

# DIGITAL THEATRE+

## UNLOCKED STUDY GUIDE:

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

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At first, reading or watching a play like *[A Doll's House](#)* can seem daunting – but we're here to help. In this guide, we'll cover a range of different topics and provide you with the information you need to be able to understand, engage with, and comment upon Ibsen's play.

Please note that the original play was in Norwegian and there are lots of different translated versions. You should always check with your teacher to make sure you're using the correct translation. This guide will refer to Simon Stephens' English language translation, first performed at the Young Vic in London in 2012.

Let's get started. There's a lot to cover, so feel free to skip ahead to the section you're most interested in – or speak to your teacher to get an idea of which bits to focus on first.

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## CONTEXT

Let's begin to explore the **context** of the play. Context can be an intimidating word, but its meaning is simple: When we talk about context, we mean all of the historical and social circumstances that shape a text. What was happening politically? What big events were taking place? What religions were people following? How did the majority of people at that time live their lives? These are all the kinds of things we think about when discussing context, so be sure to keep them in mind as you read the play.

## SOCIETY BEGINS TO CHANGE...

At the time that Ibsen was writing, his home country of Norway was going through a lot of social change. In the early 1800s, much of the country's economy was focused on agriculture. However, the industrial revolution saw the rise of factories and industries across many Norwegian cities. Many left their rural jobs looking for employment in the cities. This time period saw the emergence of an industrial working class and a rising middle class that included clerks, lawyers, and officials. The middle classes had the potential to become quite wealthy, and many wanted to imitate the aristocratic upper classes.

## WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

The growing desire to become wealthy and middle class did not really benefit women of the time. It was expected that working-class men *and* women would work to bring income into their homes. However, the middle classes viewed this differently. One huge status symbol centered around how much the 'man of the house' earned. If a man's wife also worked, it implied that his salary was not enough to support his family. This was a great source of shame to aspirational families who wanted to imitate the affluent upper classes and impress their communities. This meant that many women were discouraged from working unless they were single or desperately needed the money.

This attitude toward married women meant that many wives would never have money of their own. They became much more dependent on their husbands for their financial security. By controlling how much money their wives had access to, men of the time had a significant amount of control over nearly every element of women's lives. This topic is a major focus of *A Doll's House* and we can see it across the play.

## WHO INSPIRED THE CREATION OF NORA HELMER?

It is in this context that a real woman, Laura Kieler, lived. Born in 1849, Laura was an aspiring writer and very fond of Ibsen's plays. She eventually befriended Ibsen and his wife, Suzannah. Laura married a schoolteacher named Victor, who contracted life-threatening tuberculosis shortly after their wedding. In secret, Laura borrowed money under false pretenses to finance a trip to Italy, where Victor's health was able to improve.

As the loan's repayment deadline neared, Laura wrote a novel, hoping that the earnings from it would clear her debts. She sent it to Ibsen, hoping he would recommend it to publishers, but he did not like the novel and told her so. Laura was left with no choice but to forge a check to repay her loan.

Victor discovered the forgery and sought a divorce to keep her from her children. Laura was traumatized by this event and was committed to an asylum. This shook Ibsen deeply – possibly because he understood he could have prevented it – and Laura’s story would become a major inspiration for *Nora Helmer*.

Laura would eventually be released from the asylum and reconciled with her husband. She became a successful novelist in her own right but was deeply distressed by the release of *A Doll’s House*, as her own situation was widely known.

## HOW WAS THE PLAY RECEIVED?

*A Doll’s House* was very controversial when it premiered in 1879. Lots of critics were shocked by the ending. In Germany, the lead actor Hedwig Niemann-Raabe refused to act the final scene, claiming: “I would never leave my children.” In response to growing pressure, Ibsen reluctantly wrote an alternate ending, where Nora doesn’t leave the family. However, many progressive theatre lovers recognized the play as one that honestly reflected women’s struggle in society.

*A Doll’s House* was embraced as a feminist text. However, Ibsen was never comfortable with the title of feminist. In 1898, the Norwegian Association for Women’s Rights held a banquet in Ibsen’s honor, where he stated:

*“I have never written a poem or a play to further a social purpose. I have been more of a poet and less of a philosopher than most people seem inclined to believe. I thank you for your good wishes, but I must decline the honor of being said to have worked for the Women’s Rights Movement. I am not even very sure what Women’s Rights really are.”*

Ibsen was far more interested in the human condition more broadly than the issue of women’s rights. However, his depiction of women became a powerful influence in the movement.

## Thinking big

Lots of different elements can influence a play and it's a mixture of these elements that can make a story so compelling. Consider the different influential factors below. In the brackets, number them according to which ones you feel had the greatest influence on Ibsen as he wrote *A Doll's House*. 1 is the most influential and 4 is the least!

**Laura Kieler's story**  
[ ]

**Norway's social changes** [ ]

**The women's rights movement** [ ]

**Middle class attitudes**  
[ ]



## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Want to learn more? Why not tune into [A Concise Audio Introduction to Henrik Ibsen?](#)

It's always useful to know a little bit about the playwright you're studying. How does their life impact their work? What themes were really important to them? What did they like to write about?

### THE IMPORTANT BITS...

- ✓ Henrik Ibsen was born in Norway on March 20, 1828.
- ✓ Ibsen's family became very poor while he was still young.
- ✓ He gained success as a playwright in his early twenties, writing 25 plays between 1850 and 1899. These plays include: *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *Hedda Gabler*.
- ✓ Ibsen wrote most of his work in a self-imposed exile from Norway. He wrote *Et dukkehjem* – *A Doll's House* – in Rome in 1878.
- ✓ Ibsen did not describe himself as a feminist, but his plays were often concerned with the ways women were treated in society. For example, he wrote the following note in 1878 in Rome:  

*"A woman cannot be herself in modern society [as it is] an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint!"*
- ✓ Many regard Ibsen as the father of modern drama due to his naturalistic style and his controversial plays, which were often far ahead of their time.
- ✓ Ibsen's plays, whether intentional or not, helped to promote the women's suffrage movement. They also had a strong influence on Konstantin Stanislavski, whose method approach to acting can still be seen today.
- ✓ Ibsen died in May 1906, aged 78 years old.



## PLOT SUMMARY

It's important to understand what happens in the play, but if you're struggling to follow, don't worry. Let's briefly look at the plot. If you want to learn more, you can watch [Unlocking Structure in \*A Doll's House\*](#).

### ACT 1

- Nora Helmer, a young woman, enters the scene. Her husband Torvald emerges from his study and she shows off the Christmas presents she has bought for their children. Torvald complains about her spending, but he is also affectionate toward her. We learn he has recently been promoted to bank manager.
- Mrs. Kristine Linde and Dr. Rank arrive. Dr. Rank and Torvald exit to talk privately. Kristine and Nora have not seen each other for a decade. Nora learns that Kristine is a widow looking for work. Nora also confesses that early in her marriage, she borrowed money for a trip to Italy to save Torvald's life. She has been secretly paying off the debt ever since.
- Krogstad, an employee at the bank, arrives and talks to Torvald in private. When Torvald re-appears in the scene, Nora convinces him to give Kristine a job.
- All characters except for Nora leave the scene. Nora plays with her children until Krogstad enters. We learn Krogstad provided the money to Nora. He forces her to reveal that she forged her father's signature to get the loan. Krogstad is about to be fired by Torvald and he wants Nora to stop it. He threatens to reveal her secret if she doesn't.

### ACT 2

- It is Christmas day. Nora talks to Anna, wondering if the children would miss her if she wasn't around. Kristine arrives and helps Nora sew a costume for an upcoming fancy-dress ball: Nora plans to dress as a Romany girl and dance the tarantella.

- Nora tries to convince Torvald not to fire Krogstad. The harder she tries, the angrier Torvald becomes, until he decides to fire Krogstad then and there.
- Dr. Rank arrives, telling Nora he will die soon. Nora flirts with him and is preparing to ask for help when he reveals that he is in love with her. This shocks Nora, who no longer feels able to ask him for money. Dr. Rank leaves, clearly feeling rejected.
- Krogstad returns and tells Nora that he has left a letter explaining the debt and forgery in Torvald's letterbox. He leaves and, shortly afterward, Kristine returns. She asks Nora to distract Torvald while she talks to Krogstad.
- Kristine leaves and Nora begs Torvald to help her rehearse the tarantella. She dances in a wild and frantic way.

## ACT 3

- The next evening, the Helmers attend the party. Krogstad meets Kristine at the Helmers' home. The audience learns that they were once in love, but their relationship ended when Kristine married a wealthy man to support her family.
- Kristine suggests that now that both their spouses have died, they can finally marry and be happy together. Krogstad is overjoyed and offers to ask for his letter to Torvald back.
- Krogstad leaves and Nora and Torvald return from the party. Kristine urges Nora to tell the truth before she leaves.
- Dr. Rank arrives and talks about how much he enjoyed the party. Torvald discovers two visiting cards that Dr. Rank put in his letterbox, indicating that he is about to die.
- Nora says goodnight and sneaks out into the hall, but Torvald stops her, having read the letter from Krogstad. He is furious, saying she has ruined his life and that he won't let her raise their children.
- The maid brings a note from Krogstad saying that he has changed his mind. Torvald rejoices and says he can forgive Nora.

- Nora is shocked. She explains that she can no longer live with Torvald and that she wants to leave to discover who she really is. Torvald calls her stupid, before promising to change so that she will stay.
- Nora says that she must leave, slamming the door behind her as she goes.



The best way to learn about a play's plot is to see it in action. Why not watch Digital Theatre+'s capture of [A Doll's House](#) at London's Young Vic theatre? Or perhaps the BBC adaptation?

## ACTIVITY

This is a lot to remember! Why not try to break down this information into key points? Once you have the key points, draw them up as a timeline in 10 steps or flashcards. You can use these flashcards to memorize the plot. Here's one to get you started:

*Nora Helmer talks with her husband Torvald about his spending.  
Her old friend Kristine Linde arrives, newly widowed and looking  
for a job.*

## CHARACTERS

We're going to look closely at some of the main characters of the play. Feel free to skip ahead to the character you're most interested in (or the one your teacher has told you to look at). Why not watch our Unlocked video, [Unlocking Character: Nora Helmer?](#)

## NORA HELMER

### Key facts:

- ✓ Married to Torvald Helmer, a bank manager
- ✓ Forged her father's signature to secure money from Krogstad
- ✓ Blackmailed by Krogstad
- ✓ Close friends with Kristine Linde and Dr. Rank

### Summary:

At first, Nora appears to be more concerned with frivolities than the practicalities of modern life. She is married to Torvald Helmer, who contrasts with his wife by being very serious and down to earth. Nora struggles to pay off a debt she took on to – as she sees it – save Torvald's life. As the play progresses, she becomes increasingly desperate until she is confronted by Torvald. After bearing the brunt of Torvald's rage, Nora realizes that she has been playing a role her entire life. Her decision to walk out shows her strong desire to live authentically, no matter the cost.

### Look closer:

Some actors have described Nora as the 'female Hamlet' – she is a layered, complex character that shows a range of emotions. As the play progresses, she varies from being funny, sincere, and quietly defiant. She displays a mix of pragmatism – talking about how important it is that she maintains her looks – and is hopelessly romantic – fantasizing about a rich man solving her problems.

After Torvald's outburst in Act 3, we see an entirely different side to Nora. For the first time, she expresses the desire to have an adult conversation with her husband. She is open and honest about the fact that she has been playing a role and that she is not taken seriously. This transformation would have shocked the audience at the time.

## Key quotations:

Remember, translations of this text will vary. You should always check the version of the text that your teacher is using.

*“When I’m not quite as beautiful as I am now, I’m being serious. When he’s stopped enjoying watching me dance for him. And dressing for him. When he no longer cares for my little performances for him. It would be a good thing to have a little secret up my sleeve.”*

(Nora to Kristine, Act 1)

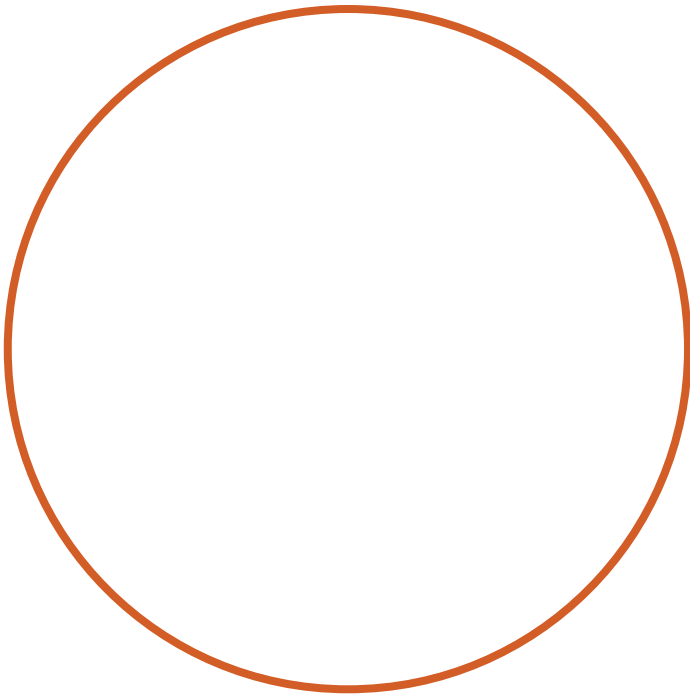
*“I’ve been your doll. Just as I was my father’s doll when I was a little girl. And the children have become my dolls. I thought it was fun when you played with me. They thought it was fun when I played with them. None of it was real anyway.”*

(Nora to Torvald, Act 3)

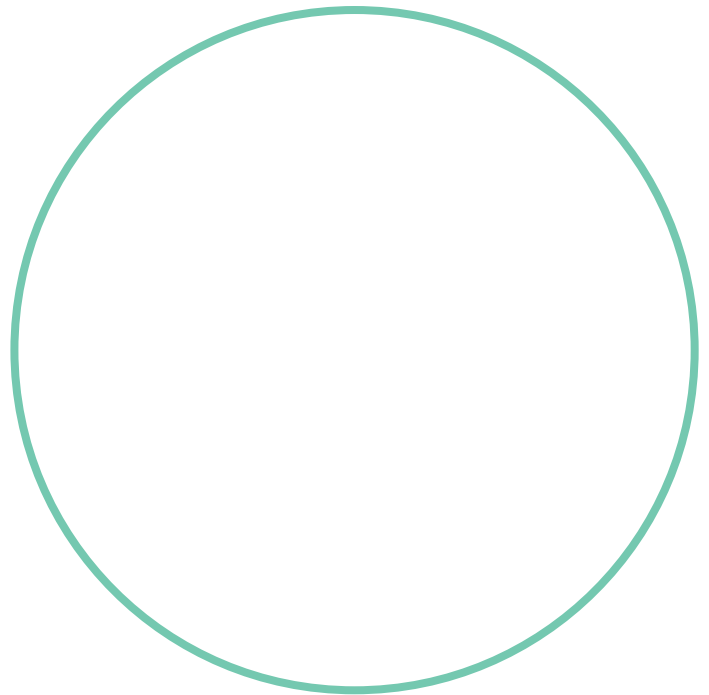
## ACTIVITY

As the play progresses, Nora's character changes. Select some quotations from Nora at the beginning and the end of the play. Look at them and then place them into two circles (or on a separate piece of paper). You can also include quotations from other characters who are talking about Nora.

**Nora at the beginning**



**Nora at the end**







## TORVALD HELMER



Want to learn more? Tune into [On Acting: Dominic Rowan](#) to gain character insights from an actor who played Torvald

### Key facts:

- ✓ Married to Nora Helmer
- ✓ Recently promoted to bank manager
- ✓ Fires Krogstad and gives his position to Kristine Linde

### Summary:

Torvald tries to project an air of strength and masculinity. However, he is quite a fragile character. Even his closest friend, Dr. Rank, explains in Act 1 that Torvald has “such a delicate sensibility.” Torvald works very hard to support his family, but he works himself to sickness from exhaustion. It is this sickness that leads Nora to pursue a loan. Torvald’s willingness to work so hard shows how uncomfortable he is with letting his wife enter employment. Torvald is used to approaching interactions from a position of strength – either as the money-making husband, or the authoritative manager. He cannot empathize very easily with people who make bad choices in a tough situation, as we see when he finds out the truth about Nora’s situation. In the final scene, when confronted with a version of Nora who talks and acts like a mature adult, Torvald completely crumbles.

### Look closer:

Torvald isn’t the antagonist of the play, but he certainly isn’t portrayed in a positive light. His controlling nature and his anger are the driving forces behind Nora’s decision to keep secrets. However, Torvald isn’t a monster – he clearly has affection for Nora. Torvald is a symbolic representation of the attitudes presented in many middle-class husbands of the time. Many men assumed authority in their relationships and would have expected their wives to remain obedient. Nora’s decision to walk out of her marriage shakes Torvald to his core. Even when he frames her decision as being against her religion and to some extent, against society’s law, she still leaves him. Torvald is forced to accept that no amount of authority can prevent Nora from leaving the family.

## Key quotations:

*“Has my little hamster been spending all of my money again?”*

(Torvald to Nora, Act 1)

*“But knitting. It’s just bloody ugly. Look. Your arms are all squashed up. The knitting needles are going up and down. Up and down.”*

(Torvald to Kristine, Act 3)

*“You’re never seeing the children again. I can’t trust you with them. That goes without saying.”*

(Torvald to Nora, Act 3)

*“Nora, can I never be more than a stranger to you?”*

(Torvald to Nora, Act 3)

## ACTIVITY

At the end of the play, Nora tells Torvald that for her to stay, it would take a miracle – he would have to change so much. But what if Torvald *could* change? What aspects of his personality are problematic and what could he do to change them? In the following table, write down a problematic trait that Torvald demonstrates, a quotation to support your opinion, and what you think he could do to change.

<b>Problematic trait</b>	<b>Quote</b>	<b>What he could do to change</b>
<i>E.g., Infantilizing his wife</i>	<i>“You’re like a little girl,” (Act 1)</i>	<i>Torvald could avoid using language that compares Nora to a child.</i>

## DR. RANK

### Key facts:

- ✓ Torvald's closest friend
- ✓ Secretly in love with Nora
- ✓ Dying because of a disease inherited by his father

### Summary:

Dr. Rank functions as a kind of counterbalance to Nora and Torvald. He has a sense of humor, whereas Torvald is never intentionally funny. He is also calm, while Nora is energetic and anxious. Dr. Rank is meant to be Torvald's best friend, but his relationship with Nora is the main focus of the play. Dr. Rank's confession that he loves Nora provokes a very negative response from her, because he makes explicit what was once only hinted at. She is forced to confront reality and realizes that she can't ask him for money – not just because it is immoral, but because if she was found out, it would cast further doubt upon her character. Dr. Rank is clearly confused at first, but forgives her by the time he sees her for the last time.

### Look closer:

Nora explains that Dr. Rank has spinal tuberculosis, supposedly inherited from his father's excessive lifestyle. His illness is fatal and in Act 2, Dr. Rank states that within the month he could be "rotting away in some churchyard or another." This blunt description implies that he takes no comfort in religion. Dr. Rank seems resigned to his fate, but is clearly anxious about being forgotten, mainly by Nora. The worst thing for Dr. Rank, as he explains in Act 2, is the idea that "he'll leave nothing but an empty space. That can be filled in by anybody." Ultimately, Dr. Rank seems to make peace with his fate. When he leaves for the last time, he and Nora display genuine affection for one another.

### Key quotations:

*"People nowadays seem to continue to labor under the misapprehension that [living] remains in some way necessary."*

(Dr. Rank to Kristine Linde, Act 1)

*“I’ll dance and you can imagine that I’m dancing just for you.”*

(Nora to Dr. Rank, Act 2)

*“Do you imagine that Torvald Helmer is the only man who would die for you because I can assure you, most vehemently, that he is not.”*

(Dr. Rank to Nora, Act 2)

## ACTIVITY

Dr. Rank often talks in coded language, especially around Torvald who cannot stomach any unpleasant phrases. But what does Dr. Rank actually allude to? What does he mean? Look at the following quotations from Dr. Rank's final scene. Read the whole scene and write down what you think Dr. Rank is actually talking about:

Quotation	Meaning
<p>"There is no such thing as an action without consequence in this life."</p>	<p><i>E.g., Dr. Rank is alluding to his own father, whose actions had a permanent and lasting impact on Dr. Rank's health.</i></p>
<p>"... have you never heard of the big, black hat of invisibility? What you do with this hat is, you put it on and then no one can see you at all."</p>	
<p>"Sleep well, Nora. And thank you. For the cigar. And for the light."</p>	
<p>Choose your own quote to decipher.</p>	

## KROGSTAD



Learn more about how Krogstad's character is interpreted by watching [On Acting: Nick Fletcher!](#)

### Key facts:

- ✓ Disgraced lawyer who works at Torvald's bank
- ✓ Blackmails Nora after she forges a signature to secure a loan
- ✓ Formerly in a relationship with Kristine Linde

### Summary:

Krogstad is introduced to the audience as a very bitter character. He has suffered in his life, such as when Kristine left him for a wealthier man. His own wife also died, leaving him to raise his children alone. Krogstad seems keen to pass on his bitterness by making those around him suffer. He is an **antagonist** in the play, putting up obstacles that Nora tries to overcome.

Krogstad was discovered forging signatures, a fact which made him a social outcast. When he discovers that Nora has done the same, he sees an opportunity to manipulate her to protect his own position in the bank. Krogstad is ambitious, vengeful, and very disrespectful to those around him. However, he can also be seen as a tragic figure. He admits he once contemplated suicide and has clearly been badly treated by society. Krogstad seems to be redeemed when Kristine re-ignites her relationship with him and tells him to take back what he said in his letter to Torvald.

### Key quotations:

*"If I am thrown into the gutter for a second time then I will bring you down there with me."*

(Krogstad to Nora, Act 3)

*"I want to get back to the top, your husband has to help me with that."*

(Krogstad to Nora, Act 2)

## ACTIVITY

Should we forgive Krogstad for his actions? In the table below, write down two reasons we should forgive Krogstad. Then write down all the reasons why we shouldn't. Make sure to include quotations from the play to support your argument. For example, you might say that Krogstad should be forgiven because he was heartbroken, and his heartbreak made him bitter. To support this, you might include the following quote from Act 3: "When you left, the earth crumbled away from beneath my feet."

We should forgive Krogstad	
Reason:	
Quotation:	
Reason:	
Quotation:	
We should not forgive Krogstad	
Reason:	
Quotation:	
Reason:	
Quotation:	



## KRISTINE LINDE

### Key facts:

- ✓ Old friend of Nora's
- ✓ Recently widowed and looking for work
- ✓ Formerly in a relationship with Krogstad

### Summary:

Kristine is an old friend of Nora's. At the beginning of the play, she reunites with Nora after 10 years of absence. Kristine is calm, collected, and offers her friends very level-headed advice. At some points, Kristine serves as an **audience surrogate**, meaning that she is someone that Nora tells her problems to. This allows the audience to hear some of the trials and tribulations that Nora faces in an authentic way. Kristine is able to bring an end to Krogstad's blackmail, though not before Torvald discovers Nora's secret.

Kristine is very clearly a survivor. She is very pragmatic, marrying not for love but for the financial security it brought to her dying mother and younger brothers. When Kristine's husband died, he left her nothing, so she once again tries to find work. This is the reason she appears at Nora's doorstep. Some have argued that Kristine's reappearance gives Nora the strength to leave her husband. This is because Kristine is always in control of the situations she finds herself in, and provides a model for Nora's life after marriage.

### Key quotations:

*"I did anything I could think of. I got a job managing a shop for a while. I got a job in a school. All I've done for the past three years is work."*

(Kristine to Nora, Act 1)

*"I sold myself for the sake of other people once before. I'm never doing it again."*

(Kristine to Krogstad, Act 3)

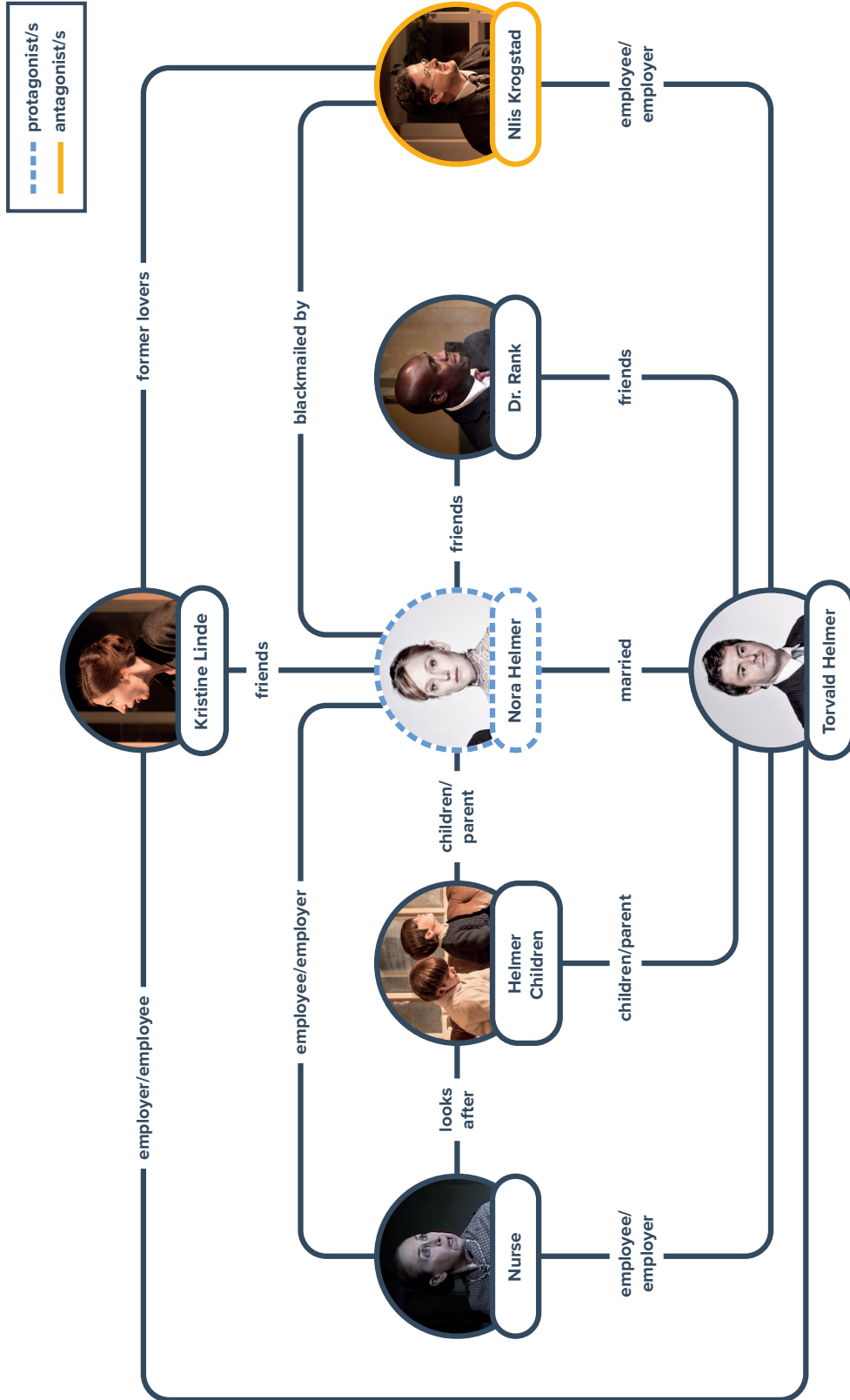
*"You have nothing to be afraid of. Not from Krogstad. But you have to tell him. He's your husband."*

(Kristine to Nora, Act 3)



Don't forget, there are other, minor characters in this story. What role do you think Anne-Marie plays? What about the children?

## RELATIONSHIP MAP



A Doll's House (Digital Theatre+) © Johan Persson/Arenapal

## THEMES

When we talk about a play's theme, we mean any idea or ideas that are repeated across the text. We're going to look at some of the common themes that pop up across *A Doll's House* – but remember, if you'd rather watch, there are lots of videos on DT+ that will help you. Why not watch [Unlocking Theme: Marriage, Gender, and Power in A Doll's House](#) for a great summary of one of the major themes of the novel?

## MONEY AND DEBT

Let's consider some of the key concepts around this theme. For each bullet point, ask yourself: do I agree? If you do, can you find evidence from the text to support your agreement? If you don't, can you make an interesting counterargument and find evidence to support your opinion?

- Money is a central focus in this play for almost all of the characters. For example, Nora is paying off a debt and relies upon her husband for money.
- Kristine's search for work means that she is given Krogstad's old job. Krogstad has to blackmail Nora to keep his position. With this in mind, to what extent do you agree that Kristine's need for money is the catalyst of the action in the play?
- Debt is the main cause of tension in the story. Nora's life becomes more fraught because she needs to make secret repayments.
- We learn from Nora that "Torvald had to live well," and Torvald finds Nora's spending habits wasteful. However, by delegating all of the housekeeping finances to Nora, Torvald reveals that he has little interest in finding out how to save this money.
- Money is used as a form of control over women, especially Nora. Nora believes that her position in the family relies upon her being attractive and sexually available to Torvald. Do you think this proves Mary Wollstonecraft's point when she wrote in 1789 that marriage was a form of "legalized prostitution"?

- Torvald tells us that he took the “liberty of ordering one or two rather decent bottles of wine” but still feels that Nora’s spending is “entirely unnecessary.” What does this suggest about his own spending?
- Nora jokingly asks her husband for money as a Christmas present, wrapped in “beautiful golden paper.” In secret, she fantasizes about a man gifting her money and allowing her to escape her financial worries.

## Relevant quotations

How do you think these quotations link to the theme of money and debt?

*“You’re like your father: You try so many different ways to get your hands on money and then once you’ve got it, it just runs like dust through your fingers.”*

(Torvald, Act 1)

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*“There’s something in the business world called quarterly interest. And there’s something else in the business world, which is known as repayment.”*

(Nora, Act 1)

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## ACTIVITY

Let's imagine that every character in the play has all the money they would ever need. How would it effect their story across the play? Write any events that you feel are relevant across the timeline for each character. A few examples have been included for you.

### **Kristine**

Financially comfortable but very bored, Kristine seeks out her old friend Nora for company.

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### **Nora**

Without any catalyst, Nora stays in her marriage, not realizing how unfulfilling it is.

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### **Krogstad**

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### **Torvald**

Secure in his earnings, Torvald indulges his wife's spending habits.

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## DEATH

Death is an almost constant presence in this play. For each bullet point, ask yourself: do I agree? If you do, can you find evidence from the text to support your agreement? If you don't, can you make an interesting counterargument and find evidence to support your opinion?

- Dr. Rank shows compassion to his father for his inherited disease.
- The way that Torvald quickly forgets about his dying friend, Dr. Rank, and his comment to Nora (“How would it help me if you were dead?”) shows that he only cares about the life and death of others if it directly affects him.
- Dr. Rank’s comment that “our entire society is turning into something of a hospital” suggests that he thinks that death is linked to moral decay, either in the individual or in their parents.
- Nora’s departure is a symbolic death and rebirth to the audience.
- The death of Kristine’s husband shows the impact that a dying spouse has on the surviving partner. Kristine has to financially support herself and is forced to take up employment to make ends meet.

## Relevant quotations

How do you think these quotations link to the theme of death?

*“And the idea of having to leave it all [...] without having left any mark or trace, without having left any proof of having been here. Not even a sign of gratitude. I’ll leave nothing but an empty space.”*

(Dr. Rank, Act 2)

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*“How would you do it Mrs. Helmer? Down under the ice? Would you drown yourself in the cold, black water? Float up in the springtime all bloated and ugly.”*

(Krogstad, Act 2)

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## ACTIVITY

We see different attitudes toward death from the characters in this play. Find a quote about death from each of the following characters. Explain what you think this reveals about their attitude toward the subject.

[On whether her husband left her anything]

“Not even grief or a sense of loss to nurture” (Act 1)

What does this tell us about their attitude to death?

**Kristine**

What does this tell us about their attitude to death?

**Dr. Rank**

What does this tell us about their attitude to death?

**Krogstad**

## LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

*A Doll's House* is full to the brim with language and literary devices. We can't cover all of them, but we can explore a few in this guide. Remember, you should begin by watching [Unlocking Language Techniques in A Doll's House](#).

## TRANSLATION

Before we think about translations of the play, we should consider the language in which it was first written. Norway was originally ruled by Denmark. In 1814, Norway came under the control of Sweden. At this time, Danish was still considered the primary language and Norway was still struggling to gain total independence. *A Doll's House* is written in a mix of Danish and a newly constructed written form of Norwegian. It has rules that are not necessarily present in English, making it trickier for translators.

For example, listen to the following line, spoken by Torvald in Act 2:

*“He strolls around talking about me as though I’m his closest friend.  
‘Torvald does this. Torvald thinks that.’ It’s embarrassing.”*

In English, it isn't very obvious why Torvald is offended by an employee using his first name. However, in the original text, Torvald is annoyed by the way that Krogstad refers to him using 'du', the informal word for 'you', rather than 'de', the formal word for it. This is an example of **localization**, where the translator has to make greater changes to preserve the meaning behind the words.

## SUBTEXT

Subtext is the underlying, **implicit** meaning behind a creative work. It refers to what a character's actions, behavior, and dialogue actually means beneath the surface.

Ibsen is thought to be one of the first dramatists to use subtext effectively. One of the most obvious examples can be found in the conversations between Nora and Dr. Rank. These two characters are very fond of each other and often flirt. However, they speak in coded language around Torvald to avoid angering him. Nora's position as a married woman means that there is a clear boundary that can't be crossed.





## LITERARY DEVICES

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### FOIL

A foil character is there to draw attention to the other character's contrasting qualities. For example, Kristine acts as a foil to Nora. Kristine will turn her hand to almost any job: shop-keeping, needlework, teaching, and even being a bank clerk. She is fiercely independent, while Nora must rely on her husband's income. Kristine is calm, decisive, and honest, while Nora is anxious and prone to deceiving her family.

Krogstad also acts as a foil to Torvald. They never interact with one another on stage, but they clearly have contrasting qualities. Torvald is respected in society while Krogstad is an outcast. Torvald views the world in a very rigid, fixed way, while Krogstad views things very pragmatically. In spite of Krogstad's flaws, when he is asked to do something by Kristine – the woman he loves – he does it almost without thinking. In comparison, Torvald is hostile to Nora's needs: He sends word to have Krogstad fired immediately, just because Nora asks for him to do the opposite.

## FORESHADOWING

Foreshadowing is when a text hints at what will happen later in the story. This is a very common technique in *A Doll's House*. At the time the play premiered, the 'well-made play' was a popular trend in theatre. This is a genre of theatre that has a tight narrative structure. The plot often led to a big reveal – with either the audience or the characters finding out a big secret. This genre relied a lot on foreshadowing so that the final revelation was satisfying to the audience and not out of the blue.

Ibsen uses several different types of foreshadowing: **clues**, **Chekhov's gun**, and **Red Herrings**.

**Clues** provide an indication of where the story is going. For example, in Act 1, the following exchange takes place:

***Torvald:** You spent three weeks locked away every night until after midnight making – what was it?*

***Nora:** Flowers.*

***Torvald:** That's right, flowers for the Christmas tree. And then the cat got in and tore every last one of them to pieces.*

We learn that Nora was actually working to help pay off her debts. The flower story is the first clue that Nora is deceiving her family and shows that she has to lie to Torvald. It might go unnoticed by an audience on the first watch, but many spot this clue upon second watching!

**Chekhov's gun** is the rule that a detail revealed early in the play must have significance later on. Anton Chekhov believed that if you have a gun hanging on the wall in Act 1, it needs to be fired by Act 3. There are some examples of this in the play. For example, across the play, we learn that Torvald has a temper and a "delicate sensibility." Torvald's easily angered nature is an important detail that we know will have greater significance later in the play. This proves true: In the final Act, Torvald's anger directly contributes to Nora's decision to leave the family.

**The Red Herring** is a deliberately misleading piece of information given in the text. This leads the audience to expect something to happen that does not, in fact, take place. It throws us off the scent! In *A Doll's House*, many of Nora's statements suggest she is contemplating suicide. In Act 2, she talks with Anna about her children, saying they will "have to get used to not having me around quite so often anymore." Krogstad also asks her if she is considering anything drastic to solve her growing problems. However, in the climax of the play, Nora does not take her own life. Instead, she decides to pursue independence and to learn more about herself, by walking out on her family.

## ACTIVITY

Can you find other examples of foreshadowing in the story? Do any of them fit into the categories that you have just learned about?

<b>Clues</b>	
<b>Chekhov's gun</b>	
<b>Red herring</b>	



## GLOSSARY

For each of the following words and phrases, select, or describe an example from the novel.

Word	Definition
Foil	a character that is used to draw attention to (or to contrast with) the qualities of another.
Foreshadowing	a hint or suggestion in the text that indicates what is going to happen.
IOU	a contract for a loan. The letters “IOU” coming from the words “I owe you.”
Localization	when translating texts, translators often have to change the words and phrases used in one language in order to preserve the meaning for the new readers.
Macaroons	a light, sweet cookie, often in a variety of flavors and colors.
Spinal tuberculosis	an infection of the spine brought on by tuberculosis.
Subtext	the process of talking about one thing on a surface level, but meaning something else on a deeper level.
Tarantella	a courtship dance from southern Italy. Frantic and energetic, it was once thought to be a dance to fend off the poison from a spider’s bite.