

# Realism and Ibsen's A Doll's House essay

Life



Ibsen: Keeping it Real Since 1879 Realism is a style of writing in which the author strays away from romance and fantasy and leans toward the everyday life of real people and the negative aspects of their lives. The Norwegian author Henrik Ibsen captures the true essence of realism in his famously controversial play *A Doll's House*. Nora is an idealistic wife who bows down to her husband's commands and fulfills his every wish. When Torvald, her husband, fell sick she did everything she could to save his life, going as far as forging her dead father's signature to receive money to pay for their trip to Italy for better health care.

The story takes place during Christmas time, where Nora is now forced to come to terms with the crime she has committed once Krogstad, the man at the bank who gave Nora the money she needed, reveals to her his plan to tell Torvald about her forgery. *A Doll's House* is a perfect example of realism, containing many of the key elements of this genre. Ibsen highlights the forced role of women, the deceptive appearances people use to hide their troubles behind, and uses a realist form and style of writing.

Understanding the realism genre of literature allows the reader to enjoy a style of writing in which they can relate to and find comfort in, knowing that someone, somewhere, sometime experienced exactly what they themselves are going through. Like many women of her time, Nora has to forget about her own wants and ideas and put on the role a woman must play to please the people around her. Torvald constantly is putting Nora in her place. When Torvald comes home one afternoon he finds Nora sitting surrounded with bags from her trip to town.

He reprimands her about her spending habits before comforting her, saying, " Now, now, my little song-bird mustn't be so crestfallen. Well? Is the squirrel sulking? " (Ibsen 149). Torvald is trying to console his wife while also belittling her by using endearing terms. In reality, his words make Nora feel controlled and repressed. Ibsen wants his audience to see that by demeaning Nora, Torvald is trying to get her to mold to the role of a submissive wife who will listen to her husband as if he were her father.

Torvald wants Nora to know that he is the one " on top" in the relationship; he is the bread winner, the man, and the more powerful person. He is always trying to suppress Nora and keep her dominance over him at bay. Not only must women be submissive to their husbands but they were expected to be obedient to him as well. Torvald is always telling this wife not to eat her favorite treat, macaroons, because her teeth will rot and fall out. When Nora buys the dessert in town, she hides them from Torvald. She lies to him when he asks if the thought crossed her mind that day to stop and get a treat.

Nora tells her husband, " No, Torvald really; I promise you... I wouldn't do anything that you don't like" (Ibsen 151). Nora is afraid of contradicting Torvald's word and promises to him she would never do anything to go against him. Instead of being her husband's equal Nora feels as if she were a child. Ibsen depicts Nora's marriage as a relationship between a father and his child instead of a husband and his wife and mother of his young children. Torvald treats Nora like a little girl who cannot make her own decisions. She is forced to play this role of a child her whole life; first under her own father's roof and now under Torvald's.

The forced roles of women were enforced in society, as well as the idea of keeping one's flaws concealed from the outside world. Deceptive appearances hide the troubles and pain Nora and Torvald both go through during the play. Mrs. Linde, Nora's longtime friend, comes over to the Helmer household. Nora and her are chatting about New Year's plans when Nora says, "Look, the people upstairs, the Stenborgs, are having a fancy-dress party tomorrow night, and Torvald wants me to go as a Neopolitan fisher-girl and dance the tarantella that I learnt in Capri" (Ibsen 183). Nora tells Mrs. Linde that her and Torvald plan on attending a masquerade party in which she will be dressing up to perform the tarantella as her husband had told her to. Ibsen is telling the reader that people hide behind clothes and masks to hide the hurt and pain going on in their own life, so as to please society and their own friends. Nora is suffering from an internal crisis and she is forced to dress up and go to the party so that her friends do not suspect anything is wrong with her. Torvald being the "doll player" that he is, controls Nora and basically forces her to put up a front for the world to see.

He never sees Nora's misery the week leading up to the revelation of Nora's crime because she has been taught to hide the pain so well. Along with hiding from society, one must fulfill all its demanding expectations. When Torvald reads the letter from Krogstad revealing Nora's forgery, he is enraged. He screams at Nora and tells her she can have no influence over the children and he loves her no longer. Then he remembers what others will think about this situation and says, "Somehow or other I must try to appease him- the thing must be hushed up at all costs."

As for ourselves- we must seem to go on just as before... but only in the eyes of the world of course" (Ibsen 221). Torvald is only concerned about keeping Krogstad quiet and the outside world remaining in the dark about his troubled marriage. He tells Nora they must continue on with life outside as it was before but once inside the house, it all does not matter; he could not care less. Ibsen communicates that along with wearing deceptive appearances, those who want to be accepted, like Torvald, must bow down to society's expectations.

These expectations include maintaining a perfect marriage, raising the children properly, and not allowing your wife to overpower you. Torvald's only concern is to keep the peace, for the sake of his own last name. He does not care about Nora any longer. He only cares about keeping himself and his reputation safe. Along with outlining some of the key elements of the real world and the society one lives in, Ibsen uses a realistic style of writing. Staying true to realism literature, Ibsen uses a realistic form and style while writing A Doll's House.

On the first page of the play, one can find a detailed description of the set including, "A comfortable room, furnished inexpensively, but with taste. In the back wall there are two doors; that to the right leads out to a hall, the other, to the left, leads to Helmer's study. Between them stands a piano" (Ibsen 147). A long list of props precludes all of the acts of the play. Ibsen uses this detailed list of props to bring a sense of reality to his play. He allows the audience to feel as if they truly are sitting in the Helmers' living room watching Nora fall prey to her husband.

It allows one to sink completely in the story and become a part of it all. One of Ibsen's viewers could easily identify with the characters seeing that they lived in the same middle class home and neighborhood as they themselves do. Ibsen also was able to identify with his audience by using a simplistic writing style. When talking to Nora about her children, the children's nanny says, "The poor little mites are playing with their presents, but-" (Ibsen 181). The nurse speaks in a common, simple language.

Unlike previous writing styles, realism uses everyday common language and interrupted thoughts, run on sentences, and expressions. Ibsen used this style of writing, again, to identify with the audience he was presenting to. His works were seen by middle class citizens, who were used to working hard long hours in filthy conditions. These people were not spending their days eating cakes and playing chess. They spoke in a ruffe-free, basic language, which is exactly the language Ibsen adopted for his realist play.

Ibsen exposed to his audience to a new view of the very lives they were living by using this form of writing. Although Ibsen was not showing his audience anything new, he presented them their most inner secrets they kept hidden and shoved them in their own faces. Ibsen highlighted the role women were taught to play, the deceptive appearances the people wore daily, and expressed these ideas using the people's realistic style of speech. Ibsen was a writer for the people of the 1800s, but his works are treasured and applicable even in today's world. ALL QUOTES DIRECTLY FROM A DOLL'S HOUSE