

## ENGLISH ADVANCED: MODULE B

**How has considering other interpretations of *A Doll's House* helped you develop your own appreciation of the textual integrity of the play?**

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In your response you should consider the ideas, dramatic techniques and structure of *A Doll's House*.

### **A Doll's House (Draft IV)**

Through the complex use of realism, play structure and an unconventional ending, Henrik Ibsen's modern drama *A Doll's House* exemplified the subservient place and role of women along with the entrapment of individuals within society, but ultimately the existential search of human beings. These enduring values transcend their original contexts due to the various ways it may be interpreted. Feminist and Marxist critics perceived it as the celebration of the feminist movement and the characterisation of a capitalist society. However, both views coherently discuss the predicament of human rights, and the need for personal individuality to transcend socio-cultural limitations. *A Doll's House's* controversial values correspond to its reproduction by the Patrick Garland film (1973), retaining its longevity as a classic.

Women were unable to transcend their own ideals and personality within the social limitation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century context, as some must fulfil first the role of a wife and mother. Immediately in Act I, Torvald's superiority is pervaded through his dehumanisation of Nora by use of animal imagery "little squirrel", "lark" and "featherbrain". These animals are symbolic for their doll-like nature and their urge to escape society, echoing the metaphor of the title "A Doll's House" emphasising Nora's conformity to Torvald's desires. Ibsen's use of the photographically accurate setting through stage directions "Backstage right a door...backstage left..." encapsulate the confinement and well-constructed nature of the room, analogising the limiting society but also Nora's entrapment. This gender role archetype is also elucidated by Christine and Ann-marie, which acts as counterpoints of Nora's bourgeoisie feminine role. This is also supported in the last frame of the Garland production, where the medium shot displays the distance between Nora and Torvald, accentuating the gender gap and the different positions of the two within the society.

Similarly Feminist critic Joan Templeton sees the play as the illumination of the suppression of women as she stated 'Nora has never been subject, only object.' However this play is not only a subject of gender, at a bigger scale, it elucidates the power relation between the capitalist and the proletariat. Marxists see the marriage as a microcosm of bourgeois ideology where Nora, the individual, lacks financial power and thus is exploited by Torvald. Ultimately for Ibsen however, by highlighting the gender "problem" and the power inequality he essentially reaches the deep notion of human inequality. Though Nora's games with her children symbolises her childishness, on deeper notion it highlights the psychological games she plays, prefiguring her endmost search for self.

The true personnel that individual strive to become lies behind the façade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific/economic/social paradigms, just like how role of women are commuted to merely mother and wife. Due to the scientific belief of social Darwinism, Dr. Rank develops a "physiological anticipation" of death. Ornate language is thus imposed through his encounter with Torvald, hinting his death through metaphors, "black hat...invisible" and the "black cross"- paralleling to the darkened stages in the Garland Production. Also the ironic juxtaposition between Dr. Rank's role as doctor and his own illness reveals his captivity as merely a product of a morally corrupt society. Textual integrity is achieved as individual's movement is controlled economically as the entire play structure is built upon the economic paradigm- starts with Nora's plea for "pennies" climaxes at the revelation of Nora's secret, and ending at her economic vulnerability. This is further emphasised by the play's staging in a well-fortune house through elegant/ elaborate interior. The degree to which

Torvald is blinded by societal engineering is imposed by dramatic irony as he sees the forgery crisis as an affront rather than his “survival kit”. This is similarly shown by his frenzy stage movement and the intensification of music in the production.

This notion of individual and society is supported by a Neo Marxist claim as Althusser suggests that “individuals in a capitalised society cannot help but further the dominant ideology,” Though this is true, individuals within the different paradigms (Dr. Rank, Nora and Torvald), jigsaws seamlessly into Aristotle’s idea of tragic heroes, “A hero’s downfall is due to his/her own faults.” Ibsen characterises them as both products and victims of the moral defilement of society blinded by *hamartia*. This is explicit in the ironic time setting of the play, where Christmas, a season of new beginning brings a dark ending.

Ultimately however, A Doll’s House shows the rise of individualism in transcending the societal values. Nora’s search for self accentuates the epitany of the play- the need of every human being as Nora quotes “Before anything, my duty is to myself.” In Act III the stage direction of the Christmas tree symbolises Nora’s predicament as a “decoration” in the house. Once this perceived identity is removed, a new year begins symbolising her incarnation as a new individual. In the Garland production, this corresponds to her removal of tarantella costume to a dull and sombre dress in the shadow which Mrs Linde refers to as “fine feathers” grown with materialism, appearance and statue. The subplot of Mrs Linde and Krogstad act as an antithesis for Nora and Torvald, Mrs Linde being a mirror reflection of what Nora would eventually become. In the Garland production, the juxtaposition of the warm and cosy Doll’s House with the barren winter highlights a non-idealistic harsh world, but also metaphorically the rules and conventions that immobilises women finically, legally and spiritually which Nora must enter into.

Proponents of feminist movement see Nora as a heroine in her attempt to transgress the patriarchal frames that incarcerate her. This is exemplified in Act III by the symbolism of a final door slam, which resonates the thematic concern, and finality of leaving. Ibsen however quotes “I must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for the women’s right movement...to me it’s a question of human rights.” Thus Ibsen’s use of the typifying melodrama in the tarantella dance symbolically prefigures a human being’s escape to search of the existential self. The last quote of the play “Miracle of Miracles” optimises that a true miracle only happens when an individual is able to see their existential self.

Ultimately, Ibsen’s A Doll’s House accentuate the endmost need of individuals to define themselves and express true humanity in opposition of the societal norms. Through Ibsen’s cohesively constructed and realistic play, it asks questions into the complexities of human relationships. This universal question thus allows different appreciations by critical audiences, which would continue to resonate in a contemporary society. In essence A Doll House is merely a microcosm of the modern society, we individuals are all imprisoned within this house and are all vestiges of “Dolls”.