

HENRIK IBSEN - 1828-1906

Norwegian playwright, considered the "Father of Realism." As director of two different theatres (one in Bergen, one in Christiania [Oslo]), Ibsen learned the craft of playwriting by directing over 100 plays and then beginning to write his own plays. His early plays were written in verse and deal with the history/mythology of Norway. In his middle period, he wrote realistic plays based on the Well-Made Play formula. The Well-Made Play (WMP) is a play with a strictly defined format, or formula. There is careful exposition and a structuring of events that lead to an inevitable conclusion. Even though the conclusion is inevitable, there is much suspense getting to it. The WMP is essentially a conflict between good and evil, with the good forces winning out in the end by a surprising twist (but logical) twist in the plot.

Ibsen reshapes the WMP's focus on events into a focus on social problems. In the case of *A Doll House*, the focus is on the lack of options for women in society. Really, one could say it is a study of the lack of options for all people in society.

Ibsen refined the WMP format and made it more realistic--for example, discarding asides and soliloquies, motivating all exposition, attributing character behavior to environment and heredity. Internal psychological motivation is emphasized, and his plays are essentially problem plays, with the problems being a social issue.

Ibsen's second play (of the middle period) *A Doll House* (1879) angered people, but his next play, *Ghosts* (1882) outraged audiences. Some of the contemporary reviews said of *Ghosts*:

"This disgusting representation. . . . An open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly. . . . Absolutely loathsome and fetid. . . . Crapulous stuff," [*London Daily Telegraph* on the 1891 London premiere of *Ghosts*].

This is a play without a single obscenity, sexual innuendo, or act of violence. What *Ghosts* does is realistically explore marriage in the Victorian age. *Ghosts* was actually written in response to the criticism of Nora in *The Doll House* for leaving her children/marriage. In *Ghosts*, Ibsen showed what happened to a woman who didn't leave. In so doing, he once again threw a spotlight on the hypocrisy that was taken for granted at that time and the limited options available to women.

"Because of their harsh subject matter, their commitment to rigorous investigation, and their unsentimental. . . analysis, Ibsen's realistic plays shocked and dazzled all of Europe during the 1890s. . . ." [*Theatre* R. Cohen-212-213]. Further, Ibsen led the way for other realistic playwrights. His plays set off a controversy that spread throughout the world, sweeping the realistic movement along with it. Ibsen and his plays changed the way that theatre was written and performed forever.

Notes on *A Doll House*

The title is not the possessive. By changing it to the above, Torvald is included. Ibsen's play is not just about Nora, it is about Torvald also. Ibsen is saying as the play opens, at least, both Nora and Torvald are posing as the couple on top of the wedding cake. In other words, they are each playing their idea of being married, rather than dealing with the realities. What is ironic is that while Nora perceives herself as a doll because first her father and then her husband has had control of her, Torvald is also a doll in that he is manipulated as a puppet would be by public perception--afraid of what his co-workers would think of his friendship of Krogstad. When the play opens, we see Nora alone in the house. As the play ends, Torvald is left alone. As Christine and Krogstad find happiness together as a couple, Nora and Torvald's marriage is breaking apart. There are many parallels in this play. But the crux of the play is Nora's and Torvald's relationship. At the play's end, Nora has gone from being a child or plaything through the painful process of becoming a human being whereas Torvald is more pathetic because he has had his life shattered and he has no inkling as to why.

[HOME](#)