

# Courage and cowardice in a doll's house

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All successful drama consists of conflict, whether between or within characters. Henrik Ibsen's work, *A Doll's House* is no exception. Ibsen's play studies Nora's early courage and her confirmation of that courage at the end of the play. Nora's strength of character in forging her father's signature on a loan, and the repercussions of that act, provide much of the driving force for the drama. But Nora's great choice remains until the last act. She speaks of "the most wonderful thing," she has countless opportunities to escape from her dilemma through the assistance of Krogstad or Rank, but it is not until the final pages of Act IV that her final decision, and that resounding door slam, emphasize Nora's final courageous choice to leave her husband and unhealthy marriage. If *A Doll's House* takes an early act of courage as its driving force, its successor, *Ghosts*, uses one of cowardice. Mrs. Alving's early failure to reveal her husband's true character and actions to his children provides the "tragic flaw" for the only play Ibsen described as a "Tragedy." Much of the action in this play -- Oswald's depression and disastrous love for Regine -- stems from that early decision. Mrs. Alving spends much of the first two acts agonizing over her early cowardice -- "if we only had the courage to sweep [the ghosts] all out and let in the light!" Mrs. Alving at last brings herself to tell Oswald the truth about his father, but by then it is too late. Her son is dying, and, bereft of any other company, relies on her to help him end his misery. And the curtain slowly closes on Mrs. Alving, still in agony in the cowardice of indecision, as irresolute and uncertain at the end as she was in the beginning. *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen's next play, tries a slightly different tack. Here the motivating incident -- Dr. Stockmann's courageous decision to reveal that the baths are poisoned

-- appears during the first act, rather than before the opening curtain. The rest of the play consists of a series of battles between Stockmann and those who would draw him back to cowardice, to keeping the danger a secret. The mayor blusters and threatens him, Aslaksen's timidity over angering those in power gets in the way, Stockmann's wife advises him " there's so much injustice in the world -- one must just put up with it," his father-in-law, Morten Kiil, tries to blackmail him, and even Hovstad and Billing, the bastions of the liberal press, fall prey to the cowardice that infects the entire community. Stockmann does not make so much one great decision, as the hero does in Ibsen's other plays, as several smaller ones, leading to his and Petra's general spirit of courage and resolution at the end of Act V. One of Ibsen's later plays, Hedda Gabler, returns to the usual pattern. The first few acts reveal Hedda's prior history as one of cowardice -- she was jealous of Thea, because Thea has the love for life Hedda cannot bring herself to feel; she broke off with Lovborg because, as he says and she admits, she is " a coward at heart." Hedda is unwilling, or rather afraid, to have a child: " No responsibilities for me!" she tells Judge Brack. " Courage! If one only had that... then life might perhaps be endurable, after all...." she admits. She has none, and her life does indeed prove unendurable. Hedda's suicide is the last expression of her cowardice, her fear of, rather than joy in, life. Ibsen's plays are studies in the conflict of courage and cowardice. His main characters choose one or the other, and then are relentlessly hounded by the consequences of that decision, forced to reinforce their choice again and again. Each play builds on half of the pair, whether it be courage in A Doll's House and An Enemy of the People or cowardice in Ghosts and Hedda

Gabler, though the other half always makes inroads, trying to swerve the characters' course. It is Ibsen's talent at setting up these conflicts and posing the difficulties that make him a great dramatist.