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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Henrik Ibsen's

A Doll's House

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *A Doll's House*

A *DOLL'S HOUSE*, PUBLISHED IN 1879, is a play about Nora Helmer, who committed forgery to obtain the money needed to take a trip that would restore her husband to health. A domestic drama, *A Doll's House* explores the relationship between Nora and her husband, the limited social choices available to women, and the roles and expectations placed on women by society in general.

Like many modern dramas, the central character is called the protagonist rather than the hero or heroine. This designation recognizes the faults that are integral to every human and suggests that each character struggles in some way against his or her own personal limitations and against the accepted social order.

The play is told in a series of events that can be charted in terms of **rising action** (events or revelations that add urgency and tension to the plot), **subplots** (events or revelations that are detours from the main plot even as they add interest or richness to the play), the **climax** (the central point of conflict or revelation), **falling action** (events that help resolve the conflict), and **resolution** (completion of the dramatic action).

One important development in *A Doll's House* is Ibsen's departure from the convention of having the resolution follow the climax without complications between the two. Instead, Ibsen surprises the audience by adding a major new development: Nora asserts her independence and dictates terms to her husband.

Feminist Theory Applied to *A Doll's House*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

Activity One

Examining the Relationship Between Nora Helmer and Torvald Helmer

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following key scenes and discuss how they compare the speeches, language, and stage directions Ibsen wrote for Nora and Helmer:
 - Act I: Pages 12-15. Note use of nicknames by Helmer, suggested body language for Nora, and the themes of their conversation.
 - Act I: Pages 35-38. Note Helmer's questioning of Nora and, again, suggested body language for her.
 - Act II: Pages 44-47 (until the entrance of Doctor Rank). Note Nora's persistence and how she approaches the subject of Krogstad and his job; note differences in tone between Nora and Helmer.
 - Act III: Pages 67 (after the exit of Mrs. Linde)-68 (until the entrance of Doctor Rank). Note what this scene reveals about how sensuality affects and is played out in the marriage of Helmer and Nora and how sensuality affects the balance of power in the marriage.
 - Act III: Pages 72-73. Note who has the most to say and, thus, dominates the conversation.
 - Act III: Pages 75 (beginning with NORA: "It is not so very late.") – Page 80. Note who says the most in this scene and the complexity of what is said, especially in comparison with earlier scenes.

Points of comparison:

- How does Helmer's use of nicknames for Nora classify her in their relationship?
- What does the use of body language convey about Nora's methods of dealing with Helmer? Why might she depend on physical (rather than mental or verbal) responses to Helmer?
- Who speaks more directly in Act I? Who speaks more directly in Act II? Who speaks more directly in Act III? What does this convey to the reader?
- How does each character conform to the stereotypes of male and female/man and wife for the period in which the play occurs (the play was published in 1897)?
- What, if anything, does Ibsen's use of language in the development and portrayal of these characters say about his feelings toward (and intentions for) those characters?
- How do Ibsen's stage directions reinforce Nora's character and emphasize the methods she has developed for interacting with Helmer?
- How does Nora's guilt influence her actions?

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *A Doll's House*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Contrasting the Influence of Doctor Rank and Krogstad on Helmer

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following key scenes and paraphrase or outline the essential exchanges between Helmer and Doctor Rank and Helmer and Krogstad.
 - Act I, pages 24 (top of page) – 26 (bottom of page)
 - Act I, pages 35 (top of page) – 37 (middle of page)
 - Act II, pages 47 (bottom of page) – 48 (middle of page)
 - Act III, pages 68 (middle of page) – 70 (middle of page)

For consideration:

1. What is Nora's initial reaction to the realization that Helmer has power over Krogstad at the bank (p. 26)? What is unusual or unexpected about this reaction? What would be a more "appropriate" reaction? How does the audience come to understand the irony of her initial reaction?
2. What is Helmer's immediate reaction when he learns that Krogstad has asked Nora to intercede for him (p. 35)? How does this begin to establish Krogstad's character? What does it reveal about Helmer? Does Helmer change his mind about Krogstad? What does this say about Helmer?
3. In Act I, Doctor Rank refers to Krogstad as having a "diseased moral character" (p. 25). How does this affect the way the audience reacts to Krogstad? How does it affect the way other characters react to him? How does the comment affect Nora?
4. What does Doctor Rank confide in Act II about his own health? What does he say about his future and his relationship with Helmer? What does this tell the audience about Helmer? How does Helmer's character limit the fullness of his relationship with Doctor Rank?
5. What is Helmer's initial reaction to Doctor Rank's visit after the party? How does he change his behavior in the course of the visit? What does this scene reveal about Helmer's id, his superego, and his ego?
6. What element of Helmer's psychological construct does Krogstad parallel?

New Historicism Applied to *A Doll's House*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture, is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Examining *A Doll's House* as A Commentary on Domestic Life in the Late Nineteenth Century

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the text and list the key scenes in which the action or dialogue offer information on domestic life in the late nineteenth century.
2. Then have them answer the following questions:
 - What does the play observe about domestic life: that is, how a household operates, makes decisions about spending, allocates responsibility and work, and how its members interact?
 - What judgments, if any, does the play impart about domestic life as portrayed in this period?
 - What evidence is there, if any, that the problems in the Helmer household could also be problems in the larger society?
 - How are the servants, as the less powerful members of the household, represented—are they treated with respect? Are they differentiated from one another or are they somewhat anonymous and interchangeable?
 - What does the play reveal about the role of children in a household in the late nineteenth century?
3. Reconvene the class and discuss the view of late-nineteenth-century Norwegian society that is provided by the play. Consider whether this is a view provided by a supporter of the society or by a discontent. What impact does Ibsen intend for his portrayal of his society to have on his audience?