

A Doll's House**Date:** 1879**Author:** Henrik Ibsen**From:** *The Drama 100: A Ranking of the Greatest Plays of All Time.*

Whether one reads A Doll's House as a technical revolution in modern theater, the modern tragedy, the first feminist play since the Greeks, a Hegelian allegory of the spirit's historical evolution, or a Kierkegaardian leap from aesthetic into ethical life, the deep structure of the play as a modern myth of self-transformation ensures its perennial importance as a work that honors the vitality of the human spirit in women and men.

—Errol Durbach, *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*

More than one literary historian has identified the precise moment when modern drama began: December 4, 1879, with the publication of Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*), or, more dramatically at the explosive climax of the first performance in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879, with the slamming of the door as Nora Helmer shockingly leaves her comfortable home, respectable marriage, husband, and children for an uncertain future of self-discovery. Nora's shattering exit ushered in a new dramatic era, legitimizing the exploration of key social problems as a serious concern for the modern theater, while sounding the opening blast in the modern sexual revolution. As Henrik Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer has observed, "No play had ever before contributed so momentously to the social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matter." A contemporary reviewer of the play also declared: "When Nora slammed the door shut on her marriage, walls shook in a thousand homes."

Ibsen set in motion a transformation of drama as distinctive in the history of the theater as the one that occurred in fifth-century BCE Athens or Elizabethan London. Like the great Athenian dramatists and William Shakespeare, Ibsen fundamentally redefined drama and set a standard that later playwrights have had to absorb or challenge. The stage that he inherited had largely ceased to function as a serious medium for the deepest consideration of human themes and values. After Ibsen drama was restored as an important truth-telling vehicle for a comprehensive criticism of life. *A Doll's House* anatomized on stage for the first time the social, psychological, emotional, and moral truths beneath the placid surface of a conventional, respectable marriage while creating a new, psychologically complex modern heroine, who still manages to shock and unsettle audiences more than a century later. *A Doll's House* is, therefore, one of the groundbreaking modern literary texts that established in fundamental ways the responsibility and cost of women's liberation and gender equality. According to critic Evert Sprinchorn, Nora is "the richest, most complex" female dramatic character since Shakespeare's heroines, and as feminist critic Kate Millett has argued in *Sexual Politics*, Ibsen was the first dramatist since the Greeks to challenge the myth of male dominance. "In Aeschylus' dramatization of the myth," Millett asserts, "one is permitted to see patriarchy confront matriarchy, confound it through the knowledge of paternity, and come off triumphant. Until Ibsen's Nora slammed the door announcing the sexual revolution, this triumph went nearly uncontested."

The momentum that propelled Ibsen's daring artistic and social revolt was sustained principally by his outsider status, as an exile both at home and abroad. His last deathbed word was "*Tvertimod!*" (On the contrary!), a fitting epitaph and description of his artistic and intellectual mindset. Born in Skien, Norway, a logging town southwest of Oslo, Ibsen endured a lonely and impoverished childhood, particularly after the bankruptcy of his businessman father when Ibsen was eight. At 15, he was sent to Grimstad as an apothecary's apprentice, where he lived for six years in an attic room on meager pay, sustained by reading romantic poetry, sagas, and folk ballads. He later

recalled feeling "on a war footing with the little community where I felt I was being suppressed by my situation and by circumstances in general." His first play, *Cataline*, was a historical drama featuring a revolutionary hero who reflects Ibsen's own alienation. "*Cataline* was written," the playwright later recalled, "in a little provincial town, where it was impossible for me to give expression to all that fermented in me except by mad, riotous pranks, which brought down upon me the ill will of all the respectable citizens who could not enter into that world which I was wrestling with alone."

Largely self-educated, Ibsen failed the university entrance examination to pursue medical training and instead pursued a career in the theater. In 1851 he began a 13-year stage apprenticeship in Bergen and Oslo, doing everything from sweeping the stage to directing, stage managing, and writing mostly verse dramas based on Norwegian legends and historical subjects. The experience gave him a solid knowledge of the stage conventions of the day, particularly of the so-called well-made play of the popular French playwright Augustin Eugène Scribe and his many imitators, with its emphasis on a complicated, artificial plot based on secrets, suspense, and surprises. Ibsen would transform the conventions of the well-made play into the modern problem play, exploring controversial social and human questions that had never before been dramatized. Although his stage experience in Norway was marked chiefly by failure, Ibsen's apprenticeship was a crucial testing ground for perfecting his craft and providing him with the skills to mount the assault on theatrical conventions and moral complacency in his mature work.

In 1864 Ibsen began a self-imposed exile from Norway that would last 27 years. He traveled first to Italy, where he was joined by his wife, Susannah, whom he had married in 1858, and his son. The family divided its time between Italy and Germany. The experience was liberating for Ibsen; he felt that he had "escaped from darkness into light," releasing the productive energy with which he composed the succession of plays that brought him worldwide fame. His first important works, *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867), were poetic dramas, very much in the romantic mode of the individual's conflict with experience and the gap between heroic assertion and accomplishment, between sobering reality and blind idealism. *Pillars of Society* (1877) shows him experimenting with ways of introducing these central themes into a play reflecting modern life, the first in a series of realistic dramas that redefined the conventions and subjects of the modern theater.

The first inklings of his next play, *A Doll's House*, are glimpsed in Ibsen's journal under the heading "Notes for a Modern Tragedy":

There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and one, quite different, for women. They don't understand each other; but in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a man.

The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction....

Moral conflict. Weighed down and confused by her trust in authority, she loses faith in her own morality, and in her fitness to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race. Love of life, of home, of husband and children and family. Now and then, as women do, she shrugs off her thoughts. Suddenly anguish and fear return. Everything must be borne alone. The catastrophe approaches, mercilessly, inevitably. Despair, conflict, and defeat.

To tell his modern tragedy based on gender relations, Ibsen takes his audience on an unprecedented, intimate tour of a contemporary, respectable marriage. Set during the Christmas holidays, *A Doll's House* begins with Nora Helmer completing the finishing touches on the family's celebrations. Her husband, Torvald, has recently been named a bank manager, promising an end to the family's former straitened financial circumstances, and Nora is determined to celebrate the holiday with her husband and three children in style. Despite Torvald's disapproval of her indulgences, he relents, giving her the money she desires, softened by Nora's childish play-acting, which gratifies his sense of what is expected of his "lark" and "squirrel." Beneath the surface of this apparently charming domestic scene is a potentially damning and destructive secret. Seven years before Nora had saved the life of her critically ill husband by secretly borrowing the money

needed for a rest cure in Italy. Knowing that Torvald would be too proud to borrow money himself, Nora forged her dying father's name on the loan she received from Krogstad, a banking associate of Torvald.

The crisis comes when Nora's old schoolfriend Christina Linde arrives in need of a job. At Nora's urging Torvald aids her friend by giving her Krogstad's position at the bank. Learning that he is to be dismissed, Krogstad threatens to expose Nora's forgery unless she is able to persuade Torvald to reinstate him. Nora fails to convince Torvald to relent, and after receiving his dismissal notice, Krogstad sends Torvald a letter disclosing the details of the forgery. The incriminating letter remains in the Helmers' mailbox like a ticking timebomb as Nora tries to distract Torvald from reading it and Christina attempts to convince Krogstad to withdraw his accusation. Torvald eventually reads the letter following the couple's return from a Christmas ball and explodes in recriminations against his wife, calling her a liar and a criminal, unfit to be his wife and his children's mother. "Now you've wrecked all my happiness—ruined my whole future," Torvald insists. "Oh, it's awful to think of. I'm in a cheap little grafter's hands; he can do anything he wants with me, ask me for anything, play with me like a puppet—and I can't breathe a word. I'll be swept down miserably into the depths on account of a featherbrained woman." Torvald's reaction reveals that his formerly expressed high moral rectitude is hypocritical and self-serving. He shows himself worried more about appearances than true morality, caring about his reputation rather than his wife. However, when Krogstad's second letter arrives in which he announces his intention of pursuing the matter no further, Torvald joyfully informs Nora that he is "saved" and that Nora should forget all that he has said, assuming that the normal relation between himself and his "frightened little songbird" can be resumed. Nora, however, shocks Torvald with her reaction.

Nora, profoundly disillusioned by Torvald's response to Krogstad's letter, a response bereft of the sympathy and heroic self-sacrifice she had hoped for, orders Torvald to sit down for a serious talk, the first in their married life, in which she reviews their relationship. "I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child," Nora explains. "And in turn the children have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you played with me, just as they thought it fun when I played with them. That's been our marriage, Torvald." Nora has acted out the 19th-century ideal of the submissive, unthinking, dutiful daughter and wife, and it has taken Torvald's reaction to shatter the illusion and to force an illumination. Nora explains:

When the big fright was over—and it wasn't from any threat against me, only for what might damage you—when all the danger was past, for you it was just as if nothing had happened. I was exactly the same, your little lark, your doll, that you'd have to handle with double care now that I'd turned out so brittle and frail. Torvald—in that instant it dawned on me that I've been living here with a stranger.

Nora tells Torvald that she no longer loves him because he is not the man she thought he was, that he was incapable of heroic action on her behalf. When Torvald insists that "no man would sacrifice his honor for love," Nora replies: "Millions of women have done just that."

Nora finally resists the claims Torvald mounts in response that she must honor her duties as a wife and mother, stating,

I don't believe in that anymore. I believe that, before all else, I'm a human being, no less than you—or anyway, I ought to try to become one. I know the majority thinks you're right, Torvald, and plenty of books agree with you, too. But I can't go on believing what the majority says, or what's written in books. I have to think over these things myself and try to understand them.

The finality of Nora's decision to forgo her assigned role as wife and mother for the authenticity of selfhood is marked by the sound of the door slamming and her exit into the wider world, leaving Torvald to survey the wreckage of their marriage.

Ibsen leaves his audience and readers to consider sobering truths: that married women are the decorative playthings and servants of their husbands who require their submissiveness, that a man's authority in the home should not go unchallenged, and that the prime duty of anyone is to

arrive at an authentic human identity, not to accept the role determined by social conventions. That Nora would be willing to sacrifice everything, even her children, to become her own person proved to be, and remains, the controversial shock of *A Doll's House*, provoking continuing debate over Nora's motivations and justifications. The first edition of 8,000 copies of the play quickly sold out, and the play was so heatedly debated in Scandinavia in 1879 that, as critic Frances Lord observes, "many a social invitation in Stockholm during that winter bore the words, 'You are requested not to mention Ibsen's *Doll's House*!'" Ibsen was obliged to supply an alternative ending for the first German production when the famous leading lady Hedwig Niemann-Raabe refused to perform the role of Nora, stating that "I would never leave *my children*!" Ibsen provided what he would call a "barbaric outrage," an ending in which Nora's departure is halted at the doorway of her children's bedroom. The play served as a catalyst for an ongoing debate over feminism and women's rights. In 1898 Ibsen was honored by the Norwegian Society for Women's Rights and toasted as the "creator of Nora." Always the contrarian, Ibsen rejected the notion that *A Doll's House* champions the cause of women's rights:

I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose. I thank you for your toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for women's rights. I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights. And if you read my books carefully you will realize that. Of course it is incidentally desirable to solve the problem of women; but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings.

Despite Ibsen's disclaimer that *A Doll's House* should be appreciated as more than a piece of gender propaganda, that it deals with universal truths of human identity, it is nevertheless the case that Ibsen's drama is one of the milestones of the sexual revolution, sounding themes and advancing the cause of women's autonomy and liberation that echoes Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and anticipates subsequent works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The impact of Nora's slamming the door of her doll's house is still being felt more than a century later.

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