

Analysis of acts in A Doll's House

Main themes:

- Money.
- Gender Roles.
- Power.
- Deception.
- Relationships/love.
- Appearances

Act 1

Money: The transaction between Nora and the porter that opens A Doll's House immediately puts the spotlight on money, which emerges as one of the forces driving the play's conflicts as it draws lines between genders, classes and moral standards. Though Nora owes the porter fifty ore, she gives him twice that amount, presumably because she is infused with the holiday spirit. While Nora likes to spend and allows the idea of buying presents to block out financial concerns, Torvald holds a more pragmatic view of money, jokingly calling Nora a spendthrift and telling her that she is completely foolish when it comes to financial matters.

Gender roles: Torvald's assertion that Nora's lack of understanding of money matters is the result of her gender. "Nora, my Nora, that is just like a woman," reveals his prejudiced viewpoint on gender roles. Torvald believes that a wife's role is to beautify the home, not only through proper management of domestic life but also through proper behaviour and appearance. He quickly makes it known that appearances are important to him, and that Nora is like an ornament or trophy that serves to beautify his home and his reputation.

Gender roles/power: Torvald's insistence on calling Nora by affectionately diminutive names evokes her helplessness and her dependence on him. The only time that Torvald calls Nora by her actual name is when he is scolding her. When he is greeting or adoring her, however, he calls her by childish animal nicknames such as "my little skylark" and "my squirrel". By placing her within such a system of names, Torvald not only asserts his power over Nora but also dehumanizes her to a degree. When he implies that Nora is comparable to the "little birds that like to fritter money," Torvald suggests that Nora lacks some fundamental male ability to deal properly with financial matters. Though Torvald accuses Nora of being irresponsible with money, he gives her more in order to watch her happy reaction. This act shows that Torvald amuses himself by manipulating his wife's feelings. Nora is like Torvald's doll - she decorates his home and pleases him by being a dependent figure with whose emotions he can toy.

Gender roles: In addition to being somewhat of a doll to Torvald, Nora is also like a child to him. He shows himself to be competing with Nora's dead Father for Nora's loyalty. In a sense, by keeping Nora dependent upon and subservient to him, Torvald plays the role of Nora's second Father. He treats her like a child, dolling out money to her and attempting to instruct her in the ways of the world. Nora's gift selections - a sword and a horse for her male children and a doll for her daughter - shows that she reinforces the stereotypical gender roles that hold her subservient to Torvald. Nora sees her daughter the same way that she has been treated her whole life - as a doll.

Nora: Nora's first conversation with Mrs Linde plays a key role in establishing Nora's childlike, self-centered, and insensitive character. Though she purports to be interested in Mrs Linde's problems, Nora repeatedly turns the conversation back to her own life with Torvald. Nora's self centeredness is further demonstrated in revelation that she failed to write to Mrs Linde after her husband passed away. It is only now, three years after the fact that Nora expresses her sympathy; up to this point, she has made no effort to think beyond herself, and the fact that she does so now seems only a matter of polite reflex. Like an impetuous child, Nora does not filter her thoughts, expressing what comes to mind without regard for what is and what is not appropriate, as when she tactlessly comments that Mrs Linde's looks have declined over the years. Though she recognises that Mrs Linde is poor, she unabashedly delights in the fact that she and Torvald will soon have "pots and pots" of money. She does not recognise that such comments might be hurtful to her old friend.

Nora: From a structural point of view, Nora, as the drama's protagonist, must develop over the course of the play. Because her first conversation with Mrs Linde shows Nora to be childlike in her understanding of the world, it becomes apparent that Nora's development will involve education, maturation and the shedding of her seeming naiveté. Whereas Nora clings to romantic notions about her love and marriage, Mrs Linde has a more realistic understanding of marriage, gained from her experience of being left "not even an ounce of grief" after her husband's death. Nora's incredulity at Mrs Linde's remark indicates to Mrs Linde, and to us, that Nora is sheltered and somewhat unsophisticated. The tension between Nora's initial interactions with Torvald and Mrs Linde is the tension between Nora's childish nature and her need to grow out of it.

Nora vs Mrs Linde: As someone who has experienced an existence that is anything but doll-like, Mrs Linde seems poised to be Nora's teacher and guide her on her journey to maturity. Mrs Linde recounts hardship after hardship and sacrifice after sacrifice - a far cry from the pampering that Nora receives from Torvald. At the same time, both Mrs Linde's and Nora's marriages involved sacrificing themselves to another in exchange for money. Nora became her husband's plaything and delights in the comforts he provides for her, while Mrs Linde marries her husband for money so that she can support her sick mother and dependent younger brothers. Again and again in *A Doll's House*, women sacrifice their personal desires, their ambitions, and their dignity. While Nora married for her own welfare, however, Mrs Linde does so for the welfare of her family.

Language: Unlike many of the dramatists who came before him, Ibsen doesn't portray rich, powerful or socially significant people in his plays. Rather, he populates his dramas with ordinary middle-class characters. Ibsen's language too is commonplace. Though his dialogue is uncomplicated and without rhetorical flourish, it subtly conveys more than it seems to. For instance, Nora's insensitivity to Mrs Linde's plight manifests itself when she speaks of her three lovely children *immediately* after learning that Mrs Linde has none. That Ibsen's dialogue is apparently simply - yet full of loaded subtext - sets Ibsen's drama apart from earlier and contemporary verse plays.

Deception: Whereas the conversation between Torvald and Nora at the beginning of *A Doll's House* seems one between a happy, honest couple with nothing to hide, in the latter half of Act One we see that the Torvald household is full of secrets and deception. The most

minor example of deception is **Nora's lying about the macaroons**. Because eating a macaroon seems like such a trivial matter, one can argue that lying about it highly insignificant. Yet one can also argue that the trivial nature of eating the macaroon is the very thing that makes the lie so troubling. Indeed, **the need to lie about something so insignificant - Nora lies twice about the macaroons, once to Torvald and once to Dr Rank - speaks to the depths of both her guilt and tension in her relationship with Torvald.**

Deception: A far more serious case of deception concerns the **loan** Nora illicitly acquired in order to save Torvald's life. Though this deception is of far greater magnitude than the lies about the macaroons and involves a breach of law (Nora is guilty of **forgery**), **we can understand and forgive Nora for her actions** because she is motivated by noble and selfless intent. **Perhaps, however, this is a modern reading, and that the audience of the time would have responded negatively to Nora taking independence such as this.** In both instances of deception, Nora lies because of Torvald's unfair stereotypes about gender roles. If Torvald could accept his wife's help and didn't feel the need to have control over her every moment, Nora would not have to lie to him.

Gender Roles: When Nora suggests that Torvald find Mrs Linde a job, Torvald again shows his biases concerning women's proper roles in society by immediately assuming that Mrs Linde is a widow. Torvald's assumption shows that he believes a proper married woman should not work outside the home. Also, as Torvald departs with Mrs Linde, he says to her, "only a Mother could bear to be here," suggesting that any woman who wants a job must not have children. These words contain a veiled expression of pride since Torvald is pleased that his home is fit only for what **he believes to be the proper kind of woman: a mother and wife, like Nora.**

Gender Roles: After **Nora reveals her secret to Mrs Linde**, Nora's and Mrs Linde's versions of femininity slowly begin to converge. With knowledge of her noble act, we see Nora's character deepen, and we see that she possesses more maturity and determination than we previously thought. What prompts Nora to reveal her secret about having saved Torvald's life by raising the money for their trip abroad is **Mrs. Linde's contention that Nora has never known hard work.** Although Mrs Linde's accusation of Nora facilitates the pair's reconciliation, what motivates the two women here is unclear. **Ibsen does not explicitly reveal whether Mrs Linde's irritation at Nora stems from envy, annoyance or even concern.** **Similarly, Nora's defensive response could signify that she is hurt, competitive or simply itching to tell someone her secret.** All that is clear is that both Mrs Linde and Nora are proud to have helped those they love be sacrificing for them. Their common experience of sacrifice for others unites them even though they come from different economic spheres and forms the basis for their rekindled friendship.

Gender Roles: **Although Nora holds some influence over Torvald, her power is extremely limited.** Paradoxically, when Krogstad asks Nora to exert this influence on Torvald on his behalf, Nora perceives his request to be an insult to her husband. Because Krogstad's statement implies that Torvald fails to conform to the societal belief that the husband should be responsible for all financial and business matters by letting Nora sway him, Nora recognizes it as an insult to Torvald for not being a proper husband. Torvald, for his part, believes that Nora is completely useless when it comes to matters of business, but he agrees to help find a job for Mrs Linde in order to make his little squirrel happy. **He also**



shows that he believes parenting is a mother's responsibility when he asserts that a lying mother corrupts children and turns them into criminals, suggesting that the father, while important in economic matters, is inconsequential to his children's moral development.

Appearances: Krogstad wants to keep his job at the bank so that he can become reputable again, but his decision to gain credibility through blackmail shows that he is interested only in reforming his appearance and not his inner self. Torvald too is preoccupied with appearances, something Nora understands and uses to her advantage. She knows that she can put her husband in good mood by mentioning the costume that she will don at the dance. The thought of Nora dressed up and looking beautiful placates Torvald, who takes great pleasure in the beauty of his house and wife.

Language: Torvald's remark about Krogstad - "I honestly feel sick, sick to my stomach, in the presence of such people" - illustrates his deep contempt for moral corruption of Krogstad's sort. What he thinks that such a bad character is in direct contrast to his "sweet little Nora", we are aware that Krogstad and Nora have committed the exact same crime → dramatic irony. Torvald has unwittingly referred to Nora when he scorns "such people". Torvald's unknowing condemnation of the actions of the woman he loves is an excellent example of dramatic irony - a literary device that makes the audience privy to details of which certain characters are ignorant.

Act 2:

Gender roles: Nora's comment to Mrs Linde that Torvald doesn't like to see swing in his home indicates that Torvald likes the idea and the appearance of a beautiful, carefree wife who does not have to do anything but rather serves as a showpiece. As Nora explains to Mrs Linde, Torvald likes his home to seem "happy and welcoming". Mrs Linde's response that Nora is too skilled at making a home look happy because she is "her father's daughter" suggests that Nora's father regarded her in a similar way to Torvald - as a means to giving a home its proper appearance. 

Deception / Gender Roles: Torvald's opinion on his wife's role in their home is his defining character trait - at least for the purposes of the story. His unrelenting treatment of Nora as a doll indicates that he is unable to develop or grow. As Nora's understanding of the people and events around her develops, Torvald's remains static. He is the only character who continues to believe in the charade, probably because he is the only character in the play who continues to believe in the charade, probably because he is the only main character in the play who does not keep secrets or harbour any hidden complexity. Each of the other characters - Nora, Mrs Linde, Krogstad, Dr Rank - has at some point kept secrets, hidden a true love, or plotted for one reason or another.

Deception: Nora's use of Torvald's pet names for her to win his cooperation is an act of manipulation on her part. She knows that calling herself his "little bird" his "squirrel" and his "skylark", and thus conforming to his desired standards will make him more willingly give in to her wishes. At first, Nora's interaction with Dr Rank is similarly manipulative. When she flirts with him by showing her stockings, it seems that she hopes to entice Dr Rank and then

persuade him to speak to Torvald about keeping Krogstad on at the bank. Yet after Dr Rank confesses that he loves her, Nora suddenly shuts down and refuses to ask her favour. She has developed some moral integrity. Despite her desperate need, she realizes that she would be taking advantage of Dr Rank by capitalizing on his earnest love for her.

Morality: When Nora explains that Dr Rank's poor health owes to his father's promiscuity, for the second time we come across the idea that moral corruption transfers from parent to child. These statements clarify Nora's torment and her refusal to interact with her children when she feels like a criminal. They also reveals that both Torvald and Nora seriously believe in the influence that parents have on their children. Although the children are seldom onstage, they gain importance through Nora and Torvald's discussion of them and of parental responsibility.

Relationships/gender roles: In Act 2, Nora shows signs that she is becoming aware of the true nature of her marriage. When she compares living with Torvald to living with her Father, doubt is cast on the depth of her true love for Torvald. Nora is beginning to realize that though her life with Torvald conforms to societal expectations about husbands and wives should live, it is far from ideal.

Act 3

Dependency/gender roles: For most of the play, we see Torvald delighting in Nora's dependence upon him but not in his control over her. Nora does refer to Torvald's restrictions of her actions - she mentions that he forbids the macaroons, for instance - but the side of Torvald we see is more pushover than dictator. He seems to love his wife so much that he allows her to do whatever she pleases, as when he gives her more money to spend after she returns from buying gifts. In the scene following the party, however, Torvald's enjoyment of his control over Nora takes on a darker tone when his somewhat perverse sexual advances toward Nora. He treats her like his possession, like the young girl he first acquired years ago. Contributing to the feeling of control that Torvald is exercising over Nora is that the evening has been of Torvald's designs - he dresses Nora in a costume of his choosing and coaches her to dance the tarantella in the manner he finds "desirable".

Gender roles: Torvald's inability to understand Nora's dissent when he attempts to seduce her stems from his belief that Nora, as his wife, is his property. Because he considers her simply an element of the life that he idealizes, her coldness and rebuff of his sexual advances leave him not baffled but incredulous. He has so long believed in the illusory relationship that Nora has helped him to create over the years that he cannot comprehend the reality of the situation - that Nora is discontent with her life and willing to express it.

Gender roles/relationships: The hollowness of Torvald's promises to save Nora shows how little he appreciates her sacrifice. Nora expects compassion from Torvald after he finds out about her predicament, especially since, after learning of Dr Rank's imminent death, Torvald fantasizes about risking his life to save Nora's. Once given the opportunity, however, Torvald shows no intention of sacrificing anything for Nora, thinking only of himself and of appearances.

Appearances/relationships: Ultimately, Torvald's selfishness becomes apparent in his lack of concern about his wife's fate, despite the fact that she committed a crime to save his life. He panics upon learning of Nora's crime not because he cares about what will happen to her but because **he worries that his reputation will be damaged if knowledge of Nora's crime becomes public.** Instead of treating Nora with understanding and gratitude for her noble intent, he threatens and blames her and then immediately begins to think of ways to cover up the shame that she has cast on his family. His proclamation of **"I'm saved"** after Krogstad's letter of retractions arrives reflect that he has been thinking only of himself in his panic. **He says nothing about Nora until she asks - "And me?". His casual response - "You too, naturally" - reveals how much her well-being is an afterthought to him.**

Relationships/gender roles: Torvald's selfish reaction to Krogstad's letter opens Nora's eyes to the truth about her relationship with Torvald and leads her to rearrange her priorities and her course of action. Her shift from thinking about suicide to deciding to walk out on Torvald reflects an increased independence and sense of self. Whereas she earlier succumbs to pressure from Torvald to preserve the appearance of idealized family life - she lies about eating macaroons and considers suicide (the ultimate sacrifice of herself) in order to conceal her misdeeds. She now realizes that she can exist outside of Torvald's confined realm.

Gender roles: **Torvald's explanation for refusing to take the blame - that a man can never sacrifice his integrity for love** - again reveals the depth of his gender bias. Nora's response that "hundreds of thousands of women" have done just that underscores that the actions of Mrs Linde and Nora, both of whom sacrifice themselves for their loved ones, have borne out. Nora's belief that Torvald should take responsibility for her seems justified, since what she expects from Torvald is no more than what she has already given to him.

Illusions/gender roles: As Nora's childish innocence and faith in Torvald shatter, so do all of her illusions. **She realizes that her husband does not see her as a person but rather as a beautiful possession, nothing more than a toy.** She voices her belief that **neither Torvald nor her father ever loved her,** but rather "thought it was enjoyable to be in love with her." She realizes that **these two men cared more about amusing themselves** and feeling loved and needed than they did about her as an individual.

Gender roles: Moreover, **Nora realizes that since she has been treated as a child** for her entire life, she is still very childlike and needs to grow up before she can raise any children or take on any other responsibilities. **Her defiance of Torvald when he forbids her to leave** reflects her epiphany that she isn't obliged to let Torvald dictate her actions - she is independent of him and has control over her own life. The height of Nora's awakening comes when she tells Torvald that **her duty to herself is just as sacred as her duties to her husband and her children.** She now sees that she is a human being before she is a wife and a mother, and that she owes it to herself to explore her personality.

Gender roles: Mrs Linde's matter of fulfilling her personal desires balances Nora's. **Whereas Nora decides that she must be totally independent to be true to herself and thus rejects her family, Mrs Linde decides that she needs to care for the man she truly loves to be true to herself and thereby become content.** Ibsen positions Mrs Linde as a **file** - a character whose attitudes and emotions contrast and therefore accentuate those of another - to Nora.



This demonstrates that Nora's actions do not constitute the only solution available to women who feel trapped by society. Mrs Linde's offer to care for Krogstad his children will be a positive move for both of them, because they love each other, and Mrs Linde, having sacrificed her whole life to live with a husband she didn't love in order to help her brothers and mother, will finally be able to live her chosen partner. Nora, on the other hand, has sacrificed her own will all her life by allowing her father and Torvald to indulge theirs. Ibsen suggests that one finds himself or herself not in an independent life but rather in an independent will. Nora exits her doll's house with a door slam, emphatically resolving the play with an act of bold assertion.