A Doll's House

Date: 1879
Author: Henrik Ibsen
From: *The Drama 100: A Ranking of the Greatest Plays of All Time.*

Whether one reads A Doll's House *as a technical revolution in modern theater, the modern tragedy, the first feminist play since the Greeks, a Hegelian allegory of the spirit's historical evolution, or a Kierkegaardian leap from aesthetic into ethical life, the deep structure of the play as a modern myth of self-transformation ensures it perennial importance as a work that honors the vitality of the human spirit in women and men.*

—Errol Durbach, *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*

More than one literary historian has identified the precise moment when modern drama began: December 4, 1879, with the publication of Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*), or, more dramatically at the explosive climax of the first performance in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879, with the slamming of the door as Nora Helmer shockingly leaves her comfortable home, respectable marriage, husband, and children for an uncertain future of self-discovery. Nora's shattering exit ushered in a new dramatic era, legitimizing the exploration of key social problems as a serious concern for the modern theater, while sounding the opening blast in the modern sexual revolution. As Henrik Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer has observed, "No play had ever before contributed so momentously to the social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matter." A contemporary reviewer of the play also declared: "When Nora slammed the door shut on her marriage, walls shook in a thousand homes."

Ibsen set in motion a transformation of drama as distinctive in the history of the theater as the one that occurred in fifth-century BCE Athens or Elizabethan London. Like the great Athenian dramatists and William Shakespeare, Ibsen fundamentally redefined drama and set a standard that later playwrights have had to absorb or challenge. The stage that he inherited had largely ceased to function as a serious medium for the deepest consideration of human themes and values. After Ibsen drama was restored as an important truth-telling vehicle for a comprehensive criticism of life. *A Doll's House* anatomized on stage for the first time the social, psychological, emotional, and moral truths beneath the placid surface of a conventional, respectable marriage while creating a new, psychologically complex modern heroine, who still manages to shock and unsettle audiences more than a century later. *A Doll's House* is, therefore, one of the groundbreaking modern literary texts that established in fundamental ways the responsibility and cost of women's liberation and gender equality. According to critic Evert Sprinchorn, Nora is "the richest, most complex" female dramatic character since Shakespeare's heroines, and as feminist critic Kate Millett has argued in *Sexual Politics,* Ibsen was the first dramatist since the Greeks to challenge the myth of male dominance. "In Aeschylus' dramatization of the myth," Millett asserts, "one is permitted to see patriarchy confront matriarchy, confound it through the knowledge of paternity, and come off triumphant. Until Ibsen's Nora slammed the door announcing the sexual revolution, this triumph went nearly uncontested."

The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction....
Moral conflict. Weighed down and confused by her trust in authority, she loses faith in her own morality, and in her fitness to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race. Love of life, of home, of husband and children and family. Now and then, as women do, she shrugs off her thoughts. Suddenly anguish and fear return. Everything must be borne alone. The catastrophe approaches, mercilessly, inevitably. Despair, conflict, and defeat.

To tell his modern tragedy based on gender relations, Ibsen takes his audience on an unprecedented, intimate tour of a contemporary, respectable marriage. Set during the Christmas holidays, *A Doll's House* begins with Nora Helmer completing the finishing touches on the family's celebrations. Her husband, Torvald, has recently been named a bank manager, promising an end to the family's former straitened financial circumstances, and Nora is determined to celebrate the holiday with her husband and three children in style. Despite Torvald's disapproval of her indulgences, he relents, giving her the money she desires, softened by Nora's childish play-acting, which gratifies his sense of what is expected of his "lark" and "squirrel." Beneath the surface of this apparently charming domestic scene is a potentially damning and destructive secret. Seven years before Nora had saved the life of her critically ill husband by secretly borrowing the money needed for a rest cure in Italy. Knowing that Torvald would be too proud to borrow money himself, Nora forged her dying father's name on the loan she received from Krogstad, a banking associate of Torvald.

The crisis comes when Nora's old schoolfriend Christina Linde arrives in need of a job. At Nora's urging Torvald aids her friend by giving her Krogstad's position at the bank. Learning that he is to be dismissed, Krogstad threatens to expose Nora's forgery unless she is able to persuade Torvald to reinstate him. Nora fails to convince Torvald to relent, and after receiving his dismissal notice, Krogstad sends Torvald a letter disclosing the details of the forgery. The incriminating letter remains in the Helmers' mailbox like a ticking timebomb as Nora tries to distract Torvald from reading it and Christina attempts to convince Krogstad to withdraw his accusation. Torvald eventually reads the letter following the couple's return from a Christmas ball and explodes in recriminations against his wife, calling her a liar and a criminal, unfit to be his wife and his children's mother. "Now you've wrecked all my happiness—ruined my whole future," Torvald insists. "Oh, it's awful to think of. I'm in a cheap little grafter's hands; he can do anything he wants with me, ask me for anything, play with me like a puppet—and I can't breathe a word. I'll be swept down miserably into the depths on account of a featherbrained woman." Torvald's reaction reveals that his formerly expressed high moral rectitude is hypocritical and self-serving. He shows himself worried more about appearances than true morality, caring about his reputation rather than his wife. However, when Krogstad's second letter arrives in which he announces his intention of pursuing the matter no further, Torvald joyfully informs Nora that he is "saved" and that Nora should forget all that he has said, assuming that the normal relation between himself and his "frightened little songbird" can be resumed. Nora, however, shocks Torvald with her reaction.

Nora, profoundly disillusioned by Torvald's response to Krogstad's letter, a response bereft of the sympathy and heroic self-sacrifice she had hoped for, orders Torvald to sit down for a serious

I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose. I thank you for your toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for women's rights. I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights. And if you read my books carefully you will realize that. Of course it is incidentally desirable to solve the problem of women; but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings.

Despite Ibsen's disclaimer that *A Doll's House* should be appreciated as more than a piece of gender propaganda, that it deals with universal truths of human identity, it is nevertheless the case that Ibsen's drama is one of the milestones of the sexual revolution, sounding themes and advancing the cause of women's autonomy and liberation that echoes Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and anticipates subsequent works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique.* The impact of Nora's slamming the door of her doll's house is still being felt more than a century later.

André Paul Guillaume Gide (French pronunciation: [ɑ̃dʁe pɔl gijom ʒid]; 22 November 1869 – 19 February 1951) was a French author and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1947. Gide's career ranged from its beginnings in the symbolist movement, to the advent of anticolonialism between the two World Wars.

Known for his fiction as well as his autobiographical works, Gide exposes to public view the conflict and eventual reconciliation between the two sides of his personality, split apart by a straight-laced education and a narrow social moralism. Gide's work can be seen as an investigation of freedom and empowerment in the face of moralistic and puritanical constraints, and gravitates around his continuous effort to achieve intellectual honesty. His self-exploratory texts reflect his search of how to be fully oneself, even to the point of owning one's sexual nature, without at the same time betraying one's values. His political activity is informed by the same ethos, as suggested by his repudiation of communism after his 1936 voyage to the USSR.

illness in *A Doll's House*

From: *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature.*

Henrik Ibsen's main characters in his play *A Doll's House* are all affected by illness, either physical or moral, as it plays a fundamental role in altering each of their lives.

Doctor Rank, once Torvald Helmer's personal physician but now considered the dearest friend of both Torvald and Nora, suffers from a physical illness alluded to as a form of syphilis. Rank's illness is a blatant case of his being physically affected by, or as he believes punished for, his father's moral discrepancies in his philandering and otherwise irresponsible sexual behavior prior to Rank's being conceived. His father's moral illness is passed down to his son in the form of a physical illness. As a result, Rank has not had the opportunity to live a full life and dies at a relatively young age. Rank's life, then, is forever altered through the actions of another. Such is also the case with Christine Linde, Nils Krogstad, Nora, and Torvald.

As a result of her widowed mother's physical illness, Christine Linde, once a school friend of Nora's, finds herself responsible, as the eldest of three children, for the care and well-being of her two younger brothers and her ill mother. To assist her in providing for her family, Linde must choose between marrying Nils Krogstad, the man whom she loves but who is not financially stable, or the man whom she does not love but who could provide financially for her family. She chooses to marry for money, rather than love, and this decision proves a bad one when she discovers her new husband's business ventures are not as sound as she believed. She is soon left widowed and penniless and must take on various menial jobs to support her brothers. If not for her mother's illness, Linde would have been free of the burden of marrying for financial stability instead of love, a choice that ultimately alters her life as she becomes a haggard woman in search of a better position. However, this search ultimately leads her to Nora's door, in hopes of finding employment through Torvald at his bank. It is in coming to Nora's home that Linde reencounters Krogstad, an encounter that leads to their joyous reconciliation by the end of the play.

It was not only Linde's life that was altered by her mother's illness and the resulting ultimatum of marriage, but Krogstad's life as well. Krogstad blames Linde's jilting of him for his resulting moral corruption. After Linde left him for another man, Krogstad entered into an unhappy marriage and was left a widower with several children. He does whatever he can to support them, including blackmail. It is as a result of Krogstad's moral corruption that he enters into a loan agreement with Nora, who then forges her dying father's signature on the loan documents so as not to trouble him with her situation. Krogstad makes it clear that it is not only money he is after but winning a position of respect in the town as well, for his sons are growing and it is imperative that they be given a fair chance to succeed. Krogstad sees maintaining his position at the bank as a necessary step in obtaining and upholding society's good opinion.

Krogstad's loan agreement with Nora is seen by Torvald as her moral demise. He is shamed by her actions and fears what society will think of a man in his position once word is leaked that his wife entered into secret negotiations with a morally reprehensible man behind her husband's back. Torvald chastises her as an unfit mother and a disappointment as a wife. If Krogstad had

been a man of high moral character, he would not have entered into such an agreement with Nora without her husband's knowledge. His diseased moral character, then, led to the moral corruption of Nora. Torvald is initially unwilling to forgive his wife for her actions, but he changes his mind once he discovers that the loan agreement has been made null and void. His response to her situation, however, causes Nora to realize that Torvald will always maintain a tainted moral view of her character, and she decides to leave him.

A chain reaction of events stemming from a physical illness alters the lives of each character—some for the worse, as in the case of Dr. Rank, whose father's philandering led to Rank's early demise, as well as in the case of Torvald, who loses his wife as a result of his reaction to her questionable behavior. But some lives are altered for the better. Although the illness of Linde's mother caused her to choose between love and money, with Krogstad's life also adversely affected in the bargain, it was her coming to Nora for assistance that led to a reunion with the man she originally loved. Consequently, Nora's entering into a loan agreement with Krogstad eventually opened her eyes to her husband's selfish and unforgiving manner, causing her to choose a new and anticipated better life without him.

Citation Information

Text Citation: Haller, Elizabeth K. "Illness in *A Doll's House*." McClinton-Temple, Jennifer ed. *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2011. *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc. http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&SID=1&iPin=ETL0597&SingleRecord=True (accessed April 12, 2012).

How to Cite

Record URL:
http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&SID=1&iPin=ETL0597&SingleRecord=True.

A Doll's House

Date: 1879
Author: Henrik Ibsen
From: *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature.*

The radical Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, the father of modern realistic drama, earned ridicule and reproof for revealing women's need for validation and for independence from male authority. In 1879, he displaced the standard pattern of domestic playwriting in his landmark social drama *A Doll's House*. Critics and moralists assailed him for publishing a decadent and subversive play that lionizes a woman guilty of fraud and of deserting her husband, home, and children. Ibsen's depiction of Nora Helmer as a sensible family financier helped to direct the course of feminist stage drama and to establish themes of middle-class hypocrisy and the emotional and financial strangulation of women by patriarchal marriage. Neither comic nor tragic in structure, the play depicts the daily tides in domestic lives that erode accepted social and religious codes.

By stripping the dialogue of the amusing husband-wife badinage common to domestic drama, the playwright relieves the atmosphere of sentimentality. He reveals the growing discontent that prefaces Nora's lengthy statement of unhappiness and that sends her on a yet-to-be discovered path to a new life. Of his perspective, he remarked, "There are two kinds of spiritual law . . . one in man and one in woman . . . but the woman is judged in practical matters by man's law" (Ferguson, 230). He stressed that Europe "is exclusively a male society with laws written by men and with prosecutors and judges who judge women's behavior from the male standpoint" (*ibid.*). He was successful with his experimental drama of ideas, which flourished in productions in Copenhagen, Munich, Oslo, and Stockholm. His publisher reprinted the play twice within 12 weeks and ordered translations in English, Finnish, German, Italian, Polish, and Russian. One of the strongest performers of the role of Nora Helmer was the Italian actress Eleanora Duse.

Ibsen's focus on the theme of miseducation and subjugation of women derives clout from the title, which suggests the gingerbread dollhouses in which little girls set make-believe families in structured domestic scenarios. Torvald miniaturizes his wife with his choice of demeaning epithets—"my little lark," "my little squirrel," "my little spendthrift," and "little featherhead" (Ibsen, 3, 4). From his self-ennobling perspective as bank manager, he further devalues her for thinking "like a woman" by borrowing money against his wishes (*ibid.*, 4). The pet names dot the dialogue of act 1—"odd little soul," "Miss Sweet-Tooth," "poor little girl" (*ibid.*, 6, 7). Echoing the father-daughter charade, Nora cajoles, connives, and lies like a child as her only means of negotiating with a husband who confuses his conjugal role with fatherhood. As an automaton, she performs the appointed tasks of mother, hostess, and nurse during his illness. In breaking out of the harness of the well-disciplined mate, she violates his dictates by negotiating a loan with a forged signature to pay for his year's recuperation in Italy.

The revelation of Nora's violation of the male banking hegemony forces viewers to examine the absurdity of treating women as senseless children. After eight years as husband and wife, they react differently to blackmail by Nils Krogstad, a disgruntled bank clerk. To Torvald, the clerk's coercion threatens scandal and an end to Torvald's reputation for refinement and business acumen. He sees Nora as "a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal!" (*ibid.*, 59). To Nora, Torvald's superficial response and his removal of their three children from Nora's care produce a climax to mounting disenchantment that sends her over the edge. No longer willing to dress, dance, and recite like a wind-up toy, she denounces the patriarchal system that transfers women from their fathers' hands into those of paternal husbands. She rejects Torvald's offer to retrain her and takes responsibility for her own rehabilitation.

Further Information

Mary Ellen Snodgrass

ethics in *A Doll's House*

From: *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature.*

The ethics of Henrik Ibsen's central male character perpetuate the chain of events pivotal to the plot of *A Doll's House.* Torvald Helmer passes judgment freely, and he expects his strict moral principles to be upheld by his wife, his friends, and his employees. Torvald's primary concern is with appearances and remaining above suspicion; therefore, it becomes clear to all who know him that deviating from Torvald's rules of conduct would certainly lead him to discontinue any semblance of an acquaintance. This is illustrated most clearly in his relationship with Nora but also in his relationship with Krogstad.

Torvald worries that others will declare him unethical if he continues to retain Krogstad as an employee at the bank once he has taken his post as manager. That they knew each other as children causes Krogstad to take a familiar tone with Torvald, who fears that this familiarity in his new and high-ranking position at the bank will be a cause for ridicule by others in his employ. Anything or anyone that deviates from Torvald's maintaining of the most respectable of appearances is quickly expelled. Additionally, rather than consider the circumstances behind Krogstad's illegal actions, Torvald looks upon Krogstad's forgery as an act of treachery signifying a lack of moral character. He passes judgment on Krogstad's home, stating that he is poisoning his children by his mere presence, instilling in his home an atmosphere of lies and evildoing. A firm believer that a parent's indiscretions are passed down to the children, Torvald criticizes Krogstad for failing to confess openly to his crime and take his punishment, a more morally defensible act than that of perpetuating a lie.

Nora fares no better than Krogstad in her husband's eyes. Torvald's demeaning view of and reference to Nora as a witless and feeble animal throughout enforces his view that it is right for a woman to be beautiful and dependent. That Nora could devise such a scheme involving the forging of her father's signature, the undertaking of a loan, and the procuring of funds to pay the loan indicates that she used her brain rather than her beauty, which undermines Torvald's belief system. As such, he is both threatened by her independence and appalled at Nora's breach of his set code of moral conduct. One has only to look at his reaction toward Nora's financial impropriety to see his willingness to uphold his rules of conduct and all appearances of propriety at all costs, including abandoning his wife.

Torvald is ever one to set forth the propriety of a situation, especially when it comes to matters of money. He is vehemently against borrowing money, believing it to be a form of dependency on outside forces that detracts from the beauty of home life. Nora is unfamiliar with legal matters, including the intricacies involved in her borrowing of money from Krogstad and the resulting bond. She looks only toward how the ends justify the means; therefore, she cannot understand why the law would not and does not consider the circumstances surrounding a crime (such as forgery) that may justify the crime being committed. When she forged her father's signature on the bond, Nora's only concern was in providing Torvald with the retreat to Italy that he needed to restore his health. That she was simply looking to save Torvald's life is of no consequence to him, however, as Torvald sees only the impropriety of his wife's legal and

financial indiscretions. Torvald's primary concern, though, remains with appearances and remaining above suspicion, for he knows that the perfect appearance of his home and his moral propriety would be forever tarnished if others became aware of the situation. Additionally, he is convinced that keeping Nora in the home would be a danger to their children, raising them in a poisoned atmosphere of deception. As such, Torvald sees fit to sever all ties with Nora in an attempt to save his children and uphold appearances.

Once he discovers that word will not leak of Nora's impropriety, however, Torvald is quick to revoke his earlier claims of dissolving their marriage, but it is too late for Nora. She points out that though a man will not compromise his honor for a woman, a woman will sacrifice hers for a man. She questions the ethics behind this behavior. It is clear to Nora that, rather than recognizing her forthrightness in seeking financial assistance as an act of desperation to keep him alive, Torvald views it as an act of moral reprehension that could spell the downfall of his position in society.

Citation Information

Text Citation: Haller, Elizabeth K. "Ethics in *A Doll's House*." McClinton-Temple, Jennifer ed. *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2011. *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc. http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&SID=1&iPin=ETL0595&SingleRecord=True (accessed April 12, 2012).

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