

Introduction to Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian playwright

Henrik Ibsen was a major Norwegian playwright of the late 19th century who introduced to the European stage a new order of moral analysis that was placed against a severely realistic middle-class background and developed with economy of action, penetrating dialogue, and rigorous thought. He is often referred to as “the father of realism” and one of the most influential playwrights of his time. Some of his notable works include *A Doll’s House*, *Peer Gynt*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, and *The Master Builder*. He wrote his plays in Danish, the common written language of Denmark and Norway during his lifetime, and lived for 27 years in Italy and Germany. He died in 1906 in Kristiania (now Oslo), Norway.

Overview of the play "A Doll's House"

A Doll’s House is a play by Henrik Ibsen that portrays the disintegration of the marriage between Nora and Torvald Helmer in the wake of a major revelation¹. The play is set in Norway in the late 19th century and consists of three acts.

The play begins on Christmas Eve, when Nora, a seemingly frivolous housewife, returns home with several packages and a Christmas tree. She is greeted by her husband Torvald, who has recently been promoted to bank manager and expects a more comfortable life. Nora also receives a visit from her old friend Mrs. Linde, who is a widow looking for a job. Nora confides in Mrs. Linde that she secretly borrowed money from a man named Krogstad to finance a trip to Italy that saved Torvald’s life when he was ill. She has been paying off the debt in instalments by working and saving money from her allowance. However, she also reveals that she forged her father’s signature on the loan contract, which is a serious crime.

Krogstad, who works at the bank, arrives and threatens to expose Nora’s secret unless she persuades Torvald not to fire him. Nora tries to convince Torvald, but he refuses and sends Krogstad’s dismissal letter. Krogstad then sends a letter to Torvald revealing Nora’s forgery and debt.

The next day, on Christmas Day, Nora is anxious about the letter and tries to prevent Torvald from reading it. She also asks for help from Dr. Rank, a family friend who is secretly in love with her and who suffers from a terminal illness. Dr. Rank confesses his feelings to Nora, but she rejects him. She then dances the tarantella, a wild dance that she learned in Italy, hoping to distract Torvald from the letter.

On Boxing Day, after the fancy dress ball, Torvald finally reads the letter and reacts with anger and contempt. He accuses Nora of being a liar, a criminal, and an unfit wife and mother. He says he will only pretend to be married to her for the sake of appearances. Nora is shocked and disillusioned by his reaction. She realizes that he does not love her as an equal partner, but as a doll that he can control and manipulate.

At that moment, another letter arrives from Krogstad, who has decided to withdraw his accusations and return the contract. Torvald is relieved and tries to reconcile with Nora, but she refuses. She tells him that she has been living in a doll’s house all her life, first with her father and then with him. She says she needs to leave him and their children in order to find herself and her own identity. She slams the door behind her as she exits, leaving Torvald alone and bewildered.

Themes and Motifs

some of the themes and motifs of the play “*A Doll’s House*” are:

- THE SACRIFICIAL ROLE OF WOMEN: The play shows how women of different classes and backgrounds must sacrifice their own happiness, freedom, and identity for the sake of their husbands, children, or society. Nora, Mrs. Linde, and the nanny are examples of this theme.
- THE CONFLICT BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND REALITY: The play exposes the gap between what seems to be and what is in the characters' lives. Nora and Torvald pretend to have a happy marriage, but they are unhappy and dishonest with each other. Krogstad is seen as a villain, but he is a decent man who wants to redeem himself. Dr. Rank appears to be a loyal friend, but he is secretly in love with Nora.
- THE GENDERED NATURE OF PRIDE: The play explores how pride is shaped by gender norms and expectations in the Victorian society. Torvald is proud of his status, authority, and reputation as a man, and he expects Nora to be submissive, obedient, and dependent on him. Nora is proud of her secret act of saving Torvald's life by taking a loan, but she also fears his reaction if he finds out. Both characters suffer from their pride when their secrets are revealed.
- LETTERS: Letters are used as a motif to reveal the hidden truths and conflicts in the characters' lives. Krogstad's letters to Torvald expose Nora's crime of forgery and blackmail her into helping him keep his job. Mrs. Linde's letter to Krogstad rekindles their old love and convinces him to withdraw his threat. Dr. Rank's letter to Nora announces his impending death and confesses his feelings for her. Torvald's letter to Krogstad fires him from the bank.
- TORVALD'S PET NAMES FOR NORA: Torvald often calls Nora by various animal names, such as "skylark", "squirrel", or "songbird". These names reflect his view of Nora as a playful, innocent, and charming creature who needs his protection and guidance. They also suggest his lack of respect for her as an equal partner and an independent person

Character

Here are some of the main characters with two-line descriptions:

NORA HELMER: The protagonist of the play and the wife of Torvald Helmer. She appears to be a happy and obedient wife, but she secretly rebels against her husband's authority and society's expectations.

TORVALD HELMER: Nora's husband and the newly promoted manager of the local joint stock bank. He is proud of his status and reputation, and he treats Nora like a child or a doll, not as an equal partner.

DR. RANK: A rich family friend, who, unlike Torvald, treats Nora as an intelligent human being. He suffers from spinal tuberculosis, a condition he believes was caused by his father's vices.

KRISTINE LINDE: An old friend of Nora's. She is a practical and independent woman, who married for money but was widowed. She rekindles her love with Krogstad, whom she had rejected for a richer man.

NILS KROGSTAD: A lawyer who went to school with Torvald and holds a subordinate position at Torvald's bank. He is a disgraced and desperate man, who blackmails Nora over a loan she took from him with a forged signature

Symbolism and Imagery

A Doll's House is a play by Henrik Ibsen that uses symbolism and imagery to convey the themes of gender roles, marriage, and self-identity. Here are some examples of symbolism and imagery in the play:

THE CHRISTMAS TREE: The Christmas tree is delivered in Nora's flurry of excitement for Christmas. It symbolizes family happiness and unity, as well as the joy Nora takes in making her home pleasant and attractive. However, as the play progresses, the tree becomes dishevelled and stripped of its ornaments, reflecting Nora's deteriorating mental state and the crumbling of her marriage.

THE MACAROONS: The macaroons are a forbidden treat that Nora secretly indulges in. They symbolize her small acts of rebellion against Torvald's authority and control over her. They also show her childishness and lack of honesty, as she lies to Torvald about eating them.

THE TARANTELLA: The tarantella is a fiery, passionate dance that Nora performs at the party. It symbolizes a side of Nora that she cannot normally show: her desire for freedom and independence. It also reveals her desperation and fear, as she uses the dance to distract Torvald from reading Krogstad's letter that exposes her secret.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE: The doll's house is a metaphor for Nora's life and marriage. She is treated like a doll by Torvald, who dresses her up, plays with her, and expects her to obey him. She also acts like a doll, pretending to be happy and ignorant. She realizes that she has never been herself, but only what others wanted her to be.

Social and Historical Commentary

A Doll House is a play by Henrik Ibsen that offers a social and historical commentary on the role and status of women in 19th-century Norway. Here are some points of social and historical commentary in the play:

THE LEGAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN: The play shows how women were denied legal rights and financial independence in the patriarchal society of the time. Nora, for example, had to forge her father's signature to borrow money from Krogstad, because she could not legally do so without her husband's consent. She also had no claim to her own property or earnings, as they belonged to Torvald. The play challenges the unfair laws and customs that restricted women's freedom and agency.

THE GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS: The play also exposes the rigid gender roles and expectations that shaped the lives and identities of men and women. Nora, for instance, had to conform to the ideal of a submissive and obedient wife, who was dependent on her husband for everything. She had to hide her intelligence, creativity, and courage from Torvald, who only wanted her to be his "doll wife" and "squirrel". Torvald, on the other hand, had to uphold the image of a strong and respectable man, who was the sole provider and protector of his family. He was obsessed with his reputation and status, and could not tolerate any challenge to his authority or honour. The play questions the validity and value of these gender norms and stereotypes.

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE: The play also critiques the institution of marriage as a form of oppression and deception. Nora and Torvald's marriage was based on lies, manipulation, and inequality. Nora lied to Torvald about her loan and her macaroons, while Torvald lied to Nora about his love and respect for her. He treated her like a possession or a toy, not as a partner or an equal. He also showed no gratitude or compassion for Nora's sacrifice for him, but only condemned her for

tarnishing his reputation. Nora realized that their marriage was a sham, and that she had never been herself, but only what others wanted her to be. She decided to leave Torvald and seek her own identity and happiness. The play challenges the conventional notion of marriage as a sacred and harmonious bond between a man and a woman