The radical Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, the father of modern realistic drama, earned ridicule and reproof for revealing women's need for validation and for independence from male authority. In 1879, he displaced the standard pattern of domestic playwriting in his landmark social drama *A Doll's House*. Critics and moralists assailed him for publishing a decadent and subversive play that lionizes a woman guilty of fraud and of deserting her husband, home, and children. Ibsen's depiction of Nora Helmer as a sensible family financier helped to direct the course of feminist stage drama and to establish themes of middle-class hypocrisy and the emotional and financial strangulation of women by patriarchal marriage. Neither comic nor tragic in structure, the play depicts the daily tides in domestic lives that erode accepted social and religious codes.

By stripping the dialogue of the amusing husband-wife badinage common to domestic drama, the playwright relieves the atmosphere of sentimentality. He reveals the growing discontent that prefaces Nora's lengthy statement of unhappiness and that sends her on a yet-to-be discovered path to a new life. Of his perspective, he remarked, "There are two kinds of spiritual law . . . one in man and one in woman . . . but the woman is judged in practical matters by man's law" (Ferguson, 230). He stressed that Europe "is exclusively a male society with laws written by men and with prosecutors and judges who judge women's behavior from the male standpoint" (*ibid*.). He was successful with his experimental drama of ideas, which flourished in productions in Copenhagen, Munich, Oslo, and Stockholm. His publisher reprinted the play twice within 12 weeks and ordered translations in English, Finnish, German, Italian, Polish, and Russian. One of the strongest performers of the role of Nora Helmer was the Italian actress Eleanora Duse.

Ibsen's focus on the theme of miseducation and subjugation of women derives clout from the title, which suggests the gingerbread dollhouses in which little girls set make-believe families in structured domestic scenarios. Torvald miniaturizes his wife with his choice of demeaning epithets—"my little lark," "my little squirrel," "my little spendthrift," and "little featherhead" (Ibsen, 3, 4). From his self-ennobling perspective as bank manager, he further devalues her for thinking "like a woman" by borrowing money against his wishes (*ibid.*, 4). The pet names dot the dialogue of act 1—"odd little soul," "Miss Sweet-Tooth," "poor little girl" (*ibid.*, 6, 7). Echoing the father-daughter charade, Nora cajoles, connives, and lies like a child as her only means of negotiating with a husband who confuses his conjugal role with fatherhood. As an automaton, she performs the appointed tasks of mother, hostess, and nurse during his illness. In breaking out of the harness of the well-disciplined mate, she violates his dictates by negotiating a loan with a forged signature to pay for his year's recuperation in Italy.

The revelation of Nora's violation of the male banking hegemony forces viewers to examine the absurdity of treating women as senseless children. After eight years as husband and wife, they react differently to blackmail by Nils Krogstad, a disgruntled bank clerk. To Torvald, the clerk's coercion threatens scandal and an end to Torvald's reputation for refinement and business acumen. He sees Nora as "a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal!" (*ibid.*, 59). To Nora, Torvald's superficial response and his removal of their three children from Nora's care produce a climax to mounting disenchantment that sends her over the edge. No longer willing to dress, dance, and recite like a wind-up toy, she denounces the patriarchal system that transfers women from their fathers' hands into those of paternal husbands. She rejects Torvald's offer to retrain her and takes responsibility for her own rehabilitation.

**Further Information**


