

A Doll's House

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A Doll's House

Introduction

A Doll's House is one of the most famous plays of the nineteenth century. Henrik Ibsen influenced many of the twentieth century playwrights as the founder of modern drama. The world premiere of *A Doll's House* took place at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, on December 21, 1879. The premiere date was fitting for the Christmas time setting of the play. Two weeks earlier, a print run of 8,000 copies of the script had been published, and it already had been sold out. It opened in London in 1882 to gain the favour of the public all over Europe.

Gender

This play focuses on the ways that women are perceived in their various roles, especially in marriage and motherhood. Torvald, **Nora's** husband, in particular, has a very clear but narrow definition of women's roles. He believes that it is the sacred duty of a woman to be a good wife and mother. Moreover, he tells **Nora** that women are responsible for the morality of their children. In essence, he sees women as childlike, helpless creatures detached from reality on the one hand, but on the other hand as influential moral forces responsible for the purity of the world through their influence in the home.

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen paints a bleak picture of the sacrificial role held by women of all economic classes in his society. In general, the play's female characters exemplify **Nora's** assertion (*spoken to Torvald in Act Three*) that even though men refuse to sacrifice their integrity, "hundreds of thousands of women have." In order to support her mother and two brothers, **Mrs. Linde** found it necessary to abandon **Krogstad**, her true—but penniless—love, and marry a richer man. **Nora's** nanny had to abandon her own child to support herself by working as **Nora's** (*and then as Nora's children's*) caretaker. As she tells **Nora**, the nanny considers herself lucky to have found the job, since she was "a poor girl

who'd been led astray."

Torvald Hemler portrays how people believed men ought to be at the time. He held a firm belief that his image was more important than anything. When he first found out that **Nora** had borrowed money from **Krogstad** and had forged her father's signature, he reacted by saying, "From now on, forget happiness. Now it's just about saving the remains, the wreckage, the appearance."

Nora is called a number of childlike names by Torvald throughout the play. These include "little songbird," "squirrel," "lark," "little featherhead," "little skylark," "little person," and "little woman." Torvald commonly uses the modifier "little" before the names he calls **Nora**. These are all usually followed by the possessive "my," signaling Torvald's belief that **Nora** is his. This pattern seems like more than just a collection of pet names. Overall, he sees **Nora** as a child of his.

Title

Nora realises that all her life, she has been simply acting as a decoration for the Hemler household and even compares herself to a doll, who gets played with, first by her father and then by Torvald, and she claims that that is the reason she had not achieved anything during her lifetime. "I have been performing tricks for you, Torvald. That's how I've survived. You wanted it like that. You and Papa have done me a great wrong. It's because of you I've made nothing of my life." By the end of the play, she has become a tougher, more independent woman. The play ends with her leaving and the door slamming behind her.

In this play, Ibsen makes many hints about the roles of society and how the female gender was treated at the time. From this play you can observe what Ibsen believed about the roles of society, equality between males and females, and the idea of feminism.

Setting

The whole play takes place in one room. Until the last act, **Nora** is in every scene; she never seems to leave the room. The action of the play all comes to her. She is literally trapped in domestic comfort. She is given her “housekeeping” money by **Helmer** as though she is a doll in a doll’s house. The play suggests that this treatment is condescending and not an appropriate way to treat one’s wife.

1
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ACT I

(SCENE.—A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right ft leads to Helmer's study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small book-case with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter.

A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open. Enter NORA, humming a tune and in high spirits. She is in outdoor dress and carries a number of parcels; these she lays on the table to the right. She leaves the outer door open after her, and through it is seen a PORTER who is carrying a Christmas Tree and a basket, which he gives to the MAID who has opened the door.)

Nora. Hide the Christmas Tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it until this evening, when it is dressed. (To the PORTER, taking out her purse.) How much?

Porter. Sixpence.

Nora. There is a shilling. No, keep the change. (The **PORTER** thanks her, and goes out. **NORA** shuts the door. She is laughing to herself, as she takes off her hat and coat. She takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket and eats one or two; then goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens.) Yes, he is home. (Still humming, she goes to the table on the right.)

Helmer (calls out from his room). Is that my little songbird twittering out there?

Nora (busy opening some of the parcels). Yes, it is!

Helmer. Is it my little squirrel busting about?

Nora. Yes!

Helmer. When did my squirrelkin come home?

Nora. Just now. (*Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth.*) Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

Helmer. Just a moment. (*A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room, pen in hand.*) Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting all my money again?

Nora. Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.

Helmer. Still, that doesn't mean we've money to burn.

Nora. Yes, Torvald, we can burn just a little, Can't we? Just a tiny little! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money.

Helmer. Yes, after the New Year; but then it will be a whole quarter before the salary is due.

Nora. Pooh! we can borrow until then.

Helmer. **Nora!** (*Goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear.*) The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and —

Nora (*putting her hands over his mouth*). Oh! don't say such horrid things.

Helmer. Still, suppose that happened,—what then?

Nora. If that were to happen, I don't suppose I should care whether I owed money or not.

Helmer. Yes, but what about the people who had lent it?

Nora. They? Who would bother about them? I should not know who they were.

Helmer. That is like a woman! But seriously, **Nora**, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt, it's

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slavery. We two have kept bravely on the straight road so far, and we will go on the same way for the short time longer till we don't have to struggle any more.

Nora (*moving towards the stove*). As you please, Torvald.

Helmer (*following her*). Come, come, my little skylark must not droop her wings. What is this! Is my little squirrel making sulky faces? (*Taking out his wallet.*) **Nora**, what do you think I have got here?

Nora (*turning round quickly*). Money!

Helmer. There you are. (*Gives her some money.*) Do you think I don't know what a lot is wanted for housekeeping at Christmas-time?

Nora (*counting*). Ten shillings—a pound—two pounds! Thank you, thank you, Torvald; that will keep me going for a long time.

Helmer. Indeed it must.

Nora. Yes, yes, it will. But come here and let me show you what I have bought. Bargains! And all so cheap! Look, here is a new outfit for Ivar, and a sword; and a horse and a trumpet for Bob; and a doll and dolly's bedstead for Emmy,—they are very plain, but anyway she will soon break them in pieces. And here are dresslengths and handkerchiefs for the **maids**; old Anne ought really to have something better.

Helmer. And what is in this parcel?

Nora (*crying out*). No, no! you mustn't see that until this evening.

Helmer. Very well. But now tell me, you extravagant little person, what would you like for yourself?

Nora. For myself? Oh, I am sure I don't want anything.

Helmer. Yes, but you must. Tell me something reasonable that you would particularly like to have.

Nora. No, I really can't think of anything unless, Torvald...

Helmer. Well?

Nora (*playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his*). If you really want to give me something, you might...you might...

Helmer. Well, out with it!

Nora (*speaking quickly*). You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it.

Helmer. But, **Nora** ...

Nora. Oh, do! dear Torvald; please, please do! Then I will wrap it up in beautiful *gilt* paper and hang it on the Christmas Tree. Wouldn't that be fun?

Helmer. What are little people called that are always wasting money?

Nora. Spendthrifts—I know. Let us do as you suggest, Torvald, and then I shall have time to think what I am most in want of. That is a very sensible plan, isn't it?

Helmer (*smiling*). Indeed it is—that is to say, if you were really to save out of the money I give you, and then really buy something for yourself. But if you spend it all on the house-keeping and any number of unnecessary things, then I merely have to pay up again.

Nora. Oh but, Torvald ...

Helmer. You can't deny it, my dear little **Nora**. (*Puts his arm round her waist.*) It's a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money. One would hardly believe how expensive such little persons are!

Nora. It's a shame to say that. I do really save all I can.

Helmer (*laughing*). That's very true,—all you can. But you can't save anything!

Nora (*smiling quietly and happily*). You haven't any idea how many expenses we skylarks and squirrels have, Torvald.

Helmer. You are an odd little soul. Daddy's daughter. You always find some new way of *wheeling* money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, **Nora**.

Nora. Ah, I wish I had inherited many of Daddy's qualities.

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Helmer. And I would not wish you to be anything but just what you are, my sweet little skylark. But, do you know, it strikes me that you are looking rather—what shall I say— rather uneasy today?

Nora. Do I?

Helmer. You do, really. Look straight at me.

Nora (*looks at him*). Well?

Helmer (*wagging his finger at her*). Hasn't Miss Sweet Tooth been breaking rules in town today?

Nora. No; what makes you think that?

Helmer. Hasn't she paid a visit to the sweetie-shop?

Nora. No, I assure you, Torvald—

Helmer. Not been nibbling sweets?

Nora. No, certainly not.

Helmer. Not even taken a bite at a macaroon or two?

Nora. No, Torvald, I swear —

Helmer. There, there, of course I was only joking.

Nora (*going to the table on the right*). You told me not to. I should not think of going against your wishes.

Helmer. No, I am sure of that; besides, you gave me your word— (*Going up to her*.) Keep your little Christmas secrets to yourself, my darling. They will all be revealed tonight when the Christmas Tree is lit, no doubt.

Nora. Did you remember to invite Doctor **Rank**?

Helmer. No. But there is no need; as a matter of course he will come to dinner with us. However, I will ask him when he comes in this morning. I have ordered some good wine. **Nora**, you can't think how I am looking forward to this evening.

Nora. So am I! And how the children will enjoy themselves, Torvald!

Helmer. It is splendid to feel that one has a perfectly safe appointment, and a big enough income. It's delightful to think of, isn't

it?

Nora. It's wonderful!

Helmer. Do you remember last Christmas? For a full three weeks beforehand you shut yourself up every evening until long after midnight, making ornaments for the Christmas Tree, and all the other fine things that were to be a surprise to us. It was the dulllest three weeks I've ever spent!

Nora. I didn't find it dull.

Helmer (*smiling*). But there was precious little result.

Nora. Oh, you shouldn't annoy me about that again. How could I help the cat's going in and tearing everything to pieces?

Helmer. Of course you couldn't, poor little girl. You had the best of intentions to please us all, and that's the main thing. But it is a good thing that our hard times are over.

Nora. Yes, it is really wonderful.

Helmer. This time I needn't sit here and be dull all alone, and you needn't ruin your lovely eyes and your pretty little hands—

Nora (*clapping her hands*). No, Torvald, I needn't any longer, need I! It's wonderfully lovely to hear you say so! (*Taking his arm.*) Now I will tell you how I have been thinking we ought to arrange things, Torvald. As soon as Christmas is over—(*A bell rings in the hall.*) There's the bell. (*She tidies the room a little.*) There's someone at the door. What a nuisance!

Helmer. If it is a caller, remember I am not at home.

Maid (*in the doorway*). A lady to see you, ma'am,—a stranger.

Nora. Ask her to come in.

Maid (*to HELMER*). The doctor came at the same time, sir.

Helmer. Did he go straight into my room?

Maid. Yes, sir.

(*HELMER goes into his room. The MAID ushers in Mrs. LINDE, who is in travelling dress, and shuts the door.*)

ACT I

Mrs. Linde (*in a dejected and timid voice*). How do you do, **Nora**?

Nora (*doubtfully*). How do you do—

Mrs. Linde. You don't recognise me, I suppose.

Nora. No, I don't know—yes, to be sure, I seem to— (*Suddenly*). Yes! Christine! Is it really you?

Mrs. Linde. Yes, it is I.

Nora. Christine! To think of my not recognising you! And yet how could I—(*In a gentle voice*.) How you have altered, Christine!

Mrs. Linde. Yes, I have indeed. In nine, ten long years—

Nora. Is it so long since we met? I suppose it is. The last eight years have been a happy time for me, I can tell you. And so now you have come into the town, and have taken this long journey in winter—that was brave of you.

Mrs. Linde. I arrived by steamer this morning.

Nora. To have some fun at Christmas-time, of course. How delightful! We will have such fun together! But take off your things. You are not cold, I hope. (*Helps her*.) Now we will sit down by the stove, and be cosy. No, take this armchair; I will sit here in the rockingchair. (*Takes her hands*.) Now you look like your old self again; it was only the first moment—You are a little paler, Christine, and perhaps a little thinner.

Mrs. Linde. And much, much older, **Nora**.

Nora. Perhaps a little older; very, very little; certainly not much. (*Stops suddenly and speaks seriously*.) What a thoughtless creature I am, chattering away like this. My poor, dear Christine, do forgive me.

Mrs. Linde. What do you mean, **Nora**?

Nora (*gently*). Poor Christine, you are a widow.

Mrs. Linde. Yes; it is three years ago now.

Nora. Yes, I knew; I saw it in the papers. I assure you, Christine, I meant ever so often to write to you at the time, but I always put it off and something always prevented me.

Mrs. Linde. I quite understand, dear.

Nora. It was very bad of me, Christine. Poor thing, how you must have suffered. And he left you nothing?

Mrs. Linde. No.

Nora. And no children?

Mrs. Linde. No.

Nora. Nothing at all, then.

Mrs. Linde. Not even any sorrow or grief to live upon.

Nora (*looking incredulously at her*). But, Christine, is that possible?

Mrs. Linde (*smiles sadly and strokes her hair*). It sometimes happens, Nora.

Nora. So you are quite alone. How dreadfully sad that must be. I have three lovely children. You can't see them just now, for they are out with their nurse. But now you must tell me all about it.

Mrs. Linde. No, no; I want to hear about you.

Nora. No, you must begin. I mustn't be selfish today; today I must only think of your affairs. But there is one thing I must tell you. Do you know we have just had a great piece of good luck?

Mrs. Linde. No, what is it?

Nora. Just fancy, my husband has been made manager of the Bank!

Mrs. Linde. Your husband? What good luck!

Nora. Yes, tremendous! A lawyer's profession is such an uncertain thing, especially if he won't undertake unsavoury cases; and naturally Torvald has never been willing to do that, and I quite agree with him. You may imagine how pleased we are! He is to take up his work in the Bank at the New Year, and then he will have a big salary and lots of bonuses. For the future we can live quite differently—we can do just as we like. I feel so relieved and so happy, Christine! It will be splendid to have heaps of money and not need to have any anxiety, won't it?

Mrs. Linde. Yes, anyhow I think it would be delightful to have what

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one needs.

Nora. No, not only what one needs, but heaps and heaps of money.

Mrs. Linde (*smiling*). **Nora, Nora**, haven't you learned sense yet? In our schooldays you were a great spendthrift.

Nora (*laughing*). Yes, that is what Torvald says now. (*Wags her finger at her.*) But "**Nora, Nora**" is not so silly as you think. We have not been in a position for me to waste money. We have both had to work.

Mrs. Linde. You too?

Nora. Yes; *odds and ends*, needlework, crotchet-work, embroidery, and that kind of thing. (*Dropping her voice.*) And other things as well. You know Torvald left his office when we were married? There was no prospect of promotion there, and he had to try and earn more than before. But during the first year he over-worked himself dreadfully. You see, he had to make money every way he could, and he worked early and late; but he couldn't stand it, and fell dreadfully ill, and the doctors said it was necessary for him to go South.

Mrs. Linde. You spent a whole year in Italy, didn't you?

Nora. Yes. It was no easy matter to get away, I can tell you. It was just after Ivar was born; but naturally we had to go. It was a wonderfully beautiful journey, and it saved Torvald's life. But it cost a tremendous lot of money, Christine.

Mrs. Linde. So I should think.

Nora. It cost about two hundred and fifty pounds. That's a lot, isn't it?

Mrs. Linde. Yes, and in emergencies like that it is lucky to have the money.

Nora. I ought to tell you that we had it from Daddy.

Mrs. Linde. Oh, I see. It was just about that time that he died, wasn't it?

Nora. Yes; and, just think of it, I couldn't go and nurse him. I was