An overview of *A Doll's House*

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**About this Work**  
**Title:** *A Doll's House* (Play)  
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Henrik Ibsen elevated theatre from mere entertainment to a forum for exposing social problems. Prior to Ibsen, contemporary theatre consisted of historical romance or contrived behavior plays. But with *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen turned drama into a respectable genre for the examination of social issues: in exposing the flaws in the Helmer marriage, he made the private public and provided an advocacy for women. In Act III, when Nora slams the door as she leaves, she is opening a door into the hidden world of the ideal Victorian marriage. In allowing Nora the right to satisfy her need for an identity separate from that of wife and mother, Ibsen is perceived as endorsing the growing “women question.” And although the play ends without offering any solutions, Ibsen has offered possibilities. To his contemporaries, it was a frightening prospect.

Bjørn Hemmer, in an essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, declared that Ibsen used a *A Doll’s House* and his other realistic dramas to focus a “searchlight” on Victorian society with its “false morality and its manipulation of public opinion.” Indeed, Torvald exemplifies this kind of community. Of this society, Hemmer noted: “The people who live in such a society know the weight of ‘public opinion’ and of all those agencies which keep watch over society’s ‘law and order’: the norms, the conventions and the traditions which in essence belong to the past but which continue into the present and there thwart individual liberty in a variety of ways.” It is the weight of public opinion that Torvald cannot defy. And it is the weight of public opinion that condemns the Helmer’s marriage. Because Torvald views his public persona as more important that his private, he is unable to understand or appreciate the suffering of his wife. His reaction to the threat of public exposure is centered on himself. It is his social stature, his professional image, and not his private life which concern him most. For Nora to emerge as an individual she must reject the life that society mandates. To do so, she must assume control over her life; yet in the nineteenth century, women had no power. Power resides with the establishment, and as a banker and lawyer, Torvald clearly represents the establishment.

Deception, which lies at the heart of *A Doll’s House*, also provides the cornerstone of Victorian life, according to Hemmer. Hemmer maintained that it is the contrasts between reality and fiction that motivated Ibsen to tackle such social problems as marriage. Victorian society, Hemmer stated, offered a “clear dichotomy between ideology and practice.” The facade of individuality was buried in the Victorian ideal of economics. In the hundred years since the French Revolution, economic power had replaced the quest for individual liberty, and a married woman had the least amount of economic power. When Nora rejects her marriage, she is also rejecting bourgeois middle-class values. In this embracing of uncertainty rather than the economic guarantee of her husband's protection, Nora represents the individual, who, Hemmer asserted, Ibsen wanted to make “the sustaining element in society and [who would] dethrone the bourgeois family as the central institution of society.” Nora's rebellion at the play's conclusion is a necessary element of that revolution; it is little wonder that Ibsen was no disgusted at the second conclusion he was forced to write. In making Nora subordinate her desires as an individual to the greater need of motherhood, Ibsen is denying his reason for creating the conflict and for writing the play.

The question of women's rights and feminist equality is an important aspect of understanding *A Doll’s House*. Ibsen himself stated that for him the issue was more complex than just women's rights and that he hoped to illuminate the problem of human rights. Yet women have continued to champion both Ibsen and his heroine, Nora. Social reform was closely linked to feminism. In her discussion of the role Ibsen played in nineteenth-century thought, which appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Gail Finney explained: “The most prominent socialist thinkers of the day, male and female, saw that true sexual equality necessitates fundamental changes in the structure of society.” Thus, in embracing women's equality in *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen is really arguing for
Finney devoted part of her essay to the feminist reception of early stage productions of *A Doll's House*, which Finney maintained, "opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement." Nineteenth-century feminists praised Ibsen's work and "saw it as a warning of what would happen when women in general woke up to the injustices that had been committed against them," according to Finney. Finney indicated that in Ibsen's own notes for this play the playwright asserted that "a mother in modern society is 'like certain insects who go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race.'" That the prevailing view is that women have little worth when their usefulness as mothers has ended is clear in Torvald's repudiation of Nora when he discovers her deception; she can be of no use to her children if her reputation is stained. That he wants her to remain under his roof—though separate from the family—defines his own need to protect his reputation within the community. Her use, though, as a mother is at an end. Until, that is, Torvald discovers that the threat has been removed. If Nora wants to define her worth, she can only do so by turning away from her children and husband.

Finney refutes early critical arguments that Nora's transformation in Act III is unbelievable or too sudden. Nora's childlike response to Torvald in which she states "I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to" and "I never get anywhere without your help" contrast sharply with the reality of her situation, which is that she has forged a signature and saved her husband's life and has also shown herself capable of earning the money necessary to repay the loan. Thus Nora's submissiveness is as much a part of the deception as other elements of Nora's personality. Finney also argued that Nora's repeated exclamations of how happy she is in Act I and her out-of-control practice of the tarantella are indicative of a woman bordering on hysteria. This hysteria further demonstrates that Nora is a more complicated woman than the childlike doll introduced at the beginning of Act I. Finney noted that Ibsen stated late in his life that "it is the women who are to solve the social problem. As mothers they are to do it. And only as such can they do it."

Errol Durbach was also concerned with Nora's role of mother. In a discussion in his *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation* that focuses on the critical reception that greeted Nora's decision to leave her children, Durbach offered the review of Clement Scott, an Ibsen contemporary. Scott held that Nora "committed an unnatural offense unworthy of even the lower animals: 'A cat or dog would tear anyone who separated it from its offspring, but the socialistic Nora, the apostle of the new creed of humanity, leaves her children without a pang.'" But Durbach maintained that for Nora to subordinate her own needs to the function of motherhood would be a greater offense, and cited Ibsen's own words to support his claim: "These women of the modern age, mistreated as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated in accordance with their talents, debarred from following their mission, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in mind—these are the ones who supply the mothers for the new generation. What will be the result?" Nora's decision, then, can be described not as an offense, but as a display of strength. Rather than take the easy path, she recognizes that to be a good mother requires more than her presence in the home; she cannot be a model for her children, especially her daughter, if she cannot claim an identity as an individual. Clearly this principle exemplifies Ibsen's stated position that if women are to be mothers of a new generation, they must first achieve a measure of equality as human beings.

Of Ibsen's approach to marriage, Durbach asserted it would be a mistake to read *A Doll's House* and extrapolate from the play that Ibsen was striking a "militant blow against the institution of marriage." For although Nora slams the door on marriage, Kristine opens the same door. In the same way that a mirror reverses a reflection, Kristine reflects the opposite of Nora. Kristine has already suffered in marriage and has been provided with a second opportunity with the death of her husband. She has the freedom that Nora now seeks. Where Nora has known security and happiness, Kristine has known deprivation and a loveless marriage. As Durbach illustrated, Kristine is clearly a non-doll to Nora's doll. Durbach argued that if feminists want to embrace Ibsen's Nora as a symbol for women's equality, they must also address the problem of Kristine; her choice is the opposite of Nora's and coming to terms with that choice only reveals the complexities of Ibsen's play. As nineteenth-century critics noted, Ibsen presents no solutions, only questions.

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