

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

The Playwright:

Henrik Ibsen, Norway's preeminent dramatist, is considered a realist, dealing objectively with the problems confronting everyday people and looking at these problems without the distortions of romanticism. Ibsen was certainly a prolific dramatist; his career as a playwright lasted from 1851 until his death in 1906. Many of Ibsen's plays were written during a period of nearly 30 years when he lived and worked primarily in Italy and Germany. This long exposure to different European cultures infuses his work with a sense of the universal. Ibsen returned to Christiania (now known as Oslo) in 1891, and he lived there until his death.

Early in his career, he combined his love for poetry with his interest in drama, writing poetic dramas. *Peer Gynt* is the most notable play from this early period. Its fame has been cemented by the incidental music composed for it by Edvard Grieg, a fellow Norwegian. Ibsen's middle career, during which he wrote his most famous plays (including *A Doll's House*), showed his discomfort with and disapproval of the empty social traditions that limited mankind's success. One major theme of this period was the negative effect of treating women primarily as social ornaments or vessels. Ibsen came to believe that women should have equal rights with men and that, in fact, women had the potential to reform social institutions and create a better world. The final phase of Ibsen's work emphasizes the use of symbolism.

Ibsen's gravestone is carved with a hand holding a hammer. For many critics, this symbolizes Ibsen's role in tearing down odd dramatic forms and subjects and rebuilding the theater with new norms and topics. Yet this summation narrows the understanding of Ibsen, who was a poet as well as a playwright, and who wrote historical dramas, satire, work with supernatural overtones, and symbolic plays as well as *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, two plays that shine a sharp light on the limited role allowed to women in Ibsen's day.

Critics often cite Ibsen as the father of modern drama because of his willingness to tackle social questions from the role of women to the negative role of social conventions to social divisions themselves. Like Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Ibsen emphasized character over plot. He recognized the power of psychological tension, both within a single character and between two characters. Ibsen's use of psychological tension is amply illustrated in *A Doll's House*, and tracing the psychological shifts of major characters is one way of understanding the play.

Born to a middle-class family whose economic stability was threatened during his childhood, Ibsen used *A Doll's House* as an vehicle for questioning the importance—and the tyranny—of wealth. This play comes from Ibsen's middle period, when his most radical ideas were presented.

The Social Context of *A Doll's House*:

A Doll's House was published in 1879. Ibsen was still living in Europe on his long self-imposed exile when he wrote this play, but he was very closely attuned to social developments in his native Norway as well as to the mores in the rest of the continent. The European social norms at this time were still largely influenced by England, the dominant political and military power. Queen Victoria set a standard of middle-class propriety, with social life tending to be based in the home, the family unit held up as an ideal, and men—in spite of Victoria's own gender—being held up as the superior being in the household. Popular art and literature extolled the calm household under the benign authority of the male.

In contrast to the surface picture of happiness and prosperity, however, challenges to the established concept were being published, although they were considered shocking, even radical. Charles Dickens was writing novels that exposed the bare and brutal underside of Victorian life, with its disregard of the poor, blatant class inequities, grinding exploitation of those relegated to domestic service and manual labor because of their lack of educational access, and heartbreak brought into homes by alcohol, poverty, and abuse. These trends were echoed across Europe and in the United States. By living in Spain, Italy, and Germany, Ibsen was exposed to these social norms and tensions to a much greater extent than he would have been had he remained solely in Norway.

Women did not have the right to vote during this period. In Great Britain, the first resolution proposing that women be empowered to vote was introduced to Parliament in 1851. While this effort failed, social critics began to think and write about the penalty society paid when only half of its members participate fully as voting citizens.

John Stuart Mill, an influential English social critic, published *Subjection of Women* in 1869—ten years before Ibsen published *A Doll's House*. A second bill proposing women's suffrage in Great Britain was introduced in Parliament in 1870. Political action leagues took up this cause, and women sought newspaper coverage as one way of achieving their aims. This strategy put the debate about women's roles and rights in the mainstream of daily life and spread discussion into novels and plays. In fact, this debate went on for many years; women gained the right to vote in Norway in 1913, with Norway and Finland being the first countries to extend this right. Suffrage was extended to women over the age of 30 after the First World War in Great Britain and revised to be the same for men in 1928. In the United States, women were granted the right to vote by the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

Although voting rights were perhaps the most prominent index of women's place in society, other social reforms were also the subject of debate. These included property rights, the role of women in the workplace, and access to education.

A Doll's House and Trends in Literary Criticism:

Ibsen was living in Europe when he wrote *A Doll's House*; it was published in 1879. While social critics, such as John Stuart Mill, were writing and speaking for an expanded role for women, the movement for women's suffrage was not yet a robust one, and women had a very narrow role in society. In many countries, as in Norway, they could not borrow money; in many places, women could not even own property. Instead, they were often treated as property rather than as people. Middle and upper-class women were generally educated at home if at all, and they were not prepared for careers.

Literary critics were, by and large, not social critics, and they tended to accept the status quo for women. Thus, when *A Doll's House* was published, it was regarded as quite a radical work because of the inversion of the social order that occurs in the play. More recently, however, feminist criticism has emerged as a new way of looking at literary works. Beginning in the 1970's, a number of female critics have argued for a reexamination of literary works with the goal of gaining insights into the evolving role of women and understanding how both women and men have used women in literature to further certain points of view.

In the world of feminist criticism, Ibsen demands closer study for his use of women as protagonists and fully formed characters. Nora Helmer and other women created by Ibsen were intended to drive home the point that no society can flourish if half its members are in bondage. Ibsen's full development of Nora, as contrasted with his limited treatment of Helmer, is designed in part to bolster the argument that women should be full participants in

society. Nora's radical decision at the end of the play is intended to argue that a woman can be a better wife and mother if she is fully actualized—that is, if her own intellectual and emotional needs are met in the process.

Ibsen's Character Development in *A Doll's House*:

In this play, Ibsen creates a traditional society in which the theater-goer of his day might expect the husband to be the dominant character, taking the role of protagonist. However, the playwright's purpose in writing this play was to advance his own belief that society at large could not afford to overlook the talent and drive of half its members: that is, of women. By making Nora a more nuanced and dynamic character than Helmer, and by making her the protagonist, Ibsen was notifying his audience that things were not all as traditional as they seemed in the Helmer household. The play's lasting interest owes much to Ibsen's skill in mixing round and flat characters, his inclusion of static characters and bits of stereotypes all which contrast with the dynamism that builds Nora's character.

Ibsen uses the notion of the foil to good effect in Act III, where two fairly flat characters, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, decide to band together in hopes of growing into their fuller selves each dreams of becoming. This development raises questions of whether a marriage of two people who recognize their faults can thrive and whether banding together will actually help them overcome those very faults. The contrast between their decision and the sterility of the Helmer marriage is a strong point of interest in the play, especially given Helmer's absolute inability to change his understanding of Nora.

The Well-Made Play:

Many of the plays from Ibsen's early and middle periods, including *A Doll's House*, follow the conventions of the "well made play." This term used by influential French playwright Eugene Scribe to describe a play with the following elements:

1. A very tight plot that typically revolves around a missing element—letters, lost or stolen document, an absent person.
2. Subplots that are related to the missing element and add tension to the work.
3. A climax or scene of revelation, in which the missing element is revealed. This scene often saves the hero of the play from ruin or embarrassment.
4. A denouement, or closing scene, in which explanations are supplied to resolve all earlier questions or mysteries in the play. This scene, according to Scribe, is to follow very soon after the climax. In French, the word denouement means "untying," so the term suggests unraveling all the knotted conditions or circumstances on which initial problems—and the plot—were based.