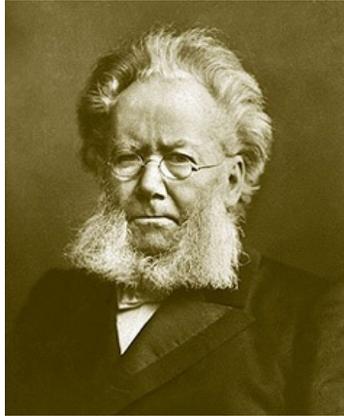


# A DOLL'S HOUSE

by Henrik Ibsen



## THE AUTHOR

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) grew up in a poor family in Norway. After being apprenticed to an apothecary in his teens, he began the study of medicine, but soon turned to play writing. His early plays gained little popular recognition, but in 1863 he went to Italy on a scholarship, and here began writing the plays, including *Peer Gynt*, that were to make him the most famous playwright in the history of Norway. His early plays were in verse, but beginning in 1877, he turned to prose plays, producing, among others, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Wild Duck*. He became the director of the Norwegian National Theater in Christiania, the town in which he died in 1906.

*A Doll's House* (1879) is one of Ibsen's social problem plays. The basic plot was based on the sad life of Laura Kieler, a journalist friend of Ibsen, who, after saving her husband in much the same way Nora does, was rejected by him and committed to an insane asylum. The play was received with shock in many places where it was first performed. Some critics even blamed Ibsen for the rising divorce rate in Norway following the play's performance. Though many categorize it as feminist play, Ibsen denied being a feminist. He did write, however, "a woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." Nora, the protagonist of the play, has spent her entire life living in a man's world, shaping herself first to please her father and later her husband. When at the end of the play she decides that self-realization is more important than her obligations to her husband and children, she anticipates the rebellion of the feminist voices of the twentieth century. This study guide is based on the Modern Library College Edition translated by Eva Le Galliene.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Torvald Helmer - A lawyer, he has just been elected president of the Joint Stock Bank. He treats his wife like a child, or perhaps a pet.

- Nora Helmer - Torvald's wife and the play's protagonist, she is childish and naive and lives to please her husband. She borrowed money without her husband's knowledge to finance a year in Italy necessary for his health and has been scrimping and saving ever since to pay back the loan. When he finds out about her selfless act, he condemns her for it and she decides to leave him and her three children.
- Dr. Rank - Torvald's best friend, he is terminally ill. He is also secretly in love with Nora.
- Kristine Linde - A childhood friend of Nora's, recently widowed, who hasn't seen her in almost a decade. Her husband left her with nothing, and she hopes that Torvald can help her financially.
- Nils Krogstad - An employee in the Joint Stock Bank, he is a lawyer with a reputation for shady dealing. Nora borrowed money from him when her husband was sick and forged the promissory note in the process, and he attempts to blackmail Nora to achieve advancement in the bank rather than being fired by Torvald. He has long been in love with Kristine Linde, and the two get together at the end of the play.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“There can be no freedom - no, nor beauty either - in a home based on loans and credit.” (Torvald, Act I)

“It would never occur to me to go against your wishes.” (Nora, Act I)

“There are men who make it a practice of prying about in other people's business, searching for individuals of doubtful character - and having discovered their secret, place them in positions of trust, where they can keep an eye on them, and make use of them at will.” (Rank, Act I)

“Because the whole atmosphere of the home would be contaminated. The very air the children breathed would be filled with evil.” (Torvald, Act I)

“Almost all cases of early delinquency can be traced to dishonest mothers.” (Torvald, Act I)

“Everything you do is always right, Torvald.” (Nora, Act III)

“My entire career is to be wrecked and all because of a lawless, unprincipled woman!” (Torvald, Act III)

“You never loved me. You just thought it was fun to be in love with me.” (Nora, Act III)

“You've prevented me from becoming a real person.” (Nora, Act III)

“One doesn't sacrifice one's honor for love's sake.” (Torvald, Act III)

## NOTES

**Act I** - The action begins on Christmas Eve in the home of Torvald Helmer, a lawyer, and his wife Nora (the entire play takes place in one room over a period of three days). She has just gotten home from Christmas shopping and is laden with packages. She has been secretly eating macaroons despite her husband's prohibition of the treat. When Torvald comes into the room from his study, he addresses her with all kinds of childish terms of endearment, then criticizes her for spending too much money. She then shows him the presents she has bought and lies to him about the macaroons. When he asks her what she wants for Christmas, she tells him she wants money so she can buy something for herself without feeling guilty about it. Both are looking forward to an expected increase in his salary due to his new position as president of the Joint Stock Bank that will allow them to be a bit less careful about money.

At this point Kristine Linde arrives to see Nora and Dr. Rank goes to the study to meet with Torvald. Nora and Kristine haven't seen one another in almost ten years, and in the interval Kristine's husband died, leaving her with no inheritance. Nora tells her about their financial struggles. Torvald was sick for a year and they had to move to Italy until he recovered; they only made ends meet because Nora's father died and left them some money, or so everyone believes. In reality, Nora scrimped and saved every penny and even secretly borrowed money in order to keep them afloat. Kristine, meanwhile, has been doing all sorts of odd jobs to survive and is hopeful that Torvald, who soon will have a large income, will be able to help her out. Nora promises to convince him to do so.

The doorbell rings and Nils Krogstad, a minor functionary in the bank, enters and asks to see Torvald. As Nils goes into the study, Dr. Rank emerges and Nora introduces him to Kristine. The doctor warns them that Nils is a bad man. After Krogstad leaves, Nora introduces her husband to her childhood friend and asks if he can find her a job at the bank. He thinks that might be possible, and Nora is overjoyed. Rank and Kristine leave as the nurse enters with the children, who have been playing outside. Nora and the children play a game of hide-and-seek, but the game is interrupted by the return of Krogstad.

As the conversation progresses, the audience learns that Nora borrowed the money for the year in Italy from Krogstad and has been paying him back in installments. Unfortunately, she forged her father's signature on the promissory note in order to secure the loan. Krogstad found out about the forgery and is now threatening Nora with exposure if she doesn't prevent Torvald from firing him as he intends to do. She sends him away and tells the children not to tell their father about the visit. Nora tries to get back to her preparations, but can't get her mind off Nils' threats.

When Torvald returns, he asks if Krogstad visited the house, and Nora lies to him. She soon admits the truth and asks what Krogstad has done in order to lose his job. Torvald tells her that he committed forgery and tried to hide it, which poisoned his entire family. This terrifies Nora, who keeps telling herself that no such thing could befall her children.

**Act II** - Christmas Day arrives, the celebration is over, and Nora is still fretting about her forgery becoming known and being separated from her children. Meanwhile, she is preparing for a fancy-dress ball the following night. Kristine Linde soon arrives to help repair the costume she plans to wear. As they talk, Kristine suggests that their friend Dr. Rank would lend Nora the money she needs to pay off her debt. Nora initially rejects the idea, but soon starts to have second thoughts. When Torvald comes in, Nora again begs him to let Krogstad keep his job, but he refuses. He writes a letter of dismissal and mails it, then goes into his study. Soon Dr. Rank rings the doorbell. He tells

Nora that he has only a month left to live and asks if she will come to him when he is on his deathbed, knowing that Torvald could never handle it. He also confesses that he has loved her for many years and would do anything for her. [In the original version of this encounter, Nora flirts with Dr. Rank, suggestively asking him about a pair of silk stockings; the translator of the version I used omitted that part, considering it offensive.] She then fears to ask him for money and sends him into her husband's study. At that point Krogstad comes to the back door. He tells Nora he will take no action at the moment, but intends to keep the promissory note even if she were to pay him back in full. He is going to use it to blackmail Torvald into giving him a promotion at the bank, creating a new position for him. Before he leaves, he drops his threatening letter into the mailbox, from which Nora is unable to retrieve it. She is clearly upset, and when Kristine asks what is the matter, she confesses everything to her. Years ago Krogstad was in love with her, so she promises to talk to him. Nora meanwhile distracts Torvald by dancing and makes him promise not to open his mail until after the party the following evening. When Kristine returns, she says that Krogstad is out of town and will return the next day.

**Act III** - Kristine Linde is talking to Krogstad while the party is going on upstairs. She reminds him of their past love, which she had to reject in favor of a more lucrative offer in order to support her mother and brothers. Now a widow, she offers to marry him and care for his motherless children. Krogstad is overjoyed and steps outside to wait for Kristine. When Torvald and Nora come in from the party, Kristine tells Nora that she has nothing to fear from Krogstad, but that she must tell her husband everything in order to clear the air. Nora insists that she dare not confess to her husband. After Kristine leaves, Torvald speaks openly of his desire for his wife, but they are interrupted by Rank knocking at the door. He asks for a cigar and then heads for home. Torvald then opens the mailbox and finds it stuffed with letters. On top are two from Dr. Rank, one with a black cross indicating that his death is near. Torvald goes into his study to read the other letters and Nora grabs her cloak, intending to drown herself. Before she can get out the door, her husband comes raging into the room demanding an explanation and calling her a vile hypocrite. He says that they must continue to live together to keep up appearances, but that she would be permitted no future contact with the children. In the middle of his rant, a letter arrives from Krogstad. It contains his apology and the promissory note, which Torvald promptly burns. He then tells Nora that he forgives her and insists that everything will return to the way it was before.

Nora changes her clothes, then sits Torvald down for the first serious talk they have ever had. She tells him that he has always treated her like a plaything, and that if she is ever to develop her own identity, she must leave him. He accuses her of betraying her sacred duty to him and their children, but she insists that she has a greater duty toward herself. He challenges her to follow the dictates of religion and morality, but she responds that she isn't sure what she believes about either one. She tells him that she no longer loves him, and that she discovered this when he refused to defend her before the world for what she had done. He offers to try to change, but she is adamant about leaving immediately. She gives her wedding ring to him and demands that he return hers, then insists that they have no further contact. The only hope with which she leaves him is that perhaps sometime in the future both of them will change so they can truly be husband and wife to one another. As Torvald contemplates his plight, Nora slams the door on her way out.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has often been described as a feminist play. Ibsen denied being a feminist, but did admit that "a woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." In what ways does the play illustrate the playwright's assessment of the society in which he lived? Consider both the legal and behavioral issues he raises in the quotation.
2. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has often been described as a feminist play. Ibsen denied being a feminist, but did admit that "a woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." To what extent does the play foreshadow the feminist movement that arose in the twentieth century, especially the aspects of it that appeared after 1960?
3. At the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora chooses self-realization over her responsibility to her marriage and family. Critique her decision, both in terms of the reality of her relationships and biblical teachings on a woman's role in the home.
4. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Torvald Helmer is a caricature of the paternalistic society of which he is a part. Critique his behavior, both toward his wife and toward the others in his environment, on the basis of biblical teaching. Be sure to use specifics in your analysis.
5. Compare and contrast Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, written twenty years later. In what ways are the women similar in their attitudes toward life and marriage? Do you find either one to be a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
6. Compare and contrast Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, written twenty years later. The play ends with Nora leaving her husband, while the novel shows what happens to Edna as a consequence of her decisions. Was Nora heading down the same self-destructive path followed by Edna? Why or why not? Support your conclusions with details from both works.
7. Compare and contrast Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, written twenty years later. Do you consider the women selfish, or are they merely seeking what is rightfully theirs? Support your argument with details from the works in question, but also be sure to include biblical analysis in your answer.

8. Compare and contrast the husbands in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, written twenty years later. Are the two fully-formed characters or mere caricatures? Does either man really love his wife? Are both men equally selfish? To what extent are they responsible for the behavior of their wives? Support your argument with specifics from both works.
9. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was written twenty years before the publication of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. While one author is Norwegian and the other American, the two works share similar themes. What do the two literary efforts tell you about social conditions in Scandinavia and the United States, respectively? To what extent have situations changed in the decades between the two works?
10. Three years after writing *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People*. Both plays portray a society that is more concerned with appearances than with reality and one that idolizes money, though they do so in very different ways. Compare and contrast the two Ibsen plays in terms of the way they develop their central themes.
11. Three years after writing *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People*. Both plays portray a society that is more concerned with appearances than with reality and one that idolizes money, though they do so in very different ways. Choose three pairs of characters from the two plays and compare and contrast the ways in which they serve to illustrate Ibsen's central critiques of society.
12. Both Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* portray women who are willing to abandon their marriages in order to pursue their personal desires. Compare and contrast Nora and Anna in terms of their reasons for abandoning their families and the ways in which they break off their family ties. Is Nora likely to suffer the consequences experienced by Anna? Why or why not?
13. Both Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* portray women who are willing to abandon their marriages in order to pursue their personal desires. Compare and contrast Nora and Emma in terms of their reasons for abandoning their families and the ways in which they break off their family ties. Is Nora likely to suffer the consequences experienced by Emma? Why or why not?
14. Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Dora Spenlow in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* are both portrayed as childish and ill-equipped for the marriages in which they find themselves. Compare and contrast the two women. What are the important differences between them? To what extent are these factors of how they are treated by their husbands?
15. Near the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Torvald tells his wife, "One doesn't sacrifice one's honor for love's sake." Nora had done precisely that, forging the promissory note in order to save her husband's life. How would you evaluate her action? Was she right, as she believed, or wrong, as her husband believed? Support your answer with specifics from the play and from Scripture.

16. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, what is the principal reason for Nora's rebellion? What does your answer tell you about the playwright's attitude toward the relationship between men and women?
17. When Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was first published and performed, Ibsen was excoriated as an enemy of marriage. Do you agree? Does the play demonstrate a low view of marriage because Nora leaves her husband and family, or a high view of marriage because she believed that it could only exist under ideal circumstances?
18. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Torvald Helmer treats his wife like a child. To what extent is Nora truly childlike at the beginning of the play? What qualities demonstrate her naivete and immaturity? Cite specific quotations and incidents to support your argument.
19. Nora, the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, changes in significant ways over the course of the play. What are the ways in which she changes the most? What speeches and actions provide evidence for these changes? Include specifics in your essay that contrast the Nora of Act III from the Nora of Acts I and II.
20. Nora, the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, changes in significant ways over the course of the play. Is the change in her attitudes and actions credible? Are you convinced that someone can change so drastically essentially overnight? Why or why not?
21. Critics of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* have often found the character of Torvald less than credible. Can the audience really take seriously someone who is so vain and clueless as this man appears to be? Do you agree with this assessment? What would become of the key themes of the play if Torvald is not to be taken seriously as a real human being?
22. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora is not the only character to change over the course of the play. Nils Krogstad, initially cast as the villain, changes as well. Do you find his change credible? What does it tell you about the reasons behind his earlier behavior?
23. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the marriage of Torvald and Nora falls apart while former lovers Krogstad and Kristine reconcile. Compare and contrast the two sets of relationships. Why does the one fail while the other ultimately succeeds? What is Ibsen trying to say about what is essential to a good marriage?
24. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Torvald Helmer is both a control freak and a pushover; he tries to dictate every aspect of Nora's life, but at the same time she is able to manipulate him rather easily to get what she wants. Which of these qualities is more central to the character? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the play.
25. Near the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora considers two ways of solving her problem - suicide and leaving her marriage. Why does she reject the former and choose the latter? What happens to change her mind?

26. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer and Kristine Linde serve as foils whose contrasting personalities and actions serve to bring out the salient qualities in one another. What are the ways in which the two are most alike, and in what important ways do they differ? Be sure to use details from the play and relevant quotations to support your arguments.
27. To what extent is Nils Krogstad the villain of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*? Does he have any admirable qualities? Do you find him contradictory, or do you think his good and bad characteristics can reasonably coexist in the same person? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
28. Many of the characters in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* demonstrate the virtue of self-sacrifice. Choose three characters who share this trait, discuss the ways in which they have sacrificed their own interests for the sake of others, and evaluate their decisions. Were all of their choices the kind of self-sacrifice that the Bible advocates, or were some of their decisions unwise?
29. At the beginning of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora seems very childish and immature. Some have argued, however, that the member of the family who is really childish is Torvald. In what ways is this the case? How does he demonstrate his immaturity and inability to deal with the world as it really is? While Nora clearly changes over the course of the play, does Torvald ever show any growth?
30. The Greek philosopher Socrates famously said, "Know thyself." To what extent is this the theme of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*? Is this what Nora ultimately seeks? Does she succeed in finding it? Why or why not? Support your answer with specifics from the play.
31. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is full of secrets. Choose three characters that seek to harbor secrets and discuss the consequences of their efforts. Would they have been better off had they revealed the truth from the beginning? Why or why not?
32. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, most of the important events in the story occur before the opening curtain. During the three days in which the play takes place, the characters react in various ways to past events that have affected them greatly and which they cannot change. How does Ibsen use this technique to craft a powerful drama? How would the play have been very different had the formative events occurred between the opening and closing scenes?
33. When Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* first was performed, audiences and critics alike debated what happened to Nora after she left her family. Did she eventually come back? Did she beg for forgiveness, or did Torvald change sufficiently for her to forgive him? What is your opinion on the subject? Base your conclusion on what you know of the characters from the play itself rather than on your own preferences.

34. In Act I of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora tells her husband, "It would never occur to me to go against your wishes." Is she telling the truth? What does this statement tell you about their marriage? To what extent does it reveal the unhealthy foundation of their relationship?
35. In Act I of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Torvald tells Nora, "Almost all cases of early delinquency can be traced to dishonest mothers." What does this statement tell you about Torvald's view of women? Consider both his ideas about moral weakness and his belief about the role of mothers in the upbringing of their children.
36. When Torvald discovers the act of forgery committed by Nora in Act III of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, he exclaims, "My entire career is to be wrecked and all because of a lawless, unprincipled woman!" What does this statement tell you about Torvald's character? His comprehension of his wife? To what extent does this outburst contribute to the ending of the play?
37. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the central couple, Torvald and Nora Helmer, do not really know one another at all after eight years of marriage. Each views the other in some idealized way that does not correspond to reality. Discuss how Torvald views his wife, how Nora views her husband, and what happens when their eyes are opened to the true natures of the people they have married. Would they have been better off retaining their illusions?
38. While many of those who first saw Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* were shocked when Nora left her husband and children at the end of the play, some feminists were equally disturbed when Kristine Linde chose marriage to Krogstad over her independent life as a self-supporting widow. Do you think they were right to be upset? Why or why not? Do you think that Kristine and Nils have a better chance at happiness than Torvald and Nora?
39. At the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, both Torvald and Nora are unwilling to accept the other's shortcomings and failures, yet Nora is often praised for leaving her husband while Torvald is condemned for his unwillingness to tolerate Nora's crime committed on his behalf. What is the reason for this double standard on the part of the typical reader or audience? Is it justifiable? Why or why not?
40. When Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was first performed in Germany, the playwright, under duress from the producers, wrote an alternative ending that he personally considered an abomination. In the new ending, Nora peeks in on her sleeping children after her announcement that she is leaving Torvald, then changes her mind because she can't bear to desert them. What do you think of the alternate ending? Does it provide a more satisfactory denouement, or does it completely ruin the impact of the play? Why do you think so?
41. When Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was first performed in England, some of its most avid supporters were Marxists. Why do you think this was the case? Consider both the economic aspects of the story and its view of marriage in your answer.

42. Critics differ in their evaluation of the ending of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Is Nora, by choosing self-realization over her husband and children, displaying the ultimate in selfishness, or is she really taking another step of self-sacrifice, as she has done so often before, in order to become the kind of woman worthy to be a good mother to her children? Support your conclusion with details from the play.