

# A *doll's house*

by Henrik Ibsen

## *Issues and Characters*

*A doll's house* is not a play which hides its meanings. Perhaps one would not go so far as to agree with Arthur Symons when he observes (1882) that 'in the dialogue there is scarcely a metaphor' [Egan: 1972], but there is in Act I--and in the title--much obvious ironic clue-giving to later action and to dominant themes.

In the opening scenes, Helmer's intimacies with and pet names for Nora are belittling ('little lark'; 'little squirrel'), even when he is admonishing her ('little spendthrift'; 'little feather brain'). His idea of what a married woman should be seems to be of a child, a doll, even a puppet he rightfully controls. Then there is money: Helmer's caution about debtors and Nora's reaction to it reveals the basis of her honesty and her attitude to money. It is no surprise, then, in her '*dropping her voice*' when telling Mrs Linde about the money she has secured from her father or that she lies about it as she has lied about the macaroons and opposing Helmer's wishes. Nora's conversation with Mrs Linde soon raises the matter of 'imprudence' --the word is twice repeated--and the 'place of woman'. Perhaps less obvious until thought about in hindsight is the irony of Helmer's reference to the inheritance of character traits and the influence of 'bad' mothers and fathers on children. Then there is the marked contrast between Nora's reaction to the entry of Rank and that of Krogstad: surely this, too, points to later developments and *dénouements*. By the end of Act I, the Krogstad connexion is made clear, as is his 'single false step' of forgery and subsequent 'play[ing] the hypocrite with everyone' with 'the most terrible part of it all': the effect on Krogstad's children. According to Helmer, 'Almost everyone who has

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gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother'. Suggested is the role of the Helmer children which will follow as the drama evolves.

The list of "clues" can be expanded and added to on later readings, with cross-referencing made to events in Acts II and III where themes are first complicated and then resolved.

Before what Nora calls 'the first time we two, you and I, husband and wife, have had a serious conversation', Helmer accuses her

What a horrible awakening! All these eight years--she who was  
my pride and joy--a hypocrite--a liar--worse--a criminal.

Despite his descriptions of her, Helmer's attention is focused on himself and his gender, as it is when they are 'saved':

I shouldn't be a man if this womanly helplessness did not actually  
give you a double attractiveness in my eyes.

He assumes that Nora has to calm herself, and returns to a "comforting" extended bird metaphor, leading to another image of 'a true man's heart':

There is something so indescribably sweet and satisfying, to  
a man, in the knowledge that he has forgiven his wife--forgiven  
her freely, and with all his heart. It seems as if that had made  
her, as it were, doubly his own; he has given her a new life, so  
to speak; and she has in a way become both wife and child to him.  
So you shall be after this, my little scared, helpless darling. Have  
no anxiety about anything, Nora; just be frank and open with me,  
and I will serve as will and conscience both to you--

It is true that Nora has not been 'frank and open' with her husband, but once Helmer has been relieved of the fear of her exposure, he returns to the belittlement of his wife. Nora's response is, to Helmer, bemusing: she claims that she has been 'greatly wronged', first by her father and then by Helmer, that they have 'committed a great sin against' her by keeping her a child and not allowing her to grow as a person. She goes on describe her experiences of "love", "happiness", and "marriage" and her need to organise herself--being unfit

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to be mother to their children, for reasons other than Helmer has asserted--and her '[d]uties to herself'.

Contemporary responses to the play are illuminating. Thus, as William Archer wrote in an 1884 issue of *Theatre* [Egan: 1972] of Ibsen's "teachings"

His didactics cannot be cut away at one stroke; they must  
be torn out by the roots, and are then found to have sent fibres  
into every scene and speech of the play.

Looking forward or backward, one can perceive, with little difficulty, these 'fibres' of theme revealed in action.

Archer sees Nora as having 'a fine nature, warped and stunted' in a drama which is 'a plea for woman's rights--not for her right to vote and prescribe medicine, but for her right to exist as a responsible member of society'. In 1889, Arthur Symons approaches the play from a slightly different angle. Nora's story, he writes [Egan: 1972].

. . . is a protest against that fatal view of woman which turns  
marriage, only too often, into a bargain between a beautiful slave  
and a kind slave owner.

To audiences of the 1990s, such interpretations seem to indicate an uncontroversial drama; such were not reactions of some contemporary audiences. Indeed, in 1884, Archer commented that 'Ibsen on the English stage is impossible', and it was not until 1889 when his own translation was staged that English audiences were confronted by an unbowdlerised presentation of *A doll's house*.

Some declared that it was too heavily didactic, since theatre-goers sought light, escapist entertainment. Perhaps modern audiences might agree. The carpenter working on my house directs and acts in plays for an amateur dramatic society. When asked if he had "done any Ibsen", he replied that he had not attempted "anything so heavy", although he'd "done a lot of Shakespeare". More interestingly, others found it indecent because of its material. Rank, they

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thought, was as rank in nature as in name: he had inherited a then unmentionable Sexually Transmitted Disease. Mrs Linde is startled that Nora should have heard of 'tuberculosis of the spine'. It was, however, Nora who drew the most shocked responses, for she was seen as rebelling against accepted roles of wife and mother, leaving her husband and children, no longer believing in 'wonderful things happening' such that her life with Helmer 'would be a real marriage'. Writing in *Academy* (15 June 1889), Frederic Wedmore argued that English audiences were so far more advanced than Scandinavians on 'the woman question' that they did not need the 'tearful argument' of *A doll's house*. His condescending argument is worth reading in more detail.

With the lower class woman, doing as much as a man, in her own way, to earn the family loaf; with the "young person" of the quite ordinary middle classes, presumably so much brighter and so much fuller of initiative, than the youth with whom she condescends to consort; with the woman of the upper middle classes and the higher classes giving to society half its value and more than half its charm--nay, rising now and again to such heights of intelligence that she can voluntarily put her name to a memorial *against* [my italics] the suffrage being ever conferred upon her; with these things being so, we do not require Ibsen's tearful argument.

More, Nora rejects not only Helmer's concern that she 'consider what people will say' but also his definition of her 'most sacred duties' as those to her husband and children.

NORA: I have other duties just as sacred.

HELMER: Indeed you have not. What duties could those be?

NORA: Duties to myself.

HELMER: Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.

NORA: I don't believe that any more.

At the end of Act I, however, Nora is, despite her macaroon naughtiness, still much the wife and mother, even though she confesses to having delighted in

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feeling 'like being a man' when she found ways of earning money. About her obtaining the seemingly impossible sum of two hundred and fifty pounds she says that she has done it because of her husband's need. One wonders if she is so excited by her cleverness--or even the attraction of sharing the recuperative holiday. What is certain is that she is kept from her father's deathbed. It is as if she no longer sees herself as her father's child, although Helmer never quite forgets her heredity. Nora's response to Helmer's talk of the effect of a bad mother on her children is denial, although she cautiously keeps her 'dolly' children from her. Helmer's 'precious little singing bird' whispers 'No, no--it isn't true. It's impossible; it must be impossible.' Then she tells the nurse not to 'let them come in to me'. Ibsen ends the Act with a characteristically Stage Directed thinking aloud:

NORA (*pale with terror*). Deprave my little children? Poison my home? (*A short pause. Then she tosses her head.*) It's not true. It can't possibly be true.

The play goes on to examine not so much the nature of truth as the consequences of its being told or its being avoided.

In Act II there is much conflict between fact and fiction as Nora tries to cope with the reality of Krogstad's demand that she pay her debt to him. '*Uneasily*' she retreats again to denial, this time seeking escape by calling upon her motherhood--'Such a thing couldn't happen; it is impossible--I have three little children'--in an argument unlikely to be persuasive to Krogstad, although Mrs Linde later uses a somewhat similar one for a different purpose. Nora then bewilders the nurse, herself separated from her child, by hypothetical talk of 'not being so much with them', even 'going away altogether'. This may recall her response to Helmer's lecture about bad parents and Krogstad's sins against his children.

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At the same time, Nora tries to concentrate on her fancy dress and the pleasure it and her dancing will give Helmer--a temporary way out of being her own, beleaguered, panicky self. Is it symbolic that the dress has to be repaired before she can make use of its "cover"? She seeks the help of Mrs Linde. As they sew, Mrs Linde, having recognised evasion, tries to tease out the knot of Nora's reality: the role of Dr Rank in her life and the complication of those two hundred and fifty borrowed pounds. Mrs Linde tries to explain to Nora the impropriety of Rank's daily visits, which as being as much to her as to Helmer. Nora seems genuinely puzzled--another indication of the naivete which allows her to prattle about Ranks tuberculosis of the spine and which has brought much of her trouble to her.

The scene which follows, when Mrs Linde exits and Helmer enters, is reminiscent of Desdemona's pleading with Othello for the reinstatement of his Lieutenant, but there is a different relationship between truth and lying. Desdemona is truthfully altruistic but "framed" by Iago and unaware of the effect her pleading will have on her righteous but misled husband. Nora, however, dissembles as she tries to evade the consequences of her misdoings if she 'Little Miss Obstinate', can persuade her own righteous husband not to dismiss 'the starving pen-pusher'.

Having failed in this endeavour, Nora is drawn, by her memory of Mrs Linde's guess that Rank had been the source of the loan, to consider Rank as a saviour, despite her horror at the thought of borrowing from a family friend. When Rank enters, she flirts with him in a way which would have confirmed Mrs Linde in her supposition but which seems based on familiar innocence rather than indicative the reality of an affaire. Just as she prepares to face reality and ask Rank for monetary help, she is startled by his declaration of love for her. Another kind of reality breaks in, and she calls for the maid to bring a lamp to break the intimate mood.

NORA: Dear Doctor Rank, that was really horrid of you.

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RANK: To have loved you as much as anyone else does? Was that horrid?

NORA: No, but to go and tell me so. There was really no need--

RANK: What do you mean? Did you know--? (*MAID enters with lamp, puts it down on the table, and goes out.*) Nora--Mrs Helmer--tell me, had you any idea of this?

NORA: Oh, how do I know whether I had or whether I hadn't?

I really can't tell you--to think you could be so clumsy, Dr Rank! We were getting on so nicely.

RANK: Well, at all events you know you can command me, body and soul. So won't you speak out?

NORA(*looking at him*). After what happened?

RANK: I beg you to let me know what it is.

NORA: I can't tell you anything now.

Surprised by Nora's sudden propriety, Rank calls her a 'riddle', for he cannot understand her reality, especially since she refuses to tell him the "something" he knows she was about to reveal before his ill-timed declaration. Rank-the-companion has become 'no expedient [she means] to make use of', as she tells Krogstad without identifying the doctor: another kind of avoidance--justified?--of the truth. Her lie about Krogstad cannot be excused as any form of altruism.

Krogstad's insistence on seeing Nora is a sign of her inability to avoid reality. There is allusive talk of suicide which Krogstad easily controls, for he has the power truth bestows, and he is able to reveal his extended blackmailing threat in clear, calm superiority to the 'fine spoilt woman'. When Mrs Linde re-enters, Nora tells some truths. It is as if reality is hunting her down and is closer to cornering her. Mrs Linde is able to guess correctly that the loan has come from Krogstad, and she honesty which will reveal all to Helmer: 'Believe me, Nora, that's the best thing for both of you.' (To tell or not to tell Helmer, and how much, becomes a growing issue as the play goes on.) Nora admits the forgery

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of her father's signature and then bewilders Mrs Linde with what seem to be ramblings--

NORA: ...if it should happen that there were someone who wanted to take all the responsibility, all the blame, you understand--

MRS LINDE: Yes, yes--but how can you suppose--?

NORA: Then you must be my witness, that it is not true, Christine. I am not out of my mind at all; I am in my right senses now, and I tell you no one else has known anything about it; I, and I alone, did the whole thing. Remember that.

MRS LINDE: I will, indeed. But I don't understand all this.

NORA: How should you understand it? A wonderful thing is going to happen!

MRS LINDE: A wonderful thing?

NORA: Yes, a wonderful thing!--but it is so terrible, Christine; it *mustn't* happen, not for all the world.

--but which have their echoes in the final scenes. Nora has her own mistaken ideas about the husbandly role; she does not see the truths of marriage any more than Helmer does.

When Mrs Linde leaves on the mission to Krogstad for which she has volunteered, Nora returns to thinking of the tarantella and her anxiety about it as a way of diverting Helmer for the letter Krogstad has left. The Act ends with further puzzling references to 'a wonderful thing', Nora's counting of time-- 'thirty-one hours to live'--and an intimate exchange between Nora and Helmer that has had the truth drained from it:

HELMER (*from the doorway on the right*). Where's my little skylark?

NORA (*going to him with her arms outstretched*) Here she is!

Having been told the truth, Mrs Linde has responded to Nora's panic with a determination to help:

MRS LINDE: I will go at once and see Krogstad.

NORA: Don't go to him; he will do you some harm.



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MRS LINDE: There was a time when he would gladly do anything for my sake.

This points to the opening of Act III when Krogstad and Mrs Linde are alone. Their exchanges not only reveal their earlier relationship but also raise again the themes of women needing to help others (while helping themselves?), needing money to do so, honesty, and the force of circumstance. When Mrs Linde asks that Krogstad 'give [her] someone and something to work for' he is cautious:

KROGSTAD: I don't trust that. It is nothing but a woman's overstrained sense of generosity that prompts you to make such an offer of yourself.

but eventually is convinced that he has 'never had such an amazing piece of good fortune in [his] life.' In their exchange, Mrs Linde again asserts the need that

Helmer must know about it. This unhappy secret must be disclosed; they must have a complete understanding between them, which is impossible with all this concealment and falsehood going on.

With Krogstad gone, Mrs Linde's thoughts of 'a home to bring comfort to' are interrupted by thoughts of and then the arrival of the Helmers from the fancy dress party where Nora has danced the Tarantella. Dishonesty reigns again: Mrs Linde lies about why she is in the house, and Nora tries to avoid Helmer's reading Krogstad's letter. Here dancing has been a success, although Helmer declares it was 'a trifle too realistic--a little more so. . . than was strictly compatible with the limitations of art'. Nora has sought escape from her predicament in dancing as if actually poisoned by the spider of guilt. Mrs Linde leaves after Helmer's extraordinary attempt persuade her to embroider rather than knit. Once more Helmer's concern for appearances as well as his idea of the proper role of women, taught by man, appear.

With Mrs Linde gone, Helmer moves to another part of the proper role of women--married women. He tries to talk Nora into satisfying his conjugal rights but is startled to be rebuffed.

NORA: Go away, Torvald! You must let me go. I won't--

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HELMER: What's that? You're joking, my little Nora! You won't--you won't? Am I not your husband--?

This expression of marital possessiveness is interrupted by the arrival of Rank who has come to announce, indirectly, but confirmed by his marked calling card, the last stages of his spinal tuberculosis. As Nora and Helmer share their grief, Helmer expresses a sentiment he is shortly to revoke when he thinks he is implicated in Nora's guilt when it is exposed: 'I have often wished that you might be threatened by some great danger, so that I might risk my life's blood, and everything, for your sake.'

After he has read Krogstad's first letter, the effect is scarcely as therapeutic as Mrs Linde has predicted. As he rails about the consequences for himself, Nora grows quieter, more determined to handle the situation in her own way. Helmer's self-centredness appears again when the second letter arrives from the newly happy and no longer vindictive Krogstad: 'I am saved! Nora, I am saved!' Nora, in growing confidence in her knowledge of the reality of their married life, asks, ironically, 'And I?'. As he waxes excitedly loving in his relief, it takes Helmer some time to notice Nora's 'cold, set face', and he cannot see the implications of her leaving him to remove her self-concealing fancy dress. He expects her to go to bed; instead she returns in ordinary dress, ready for what she calls 'a settling of accounts'.

Where once Helmer has told the exposed criminal  
... as for you and me, it must appear as if everything between us  
were just as before--but *naturally* [my italics] only in the eyes of the  
world. You will remain in my house, that is *a matter of course* [my  
italics]. But I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not  
trust them to you. To think that I should have to say this to one I  
have loved so dearly, and whom I still--No, that is all over. From  
this moment happiness is not the question; all that concerns us is  
to save the remains, the fragments, the *appearance*-- [my italics].

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he is shocked by her declaration that she is leaving him. Eventually, Helmer reacts to Nora's argument, whatever its flaws, that she cannot remain with 'a strange man', even overnight, with a plea: 'But can't we live like brother and sister?'. Now Nora is in control, from when she changes her clothes until she shuts the downstairs door ending what she recognises has been a non-marriage in what has been a doll's house, not a home.

The thematic importance of marriage and woman's role in it and wider society was obvious to Henrietta Frances Lord who herself translated *Et Dukkehjem*, calling it *Nora* [Egan: 1972]. In her Introduction she writes feelingly.

Some of the clearest light Ibsen has so far shed on marriage we get from *Nora*. The problem is set in its purest form; no unfavourable hinder the working out of marriage; . . . both are well fitted in life, and everything points to their being naturally suited to each other. The hindrance lies exclusively in the application of a false view of life . . . . He would deprive her but of one thing--reality. . . . And he so

far succeeds in unfitting her for action, that when she takes upon herself to meddle in realities, she immediately commits a crime. He gives her everything but his confidence; not because he has anything to conceal but because she is a woman.

The idea in *Nora is*: the object of marriage is to make each human personality free. . . . The poet's work tells us [that] until the relation between man and woman turns in this direction, the relation is not yet Love. This is the idea in *Nora*, freed from all side issues, and no other key will unlock it.

It is necessary to examine this comment in terms of what all the men in Nora's life have done to her and how she allowed it.

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Extracts from critical commentaries used in this piece of writing have deliberately been chosen from the works of writers contemporary with the beginnings of Ibsen's impact on English audiences and the part Ibsen played in the development of 'the woman question'. These, and more modern critical writing can be found in *Ibsen: the critical heritage* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

-Ann McLaren