
UNIT 15 THEMES AND CHARACTERISATION

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

In this last unit on *A Doll's House* when we have concluded our study of the text, we shall take an overall view of the play. By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the development of all the major characters;
- discuss whether or not the play is a tragedy, and if so, what kind;
- come to conclusions of your own concerning issues like Ibsenism;
- appreciate Ibsen's contributions to modern drama.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

In this last unit, we will try to bring together all that we have discussed in the previous three units. In those units, you will remember, we gave you a detailed background to the study of Ibsen and to *A Doll's House* in particular. Also apart from discussing the plot each Act was taken up individually and the issues and the characters discussed as and when the need was felt. In this unit, we will put together the various threads of the fabric of the play. In this way, we will be able to discuss the aspects of the play in their entirety, looking at *A Doll's House* as a modern play.

15.2 A DOLL'S HOUSE AS TRAGEDY

Is *A Doll's House* a tragedy or tragi-comedy? How are we to define the most problematic terms? We better clear our understanding of the definition of tragedy. The Aristotelian definition is that tragedy describes a serious action of a person of noble birth or of high rank. Now our protagonist Nora is neither of high birth nor of high standing and wealth. Therefore, she cannot be a tragic heroine in the Aristotelian sense. The next question according to the Aristotelian definition is the nature of this serious action. The serious action is that whose consequences are serious and has metaphysical implications. The protagonist is aware that he has to exercise a choice which results in a serious action and serious consequences, but he is in a situation where he is forced to give his option. The consequences of the choice made are grave and cause a great deal of suffering to the protagonist and other people. Finally, this suffering ends in the death of the hero, and the play ends with an affirmation of the values that the protagonist had died for.

It appears that we should modify the definition of Aristotelian tragedy while discussing Nora and by implication of Ibsen's world.

Whereas Aristotelian definition of tragedy is based on a social conception of man, the individual according to Ibsen is a revolutionary, superior to all confining social, political, or normal imperatives who finds true meaning of life in the pursuit of his own personal truth. Self-realisation is the highest goal of life and if it conflicts with his duties as a citizen or public welfare, then he should follow the dictates of his self. Ibsen's revolt, in other words, so personal that it can find nothing common with the Aristotelian nature of a serious action. Ibsen's protagonists recognise the fact that freedom of the self comes in conflict with forces outside the self. Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* in a debate with Pastor Manders yields for a moment to his defense of custom by saying, perhaps ironically, "You may be right". Thus Ibsen's tragic vision lies in this indissoluble dilemma, the perpetual doubt. With this in mind if we read *A Doll's House* we find the implication clear that men cannot be "free" (or authentic) persons. It is evident in the final curtain that Nora is bewildered and can think of nothing except the necessity of taking leave. With this vision of Ibsen's tragic world, let's come to a detailed characterisation of Nora Helmer.

15.3 NORA AS TRAGIC HEROINE

Our first acquaintance with Nora is that of a socialite tied to a middle-class respectability. Nora Helmer behaves as a wife in her own milieu, both when she respects Helmer's sense of dignity as a lawyer and as the family's breadwinner, and when she submits to his requests such as that she keep off sweets for the sake of her teeth. But her actions outside her husband's study door, with a bag of macarons in her hand and then later in her pocket, show that she regards this form of dutifulness as a role in which she has been cast to play, and there is something similar about her attitude to money and to the law. She simply does not feel bound by her husband's views on these things. And this marks a situation that is characteristic both of her actions as a whole and of the actions of many other of Ibsen's characters. Some form of dissimulation helps them to keep the past a secret and to hide their real attitude to things in the present.

The dissimulation in Nora's case has a deeper effect than she had reckoned with. The course across society's moral and judicial laws brought her into conflict with her own aspirations in two respects. The secret decision recoils back as she finds herself in conflict with the partnership, she had entered with Helmer. And in the second place dissimulation for the sake of one's objective prevents any proper realisation of one's personality. With the result that there is betrayal with one's own self-development. We find Nora living a deeper life than what surfaces in the beginning. We confront a humming, gay, happy mother and wife in Nora when the curtain rises. In spite of her husband's strictures, who treats her as a child and refers to her as a skylark and a squirrel, we know through her encounter with Mrs. Linde that she is not as frivolous and inexperienced as she appears to be, she has lived through a crisis and so her vision is deeper and vaster than anyone else's in the play. The crisis has also given her the strength to take independent decisions. This has been revealed in her action of signing bonds and borrowing money without her husband's knowledge. And yet in her own set of values, her love for her husband ranks above everything else. It is her love that she is prepared to be a "doll" to him while at the back of her mind she remains assured that her husband's love will always be with her in any crisis. In this sense, Torvald does not know Nora. The quality of Nora's suffering is of different order than that of average human being because of awareness that goes with it. Her complete isolation emphasises her strength and the courage of conviction stays with her till the last. So an unshakeable sense of her individuality makes us conclude that she has existential virtues.

The blow to Nora's happiness comes in the shape of Krogstad's threat and the complexities in her character come to the surface. She has forever deluded herself with her husband — concealing facts. Once the mask is to be ripped open, the truth shatters her making it obvious for her to leave her husband and children.

Nora, to an extent, is responsible for her destiny. As we have discussed earlier, dealing with a tragedy, the allocation of responsibility is of paramount importance. In Nora's case her deliberate action of forging of the cheque is a moral and legal violation. And as she has chosen this course of action, the consequences become tragic. A person's life can be tragic only when he or she is pitted against large and powerful forces whom he or she chooses to fight. Nora is tragic because the struggle of her character against fate

In Dr. Rank, Nora has counterpart, who is also corrupt. Nora is more natural and honest with Rank than she is with Helmer. Deceitful in her own way, Nora can transmit corruption to her children as Rank has been physically ruined by his corrupt father. The tragic heroism also lies in the fact that when Mrs. Linde persuades Krogstad to take back the threat of blackmail, she has achieved an awareness which does not allow her to live with Helmer. She to whom love is everything, above the letter of law, public opinion, even religion, discovers that Helmer's love is a convenience, not a commitment of the self. Thus her love for him is destroyed.

It has been time and again said that Nora's transformation from the "featherbrain" to the thoughtful woman of the final Act, though credible as an idea, can not be accepted the way it is written. All that can be said to counter this charge is that the dramatist's need to wind up the story within a tight structure is the reason for such a surmise. But the study of the play reveals that Nora's evolution has been laid down from the beginning.

Nora's final posture is that she must take steps to educate herself if she has to reach any understanding of herself and the things around her.

What you must also keep in mind for a fuller comprehension of *A Doll's House* is that all the characters are bent on maintaining or achieving worthiness. The catch is that worthiness is different for each person. For Torvald, worthy is to be in the "right". For Nora worthiness means to do right by everyone. She protected her father. She tries to shield Helmer in every way, she cares for the children, she gets a job for Mrs. Linde. She is generous with money, she won't take advantage of Dr. Rank's love for her and borrow money from him when her image of herself and her domestic life is shattered. she does what she feels she must to become a true person.

Self Check Exercise 1

a) Name any one existential virtue in Nora. (20 words)

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b) Do you think that Nora's conversion from frivolous to a mature woman is sudden? Justify your view. (100 words)

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c) Would you consider Nora a tragic character? (200 words)

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15.4 HELMER

We can discuss Helmer under two headings:

- i) as a static character;
- ii) as an essentially human character.

From the first we observe that Torvald lives in a blissful world of ignorance. Nora for him is no more than a "lark", "a squirrel", "a spendthrift", "a feather brain", "a little liar". Having been persuaded by Nora to go on the trip to Italy, he barely inquires how she procured the money for it. He can't possibly guess that Nora saves most of the allowance she receives for clothes, and is engaged in needlework and crocheting for others as a means of earning money in order to pay back the debt incurred for Torvald's sake. Torvald owes his self centredness and blissfulness to his thoughtlessness. In all essentials, he is more ignorant than Nora, for she has already faced and survived a crisis, and has taken difficult decisions for his sake.

Torvald has a stuffy retitude – his rigorous middle-class code of proper conduct. Strindberg took pleasure in pointing out that Torvald Helmer is an honest man – as a lawyer he never accepted a shady case – while Nora is a liar, worse still a flirt. Nora indulges in "pretty tricks". Nora's coquetry, is inspired by Torvald's appetite for it.

Torvald at thirty is still a "boob" but not a villain. His preachments as to the evil effects on children of a bad mother are shocking, but are by no means untrue. But what is wrong with his moralising is that it is hardly the result of any experience; it is largely bookish.

When Helmer, comes to know of Nora's secret of forging a cheque, he is frightened out of his wits by the prospect of dismissal from his job and public defamation. His mind works to save himself from the situation. He neither considers the reasons behind Nora's action nor is governed by the impulse to protect Nora.

There is also a hint of Nora's repression in the most trivial matters. Torvald has forbidden her to eat macaroons and to his wholly unreasonable protestations in the end, one can only say that he cannot extend any logic to his protestations asking Nora to take back her decision of leaving the family.

All said and done, one must still maintain that Helmer is not a hard man. "I am not so harsh as to condemn a man irrevocably for one mistake", he says referring to Krogstad. What he cannot control is his middle-class revulsion at being addressed by his first name in the presence of subordinates at the bank. To him all excess of temperament is embarrassing and to be discouraged even in the dancing of tarantella.

Torvald is a composed personality. Nora and Torvald return from a party, where Torvald is sexually aroused by the hysterical dance of Nora. Still to his credit, he desists from carrying her off to bed.

Helmer adheres to the mid-nineteenth century idea of prettiness. Everything nice and pretty became a property. Nora's loveliness is for Helmer "mine, wholly and utterly mine, mine alone".

His first reaction to Krogstad’s withdrawal of all threats is “I am saved. I am saved” Having got rid himself of his fears he is willing to admit Nora’s sufferings. He wants her to remain with him, he hopes to change, to achieve the “miracle” of which she spoke, though he only dimly comprehends its essence. Seen in the light of Torvald’s character, the play is a plea for men’s as much as women’s spiritual liberation.



Self Check Exercise 2

a) Bring out the weaknesses in Torvald’s character. (250 words)

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b) Talk about the strengths in the character of Torvald Helmer. (200 words)

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15.5 MINOR CHARACTERS

Besides Nora and Helmer, there are some important characters who are an integral part of the play. These serve to:

- further the action of the plot;
- comment on the main characters, and
- give depth to the main issues.

15.5.1 Mrs. Linde and Krogstad

Mrs. Linde and Krogstad form a contrast to the Helmers. Although as yet not married, they give the impression of mature people. They are practical not pretentious people.

Mrs. Linde plays a catalytic role in enabling Nora to achieve self-realisation.

Mrs. Linde is Nora's friend and Krogstad's redeemer. Her suggestions to Nora are meaningful. Her friendly nature is borne out by the fact that she can expect help from Nora even after having been separated for a long time.

Mrs. Linde, in spite of her wreck, remains unhysterical. It is also to be noted that Mrs. Linde believes that if Nora were to reveal her secret to her husband, their marriage could be saved. We find the first clue to the process of Nora's development in her colloquy in Act One with Mrs. Linde.

She lends support to Krogstad's struggle to sustain himself as a man who is ruined by adversity and poverty; rather Mrs. Linde's loveless marriage to assume help for her mother and two brothers, lends her the fortitude to enter her future relationship with Krogstad on a basis of mutual compassion and understanding. They are equal in their experiences of trial and manifest a stern practicality of behaviour and thus lend credence to Ibsen's anti-romantic stand.

Krogstad's bitterness has to be examined in the larger context of his being a widower with sons, whose respectability in society is threatened by the forgery committed through him before the commencement of the play. Social and earlier personal rejection by Christine (now Mrs. Linde) had combined in him to make a bitter man.

Krogstad can be revengeful is evident by the fact that he threatens to blackmail Nora in the event of Helmer's firing him out of his job, but is visibly willing to withdraw his threats to Helmers on being persuaded by Mrs. Linde to withdraw. This withdrawal is also conditional on the fact that Mrs. Linde will marry him.



Self Check Exercise 3

What is the significance of Krogstad and Mrs. Linde's presence among the personages?
(150 words)

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15.5.2 Dr. Rank

Dr. Rank's name speaks for his diseased physical nature, Dr. Rank's physical corruption resulting from the immoral character of his father is used by Ibsen to set off Nora's moral corruption. Dr. Rank's discourse with Nora provides insights into the deeper Nora concealed in the fibbing "doll". The buried self of Nora is visible in a later

scene with Dr. Rank who calls her a "little rogue". She tells him, "I always think it tremendous fun having you here". To this Dr. Rank reacts: "I can't quite make you out. I've often felt you liked being with me almost as much as being with Helmer." She then explains that there are people one loves best — and yet others one would almost rather be with. Rank belonged to the second category.

In the death of Dr. Rank, Ibsen provides an analogy of Nora's corruption and accompanied death in the form of social ostracism. When Dr. Rank learns that he has a few more days to live, he announces quietly with the cross on his card that he will remain cut off from society. His humane, tolerant and consistent friendliness toward Helmer's is reciprocated by Helmers in a similar manner.

15.6 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

As has been discussed earlier, *A Doll's House* is about woman's right to freedom. The word doll signifies a woman who has no individual thinking or mind of her own. *A Doll's House*, therefore, means a house in which there lives such a woman or make believe world for a woman. Nora, the heroine, has remained a "doll" in the context of her passive and subservient kind of wifely role. It is true that she took a bold step once to save her husband's life, but is not courageous enough to offend him by telling him the secret. (For her relationship with her husband refer to earlier sections 15.3 and 15.4.)

In her arguments with Helmer on the occasion of the Christmas Eve, it is evident that she has the inclination to submit to the wishes of a husband who is conscious of his powers over her.

Her infirm attitude is again evident when her recommendation for Krogstad is disregarded by Helmer. She gives in to his judgement.

The title and its significance are brought out poignantly with Helmer's reactions to Krogstad's two letters. After she has been severely reprimanded by Helmer, she realises that she has been a non-entity in the house. She tells Helmer that he has been treating her as his doll-wife just as her father had in the past treated her as his doll-baby. She then decides to know things first hand for which she wishes to embark alone on the voyage of discovery for herself.

Nora's final posture to stand alone is Ibsen's prescription to get away from a doll's house.

Self Check Exercise 4

Discuss the significance of the title "A Doll's House". (150 words)

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15.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to sum up the various aspects of the play. Major points of views discussed in the previous units have been recapitulated and given a comprehensive coverage to describe Ibsen's tragic vision, characterisation, theme, significance of title, etc. We hope that after reading this block you will be able to form your own perspectives on the play and feel motivated to read more of Ibsen's works.

15.8 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

- 1) a) She has undergone a crisis and is living through the consequences of her crisis independently of her husband. Refer to section 15.3.
b) Refer to section 15.3.
c) Refer to sections 15.2 and 15.3.
- 2) a) Refer to section 15.4.
b) Refer to section 15.4.
- 3) Refer to section 15.5.
- 4) Refer to section 15.6.