



A Doll's House

Henrik Ibsen



Henrik Johan Ibsen


1828-1906

- ▶ Poet, playwright, and essayist
- ▶ Sometimes wrote under the pseudonym Brynjolf Bjarme.
- ▶ Considered the pioneer of modern drama because he broke away from the romantic tradition of 19th Century Theatre with realistic portrayals of individuals.
- ▶ Changed theatrical tradition from exaggerated suspense and mistaken identity to a scenario that closely resembles everyday life.
- ▶ Used realistic dialogue, commonplace events, and symbolism to explore the elusiveness of self-knowledge and the restrictive nature of traditional morality.
- ▶ His characters are strong individuals who come in conflict with the oppressive social mores of 19th century Norwegian society



Henrik Ibsen

- ▶ Ibsen was a prolific playwright who wrote histories (*Emperor and Galilean*, 1873, e.g.), verse dramas (*Peer Gynt*, 1867), experimental dramas (*The Master Builder*, 1892), philosophical dramas (*When We Dead Awaken*, 1899), and more.
- ▶ Best known for his plays of social commentary and psychological realism, like *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *The Wild Duck* (1894), and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), among others.
- ▶ He has been referred to as the “Father of Modern Drama.”



A Doll's House

- Norwegian title *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*, 1879) is considered a masterpiece of realist theatre.
- The plot concerns the collapse of a middle class marriage.
- Sparked debates about women's rights and divorce.
- Considered innovative and daring because of its focus on psychological tension instead of external action.
- Created a new acting style that required emotion be conveyed through small, controlled gestures, shifts in action, and pauses.
- Groundbreaking in that it caused drama to be viewed as social commentary and not merely entertainment.



Social Background



- ▶ Motherhood within marriage was considered a woman's highest possible achievement
- ▶ Working class mothers were labeled neglectful
- ▶ Publications to instruct women on how to be good wives and household managers.
- ▶ Servants were a status symbol and not intended to relieve the stress of house management
- ▶ Marriage was considered a business deal.
- ▶ A woman could not have a will for her personal possessions.
- ▶ An unmarried woman could inherit money and property after age 21, but upon marriage control of her money went to her husband.



Characters

- ▶ Nora Helmer
 - ▶ Torvald Helmer
 - ▶ Kristine Linde
 - ▶ Nils Kogstad
 - ▶ Dr. Rank
 - ▶ Annie Marie
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Act I



- ▶ Nora Helmer enters her home with Christmas gifts
- ▶ An old widow friend from her past, Mrs. Linde comes to meet her to find a job
- ▶ Nora's husband Torvald recently earned a promotion, so she happily finds employment for Mrs. Linde
- ▶ Nora tells Mrs. Linde that she forged her dead father's signature in order to illegally obtain a loan
- ▶ Nils Krogstad tries using his knowledge of her forgery to blackmail Nora. He wants to insure his position at the bank; otherwise he will reveal the truth to Torvald
- ▶ Nora keeps the truth concealed from her husband, as well as Dr. Rank, a kind yet sickly old friend of the Helmers. She tries to distract herself by playing with her three children.



Act II

- ▶ Nora tries to concoct ways to prevent Krogstad from revealing the truth. She tries to convince Torvald, asking him to let Krogstad keep his job
- ▶ Helmers prepare for a holiday ball
- ▶ Mrs. Linde tells Nora that she had a romantic attachment to Krogstad in the past, and that she can perhaps persuade him to relent
- ▶ Nora believes that Torvald would go to jail instead of her. She wants to sacrifice herself for his benefit.



Act III



- Krogstad and Kristine reunites.
- Krogstad considers tearing up Nora's IOU
- Mrs. Linde believes it would be best if Torvald and Nora finally confront the truth
- When Torvald learns about the forged signatures he calls Nora immoral, unfit as a wife and mother
- When Krogstad returns the document, Torvald feels they are saved and forgives Nora
- But Nora realizes that their marriage has been a lie and she leaves Torvald and the children



Realism

- Realism in the theater began in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century through playwrights like Ibsen, August Strindberg, and George Bernard Shaw. *A Doll's House* played a significant role in the movement. Realism reached America later, finding its fullest expression in Eugene O'Neill
- Realism began as a reaction to the excessively contrived, sentimental, and didactic melodramas that dominated drama in nineteenth-century Europe and America
- Realists take a mimetic approach to theater, striving to create the illusion of everyday life on stage
- Realists tend to depict the middle, lower, and lower-middle classes: their work, family life, language, dress, and problems



Realism



- ▶ Prefer contemporary settings
- ▶ Strive to create complex characters, to make internal conflict as dramatic as external conflict
- ▶ Prefer the open ending, which does not resolve all the play's questions and sometimes leaves in doubt the future of the protagonist. The resolution or *denouement* is generally short in realistic dramas and virtually non-existent sometimes.



Realism



- ▶ Lack of sentiment and idealism
- ▶ Lacks the flowery language of traditional Romantic works
- ▶ Contains a great deal of detail and imagery
- ▶ Contains a straightforward narrative voice
- ▶ Realist writers focused mainly on the lower and middle classes of society



Well Made Play

- ▶ Form for *A Doll's House* and other plays is from the nineteenth-century “well-made” play
- ▶ The well-made play is a carefully crafted work, neat in structure and obviously contrived in its numerous plot twists and turns
- ▶ Emphasis on plot not character development. The first act of a well-made play *introduces* the problem; the second act *complicates* it, and the third *resolves* it



Well Made Play

- ▶ The characters tend to be types, the overly concerned parent, the straying child, the corrupt businessman. Characters are uncomplicated and easily identified as hero and villain, good guy and bad guy
- ▶ Standard devices: exposition conveyed through gossipy servants, plot complications from lost or forged documents, and resolutions from the entrance of an absent family member or the recovery of letters and documents
- ▶ The most famous author of well-made plays was Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) who wrote hundreds of plays, several of which Ibsen directed



Symbols



- ▶ Black hat and black cross - a symbol for death
- ▶ Fisher girl costume - symbolises Nora's pretence of enjoying life
- ▶ Italy - the good false image of Nora's life
- ▶ Norway - reality
- ▶ Doll house - the tendency of the characters to role-play
- ▶ Toys - the act of pushing the roles onto Nora's children



Symbols



- ▶ Macaroons - Nora's deceit to her husband
- ▶ Tarantella - Nora's agitation at her struggle with Krogstad and her husband
- ▶ Christmas tree - the mood of the play
- ▶ Stockings - Nora's attitude trying to please men and flirting with Rank
- ▶ Letterbox and letter - stereotypes pressed on woman
- ▶ Ring - marriage and its demise
- ▶ Skylark - Torvald treating Nora like a child



The Feminist Message

- ▶ The play rocked the stages of Europe when the play was premiered.
- ▶ Nora's rejection of marriage and motherhood scandalized contemporary audiences.
- ▶ In fact, the first German productions of the play in the 1880s had an altered ending at the request of the producers.
- ▶ Ibsen referred to this version as a "barbaric outrage" to be used only in emergencies.



The Feminist Message

- ▶ Ibsen was reacting to the uncertain tempo of the time; Europe was being reshaped with revolutions
- ▶ The revolutionary spirit and the emergence of modernism influenced Ibsen's choice to focus on an unlikely hero--a housewife--in his attack on middle-class values
- ▶ The play succeeded in its attempt to provoke discussion. In fact, it is the numerous ways that the play can be read Each new generation has had a different way of interpreting the book, from feminist critique to Hegelian allegory of the spirit's historical evolution



Themes

Women and Men:

- ▶ This play focuses on the way that women are seen, especially in the context of marriage and motherhood. Torvald, in particular, has a very clear and narrow definition of a woman's role
- ▶ Torvald 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 both child-like, helpless creatures detached from reality and influential moral forces responsible for the purity of the world through their influence in the home



Themes



► **Materialism v. People:**

- This is particularly important for Torvald, whose sense of manhood depends on his independence.
- In fact, he was an unsuccessful barrister because he refused to take "unsavory cases". As a result, he switched to the bank, where he primarily deals with money.