













### **A Doll's House Summary**

Nora Helmer, a young woman, enters her house carrying packages. It is Christmas Eve, and a porter delivers a Christmas tree. Nora's husband, Torvald, emerges from his study and greets her. She shows off the Christmas gifts she has bought for their children, and although Torvald chastises her for spending too much, he is also very affectionate towards her, calling her his "little skylark" and "little squirrel." The two of them celebrate the fact that Torvald has recently been promoted to Bank Manager, meaning they can have a more comfortable life. Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank arrive. Dr. Rank and Torvald exit to talk in his study. Mrs. Linde, who hasn't seen Nora for eight years, tells her that she had an unhappy marriage and is now a widow hoping to find a job. Nora promises her that she will ask Torvald to give her a job. Nora then reveals a secret she has been hiding: when she and Torvald were first married, she borrowed money in order to finance a trip to Italy that was necessary to save Torvald's life, as he had grown ill. She has paid off the debt in installments, secretly taking jobs and saving money from her allowance from Torvald.

Nils Krogstad, an employee at the bank, arrives and talks to Torvald in Torvald's study. Dr. Rank comes out to talk to Nora and says that Krogstad is morally corrupt. Torvald enters, and after a brief conversation with Mrs. Linde, says he can give her a job at the bank. Torvald, Mrs. Linde, and Dr. Rank exit, and Nora plays happily with her children. Krogstad enters, and Nora tells the children to go to their nursemaid and not tell anyone about Krogstad's visit. It is revealed that Krogstad is the person who Nora borrowed money from. He explains that he is being fired by Torvald, and that Nora must stop this happening or else Krogstad will tell everyone her secret. He adds that he has evidence that Nora forged her father's signature in an IOU. Krogstad exits, and Torvald returns. Nora tries to persuade him not to fire Krogstad, but is unable to.

Act Two begins the next day, on Christmas Day. Nora, alone on stage, worries about her fate. Mrs. Linde arrives to help Nora sew her costume for a fancy dress ball that is being held on Boxing Day. Nora is dressing as an Italian fisher girl and plans on dancing the tarantella. Mrs. Linde asks to know more about Nora's secret, but Nora refuses to tell her anything for the moment. Torvald enters and Nora tries again to convince him not to fire Krogstad. However, the harder Nora tries, the angrier Torvald gets, and he eventually decides to send Krogstad's notice immediately.

Dr. Rank arrives and is depressed, telling Nora he will die soon. She flirts with him and seems to be considering whether to ask him for money. He reveals that he is in love with her, and Nora gives up the idea of asking him for help. Dr. Rank leaves and Krogstad returns, asking if Nora had told Torvald her secret and telling her his ambition to eventually run the bank. He leaves a letter explaining the secret debt and forgery in Torvald's letterbox and exits. Mrs. Linde returns and Nora explains the situation to her. Mrs. Linde tells Nora that she and Krogstad used to be in love, and asks that Nora distract Torvald while Mrs. Linde attempts to talk to Krogstad. Mrs. Linde leaves, and Nora begs Torvald to help her rehearse

the tarantella. She dances in a crazed, uninhibited way, puzzling Torvald about what has gotten into her. Mrs. Linde returns, saying Krogstad was not in but that she left him a note. The Act ends with Nora declaring that she has thirty-one hours left to live.

Act Three opens on the next day. Krogstad comes to meet Mrs. Linde at the Helmers' house while they are at the ball. It is revealed that the two of them once loved each other but that their relationship ended when Mrs. Linde chose to marry a richer man because that was the only way to support her family. Mrs. Linde suggests that, now that their respective spouses have both died, she and Krogstad marry so that she can take care of his children and they can live a happier life together. Krogstad is thrilled, and offers to ask for his letter to Torvald back, as he now regrets his earlier actions. Mrs. Linde, however, tells him to leave it, saying that the truth must come out.

Krogstad leaves, and Nora and Torvald return from the ball. Mrs. Linde urges Nora to tell her husband the truth, and then she leaves as well. Torvald tells Nora how much he desires her, but Nora stubbornly resists his advances. Dr. Rank arrives and talks happily about how much he enjoyed the party, especially the wine. He leaves and Torvald discovers two visiting cards that Dr. Rank put in his letterbox, indicating that he is about to die. Nora says goodnight to Torvald and sneaks out to the hall, preparing to escape and commit suicide. However Torvald stops her, having discovered the letter from Krogstad. He is furious with her, saying she has ruined his life and that, although they will keep living together to preserve appearances, they cannot be happy and he won't let her raise their children.

The maid brings a note from Krogstad saying he no longer wishes to blackmail Nora; the IOU is enclosed. Torvald rejoices, saying he is saved and that he forgives Nora. However, Nora reveals that she was going to kill herself because she thought that Torvald would step forward and defend her, ruining his life and career. She explains that she has realized that she can no longer live with Torvald, whom she considers to be a stranger to her, and wishes to leave in order to discover a sense of who she is. Torvald at first calls her stupid and insane, before changing his tone and promising to change so that she will stay. Nora, resolute, says she must leave. Torvald is left alone onstage in despair. The play ends with the sound of the slam of the front door as Nora exits.

## **A MODERN MARRIAGE: IBSEN & *A DOLL'S HOUSE* IN CONTEXT**

### **Economic exile**

Born in 1828, Henrik Ibsen's early life and career were marked by financial struggle. His father was a merchant, but the family went bankrupt when Henrik was seven years old and was forced to move to a coastal port city. Even in financial difficulty, the Ibsens kept servants and maintained a certain level of affluence or at least the public image of it. "The Ibsens had been rich; then they became not poor, but much less wealthy; and yet they were keen to keep up appearances," Erica Wagner writes for *The New Statesman*, tying Ibsen's

childhood to one of the core themes of his later career. “This conflict between reality and appearance is what still draws audiences to Ibsen's work.”

Ibsen’s path to playwriting took a circuitous route. He became an apothecary’s apprentice at the age of 15, and he fathered a child with the maid at the shop at the age of 18. Though they did not marry, he paid child support for 15 years. Some biographies of Ibsen skip over the chapter in his young life as incidental, but others see it as a formative chapter in Ibsen’s development. As scholar Toril Moi writes, “For a young penniless woman, the birth of an illegitimate child would have meant the end of any hopes of an education, let alone of any chance to write. For a young man with no money, it meant a burdensome struggle to pay child support for a son he probably never met.” In her book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, Moi quotes Ibsen’s letter to the judge: “I am now in my twentieth year; I own absolutely nothing, except some shabby clothes, shoes, and linen, and will shortly leave the Grimstad pharmacy where I have lived as an apprentice, that is to say without any other pay than my food.” Ibsen moved to Christiania (now Oslo), and though he planned to go into medicine, he failed critical exams. He decided to pursue writing.

The first decade of his writing career is largely forgotten. At the age of 20, Ibsen published his first play *Catalina* under a pseudonym, though it was never performed. His second play *The Burial Mound* was produced at the Christiania Theatre. Ibsen was only 23 when he was invited to serve as resident playwright at the nationalist Norwegian Theatre in Bergen, a position he held from 1851 to 1857. During this period, he wrote a number of plays, primarily verse dramas that explore Norwegian history or myth — in addition to directing, designing, and managing the operations of the theatre. From 1858 to 1862, he led the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (Oslo) until the theatre went bankrupt. Through this period he is sued for his debts several times, and barely escaped debtors' prison. To pay for his expenses, he pieced together a series of grants; in 1864, on receipt of a grant to write abroad, he moved to Rome and did not return to Norway for ten years. All the belongings he left in Norway were sold at auction.

Living abroad changed Ibsen. (“Life out here in Europe is after all freer and more refreshing, and larger,” he wrote in a letter.) His verse play *Brand* — his first play to establish his core theme of the false morality of modern society — led to him being awarded an annual grant from the Norwegian government, which finally stabilized his economic status. He was able to devote himself to writing. He soon wrote *Peer Gynt*, another verse play (the first play of Ibsen’s that is still widely performed today).

The year 1877 marked a turning point when Ibsen firmly abandoned verse for prose. Scholar and translator Eric Bentley writes, “It isn’t that this prose can do more than that verse, but that the prose is part of a complex (character, milieu, tone) that constitutes a far more expressive form of psychological theatre. Verse overstates, prose understates. [...] People in *Brand* say the maximum, in *Ghosts* or *The Wild Duck* the minimum. Sentences are short. They may even be broken off. Silences are awesome and full of juice.” After transitioning to prose, Ibsen’s first play was *The Pillars of Society*, examining the hypocrisy of business. The second play he wrote in this period was *A Doll’s House*.

### **Worldwide sensation**

Ibsen borrowed the broad outlines of the story for *A Doll's House* from a woman he knew, Laura Kieler (Kieler wrote a novel that was a sequel to his play *Brand*, and she asked him for an endorsement to help get it published; Ibsen refused). In 1876, Kieler forged her husband's signature to borrow money; her husband ultimately committed her to a sanitarium for a time.

In 1879, living in Rome, Ibsen wrote an outline that he titled "Notes for a Modern Tragedy." It begins: "There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and one, quite different, for women. They don't understand each other; but in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a man." (Some critics see the play he wrote as an extension of this initial impulse; contemporary scholar Sandra Saari advances the theory that Ibsen discarded this notion and "embraced an entirely different fundamental premise [...] in order to demonstrate the radical transformation of Nora from female to human being.")

Ibsen wrote the play in just a few months, and productions quickly followed in Denmark, Germany, and Norway. Contemporary Halvdan Koht wrote: "A Doll's House exploded like a bomb into contemporary life. *The Pillars of Society*, [...] though it attacked reigning social conventions, still retained the traditional theatrical happy ending, so that it bit less sharply. But *A Doll's House* knew no mercy."

The play shocked conventional morality of the time, and therefore held an irresistible attraction for theatregoers to talk about it. "Such furious discussion did Nora rouse when the play came out that many a social invitation given in Stockholm during that winter bore the words 'You are requested not to mention Ibsen's Doll's House,'" wrote Henrietta Frances Lord, a translator living in Stockholm at the time.

Though his following play *Ghosts* was banned in some countries for its scandalous plot, no future play of Ibsen's was to catch the cultural and political zeitgeist to the extent that *A Doll's House* did. Quickly and enduringly the play was championed by members of the women's movement, even without Ibsen's encouragement. "[I] must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement," Ibsen said in a 1898 speech. "I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general."

Though he was briefly an anarchist, Ibsen rarely participated in politics and distrusted politicians. For some, that only burnished his reputation. In 1914, anarchist feminist Emma Goldman wrote, "Uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy, Ibsen consistently strove to uproot every stone of our social structure."

### **Ibsen in translation**

At the time of Ibsen's death, *A Doll's House* was available in ten languages. Today, it is published in 78. The feat is remarkable for a playwright who wrote in a relatively obscure language. Only 1.4 million people could read Norwegian when Ibsen began writing. William Archer, the first English translator of Ibsen, wrote, "In respect of language, Ibsen stands at a unique disadvantage. Never before has a poet of worldwide fame appealed to his worldwide audience so exclusively in translations."

Scholars do not even generally agree on how the title of *A Doll's House* should be handled. The original title *Et Dukkehjem* does not use the possessive, so some translators choose *A Doll House*. But it is not the same word that would have been used in Scandinavia for a literal doll's house (*dukkehus*). Instead of *hus*, Ibsen chose *hjem*, the Norwegian word for "home." Every word could have this level of debate over choice and nuance.

The adaptation for the Huntington production is by British feminist playwright Bryony Lavery, one of the few translations by a woman. Lavery chose to leave the "clockwork" plot of the original play largely untouched. "I try to remember that I am trying to serve another writer to have their work presented in another language," says Lavery in an interview with the Manchester Library Theatre in England. "So the task is simply to find the shortest path through the forest. The big reminder I had in my head was to not think of it as Victorian, but to obey the internal rules of the play's culture."

Lavery's main focus instead was on maintaining the play's tension for a modern ear. "The main license I took was deciding that, as it was a domestic drama, people who live together and know each other rather well, often talk over one another," says Lavery. "I simply decided where the next speech should cut in to the former, which I think gives the scenes a lack of formality and intensity of repressed frustration that helps the airless landscape of the play."

The Lavery translation has never had a professional production in America; it has been in wide use in the United Kingdom, including a revival for the Royal Exchange in 2014, where critics celebrated its grasp on the heart of the play. As Dominic Cavendish writes for *The London Telegraph*, "Lavery's subtly modern version [understands,] crucially, that it's what's not being said between husband and wife that counts most." — CHARLES HAUGLAND

## Textual Response: Exercise 2 (Context)

### The Angel in the House: The Ideal Victorian Woman

The Victorian ideal of a woman was that of an angel in the house. The phrase “Angel in the House” comes from the title of a popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds up his angel-wife as a model for all women.

#### Extract from *The Angel in the House* – Canto IX, Book I, ‘The Sahara’ (1854)

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman’s pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.  
How often flings for nought, and yokes  
Her heart to an icicle or whim,  
Whose each impatient word provokes  
Another, not from her, but him;  
While she, too gentle even to force  
His penitence by kind replies,  
Waits by, expecting his remorse,  
With pardon in her pitying eyes;  
And if he once, by shame oppress’d,  
A comfortable word confers,  
She leans and weeps against his breast,  
And seems to think the sin was hers;

Paraphrase the action of the poem

1. How does this poem shed light on how women and men should behave during this time?

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## Exercise 4: Character Analysis

### Meeting Nora: Characterization

**Directions:** In the opening section of the play, we are introduced to the characters Nora and Torvald Helmer. Nora's stage directions provide a great deal about her character before she has even spoken much. For each of the stage directions listed in the chart below, explain what they could suggest about Nora's character.

Stage directions	What could this suggest about Nora's character?
<i>"A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open."</i>	
<i>"Enter NORA, humming a tune and in high spirits"</i>	
<i>"she is in outdoor dress and carries a number of parcels"</i>	
<i>"a PORTER who is carrying a Christmas Tree and a basket"</i>	
<i>"he gives to the MAID who has opened the door"</i>	
<i>"To the PORTER, taking out her purse."</i>	
<i>"She is laughing to herself, as she takes off her hat and coat."</i>	
<i>"She takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket and eats one or two; then goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens."</i>	
<i>"Still humming, she goes to the table on the right."</i>	















## Symbolic Properties

A prop, formally known as (theatrical) property, is an object used on stage by actors during a performance. In practical terms, a prop is anything movable or portable on a stage, separate from the actors, scenery, or costumes.

**Directions:** There are many objects (called properties in the theater) on stage in this scene, which all have significance. Make a list of the properties required throughout this scene and then reflect on what they might suggest about the characters.

Prop	Who owns the prop?	Is the prop a gift? To whom?	What could the prop suggest about the character who owns it? About the intended recipient?





























