PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

A DOLL'S HOUSE

by Henrik Ibsen

UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

A Doll's House

Henrik Ibsen

Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

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CONTENTS

Notes

Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien, Norway, on March 10, 1829, into a wealthy family. He had five other siblings. In 1843, Ibsen moved to Grimstad to study as a pharmacist's assistant. He applied to Christiana University, but was rejected.

Ibsen became an assistant stage manager and dramatic author at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen in 1851, writing *Lady Inger* (1855), *The Feats at Solhoug* (1856), and *Olaf Liljekrans* (1857). These plays were written in verse, and Ibsen drew from popular folklore and myths to create them. He later took a position at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiana and married Suzannah Thoresen in 1858. They had one child, Sigurd.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

To better appreciate the focus of Ibsen's work in *A Doll's House*, readers need to understand how he uses his characters to develop commentary on social issues:

1. Ibsen creates characters that are stereotypical for the era of the play:
   - Torvold and Nora Helmer depict the traditional roles of husband and wife.
   - Belief in male dominance, responsibility, power, and control characterize the conventional role of a husband as the breadwinner.
   - The superiority of husband over wife is emphasized through Ibsen's use of bird metaphors and references to small or frail creatures.
   - Notice how Nora defies her prescribed role as a dependent, weak, and suppressed wife.

2. Marriage was a private institution that was closed to outsiders, but was under society's constant scrutiny:
   - Notice how Ibsen clearly defines societal duties for a wife, and how Nora struggles emotionally with these restraints.
   - Mrs. Linde's character foreshadows Nora's ultimate conclusions and actions about her marriage with Torvold.
   - Aspirations of married women were suppressed, as they maintained positions subordinate to their husbands. Pay particular attention to how different women in the play relate to this concept.

Dramatis Personae

Torvald Helmer.
Nora, his wife.
Doctor Rank.
Mrs. Linde.
Nils Krogstad
Helmer's three young children.
Anne, their nurse.
A Housemaid.
A Porter.

(The action takes place in Helmer's house.)

ACT I

[Scene.— A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right leads to the entrance-hall, another to the left leads to Helmer:'s *study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a window. Near the window are a round table, arm-chairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small book-case with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter.*

A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open. Enter Nora, *humming a tune and in high spirits. She is in out-door dress and carries a number of parcels; these she lays on the table to the right. She leaves the outer door open after her, and through it is seen a* Porter *who is carrying a Christmas Tree and a basket, which he gives to the* Maid *who has opened the door.]*

Nora: Hide the Christmas Tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it till this evening, when it is dressed. *[To the* Porter, *taking out her purse.]* How much?

Porter: Sixpence.

Nora: There is a shilling. No, keep the change. *[The* Porter *thanks her, and goes out.* Nora *shuts the door. She is laughing to herself, as she takes off*

her hat and coat. She takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket and eats one or two; then goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens.] Yes, he is in. *[Still humming, she goes to the table on the right.]*

HELMER: *[calls out from his room]*. Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA: *[busy opening some of the parcels]*. Yes, it is!

HELMER: Is it my little squirrel bustling about?

NORA: Yes!

HELMER: When did my squirrel come home?

NORA: Just now. *[Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth.]* Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

HELMER: Don't disturb me. *[A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room, pen in hand.]* Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?

NORA: Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.

HELMER: Still, you know, we can't spend money recklessly.

NORA: Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn't we? Just a tiny wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money.

HELMER: Yes, after the New Year; but then it will be a whole quarter before the salary is due.

NORA: Pooh! we can borrow till then.

HELMER: Nora! *[Goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear.]* The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds to-day, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and—

NORA: *[putting her hands over his mouth]*. Oh! don't say such horrid things.

HELMER: Still, suppose that happened,—what then?

NORA: If that were to happen, I don't suppose I should care whether I owed money or not.

HELMER: Yes, but what about the people who had lent it?

NORA: They? Who would bother about them? I should not know who they were.

HELMER: That is like a woman! But seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. We two have kept bravely on the straight road so far, and we will go on the same way

for the short time longer that there need be any struggle.

NORA: *[moving towards the stove]*. As you please, Torvald.

HELMER: *[following her]*. Come, come, my little skylark must not droop her wings. What is this! Is my little squirrel out of temper? *[Taking out his purse.]* Nora, what do you think I have got here?

NORA: *[turning round quickly]*. Money!

HELMER: There you are. *[Gives her some money.]* Do you think I don't know what a lot is wanted for housekeeping at Christmas-time?

NORA: *[counting]*. Ten shillings—a pound—two pounds! Thank you, thank you, Torvald; that will keep me going for a long time.

HELMER: Indeed it must.

NORA: Yes, yes, it will. But come here and let me show you what I have bought. And all so cheap! Look, here is a new suit for Ivar, and a sword; and a horse and a trumpet for Bob; and a doll and dolly's bedstead for Emmy,—they are very plain, but anyway she will soon break them in pieces. And here are dress-lengths and handkerchiefs for the maids; old Anne ought really to have something better.

HELMER: And what is in this parcel?

NORA: *[crying out]*. No, no! you mustn't see that till this evening.

HELMER: Very well. But now tell me, you extravagant little person, what would you like for yourself?

NORA: For myself? Oh, I am sure I don't want anything.

HELMER: Yes, but you must. Tell me something reasonable that you would particularly like to have.

NORA: No, I really can't think of anything—unless, Torvald—

HELMER: Well?

NORA: *[playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his]*. If you really want to give me something, you might—you might—

HELMER: Well, out with it!

NORA: *[speaking quickly]*. You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it.

HELMER: But, Nora—

NORA: Oh, do! dear Torvald; please, please do! Then I will wrap it up in beautiful gilt paper and hang it on the Christmas Tree. Wouldn't that be fun?

HELMER: What are little people called that are always wasting money?

NORA: Spendthrifts—I know. Let us do as you suggest, Torvald, and then I shall have time to think what I am most in want of. That is a very sensible plan, isn't it?

HELMER: *[smiling]*. Indeed it is—that is to say, if you were really to save out of the money I give you, and then really buy something for yourself. But if you spend it all on the housekeeping and any number of unnecessary things, then I merely have to pay up again.

NORA: Oh but, Torvald—

HELMER: You can't deny it, my dear little Nora. *[Puts his arm round her waist.]* It's a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money. One would hardly believe how expensive such little persons are!

NORA: It's a shame to say that. I do really save all I can.

HELMER: *[laughing]*. That's very true,—all you can. But you can't save anything!

NORA: *[smiling quietly and happily]*. You haven't any idea how many expenses we skylarks and squirrels have, Torvald.

HELMER: You are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora.

NORA: Ah, I wish I had inherited many of papa's qualities.

HELMER: And I would not wish you to be anything but just what you are, my sweet little skylark. But, do you know, it strikes me that you are looking rather—what shall I say—rather uneasy to-day?

NORA: Do I?

HELMER: You do, really. Look straight at me.

NORA: *[looks at him]*. Well?

HELMER: *[wagging his finger at her]*. Hasn't Miss Sweet-Tooth† been breaking rules in town to-day?

NORA: No; what makes you think that?

HELMER: Hasn't she paid a visit to the confectioner's?

NORA: No, I assure you, Torvald—

HELMER: Not been nibbling sweets?

NORA: No, certainly not.

HELMER: Not even taken a bite at a macaroon or two?

NORA: No, Torvald, I assure you really—

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

Glossary

Act I

"**Miss Sweet-Tooth**" – a nickname used for Nora in an attempt to force her to admit that she had eaten some sweets; Helmer uses the term in a derogatory way by calling her "Miss," referring to her as if she were a child instead of his wife.

"**odds and ends, needlework, crochet-work, embroidery**" – In Ibsen's era, married women did not usually work outside the home because people might think the husband was unable to take care of his family. If married women wanted to do small things inside the home to earn a bit of money, they did handwork that was referred to as "odds and ends."

"**his manly independence**" – Nora seeks to protect her husband's image and role as the independent breadwinner. In nineteenth century England, a man would be shamed if he needed the help of his wife or another woman.

"**It was like being a man.**" – Nora strongly desires independence and individuality, traits that were associated with males for the era. She is proud when she feels she has worked as a man would.

Act II

"**consumption of the spine**" – a disease marked by the deterioration of tissue; it would have been incurable in the nineteenth century.

"**an incubus in after life**" – an "incubus" is an evil spirit or a very bad dream; Helmer is referring to Krogstad, noting the fact that their early association would return to haunt Helmer with nightmares or bad reflections.

Tarantella – a lively dance of southern Italy; the Tarantella was originally used as a remedy for tarantism, a condition once thought to be caused by the bite of a tarantula spider.

"**taking stock of my internal economy**" – Dr. Rank feels it is time for him to properly evaluate the workings of his body and refers to it as "taking stock" of what is occurring inside him. He is prepared to recognize and accept the condition of his poor health.

"**a quill-driver**" – a term that was a somewhat derogatory nickname for a cashier, bookkeeper, or a person who kept accounts. It is a highly demeaning term for entry-level personnel.

Vocabulary

Act I

backwater – stagnating or spiritless
barrister – [British] a lawyer
blackguard – an unprincipled character; a ruthless person
broach – to introduce a subject for discussion
caprices – whims; quick changes of mind
confectioner – an owner of a shop that sells candy, cakes, or sweets
deprave – to corrupt, warp, or mark with dishonesty
dissimulation – the hiding of the truth; deceit
dress-lengths – pieces of material cut just long enough to make a dress
economise – to use money frugally
entreaties – pleas, requests
gilt – covered with gold or looking like gold
imprudent – impulsive; not thought out
incredulously – with disbelief
indulgent – giving in to; liberal
palled – bored, made tiresome
plucky – showing strength in character in dire circumstances
precarious – unsteady; subject to abrupt change
procuring – finding or bringing about
solicitor – [British] a lawyer of lower rank who is not allowed in higher court
spendthrift – a person who wastes money
traveling dress – an outfit a woman would wear while being transported publicly
unassailable – unable to be disproved
unsavory – without taste; offensive
watering-place – a place, such as a spa or seaside resort, that people visited for rest and relaxation
wheedling – convincing another by trickery or flattery

Act II

amicably – in a friendly way
contrive – to invent or improvise a scheme
disheveled – fallen into disorder or an unkempt condition
expedient – the means to reach an end
fancy – a whim; fantasy
have leave – have permission
inexorable – unable to be persuaded