

# Themes, Motifs & Symbols - A Doll's House Study Guide

## Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

### The Sacrificial Role of Women / Role of women in the society

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen paints a bleak picture of the sacrificial role held by women of all economic classes in his society. In general, the play's female characters exemplify Nora's assertion (spoken to Torvald in Act Three) that even though men refuse to sacrifice their integrity, "hundreds of thousands of women have." The following points show how women sacrifice in this society.

- In order to support her mother and two brothers, Mrs. Linde found it necessary to abandon Krogstad, her true—but penniless—love, and marry a richer man.
- The nanny had to abandon her own child to support herself by working as Nora's (and then as Nora's children's) caretaker. As she tells Nora, the nanny considers herself lucky to have found the job, since she was "a poor girl who'd been led astray."
- Though Nora is economically advantaged in comparison to the play's other female characters, she nevertheless leads a difficult life because society dictates that Torvald be the marriage's dominant partner.
- Torvald issues decrees and condescends to Nora, and Nora must hide her loan from him because she knows Torvald could never accept the idea that his wife (or any other woman) had helped save his life.
- Furthermore, she must work in secret to pay off her loan because it is illegal for a woman to obtain a loan without her husband's permission. By motivating Nora's deception, the attitudes of Torvald—and society—leave Nora vulnerable to Krogstad's blackmail.
- Nora's abandonment of her children can also be interpreted as an act of self-sacrifice. Despite Nora's great love for her children—manifested by her interaction with them and her great fear of corrupting them—she chooses to leave them. Nora truly believes that the nanny will be a better mother and that leaving her children is in their best interest.

### Parental and Filial Obligations

Nora, Torvald, and Dr. Rank each express the belief that a parent is obligated to be honest and upstanding, because a parent's immorality is passed on to his or her children like a disease. In fact, Dr. Rank does have a disease that is the result of his father's depravity. Dr. Rank implies that his father's immorality—his many affairs with women—led him to contract a venereal disease that he passed on to his son, causing Dr. Rank to suffer for his father's misdeeds. Torvald voices the idea that one's parents determine one's moral character when he tells Nora, "Nearly all young criminals had lying -mothers." He also refuses to allow Nora to interact with their children after he learns of her deceit, for fear that she will corrupt them. Yet, the play suggests that children too are obligated to protect their parents. Nora recognized this obligation, but she ignored it, choosing to be with—and sacrifice herself for—her sick husband instead of her sick father. Mrs. Linde, on the other hand, abandoned her hopes of being with Krogstad and undertook years of labor in order to tend to her sick mother. Ibsen does not pass judgment on either woman's decision, but he does use the idea of a child's debt to her parent to demonstrate the complexity and reciprocal nature of familial obligations.

### The Unreliability of Appearances

Over the course of *A Doll's House*, appearances prove to be misleading veneers that mask the reality of the play's characters and -situations. Our first impressions of Nora, Torvald, and Krogstad are all eventually undercut. Nora initially seems a silly, childish woman, but as the play progresses, we see that she is intelligent, motivated, and, by the play's conclusion, a strongwilled, independent thinker. Torvald, though he plays the part of the strong, benevolent husband, reveals himself to be cowardly, petty, and

selfish when he fears that Krogstad may expose him to scandal. Krogstad too reveals himself to be a much more sympathetic and merciful character than he first appears to be. The play's climax is largely a matter of resolving identity confusion—we see Krogstad as an earnest lover, Nora as an intelligent, brave woman, and Torvald as a simpering, sad man.

Situations too are misinterpreted both by us and by the characters. The seeming hatred between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad turns out to be love. Nora's creditor turns out to be Krogstad and not, as we and Mrs. Linde suppose, Dr. Rank. Dr. Rank, to Nora's and our surprise, confesses that he is in love with her. The seemingly villainous Krogstad repents and returns Nora's contract to her, while the seemingly kindhearted Mrs. Linde ceases to help Nora and forces Torvald's discovery of Nora's secret.

The instability of appearances within the Helmer household at the play's end results from Torvald's devotion to an image at the expense of the creation of true happiness. Because Torvald craves respect from his employees, friends, and wife, status and image are important to him. Any disrespect—when Nora calls him petty and when Krogstad calls him by his first name, for example—angers Torvald greatly. By the end of the play, we see that Torvald's obsession with controlling his home's appearance and his repeated suppression and denial of reality have harmed his family and his happiness irreparably.

## **Marriage as an Unequal Partnership**

At the heart of *A Doll's House* is the marriage between Nora and Torvald—one fairly typical of the era. Is it a good or exemplary marriage? Is it an equitable relationship for the woman?

A close analysis of the dialogue shows a very unequal relationship with Torvald holding all the power. In fact, the interactions between husband and wife serve a specific purpose: they illustrate the banality of the discourse between the two. Torvald does not address his wife regarding any subject of substance. Instead, he bestows her with pet names that often begin with the personal pronoun "my" and often include the diminutive "little": "Is that my little lark?" In this respect, Torvald may think he is flattering his wife. However, he is actually reducing her to a cute, harmless pet—one that is clearly owned.

And like a pet, Nora is expected to obey her owner/husband and his petty tyrannical rules: she is forbidden from eating macaroons and must do so on the sly—which she clearly resents. Additionally, when Torvald addresses Nora, he belittles her by constantly bringing up her lack of responsibility with money. Depending on the translation, Nora is "spendthrift," "prodigal" and "little moneybags." All of these terms, spoken affectionately, are passively aggressive.

*A Doll's House* has few stage directions indicating tone of voice, so there is a great deal of freedom in the manner in which the actor can play the part Torvald. He can be played like a patriarchal tyrant or a fatuous, passive-aggressive sexist. The second option is, perhaps, the better choice; Torvald's utter obliviousness to his own oppressive behavior is a driving force in the play. He berates his wife for knowing nothing about worldly matters but, ultimately, is himself unaware of the measures she has taken to save his life. Torvald is so self-centered that he continues to see his wife how he wants her to be or how she fails to be his ideal woman; he never sees the actual woman she is.

## **Materialism**

Torvald in particular focuses on money and material goods rather than people. His sense of manhood depends on his financial independence. He was an unsuccessful barrister because he refused to take "unsavory cases." As a result, he switched jobs to the bank, where he primarily deals with money. For him, money and materialism may be a way to avoid the complications of personal contact.

## **Respect and Reputation**

The men of *A Doll's House* are obsessed with their reputation. Some have good standing in their communities and will do anything to keep it; others have lost their good name and will do anything to get it back. Though the play is set in the living room of a private residence, the public eye is constantly peeking through the curtains.

## **Disease and Morality**

Dr. Rank has inherited his consumption from his father, who lived a morally questionable life, and in much the same way, Nora worries that her morally reprehensible actions (fraudulently signing her father's name) will infect her children. Corruption, the play suggests, is hereditary. As he does in other plays, such as *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen explores the tension between real life and moral ideals.

## Higher Moral Values vs. Societal Mores and Laws

As Nora reveals to Mrs. Linde, she faced a moral crisis at the beginning of her marriage. Unable to procure, in a legal manner, the funds needed to save her husband's life, she resorts to forging her father's name as guarantor of the loan. She places her love and concern for her husband's well-being above the law. Since she diligently works to pay back the loan, the offense does not seem so severe; it is a crime in definition only. In a higher sense, Nora has not acted in an immoral manner.

However, those who adhere to societal standards, like her husband, ultimately have different values. Torvald values social respectability and honor above all else, including actions done out of love. Nora values love over social honor. Consequently, a conflict emerges regarding their prioritization of values.

## The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living

This paraphrase to a Socrates aphorism applies to Torvald and Nora. However, Nora eventually stops to look at herself and her marriage and doesn't like what she sees. So she steps out of her old persona and into a new one, and then walks into an uncertain future. She has begun examining her life.

## Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

## Nora's Definition of Freedom

Nora's understanding of the meaning of freedom evolves over the course of the play. In the first act, she believes that she will be totally "free" as soon as she has repaid her debt, because she will have the opportunity to devote herself fully to her domestic responsibilities. After Krogstad blackmails her, however, she reconsiders her conception of freedom and questions whether she is happy in Torvald's house, subjected to his orders and edicts. By the end of the play, Nora seeks a new kind of freedom. She wishes to be relieved of her familial obligations in order to pursue her own ambitions, beliefs, and identity.

## Letters

Many of the plot's twists and turns depend upon the writing and reading of letters, which function within the play as the subtext that reveals the true, unpleasant nature of situations obscured by Torvald and Nora's efforts at beautification. Krogstad writes two letters: the first reveals Nora's crime of forgery to Torvald; the second retracts his blackmail threat and returns Nora's promissory note. The first letter, which Krogstad places in Torvald's letterbox near the end of Act Two, represents the truth about Nora's past and initiates the inevitable dissolution of her marriage—as Nora says immediately after Krogstad leaves it, "We are lost." Nora's attempts to stall Torvald from reading the letter represent her continued denial of the true nature of her marriage. The second letter releases Nora from her obligation to Krogstad and represents her release from her obligation to Torvald. Upon reading it, Torvald attempts to return to his and Nora's previous denial of reality, but Nora recognizes that the letters have done more than expose her actions to Torvald; they have exposed the truth about Torvald's selfishness, and she can no longer participate in the illusion of a happy marriage.

Dr. Rank's method of communicating his imminent death is to leave his calling card marked with a black cross in Torvald's letterbox. In an earlier conversation with Nora, Dr. Rank reveals his understanding of Torvald's unwillingness to accept reality when he proclaims, "Torvald is so fastidious, he cannot face up to -anything ugly." By leaving his calling card as a death notice, Dr. Rank politely attempts to keep Torvald from the "ugly" truth. Other letters include Mrs. Linde's note to Krogstad, which initiates her -life-changing meeting with him, and Torvald's letter of dismissal to Krogstad.

## Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

### The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree, a festive object meant to serve a decorative purpose, symbolizes Nora's position in her household as a plaything who is pleasing to look at and adds charm to the home. There are several parallels drawn between Nora and the Christmas tree in the play. Just as Nora instructs the maid that the children cannot see the tree until it has been decorated, she tells Torvald that no one can see her in her dress until the evening of the dance. Also, at the beginning of the second act, after Nora's psychological condition has begun to erode, the stage directions indicate that the Christmas tree is correspondingly "dishevelled."

### New Year's Day

The action of the play is set at Christmastime, and Nora and Torvald both look forward to New Year's as the start of a new, happier phase in their lives. In the new year, Torvald will start his new job, and he anticipates with excitement the extra money and admiration the job will bring him. Nora also looks forward to Torvald's new job, because she will finally be able to repay her secret debt to Krogstad. By the end of the play, however, the nature of the new start that New Year's represents for Torvald and Nora has changed dramatically. They both must become new people and face radically changed ways of living. Hence, the new year comes to mark the beginning of a truly new and different period in both their lives and their personalities.

### Dress and Costume

Nora's fancy dress for the party symbolizes the character she plays in her marriage to Torvald. Take note of when Nora is supposed to be wearing it and for whom. Note too that when she leaves Torvald in the last act, she first changes into different clothes, which suggests the new woman she is to become.

### The Masquerade Ball

The masquerade ball that Torvald and Nora attend represents the lies and deceit that people resort to in everyday life. At a masquerade, people hide behind masks. Their true selves cannot be seen through the costume. Nora is hiding behind a mask of lies, keeping the truth from her husband and Dr. Rank. She is pretending and "playing a part" much like people do at a masquerade ball. It is not long after the ball that the mask comes off and the truth is revealed.

### The Tarantella

A tarantella is a folk dance from southern Italy that accelerates from its already quick tempo and alternates between major and minor keys. In its constant fluctuation, it is like Nora's character. In this Act, it serves as Nora's last chance to be Torvald's doll, to dance and amuse him. Also, the tarantella is commonly (and falsely) known as a dance that is supposed to rid the dancer of the bite of the tarantula. Applied to the play, its use suggests that Nora is trying to rid herself of the deadly poison of an outside force, however fruitlessly. Rather than alleviating the bite, though, the music and her life only continue to accelerate and spin out of control.