**A DOLL’S HOUSE- ESSAY QUESTIONS AND SAMPLE ESSAYS**

1. **How could the submissive, selfish and silly Nora of the first two acts transform herself into an independent woman by the end of the last act? Is the transformation realistic?**

While Nora puts on a convincing performance of being a submissive, selfish and foolish woman during the first act, there are early signs that this is not the real her. When she asks Torvald for more money despite having just been on a spending spree, she appears selfish and grasping. But we soon discover, in her conversation with Mrs Linde, that she is not squandering the money to satisfy her own desires, but using it to pay off the loan she took out in order to save her husband's life. In doing so, she has denied herself new things so that her husband and children can have all they need. Her arranging the loan and the trip to Italy - and her subsequent careful management of money and of her secret - show an astonishing strength of character. In addition, she secretly takes jobs to pay off the loan, a step towards the independence she finally embraces. But in the first two acts, Nora does not dare to acknowledge her own strength, let alone use it. There are many reasons for this. Chief among them are that her beloved Torvald, and society in general, would not comfortably countenance such strength in a woman. So it is easier for Nora to keep her head below the parapet rather than risk the consequences of showing herself as she is.

Nora's submissiveness to Torvald is not all it seems. By playing the doll-child according to his wishes, she manipulates him into the role of indulgent father-figure. But in spite of her skill at 'managing' him, there is one instance in which she desperately wants him to adopt the manly and dominant role: she wants him to rescue her from the ruin caused by Krogstad's revelations. When he fails to provide the strength she needs, she realizes that she no longer loves him, as he is not the man she thought him. It is almost inevitable that she is forced to find that strength within herself. Her realization that she wants to pursue her independence is not so much a transformation as an awakening to a strength she has possessed all along.

1. **In what way does A Doll's House explore social issues?**

A Doll's House shines a searchlight on Victorian society, drawing attention to its hypocrisy and use of public opinion to suppress individuality. The critic Bjorn Hemmer, in an essay in The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen, wrote: "The people who live in such a society know the weight of 'public opinion' and of all those agencies which keep watch over society's 'law and order': the norms, the conventions and the traditions which in essence belong to the past but which continue into the present and there thwart individual liberty in a variety of ways."

Torvald lives by society's norms, and when faced with a choice of whether to support his wife or society, he sides with society. When he realizes that she has broken the law in forging her father's signature on the loan document, he never questions the morality of such a law: it is left to Nora to do that. His aim is to preserve the appearance of respectability and ensure his continued acceptance in society. He has become so shaped by society's conventions that he cannot see his wife's suffering. In The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen, Gail Finney writes that in Ibsen's own notes for this play, he notes that a mother in modern society is "like certain insects who go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race." This view is confirmed by Torvald's rejection of Nora when he discovers her secret; he says she is not fit to bring up their children if her reputation is tarnished. For Torvald, public life has obscured and overtaken private self. In order to find out who she is and what she wants, Nora has to reject the life that society prescribes for her as a wife and mother, and strike out on her own. "I am going to see," she tells Torvald in Act 3, "who is right, the world or I."

But this is not simple. The nineteenth century saw a huge shift from the old social order of self-improvement within a stable rural society to a new social order founded on money. But women at the time could not control money without the authority of the man who 'owned' them, be it husband, brother or father. Single and lone women like Mrs Linde had more control over their lives and money than married women, who were discouraged from taking jobs and had to surrender money matters to their husbands. But as Mrs Linde's story shows, having no male 'provider' brought its own problems.

In sum, women had little power. Power lay with people like Torvald, who is a banker and lawyer. Torvald is able to dictate the fate not only of his family but of Mrs Linde (by giving her a job) and Krogstad (by giving away his job). He is gratified by the prospect of sacking Krogstad because he disapproves of his morality. In effect, the Torvalds of this world defined morality. As we have seen with regard to Nora's crime, they also defined the law, and therefore, who was a criminal. It is worth noting that Ibsen based the episode of Nora's forgery on a similar 'crime' committed by a female friend of his, which ended tragically for her, so he was drawing attention to what he saw as a genuine social problem. He supported economic reform that would protect women's property and befriended European feminists.

Other social issues addressed in the play include how women should be educated, both for the responsibilities of family and for self-fulfillment; the right of women to define their role in the family and society; the degrading effects of poverty on self-fulfillment (as with Mrs Linde and the Nurse); and the scourge of venereal disease (as suffered by Dr Rank).

1. **How do different characters use the words "free" and "freedom"? How does the use of these words change throughout the play?**

It is Torvald who introduces the concept of freedom in the play, claiming that "There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt." He defines freedom in economic terms, as befits an age where power depended upon money. He is also adopting society's values, as debt was disapproved of and considered a sign of moral degeneracy. The dramatic irony behind his words lies in the fact that Torvald would not have any life at all if his wife had not gone into debt, though he does not realize this.

Like Torvald, Krogstad sees freedom as moral respectability in the eyes of society. His job at the bank is the means by which he will "cut [himself] free" from the stigma of his "indiscretion" of forgery. The problem with this approach is that his "freedom" depends upon the whim of his employer, who also sits in moral judgment on him and can withdraw his job if he finds that he falls short in that respect.

Mrs Linde feels proud that by working hard, she was able to support her brothers and mother, and "I was privileged to make the end of my mother's life almost free from care." Like Torvald, she is defining freedom in economic terms. But she is operating at a lower economic level than he is. She is talking of being able to provide the necessities of life, whereas he is talking of the relative luxury of being free from debt.

In Act 1, Nora is delighted that soon she will have paid off her debt to Krogstad and will be "free from care, quite free from care; to be able to play and romp with the children; to be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it!" At this point, she defines her freedom in terms of the very things that (as she later realizes) restrict her: her role as a submissive wife and mother.

By the end of Act 2, Krogstad's letter revealing Nora's debt and forgery of her father's signature is sitting in Torvald's letterbox. Nora, who fears yet hopes that Torvald will shield her by taking the entire blame upon himself, means to disappear or commit suicide, thereby saving him from disgrace. She tells him: "Then you will be free." Thus Torvald will maintain his respectability by means of Nora's obliterating herself from his world.

At the end of the play, Nora has been awakened to Torvald's narrow-mindedness and no longer sees freedom in terms of bondage to him or obliteration of herself. On the contrary, she defines freedom for herself and Torvald as complete independence from each other, as she leaves the marriage to forge a new life for herself: "I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides."

1. **Compare Torvald’s and Nora’s attitudes toward money.**

Torvald and Nora’s first conversation establishes Torvald as the member of the household who makes and controls the money and Nora as the one who spends it. Torvald repeatedly teases Nora about her spending, and at one point Mrs. Linde points out that Nora was a big spender in her younger days. These initial comments paint Nora as a shallow woman who is overly concerned with -material delights. Yet Nora’s generous tip to the porter in the play’s opening scene shows that she is not a selfish woman. More important, once the secret of Nora’s loan is made known to the audience, we see that Nora’s interest in money stems more from her concern for her family’s welfare than from petty desires. We realize that the excitement she has expressed over Torvald’s new, well-paying job results from the fact that more spending money means she can finally pay off her debt to Krogstad.

While Torvald seems less enthralled by money because he doesn’t talk about it except to chastise Nora for her spending, he is obsessed with having a beautiful home, including a beautiful wife. He considers these things important to his reputation, and keeping up this reputation requires money. Although Torvald accuses Nora of wasting money, Nora spends her money mostly on worthy causes, whereas Torvald uses his for selfish, shallow purposes.

1. **Why does Torvald constantly reprimand Nora for her wastefulness and foolishness while simultaneously supporting her behavior? What insight does this contradiction give us into Torvald and Nora’s relationship?**

Torvald perceives Nora as a foolish woman who is ignorant of the way society works, but he likes Nora’s foolishness and ignorance because they render her helpless and therefore dependent on him. It soon becomes clear to us that Nora’s dependence, not Torvald’s love for Nora as a person, forms the foundation of Torvald’s affection for her. In Act One, Torvald teases Nora about wasting money but then tries to please her by graciously giving her more. Similarly, he points out her faults but then says he doesn’t want her to change a bit. He clearly enjoys keeping Nora in a position where she cannot function in the world without him, even if it means that she remains foolish.

In general, Torvald disapproves of any kind of change in Nora’s constant, obedient demeanor because he needs to control her behavior. When Nora begins to dance the tarantella wildly in Act Two, he is unsettled. In Act One, Nora says that it would humiliate Torvald if he knew he was secretly in debt to her for his life, indicating that Torvald wants the power in his marriage to be one-sided rather than mutual.

1. **Compare and contrast Mrs. Linde and Nora at the end of the play.**

By the end of Act Three, both Nora and Mrs. Linde have entered new phases in their lives. Nora has chosen to abandon her children and her husband because she wants independence from her roles as mother and wife. In contrast, Mrs. Linde has chosen to abandon her independence to marry Krogstad and take care of his family. She likes having people depend on her, and independence does not seem to fulfill her. Despite their apparent opposition, both Nora’s and Mrs. Linde’s decisions allow them to fulfill their respective personal desires. They have both chosen their own fates, freely and without male influence. Ibsen seems to feel that the nature of their choices is not as important as the fact that both women make the choices themselves.

1. Using specific examples, discuss how Ibsen's "progress from one work to the other" is due to a "perpetual scrutiny of the same general questions regarded from different points of view."
2. Do you feel that Ibsen's drama is "dated"? To defend your view, cite dramatic themes in these plays which you consider to be universal, or limited in scope.
3. Show how the first act forewarns the audience of almost all the forthcoming events in the rest of the drama.
4. Point out some instances where Ibsen is able to "externalize" inner problems by using effective symbols.
5. At least one character in each play prefers an imaginary view of life to a realistic viewpoint. With this in mind, discuss the life-view of Torvald Helmer.
6. In what ways does the vocation of Torvald Helmer provide additional insight into his character?
7. Devise an alternative ending for A Doll's House, trying not to violate Ibsen's dramatic thesis. Defend either your new conclusion or the inviolability of Ibsen's original ending.
8. Explain the symbolic significance of hereditary disease in A Doll's House.
9. Do today's women face the same sort of barriers that women did in Nora's time?
10. In what ways is Torvald caged by societal expectations? What about the other men in the play? Krogstad? Dr. Rank?
11. What is important about the title? Who is the "doll" Ibsen refers to?
12. Who is the more significant female character in terms of plot development, Nora or Kristine? Explain your answer.
13. Do you think Kristine's decision not to prevent Krogstad from revealing the truth to Torvald is a betrayal of Nora? Does this act ultimately hurt or benefit Nora?
14. How does Henrik Ibsen reveal character in A Doll's House? Is Nora a sympathetic character? Did your opinion of Nora change from the beginning of the play to its conclusion
15. Does the play end the way you expected? Do you think this was a happy ending?
16. A Doll's House is generally considered a feminist work. Do you agree with this characterization? Why or why not?
17. How essential is the setting, both in terms of time period and location? Could the play have taken place anywhere else? Would the final outcome have had the same impact if A Doll's House had been set in the present day? Why or why not?
18. Knowing that the plot is based on a series of events that happened to a female friend of Ibsen's, did it bother you that he used Laura Kieler's story without it benefiting her?
19. Which actress would you cast as Nora if you were to stage a production of A Doll's House? Who would play Torvald? Why is the choice of actor important to the role? Explain your choices.