

# Comparing a dolls house to the gospel according to mark essay samples

[War](#), [Intelligence](#)



Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* tells the story of a young couple – Nora and Torvald – focusing on Nora's increasing dissatisfaction with her husband and her life. This results in a searing, gritty contemporary drama that seeks to shake up the prevailing wisdom of the time with regards to societal expectations of women. Conversely, Juan Luis Borges' short story "The Gospel According to Mark," in which a young medical student starts reading the Bible to an illiterate family at a farm, deals primarily with issues of authority, culture and religion. Despite these seeming differences, both stories have some surprising similarities; both Nora and Espinosa (the student of Borges' story) find themselves trapped and stifled under the weight of the social conditions in which they live. However, whereas Nora's cage is that of patriarchal ideas of feminine submission to their husbands, Espinosa's cage is the indifference and inability to communicate to his fellow man, as well as his conflicting relationship with religion. In many ways, both of these characters find unhappiness in their social situations.

Henrik Ibsen's play is titled *A Doll's House* for good reason; Nora, as a character, is treated less like a person and more like a plaything for Torvald, a symbol of his status in high society. Despite Nora's inner strength and desires, she is meant to stay in their immaculately kept home, waiting on hand and foot for Torvald's next order. Nora, in effect, is just another heirloom to keep around the house and admire. Torvald's constant use of pet names ("skylark", "singing bird") continues to dehumanize Nora and place her in the status of object to be worshipped. Because of this central relationship of Nora to her surroundings, the audience notices how oppressive the society in which she lives can be.

Misunderstandings pervade both stories – while Nora’s intelligence is underestimated, Espinosa’s is overestimated, or perhaps misunderstood. Nora is shown to be a highly intelligent woman, which is what makes her oppressive situation even more frustrating. She often finds herself questioning the prevailing wisdom of the time, even going so far as to question Mrs. Linde about her loveless marriage: “ Tell me, is it really true that you did not love your husband? Why did you marry him?” (Ibsen, Act I). This demonstrates her dissatisfaction with where she is, which is unsurprising since women were not allowed to do anything except raise a family and take care of the home.

Espinosa, on the other hand, shows the contradictory nature of intelligence; while he is smart, he is often too smart for his own good, Borges criticizing his continental perspective: “ Owing to an acquiescent nature, he was full of opinions, or habits of mind, that were questionable” (Borges). Like Nora, Espinosa constantly dreams of a life outside where he is, believing that the grass is greener on the other side, but unlike Nora he is constantly going different places, never finding solace in any of them: “ Strangely enough, he missed places he never frequented and never would” (Borges). This showcases a nomadic, dissatisfied and disaffected main character who is clearly too apathetic and provincial for his own good. Espinosa’s other failure is his inability to understand or properly respect the intentions of the Gutres; not fully comprehending what he is telling them by reading from the Gospel of Mark, the Gutres eventually crucify him as per his design: “ The shed was without a roof; they had pulled down the beams to make the cross” (Borges). In this way, he becomes a Christ figure of his own – the man who comes

down and teaches them about the way the world works, and subsequently dies on the cross.

Apart from the two characters' suffering, they could not be more different; Nora suffers under incredibly stifling societal conditions, while Espinosa squanders the privilege that he has by feeling ungrateful and out of place with the illiterate Gutres. During his time there, his modern attitudes and secular upbringing merely bring him unhappiness and disrupts the peaceful ignorance of the Gutres – he sleeps with their daughter, a painful and awkward moment that does not seem to bring to them any particular solace. However, he does not fully belong there, believing that he is merely visiting, performing a kind of poverty tourism – he plays at growing a beard and thinks about how much his friends would be impressed at this new set of stories about the exotic country. Nora, on the other hand, absolutely deserves to benefit from a more equal society – she has the cunning and intelligence to be socially successful, but is relegated to unsatisfying domestic duties because of what men think women are good for in cosmopolitan society.

Espinosa's blasé attitude toward religion plays into his patronizing attitude towards the Gutres; their use of his readings to substitute their faith seems strange and savage to him: " They lacked any religious faith, but there survived in their blood, like faint tracks, the rigid fanaticism of the Calvinist and the superstitions of the pampa Indian" (Borges). As they attempt to understand the nature of Christ, Espinosa accidentally signs his own death warrant by inadvertently giving the Gutres permission to kill him in exchange for finding mercy: "'And the Roman soldiers who hammered in the nails --

were they saved, too?' ' Yes,' said Espinosa, whose theology was rather dim.' (Borges). In this way, Espinosa's intelligence is belied by his dimwittedness and shortsightedness, a far cry from Nora's intelligence and strong-willed nature.

While Espinosa accidentally brings about his death due to his ignorant insertion of religion into the lives of the Gutres, Nora is fully aware of her effects on others. One recurring theme in *A Doll's House* is Nora lying to Torvald about what she is doing. From big lies to small lies, Nora deceives Torvald at every step – both as part of her desire to play the good wife and keep him from bad news, and to rebel in whatever small way she can against her oppressive marriage (Yuehua, 2009). She forges Torvald's name to a document to acquire a loan from Krogstad, a rebellious move that she makes out of necessity and to spare Torvald from losing his pride. Throughout her hiding of this secret, Nora becomes increasingly disillusioned with the men around her, including Torvald and Krogstad, believing them to be dimwits who value their own honor over behaving respectably or equally.

In the end, both characters are incredibly sacrificial figures, who end up suffering for the sins of others. Nora's marriage to Torvald is one long suffering for the sake of a marriage (and the pride of her childish husband); she endures it until she can no longer, and opts to get out of her life with Torvald in order to seek out a new life of potentially greater happiness. Espinosa, meanwhile, happens upon his sacrifice entirely by accident – his is an ending born of cruel fate, as he accidentally introduces the ideas of martyrdom and sacrifice from on high to an impressionable group of illiterate farmers who believe that killing and crucifying him will bring about their

salvation (Kefala 343). By underestimating the effects he has on them, he ends up suffering for their ultimate good (the feeling of release they will get from his death).

In conclusion, the journeys of both Nora and Espinosa in their respective stories have surprising similarities, yet fundamental differences. Both characters are on journeys of self-discovery, attempting to figure out who they are in a world they do not quite fit into. However, whereas Nora is attempting to free herself from the shackles of male domination and oppression, Espinoza recklessly involves himself in the workings of an illiterate family upon which he imparts too much misinformation and poorly-placed wisdom. The end results for both characters are also decidedly different; Nora suffers social stigma for the bold chance at starting a new life, while Espinosa is put to death by a gleeful family that does not know what they are doing. These characters are outsiders in the world around them, but their awareness, intelligence and virtue take them to substantially different places in the end.

## Works Cited

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