A Doll’s House by Henrik Ibsen

Act by act questions

Pre-reading activity

In pairs, list as many connotations as possible for the term ‘doll’s house’. Try to divide them into positive and negative ideas. It may be useful to visit a website such as www.dollshouse.com to get ideas if you have never had a doll’s house!

Act 1

1. The stage setting is described in detail. Sketch it out, or make a model, and map on it the entrances and exits of various characters. At the end of reading the first act, discuss the significance of these details and the dramatic effects created.

2. A Doll’s House may be described as a ‘well-made play’: a style of 19th century play with clear-cut protagonists and antagonists, artificially logical plots, often involving some ‘skeleton in the family cupboard’, and usually happy endings. These plays often used stock characters and lines of business. Oscar Wilde used these devices in The Importance of Being Earnest, while Ibsen and Shaw often used the basic form of the well-made plot, but used more realistic and problematic characters. During your reading of the first act, note any possible ‘skeletons’ which may be developed later in the play. What expectations are raised?

3. Look at the language Torvald uses when he speaks to Nora. How does this develop the concepts you have already discussed when thinking about the term ‘doll’s house’?

4. How is money made central to characters’ concerns in this act?

5. How important is Nora’s deception over the macaroons in helping us understand her greater deceptions?

6. Consider ways in which Nora’s behaviour towards Kristine reinforces our view of her that has been established by her husband.

7. How does the first act provide social commentary on the lives of middle class women in the 19th century? What dramatic effects are created by the discussion between the two old friends?

8. Nora says: ‘It would ruin everything between us. Our whole marriage would be wrecked by it!’ Return to this quotation when you have read Act 3 and decide how right she was. What dramatic effects are obtained by its placement here?

9. The first act introduces us to a banker, a doctor and a lawyer. How does Ibsen use these characters from respected professions to comment on society?

10. Evening falls during the course of this act. How does the reappearance of Krogstad tie in with the changes on stage?

11. Compare the opening and closing lines of this act. How far have we moved from the simplicity of the Christmas preparation scene?
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Act 2

1. Look at the exchange between Nora and Anne-Marie concerning the children. What sense is there that tragedy may be on its way?

2. Find out the origin of the dance ‘Tarantella’ and make notes on how it becomes an important symbol in the development of the play. Make notes on the dramatic use of the dance in this and the next act.

3. How does the information Nora gives about Doctor Rank alter our perception of him?

4. Discuss the methods Nora uses to get her husband to employ Krogstad. How do these contribute to the changing atmosphere in the play?

5. Helmer says ‘No matter what happens, you’ll see – I have strength and courage for us both. My shoulders are broad – I’ll bear the burden.’ Compare this with Nora’s comment in Act 1 (activity 8) and with the end of the play. How do his views tie in with the play’s title?

6. Once again, darkness falls in the act. Discuss the effects of Doctor Rank’s revelations during this period. What methods does Ibsen use to avoid direct reference to the effects of syphilis? What is your feeling about the way Nora responds to him?

7. Krogstad raises a hideous vision of Nora’s body being found after she has committed suicide. How far does the audience believe this is a likely outcome? How are blackmail and manipulation used to dramatic effect in this act?

8. What do you think may be the ‘wonderful thing’ Nora refers to?

9. Compare the speeches at the end of this act with those from the first. Does it seem the play is more ‘well-made’ or tragic at this point?

Act 3

1. Discuss the effect of the meeting between Mrs Linde and Krogstad in the Helmers’ own sitting room.

2. Compare what you learn of the relationship between these two characters with the Helmers’ marriage. What does it imply about life outside the ‘doll’s house’?

3. Krogstad says ‘Two people on a raft have a better chance than one’. Evaluate this in light of other characters’ statements.

4. ‘A woman’s exaggerated craving for self-sacrifice’ - how can this be seen as true of the play as a whole? Can you relate this view to other texts you have studied for this unit?

5. Compare the attitudes to work and life demonstrated by Mrs Linde and Nora.

6. Torvald refers to Nora as his ‘capricious little Capri girl’. Research the link between the origin of these words and the Greek concept of tragedy.

7. There is clear sexual tension between husband and wife in this scene; how does Ibsen present it? How does this make things worse for Nora?

8. The idea of the masquerade is presented as pleasantly entertaining. What more serious masquerades are being played out in this act? How effective is this as a symbol for human relationships?

9. In the final stages of the act, when the secret is at last revealed, drama gives way to discussion. How effective do you consider this ending to be?

10. Refer to your notes for Act 1 activity 2. Is this a ‘well-made play’, a tragedy, or something else entirely?

11. Why did Ibsen call the play A Doll’s House?