

THE  
CONNELL SHORT  
TO HENRIK IBSEN'S



A DOLL'S  
HOUSE

“I think these guides are a very exciting way to  
encourage people to read great novels, plays  
and poems.”

MELVY BRAGG

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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

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*by Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr*

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# Introduction

Do boys play with dolls?

Not in provincial Norway in 1879. Not even today—unless the dolls are superhero figures.

By using the word “doll” Ibsen’s play calls attention immediately to girls. Sometimes people argue that *A Doll’s House* is not concerned with the plight of women, but is about the universal need to find self-fulfilment in life. They often point to a statement Ibsen made late in his career about not being a feminist. “I am not a member of the Women’s Right League,” he said rather ungraciously in a speech to the Norwegian League of Women’s Rights who were giving him a banquet to celebrate his seventieth birthday. “I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement.” He explained that his emphasis was on art and poetry, not “propaganda.” The key word in Ibsen’s speech is “consciously.” He called his play *A Doll’s House* because he was focusing on gender; he made his main character a woman so that he could expose a deep societal problem, namely how women are treated like dolls, or playthings, by the patriarchal society. But he did not write a prescription and solve a problem; he simply posed a question in the form of a play. What are women in contemporary life supposed to do; how can they live in a male-dominated world?

By the time a small, plucky group in England put on the play in a dingy theatre in London in 1889, *A Doll's House* had already become a sensation in most of Europe. It has since become one of the most written-about and performed plays in the world. The societal problems it exposed in 1879 when it was first published and performed have by no means gone away or been fully resolved. Clearly, this is a play that dissects conventional bourgeois society, exposing its rigidity and the constraints it places upon character and on each individual life. There is another very prominent issue at stake too, and that is the relationship between parents and their children. But even more significantly, the dramatic innovations the play presented have left a long legacy on modern drama in terms of how plays are written, beginning with a very basic element: the plot.

## A summary of the plot

Norway, 1870s. A young woman's husband is suddenly taken gravely ill, and the doctor's advice is to go south to a warmer climate for as long as it takes for him to get well. The woman knows they can't afford it, but she wants to save her husband's life, so she thinks she will ask her father for help. But her father dies before she can ask him, so out of desperation she forges her father's signature so

that she can borrow money from a shady lender named Krogstad with her father as guarantor for the loan. The couple goes to Italy, the husband recovers fully and returns to become head of the local bank.

Nice story; very dramatic. That would certainly make a great play. But this doesn't describe the plot of *A Doll's House*: all of this has happened many years earlier, and when the curtain rises we only see its aftermath. Ibsen starts his play where other playwrights of the time would have ended theirs. Everything seems fine at the start of *A Doll's House*: Torvald is settling in as bank director; Nora is happily getting ready for Christmas, decorating the tree in their living room, humming a little tune. The two of them flirt a bit, Torvald calling her his little lark and squirrel and saying how satisfied he is to be in good health, with a lovely wife and family and a successful career. Then an unexpected visitor arrives: Nora's old school friend, Mrs Linde, who has come to ask for a job from Torvald, because she is a widow with no money or children who has had to take care of her sick mother and her brothers, leaving her sobered and haggard by comparison with the pretty, vibrant Nora, happy mother of three and wife of prosperous bank manager.

As so often in Ibsen's plays, a knock on the door in the midst of seeming domestic bliss sets in motion a series of catastrophic events. This time

it is Krogstad: he used to work with Torvald but got in trouble for embezzling funds, went to prison, and turned loan shark. He is the one who, unbeknownst to Torvald, lent Nora the money that allowed the family to go to Italy on the trip that saved Torvald's life. Nora is startled to see Krogstad, thinking he is here to demand repayment more quickly than they had agreed; but he has come to ask Torvald for a job. Torvald is above hiring someone with a shady past.

On his way out, Krogstad is surprised to see Mrs Linde, his old flame. Indeed, the house is brimming with visitors; the old family friend of the Helmers, Dr Rank, comes next, and reveals that he is dying of a mysterious hereditary illness that we can only surmise is syphilis, though no one seems to take much notice. He is secretly in love with Nora and when, later in the play, she is desperate for someone to turn to for the money to pay Krogstad back and clear herself of her debt — since Krogstad threatens to tell Torvald about the forged signature in retaliation for being snubbed by Torvald — she nearly asks Dr Rank but before she can, he reveals his love for her and she turns away, feeling that to ask him for money when she knows his true feelings would be wrong. Nora grows increasingly desperate as she tries to prevent Torvald learning the truth. In one stunning scene, she rehearses a feverish Sicilian dance called the

*Opposite: Henrik Ibsen photographed in 1891*



tarantella which she will dance in peasant costume at a party the Helmers are throwing. The passion and hysteria she shows through her dance inflame Torvald's desire and, when they are alone, he confides that at parties he pictures her across the room as a virgin whom he can't wait to seduce. He says all of this to Nora while she is offstage, in the next room, and he is lying on their bed waiting for her; she has gone to "throw off her masquerade costume" but little does he suspect it is to be substituted for a street dress and that she is about to leave him for good. They spend the final scene of the play discussing their relationship, Nora calmly and coolly explaining that seeing Torvald condemn her for a deed she did out of love for him and that harmed no one else made her realize he was not prepared to support her, to take her side. He is appalled: "no man sacrifices his honor for the one he loves!" She retorts: "Millions of women have done so." Nora says their marriage is not a true partnership because she has simply passed from her father's hands to her husband's and is merely his plaything; she has never had a proper education in anything and must start from scratch, on her own. He tries desperately to understand and first commands and then tearfully begs her to stay. She is resolute; and as she leaves, we hear the door slam and we see Torvald alone on stage, only just beginning to comprehend her viewpoint.

## What the critics said

Early critics of Ibsen had strong views on the play. On one extreme was George Bernard Shaw, who adored Ibsen and emulated him. Shaw's lectures on "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" in 1890 were published under that title and became widely read; they still give great insight into not just a fellow playwright's "take" on Ibsen but, more revealingly, Shaw's own views on theatre (it was quickly dubbed "the quintessence of Shavianism"). On the other extreme was August Strindberg, the Swedish playwright and younger rival of Ibsen, who was notoriously misogynistic and loathed Ibsen's feminism. His 3-act drama *Sir Bengt's Wife* (1882) put the wife firmly back in her place, an idea he developed further in his comedy *Marauders* (1886) which showed the husband's mental superiority to the wife. As Egil Törnqvist notes, the title *Marauders* "refers to the pseudo-Darwinian idea that woman, after thousands of years of male development, mistakenly believes that she has the right to come marauding into his territory."

One of Ibsen's biographers, Michael Meyer, found Nora "an irrational and frivolous narcissist," a view in line with readers who see her as hysterical, vain, abnormal, egotistical, and selfish (all terms used by critics in recent years, as Templeton points out in her book *Ibsen's Women*).

More recently, Erroll Durbach insists on a reading of Nora as Everyman, a universalism that Joan Templeton entirely refutes when she calls the play “Ibsen’s most explicit treatment of the woman question.” In short, there is a plethora of views on Nora and on the play more generally.

Writing about one of Ibsen’s later plays, *The Master Builder* (1893), Toril Moi suggests that it asks a fundamental existential question: “is it possible to find meaning in life when one feels that one’s future is shrinking with every day that passes?” This question is not just a concern of late Ibsen but already lies at the heart of *A Doll’s House*. It helps to explain the urgency with which Nora must leave; why she can’t put off her departure but must make the most of every day that is passing, and try to offset all the wasted days already gone before she came to her great realization about the need to go out into the world and find out who she really is. This problem is not new to Ibsen: already in *Peer Gynt* (1867) he satirizes the character who is not wholly and committedly himself but is only partially self-realized, only himself “enough.” In that play’s climactic scene, Peer peels an onion looking for the core that lies beneath all the layers, only to discover that an onion has no core. Nora’s departure is necessary for her to discover her true self and, if there is none, to create one, once she has discarded the empty layers of the self that she

inherited and adopted unthinkingly from the society around her.

## “The Modern Tragedy”

There are no dead bodies littering the stage at the end of *A Doll’s House*, as in the classics of Western drama that have provided a template for what we call tragedy, such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Oedipus Rex*. But Ibsen self-consciously called it that: in his “Notes to the Modern Tragedy,” his preliminary jottings as he began work on the play, Ibsen challenges this age-old model of tragedy by bringing it up to date and saying that you don’t need to have heaps of corpses on stage (or indeed death at all) in order to have a tragedy—though in later plays, from *The Wild Duck* onwards, he gives us plenty of dead bodies at the end. Ibsen’s notes begin: “There are two laws: one for men, another, entirely different, for women.” He’s not just talking about the law in a legal sense, but in a natural sense as well; how men and women are built differently (both physically and spiritually) yet women are forced to conform to a system that only recognizes masculine modes of being and thinking. “A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society; it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of

view.” By giving his play the subtitle “a modern tragedy” Ibsen is announcing that this unacknowledged but fundamental difference between men and women, with the resulting impoverishment of women’s lives, is the single greatest tragedy of contemporary life. He is also consciously following the injunction of the influential Danish critic Georg Brandes that modern literature should “submit problems to debate,” as he put it in a lecture in 1871 that reverberated throughout Scandinavia’s artistic and intellectual circles. As the late eminent Ibsen scholar and translator James McFarlane puts it, the play’s drama erupts when a woman’s “natural instincts are brought into conflict with the notions of authority she has grown up with.”

Ibsen actually got his idea for the play from real life. Nora Helmer was modelled on a young woman of Ibsen’s acquaintance, Laura Kieler, whose painful story he adapted to his creative needs. She was an aspiring writer who confided in Ibsen that when her husband developed tuberculosis, she secretly borrowed money in order to take him as the doctors advised to a warmer climate; but, pressured by her creditors, she ended up committing forgery in order to get more money. When her husband discovered her crime, he demanded a divorce and he took her children away from her. She ended up in a mental asylum for a period. At the time, everyone in their

circle knew instantly that Ibsen’s play was based on her story, and it caused Laura Kieler deep distress that this tragic and deeply personal situation was revealed which she had told Ibsen in complete confidence. It is indeed a cruel irony that a play that seeks to remedy the exploitation of women should so ruthlessly exploit one unfortunate woman.

## Ibsen and Feminism

Nevertheless, Ibsen dared to put on the stage an issue that was simmering away throughout the Victorian period. He helped to unleash the full force of the woman’s movement and the widespread agitation for the vote. His articulation of the double standard, the “two laws,” directly influenced fellow playwrights like Oscar Wilde who uses the phrase in his play *An Ideal Husband* (1893), and Shaw, whose plays and prefaces from the 1890s in particular explore the gender divide that Ibsen so powerfully articulated.

Ibsen’s life-long interest in the plight of women can be found everywhere, in play after play, utterly refuting that speech he made in 1898 denying his interest in women’s issues and which can be explained by his fear of being affiliated with any one particular group, whether feminist, Socialist, anarchist, or Symbolist; he wanted to be his own

man. His work is, in a very real sense, one long meditation on women's issues. When someone asks you what *A Doll's House* is about, or *Ghosts*, or *The Lady from the Sea*, or *Rosmersholm*, or *Hedda Gabler*, you start by saying, "It's about a woman who..."

But Ibsen also wrote many plays that you would start out describing as, "It's about a man who..." Many of these have to do with men having to juggle family demands with all-consuming careers, particularly artists, as in *When We Dead Awaken* (1900), Ibsen's last word on this subject and a very agonizing, guilt-ridden self-portrait. How far, he seems to be asking, does devotion to one's calling and vocation pre-empt all other aspects of life, including family? He explored this in *Brand* (1865); he explored it in *The Master Builder* (1892); and again in *When We Dead Awaken*, plays that revolve around sacrifice and compromise.

They also show the pitfalls of a too-rigid commitment to idealism, the "all-or-nothing" mentality. Ibsen shows the need for such engrained, archaic masculine traits to be stripped away from modern men. Thus, a play like *A Doll's House* doesn't just point an accusing finger at men. It would never have had the staying power that it has if it just did that. Instead, he shows how both men and women unconsciously play roles they seem to be expected to play: the obedient wife, the authoritative husband, the loving mother, the

distant father, and so on. *A Doll's House* is ultimately about how all of us play roles in life, usually unconsciously and therefore unquestioningly—a theme that Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello explored in his modernist dramas several decades later.

Nora is a sexual object. Her husband sees her constantly in a sexual light, confiding to her after the party at which she so enticingly danced the tarantella that he imagines her as his young bride, "that we are just leaving our wedding, that I am taking you to our new home for the first time...to be alone with you for the first time...quite alone with your young and trembling loveliness!" He needs to turn back time and make her a virgin again, fantasizing about her virginity and erasing the fact that she is a sexually mature woman who has had three children with him. The "trembling" is especially revealing: Ibsen was fully aware of the growing discourse, particularly in frank novels by his contemporaries in Scandinavia, around the "suffer and be still" predicament of young women who were not told what to expect on their wedding night, but kept in sexual ignorance only to become traumatized by their painful initiation. What is Ibsen suggesting about men's expectations of, and attitudes toward, women? Nora is one of a long line of female characters Ibsen created who are older and already mothers and wives with a history and with sexual experience. He seems to be saying