Torvald, “I have broad wings to shield you”



“I shall watch over you like a hunted dove which I have snatched unharmed from the claws of the falcon”

## Home



represents security

- E.g. pg 29, 52 and p3

- Realistic details of opening stage directions lead audience into close identification with characters who inhabit room who seem so familiar
- Nora never enters her husband’s study, seemingly trapped in the house
- When she feels threatened, she moves to the stove, whose warmth

## THEMES

### Wealth

“A comfortably and tastefully, but not expensively furnished room”

Indication of Helmers’ middle class background, engravings on the wall

A wife can't borrow money without her husband's consent

Lack of financial independence for women, but married women's property act 1882 (England)

## Gender expectations + marriage

Torvald: Is that my skylark twittering out there?

Nora: It is!

Submissive behaviour

You must show me every step of the way.

Never fear. I will

Ivar – a sword

Cradle for Emmy

Reinforcing gender stereotypes

He hadn't to know how dangerously ill he was. It was me they told that his life was in danger

Women being stronger than men

A poor girl what's got into trouble can't afford to pick and choose. That good-for-nothing didn't even lift a finger

Women's sacrifice, comments about class

When Nora suggests to Torvald that they can borrow the money, he responds that it was his duty as a husband not to pander to Nora's moods

What, not look at my most treasured possession?

Objectification of women

You have never loved me. You just thought that it would be fun to be in love with me.

Nora's blunt address to Torvald

You and papa have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that I have done nothing with my life

Men prevent women from moving forward with their life

Nils, a woman who has sold herself once for the sake of others doesn't make the same mistake again

Link with Goblin Market, women making sacrifices

Sacred duties – duties towards your husband and your children

I have another duty that is equally sacred – my duty towards myself

just open your heart to me

reference to Twice

helplessness did not make you doubly attractive in my eyes

## Sacrifice

I don't accept things from strangers

harsh

Often I wish some terrible danger might threaten you, so that I could offer my life and my blood.

No man can be expected to sacrifice his honour, even for the person he loves.

Millions of women have done it.

Wretched woman! What have you done?

I am man enough to bear the burden for us both

lies

## Death

Thirty-one hours left to live

At the next masquerade, I shall be invisible

There's a big, black hat – haven't you heard of the invisible hat? Once it's over your head, no one can see you any more

When the time comes, it's best to go silently

## Secrets

If you only knew how many expenses we larks and squirrels have, Torvald

You're dying of curiosity now, aren't you, Christine?

## Inheritance

You're a funny little creature. Just like your father

Nearly all young criminals are the children of mothers who are constitutional liars

Rank's spinal tuberculosis

All your father's recklessness and instability

## Reputation

If the rumour got about that the new vice-president had allowed his wife to persuade him to change his mind

You have ruined my whole future

## Religion

I don't really know what religion means

## Nora

- Nora seems to be the perfect bourgeois wife at the start
- Meyer, "relationship rests upon his paternalism and her childlike qualities"  
Although she seems childlike, she knows that if she told Helmer the truth, it would "completely wreck our marriage"
- Representation of female empowerment



- Parades her practicality in front of Mrs Linde when she talks about how she found the money to pay for their trip to Italy but she is impractical because she did not consider the consequences of her actions
- It is Nora who takes the lead in the ending, forcing Torvald to look at the marriage in a completely new perspective, "in eight whole years... we have never exchanged a serious word on a serious subject"
- Torvald views Nora as his "most treasured possession"

## Torvald

- Treats his wife as a decorative object to his status
- Dominates over Nora in his financial control of the household
- It is his refusal to compromise his honour by borrowing money that gives Nora the chance to prove her own ingenuity
- His security depends upon feeling superior
- Nora, "he's so proud of being a man" it is this very pride which ensures that the miracle she expects can never happen
- Torvald is very trivial and concerned about his reputation, the embarrassment that Krogstad could cause by referring to Torvald by his first name is, in Torvald's view, more than enough reason to sack him
- Very selfish, doesn't seem to care much that Dr Rank will die soon, dismisses it as "a kind of dark background to the happy sunlight of our marriage" allowing him to return to his main preoccupation which is to make love to his wife
- Torvald as a victim? "whereas he has suffered from overwork, financial insecurity and a certain amount of dishonour, she has been protected by her lack of involvement with the world" Meyer
- "he is as much a victim of his society's attitudes as Nora"

## Krogstad

- Arguably the villain in the play whose entrance tears apart the Helmers' marriage, embodiment of villainy until his dialogue with Mrs Linde
- Weakness exposed, emotional when he talks about his past relationship with Mrs Linde, "when I lost you, it was just as though all solid ground had been swept from under my feet"
- Interrupts Nora's innocent game of hide and seek, appears like the spectre at the feast
- Nora is under his control, determined to exploit his position as Nora's creditor to his own financial and social benefit
- Tries to frighten Nora by hinting forcefully at effects of drowning "down in the cold, black water? And then, in the spring, to float up again, ugly, unrecognizable, hairless -?"

## Dr Rank

- Cynical attitude, those who are corrupt are given "some nice, comfortable position" whilst the "healthy ones just have to lump it"
- Views that society has been turned into "a hospital"
- Continues to show affection and support to Nora even though she carelessly wounds him by equating his company with that of the servants when she was a child

## Mrs Linde

- At the end of the play, Tony Garland argues that it is "Mrs Linde who is in a renewed position of repression whilst Nora steps forth into the freedom of the unknown"
- Nora's sexuality contrasts with Mrs Linde's practicality



- "Mrs Linde is fleeing from the cold emptiness of the world outside, Nora is preparing to exile herself", Meyer
- Perceives new-found freedom as loneliness, knows the value of support of another human being: "castaways have a better chance of survival together than on their own"
- Motherly confidante, it is her realisation that the secret must be revealed for Nora and Torvald to gain a full understanding of each other
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## Love & Marriage

- Message that marriage should be a joining of equals
- Play centres on a dissolution of an unequal marriage
- Lack of understanding between Nora and Torvald
- Discovery that there was never love between them
- Different types of love: familial, maternal, paternal, fraternal
- True love can only exist between equals e.g Krogstad and Mrs Linde
- Both Nora and Torvald are victims of their social role as husband and wife, in their attempt to behave according to this convention, have developed a marriage based on illusion
- Ibsen shows romantic love to be a delusion, inhibiting growth of individual e.g. to keep Torvald's love, Nora pretends to be helpless and suppresses her true feelings

## Women's liberation and feminism

- Nora has often been painted as one of modern drama's first feminist heroines
- Nora is submissive to Torvald but can manipulate him into giving her what she wants
- Puts the idea of men always being in power to the test
- Play has been repeatedly acclaimed and vilified as advocating women's liberation
- Ibsen never said he was a feminist, not a term used then, more of a proto-feminist
- He said he was writing about reality
- "it is desirable to save the woman problem along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity"
- Ibsen wrote that women can't be themselves in an "exclusively male society, with laws made by men"
- Ideas about female liberation comes under a greater theme, the theme of self-liberation
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## Home

- Home is seen as comfort, joy and shelter
- 'happy home' is a façade of a doll's house
- Irony that other characters envy the Helmer's home