

## SYNOPSIS OF IBSEN'S A DOLL'S HOUSE

*A Doll's House* is a play which lifts marriage problems in 19th century as its major theme. The play opens as Nora, the protagonist tells her maid to hide the Christmas tree. When interacting with her husband, Torvald Helmer, Nora behaves like a silly, childish woman, and is treated as such by him. Her old friend Christine Linde, who is widowed and is short of money, has heard about Helmer's recent promotion to be the bank's manager. She comes to ask Nora for help in persuading Helmer to give her a job. Nora promises to ask Helmer to give Mrs. Linde a position in his bank.

Nora confides to Mrs. Linde that she once secretly borrowed money from a disgraced lawyer, Nils Krogstad, to save Helmer's life when he was very ill, but she has not told him in order to protect his pride. She then took secret jobs copying papers, which she carried out secretly in her room, and learned to take pride in her ability to earn money "as if she were a man." Helmer's new job promises to finally liberate her from having to scrimp and save in order to be able to pay off her debt. However, she has continued to play the part of the frivolous wife for the benefit of her husband.

Meanwhile, Dr. Rank, a close friend of the family, flirts with Nora before revealing that he is victimized by a deadly disease named tuberculosis of the spine. He has only a month to live and he has been secretly in love with Nora. After being fired by Helmer from his minor position at the bank, Krogstad approaches Nora, declaring he no longer cares about the remaining balance of her loan but will preserve the bond in order to blackmail Helmer. Krogstad informs Nora that he has written a letter detailing her past crime namely forging her father's signature of surety on the bond and puts it in Helmer's mailbox. Nora tells her worry to Mrs. Linde who finally says that she and Krogstad were in love before she married, and promises she will convince him to change his mind.

Helmer tries to check his mail before he and Nora go to a costume party, but Nora distracts him by showing him the dance she has been rehearsing for the party. Helmer declares that he will postpone reading his mail until the evening. Meanwhile, Mrs. Linde tells Krogstad that she only married her husband because she had no other means to support her sick mother and young siblings, and that she has returned to offer him her love again. Krogstad is moved and

offers to take back his letter to Helmer. However, Mrs. Linde decides that Helmer should know the truth for the sake of his and Nora's marriage.

Back from the party, Dr. Rank gives his letters of death to the Helmers, and Nora talks to him as if nothing is going to happen. Helmer goes to check the mail while Nora does everything to stop him but fails. Helmer goes to read his letters and Nora prepares to take her life. Before she has the opportunity, Helmer intercepts her, confronting her with Krogstad's letter. In his rage, he declares that he is now completely in Krogstad's power. This means that he must yield to Krogstad's demands and keep quiet about the whole affair. He berates Nora, calling her a dishonest and immoral woman and telling her she is unfit to raise their children. He says that their marriage will be kept only to maintain appearances.

A moment later, a maid enters, delivering a letter to Nora. Krogstad has returned the incriminating papers, saying that he regrets for his actions. Helmer is delighted, telling Nora he is saved as he burns the papers. He takes back his harsh words and tells her that he has forgiven her. He also explains to her that her mistake makes her all the more precious to him because it reveals an adorable helplessness, and that when a man has forgiven his wife it makes him love her all the more since she is the recipient of his generosity.

By now Nora has realized that her husband is not the man she thought he was, and that her whole existence has been a lie. Her fantasy of love is just a fantasy. Helmer's love is highly conditional. She has been treated like a plaything, first by her father and then by her husband. She decides that she must leave to find out who she is and what to make of her life. Helmer insists she must fulfill her duty as a wife and mother, but Nora believes she also has duties to herself. From Helmer's reaction to Krogstad's letters, Nora sees that she and Helmer are strangers to each other. The play ends with Nora leaving the house.

## CHARACTER SKETCHES

### 1. Nora Helmer:

Nora Helmer, the protagonist and wife of Torvald Helmer, is the most complex character in the play *A Doll's House*. She is excitable and cheerful young woman. She has never lived alone, going immediately from the care of her father to that of her husband. Inexperienced in the ways of the world as a result of this sheltering, Nora is impulsive and materialistic. Nora initially seems like a playful, naive child who lacks knowledge of the world outside her home. She seems completely happy. She responds affectionately to Torvald's teasing, speaks with excitement about the extra money his new job will give them, and takes pleasure in the company of her children and friends. She does not seem her doll-like existence. In which she is pampered and patronized.

As the play progresses, Nora reveals that she is not just a silly girl, as Torvald calls her. She does have some worldly experience, however and the small acts of rebellion in which she engages indicate that she is not as innocent and happy as she appears. Her understanding of the business details related to the debt she incurred in taking out a loan to preserve Torvald's health indicates that she is intelligent and possesses capacities beyond mere wifedom. Her description of her years of secret labour undertaken to pay off her debt manifests her fierce determination and ambition. Additionally, the fact that she was willing to break the law in order to ensure Torvald's health shows her courage.

Krogstad's blackmail and the trauma that follows do not change Nora's nature; they simply open her eyes to her unfulfilled potential. "I have been performing tricks for you, Torvald," she says during her climatic confrontation with Torvald. Nora comes to realize that in addition to her literal dancing and singing tricks, she has been putting on a show. She has pretended to be someone she is not in the order to fulfill the role that Torvald, her father, and society expects of her.

Torvald's selfish reaction after learning of Nora's deception and forgery serves as the final catalyst for Nora's awakening. But, even in the first act, Nora shows that she is not totally unaware that her life is at odds. She also swears, apparently just for the pleasure she derives from the minor rebellion against societal standards. As the drama unfolds, and as Nora's awareness of

the truth about her life grows, her need for rebellion escalates. This need culminates in her walking out on her husband and children in order to find independence and finds the strength to free herself from her oppressive situation.

Nora at the end of the play reveals herself to be an emancipated woman. She is thus a symbol of female revolt against male domination.

## **2. Torvald Helmer:**

Torvald embraces the belief that a man's role in marriage is to protect and guide his wife. He clearly enjoys the idea that Nora needs his guidance, and he constantly interacts with her as a father would. He instructs her with trite, moralistic sayings, such as: "A home that depends on loans and debt is not beautiful because it is not free." He is also eager to teach Nora the dance she performs at the costume party. Torvald likes to envision himself as Nora's saviour, asking her after the party, "Do you know that I've often wished you were facing some terrible dangers so that I could risk life and limb, risk everything, for your sake?"

Although Torvald seizes the power in his relationship with Nora and refers to her as a "girl", it seems that Torvald is actually the weaker and more childlike character. Dr. Rank's explanation for not wanting Torvald to enter his sickroom – "Torvald is so fastidious, he cannot face to anything ugly" – suggests that Dr. Rank feels Torvald must be sheltered like a child from the realities of the world. Furthermore, Torvald reveals himself to be childishly petty at times. His real objection to working with Krogstad is not deficiencies in Krogstad's morality. His decision to fire Krogstad stems ultimately from the fact that he feels threatened and offended by Krogstad's failure to pay him the proper respect.

Torvald is very conscious of other people's perception of him and of his standing in the community. His explanation for rejecting Nora's request to retain Krogstad in the office - would

make him “a laughing stock before the entire staff”- shows that he prioritizes his reputation over his wife’s desire. Torvald further demonstrates his deep need for society’s respect in his reaction to Nora’s deception. He will let her live with him in their home but they will not be man and wife again. This he will do in order to preserve appearances of an unbroken home in the eyes of the society. Though very clever and practical, Helmer is not able to understand the line of argument of Nora. He tries to retain her by appealing to her sense of duty to him, their children and the society.

Helmer is a representative of the domination of men, especially husbands, over females. He wants to live according to ideals of responsibility, moral, courage and leadership. These are too demanding and he fails. Although *A Doll’s House* highlights the problems of women in a male-dominated society through Helmer, the play reveals that men have social roles that are often beyond their capacity.

### **3. Nils Krogstad:**

Nils Krogstad is one of the minor characters in *A Doll’s House*. He is a lawyer by profession. He is also the old schoolmate of Torvald Helmer. He is working as a clerk in the bank to which Torvald is appointed as Manager. It is Krogstad who lent money to Nora to take her husband Torvald to southern Europe to save him from critical illness. Though Nora is paying off the installments of the loan regularly, Krogstad traces the fact that Nora has forged her father’s signature in the bond signed him for the loan. He makes Nora realize the consequences of her criminal act. So he asks her to prevail upon her husband to retain him at the bank in order to guard her secret. The challenge posed by Torvald to chuck him off from his bank position makes Krogstad bitter and harsh in his dealings with Nora. Though his willingness to allow

Nora's torment to continue is cruel, Krogstad is not without sympathy for her. As he says, "Even money-lenders, hacks, well, a man like me, can have a little of what you call feeling, you know". He visits Nora to check on her, and he discourages her from committing suicide. Moreover, Krogstad has reasonable motives for behaving as he does: He wants to keep his job at the bank in order to spare his children from the hardships that come with a spoiled reputation. Unlike Torvald, who seems to desire respect for selfish reason, Krogstad desires it for his family's sake.

Like Nora, Krogstad is a person who has been wronged by society. Though he did break the law, Krogstad's crime was relatively minor, but society has saddled him with the stigma of being a criminal and prohibited him from living down his past. Additionally, Krogstad's claim that his immoral behaviour came about when Mrs. Linde abandoned him for a man with money so she could provide for her family makes it possible to understand Krogstad as something of a victim of circumstances. One could argue that society forced Mrs. Linde away from Krogstad and thus prompted his crime. Though society's unfair treatment of Krogstad does not justify his actions, it does align him more closely with Nora and therefore tempers the readers perception of him as a despicable character. He is a contrast to Nora because he does not hide his shady past either with Nora or with Christine Linde. Krogstad becomes a reformed man in the end when Christine offers to marry him. He feels genuinely sorry for the harm he had done to Nora.

Krogstad, however, is not a dye-hard villain. He is conscious of his moral lapses and trying to reorder his life for he knows social acceptance depends upon his good conduct in society.

#### 4. Mrs. Christine Linde:

Mrs. Christine Linde is a childhood and school friend of Nora. Christine is a young widow for she had lost her husband. She had to marry just for the sake of her husband's money for at that time her mother was bed-ridden and her two younger brothers had to be looked after. At the time of her husband's death his business crashed and he left nothing for her. Mrs. Linde's account of her life of poverty underscores the privileged nature of the life that Nora leads. Also, Mr. Linde takes responsibility for her sick parent, whereas Nora abandoned her father when he was ill. Pressed for money, Mrs. Linde successfully asks Nora to help her secure a job at Torvald's bank. It is her arrival at Helmer-home which starts the exposition of the play.

Christine is a contrast to Nora whose life is full of illusion and falsehoods. She faces life boldly. Crises do not drive her to resort to the extreme step of suicide or shirking responsibility by running away from problems. She is very practical, honest and open in her dealings. Having so much experience and responsibility, Christine feels superior to Nora. This annoys Nora and provokes her into confiding her secret troubles of Christine. Christine recommends that Nora be open and honest with Torvald. She appears to entertain none of Nora's pretentiousness or dishonesty. Hearing that Krogstad is threatening Nora, she acts decisively. She goes immediately to see him. She also uses this opportunity to explain to Krogstad why she deserted him and married the other man. She tells him of her loneliness and proposes Krogstad. Mrs. Linde decides that she will only be happy if she goes off with Krogstad. Christine's older, weary viewpoint provides a foil for Nora's youthful impetuosity as well as a symbol of the ultimate hollowness of the matriarchal role. Her relationship with Krogstad also provides a point of comparison for that of Nora and Torvald.

## **5. Dr. Rank:**

Dr. Rank is a close family friend of the Helmers. He is the trusted friend of Torvald and a confidant of Nora. Only in his company, Nora is able to relax herself. He knows the true worth of Nora and adores her silently and confesses his secret passion for her. But Nora tells him that she prefers him only as a companion, he is decent enough not to embarrass Nora further. He is a moralist like Torvald. He has a cynical contempt for the society. He is highly critical of Krogstad who is guilty of forgery. He is a brooding, gloomy, cynical old man. He is critical of others as well of himself. He loves life and wants to enjoy all that is best in life. Rather than providing moral guidance and example for the rest of the character, Dr. Rank is a corrupt force, both physically and morally. He is suffering from consumption of the spine as a result of his father's sexual exploits. His dark and sad plight provides the tragic atmosphere for the tragedy of Nora. His secret passion for Nora touches the theme of love and marriage in the play.



## Quest for Identity in Ibsen's A Doll's House

Nora, the protagonist, is considered to be the mother and a wife, thoroughly devoted to her children, latter turns out to be a self-centered person who regards herself as autonomous woman to live on her own and discovers the true meaning of life.

Torvald Helmer, a lawyer and bank manager is a loving, committed and generous husband does not unveil his true character as a shallow and egotist person till the end of the play. His admiring behaviour with Nora makes one believe that he is such a perfect husband, but the truth turns out to be something else. In her husband's eyes, Nora is nothing but a silly "squirrel", a "little skylark", a "song bird" or a cute "scatterbrain" which shows his affectionate, but deceitful behaviour through words of affirmation. It clearly emphasizes his view that she is subservient to him, a kind of doll that lacks an independent soul and the capacity for rational thought. Since her childhood, she has never lived alone, going immediately from the care of her father to that of her husband Torvald. Her husband treated her like a valued possession and as a child. He forbids her to eat macaroons; he makes her dance for him, dresses up and recites for him. He is so possessive about her to the extent that he refuses to share Nora's female friends, like Mrs. Linde. When Torvald was seriously ill, Nora forged her father's signature so that she could borrow money from Nils Krogstad in order to save Torvald's life. When Krogstad later blackmails her with his knowledge of her forgery, Nora thinks of committing suicide so that she can protect Torvald's honour.

Nora's motives were absolutely selfless because that trip saved her sick husband's life. Nora knew that the revelation would have put her husband's reputation at stake, but she felt deep inside that her husband would sacrifice his reputation to defend her as soon as he came to know

that she did that to save his life. That feeling tormented her to the extent that she contemplated suicide.

At the last moment, however, when she realizes that Torvald is an egoist who cares only for himself, she decides to leave him and her children: instead of dying, Nora determines not only to live, but also to become an independent human being. So she walks out of his house, slamming the door and goes out in quest of her identity.

## Question Bank:

1. Discuss the play *A Doll's House* as a feminist play.
2. Write a note on the title of the play.
3. Write a note on the use of symbolism in the play *A Doll's House*.
4. What is the role of money in the play *A Doll's House*.
5. Examine Nora Helmer as a tragic heroine of *A Doll's House*.
6. Compare Nora's and Christine's lives since marriage. Who is better off? Explain.
7. What crime has Nora committed?
8. Discuss the foreshadowing in Nora's conversation with Anne-Marie.
9. Discuss the irony in Torvald's accusation that Nora has played with him "like a puppet."
10. Discuss Nora's decision to leave her family. Is it truly the only way she can reclaim her identity and humanity?

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