

*A Doll's House Analysis*

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This paper provides brief analysis of the issues relating to past reconstruction in *A Doll's House* by Ibsen. If one sets aside the psychological implications, the past becomes a fairly simple matter. Thorvald Helmer fell seriously ill and needed a long holiday abroad; Nora forged her father's name on a promissory note and raised the funds required for that holiday, then slaved and saved enough behind her husband's back to pay to Krogstad the installments of the debt as they fell due. In *A Doll's House*, besides uncovering the past, Ibsen opened a window into the future. He developed his situation in such a way that in the end it was replaced by another; but no solution was offered or suggested.

From a talk between Nora Helmer and Kristine Linde early on in *A Doll's House*, two major points emerge: first, that her husband, Thorvald Helmer, has just been appointed Director of the local bank; second, that, her circumstances not always having been so thriving as they now look like becoming, she once, unbeknown to her husband when he was very ill, raised a loan of not less than 1200 *spd* and that she has had a hard time of it repaying principal and interest. To the summary of the main plot, a note on the sub-plot should be added. For the catastrophe to be precipitated in the precise form which it takes, Krogstad's destruction of the forged bill is essential. The incentive is a change of heart in the blackmailer, but has the technical merit of firmly tying to the main story the figure and fortune of Fru Linde, who, otherwise, would be no more than the *confidante* of the old drama and the heroine of an independent sub-plot. She and Krogstad, it has been observed, are friends of old standing. As the principal action proceeds, he, a widower, and she, a widow, decide to join their 'shipwrecked' fortunes in matrimony, and Krogstad's destruction of the incriminating paper proceeds from his wish to begin their new venture on a basis of perfect openness and virtue. The change of

intention has a bearing on what might be called the main moral plot, as exhibiting the good which may accrue from the main plot to which at the end Nora also aspires.

Except for three virtual supernumeraries, all the persons of the play belong to the educated middle class. Even the blackmailer is by origin of the same social standing as the others; indeed, one of Thorvald Helmer's objections to him is that he presumes on their former companionship. Lawyer Krogstad is man who has come down in the world, against whom there was once an accusation of forgery and who clings all the more tenaciously to the lowest rung on the ladder of prosperity and respectability. Fru Linde, who, as the stage producer should remember, is of about the same age as Nora, has been through a joyless, sterile marriage. It has given her a sober outlook on life and, disposed though she may be to make the best of things, there is, as we shall shortly see, a certain moralistic strain in her. About the last figure on the secondary plane, Dr Rank, more must be said in another connection. He is a melancholy celibate invalid, dying of inherited disease and, by reason of his loneliness and sad fate, more attached to Nora and Thorvald than they are to him.

It is by no means easy to disentangle the true history of Laura Kieler and the complicated interrelations of that history with *A Doll's House*. 'Interrelations' is the correct term; for not only did, on this occasion, truth issue in fiction, but the fiction in its turn reacted on the life story of the model. The difficulty of the case proceeds partly from Ibsen's customary reticence--from his own utterances one could scarcely guess that Fru Kieler had played any but the smallest part in his life; it lies likewise in the unreliability of the lady's evidence, given very often as an untested plea in her own defense, generally some time after the events which it is meant to illustrate and always under the stress of great emotion.

We may now proceed to the issues which provoked the very liveliest of the innumerable debates stirred up by *A Doll's House*. Questions about the dividing line between the novel and the drama were the concern mainly of aesthetes. How far Nora Helmer could be identified with Laura Kieler could not interest anyone outside Denmark. Nearly everyone, however, to whose notice they came, was eager to sit in judgement on her character and her conduct. The questions at issue can be reduced to something like this dual form: What are precisely the motives that drive Nora Helmer to break up her home; and is it credible that these motives should have presented themselves spontaneously to such a person as the author represents his heroine as being and should so effectively have actuated her?

In elaborating, as is now necessary, the sketchy analysis of Nora's character already attempted above, one may, for a moment, dwell on two negative factors. First, **frivolous** and irresponsible though Nora might be, nothing suggests that she was the woman to consider walking out of the house a trivial matter: the Helmers' front door had not been slammed after every disappointment: the act is unique and momentous. Second, in describing Nora's character with the regard for its formation in the past, Ibsen gave no hint that she was either fundamentally capricious and, like the prophet Habakkuk, capable of anything.

#### Works Cited

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