

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**NORA***Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Nora** (in Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*)      **emotional**

**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.'

**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 gough 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?