

CONTEXT

E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story 'The Sandman' appeared in 1817 and tells the sinister tale of a man obsessed with a mechanical doll that looks like a real woman but can only say 'Ah, ah!' The ballet *Coppelia*, or the *Girl with the Enamel Eyes* (1870) gave the story a subversive and feminist comic edge. In an amusingly mechanistic dance style Swanilda takes the doll's place in order to play tricks on both the inventor and her boyfriend, who is smitten with its charms.

In 2000 Polly Teale's production at the New Ambassadors in London with the company Shared Experience, known for its devised work as well as theatre classics, placed a large white doll's house on stage, from which Nora emerged at the beginning, dancing to the sound of a musical box. While both Krogstad and Helmer were played by black actors, Jude Akuwudike and Paterson Joseph respectively, the chilly Norwegian setting was emphasised by the bleached-out colour of everything on stage (and the chunky sweater that Mrs Linde was knitting before Helmer demanded pretty embroidery). Nora's father appeared behind her as a silent ghost, underlining Nora's realisation during her talk with Rank that Helmer was a substitute father rather than a partner. At the end, Anne-Marie Duff's Nora unhooked the wall of the house, as if it were literally a doll's house, and walked into a night of swirling snow.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

READING CRITICALLY

This section provides a range of critical viewpoints and perspectives on *A Doll's House* and gives a broad overview of key debates, interpretations and theories proposed since the play was published. It is important to bear in mind the variety of interpretations and responses this text has produced, many of them shaped by the critics' own backgrounds and historical contexts.

No single view of the text should be seen as dominant; it is important that you arrive at your own judgements by questioning the perspectives described, and by developing your own critical insights. Objective analysis is a skill achieved through coupling close reading with an informed understanding of the key ideas, related texts and background information relevant to the text. These elements are all crucial in enabling you to assess the interpretations of other readers, and even to view works of criticism as texts in themselves. The ability to read critically will serve you well both in your study of the text, and in any critical writing, presentation or further work you undertake.

RECEPTION AND CRITICAL VIEWS

EARLY CRITICS

Many of the first European responses to *A Doll's House* focused on its ending. The largely Christian and idealist right wavered between expressing desire for a noble and maternal Nora to provide the audience with something to aspire to, and complaining that Ibsen's Nora was unrealistic because women were noble and maternal already. After the Copenhagen premiere the critic and theatre manager M. W. Brun protested in the newspaper *Folkets Avis* that any real wife in Nora's situation would 'throw herself into her husband's arms', and maintained that the 'screaming dissonances' ran counter to common sense (24 December 1879). Writing in the

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Our word 'critic' comes from the Greek term for the jury who gave the prize for the best play at annual festivals. They were not professionals; they were chosen by lot, because the views of all citizens were considered equally important. This is a useful way of thinking about criticism: it is designed to help you as a fellow reader and theatregoer to form and argue your own views.

EARLY CRITICS continued

**CHECK THE BOOK**

A Beginner's Guide to Critical Reading: Readings for Students by Richard Jacobs (2001) provides entertaining commentary on a range of literary texts. It will help you see how criticism and theory can enhance your own enjoyment and appreciation of literature.

Norwegian paper *Aftenbladet* in January 1880, Fredrik Petersen, a professor of theology at the University of Kristiania, declared that the absence of either a reconciliation scene or the 'uplifted mood' the Greeks imparted to a tragedy was a serious flaw: without either the play was 'ugly' and 'distressing' (quoted in Toril Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*, 2006, p. 227).

In Germany Ibsen was pressured into writing a happy ending, with Nora, faced by the sight of her children, unable to walk through the door and fainting on the threshold. This was rapidly abandoned, although the journal *Deutsche Rundschau* continued to accuse Ibsen of 'loving the repulsive', while a review in *Die Gegenwart* considered the ending 'illogical and immoral' (quoted in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen*, 1985, p. 482). Such reviews were countered by assertions from the radical and secular left that 'our own life, our own everyday life, has here been placed on stage and condemned!' (quoted in Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 2006, p. 228). But though delighted by the energy of the play, they tended to discuss it only as an attack on marriage; its theatrical complexity and innovation tended to be ignored.

VICTORIAN ENGLAND

By the time the play reached Britain its reputation meant that thousands felt themselves entitled to a view, even if they had not seen or read it. A *Punch* cartoon called 'Ibsen in Brixton' (2 May 1891) shows an enormous grim-faced woman poised at her open front door while two servants stagger out with her luggage. Confronting her cowering shrimp of a husband she proclaims, 'Yes, William, I've thought a deal about it, and I find I'm nothing but your doll and dicky-bird, and so I'm going!' To critique the play was to join a wider debate, for reviews were a forum in which questions about social problems, the status of women and the future of theatre under censorship could be aired. It is not surprising that many who joined the debate were critic-playwrights, like George Bernard Shaw and William Archer, novelists like Henry James, or political activists like Eleanor Marx. Reviews and articles offered the kind of platform a current affairs programme on television might now provide – Shaw considered criticism a form of

**QUESTION**

Shaw published some of his early drama, influenced by Ibsen, in two volumes called *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). In which category would you put *A Doll's House*, and why?

'gladiatorship' and his role a mixture of 'court jester' and 'confessor' (as described in his preface to the first volume of *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*; see p. 9 of the 2000 Penguin edition of *Plays Unpleasant*).

Clement Scott, Ibsen's most implacable enemy in England, centred his attack on the character of Nora; he assumed, without question, that this was inherent rather than formed by her circumstances, demanding: 'How Torvald Helmer could by any possibility have treated his restless, illogical, fractious, and babyish little wife otherwise than he did; why Nora should ever adore with such abandonment and passion this conceited prig ... are points that ... require a considerable amount of argument ... to convince the common-sense playgoer' (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 1889; quoted in *Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Michael Egan, 1972, p. 102). The *Spectator* did try to engage with what it termed Ibsen's 'useful lesson' that the infantilising of women leads to 'distorted relations', but castigated him for the 'moral vacuum' at the end, blaming Nora for her unwillingness to 'make a hero where she had failed to find one'. In full-blown idealist vein it warned women to 'beware of confounding the feelings of men who look to them for nothing better than pleasant sensations and mental distractions, with the feelings of men who look to them to raise their ideal of mental and moral grace and beauty' (*Spectator*, 21 June 1889; also quoted in Egan's *Henrik Ibsen*, 1972, pp. 110–13).

One of the most substantial pro-Ibsen manifestos was George Bernard Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), originally a paper to the Fabian Society. What Shaw, like many of his contemporaries in the socialist and suffragist movements, most admired in Ibsen was his 'sharpshooting at the audience ... we are not flattered spectators killing the idle hour with an ingenious and amusing entertainment: we are "guilty creatures sitting at a play"' (*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1932 edition, p. 63). Eleanor Marx valued Nora as a woman with complex and adult moral stature; she complained that critical discussion of plays like *A Doll's House* was distorted by a particularly English narrowness which perceived the word 'morality' as 'like the word "virtue" ... applied to only one special quality ... sexual relations'. Together with Israel Zangwill she wrote a witty parody of Ibsen's ending 'to please the critic of

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Scott summarised *Ghosts, Hedda Gabler and Rosmersholm* thus: 'A few steps out of the hospital ward, and we arrive at the dissecting-room. Down a little lower ... and we come to the dead-house. There, for the present, Ibsen has left us' (*Illustrated London News*, 25 April 1891). Scott eventually alienated the whole acting profession by stating that the theatre 'draws out all that is bad in man and woman'.

**CHECK THE NET**

You can read this comic parody of the ending of Ibsen's play – '*A Doll's House Repaired*' – together with its witty introduction, online; search for 'Eleanor Marx' and '*A Doll's House Repaired*' using an online search engine.

the *Daily Telegraph* in which Helmer realises his wife has been dangerously infected with feminism and packs the children off to boarding school.

LATER CRITICS

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, it was plain that Ibsen, and **naturalism**, would shape much of Western drama and performance. (In 1897 Queen Victoria and the Archbishop of Canterbury went to see *Ghosts*, an odd choice for her Diamond Jubilee treat.) However, Ibsen's work has suffered from a lack of serious reappraisal. This is largely due to the label 'naturalist', which meant that for a long time he was discussed almost exclusively in those terms. By the end of the Second World War naturalism itself was called into question. The influential German critic and philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69) noted that Ibsen's name called forth boredom, the playwright and his plays both seeming 'outdated' (quoted in Toril Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*, 2006, p. 18). For the most thoughtful twentieth-century English critic of Ibsen, the Marxist Raymond Williams, the problem was that 'Ibsen and Stanislavsky have won' (*Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, 1976, p. 7). He considered that while Ibsen's naturalism had been necessary at the time in order to show the psychological and political limitations of bourgeois domestic life, it was a stage the theatre needed to outgrow. His *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* locates the future of drama in theatrical techniques that do not disguise their artificiality but embrace it, like the work of Brecht (see **Contemporary approaches: Marxist criticism**).

For others, however, Ibsen is not naturalistic *enough*, the structure of the earlier plays too obvious in comparison with the delicacy of Anton Chekhov (1860–1904). Ronald Gray's *Ibsen: A Dissenting View* (1977) expounds this accusation at length, accusing *A Doll's House* of cynically exploiting the techniques of popular drama. However, to a later generation brought up within some of the newer critical disciplines (see **Contemporary approaches**), the relationship of Ibsen's plays – and *A Doll's House* in particular – to notions of theatricality and performance is precisely what makes them interesting. Toril Moi, in the most radical reappraisal of Ibsen since

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Stanislavsky (1863–1938) co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 to explore naturalistic technique. The Russian director, actor and teacher maintained that the creativity of the actor must be developed from within, and recorded his own development in *My Life in Art* (1924). The 'method' style of acting derived from his teaching is characterised by spontaneity and improvisation, together with an emphasis on psychological realism.

Williams, sees Ibsen as a pioneer of **modernism**. She examines Ibsen's presentation of individuals who simultaneously theatricalise their own experience and see 'theatricality' as an enemy to 'truth' (for more on this idea, see also **Themes: Theatricality**). *A Doll's House*, Moi suggests, is an 'invitation to reflect on the nature of theatre' (*Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 2006, p. 237). This idea has interesting possibilities for feminist critics (see **Contemporary approaches: Gendered criticism**) and also for performers.

It is not surprising that some of the most interesting recent writers on Ibsen have grounded their studies in performance; for, although critical attention has been lacking, he has never ceased to be one of the most widely produced playwrights. Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, for example, in their work *Ibsen's Lively Art: A Performance Study of the Major Plays* (1989), see the work of designers, directors and actors – especially the interpreters of Nora – as an 'essential dimension' (p. ix) to the understanding of how different generations have understood Ibsen. Egil Törnqvist in *A Doll's House* (1995) explores performances of the play in different media – stage, film and radio – and in both Norwegian and English, in order to highlight the variety of possible interpretations.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

SIGNS AND SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is the study of signs. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was the first to define language as a system of words or 'signs' which have no intrinsic relationship to the things they signify but have meanings commonly agreed upon, which distinguish them from other signs for other things (speakers of English, for example, agree that 'cat' means a small furry animal and 'cot' does not). Claude Lévi-Strauss (b.1908) and Roland Barthes (1915–80) expanded this definition to include all kinds of sign systems used to convey meaning between people, such as gestures, clothing and codes of manners. Because these are arbitrary, the relationship between the signifier (the word or image or action) and the signified (the meaning conventionally ascribed to it) can change or slip.



CHECK THE BOOK

Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (2006) reappraises Ibsen in the context of literary history and discusses in detail his relationship to the visual arts.