UNIT 9: HENRIK IBSEN: *A DOLL'S HOUSE* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Summary of the Play

9.4 Significance of the Title

9.5 Major Characters

9.6 Major Themes

9.7 Style and Language

9.8 Let us Sum up

9.9 Further Reading

9.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

9.11 Model Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the content and context of the play
- discuss the role of major characters
- explain the themes relevant to the play
- analyse the style and language employed by the playwright
- critically examine the ending of the play

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit,you haveread about the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and the related background details. Now in this present Unit, you will get an opportunity to read one of his most **influential** play *A Doll's House* and look at things in **microscopic** details.*The play A Doll's House* is a realistic stage drama in three acts. It depicts ordinary life as it is, not as one would like it to be.This play **manifests** Ibsen's concern for women's rights, and for human rights in general.



Influential: significant

Microscopic: minutely

Manifests: show/exhibit

Frederik Hegel & Son first published the play on December 4, 1879, in Copenhagen.Seventeen days later, it was staged for the first time in Copenhagen's Royal Danish Theater. Ibsen wrote the play in Dano-Norwegian, a mixture of the Danish language and Norwegian dialects.Many translators took up the initiative to translate it into English which helped him find a prominent place in the mainstream literature. Most English translations of the play are titled A Doll's House, whereas some scholars are of the opinion *A Doll House* is a more accurate translation of the original Norwegian. For our study, we would consider *A Doll's House* translation and look at the play at different levels relating it with the context and background of the time.

The play *A Doll's House*,that you are going to read in details in this Unit, is set in Norway. The setting of the play is the home of Mr. and Mrs. Torvald Helmer during the Christmas season in the late 1800's. All the action takes place in a single room in their household. The room, however, is the world, a microcosm representing the household culture and the society during that time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. When was the play *A Doll's House* first published?

Q2. In which language is the play originally written?

Q3. Discuss the setting of the play.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Torvald Helmer: A lawyer

Nora Helmer:Torvald's wife

Dr. Rank: Torvald's closest friend

Mrs Linde: Nora's childhood friend

Nils Krogstad: A bank clerk

Minor Characters

Ivar, Emmy, Bob: The Helmers' three small children

Anne Marie: Nora's former nanny, she now cares for the children

Helene: The Helmers' maid

Delivery Boy

9.3 SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

ACT 1:

The setting of the play is Christmas eve. As the play begins Nora is seen entering home after Christmas shopping.Torvald, her husband emerges to greet her with questions about her spending, calling Nora his "little lark," "squirrel," and "sweet tooth." When she expresses her desire to show her husband what she has bought, Torvald teases her as "**spendthrift**". Nora replies that with Torvald's new positon in the bank,they can afford to spend now.But her husband retorts by saying that he will not take over that position until after the new year begins so she should be cautious enough. And he does not prefer to be in debt by being extravagant.They are seen discussing about finances which indicates they must have had hard time financially. But, he says, he loves his "lovely little singing bird" just the way she is, and he would not want her to change.



Spendthrift : a person who spends money in ah irresponsible way.

In the midst of their discussion,the maid announces Torvald that their family friend, Dr. Rank, awaits him in his room. When Torvald has gone, another visitor Kristine Linde, arrives to see Nora.They have not seen each other for the past ten years.Mrs Linde tells about her unfortunate life who was married unlovingly, childless widowed for the past three years. She says that Nora is quite a lucky woman for not to know any hardship in her life. Nora instantly retorts by saying that how she borrowed 250 pounds when Torvald's health was in such danger that he needed to go to a southern climate to improve his condition. She had to borrowed money for the treatment then, but she lies Torvald that her father had left them the money. She in order to hide the truth forged her father's signature and borrowed the money from Krogstad. She kept her husband in false **illusion** just to make sure that his male ego is



salvage: save

to spill the beans: to reveal the secret

not hurt. While she told Torvald that her father had left them the money. Nora adds that the real truth is still hidden from her husband. She describes how she has been secretly repaying installments of the debt by cutting down her personal expenses and taking in copying work to do at night. Mrs Linde is amazed to know that Tolvard is not aware of this fact completely.The play progresses with the women pouring their heart out to each other.

The maid announces another visitor Nils Krogstad for Torvald. He is a moneylender who is now lower-level employee at Torvald's bank. Nora is clearly uneasy when she sees him. He comes with the hope to **salvage** his position at the bank by speaking to Torvald. Leaving the study to allow Krogstad a private talk with his chief, Dr. Rank emerges to greet the ladies.The physician characterises Krogstad as "morally diseased." According to Dr. Rank, the lawyer refuses to submit to his fate, despite great agony, in the hopes of a change in his position.

After Krogstad leaves, Nora convinces her husband into giving Mrs. Linde a position at the bank. Krogstad again returns with a threat: Nora must convince her husband to keep Krogstad' sposition retained at the bank, or else he would spill the beans. Upon Torvald's return, when Nora talks to her husband into favour Krogstad and saves him, and Torvald explains that Krogstad lost his own reputation due to forgery. Torvald returns to his study, leaving Nora anxious but determined.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. What are the pet names used by Torvald for his wife?

Q5. When does Torvald plans to join his new position in the bank?

Q6. Who is Mrs. Kristine Linde?

Q7. Why did Nora had to borrow a huge amount of money secretly?

Q8. Why does Krogstag blackmails Nora?

ACT 2

The curtain rises on the same room the next day, which is Christmas. The **messiness** of the area around the Christmas tree indicates that the Christmas Eve celebration has taken place.Mrs Linde arrives to help Nora repair a masquerade dress for a costume function that Torvald and she plan to attend the next day.Torvald returns from the bank while Nora seizes an opportunity to convince her husband that Krogstad be retained in the bank. Nora says she is afraid he might write **malicious** statement in the newspapers regarding Tovald, threatening his new position just as her father had once been threatened. Torvald assertively dismisses Nora's plea and retires back to his study. He says that Krogstad is an embarrassment and that he cannot work with him any longer. When Nora calls Torvald's reasoning petty, he becomes upset and sends Krogstad's **termination** letter to his home.



Messiness: untidiness

Malicious : the desire toharm others

Dr. Rank, the family friend, arrives. Nora asks him for a favour, but Rank responds by revealing that he has entered the **lethal** stage of tuberculosis of the spine and he is dying.He also expresses himself by saying that he has always been secretly in love with her. Nora feels disturbed by his declaration of love. She tries to explain him that she is not in love with him, but that she just loves him dearly as a friend.



Termination : the act of firing or dismissing someone

Lethal : deadly

Retrieve : get back

Krogstad, who has just received Torvald's letter of dismissal visits Nora and is furious for being fired. He returns to threaten Nora again and tells her that he no longer bothers about the remaining loan that she owes him. Instead, he would now use the situation in his favour by blackmailing them. Nora convinces him that she has done her best to persuade her husband, but he refuses to change his mind. Krogstad, who is in the revengeful mood, informs Nora that he has written a letter about all her crime (forging her father's signature)and has dropped a letter to Torvald in the letter-box,which is locked. Mrs Linde on the other hand,offers to persuade Krogstad to ask for the letter back,unread later assures Nora that she and Krogstad were into relationship in the past and she would try to convince Krogstag to be less severe regarding the matter.

Masquerade: a party, dance, or other festive gathering of persons wearing masks and other disguises, and often elegant, historical, or fantastic costumes.

Torvald enters and tries to **retrieve** his mail, but Nora,in order to distract him, begs him to help her with the tarantella dance she will perform at the **masquerade**. When the second Act ends,Torvald has not yet read Krogstad's letter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9. What is the reason behind Nora persuading her husband to retain Krogstad in the bank and not be severe on him?

Q10. What did Dr. Rank confess Nora?

Q11. What is the relationship between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad?

ACT 3

The act opens, once again, in the Helmer's living room, where MrsLinde awaits the Helmers' return from the party upstairs.Krogstad soon appears in the doorway, having received a note from Mrs. Linde asking her to meet him. As Mrs. Linde waits, Krogstad arrives at her request. She tells him that they have "a great deal to talk about," and it becomes apparent that Mrs. Linde once had romantic relations with Krogstad but in order to meet the financial difficulties for the sake of her brothers and mother,she had to marry another man,who had more money. Mrs. Linde says that she felt the marriage was necessary then because of the circumstances but she regrets having ignored her heart. Now they both meet at such **juncture** of life where she is a widow whereas Krogstad a widower. She tells Krogstad that she wants to get back together with him, to take care of him and his children. Krogstad is overjoyed and moved and offers to take back his letter to Torvald. However, Mrs Linde changes her mind and decides that Torvald must find out the truth. According to her, secrecy and **deception** should no longer exist in the lives of the Helmers.

Juncture: a particular point in events or time.

Deception: cheating /trickery

Nora and Torvald are back from the party. He is annoyed to find Mrs Linde waiting up for them.Mrs Linde tells Nora of her talk with Krogstadand tells Nora to make a full confession to her husband regarding the debt.In the

meantime,Torvald opens letter box and finds two of Dr Rank's visiting card with' a black cross above his name' among the letters. Nora explains to Torvald that this means that Dr. Rank has gone away to die. In the meanwhile,Torvald reads Krogstad's letter and confronts her with it. He is very much in shock and calls Nora 'a **hypocrite**, a liar,worse than that, a criminal'. He says their marriage has lost all trust and faith. He adds that for the sake of appearance, she may still live in the house, but she will not be allowed to raise the children and shall share no intimacy with her husband. At this point of tensed atmosphere, their maid enters, delivering a letter to Nora which is from Krogstad. Torvald demands to read the letter, taking it from Nora. It informs of Nora's cancelled debt, which makes Torvald happy again. He dismisses the fact that Nora had to make the choice just for the sake of his health. His male ego on the other hand fails to understand this fact. She says that he has failed to understand his wife and she has been treated as a doll, first by her father then by him. She finally announces that she is leaving him in order discover her true self.Torvald pleads her but she remains undaunted in her decision saying that she will never see her children nor she would wish him to write to her or send her help. Nora exits her doll's house, and the audience is left with the sound of a door slamming shut.



Hypocrite: a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q12: What led Kristine Linde marry somebody else even though she and Krogstad were involved in a romantic relationship?

Q13. What does the black cross above Dr Rank's visiting card indicate?

Q14. What is Torvald's reaction towards Nora,after he reads Krogstad's letter?

Q15. Discuss the ending of the play.

9.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

The title *A Doll's House* has a symbolic significance in relation to the play. The doll represents Nora, the central character; and the house stands for the house of Helmer where Nora lives. Nora compares her existence to a doll which hints towards her passive existence at home.Doll symbolises beauty, passivity and basically feminine quality.The doll represents Nora the central character, and the house stands for the house of Torvald Helmer where Nora lives. It is the house for her which is 'just a place to live in', 'a shelter', 'a lifeless thing'.Indeed, for Nora, the house of Helmer has never been a home; it has been a house. Her role in the house is as passive as adoll.

She never gets the respect worth as a wife and mother, but instead, gets attention by acting up and pretending to be childish.Her husband treats her in a manner just like a child treats its doll. The title is thus, very appropriate and is also indicative of the theme of the play. At the end of the play, Nora claims that she had been her father's doll until her marriage and Helmer's doll for eight long years since her marriage. The word "house" also has symbolic suggestions and thematically significant connotations. "House", as contrasted to "home", means 'a structure or shelter to live in', unlike "home" which means 'a house where one's family lives and one gets love and care".For Nora,it was a just a house and not a home and she was the doll of the house.

"...But our home has never been anything but a play-room, I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's dollchild. And the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went and played with them. That's been our marriage ,Torvald…. "(Act 3;Page 82)

Thus, we can conclude that the titleof the play *A Doll's House* has been aptly justified.The title itself is loaded with enough meaning for the readers to form a basic idea regarding the play.

9.5 MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nora Helmer*:*

Nora, is the protagonist of the play,mother of three children and the "doll-wife" of Torvald Helmer.Initially in the play,she is seen always making an effort to charm her husband. Nora is her husband's "singing lark," his pretty "little squirrel," and his "little spendthrift."Torvald at times accuses her for being extravagant. But we rather discover that she doesn't spend on herself but just on her children. She makes all effort to save the money and pay back the secret loan. She is rather self-sacrificing in nature but her husband fails to understand her true worth. She is seen pretending to be subservient to him. She says to her husband, "I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to". She doesn't seem to protest in the beginning of the play. There is communication gap in the relationship between her and her husband. She finds in Dr Rank an emotional substitute for her husband.She tells Dr Rank, "Keep coming as you have always done. "Towards the end,we find her as a rebellious character who breaks all chains imposed upon her and sets to explore her own self by abandoning her husband and children behind.

Torvald Helmer:

Nora's husband, a newly promoted bank manager, Torvald is enamoured of his wife.He represents the dominant male in the male dominant society. He fails to see situation from Nora's perspective and is hard on those who break the moral and social norms of the society. He sees himself as a model of moral uprightness and is harsh on Nora at times.When Helmer reads Krogstad's first letter,his violent reaction speaks about him.He fails to understand the gravity of the situation. His wife borrowed money just to save his life. But he is not considerate enough and fails to look at circumstances and situation from Nora's point of view. He even lacks humility and simplicity. His references to Nora's father are particularly offensive. He does not see life beyond job and a good healthy income. He fails to be an ideal husband in the play which probably compels Nora to abandon him and his home and she moves on in her life.

Mrs Linde:

Mrs Kristine Linde is Nora's old school friend, widow, and is seeking employment. She was in a relationship with Krogstad but she marries somebody else for financial security. She seems to be strong enough who had battled a lot in life. Herself a widow, she wishes to rebuild her life again with Krogstad,who is a widower too. Even though she has lost everything,we see her in a better light than Nora.She moves to Nora's town seeking new employment, and she comes to Nora's home hoping to secure an office job at Torvald's bank.. She is a strong character in the play and does not submit her situation to fate. She is rather ready to start afresh her new life.She even extends help to Helmers but convincing Krogstad to take up all the charges against them.And in the process,she makes Krogstad a better person. At the end of the play,she takes a bold stand. She wants Torvald to know Nora's secret and she feels "there should be an end to secrecy and deception between the husband and wife"; and this seems to speaks volume about her .

9.6 MAJOR THEMES

Quest for Identity: This is a major theme that runs through the play. In a society which is very much male-centric, Nora is seen dedicating her life to the service of her husband and children. There comes a point when she is not even acknowledged for all her sacrifices she made. She never gets her true position as a wife in the house that she longs for, but rather she is being treated like a doll.Torvald calls her "little lark," "squirrel," spendthrift," and "sweet tooth". He controls Nora's life to the point that he monitors what and how much she eats, refers to her with demeaning pet names such as "my little spendthrift", and pats her on the head like a puppy. Nora even claims that she before marriage she was doll to her father. The situation, however, does not change ever after her marriage.Towards the end,she feels that she can find her true identity outside the doll's house. Therefore, she decides to move on abandoning her children and husband. By the end of the play, she has realised her true strength and strikes out as

an independent woman. She is being repressed by a husband who expects her to fulfill her wifely and motherly roles under strict guidelines of morality and appearance.Nora finally discovers that she has a will of her own. Ultimately, she comes to a realisation that there is only one path that leads to her true identity- and that path begins outside the doll house.

Deception: This is also an important theme in the play. Nora forged a signature to borrow a large sum of money previously, and is struggling to pay it back without Torvald's knowledge, even though the money was ironically borrowed to save his life. She lies her husband that she had borrowed the money from her father. But in reality, it was Krogstad from whom she borrowed the money. Again,the characters in this play are under the false illusion of certain facts. The Helmer marriage appears loving, but turns out that the basic foundation of their marriage is built on lies, play-acting and an unequal relationship. Dr Rank acts the role of friend to Torvald and Nora, but we later discover the true motive for his daily visits: he is in love with Nora. Torvald, for all his faults, appears to be a loving, and generous husband. But in reality he is a shallow, vain man, concerned mainly with his reputation in public. He fails to be an ideal husband to Nora.

Women as an Epitome of Sacrifice and Strength: The major women characters,both Nora and Mrs Linde stands as an epitome of sacrifice and strength. Nora's assertion (spoken to Torvald in Act Three) that even though men refuse to sacrifice their integrity, "hundreds of thousands of women have."She is called by her husband as "spendthrift", whereas we see in the play that she is not extravagant for herself but only for the children. Furthermore, she must work in secret to pay off her loan for her husband's treatment which he is unaware of. In case of Mrs Linde ,we see that in order to support her mother and two brothers, she abandons Krogstad, her true—but penniless—love, and marry a richer man. Nora's abandonment of her children can also be interpreted as an act of self- sacrifice. Despite Nora's great love for her children, she chooses to leave them in great fear of corrupting them.

9.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE



Pioneer : develop or be the first to use or apply (a new method, area of knowledge, or activity)
Genre: a style or category of art, music, or literature
Colloquial : conversational
tinge: trace
Grandiose: extravagant
lofty: high

Ibsen was the **pioneer** of realistic drama;other writers in this **genre** were Chekhov, Strindberg, Shaw, and O'Neill. In realistic dramas,the language used is **colloquial** speech without any **tinge** of complexities as opposite to **grandiose** speech and **lofty** tones.Ibsen has tried to capture the society of his time as it is rather than as it should be. Ibsen's characters are ordinary people going about their ordinary lives.The tone is conversational in the play whereas the characters are continuously involved in conversation with each other.The story in the play is told directly through the characters; there are no visible narrators in the play.

There are also use of **monologues** in the play, most often from Nora, but also Mrs Linde at times.The use of monologues reflects the character's frame of mind whether they are in strong agitation, upset, or in despair etc.

"Five.Seven hours to midnight.The twenty-four hours till the next midnight.Then the tarantella will be over.Twenty-four and seven? Thirty-one hours to live." (Act-2;Page 63)

The play overall is written is three Acts,which makes an easy read for the readers to delve deep into the lives of the characters.



9.8 LET US SUM UP

After studying the unit on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the learner will be able to provide a detailed explanation of the content and context of the play.The play has been summarized Act wise for the convenience of the reader.A detailed comprehension of the play will enable the learner to highlight the relevant themes and to compare and contrast the major characters in the play.

The detailed glossary provided alongside the text of the play will prove beneficial to the learner's and will also serve as an easy reference. An analysis of the style and language of the prescribed play will be beneficial

for the learner to develop a more critical approach towards the reading of the text.



9.9 FURTHER READING

1) Barnet, Burto, Ferris and Rabkin (2001) *Types of Drama: Plays and Contexts* 8th edition. United States: Longman Publishing

2) Bradbrook, M.C. (1966) *Ibsen - the Norwegian*. 3rd edition. London: Chatto & Windus Ltd.

3) Ibsen, H.*A Doll's House*. (Mcfarlane W James, trans.) Student edition.Reading,Oxford University Press

4) Templeton, J. (1997) *Ibsen's Women* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

9.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Ans to Q1: The play *A Doll's House* was first published the play on December 4, 1879.

Ans to Q2: Ibsen originally wrote the play in Dano-Norwegian, a mixture of the Danish language and Norwegian dialects.

Ans to Q3: The play *A Doll's House*,is set in Norway. The setting of the play is the home of Mr. and Mrs. Torvald Helmer during the Christmas season in the late 1800's. All the action takes place in a single room in their household.

Ans to Q4: Torvald calls Nora his "little lark," "squirrel," and "sweet tooth."

Ans to Q5: Torvald says that he will not take over his new position in the bank until after the new year begins.

Ans to Q6: Mrs Linde is Nora's childhood friend,a childless widow who comes to Nora in search of job.

Ans to Q7: Torvald's health was in such danger that he needed to go to a southern climate to improve his condition.Cimcumstances compelled Nora to borrow money for the treatment then as they were financially not well off.

Ans to Q8: Nora actually forged her father's signature and borrowed the money from Krogstad.When Krogstad senses that Torvald would sack him out of the job,he takes Nora's secret as defence mechanism in order to save himself.He wants that Nora should talk to her husband in his favour so that his position in the bank is retained.

Ans to Q9: Nora persuades her husband to retain Krogstad in the bank just because Krogstad was blackmailing her that he would reveal about the secret loan that she borrowed for him to her husband.

Ans to Q10: Dr Rank confesses Nora that he has always been secretly in love with her.

Ans to Q11: Krogstad and Mrs Linde were former lovers who didn't end up marrying each other.

Ans to Q12: Dr Rank's visiting card with 'a black cross above his name' among the letters,according to Nora, indicates that he has gone away to die.

Ans to Q13: Torvald is very much shocked to read Krogstad's letter and calls Nora 'a hypocrite,a liar,worse than that, a criminal'. He says their marriage has lost all trust and faith. He also adds that for the sake of appearance, she may still live in the house, but she will not be allowed to raise the children and shall share no intimacy with her husband.

Ans to Q14: After Torvald's reaction,Nora says she has been treated as a doll, first by her father then by him. She announces that she is leaving him in order discover her true self. Torvald pleads her but she remains undaunted in her decision saying that she will never see her children nor she would wish him to write to her or send her help. Nora exits her doll's house, and the audience is left with the sound of a door slamming shut.



9.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Compare in details the two female characters Nora and Kristine's lives since marriage.

Q2. Give a character sketch of the following characters:

a. Torvald Helmer

b. Nora

c. Kristine Linde

Q3. Discuss the significance of the title of the play.

Q4. What are the major themes present in the play? Discuss in details.

Q5. What do you think is the role of Dr. Rank in *A Doll's House?*

Q6. Discuss the different symbols used in the play.

Q7. Discus the style and language of the play.

****