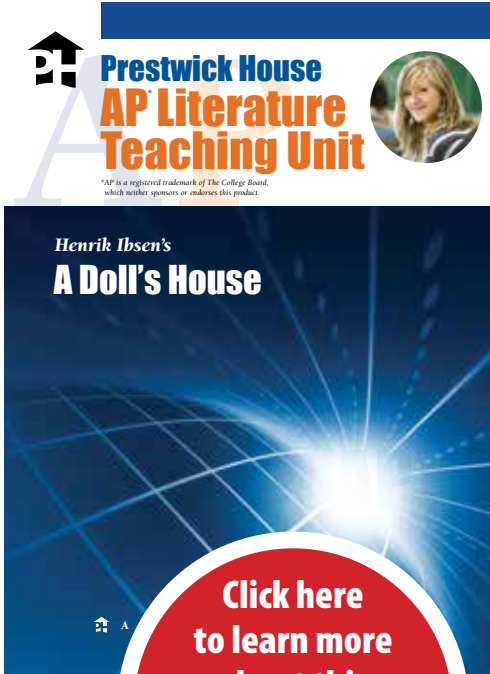




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Teaching Unit

# A Doll's House

by Henrik Ibsen

Written by Ashlin Bray



# Prestwick House

Item No. 301953

# A Doll's House

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss *A Doll's House* in the social and historical context of its time.
2. explain the concept of the "well-made play" and show how *A Doll's House* both adheres to the formula and departs from it.
3. diagram Freytag's pyramid and assign plot elements from *A Doll's House* to each element of the pyramid.
4. define the terms round character, flat character, dynamic character, static character, stock character, and foil, and give an example of each in the play, stating the rationale for the assignments.
5. identify the protagonist and the antagonist of the play, and explain the basis for the choices.
6. discuss the importance of irony and foreshadowing in *A Doll's House*, citing examples.
7. discuss *A Doll's House* in terms of feminist criticism.
8. place *A Doll's House* in the context of the movement for women's suffrage and the emerging societal reevaluation of women's place in society.
9. explain Ibsen's use of language and his handling of figurative language in *A Doll's House*.
10. analyze the characters of Helmer and Nora individually and in relation to each other.
11. trace Nora's awakening sense of herself and discuss the realizations that drove her to the choice she makes at the end of the play.
12. answer multiple-choice questions on the plot, structure, and characters of the play that are similar to those on the Advanced Placement in Literature and Composition exam.
13. complete essay questions displaying a critical understanding of the play and its importance in the dramatic tradition similar to those on the Advanced Placement in Literature and Composition exam.

## Lecture Notes

### THE PLAYWRIGHT

Henrik Ibsen, Norway's preeminent dramatist, is considered a realist, dealing objectively with the problems confronting everyday people and looking at these problems without the distortions of romanticism. Ibsen was certainly a prolific dramatist; his career as a playwright lasted from 1851 until his death in 1906. Many of Ibsen's plays were written during a period of nearly 30 years when he lived and worked primarily in Italy and Germany. This long exposure to different European cultures infuses his work with a sense of the universal. Ibsen returned to Christiania (now known as Oslo) in 1891, and he lived there until his death.

Early in his career, he combined his love for poetry with his interest in drama, writing poetic dramas. *Peer Gynt* is the most notable play from this early period. Its fame has been cemented by the incidental music composed for it by Edvard Grieg, a fellow Norwegian. Ibsen's middle career, during which he wrote his most famous plays (including *A Doll's House*), showed his discomfort with and disapproval of the empty social traditions that limited mankind's success. One major theme of this period was the negative effect of treating women primarily as social ornaments or vessels. Ibsen came to believe that women should have equal rights with men and that, in fact, women had the potential to reform social institutions and create a better world. The final phase of Ibsen's work emphasizes the use of symbolism; *The Master Builder* is an example of his work from this period.

Ibsen's gravestone is carved with a hand holding a hammer. For many critics, this symbolizes Ibsen's role in tearing down old dramatic forms and subjects and rebuilding the theater with new norms and topics. Yet this summation narrows the understanding of Ibsen, who was a poet as well as a playwright, and who wrote historical dramas, satire, work with supernatural overtones, and symbolic plays as well as *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, two plays that shine a sharp light on the limited role allowed to women in Ibsen's day.

Critics often cite Ibsen as the father of modern drama because of his willingness to tackle social questions from the role of women to the negative role of social conventions (*Ghosts*) to social divisions themselves (*An Enemy of the People*). Like Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Ibsen emphasized character over plot. He recognized the power of psychological tension, both within a single character and between two characters. Ibsen's use of psychological tension is amply illustrated in *A Doll's House*, and tracing the psychological shifts of the major characters is one way of understanding the play.

Born to a middle-class family whose economic stability was threatened during his childhood, Ibsen used *A Doll's House* as one vehicle for questioning the importance—and the tyranny—of wealth. This play comes from Ibsen's middle period, when his most radical ideas were presented.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Diagram the major incidents of the play in terms of rising action.
2. Discuss the falling action of *A Doll's House*, including the secondary crisis that moved this play away from the model of the well-made play.
3. Evaluate how Ibsen departed from the concepts of the well-made play.
4. Cite examples of dramatic irony (verbal and situational) in *A Doll's House*, and explain how this device adds to the tension and movement of the play.
5. Identify a monologue by Helmer and one by Nora, and explain why each monologue is important in character revelation.
6. Analyze the character of Krogstad, including his earlier life, his initial appearance in the play, and his struggle to rise above his past.
7. Discuss the many ways in which the Helmer household—and Torvald Helmer in particular—engages in trying to keep up appearances, and predict how the ending of the play would affect him in the coming weeks.
8. Analyze and judge Mrs. Linde's actions in the context of how the play's events unfold.
9. Compare and contrast the two main characters: Torvald Helmer (is he a villain, a hero, or a man blinded by the social conventions of his time?) and Nora Helmer (is she a victim, a hero, or something in between?).
10. Discuss the theme of male dominance/female subservience as it is presented in *A Doll's House*.
11. Discuss the symbolism of the Christmas tree, the letter box, and the fancy-dress ball in the play.

# A Doll's House

## Act I

1. What does the fact that Nora pays the porter twice what she owes him suggest about Nora? What might this incident foreshadow about the play?

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2. What is the significance of the fact that Nora eats macaroons, hides the package in her pocket, and wipes the crumbs from her lips?

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3. Torvald Helmer has several pet names for Nora. What do they include, and what do they say about how he regards her?

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4. What points do Helmer and Nora each make in their first conversation about money? How does this set up a framework for future action?

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5. What does Nora's flirtatious behavior suggest about her relationship with Helmer?

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6. What literary element is used when Helmer refers to Nora's father, and what does Helmer say about the father?

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**Act II**

1. What is tormenting Nora as Act II opens?

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2. What fears does she reveal as she talks to the nurse?

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3. What is significant about Nora's account of Doctor Rank's disease?

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4. What has Mrs. Linde concluded about the source of the loan?

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5. What is Nora's reaction?

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6. When Helmer returns, what does Nora ask him to do?

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7. What reason does Helmer give for saying Krogstad cannot return to the bank?

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**Act III**

1. What exposition is given for the past relationship of Mrs. Linde and Krogstad?

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2. What idea does Mrs. Linde broach to Krogstad?

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3. How would a marriage between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad differ from the Helmer marriage, and what literary device is suggested?

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4. Why does Mrs. Linde tell Krogstad to leave his letter in the mailbox for Helmer to read?

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5. What does the fancy-dress ball symbolize?

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6. When Mrs. Linde says Nora “must tell [her] husband all about it,” Nora replies “I knew it”. What does Nora mean?

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7. Why does Ibsen include the scene in which Helmer tries to convince Mrs. Linde to take up embroidery rather than knitting?

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