

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Doll's House

by  
Henrik Ibsen

### Book Information

Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*  
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The story of Nora and her husband, Torvald, is told just as the secret Nora has been hiding for years is finally revealed. In the process, Nora discovers her importance as a person.

**Topics:** Arts, Theater/Plays; Character Traits, Self Improvement; Emotions, Love; Family Life, Money Crisis; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

### Main Characters

Christine Linde an old school friend of Nora whose harsh life experiences enable her to act as a confidante

Dr. Rank an ailing family friend of Torvald and Nora who is secretly in love with Nora

Nils Krogstad a corrupt employee at Torvald's bank who uses his previous business with Nora to blackmail her

Nora the beautiful and complex wife of Torvald, who believes that her efforts to please others is one of her most admirable traits

Torvald Helmer the self-centered husband of Nora, who is employed as a bank manager

### Vocabulary

**bedridden** a state of ill health so severe that it prevents a person from being able to leave bed

**consent** permission

**indiscretion** a moral violation

**precarious** unstable or dangerous

**pretense** acting a part in order to make it seem that one is something other than what one actually is

**spendthrift** someone who recklessly spends money

### Synopsis

*A Doll's House* tells the tale of Nora, a young housewife and mother who defines herself through her husband's expectations of womanhood. Her true nature is revealed when an old friend, Christine Linde, comes to visit.

Christine has fallen on hard times and asks Nora to use her influence to get Christine a job at the bank at which Torvald, Nora's husband, has just been made manager. When Nora boasts to Christine about how easy life will be now that Torvald will be making so much money, Christine becomes annoyed. She has spent the last few years struggling to support her mother and two young brothers after her marriage of convenience ended when her husband died and left her penniless. She accuses Nora of being a spendthrift, a criticism that Nora routinely accepts from her husband. Nora good-naturedly tells her that she has spent the years struggling secretly to pay off the loan she procured when Torvald was ill and needed a change of climate in order to regain his health. Their discussion of Nora's suffering is cut short when Torvald's friend and Nora's secret admirer, the terminally ill Dr. Rank, joins them.

Meanwhile, Torvald is busy in his study listening to a bank employee with a questionable reputation plead for his job. Nils Krogstad is a desperate man who is being pushed to the edge by Torvald's decision to remove him from the bank. After Krogstad and Nora's guests leave, Krogstad comes to ask Nora to speak on his behalf. He is the one responsible for getting Nora the loan, and he knows that Nora fraudulently signed her father's name on the document because she did not want to upset her father, who was dying. He threatens to expose her secret criminal act to Torvald and the public in a manner that will destroy both her and Torvald's career.

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She is reluctant to upset Torvald by admitting her crime, but she also believes that Torvald will jump at the opportunity to sacrifice himself in order to protect her. She is frightened by the possible consequences of Krogstad's blackmail, but at the same time, she feels a secret excitement that her husband will make such a painful sacrifice for her. She asks Torvald to spare Krogstad, but she refuses to reveal her secret to influence Torvald's decision. Torvald dismisses Nora's assertion that Krogstad deserves a chance because he says that he cannot bear Krogstad's breach of character.

Nora considers asking Dr. Rank for the money to pay off the loan, but she realizes this is inappropriate when Dr. Rank openly expresses his love for her.

When Nora tells Krogstad that she can do nothing to help him, he leaves an incriminating letter in Torvald's letterbox intending to expose her actions. Nora decides to spend the next day and a half satisfying Torvald's every whim in an effort to distract him from the letterbox long enough for them to share the time together in self-delusional bliss. She does this by promising to perform a dance Torvald likes at an upcoming party and by encouraging Torvald to satisfy his ego by spending the evening correcting her dance technique.

During the party, Christine arranges a meeting with Krogstad. She and Krogstad were once engaged; it was her dissolution of the engagement that led to Krogstad's decline. After reestablishing their romantic relationship, Christine dissuades Krogstad from reclaiming his letter because she feels Nora and Torvald need to discuss the situation in order to create an open and honest relationship.

The play comes to its climax when Torvald finally reads the letter and rejects Nora as his wife because he feels she is morally bankrupt. A reformed Krogstad sends Nora the loan papers to cancel the debt as Torvald is outlining his intended restriction of her role as mother and wife. When Torvald realizes that Krogstad is not going to blackmail them any

further, he tells Nora he forgives her. At this point, Nora realizes that Torvald had never intended to make any sacrifices on her behalf as she did for him. She realizes he has been treating her as a possession or a "doll" and she needs to leave him to claim her identity and independence.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Nils Krogstad may be the most complicated character in this play. He seems to play the role of villain with a great deal of reluctance and jumps at the chance to redeem himself when it is offered to him. Why does Krogstad take so long to tell Torvald of Nora's secret? Why does he urge her to tell Torvald herself?

*Ibsen shows that Krogstad is aware of Torvald's weakness of character when he tells Nora that he knows from his school days with Torvald that Torvald is not "unassailable." He seems fairly certain that Torvald will buckle once he knows that his reputation is at stake, but he does not really want to harm Nora. He believes that Torvald will be more understanding if Nora confesses her crime to Torvald. He does not really want to play the villain and hopes that Nora will spare him the need to act upon his threat. After realizing that he no longer wants to blackmail Torvald, his first reaction is to want to reclaim his letter.*

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#### Literary Analysis

Throughout the play Ibsen gives many clues to suggest that Torvald is not quite the noble creature Nora has envisioned him to be. How does Ibsen show that Nora's faith is ill conceived?

*Hidden in the high-minded speeches Torvald is so fond of making are often brief statements which reveal his true character. For instance, Torvald admits that the main reason he insists upon Krogstad's dismissal is the fact that Krogstad was once his friend and feels free to address Torvald as his equal. Torvald's willingness to destroy a former friend simply because he makes him feel uncomfortable shows that Torvald is more interested in protecting his own image than he is in protecting others.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

On the surface, Nora and Christine seem to have led very different lives. Nora married for love, while Christine married for financial stability. Christine has had to support herself for many years while Nora has led a very dependent life. Nora prides herself on being beautiful, while Christine prides herself on being useful. Despite these differences, they are both very similar. How are they alike?

*Both Christine and Nora have dedicated their lives to their families. Christine was willing to marry a man she did not love in order to help her mother and brothers. Nora was willing to play an external role that did not match her internal personality so that she could live up to her husband's ideal of a happy home life. Both women come to the realization that they have stunted themselves and those they loved by sacrificing too much for others. At the end of the play they are attempting to amend their self-abasing tendencies and find true happiness.*

#### Constructing Meaning

How does the reader know that Nora is acting a part when she is around Torvald?

*Nora acts differently around Torvald than she does around other people. She plays the fool when Torvald asks her where the money goes and calls her a spendthrift, but when Christine makes the same accusation she corrects her. She openly bases her actions on Torvald's opinions. She asks him to choose her clothes, pretends to abstain from eating sweets, and keeps the household the way he likes it to be. But when she is alone with Dr. Rank or Christine, she does not defer to them. Instead she tells her own stories, eats what she wants, and expresses her own opinions.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** To a modern reader, the relationship between Nora and Torvald may seem very strange. Have the students discuss the differences between the treatment of women in the nineteenth century and their treatment in current Western culture. Is the situation of women completely different, or are there some similarities?

**Recognizing Plot** The fortune of Ibsen's characters shift dramatically in this play. In order to give the students a greater understanding of the plots and subplots in *A Doll's House*, have them explore the growth or decline of the characters. Give each student a sheet of graph paper and have him or her show how each of the main characters rises or falls throughout the play. Then, have them write a brief explanation of their chart.

**Making Predictions** At the end of *A Doll's House*, Nora and Torvald are faced with the dissolution of their comfortable life. Nora leaves to establish her identity, and Torvald must decide whether he is willing to change in order to win Nora back. Have the students write a short story about the lives of one or both of these characters one year past the end of the play. Where do they see the characters going? Do they believe that Nora will

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stick to her resolution to leave Torvald? Do they think Torvald will reconsider his attitudes toward women? Is there any hope of this couple being happily reunited?

**Responding to Literature** It is often difficult for a reader to grasp the full impact of a play until they see it acted out. Have the students write a brief account of their response to this play, then have the students watch a taped production of this play. Have them discuss whether their response to the play is different after they have seen it performed.