

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# A DOLL'S HOUSE

## Henric Ibsen

### Overview

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright—he wrote in Danish, the culture language of Norway at the time—who spent most of his adult life living in Germany and Italy. He is widely considered the modern world's finest social dramatist, after Shakespeare; his courageous look at the social world of his time, in the 'new Europe,' woke consciences, and continues to do so, having won him, in his time, the title of the 'Founder of Modernism.' His ground breaking plays—'A Doll's House,' 'Peer Gynt,' 'The Wild Duck,' 'Ghosts,' 'The Master-BUILDER,' 'Pillars of Society'—a dozen in all—exercised an intense influence on European cultural consciousness, and, though dealing in social and familial 'scandals' which might seem dated today, continue to raise global theatrical consciousness. Women's rights, or is it simply human rights?, are unforgettably (and complexly) explored in 'A Doll's House.'

### Story

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) opens onto Christmas Eve, a domestic interior in the house of Torvald and Nora Helmer, a mid-level bank employee and a busy housewife. Nora has just entered the house, carrying Christmas gifts. Helmer chides her playfully for spending too much on the gifts, a remark which reflects on the serious financial issues the couple has had in the recent past, but, more importantly, reflects Helmer's readiness to treat Nora like a child, like a figure in a doll's house. This is where we hear the note of male protectiveness, and gentle male superiority, which are portrayed to exquisite relevance in this masterpiece, which since its first performance has been greeted as the voice of feminism.

The ground laying first act of the play opens our eyes to the complexity of the Helmer home. We learn that Nora has gone into debt, in order to finance a much needed vacation she and her husband took a few years previously. (She had borrowed the money on the sly, illegally as it turns out.) With the arrival on scene of Krogstad, a low level employee of Torvald, at the bank, we learn that he is in fact the person who made possible the loan which Nora took out, and that he wants his money. He also happens to be in possession of a letter from Nora to the bank, in which she has forged her father's name. In other words, the play opens on a Nora who is pissed off by being patronized, but is at the same time in a weak position—thanks to the fraud she has committed, and the improper loan she has long ago taken out.

Family tension gradually engulfs Nora and her husband. Threatened by Krogstad, that he will reveal her secret financial life unless she helps him maintain his bank post—Torvald strongly dislikes him—Nora attempts to prevail on her husband, to retain Krogstad. The couple argue, and Torvald decides on writing a dismissal letter for Krogstad: he gives the letter to the maid, to deliver.

In possession of the letter of dismissal, Krogstad reacts strongly. He returns to Nora, demanding that she not only have the dismissal withdrawn, but that Torvald should arrange for a higher position in the bank for Krogstad. To enforce his point, he puts a letter in the Helmers' mailbox, detailing Nora's debt and forgery. By a complicated set of domestic maneuvers, Nora distracts her husband from going to the mailbox, until after the Christmas Eve costume party, which is impending.

Upon their return from the party, Torvald comes on Krogstad's letter in his mailbox, and is infuriated. He condemns Nora as a hypocrite, for having swathed his vacation pleasure in pretence; she has ruined his happiness, and he will not allow her to participate in raising his children. Shortly after this fracas, the maid brings in another letter, again from Krogstad—who has meanwhile found love again and changed his life view—returning Nora's forged letter and debt contract. Torvald immediately withdraws his insults of Nora, overjoyed at the financial turnaround heralded by this second letter. But by this time Nora has had enough. Her husband's recent insults have hurt her, but it is not just those recent insults. It is eight years of marriage in which she both worked and saved, in order to earn the needed pennies to pay back a trip debt. Had fate not cast her in the role of 'doll,' she realizes she would have been able to take care of her own life. She leaves the house, slamming the door behind her.

### Themes

**Subterfuge.** Much of the play's substance concerns the harm done to Nora, and to her marriage, by the debt which she has hidden from her husband. The need for this subterfuge derives from the subordinate female role, which Nora reluctantly plays.

**Patronizing.** Helmer's patronizing attitude toward his wife, Nora, is at the root of her resentment of him. One sees, at the end of the play, that all Nora wants is to be dealt with as an equal adult.

### Characters

**Nora.** Nora is a 'conventional housewife,' of her time, who wishes the best for her children and her husband, but whose weakness has allowed her to entangle herself in a web of deceit she can break out of only through slamming the door on the doll's house of pretense.

**Torvald.** Nora's husband, Torvald, is a staunch bourgeois, who has made his way upward in banking. Nothing can upset him more, than the burden of debt which his wife has laid upon his family existence.

**Krogstad** is a slightly disreputable bank employee, who dabbles in blackmail, when he thinks it to his advantage, but who proves to be a lover and a romantic, when he enjoys freedom from anxiety.

### MAJOR CHARACTER

**Nora** (Emotional)

**Character** Nora is the wife of the Bank Manager in her town; from the start of the play she seems a loving and enthusiastic mother, devoted to the welfare of her family. She is preparing for the family's Christmas celebration, and we can hear her humming with Christmas spirit. But our clue that all is not well is quick to appear: her husband enters as he hears 'his little squirrel' bustling about. This epithet for Nora is the clue we need. As the play unfolds we come to know that Nora can no longer endure being babied and talked down to by her husband, and that her deep annoyance is compounded by her unpaid past debts, which keep her long desired independence sharply in check. We sense from the start of the play that a time bomb is ticking in Nora.

**Parallels** Three literary women come to mind who refuse, as does Nora, to put up with any more guff from male-dominated society. Chaucer's late mediaeval feminist, the Wife of Bath, determines to have her pleasure from men, but never to be pushed around or entrapped by them; Euripides' Medea will settle down briefly in Jason's regional court, as a spousal trophy, but when bride # 2 rolls in, Medea will put up with no more, including her own children; Hawthorne's Hester

Prynne (*The Scarlet Letter*, 1850), will not tell on her illicit lover, nor abjure her guilt, though her whole Massachusetts society turns against her for the sin of adultery.

### Illustrative moments

**Feminine** Nora, who is to make history by her refusal to remain a caged bird, for a long time plays into the 'little woman' role that her husband expects, and that locks her cage. She puts away some cash for a rainy day, old age, when her charms will have faded: 'when Torvald is no longer as devoted to me as he is now; when my dancing and dressing up and reciting have palled on him.' At that time, she is thinking, it may be a good thing to have something—she means cash—'in reserve.' She is very involved with this future oriented thinking and planning. The cage Nora will eventually break to pieces is one which she, her husband, and her society have laboriously constructed, but which with aging has lost its value as a protective barrier.

**Defiant** Nora owes an old and substantial debt to a cross loser who was formerly in the bank employ of her husband, Torvald. As life needs press on the loser, Mr. Krogstad, he ratchets up the pressure on Nora to pay up. He asks Nora when she can pay. 'What right have you to question me, Mr. Krogstad,' she replies. 'You, one of my husband's subordinates!' She gradually realizes, however, that Krogstad has the upper hand, for Nora had taken the loan without the knowledge of her husband, and had listed her husband as a co-signer. If she doesn't pay, Krogstad will go to her husband—who knows nothing of the matter—for the cash.

**Secretive** Even to her intimate friend, Mrs. Linde, Nora will not disclose the identity of the person who loaned her money, and who is now demanding it back at once. While Mrs. Linde questions Nora, on the matter, Nora denies that the lender was Doctor Rank, who visits the family almost daily, on a friendly basis. Nora grows ever more taciturn, as she hides the secret of Krogstad's loan, and the fact that he is now applying the screws to her. Meanwhile, of course, Torvald becomes increasingly aware of his wife's anxieties, and doubles in on treating her as a pet, precisely the move that generates her explosive private decision to rebel, with which the play will end.

**Truth** By the end of the play, when Nora has found Krogstad's pressure intolerable, and the dissimulation within her own home equally painful, she cannot bottle up her frustrations any further. She tells Torvald 'the truth': 'You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.' When Torvald asks whether she has been happy in their home, she replies that she has been 'merry,' but not 'happy,' because she was herself always treated as a toy, just as she treated her own children like toys. She slams the door behind her, leaving the marital home and the intolerable pressures she has in good part brought down on herself.

### Discussion questions

Do you read Nora's door-slam as a blow in defense of Feminism? Or on behalf of human rights? Or do you see the play as a closet drama without particular symbolic resonance?

Is Ibsen, in this play as elsewhere, a social critic, or is he a clever artist, who uses social complexities as the material of his art?

Do you see Nora returning home after a cooling off period? Or has she made an irrevocable decision?