

# DIGITAL THEATRE+

## STUDY GUIDE

### Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Ella Hickson

Digital Theatre+ Study Guides are specially commissioned from leading theatre academics and practitioners, with expert knowledge of the texts that they explore. The guides examine plays from literary and contextual, as well as dramatic perspectives, to provide a thorough and manifold access point to key texts, from the classical to the contemporary.

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## ABOUT OUR WRITER

Ella is a multi-award-winning young playwright.

She is currently under commission to Headlong Theatre and the RSC, for whom she is writing a high profile adaptation. Previous work includes *Boys*, *High Tide*, *Nuffield*, *Soho*; *The Authorised Kate Bane* for Gridiron, Traverse, Tron; *Eight* (Fringe First winner and Evening Standard Award nominee), Trafalgar Studios and New York; *Precious Little Talent*, Trafalgar Studios; *Soup*, Traverse Theatre and *Hot Mess*, Latitude, Arcola.

Ella has an MA in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh and has worked with the Traverse as their Emerging Playwright on *Attachment* and the Lyric as Pearson Playwright in Residence. She is a member of The Old Vic New Voices.

Ella also writes for radio and screen. Most recently *Rightfully Mine* was broadcast on BBC R4 and her short film, *Hold On Me*, was screened at the London Film Festival 2012. It won Best Short Film at the 2012 Independent London Film Festival.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY

The Helmer family home is getting ready for Christmas. **Torvald Helmer** works at a **bank** and his wife, **Nora**, is a housewife and mother; they have three small children. The Helmers are a well-respected, affluent Norwegian family living in 19th-century Oslo.



Nora Helmer returns home having been Christmas shopping, her arms laden with presents. Nora is confronted with the adoration of her husband and the promise of her joyful children. In the opening few pages, Ibsen paints the scene of a happy family. Helmer calls Nora his "*squirrel*", his "*skylark*", and Nora coos back at Helmer. Nora has been extravagant with the gifts but as Helmer is soon to be promoted at work she feels they can afford it. Helmer chides her for being a spendthrift, Nora sulks and Helmer cheers her up by giving her some **money**.

**Mrs Linde**, an old school friend of Nora's, has fallen on hard times. She arrives at the house unannounced and asks Nora if Helmer might be able to offer her some work at the bank. Nora agrees to help and Mrs Linde is very grateful – suggesting that Nora's understanding is especially good of her as she has no real experience of hardship herself. In reply,





Nora **confesses to Mrs Linde** that, some time ago, she borrowed a large amount of money from a moneylender to pay for a trip to Italy that her husband needed to improve his health. Nora had lied to Helmer and told him the money had come from her father. Mrs Linde is shocked as, “a wife can’t borrow without her husband’s consent” (**ACT 1**).

During their conversation **Nils Krogstad** arrives at the house. Mrs Linde recognises him from the town that Nora and she grew up in. Nora knows him – he is a clerk at Helmer’s bank – but he is deemed to be untrustworthy and is known to be involved in morally dubious activity. **Dr. Rank**, a great friend of the Helmer family, is visiting the house and has been in speaking to Helmer. Dr Rank greets Mrs Linde and also throws further suspicion on the character of Krogstad.

Later, when Nora is alone in the house with the children, Krogstad returns. Krogstad is the man from whom Nora borrowed the money for her husband’s life-saving trip. Krogstad **begins to blackmail her**, threatening to expose Nora if she doesn’t safeguard his position at the bank. Krogstad is rightly concerned that it is his position that Helmer will give to Mrs Linde. Nora refuses to be threatened until Krogstad reminds her that she forged her father’s signature on the lending papers, which is not only a moral but a **criminal offence**. The act finishes with a great piece of dramatic irony, in which Helmer warns Nora of the danger of being involved with a man like Krogstad, how such evil infects the happiness of a family, and how forging a signature is the height of moral corruption. The audience already know it is too late for warnings.

The central section of the play sees Nora becoming desperate in her attempts to escape from and/or conceal her wrongdoing. Mrs Linde visits once again and asks if Dr Rank might be the man that Nora borrowed from; planting the idea in Nora’s head that Dr Rank might have the money to help her. **Nora pleads with Helmer** to let Krogstad keep his job at the bank. As the desperation of Nora’s plight increases, so the tactics she uses to persuade Helmer become more intense. What was at the outset a cooing softness becomes a frantic performance of subservience – she promises to sing and dance for him, to scamper about and “*do her tricks*” but Helmer refuses to be influenced by his wife and, in a fit of frustration with her, he sends Krogstad his notice.





Dr Rank visits Nora to tell her that he is dying from consumption of the spine. Nora, in her desperation, sees Dr Rank as a possible solution to her situation. She begins to flirt with him, flipping him on the cheek with silk stockings and calling him, “naughty” (**ACT 2**) but at the very moment that she is about to ask for his financial assistance, Dr Rank confesses his affection for Nora. Nora backs down and chides Dr Rank for being so forward.

The intensity of Nora’s performance as the good, pretty wife continues to increase. She has an elaborate costume made for the fancy-dress party – and she practises the Tarantella, a particularly alluring Italian dance which will please Helmer who has asked her to dress up as a Neapolitan maid. As Nora’s panic increases, Krogstad returns and raises the stakes. He not only wants his job back but he wants a promotion too. Nora refuses, and Krogstad posts a letter revealing everything into Helmer’s letterbox, for which Nora doesn’t have the key. After Krogstad leaves, Helmer goes to open the letterbox but Nora keeps him from it with the promise of a dance. She pleads with Helmer to watch her dancing instead of working and tells him that she can’t do anything without his instruction and he must stay to help her. With Dr Rank and Helmer watching, Nora **dances the tarantella**







like a wild woman, her dancing becoming more and more desperate, dancing as if her life depended on it. Nora has resolved to kill herself before Helmer finds out about what she has done – she would rather die than see her husband shamed by her. With the decision made, she resolves to go out with a bang. The party the following night will be a blowout – champagne, macaroons and dancing until dawn... it will be Nora's swansong.

The final act begins while the party is going on upstairs, as Nora's dance is being danced. Downstairs in the Helmer home, Mrs Linde has arranged to meet Krogstad. We discover that the pair of them had a romance when they were younger. Mrs Linde broke off the engagement because she received an offer from a wealthier man and she had a responsibility to support her mother and brothers. Mrs Linde suggests that Krogstad and she should marry as this would make Krogstad respectable once again and relieve Krogstad of having to expose Nora. Krogstad agrees to the match... all should be well.



Nora and Helmer return from the party and Helmer is in high spirits; he has been transfixed by his wife's dance which was alluring but perhaps a little "too real" (ACT 3).





Helmer wants to go to bed with Nora. Nora is preoccupied with her own anguish and bats Helmer off before both are interrupted by Dr Rank. Dr Rank comes to say goodbye to the pair. He too is set on death, his illness has progressed and he will lock himself away until it is over. Nora uses Dr Rank's bad news to put off Helmer's advances for the evening. Helmer exits to read his letters and Nora bids goodbye to the world. Before she can act on her impulse, however, Helmer bursts into the living room having read Krogstad's letter – he now knows everything of his wife's misdemeanour.

Helmer severely berates Nora, accusing her of being completely devoid of **morality** or duty. He has little concern for her and makes no attempt to take the blame for her, which is what she had expected. Helmer is only concerned with the effect that this will have on his social standing. He proposes to keep up appearances as a married couple but Nora will not be loved nor allowed to bring up the children. At this moment, Krogstad delivers another letter informing Helmer and Nora that he will marry Mrs Linde and so will have no need to reveal Nora's wrongdoing. Helmer's transformation is complete; he is suddenly overjoyed and forgives Nora everything now that his reputation is no longer under threat.

Nora, however, in seeing that her husband cared for his honour much more than for her, has a revelation. Finding her whole marriage as a performance; she becomes set on a course of self-discovery and truth. Neither of which she can achieve while living in the captive unreality of her marital home. Nora refuses to be a, "doll-wife" (**ACT 3**) any longer and, taking nothing with her, she leaves her husband and children to live alone.

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## CHARACTERS

### NORA HELMER

Nora is the wife of **Torvald Helmer** and mother to their three children. We know that she has moved to the city from the provincial town where she grew up with **Mrs Linde**, and that her father was: “always on the look out for all the money you can get” and that she feels that, “the moment you have it, it seems to slip through your fingers” (**ACT 1**). However, we know little else about her upbringing.



Nora tells Mrs Linde how Helmer doesn't like Nora to talk of her previous life:

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*In the early days he used to get quite jealous if I even mentioned people I'd liked back home, so of course I gave it up. (**ACT 2**)*

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We hear a reference to her father, whom Nora says is very like Helmer, and the nurse tells us that Nora, “hadn't any other mother but me (**ACT 2**) – suggesting that Nora's mother died. Nora's whole existence, it seems, is defined by the men to whom she has belonged, having been passed from father to husband.

In the opening pages of the play, the audience's perception of Nora is constantly changing. As she enters she carries presents and offers a tip to the porter. The first impression may then be one of generosity and goodwill – a good mother making a good home for Christmas. It becomes quickly apparent, however, that her generosity is, in fact, frivolity, as Helmer quickly chides her for being wasteful. Yet Nora uses her coquettishness to draw more money out of him. It seems apt, therefore, that at this stage Helmer talks to her with **pet names**: “sweet little song bird”, “skylark”, “squirrel” (**ACT 1**).





We are only allowed to retain the idea of her as frivolous and silly for a page or two, however, as soon she lies, straight-faced, to her husband about the macaroons and we see her as not just silly but duplicitous. We are only several pages on when we discover that she has had the daring and cunning to arrange a loan from a loan shark, to pay for a trip abroad to save her husband's life when he was suffering from ill health, and to keep up the repayments ever since. Suddenly, we see that all Nora's flirtation and frippery is not the result of affectation but, in fact, an arsenal of tactics used on her husband to elicit enough money to keep up her repayments. Nora is a character of huge change.

Nora travels from a position of entrapment to one of freedom. As we meet her in the first two acts she is very much Helmer's possession. She lives in a house to which she doesn't have a key for the letter box, she must ask Helmer for any money she needs, she is forced to lie about eating sweets, she must practice dancing when Helmer tells her and she must dress up in the clothes that Helmer likes. These demands, while shrouded in the soft, cooing language of affection, place Nora somewhere between a slave and a child. **Ibsen** creates a world in which Nora has no escape route; society offers her no way out. The only actions which make Nora feel free require her to break social codes in a way that would mean she is cast out of society: borrowing money from **Krogstad** felt: "like being a man" (**ACT 1**).

Her **wild dancing of the tarantella** offers her freedom (which Helmer says is "*madness*" and demands she stop); thoughts of suicide; the final act of leaving her children. It is not until Nora accepts that she cannot be both in society and an individual that she makes her choice to be free. It is this wild courage, to react against everything and everyone you know, that makes Nora so compelling. Her rebellion is not purely impulsive.



Ibsen also shows Nora to be a great thinker. When Nora questions the terms of **the law** that would damn her:



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*Hasn't a daughter the right to protect her dying father from worry and anxiety? Hasn't a wife the right to save her husband's life? (**ACT 2**)*

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Here she takes a huge philosophical problem in hand and argues it successfully. Equally, the depths of her perception into the problem of her marriage that occur so quickly and are expressed so clearly show a huge emotional intelligence; she says to Helmer:

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*You've never loved me; you've only found it pleasant to be in love with me. (**ACT 3**)*

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Ibsen has not painted Nora entirely as a heroine. While leaving her home may be philosophically and emotionally courageous, one must not forget it is also cruel – she is leaving three young children without a mother. Equally, Nora's captivity is self-constructed in some part. She agrees to Helmer's demands and uses her inferiority as a tool to get what she wants. Nora is certainly self-aware about the fact she hides the truth from Helmer and uses tricks to entertain him instead; she says to Mrs Linde that she'll tell Helmer the truth about the loan:

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*When my dancing and dressing up and reciting don't amuse him any longer. It might be a good thing, then, to have something up my sleeve. (**ACT 1**)*

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To be this aware of the nature of the relationship she has with Helmer and yet not try to change it before it is too late suggests Nora may be underestimating Helmer, just as he does her. Indeed, in the final conversation, Helmer does offer to try to change; perhaps if Nora had mentioned this problem earlier then change may have been possible. There may also be an argument that her pride in setting up the loan with Krogstad is somewhat greater than the love that motivated the action. Certainly she delivers the news to Mrs Linde in the first instance with no



humility or shame, and, given her intellectual prowess in other areas, it's hard to believe this is due to her ignorance.

Nora reflects the arc of the whole play – transforming from a performing ‘song bird’, to a desperate madwoman, and a rational revolutionary – and at each stage Ibsen has crafted her well enough that the audience understand and like her.

Nora embarks on a journey of self-discovery during the play, and the audience is encouraged to travel with her. She is the central protagonist of the story and we see her transform from a subservient wife to a liberated individual. Throughout this transformation, Nora is not just a character but a symbol of the social change occurring at the time. Nora Helmer is an iconic figure in European theatre. Her act of closing the door on her husband and children, at the end of the play, has come to resemble a turning point from a society of Victorian morality, with its strict social codes, to a society that values the independence of the individual over and above social duty.



### QUESTIONS:

- Do you think you would like to live Nora’s life, or would you, like her, strive for freedom?
- Where do you think Nora’s independence comes from? Do you think that urge is in all of us? Is it a natural urge, or do you think it is something that is specific to the character of Nora?
- Do you think Nora would have killed herself? What evidence do you have for your opinion?
- What do you think will become of Nora after she leaves her home? How will her life be different?



- Do you think Nora really loves Helmer? What evidence is there for your decision?
- What caused the Helmers' marriage to fail? Is it the fault of society, or of Helmer, or does Nora have a part to play?

**KEY LINE:**

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*I believe that before everything else I'm a human being. (ACT 3)*

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## TORVALD HELMER

Torvald Helmer is a banker and a lawyer. We are introduced to him as **Nora** carefully listens at his study door where he is working. Nora has to drag Helmer away from his work in order to **show him the presents** that she has bought for their children. Helmer is defined first as a banker and lawyer, and second as a husband. In his initial interaction with Nora we take him to be a particularly adoring husband, but soon **his language becomes patronising**. He refers to his wife as

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*“Little Nora”,*

*“a song bird” (ACT 1)*

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– and he laughs while chastising her, not taking her seriously.



If Nora represents social change then Helmer, by comparison, represents social stasis. Helmer represents the unflinching powers of the establishment – he deals in **money**; he is a father, husband and a boss;



and he is the owner of the land on which the action takes place. Helmer represents the hegemony of a capitalist patriarchy. Every character in the play is financially dependent on Helmer; they are all in his employ – even Nora and the children are reliant on his financial handouts.

While it is easy to paint Helmer as a tyrant and Nora as the naïve wife who suffers under his control, one must not forget that Helmer is not aware of any damage he is causing. His greatest sin is perhaps his ignorance. The shock he shows at Nora's revelation shows that he has no awareness that there is anything wrong with the status balance in his relationship. Indeed, the husband as boss and the wife as “little song bird” was absolutely normal for the time. Helmer is perhaps not unusually patronising or demanding, but rather Nora is unusually perceptive, aware and radical. In this respect it is, in fact, possible that Helmer is as much of a ‘doll’ as Nora. Helmer cannot deal with the realities of life; Nora won't tell him about the loan, or about **Dr Rank's** illness, and she doesn't tell him any of the details of **Mrs Linde's** situation. Nora can only offer Helmer sweet nothings, dress-ups and **pleasing dances**. Nora treats him as a child just as he as such. In fact, Nora is, in many ways, more knowing than Helmer; she is aware of the flaws in their relationship, yet she chooses not to speak of them.

Helmer's behaviour at the **end of the play** is unquestionably weak and vain. It is in this moment that Nora's character is vindicated. He is two-faced with regard to his old friend Dr Rank, angrily bemoaning his knock at the door (“Oh, what does he want now?’ **ACT 2**), but as Dr Rank enters, in the very same line, offers, “Ah, it's nice of you not to pass our door without looking in” (**ACT 3**).

Shortly before Helmer discovers the truth about the loan, he fantasises that he would like to protect Nora:

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*I've often wished that you could be threatened by some imminent danger so that I could risk everything I had – even my life itself – to save you. (**ACT 3**)*

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However, within minutes of discovering her wrongdoing he thinks only of saving himself: “Do you realise what you’ve done to me?” (**ACT 3**)

Nora had assumed her husband, in love, would try and defend her but she was wrong:

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*Nora, I'd gladly work night and day for you, and endure poverty and sorrow for your sake. But no man would sacrifice his honour for the sake of his wife. (**ACT 3**)*

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Helmer is willing to do anything as long as he stays within the realms of social propriety; he will not transgress the social value system to help his wife. When, of course, this is exactly what she was willing to do to save him.

This inability on Helmer’s part makes him very unlikeable. He seems to lack the intrinsic humanity that Nora has – we see him as a puppet, a façade of a man.

### **QUESTIONS:**

- Do you think Helmer really loves Nora?
- What do you think Helmer might have done differently?
- What do you think would need to happen for Helmer and Nora to make their marriage work?
- How would you react if your partner had got you into debt without telling you?
- Do you think Nora is right in saying to Helmer, "It's your fault that I've made nothing of my life"?

### **KEY LINE:**

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*No man would sacrifice his honour for the sake of his wife. (**ACT 3**)*

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## NILS KROGSTAD

Nils Krogstad is an employee at the bank where **Helmer** has recently been made manager. He has a reputation for moral weakness as he was involved in a dubious scandal in his past in which he forged a signature. This is the same act that **Nora** has performed as part of the **money**-lending agreement she has with Krogstad. When Helmer threatens to take away Krogstad's job, Krogstad **resorts to blackmailing** Nora.



There is an interesting comparison to be drawn between Krogstad and Helmer.

At the outset of the play it is clear that Helmer is a more virtuous character than Krogstad. However, by the end of the play it can be argued that the two men have swapped into one another's positions. Ironically, Helmer angles the accusation most suited to him at Krogstad, saying he needs to "wear a mask in the presence of those near and dear to him" (**ACT 1**).

At the moment that Helmer believes he is losing his wife he talks of duty and disgrace; he attempts to forbid Nora from leaving and asks her to think of "what people will say" (**ACT 3**).



Helmer claims to love Nora but he is not prepared to risk anything for the sake of that love. Compare this with when Krogstad tells **Mrs Linde** how he felt when he lost her love:

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*When I lost you it was as if the very ground had given way beneath my feet. Look at me now, a shipwrecked man clinging to a spar.*  
**(ACT 3)**

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This one line may be the most emotionally honest line in the play and yet it is spoken by the villain that nobody trusts.

Krogstad is willing to compromise his honour for love. The whole reason that he begins to blackmail Nora is for the sake of his sons – Krogstad is risking social disgrace for the sake of his family, something Helmer is not capable of. Ibsen works to undermine the idea that moral strength lies with those characters that are ‘morally upstanding’ in the eyes of society.

Krogstad’s relationship with Mrs Linde is the real romance of the play. You believe in their love. Ibsen places real emotion in the relationships that defy social rules (Mrs Linde and Krogstad, Nora and **Dr Rank**) and leaves those ‘respectable’ relationships (Helmer and Nora) empty of real feeling. In the story of Mrs Linde and Krogstad, love has the power of redemption – freeing both characters from the sins of their past. In doing this, Ibsen opposes the idea that sin is forever; he believes in the agency of the individual to effect change and to determine their own paths in life.

### **QUESTIONS:**

- In what ways are Krogstad and Nora similar?
- Do you think Krogstad is an inherently bad man or is he a victim of his situation?
- How could Krogstad have defended his job at the bank without resorting to blackmail?
- Do you like Krogstad or Helmer more as a character? Which one do you think is the ‘better man’ and why?





**KEY LINE:**

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*When I lost you it was as if the very ground had given way beneath my feet. Look at me now, a shipwrecked man clinging to a spar.*  
**(ACT 3)**

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## DR RANK

Dr Rank is a family friend who visits the Helmers on a daily basis. He is a doctor by profession but does not visit in a medical capacity. Dr Rank is dying of tuberculosis of the spine, inheriting his disease from his father who contracted VD due to his sexual promiscuity. Like Nora, Dr Rank is suffering on behalf of someone else; he says: “My poor innocent spine must pay for my father’s amusements” (ACT 2).



This situation works in parallel with Nora’s taking on the loan for Helmer: she suffers for the sake of her husband; Dr Rank questions the justice in suffering for his father’s sins. Ibsen uses Dr Rank’s illness to demonstrate that the idea of punitive morality is flawed.

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*RANK: To pay for someone else’s sins! Where’s the justice in that? Yet in one way or another there isn’t a single family where some such inexorable retribution isn’t being exacted. (ACT 2)*

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Dr Rank uses language that seems to suggest that morality and capitalism are such strong forces in the world of the play that these forces are somehow represented in the body, as if they can be ingested. Dr Rank talks of **Krogstad** as a: “moral invalid” and when talking of his own illness he describes his “internal economy” as “bankrupt” (**ACT 2**).

The main function of Dr Rank as a character is that his relationship with Nora is a friendship of equals, providing a counterpoint to Nora’s relationship with Helmer. Nora talks about her own childhood when she would talk with the servants because they were “terribly amusing” and “never lectured me at all” (**ACT 2**) – unlike her father. Nora now talks to Dr Rank in the same way as he is unlike her husband, perhaps being more of herself with Dr Rank in a way that she cannot with Helmer. This closeness becomes complicated when Dr Rank confesses his affection for Nora:

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*RANK: I’ve sometimes thought you’d as soon be with me as with Helmer.*

*NORA: You see, there are some people that one loves, and others that perhaps one would rather be with. (**ACT 2**)*

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This strange understanding places marriage and love as something other than enjoying being with someone; it suggests that marriage is not a relationship in which you can be who you really are.

Nora turns down Dr Rank’s advance due to the moral code of the day. But what remains is a touchingly intimate relationship between two people who have a real understanding of one another. In Dr Rank’s final scene, Nora is aware that she will never see him again as he is going to die, but Helmer is not aware. Dr Rank and Nora talk in code – Nora telling Dr Rank that she hopes he: “sleeps well” (**ACT 3**).

Nora then offers Dr Rank a light for his cigar, for a moment they stand in the same pool of light from the match, emphasising their complicity in a small, enlightened world that Helmer is not a part of.







**KEY LINE:**

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*I've sometimes thought you'd as soon be with me as with Helmer.*  
**(ACT 2)**

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## MRS LINDE



Just as **Helmer** and **Krogstad** are set up as comparative characters, so Mrs Linde's trajectory works as an opposite to **Nora's**. Mrs Linde enters the play with no prospects. She is poor and unemployed. Mrs Linde was forced to marry a man that she did not love, rejecting **Nils Krogstad** in the process, in order to support her mother and young brothers. Her family have now all left her and she is exhausted and alone. In the opening scene Nora can hardly stop herself from bragging about all that she has: the happiness of her marriage, her healthy financial position and her three lovely children. By the end of the play these positions have all but reversed: Mrs Linde is in love and soon to be married to a man of means while Nora is alone and unemployed.

Mrs Linde is a force of truth in Nora's life, encouraging her to speak to Helmer about the debt, time and time again. Mrs Linde is, perhaps, able to be so courageous about the truth because she has nothing to lose. Again, this suggests that the wealth and position of Nora and Helmer are prohibitive to an honest relationship. Mrs Linde is also resolutely practical.



When Nora gushes with the fervour of explaining how she set up the loan and says, “It was almost like being a man” (**ACT 1**), Mrs Linde quickly steps in with the practicalities: “How much have you been able to pay off? (**ACT 1**). Nora dresses up and dances for Helmer, as “Torvald can’t bear to see dressmaking’ (**ACT 2**), but Mrs Linde sits and mends the dresses, the only practical and useful element to the whole ‘dressing up’ affair. Indeed, when the nurse discovers the box and says that the dresses will need ‘patience’ to mend, Nora immediately says, “I’ll go and get Mrs Linde to help me” (**ACT 2**).

There is an authenticity to Mrs Linde that is related to her hard work and having seen the harsh reality of the world. She almost fits into the puritan idea that virtue comes from suffering. Indeed, at the end of the play when she marries Krogstad, it seems she has been rewarded for her pragmatism and drudgery.

### QUESTIONS:

- Do you think Mrs Linde likes Nora?
- Was Mrs Linde aware of Helmer’s new job before she arrived to see her old friend?
- What do you think makes Mrs Linde suspicious of Nora and Dr Rank?
- Why do you think Mrs Linde is so intent on getting Nora to tell Helmer the truth?

### KEY LINE:

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*I just had to struggle along. (**ACT 1**)*

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## THE NURSE

Anna-Maria was a nurse to Nora when she was a child, and now she is helping Nora to bring up her own children.



The nurse is, like Mrs Linde, an example of someone forced to be fiercely pragmatic because society was not kind to her. The nurse had a child out of wedlock, and the father of the child never offered any money to help raise the baby. Subsequently the nurse had to give the child away when she was offered the chance of a job looking after young Nora.

Just as Mrs Linde was forced to marry for money rather than love, so the nurse was forced to repress the ‘natural’ instinct of maternity for the sake of her own survival. These women do not have the privilege to ‘do the right thing’ – they had to act out of necessity; they are exemplars of self-sacrificial women that have suffered due to the failings of men. The nurse refers to Nora as: “poor Nora” and the children as “poor little mites” (ACT 2), even though she is of a much lower social standing and has a much harder life than theirs.



She also has the same practicality as Mrs Linde – again contrasting with Nora’s impulsive nature. When Nora discovers the fancy dress in “terrible state” she thinks she “should like to tear it all to pieces” (**ACT 2**). But instead, the nurse, never having put any importance in such things, calmly states it can be: “put right – it only needs a little patience” (**ACT 2**).

When Nora leaves Helmer she knows she is leaving her children in the care of the nurse, which offers the nurse three children of her own. Just as Mrs Linde’s loveless past is replaced by a loving future, so the nurse’s childless past seems to have been replaced by a future of motherhood. It is as if **Ibsen** is writing a new value system in which those that have suffered – and subsequently come to understand themselves – are rewarded.

**QUESTIONS:**

- Do you think the nurse will make a better mother than Nora after Nora is gone?
- Do you think the nurse respects Nora’s decision to leave?

**KEY LINE:**

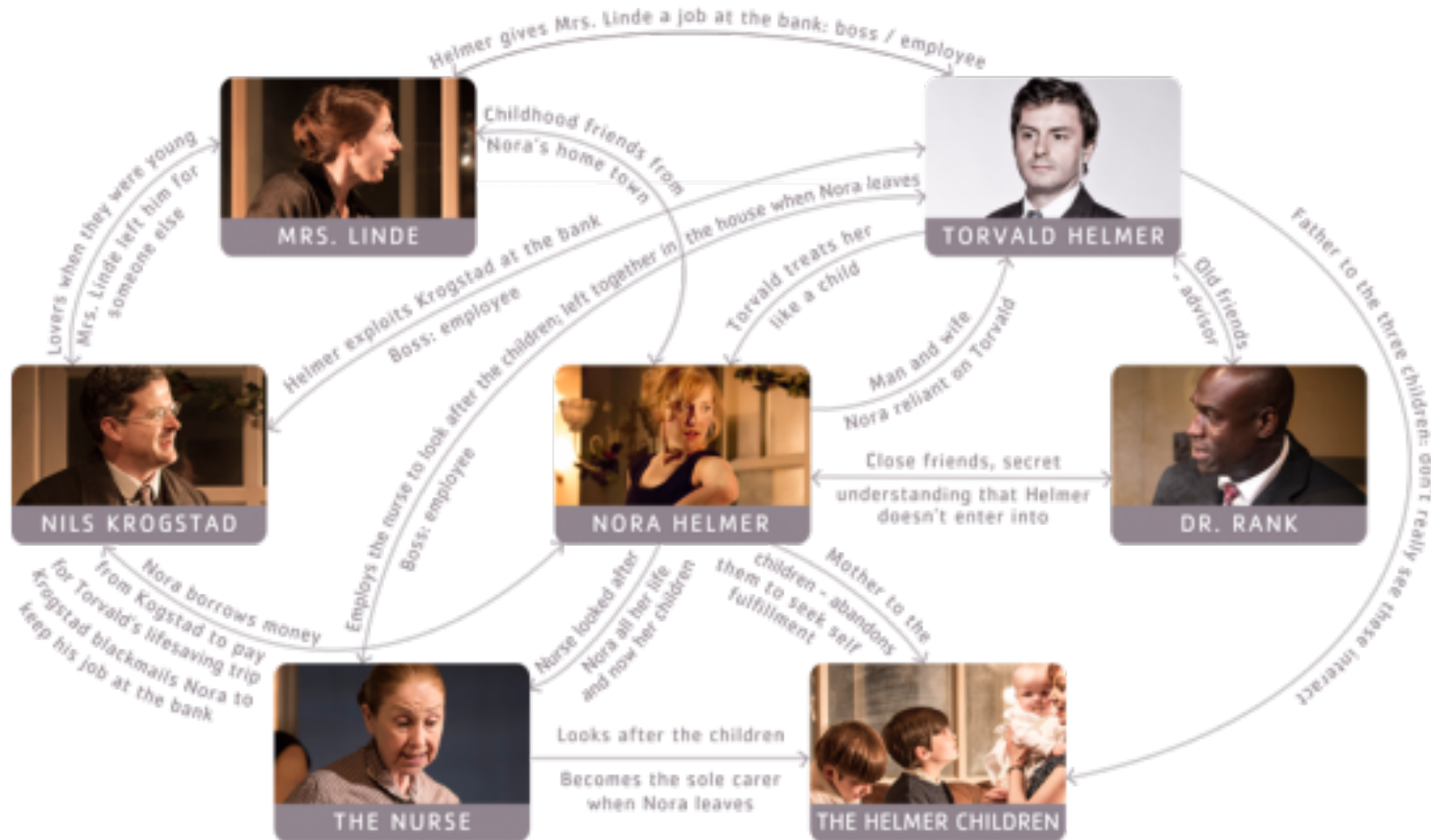
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*Poor little Nora – she hadn’t any other mother but me. (**ACT 2**)*

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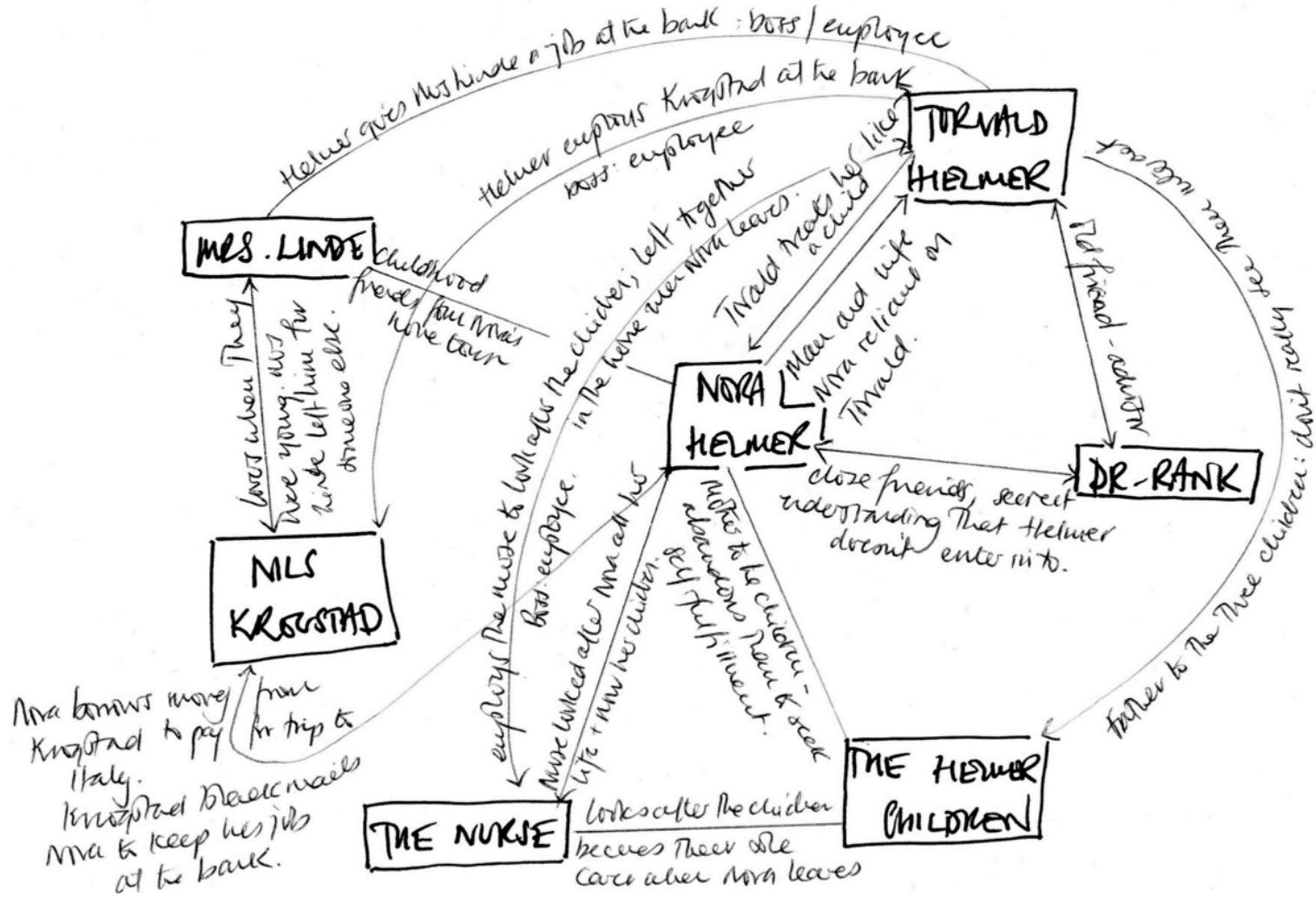


RELATIONSHIP MAP





[ A DOLL'S HOUSE : Relationship MAP.]





## PLOT SUMMARY

### ACT 1

**Nora** returns home from Christmas shopping with armfuls of parcels for her children and a Christmas tree. She tips the porter extravagantly and eats some macaroons. Nora summons **Helmer** through to the front room to show him what she has bought, hiding the macaroons in the process. Helmer scolds Nora for being a spendthrift and tells her that she has inherited this bad habit from her father. Nora plays the innocent and reminds him that he is soon to be promoted and they will be well-off enough not to worry. Helmer asks Nora if she has been eating sweets and she lies. Together they delight in what a wonderful evening they will have and how comforting it is to have: “a good safe post and ample means” (**ACT 1**).

**Mrs Linde**, an old school friend of Nora’s arrives. Mrs Linde tells Nora that she has had a hard life in which she was forced to marry for **money** and that now her husband and children have gone. She has moved to the city to find work and company. Nora gloats about her own comfort and happiness in the face of these confessions. Mrs Linde asks Nora if she might ask Helmer to give her a job at the bank and Nora happily obliges.



Nora tells Mrs Linde that she and Helmer had to take a trip to Italy for a whole year to protect Helmer’s health when he was ill. This trip cost a lot of money which she received from her father. When Mrs Linde accuses Nora of knowing nothing about *“the troubles and hardships of life”*, Nora confesses that the money for Helmer’s trip did not come from her father but, in fact, she borrowed it. Mrs Linde is outraged, as *“a wife can’t borrow without her husband’s consent”*. Nora is in the middle of explaining to Mrs Linde how it will all be fine because of Helmer’s promotion when **Krogstad** arrives at the house to see Helmer.





Mrs Linde recognises Krogstad from the town in which she and Nora grew up. Nora tells Mrs Linde that Krogstad has had an unhappy married life and Mrs Linde warns Nora that Krogstad has been involved in a lot of **morally dubious** business. Nora ignores Mrs Linde's warning, shuts the door of the stove and warms the room up. **Dr Rank** – a friend of the family – in to join the two women, informs them that Krogstad works at Helmer's bank and warns them further of Krogstad's bad reputation. Nora seems pleased that Helmer is Krogstad's boss. Helmer joins the three in the room and confirms that Mrs Linde may indeed have a job at the bank.

Nora is left alone in the house and is playing a game of hide and seek with her children when Krogstad returns. We discover that Krogstad is the man from whom Nora borrowed the money for Helmer's trip, and now he has **returned to blackmail** Nora. He threatens her that unless he keeps his job at the bank – the job Nora has just arranged to be given to Mrs Linde – then he will tell Helmer everything. He goes on to explain that not only did Nora borrow money from him but she also forged her father's signature, which is a **criminal offence**. Nora is distraught and she questions the law – "Hasn't a wife the right to save her husband's life?".

Helmer returns home and Nora lies to him about Krogstad having been there. Nora, after some persuasion, tells Helmer that Krogstad wants to safeguard his job at the bank. Helmer refuses to help. Nora panics and pleads with Helmer, but Helmer just lectures Nora about how bad a man Krogstad is and how terrible Krogstad was to forge a signature. Helmer warns Nora of the dire consequences of such an action – with no idea, of course, that Nora has done exactly the same thing.

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*HELMER: Just think how a guilty man like that must have to lie and cheat and play the hypocrite with everyone. How he must wear a mask even with those nearest and dearest to him – yes, even with his own wife and children. (ACT 1)*

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Nora cannot tell Helmer what she has done. Helmer returns to his work and Nora is left in a blind panic, refusing to see her children for fear her immoral deeds make her unfit to be a mother.

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## ACT 2

**Act 2** opens one day later. The Christmas tree is stripped and dishevelled and the candles are burnt out. **Nora** has grown progressively anxious since we last saw her; she paces the room manically and jumps at the sound of the door. **Helmer** and Nora are due to go to a fancy dress party the next evening but all the fancy dress clothes are in tatters – the calm, cosy and peaceful home of **Act 1** is in disarray.



Nora tries to concentrate on making her costume pretty, on the frippery and adornment of the party, but she is overwhelmed by fear that **Krogstad** will arrive and expose her secret. Helmer has asked Nora to dress up as a Neapolitan fisher-girl and dance the Tarantella which she learnt while they were in Capri, Italy. Nora **tries to influence Helmer**, offering to dance and sing and show him tricks, to convince him to let Krogstad keep his place at the bank. Helmer is not wooed by her flirting and becomes furious that Nora would imagine he might be influenced in a business decision by his wife. This insult to his pride causes him to immediately write a letter to Krogstad informing him of his dismissal. Helmer leaves Nora alone in the room telling her to practise her Tarantella



with a tambourine. He says she may make all the noise she likes and he won't hear her.

**Dr Rank** visits to tell Nora that he is dying. He has tuberculosis of the spine and it has become so chronic that he must hide himself away to see out the end of his days. The mood, however, is strangely light – almost flirtatious. Due to **Mrs Linde**'s earlier incorrect suspicion that Dr Rank was Nora's benefactor, Nora suddenly has the idea to ask Dr Rank for the money. She knows no other way of persuasion than playing the coquette, and so she begins to flirt with him. Dr Rank declares his affections for her, causing Nora to retreat. Nora rises and asks for the lamp to be brought in. Having scolded Dr Rank for being so forward, Nora goes on to be very honest with him, explaining that she can speak openly with him in a way that she cannot with Helmer; they have an equal friendship whereas her relationship with Helmer is like that of parent and child.

Krogstad, hearing that he has been dismissed, comes straight to the house to talk to Nora, who is by now frantic with panic. He makes it clear to Nora that he wishes to gain his standing in society rather than **money**, and he not only wants Nora's loan repaid but also a promotion at the bank. Nora threatens to kill herself if he reveals her secret but Krogstad doesn't believe her, reminding her that her secret would still damage her family even after she was dead. Nora is helpless to stop Krogstad. He knows he has to blackmail Helmer with the threat of social shame to get what he wants. Krogstad leaves a letter explaining Nora's loan and her fraudulent signature in Helmer's letterbox – a letterbox to which Nora does not have the key.

Mrs Linde comes to give the repaired dress to Nora. Nora confesses to her that Krogstad was the man who lent her the money, and that now he has left a letter explaining everything to Helmer. Mrs Linde thinks that Helmer discovering the truth is the best thing that could happen. Nora suggests to Mrs Linde that she will kill herself. Mrs Linde leaves to go straight round to Krogstad to try to talk him out of his plan, explaining that she and Krogstad were once in love.

Helmer returns, thinking that Nora is getting ready to show him her costume for the party. He expects "a great transformation scene" (**ACT 2**).





Nora puts him off, saying that no one can see it until tomorrow. Nora, distraught and frantic, keeps Helmer from opening his letters by demanding his help, “I can’t do anything unless you help me” (**ACT 2**).

Helmer agrees to stay and teach her the dance of the Tarantella. Nora, wild with panic, **begins to dance** while Dr Rank plays the piano and Helmer shouts instructions. The frenetic scene grows more and more tense as Nora begins to dance like a savage, her hair comes down, she looks wild, completely ignoring Helmer’s instructions. Mrs Linde returns to see the frantic scene, exclaiming, “Nora darling, you’re dancing as if your life depended on it” (**ACT 2**).

Helmer chides Nora, telling her not to be "so wild and excitable". Nora knows, however, that she is beyond help; she has resigned herself to being found out and her resignation has brought freedom. She tells Mrs Linde that “it’s a wonderful thing to be waiting for a miracle” (**ACT 2**)

Mrs Linde stands confused as to what Nora means by a miracle. We learn that after the dance ends the next evening, Nora intends to kill herself:

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*The Tarantella will be over... thirty-one hours to live (**ACT 2**).*

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## ACT 3

The act opens with the costume party in full swing in the flat above; the music of the Tarantella can be heard coming through the ceiling. Mrs Linde has arranged to meet Krogstad secretly while the Helmers are at the party. Mrs Linde and Krogstad discuss their past love affair for the first time.

Mrs Linde explains that when she was younger she had to leave Krogstad for an offer from a richer man because her “mother was quite helpless” and she “had two small brothers” (**ACT 3**). Krogstad resents Mrs Linde for the pain she caused him; Mrs Linde tries to make amends by suggesting that the two of them marry – they have the chance to set themselves right in the eyes of the world. Love is a redeemer.

In light of this, Krogstad offers to retrieve the letter from Helmer’s letterbox, keeping the secret from Helmer and saving Nora from disgrace. Mrs Linde, however, urges him to leave it – she believes that the best thing for Nora and Helmer is to discover the truth so that they can have a complete understanding between them. Krogstad agrees with Mrs Linde and exits – saying:

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*Kristina, this is the most marvellous thing that has ever happened to me. (**ACT 3**)*

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Helmer drags Nora into the living room, having had to march her away from the party. Nora is desperate to return; she does not want the dance to be over. Helmer tells Mrs Linde how Nora’s rendition of the Tarantella was “a trifle too realistic” (**ACT 3**). Helmer exits to light all the candles because it is very dark. Mrs Linde is left alone with Nora and tells her that the letter is still in Krogstad’s letterbox and Helmer will find it. Nora takes this as a sign that all is lost and she begins to consider her suicide.

Helmer tells Nora that this evening he has been pretending that they are new lovers, that Nora is a young bride and he is taking her home for the first time. Nora tries to rebuff him and Helmer assumes it is play because a wife must accept her husband’s advances. Dr Rank interrupts, coming to say goodbye to the Helmers as he is going to die. Nora understands his





intention and they speak in metaphors: Dr Rank explains that his next costume will be a big, black hat, which when you put it on no one can see you. Helmer understands nothing. Dr Rank has one last cigar with the couple. Nora lights it for him and bids him “sleep well” (**ACT 3**).

Helmer goes to open his letters. Nora is left alone – she speaks into the empty room of her own suicide – and talks of never seeing her children again, of black water that is cold and deep. She bids goodbye to Helmer and her children and goes to rush out into the night. Before she leaves, Helmer enters, having read the letter from Krogstad.



Helmer locks the door and stops Nora from leaving. He says she has no religion, no **morality** and no sense of duty. Helmer seems only concerned for his standing in society and the degree to which Krogstad can damage that standing. Helmer says that in the eyes of the world they must be seen to continue just as they were before. Nora will be kept in the house but she will no longer be allowed to bring up the children.

A second letter arrives from Krogstad explaining that he and Mrs Linde will be married and he no longer need blacken Nora’s name. Helmer is overjoyed - they are saved! Helmer throws both letters in the stove and





watches them burn. Nora, however, doesn't seem to be happy with the news: a change has come over her, her mood is sober. Helmer exclaims that he has forgiven her and all is well; Nora leaves the room sullenly and takes off her fancy dress. Helmer continues to delight in the fact he has forgiven Nora; he says it is as if she has become both his wife and child.

Nora returns to the room in her everyday clothes, she is set to leave the house. Nora expected Helmer to defend her, to take the blame for her, to be heroic and honourable for the sake of his wife but Helmer was only concerned about his reputation. This reaction has caused Nora to realise that their marriage has been a farce. Nora believes Helmer has never loved her but only found it pleasant to be in love with her.

**Nora has had an epiphany.** She sees clearly that she has spent her life performing tricks and being a doll-wife to Helmer just as she was a doll-child to her father. She must leave to try to educate herself and to stand on her own two feet. Nora is determined to get to know herself and the world outside.

Helmer at first promises change and then attempts to forbid Nora to leave; finally he resorts to his greatest threat – what people will say. The pair reach an ideological standoff where Nora realises that Helmer is so entrenched in the prescriptive value system set out by society that she cannot make him understand her position, and therefore there is no hope for their future. Nora talks once again of a miracle, the miracle that one day Helmer may come to understand her completely – but she realises that "both of us would have to be so changed" that it is impossible. Nora leaves the house, Helmer and her children and goes out into the world alone. In the final moment of the play we hear the front door slam.

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## LANGUAGE

## SYMBOLISM

*A Doll's House* is laden with symbols and metaphors that work to reinforce the themes of the play in subtle ways.

### THE STOVE

The stove is initially a symbol of familial comfort. It provides warmth, and when sitting by the fire, a family are sitting in close proximity. The image of the family around a fire is a hallmark of familial contentment.

However, during the play, this seemingly comforting symbol becomes more threatening. At the first mention of **Krogstad**, **Nora** shuts the stove, saying, “There, that should burn up now” (**ACT 1**) and pushes the rocking chair a little way away from the stove. The threat of Krogstad equates to the fire; the pressure and tension equate to the heat, the speed with which Krogstad could cause destruction is just like that of a fire, and Nora’s need to keep her family away from the increasing threat is symbolised in her pushing the rocking chair to a safe distance.

Later **Dr Rank** sits by the stove when he is talking of the threat of his illness, “the sands are running out for me...” (**ACT 2**) and **Helmer** stands by the stove while Nora dances the **Tarantella**, her wildness and freedom (symbolised by the dance) providing the greatest threat to their marriage. Ibsen has specifically indicated that these moments should be played near the stove – moments of threat, of danger – moments in which the artifice of harmony could catch light at any moment.

### THE LAMP

**Ibsen** uses the amount of light in a scene as a symbol for **morality** – the absence or presence of light becomes a kind of moral barometer. The scene in which Nora is provocative towards Dr Rank begins with the stage direction, “During the following scene it begins to grow dark” (**ACT 2**), representing the moral dubiousness of the behaviour. When Dr Rank finally confesses his feelings towards Nora, Nora calls to the maid to bring the





lamp in and says to Dr Rank, “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, now that the lamp has come in?” (**ACT 2**).

### **THE DOOR**

The whole of *A Doll’s House* is set in one room. This makes the entrances and exits large events in the scenes, added to which this is a play about a family threatened by outside forces and so the door becomes the site around which this threat is focused. One of the most threatening moments in the play is when Krogstad enters ‘unnoticed’ because the door, the defence a family has against the outside world, seems to have been bypassed. The final gesture of the play is the "*noise of a door slamming*". Nora has decided to put herself on the other side of her own front door; she has become an outsider to her own family. Leaving your husband and children was, at the time of the first performance of *A Doll’s House*, a wildly radical idea, and, because of this, the slamming of the door at the end of the play takes on great symbolic weight. The closure of this one door has come to stand for a cultural shift from patriarchal 19th-century morality to a new era of increased individuality and liberalism.

### **THE TARANTELLA**

The Tarantella is a wild dance that originates in Southern Italy. The cultural connotations of the dance, being a hot-blooded Roman expression of savagery, contrast with the cool and calm nature of the Scandinavians.

The dance is named after the tarantula spider. The poison of the tarantula spider was suspected to cause ‘tarantism’, a mad jigging that only ceased when the victim was exhausted. This dance works as a symbol for Nora’s downfall in several ways. Firstly, the dance originates in Italy, the country that is connected with the debt, as if the borrowing of the money/the fraudulent signature are the ‘bite’ of the spider and, ever since, Nora has been ‘dancing’ or pretending to Helmer. Indeed, she must keep dancing, just like the victim of the bite, until she is exhausted.

There is also the sense that the tarantella is Nora’s swansong. She intends to kill herself when the dance comes to an end. So again, Nora’s dance represents the original mythology surrounding the tarantella – that it is, in a sense, a death dance. Nora is also dancing to stop Helmer opening the





letter from Krogstad, so in this respect ‘social death’ – the loss of face and honour – is equated to actual death.

When Nora performs the dance it is a dance of wild abandon. This force of savagery breaks with the idea of ‘appropriate behaviour’ or ‘decorum’. It is, therefore, a physical embodiment of the force of will and the strength of independence that makes Nora leave at the end of the play.

Helmer’s interaction with this symbol is also telling. Helmer only wishes to see the sedate version of the dance that society has cultivated. When Nora practices the dance, Helmer says:

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*I’ll go and sit in the inner room and shut the doors, so you can make all the noise you like – I shan’t hear a thing. (ACT 2)*

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And when Nora dances the dance with all her wild abandon, Helmer complains that it was “a trifle too realistic... more so than was... artistically necessary” (ACT 2). Again, we see that Helmer can only cope with an artificial, socially codified version of reality – not with the savagery of life as it actually is.

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## STRUCTURE

Ibsen follows a traditional three-act structure:

1. The proposal of the play is in the **opening act**: will Nora be able to keep her wrongdoing hidden from her husband?
2. The tension and urgency surrounding the problem increases in the **second act**: Krogstad raises the stakes, Mrs Linde urges Nora to come clean.
3. The **third act** sees the resolution and consequences of the proposal: Helmer does find out about the wrongdoing. Nora decides to leave her husband and children.

However, there are some specific structural devices that Ibsen uses in this play which help to make the drama so effective. All the significant events of the play have taken place before the play opens – Torvald’s new job, Nora’s deal with Krogstad, the death of Mrs Linde’s husband and Dr Rank’s illness. This means there is very little action in the play. It does mean, however, that the play can focus on the consequences of action rather than action itself which, considering the consequences, are the subject of Ibsen’s play and rather important.

The inescapability of these consequences is testament to Ibsen’s skill – he constructs the **moral** web so tightly that his characters have no way to turn. Every option is laden with moral weight. In this way he expertly translates moral and philosophical questions into dramatic choices.

Ibsen’s plays are renowned for their lack of action. Their single location and static nature is typical of the classical three-act play. We are encouraged to view the change/action of the play as internal rather than external. The naturalistic domestic setting also allows the audience to see their own lives in the design of the play, creating a greater sense of empathy with the characters.

*A Doll’s House* was first performed over Christmas, a time when families are just getting ready to spend the holidays together, a time of Christian celebration and sentimentality, which makes the cruelty of Nora’s final act even more effective.





Setting the play in the few days of Christmas – we go through the ritual, performance and pomp of Christmas Eve and the burnt-out effects of Christmas Day – makes us dimly aware of the prospect of a New Year which should bring hope and happiness. Torvald is due to start a new job, Nora believes she will be free of her debt by the New Year and Krogstad and Mrs Linde start a new future. Christmas here is a watershed – a pivotal point around which change can occur.

In the setting of this play there are very few dramatic devices. There are no asides or flamboyant stage tactics. The lighting is simple, and the staging is realistic. The most theatrical moment in the play – the tarantella dance – is not a great feat of theatricality; it is rooted in a human impulse, in a natural urge, a human expression. These decisions are rooted in Ibsen's desire to create a 'new realism', a theatre without artifice. The form and staging of the play reflect the content of the play in seeking this new world of truth.

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## PET NAMES

Helmer uses a selection of pet names to talk to Nora:

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*“Little squirrel”, “songbird”, “skylark”*

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**(ACT 1)**

All of these names work to belittle her and to make her seem delicate and soft. There is also the connotation that these birds ‘sing’ or ‘perform’ – both of which Nora does for Helmer. There is an irony in Ibsen’s use of language here, though, as none of these animals are pets at all. All of them are, in fact, wild animals that should not be kept in cages. These names suggest a freedom that Nora does not have.

It is interesting, however, that Nora calls Helmer by his first name, Torvald. In almost all of Ibsen’s other plays, wives call their husbands by their second names. According to the social convention of the time it would have been more normal for Nora to call her husband Helmer. Both Nora and Helmer are overly-colloquial or use ‘pet names’ with one another.

## PLAYING WITH MEANING

Ibsen takes the fabrication and affectation of character as a theme in this play. He also follows this notion of inauthenticity through into his use of language. The language is a product of the society that uses it, therefore the language is as duplicitous and full of artifice as the characters.

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## ‘NEW NORWEGIAN’

When **Ibsen** began writing, he chose to write in verse. This heightened language, with its poetic structure and its rhyming couplets, was typical of the type of theatre being shown in Norway at that time. He wrote these early verse plays based on Old Norse folk ballads and legends – wild tales of trolls and monsters. At this time, Ibsen was quoted as saying, *"In Art there is no place for mere Reality – what is wanted is illusion."* And yet *A Doll's House* is a very naturalistic portrayal of a real family set in their front room.

Ibsen spent his life trying to move away from the romance and poetry of his early verse work. It took him almost ten years to write his first play in prose. The ambition was to set down a play that reflected life as it actually was – no frills, no romance or poetry – just reality. First of all, this required a change in subject matter – there aren't many trolls or monsters in the average 19th-century Norwegian home. Secondly, and most importantly, it meant Ibsen had to refine a new kind of language, the language that people actually spoke, this came to be known as Ibsen's 'new Norwegian' spelling.

Ibsen first achieved this in 1869 with the play, *The League of Youth*, about which he said:

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*I have accomplished the feat of doing without any soliloquies and... without a single aside... I am confining myself to the... task of truthfully portraying the fluent speech of everyday life... since it was human beings that I wanted to draw, I could not let them speak the language of Gods.*

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### QUESTIONS:

- How realistic do you think Ibsen's language is?
- Can you imagine saying the things that his characters say in the way that they say them?





Of course, to us, today, the play still feels a little stilted. One must take into account that what may have seemed very realistic to Ibsen in 1879 will seem very old-fashioned and formal to us today. One must also remember that *A Doll's House* was originally written in colloquial Norwegian which means the text will never sound quite as natural or effective in its English translation.

Peter Watts, who wrote one translation of the text, says:

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*Ibsen's plays are essentially Norwegian – so that a translation that is really a transplantation is bound to bristle with improbabilities and inconsistencies... to update the language to contemporary colloquial English the text would be rife with anachronisms... But to use the authentic stage language of the period is almost unreadably stilted.*

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Translation creates problems in style and meaning. For example, the title of this work is most often translated as *A Doll's House*, whereas in fact, according to the Norwegian, it could just as easily be 'A Doll House'. The meanings implied by these two titles are different. The first suggests the house belongs to the doll, the second doesn't. To best suit the meaning intended by the play it would seem that 'A Doll House' is correct, but because of style, tone and the passage of time *A Doll's House* is used.

### **QUESTIONS:**

- Can you find anything in the text that has remained Norwegian? Why do you think the translator chose to leave this as it was?
  - What is it about the text that lets you know it is not a modern text? What about the text tells you it is not set in contemporary Britain?
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## DECEPTIVE LANGUAGE: DOUBLE MEANINGS

While talking to Dr Rank and Mrs Linde, Nora secretly discovers that Krogstad is in the employ of her husband. Nora finds this information funny as she believes this means Krogstad is no longer a threat. It is, however, Krogstad's need to protect his job that makes him more dangerous.

Nora begins to laugh at the news and says she finds it “frightfully funny” (ACT 1). The juxtaposition of ‘frightful’ and ‘funny’ – something scary/something amusing – resembles the central theme of the play: real danger hidden behind conversational niceties.

This phrase, ‘frightfully funny’, is then used three times in quick succession. The repetition strips the phrase of meaning – reducing its authenticity – when all the while the information they are discussing is, in fact, the root of a situation that eventually causes Nora to try to kill herself. Yet, here she is laughing and saying how “*frightfully funny it is*”.

This same device is used again later on. Just after the audience have discovered that Nora forged a signature and so is in much more serious trouble than first imagined, Nora says she is “terribly looking forward to the fancy dress party” (ACT 2).

Here again, the severity and threat of ‘terrible’ contrasts with the fun of a ‘fancy dress party’ – the threat is veiled in artifice. In the very next line, Helmer uses the word again; he is “terribly curious to see what surprise...” (ACT 2). Nora is planning for him. Here the dread of ‘terrible’ contrasts with the joy of ‘surprise’ – which Helmer believes to be a dress when, in fact, the audience knows that the surprise is the very grim truth about her deal with Krogstad. At every turn grim reality is covered and concealed in frippery.

The word ‘hide’ and the act of ‘hiding’ also take on double meanings in the play. It is the first word that Nora uses, “Hide the Christmas tree properly” (ACT 1). Her first act is one of concealment. She then goes on to hide the macaroons and the Christmas presents. At this stage all the ‘hiding’ is innocuous and innocent. Indeed, this playful aspect of ‘hiding’ is confirmed when, towards the end of the act, Nora plays ‘hide and seek’ with the children: Nora is hiding under the table when Krogstad enters the room







unannounced. Suddenly Nora's concealment changes from a playful game to defence against a real threat, constantly blurring the line between what is playful and what is dangerous.

Another repeated idea in the play is that of seeing truth 'in the face' of a character. Helmer says to Nora "*look me straight in the face*" when he is trying to see if she has eaten macaroons. Later on, when Nora tries to lie and say Krogstad hasn't visited, Helmer can see by Nora's face that she is lying. We see here that when characters look directly at one another and trust what they see, then honesty might prevail. We see this idea proven between Mrs Linde and Krogstad. Krogstad is convinced of Mrs Linde's affection, against his rational suspicion, because "I can see it in your face" (**ACT 3**).

However, in the case of the macaroons, Nora goes on to use language to lie –

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*"No, of course not", "I promise you", "I wouldn't do anything you don't like" (ACT 1)*

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and Torvald is deceived. **Ibsen** makes language the tool by which their mutual deception becomes possible. When Helmer becomes convinced of Nora's lie it is because, he says, "you've given me your word" (**ACT 3**).

Language, like society, is a construction that is not to be trusted. Faces are to be trusted – language is not.

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## CONTEXT

### THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

***A Doll's House* was first performed at The Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, in Demark on 21 December 1879.**

It had been published previously and the first 8,000 copies sold out within a month. It was clear that it was a popular hit - people wanted to read it. However, the reaction to the first performance was, in some cases, outrage. It was considered to be a barbaric attack on the convention of marriage and Nora was considered by many to be inhuman for deciding to leave her husband and children. There were some critics, however, who had the foresight to engage with Ibsen's attempts at 'new realism'. Erik Bogh, one such critic, delighted in the naturalism of the play :

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*Not a single declamatory phrase, no high dramatics, no drop of blood, not even a tear.*

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This reaction didn't damage the popularity of the play. The Copenhagen run sold out completely and the show quickly transferred to The Theatre Royal, Stockholm.

### QUESTIONS:

- Can you think of any contemporary plays that have outraged audiences?
- How do you think *A Doll's House* would be received were it to premiere today?

When the play ran in Germany, however, the audiences and actors were not quite so accommodating of Ibsen's radical ideas. The actress, Hedwig Niemann-Rabbe, refused to perform the part of Nora, claiming that she couldn't relate to a woman that acted so savagely. Ibsen was forced to write an alternative ending in which Nora doesn't leave but instead breaks down and cries at the sight of her children – suggesting that she will stay in the marriage for their sake. Ibsen referred to the new ending as "an act of barbarous violence against the play". Ibsen was eventually vindicated,





however, when the new ending damaged the popularity of the play and caused protests – and so the original ending was reinstated.

The original version went on to play across the globe to huge critical and popular success. Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman wrote a completely new version of the play called *Breaking a Butterfly* for London stages in 1884, but it was no match for the original. It wasn't until 1889 that a translation of the original Ibsen play came to London.

### QUESTIONS:

- How would Nora staying for the sake of her children change the message of the play?
  - Would Nora's decision to stay make her more likeable as a character?
  - If you were Nora what would you do?
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## **IS A DOLL'S HOUSE STILL RELEVANT TODAY?**

Nora's strident individualism and her need to break free are set against a society in which women were not allowed to vote, where they had to ask their husband for any money they wanted and where they were frowned upon for working. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine in today's world that Nora's concerns would still be valid. A woman can indeed borrow money without her husband's permission; she can earn her own money, own her own bank account and run up her own debts. The behaviour that Nora employs to get her way – playing the innocent, acting dumb, dancing, prancing and singing to entertain her husband – also seems to be part of a now-antiquated marital gender dynamic. One would hope that society allowed for men and women to be equal, honest and emotionally frank with one another.

However, Nick Payne, a contemporary British playwright, has recently written a short film entitled *Nora*, updating Ibsen's play. Payne, drawing on a book called *The Equality Illusion* by Kat Banyard, among other sources, points out that gender inequality is still rife in today's society. His 'Nora' has to juggle being a mum and working full time. The men in her office are congratulated for making it to children's plays and sports matches where, for the women, it is expected.

Payne's Nora has to get the kids ready for school and sort out the admin of the house and get to work, whereas, for her husband, work is allowed to be the main priority. Payne also focuses in on the aesthetic pressure that women are under: the Nora in his short film forces herself into high heels at breakneck speed while all the men are comfortably strolling around in comfortable brogues. This new Nora slaps make-up on so she can look 'tidy' in the office – but does so while being judged by a younger, prettier woman who has a lot more time on her hands. These issues of inequality are not just the stuff of fiction; British women still earn 22.7% less than men per hour and female power is still very much linked to looks – The Bank of England recently encouraged its female employees to wear heels and lipstick if they wished to succeed.

**[Click here for Nick Payne's short film and the related article.](#)**





**QUESTIONS:**

- Would you sympathise with a woman who left her husband and children in today's world because she felt her individualism was being threatened?
  - Do you think there are countries in the world where Ibsen's story is still an accurate depiction of gender politics?
  - Do you think Ibsen's story is still relevant in today's world?
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## PLAYWRIGHT

Ibsen was born in 1828, into a wealthy family due to his mother's inherited wealth and his father's successful merchant business. When Ibsen was four, the family moved into a larger house and held lavish parties. This initial period of comfort, however, was punctuated by tragedy. Ibsen's elder brother had died several weeks after his own birth. He was born into a house that was suffering a loss; in addition, the affluence that the family enjoyed soon disappeared. By the time Ibsen was six the family was bankrupt. The pain of loss and the anxiety created by the threat of poverty run as strong themes through *A Doll's House*.

Ibsen became an unhappy child, shutting himself up in a disused pantry away from his siblings – drawing caricatures of them and bursting into rages if they interfered with his papers or his toy theatre. Having initially wanted to be a doctor, a lack of family money meant he was only able to become apprentice to an apothecary in Grimstad. He spent six unhappy years there. He had no privacy during this time, being forced to share his lodgings with the children of his boss. While he was there, he fathered an illegitimate child by a woman ten years older than him. He would go on to be financially responsible for this child even through his most poverty-stricken years.

While he was in Grimstad, Ibsen did make two good friends – Christopher Due and Ole Schulerud – friends who would go on to sponsor and support his work for many years to come.

His position as the 'resident poet' at the Bergen Theatre turned out to be more of a stage management job, but at least Ibsen was working in the world of theatre, as he wished. He continued to write plays through his employment.

He was soon offered a job at the Norwegian National Theatre, and he experienced a brief period of some comfort as they paid him twice the wage the Bergen Theatre had paid. However, when the theatre – which had established itself on a nationalist remit -failed due to a lack of good Norwegian material, Ibsen was let go. Ibsen was desperately poor once again and now had a wife and a four-year-old son to support.







It was at this time that he finally secured a bursary for travel, heading first to Denmark. Ibsen's patriotism became complicated by this trip to Copenhagen in 1864 as the Danes were fighting a war with Prussia. He was so moved by the courage of the Danish fighters that he wrote many poems and articles to try to motivate the rest of Scandinavia to become Denmark's allies in their struggle. Norway did nothing, and, as a result, the Danes were defeated. Ibsen was so ashamed by his countrymen that he swore never to return to Norway.

This distance from his homeland offered Ibsen critical distance from his native culture and made him more aggressively Norwegian in his work. Perhaps, now living in Rome, his cultural identity became more potent as he marked his difference from those around him. The first play he wrote while living in Rome abandoned a romantic verse style influenced by the song and legend of his own country, and instead was written in a strong Norwegian vernacular and coined a nationalistic spelling.

Ibsen was at one of his poorest moments when living in Rome – at this time the Norwegian National Theatre wrote to offer him the post of director which would have solved all of his family's financial worries. However, his principles were stronger than his fear of poverty. Ibsen turned down the offer on the basis that being in Norway would have restricted him creatively.

While in Rome, in 1867, Ibsen wrote *Brand* and he finally achieved financial success. This play afforded him a state pension and he could escape the anxiety of poverty that had followed him his whole life – the concern did, however, live on in his work.

### **QUESTIONS:**

- How do you think the poverty that Ibsen experience in his own life influenced *A Doll's House*?
- Have you found that you have a greater ability to 'see things more clearly' when you are away from them?
- How do you think Ibsen's new-found financial security may have affected his writing?





## TIMELINE

### 1828

20 March: Ibsen is born Skien, Norway, to Marichen and Knud Ibsen. They are merchants with a considerable fortune. Ibsen's elder brother dies shortly after his birth.

### 1830

The Ibsens move into a larger house and entertain lavishly.

### 1834

The Ibsens declare themselves bankrupt.

### 1846

Ibsen has an affair with the maidservant of the apothecary he is working for in Grimstad. As a result he has an illegitimate son, Hans Jacob Hendrichsen Birkedalen.

### 1849

Ibsen writes his first full length play *Catharine*

### 1850 – 1857

Ibsen is 'resident poet' at The Bergen Theatre.

### 1857 – 1862

Ibsen works for the National Theatre at Kristiania (now Oslo), on twice the salary he was on in Bergen.

### 1858

*Feast at Solhaug* is given six performances at Bergen Theatre.

### 1858

June: Ibsen marries Susannah Thorensen, a pastor's daughter.

### 1858

*The Vikings at Helgeland* is published.



**1859**

23 December: Ibsen has his first and only legitimate son, Sigurd.

**1862**

The National Theatre of Norway fails – not enough plays. Ibsen is left unemployed and wretchedly poor.

**1862**

Ibsen writes *Love's Comedy* – it is denounced as an unsuccessful and overly fierce attack on marriage.

**1864**

April: Ibsen awarded a grant for foreign travel and heads for Copenhagen and Berlin before settling in Rome.

**1865**

Ibsen writes *Brand*.

**1867**

March: *Brand* is published. It is well received and finally Ibsen is financially secure.

**1867**

Ibsen writes *Peer Gynt*. This was Ibsen's finest and last play in verse.

**1869**

Ibsen writes *The League of Youth*. Renounces poetry and writes prose drama from then on in.

**1878**

May: Ibsen starts thinking about *A Doll's House* – refers to it as 'a play of modern life'.

**1879**

15 September: Ibsen sends a fair copy of the script to his publisher.

**1879**

4 December: *A Doll's House* is published.



**1879**

21 December: *A Doll's House* opens at the Theatre Royal, Copenhagen.

**1880**

*A Doll's House* runs at the Royal Theatre, Stockholm, Sweden.

**1880**

February: *A Doll's House* opens in Flensburg, Germany with an altered ending. Goes on to tour Germany.

**1880**

*A Doll's House* opens at the Residenz Theatre, Munich, with the original ending. Ibsen attends.

**1881**

Ibsen writes *Ghosts*.

**1882**

Ibsen's son completes a PhD in law while they live in Rome.

**1884**

The English adaptation, *A Broken Butterfly*, written by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, opens in London.

**1885**

Ibsen dares to travel to Scandinavia again

**1889**

First production of the original (in translation) version of *A Doll's House* opens in Britain.

**1889**

December: *A Doll's House* opens on Broadway, New York.

**1890**

Ibsen writes *Hedda Gabler*.





**1891**

Ibsen returns to Norway.

**1892**

Ibsen writes *The Master Builder*.

**1906**

23 May: Ibsen dies aged 78, after having had many strokes. He dies in his native Kristiania – now Oslo.

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## THEMES

### MONEY

**Torvald** is a pillar of society because he works in a bank. Money seems to lend him social legitimacy. Money is also allowed a moral value. It was a masterstroke from **Ibsen** to set the play at Christmas. The decision allows the exploration of the ‘sentimentality’ of money. **Nora** begins the play buying presents for her children, buying a Christmas tree, giving the porter a large seasonal tip. In this festive environment, money is no longer a moral evil but a benign, if not actively good, force. It is dressed up as ‘generosity’ and ‘Christian charity’.

However, is the buying of Christmas gifts not, in fact, less morally admirable than Nora buying Helmer his trip to Italy in order to save his life? And yet, for the former, Nora is deemed a good mother, and for the latter she is a criminal.

It is in this way that Ibsen never really lets us relax into accepting any hard and fast rules about what is good and bad. This repeated attempt to complicate the value system of the play is an effective critique of the solid and inflexible values of the period.

### QUESTIONS:

- Can you think of any contemporary situation in which doing something for the good of someone else is against the law?
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## THE LAW

**Ibsen** implies that the judicial system of his day is particularly male. He said in his notes for the play that the background to the drama was:

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*An exclusively masculine society with laws written by men and with prosecutors and judges who regard feminine conduct from a masculine point of view.*

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**Nora's** critique of the legal system is couched in the slightly naïve and emotive language that was considered typical of a woman at the time. However, what's brilliant is that it does, in fact, contain a very strong argument. **Krogstad** points out that the law is not concerned with motives – Nora calls it a "very stupid law." Nora goes on to state,

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*Hasn't a daughter the right to protect her dying father from worry and anxiety? Hasn't a wife the right to save her husband's life?*  
**(ACT 2)**

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This idea that the law should take motive into account is radical and reformist, and Nora's voicing it, when she is a woman who would usually have no say in politics or law, makes it all the more revolutionary.

### QUESTIONS:

- What would a legal system that had been created by women look like? Which laws might be different?
  - Which laws are particularly suited to men?
  - Do you think the law should take motives into account or should it just look at a person's actions?
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## MORALITY

There are elements of Ibsen's narrative that are conventionally didactic: the central character makes a key mistake that is linked to a weakness of character; this protagonist then suffers the consequences of this error in judgement and must redeem themselves by changing their behaviour and eventually triumphing. However, Ibsen complicates this conventional model over and over again in the interests of undermining a didactic form that is created by a didactic society.

- Nora's 'mistake' is complicated in that it may be socially reprehensible but it is morally good. She loves her husband and did the best for him and yet this act is deemed illegal.
- On the one hand Mrs Linde married for money which is morally dubious and she seems to pay for her 'moral mistake' with an unhappy marriage and poverty. However, Ibsen also points out that she had to marry to help her mother and brothers, and he rewards this pragmatism by giving Mrs Linde a happy ending with Krogstad.
- The Nurse gave away her own child – again something that society would look down upon. However, the nurse points out that this was the very best thing she could have done for the child and indeed the child has forgiven her and still writes to her.
- Krogstad blackmailed Nora but it was for the sake of his sons' future. His actions are socially reprehensible and yet he expresses the most emotion and feeling in the play.

There is something compelling in the contradiction between the conservative and Christian idea of moral causality and the radical liberalism of the value system that Ibsen follows in the play. The moral system of the play rewards pragmatism over sentimentality – but equally it rewards human emotion and empathy over and above the predetermined, illogical and intolerant morality that society imposes.





**QUESTIONS:**

- Which character do you think Ibsen likes best?
  - What do you think, morally speaking, is the 'worst' action of any character in the play and why?
  - Draw a list of which characters are 'good' and 'bad' in descending order according to: the law, Christian morality, social codes of the time, social codes of today and your own opinion. How do these lists differ and why?
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## FEMINISM

A *Doll's House* is often considered a Feminist play because of **Nora's** defence of her individualism against the prescriptive social roles of 'wife' and 'mother'. However, **Ibsen** refused to be called a Feminist. There is evidence in other works of his concerns over women's rights. In *Pillars of Society* a female character cries out, "*your society is a society of bachelor souls!*" And again in *The League of Youth* the character of Selma delivers the following speech to her husband:

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*If ever I asked about anything I was sent about my business with a clever joke. You dressed me like a doll, and played with me as they play with a child... I am a serious person with a longing for all the higher, more inspiring things in life... I'm leaving you.*

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It seems clear that the theme of female liberation had been developing in Ibsen for some time. There is also evidence that Ibsen had been influenced by Feminist writings and events in his personal life. His friend, Camilla Collett, had written a book on the status of women which he championed; another friend, Laura Kieler, wrote to the Ibsens asking for help when she was committed to an asylum by her husband for taking out a loan without his permission. Ibsen declined to help Laura at the time. Perhaps some of the motivation for Nora being so clearly a heroine of her circumstances was to do with Ibsen's guilt at his own inability to step in – perhaps he, like **Torvald**, felt bound by social convention. Ibsen also stormed out of his social club because they refused women the right to vote at club meetings.

The personal concerns that Ibsen had surrounding the rights of women are represented throughout the text:

Nora expresses anxiety about ageing. This is a particular concern of women as they are subject to aesthetic judgement much more than men are – and at the time of the play women needed to place even more value on their looks because so much of their power was bound to how well they married.





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*Nora: When I'm not pretty any more... When Torvald isn't as fond of me as he is now... it might be a good thing to have something up my sleeve. (ACT 1)*

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Helmer sees Nora as an object. She **dances for him** and dresses up in costumes that make her look like a character rather than herself. Indeed he is most sexually aroused by the idea of her as an unknown, virginal creature – a creature over which his power and experience give him control.

### QUESTIONS:

- What was Ibsen's own marriage like? Did he have a reformist relationship?
- Can you spot other examples in the text where Helmer denies Nora her independence?

One could make the case that Helmer is as much a doll in his house as Nora is: Nora has to keep the truth about the loan from him; **Dr Rank** won't tell Helmer of his imminent death because Helmer will find it 'too ugly'; Helmer isn't allowed to look at the dress; he can't bear to see the reality of things being mended and he can't shop for the children's presents. When Nora speaks of Helmer with Dr Rank she claims that she loves Helmer but there are:

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*Others that perhaps one would rather be with... I'm sure that you can see that being with Torvald is very like being with Papa. (ACT 2)*

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While on the one hand this can be seen as Nora acknowledging a patriarchal world, it is also very patronising – to refer to your husband as being like your father suggests old age and sexlessness.

Perhaps there is a third way to look at this text. Some critics have said one should view *A Doll's House* as a 'reformist' text rather than a Feminist text – meaning that Ibsen was supporting the reform of society as a whole rather than just reforming the role of women.





**QUESTIONS:**

- Do you think *A Doll's House* is a Feminist text, and why?
  - What do you understand 'Feminism' to mean in today's world?
  - Do you think Ibsen is as critical of the male characters in his text as he is of the females?
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## REVIEWS

### THE TELEGRAPH – 17/07/2012

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*Ibsen lays it on the line in A Doll's House. He claimed that the play was not a feminist tract, but through the retrospectoscope it is – it really is. As Nora Helmer explodes her husband Torvald's coochie-coochie world of him and his little wifey in the closing exchanges, it's as if history were taking one final gulp of breath before exhaling a different future upon the lives of men and women.*

*If you ever see a production of the play, see this one. The director Carrie Cracknell's version, in a sharp new adaptation by the playwright Simon Stephens, is a master class in slow burn.*

*It plays upon our desire for a happy conclusion, whilst moment by moment – from Nora's breathlessly optimistic entrance with a Christmas tree at the beginning to the savage end – dismantling our sentimental illusions. (I really did want Nora's kids to have their Christmas presents and all to be well.)*

*Time may prove me wrong, but Hattie Morahan's Nora strikes me as a once-in-a-lifetime performance: sexy, resourceful, desperate, defiant, she drags us through her domestic torment. Dominic Rowan brings whatever baffled dignity can be brought to the out-of-his depth Torvald, and the rest of the company provide sure-footed accompaniment...*

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**THE DAILY EXPRESS – 13/07/2012**

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*Ian MacNeil's fabulous revolving design really does make the Helmers' cramped household resemble a doll's house.*

*It cleverly echoes the claustrophobia of Nora's marriage in a drama which was once deemed scandalous for allowing its heroine to walk out on her controlling husband.*

*It's not the only thing to commend in Carrie Cracknell's continually absorbing production.*

*Simon Stephens' translation feels direct and modern while Hattie Morahan delivers a tremblingly emotional performance as Nora, darting between frivolous girlish flutters, coy flirtations and wide-eyed terrified looks while Dominic Rowan is suitably patronising as her domineering yet besotted banker husband Torvald.*

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**THE DAILY MAIL – 10/07/2012**

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*Hattie Morahan, a rising talent, is nervy Nora Helmer, mother, muse, debtor. Miss Morahan does intense scattiness pretty well.*

*She almost overdoes it at times – my dear, wave those hands 50 per cent less and it will still be too much – but this Nora is certainly one of those melodramatic types easily tipped from happy to cataclysmic.*

*That constant nibbling at imbalance encapsulates Ibsen's tragedy. And tragedy it is, despite odd giggles from a puerile Young Vic audience last night.*

*Perhaps the laughter is healthy evidence of the playwright's objectivity or the slightly excessive modernity of Simon Stephens's text. Or perhaps it is just duff direction by Carrie Cracknell, failing to build a sense of the ominous.*

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