

'A Doll's House'

by

Henrik Ibsen



Study guide

Name: _____

Short questions:

1. Who are the main characters?
2. Identify the protagonist of the play.
3. Identify the antagonist.
4. What day of the year does the play begin?
5. How many children do the Helmers have?
6. How many acts are in the play?
7. What does Torvald do for a living?
8. Who is Mrs. Linde?
9. How much money did Nora borrow?
10. What country did the Helmers go to?
11. When did Nora's father die?
12. What date did she sign the cheque?
13. Why does she dance for Torvald?
14. What does she need a dress for?
15. What day does the play end?

Comprehension questions:

1. Describe the relationship between Nora and Helmer.
2. What is supposed to happen for Helmer at the beginning of the new year, and what will it mean for him and his family?
3. How did Krogstad persuade Nora to try to influence Helmer on his behalf?
4. What crime had Krogstad committed, and what was Helmer's reaction to it?
5. Why doesn't Nora want to see her children at the end of Act One?
6. What final arguments does Helmer make to Nora as reasons for firing Krogstad?
7. What was in Krogstad's letter to Helmer?
8. How does Mrs. Linde plan to help Nora?
9. Why did Mrs. Linde tell Krogstad not to go get the letter back?
10. What was Torvald's reaction to Krogstad's letter?
11. What did Torvald do when he opened the envelope containing the document from Krogstad?
12. Why did Nora leave Torvald?
13. Did you like the play? Why/why not? Give reasons.

Past exam questions:

A DOLL'S HOUSE Henrik Ibsen (2004)

1. (a) Why does Krogstad first call on Nora and why is she so upset by what he says? (10)

(b) Do you think Nora is a capable or a useless person? Explain your view. (10)

(c) Do you think Nora is right to leave Torvald and her children? Refer to the play to support your view. (10)

2. (i) The ending of *A Doll's House* shocked people when it was first performed. Do you think it would shock people today? Support your answer with reference to the play.

(ii) Your class is having a debate on the motion that *A Doll's House* is not true to life. Write out the speech you would make for or against the motion.

(iii) Have your views on love and marriage changed as a result of reading *A Doll's House*? Explain why or why not, referring to the text in support of the points you make.

A DOLL'S HOUSE - Henrik Ibsen (2012)

1. (a) Describe Helmer's treatment of Nora in the early part of the play. (10)
2. (b) In your opinion, why did Nora not tell Helmer that she was being blackmailed by Krogstad? Support your answer with reference to the text. (10)
3. Explain what you find most interesting about Krogstad. (10)
4. (i) 'Helmer is a difficult character to like.'

Do you agree with this statement? Base your answer on your knowledge of the play.

1. (ii) Based on your knowledge of the play, write a piece beginning with one of the following prompts:

- - I would like to live in Nora's world because ...
- - I would not like to live in Nora's world because ...

2.(iii) Imagine your school is staging this play. Which character would you most or least like to play on stage? Explain your choice with detailed reference to the text.

A DOLL'S HOUSE - Henrik Ibsen (2017)

1. (a) Describe the relationship between Nora Helmer and Christine Linde.

Support your answer with reference to the text. (10)

(b) Explain why you do or do not admire Nora Helmer. Support your answer with reference to the text. (10)

(c) Identify one episode or incident from the play, *A Doll's House*, which you find shocking or surprising. Explain why you find this episode or incident shocking or surprising. (10)

1. (i) Imagine your class has decided to stage a production of Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, and you are the set

designer. Describe, in words, the set you would create for the Helmers' living room. Your set design should demonstrate your knowledge of the play, *A Doll's House*.

(ii) In your opinion, which of the following observations is more accurate?

a.- The female characters in the play are more fascinating than the male characters.

b.- The male characters in the play are more fascinating than the female characters.

Explain your answer with reference to at least one male character and one female character in the play, *A Doll's House*.

(iii) "Despite being first performed in 1879, Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, is both interesting and relevant to readers and theatre audiences today."

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Your answer should demonstrate your knowledge of the play.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1870s were dominated by strict Victorian social codes and laws that severely restricted the rights of all women, and married women in particular. Governments throughout Europe used the Napoleonic Code, which prevented women from engaging in financial transactions.

Many women who conducted their own business or earned their own wages chose not to marry because the laws regarding what married women could do when it came to finances were so limiting. By the beginning of the 20th century, things were beginning to change as the female suffrage movement swept over Europe and the world and women were awarded rights such as the right to own property and the right to vote. However, for most people in the late 1870s, such eventualities were not yet even a distant dream.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Doll's House (Norwegian: Ett dukkehjem)
- **When Written:** 1879
- **Where Written:** Dresden, Germany
- **When published:** Published and first performed in December 1879
- **Literary Period:** Realism; modernism
- **Genre:** Realist modern prose drama
- **Setting:** A town or city in Norway
- **Climax:** When Torvald discovers the letter from Krogstad revealing Nora's secret
- **Antagonist:** At first Krogstad, then Torvald

EXTRA CREDIT

A True Story: A Doll's House is based on the life of Ibsen's family friend Laura Kieler, whose actions inspired the story of Nora's secret

debt. In reality, however, Kieler did not forge a signature, and when her husband, Victor, discovered her secret, he divorced her and forced her to be committed to an insane asylum. Ibsen, appalled by Kieler's committal, wrote *A Doll's House* in part as a way of defending her. After two years in the asylum Kieler returned to live with her husband and children and became a famous author in Denmark.

Scandalous: When it was first performed and for many years afterwards, '*A Doll's House*' caused quite the scandal for its criticism of 19th-century marriage customs and portrayal of a woman abandoning her family in order to gain a sense of self. Pressured by several theatres and even the actress who was supposed to play Nora in a German production of the play, Ibsen wrote an alternative ending, in which Nora, upon seeing her children, changes her mind and stays with Torvald. He later regretted doing this, calling the adapted ending "a barbaric outrage."

Characters

Nora Helmer - Nora Helmer is the heroine of the play. Still a young woman, she is married to Torvald Helmer and has three children. At the play's outset, she is bubbly and carefree, excited about Christmas and her husband's recent promotion. Although she is frustrated by the fact that the other characters believe she is a "spendthrift," she does not seem to really mind, and happily plays along with Torvald's pet names for her, which include "skylark," "songbird," "squirrel," and "pet." Torvald also regularly refers to her and treats her as a child, for example, by forbidding her from eating macaroons, something she does anyway despite her promises of total obedience to him.

The animal and child imagery both reflect Nora's apparently innocent, carefree nature, and suggest that her husband does not think of her as a proper adult because she is a woman. As the play progresses, it is revealed that Nora's disobedience consists of more than simply eating the occasional macaroon: at the beginning of her marriage, she

secretly borrowed money from Nils Krogstad and forged her father's signature in order to finance a trip to Italy that was necessary to save Torvald's life. When Torvald finds out about the debt and fails to forgive her until he is sure that his reputation is safe, Nora realises that her understanding of herself, her husband, her marriage, and even her society was all wrong.

Therefore, she decides that she can no longer be happy in her life and marriage, and resolves to leave Torvald and her home in order to find a sense of self and learn about the world. The play's final image of Nora is of an embittered yet sophisticated, intelligent, and newly empowered woman boldly escaping the infantilising clutches of her old life.

Torvald Helmer - Torvald Helmer is a lawyer who at the play's outset has recently been promoted to Bank Manager. He is married to Nora Helmer, with whom he has three children. He does not seem particularly fond of his children, even once saying that their presence makes the house "unbearable to anyone except mothers." Straightforward and traditional in his beliefs about marriage and society, he

loves and is very affectionate towards Nora, but often treats her more as a pet, child, or object than as a real person. His best friend is Dr. Rank, who visits him every day. However, towards the end of the play this friendship is revealed to be something of a façade, as Torvald seems untroubled and even a little relieved at the thought of Dr. Rank's death.

A similar occurrence happens when he finds out about Nora's secret debt and instantly turns on her until he realises that his reputation is safe. Torvald's focus on status and being treated as superior by people like Nils Krogstad, highlights his obsession with reputation and appearances. When Nora tells him she is leaving him, Torvald at first reacts by calling her mad and saying she is acting like a stupid child. However, when he realises how resolute she is in her decision, Torvald offers to change and desperately searches for a way to stay with her. His despair as Nora exits at the very end of the play suggests that, despite his patronising and unjust treatment of her, Torvald really does love Nora (or at least the idea of her).

Kristine Linde - Mrs. Linde, as she is generally known to the other characters, is an old friend of Nora's. She is a woman whose marriage was loveless, and based on a need for financial security, and who doesn't have any children. She and Krogstad had been in love at the time, but he was too poor to support her family. She arrives in town in search of a job in order to earn money and survive independently. In this way, she is a fairly modern woman; towards the end of the play, she explains to Krogstad that she finds joy and meaning in work.

However, in other ways she is more traditional. She tells both Krogstad and Nora that she is miserable without other people to take care of, thereby fitting into the traditional role of women as caretakers and nurturers. It is this conviction that causes her to marry Krogstad towards the end of the play. She believes very deeply in honesty and stops Krogstad from taking the letter he wrote to Torvald back, thereby ensuring that Torvald find out about Nora's secret. Although this at first seems like a betrayal of Nora, it turns out to ultimately be a decision to Nora's benefit as

it is after Torvald finds out about the debt that Nora is able to see the true nature of her marriage. This twist confirms Mrs. Linde's belief that honesty is always better than deceit, even if Mrs. Linde's expectation was that it was Nora's deceit that needed to be exposed, not the shallowness of Torvald's feelings.

Nils Krogstad - Nils Krogstad is, at least at the beginning, the antagonist of the play. Known to the other characters as unscrupulous and dishonest, he blackmails Nora, who borrowed money from him with a forged signature, after learning that he is being fired from his job at the bank. In the past, he too committed the crime of forgery, an act that he did not go to prison for but that nonetheless ruined his reputation and made it extremely difficult to find a respectable job.

Later in the play, it is revealed that he was once in love with Kristine Linde, who ended up marrying another man in order to have enough money to support her dying mother and young brothers. This left Krogstad lost and embittered, unhappy in his own marriage, and is presented as the reason

behind his moral corruption. At first he treats Nora without mercy on the basis that no mercy has been shown to him in life; however, after he and Mrs. Linde decide to marry, he becomes happier and rescinds his threats to Nora, saying he regrets his behaviour. He is one of several examples in the play of a person being forced into morally questionable action as a result of the rigid and unmerciful forces of society.

Dr Rank - Dr Rank is a doctor who is best friends with Torvald and Nora, who he visits every day. Dr Rank suffers from spinal tuberculosis, a condition he believes was caused by his father's vices, which included having extramarital affairs and consuming too much luxurious food and drink.

Dr Rank is unmarried and lonely, and over the course of the play it is revealed that he is in love with Nora. Cynical about life, he rejoices when he finds out that his illness is terminal, and insists that neither Torvald nor Nora visit him in his dying days. As he predicted, he is not particularly missed by the other characters.

Themes

Marriage

The main message of *A Doll's House* seems to be that a true marriage is a joining of equals. The play centres on the dissolution of a marriage that doesn't meet these standards. At first the Helmers seem happy... but over the course of the play, the imbalance between them becomes more and more apparent.

By the end, the marriage breaks apart due to a complete lack of understanding. Together in wedlock, Nora and Torvald are incapable of realising who they are as individuals.

Questions About Marriage

1. How are ideas of marriage different today than during the time period of the play?
How are they similar?
2. Can the Helmers' marriage be salvaged?

3. How could the Helmers make their marriage equal?

4. Is the destruction of the Helmers' marriage a good or bad thing?

Gender

'*A Doll's House*' exposes the restricted role of women during the time of its writing and the problems that arise from a drastic imbalance of power between men and women. Throughout the play, Nora is treated like a child by the other characters. Torvald calls her his "pet" and his "property," and implies that she is not smart or responsible enough to be trusted with money. Neither Krogstad nor Dr. Rank take her seriously, and even Mrs. Linde calls her a "child."

While this treatment does seem to mildly frustrate Nora, she plays along with it, calling herself "little Nora" and promising that she would never dream of disobeying her husband.

However, there are clues that she is not entirely happy with the limited position she has as a woman. When revealing the secret of how she borrowed money to finance the trip to Italy, she refers to it as her "pride" and says it was fun to be in control of money, explaining that it was "almost like being a man." Although she comes to regret her decision to borrow money, Nora's dissatisfaction with her status as a woman intensifies over the course of the play.

In the final scene she tells Torvald that she is not being treated as an independent person with a mind of her own. Her radical solution to this issue is to leave domestic life behind, despite Torvald's declaration that he will change.

Nora's decision suggests that she, and the play, see the issue as only partially with Torvald. The more fundamental issue is with domestic life as it was conceived and lived at the time, in the way it legally and culturally infantilised women

and made it impossible for them to be recognised or treated as full individuals.

Meanwhile, the men of the play are also expected to fill a certain role. Both Torvald and Krogstad are very ambitious, driven not only by the need to provide for their families but also by a desire to achieve higher status.

Respectability is of great concern to both of them; when Nora's borrowing is revealed, Torvald's first thoughts are for his reputation. Meanwhile, Krogstad is fixated on achieving success now that he has "gone straight," and intends to one day take over Torvald's job and run the bank.

Women and femininity

Nora of *A Doll's House* has often been painted as one of modern drama's first feminist heroines. (Get it, Nora!) Over the course of the play, she breaks away from the domination of her overbearing husband, Torvald. The playwright, Henrik Ibsen, denied that he had

intentionally written a feminist play, preferring to think of it as "humanist."

Still, though, throughout this drama there is constant talk of women, their traditional roles, and the price they pay when they break with tradition.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What are some characteristics of the roles of women in the play?
2. How does Christine's perception of motherhood differ from Nora's by the end of the play?
3. What unique powers do the women in the play have? Are they really as submissive as they seem?
4. What is the difference between feminism and humanism? How can this difference be applied when interpreting the play?

Men and masculinity

The men of *A Doll's House* are in many ways just as trapped by traditional gender roles as the women (Torvald Helmer being the chief example). The men must be providers. They must bear the burden of supporting the entire household. They must be the infallible kings of their respective castles. By the end of the play, these traditional ideas are truly put to the test.

Questions About Men and Masculinity

1. In what ways is Torvald caged by society's prescribed masculine roles?
2. There is usually a lot of discussion about Torvald's sexist behaviour, but what sexism does Krogstad demonstrate? Dr. Rank?
3. In what ways is Torvald's masculine self-worth tied into his public reputation? Krogstad's?

4. Are there any moments in the play where the men defy the gender roles prescribed for them by society?

Love

There is much talk of love in *A Doll's House*, but in the end, the Helmers discover that true love never existed between them. Throughout the play we hear of and see many different forms of love: familial, maternal, paternal, and fraternal. Romantic love even blossoms for two of the secondary characters. However, for the main characters, the Helmers, true romantic love is elusive.

Questions About Love

1. In what ways is Nora's love for Torvald similar to her love for her father? How is it different?
2. What different breeds of love are seen throughout the play?

3. Is Dr. Rank's love of Nora just as superficial as Torvald's, or does he have a deeper understanding of her?
4. Do you think the Helmers ever truly loved each other? What does "truly loved" even mean?

Lies and deceit

The essential tension running throughout *A Doll's House* comes from Nora's fear of a secret being discovered. Her absolute terror of this revelation leads her to tell lie after lie. When her web of lies finally tightens around her, her marriage proves too weak to bear the strain.

Questions About Lies and Deceit

1. How could Nora have saved Torvald without lying?
2. In what ways have Nora's lies weakened her marriage?

3. What deceitful behaviour does Torvald demonstrate?
4. Since Nora's forgery saved her husband's life, was it really a bad thing?

Symbols

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The Christmas tree is delivered in Nora's flurry of excitement for Christmas. It symbolises family happiness and unity, as well as the joy Nora takes in making her home pleasant and attractive. At the beginning of Act Two, the tree has been stripped and the candles burned out; the stage directions dictate that it should look "bedraggled." This represents the end of Nora's innocence and foreshadows the Helmer family's eventual disintegration.

MACAROONS

Torvald has banned Nora from eating macaroons.

Although Nora claims that she never disobeys Torvald, this is proved false in the very opening of the play when Nora eats macaroons while she was alone in the living room. The macaroons come to represent Nora's disobedience and deceit. She lies to Dr. Rank about having been

given some by Mrs. Linde, and after giving a particularly tempestuous performance of the tarantella asks that macaroons be served at dinner, indicating a relationship between the macaroons and Nora's inner passions, both of which she must hide within her marriage.

THE TARANTELLA

Like the macaroons, the tarantella symbolises a side of Nora that she cannot normally show. It is a fiery, passionate dance that allows Nora to drop the façade of the perfect mild-mannered Victorian wife. Throughout the play, Nora uses performance to please Torvald, and the tarantella is no exception; he admits that watching her perform it makes her desire her. However, this is only under very controlled circumstances, and Torvald seems to enjoy the fact that it is a performance that impresses other people more than anything.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE

There are a few mentions of doll's houses early on in the play, for example when Nora shows

Torvald the dolls she bought for her daughter, and says that the fact that they are cheap doesn't matter because she will probably break them soon anyway. This is interesting as it suggests that Nora is raising her daughter for a life similar to Nora's own, yet simultaneously foreshadows Nora breaking up her family life by leaving Torvald. When Nora plays with her children she also refers to them as her "little dollies." However, it is not until the end of the play that the metaphor becomes explicitly clear. Nora tells Torvald that both he and her father treated her like a doll, and cites this as one of the reasons why she has become dissatisfied and disillusioned with her life with him.

Quotes

Nora - "One day I might, yes. Many years from now, when I've lost my looks a little. Don't laugh. I mean, of course, a time will come when Torvald is not as devoted to me, not quite so happy when I dance for him, and dress for him, and play with him."

Nora - "Free. To be free, absolutely free. To spend time playing with the children. To have a clean, beautiful house, the way Torvald likes it."

Torvald - "Nora! Just like a woman. Seriously though, Nora, you know what I think about these things. No debts! Never borrow! There's always something inhibited, something unpleasant, about a home built on credit and borrowed money."

Nora - "Oh, I often got so tired, so tired. But it was great fun, though, sitting there working and earning money. It was almost like being a man."

Nora - "It's your fault that I have done nothing with my life."

Nora - "tell me what to do, keep me right—as you always do."

Torvald - "But my dear darling Nora, you are dancing as though your life depended on it."

Nora - "I have been performing tricks for you, Torvald. That's how I've survived. You wanted it like that. You and Papa have done me a great wrong. It's because of you I've made nothing of my life."

Torvald - "First and foremost, you are a wife and mother."

Nora - "our home has never been anything but a playroom. I've been your doll-wife just as I used to be papa's doll-child."

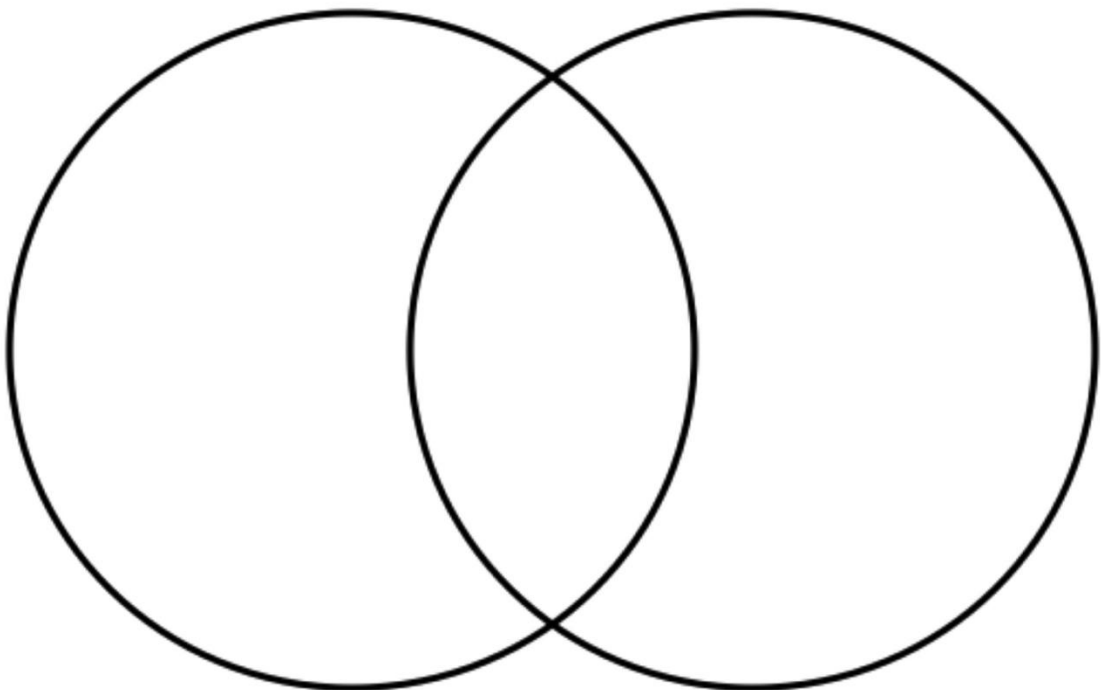
Nora - "I must stand on my own two feet if I am to find out the truth about myself and about life."

Nora - "I don't love you any longer."

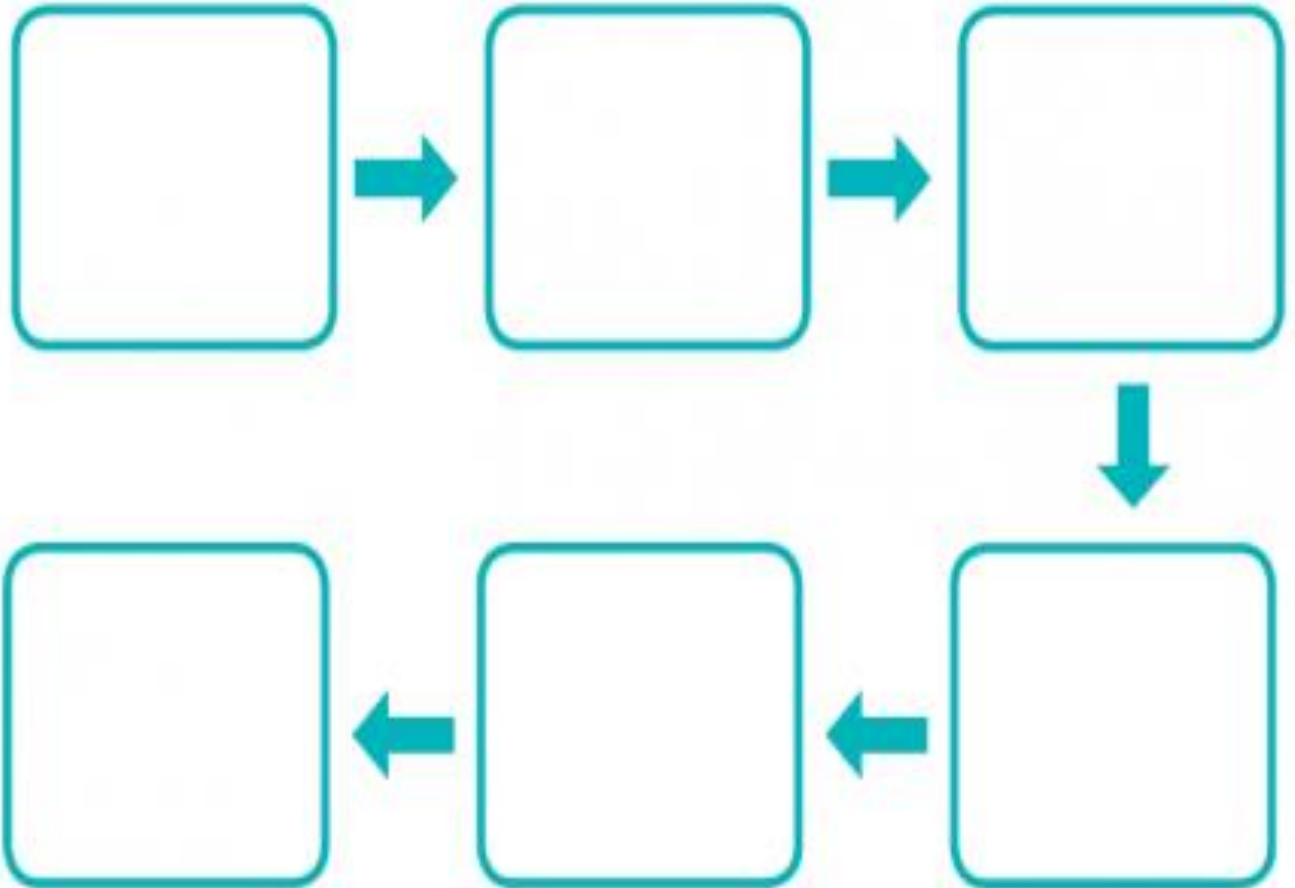
Torvald - "Oh, you think and act like a stupid child."

Activities

1. In pairs, write a **dialogue** from Nora and Torvald's point of view at the end of the play. Write at least **ten lines** each.
2. Complete the Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting two major characters from the play. Think about what they have in common and what they do not have in common.



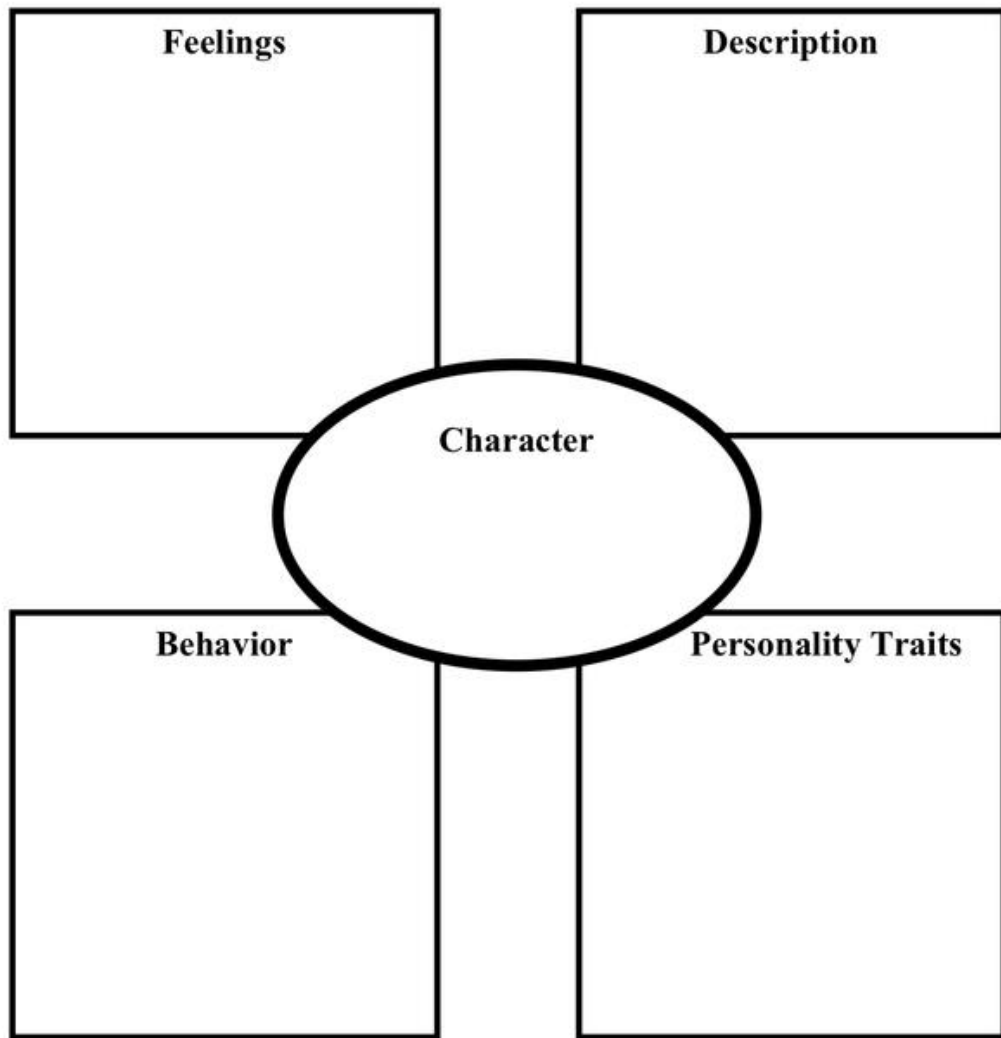
3. Complete the following chart with the key moments from the play. Make sure you put them in **chronological order**.



4. Complete the following character analysis charts about **two** of the major characters from the play.

CHARACTER MAP #1

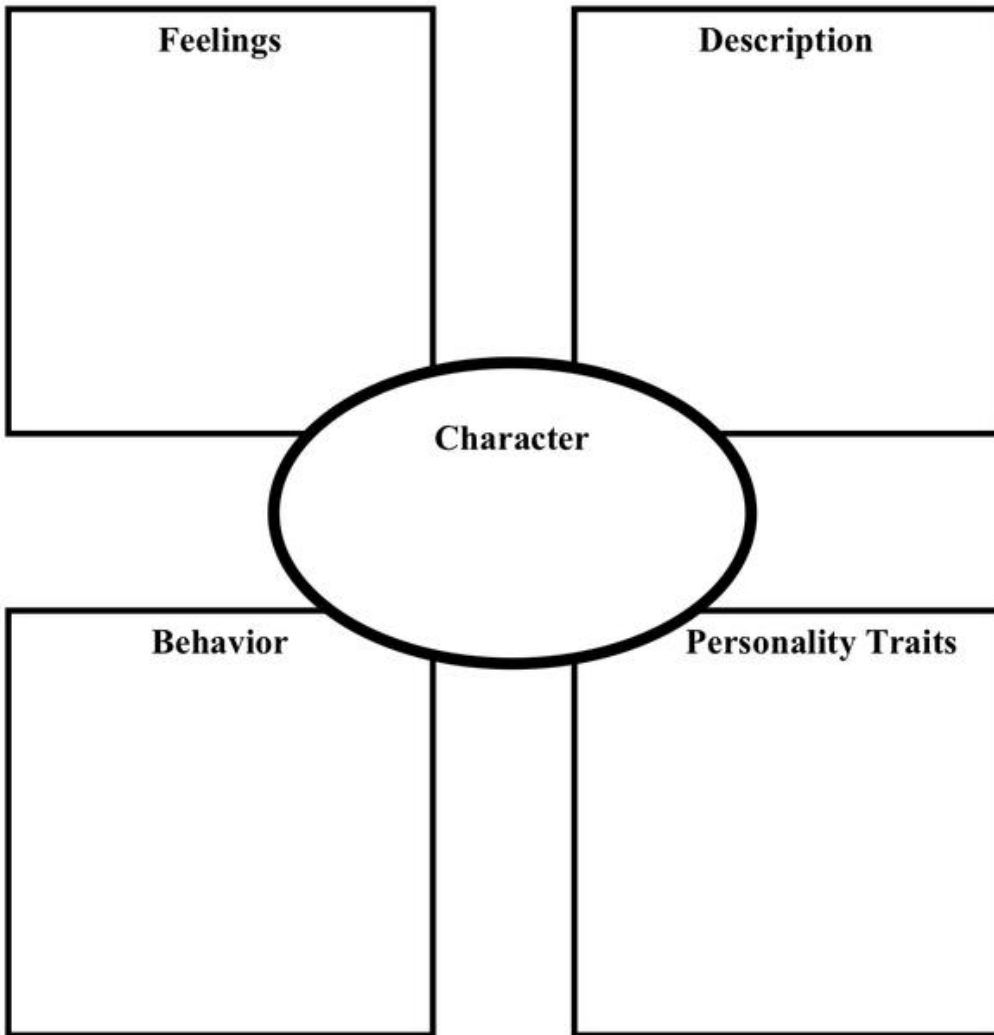
Name: _____ Date: _____



GO.5.1

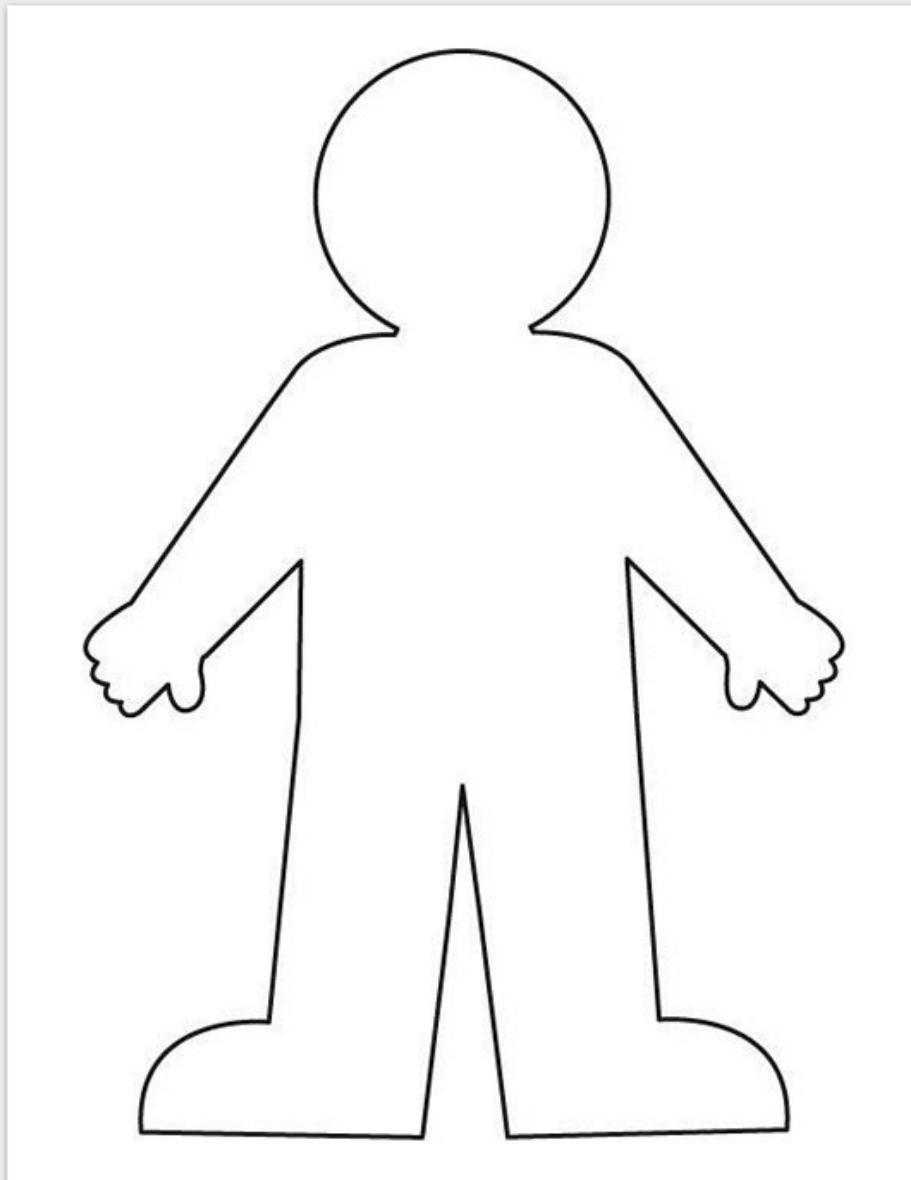
CHARACTER MAP #1

Name: _____ Date: _____



GO.5.1

5. Nora is viewed as the heroine of the play. Note the internal problems /conflicts/ doubts that she faces inside the outline. Note the external problems /conflicts/ doubts that she faces outside the outline. Add in other details that gives a sense of her, her life and problems she faces.



Connecting/link words for writing:

<p>To indicate order...</p> <p>To begin with Next Firstly, Secondly, etc. On second thoughts In conclusion Finally In spite of all</p>	<p>To infer...</p> <p>In other words In that case Otherwise This implies Frankly</p>	<p>To reformulate...</p> <p>In other words That means That is to say I mean Another way of stating this is Another way of putting it is It would be better to say</p>
<p>To express concession...</p> <p>Although Even if Even though Besides Anyhow, anyway In any case At any rate</p>	<p>To refer to...</p> <p>With regard to With reference to Referring to As to, as for According to the latter / the former</p>	<p>To compare to...</p> <p>Likewise Both Whereas While the first might indicate Similarly As for Equally As well as</p>
<p>To express reason / purpose...</p> <p>Therefore That is why For this reason Hence Because So Since As On account of So that</p>	<p>To express place and space...</p> <p>On the right To the left Nearby Between Among Here / there / where In the distance Straight ahead In front of / behind</p>	<p>To add an idea...</p> <p>Moreover Furthermore Also And Similarly Likewise Too Equally In the same manner Besides In addition to</p>
<p>To express condition or consequence...</p> <p>If Unless Suppose that In case of Providing that On condition that Consequently Hence Thus Accordingly As a result It follows that</p> <p>Adapted from English on the Web</p>	<p>To express opposition...</p> <p>But However Nevertheless Otherwise On the other hand On the contrary Yet Still Maybe Perhaps Instead Except for Despite</p>	<p>To express time...</p> <p>When Before / After Now While Since As long as / As soon as No sooner than Subsequently Eventually Initially Previously Recently Meanwhile Lately At last From now on Time and again Often Afterwards</p>

Lexis:

1. Heroine =
2. Embittered =
3. Sophisticated =
4. Infantilising =
5. Fundamental =
6. Conceived =
7. Unbearable =
8. Superior =
9. Despair =
10. Patronising =
11. Deceit =

12. Unscrupulous =

13. Rescinds =

14. Cynical =

15. Rejoices =

16. Overbearing =

17. Humanism =

18. Infallible =

19. Fraternal =

20. Superficial =

21. Foreshadows =

22. Fiery =

23. Disillusioned =

K-W-L Chart		
Topic: _____		
What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned

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My overall thoughts on the play are....