



**Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*
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THE SCANDINAVIAN DRAMA: HENRIK IBSEN

A DOLL'S HOUSE



IN "A Doll's House" Ibsen returns to the subject so vital to him,--the Social Lie and Duty,--this time as manifesting themselves in the sacred institution of the home and in the position of woman in her gilded cage.

Nora is the beloved, adored wife of *Torvald Helmer*. He is an admirable man, rigidly honest, of high moral ideals, and passionately devoted to his wife and children. In short, a good man and an enviable husband. Almost every mother would be proud of such a match for her daughter, and the latter would consider herself fortunate to become the wife of such a man.

Nora, too, considers herself fortunate. Indeed, she worships her husband, believes in him implicitly, and is sure that if ever her safety should be menaced, *Torvald*, her idol, her god, would perform the miracle.

When a woman loves as *Nora* does, nothing else matters; least of all, social, legal or moral considerations. Therefore, when her husband's life is threatened, it is no effort, it is joy for *Nora* to forge her father's name to a note and borrow 800 crowns on it, in order to take her sick husband to Italy.

In her eagerness to serve her husband, and in perfect innocence of the legal aspect of her act, she does not give the matter much thought, except for her anxiety to shield him from any emergency that may call upon him to perform the miracle in her behalf. She works hard, and saves every penny of her pin-money to pay back the amount she borrowed on the forged check.

Nora is light-hearted and gay, apparently without depth. Who, indeed, would expect depth of a doll, a "squirrel," a song-bird? Her purpose in life is to be happy for her husband's sake, for the sake of the children; to sing, dance, and play with them. Besides, is she not shielded, protected, and cared for? Who, then, would suspect *Nora* of depth? But already in the opening scene, when *Torvald* inquires what his precious "squirrel" wants for a Christmas present, *Nora* quickly asks him for money. Is it to buy

macaroons or finery? In her talk with *Mrs. Linden*, *Nora* reveals her inner self, and forecasts the inevitable debacle of her doll's house.

After telling her friend how she had saved her husband, *Nora* says: "When *Torvald* gave me money for clothes and so on, I never used more than half of it; I always bought the simplest things. . . . *Torvald* never noticed anything. But it was often very hard, *Christina* dear. For it's nice to be beautifully dressed. Now, isn't it? . . . Well, and besides that, I made money in other ways. Last winter I was so lucky--I got a heap of copying to do. I shut myself up every evening and wrote far into the night. Oh, sometimes I was so tired, so tired. And yet it was splendid to work in that way and earn money. I almost felt as if I was a man."

Down deep in the consciousness of *Nora* there evidently slumbers personality and character, which could come into full bloom only through a great miracle--not the kind *Nora* hopes for, but a miracle just the same.

Nora had borrowed the money from *Nils Krogstad*, a man with a shady past in the eyes of the community and of the righteous moralist, *Torvald Helmer*. So long as *Krogstad* is allowed the little breathing space a Christian people grants to him who has once broken its laws, he is reasonably human. He does not molest *Nora*. But when *Helmer* becomes director of the bank in which *Krogstad* is employed, and threatens the man with dismissal, *Krogstad* naturally fights back. For as he says to *Nora*: "If need be, I shall fight as though for my life to keep my little place in the bank. . . . It's not only for the money: that matters least to me. It's something else. Well, I'd better make a clean breast of it. Of course you know, like everyone else, that some years ago I--got into trouble. . . . The matter never came into court; but from that moment all paths were barred to me. Then I took up the business you know about. I was obliged to grasp at something; and I don't think I've been one of the worst. But now I must clear out of it all. My sons are growing up; for their sake I must try to win back as much respectability as I can. This place in the bank was the first step, and now your husband wants to kick me off the ladder, back into the mire. *Mrs. Helmer*, you evidently have no idea what you have really done. But I can assure you that it was nothing more and nothing worse that made me an outcast from society. . . . But this I may tell you, that if I'm flung into the gutter a second time, you shall keep me company."

Even when *Nora* is confronted with this awful threat, she does not fear for herself, only for *Torvald*,--so good, so true, who has such an aversion to debts, but who loves her so devotedly that for her sake he would take the blame upon himself. But this must never be. *Nora*, too, begins a fight for life, for her husband's life and that of her children. Did not *Helmer* tell her that the very presence of a criminal like *Krogstad* poisons the children? And is she not a criminal?

Torvald Helmer assures her, in his male conceit, that "early corruption generally comes from the mother's side, but of course the father's influence may act in the same way. And this *Krogstad* has been poisoning his own children for years past by a life of lies and hypocrisy--that's why I call him morally ruined."

Poor *Nora*, who cannot understand why a daughter has no right to spare her dying father anxiety, or why a wife has no right to save her husband's life, is surely not aware of the true character of her idol. But gradually the veil is lifted. At first, when in reply to her desperate pleading for *Krogstad*, her husband discloses the true reason for wanting to get rid of him: "The fact is, he was a college chum of mine--there was one of those rash friendships between us that one so often repents later. I don't mind confessing it--he calls me by my Christian name; and he insists on doing it even when others are present. He delights in putting on airs of familiarity--*Torvald* here, *Torvald* there! I assure you it's most painful to me. He would make my position at the bank perfectly unendurable."

And then again when the final blow comes. For forty-eight hours *Nora* battles for her ideal, never doubting *Torvald* for a moment. Indeed, so absolutely sure is she of her strong oak, her lord, her god, that she would rather kill herself than have him take the blame for her act. The end comes, and with it the doll's house tumbles down, and *Nora* discards her doll's dress--she sheds her skin, as it were. *Torvald Helmer* proves himself a petty Philistine, a bully and a coward, as so many good husbands when they throw off their respectable cloak.

Helmer's rage over *Nora's* crime subsides the moment the danger of publicity is averted--proving that *Helmer*, like many a moralist, is not so much incensed at *Nora's* offense as by the fear of being found out. Not so *Nora*. Finding out is her salvation. It is then that she realizes how much she has been wronged, that she is only a plaything, a doll to *Helmer*. In her disillusionment she says, "You have never loved me. You only thought it amusing to be in love with me."

Helmer. Why, *Nora*, what a thing to say!

Nora. Yes, it is so, *Torvald*. While I was at home with father he used to tell me all his opinions and I held the same opinions. If I had others I concealed them, because he would not have liked it. He used to call me his doll child, and play with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house-- . . . I mean I passed from father's hands into yours. You settled everything according to your taste; and I got the same tastes as you; or I pretended to--I don't know which--both ways perhaps. When I look back on it now, I seem to have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by performing tricks for you, *Torvald*. But you would have it so. You and father have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that my life has been wasted. . . .

Helmer. It's exasperating! Can you forsake your holiest duties in this way?

Nora. What do you call my holiest duties?

Helmer. Do you ask me that? Your duties to your husband and children.

Nora. I have other duties equally sacred.

Helmer. Impossible! What duties do you mean?

Nora. My duties toward myself.

Helmer. Before all else you are a wife and a mother.

Nora. That I no longer believe. I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are--or, at least, I will try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, *Torvald*, and that they say so in books. But henceforth I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books. I must think things out for myself and try to get clear about them. . . . I had been living here these eight years with a strange man, and had borne him three children--Oh! I can't bear to think of it--I could tear myself to pieces!. . . I can't spend the night in a strange man's house.

Is there anything more degrading to woman than to live with a stranger, and bear him children? Yet, the lie of the marriage institution decrees that she shall continue to do so, and the social conception of duty insists that for the sake of that lie she need be nothing else than a plaything, a doll, a nonentity.

When *Nora* closes behind her the door of her doll's house, she opens wide the gate of life for woman, and proclaims the revolutionary message that only perfect freedom and communion make a true bond between man and woman, meeting in the open, without lies, without shame, free from the bondage of duty.