Historical Context

Feminism

A Doll's house was written during the first wave of feminism and initially received very poorly in Europe as a result of its original ending (Nora slamming the door on Helmer and exiting the marriage). In fact, in generated so much controversy among both audiences and critics that, in some countries, the play had to be rewritten to change the ending. Nora comes back to Helmer and lives happily ever after.

1st wave - mid 1800’s - early 20th century
- concerned with suffrage
- women’s place in society

2nd wave - 1960’s - post WW2
- concerned with working class women
- sexual liberation: the introduction of birth control
- Occurred in the midst of other social reforms and, as a result, was overshadowed by them. (black rights, world peace)
- gave feminism a negative connotation

3rd wave - 1990’s
- Going against the second wave. (Women don’t have to be like men to be strong, they can be feminine if they want to; they have the right to do as they like)

Marxism

Literature is influenced by the social climate in which it was produced. “Is it a protest? or is it inherent?”

- Marxism was an emerging ideology at the time of the play’s release.
- Context of the work is related to the social class of the author
  - Henrik Ibsen (author) may have been unaware of what he was revealing
  - For example: Ibsen was friends with feminists. Although he denied being a feminist himself, his text is riddled with feminist ideology.
  - “Covert content of literary work subject to basic Marxist themes such as:
    - Class struggle
    - Progression of society
    - Transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism

Henrik Ibsen

New Norway

- Ibsen was born into a time of change. Norway was on a path to independence; change of national identity
- During Ibsen’s lifetime Norway was recovering from being owned; seeking independence
- At the time of Ibsen’s birth 90% of the population were part of the agricultural sector of the country
- During the writing of the play:
  - Norway became capitalised and industrialized.
  - Move towards city
  - More buildings
  - Population doubled - more work, money, children
  - Norway was still under the power of the judiciary.
- 1848 - the farming and factory worker revolution failed. Ibsen wrote The league of youth (1869) out of sympathy.
- 1864 - German Prussians invade Denmark
  - Ibsen ashamed of Norway’s inability to assist. He was very politically motivated and culturally motivated in the writing of his plays. “the majority is never right”

New Science

- Ibsen was a science fanboy and was fascinated by how it reduced the gap between the classes.
  - photographs and stuff
  - Naturalistic theatre: jokes, dreams, metaphors. slips of the tongue
  - Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species”

- Doll’s house (1879) and Ghosts (1881)
  - Questions of heredity, survival and the struggle of the individual towards meaning in life without religion
  - What is the right thing and the wrong thing to do… moral code.
  - individual choices; individual morality

New Women

- Formal relationship between men and women
  - White collar women (Mrs Linde)
- 1876: formal education given to women
- 1882: Women could go to university
- Women NOT allowed to be married AND work
- Man’s social status was elevated by his wife
  - Nora for Helmer
  - Social spheres.
  - Women were infantilized and educated to be “pleasing”
  - Feminism was linked to socialism
    - Ibsen’s women:
      - In historical dramas: Strong, articulate, powerful
      - Modern life: marginalised, unft, petty
    - Nora is aware that she is at odds with her society
      - The alternate ending was shitty for feminism
  - Women’s suffrage in UK
  - Ibsen is persuasive and convincing in his language for society to debate relationship between men and women
  - “Shift from agriculture to industrialisation
  - Gender based groups from agricultural sphere spilled into everyday life - a shift away from that
  - Focus on individuals rather than group identity

Some general context: (from wiki)

1848 witnessed the beginning of a general revolutionary movement throughout Europe. The content of Ibsen’s play, written in 1879, reflected that rebellious mood and shocked contemporary audiences by its portrayal of a housewife who comes to reject her husband and children. Ibsen is often recognised as the ‘father’ of modern drama, since many of his plays broke new ground, marking a move away from the romantic and artificial melodramas, which were popular in the nineteenth century.

Written in prose, and considerably shorter than Brand and Peer Gynt, A Doll’s House is the second of Ibsen’s great realistic social dramas. The play deals with the issue of the position of woman in marriage and in society. In Ibsen’s day, the following opinions of marriage were prevalent.

- In the business of the home, the wife was more of a servant than a helper.
  - She should influence home policies and decisions, only indirectly by suggestions to her husband.
  - She was expected to look up to her husband as an Ideal-Maker.
  - She was to follow the lead of her husband: “I will be your conscience and your will.”
- She would therefore become a somewhat useful but very decorative member of the household, to be loved and cherished by her husband, and not to share in any family responsibilities or troubles.

In such a system of marriage, the frivolity, romanticizing, and occasional lying that characterise Nora are to be expected. Unable by social convention to have a truly deep and serious share in the marriage, the wife must rely on either escapist dreams or petty subterfuges to adjust her situation.

Although the play has a serious theme and deals with what was in Ibsen’s day a topic of great concerns – women’s rights – it is essentially a comedy rather than a tragedy. Ibsen maintains the comic spirit by his subtle characterisation of Nora as a romantic dreamer whose grasp on reality is conditioned by her dreams, ideals, and wishes of Torvald, her husband, whose pose of strict high-minded morality nearly always crumbles into petty selfishness when he is faced by a crisis.

The play proved successful both on the stage and in print, but Ibsen was compelled soon after its first performance in 1879, to write an alternate conclusion in which Nora returns to her husband. With this happy ending, the play was shortly produced in nearly every European country, with considerable acclaim, and much heated discussion of the problems raised.
### Stage Directions

The opening stage directions in A Doll’s House are important to help understand the setting, time period, season and class of the characters.

- “a comfortable room, furnished inexpensively, but with taste” suggest that the scene is set within a well-used room, that belongs to a middle-class family.
- “the stove is lit” and “it is a winter day” tells us about the season and setting of the play.
- “takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket” and eats just “one or two” then goes “cautiously to her husband’s door and listens” indicates Torvald’s authority over what Nora does, but she is frivolous in meddling with his rules.

### Dramatic Irony

Ibsen’s use of dramatic irony is evident throughout the text to indicate Nora’s exit from the book. An accumulation of her forgery, her lies, and her background made her not only think about the life she’s been living, but also her relationship with Torvald.

Examples:

- Nora to Mrs Linde: “You all think I’m incapable of doing anything serious… or of ever having to face the brutality of life.” p.23
- Torvald to Nora: “Because an atmosphere of lies infects and poisons the entire household. Every breath the children take is filled with the germs of evil.” p.51
- Nora to nurse: “Well, Anna, I won’t be able to be with them as much any more… Do you think they’d forget their mother if she went away for good?” p.54
- Nora to Mrs Linde: “You shouldn’t have done anything. You must let everything take its course. In a way, it’s wonderful to be waiting for a miracle.” p.86
- Torvald: “Let what will happen, happen. When the real crisis comes, you will not find me lacking in strength or courage. I am man enough to bear the burden for us both.”
- Nora: “I wouldn’t do anything that you don’t like.” p.151

### Symbolism

In Act III, Nora tells Torvald that both her father and Torvald have treated her like a doll-child, with no opinions of her own, and have only played with her.

Examples:

- “When I lived at home with Papa, he told me all his opinions, so I had the same ones too; or if they were different I hid them, since he wouldn’t have cared for that. He used to call me his doll-child, and he played with me the way I played with my dolls.” — Nora

In Act I, Nora acts like a silly, spoilt child; later, when she is practicing and dancing for the Tarantella, she acts the captivating, decorative plaything.

Examples:

- “Nora, darling, you’re dancing as if your life depended on it!” — Torvald p.204
- “Hasn’t Miss Sweet Tooth been breaking rules in town today? …taken a bite at a macaroon or two?” — Torvald

At the beginning of the play on Christmas Eve, Nora still believes her marriage to be happy. We see her insisting that it is hidden until she has decorated it. Symbolically, this alerts us to the fact that there are hidden aspects to life in this household, that a carefully created appearance is what matters, and that Nora is the keeper of appearances. By Christmas Day, the tree is stripped of its ornaments and its candles have burnt out - by this point the carefully maintained appearance of the happy marriage is disintegrating under the encroachment of truth.

- “The Christmas Tree is… stripped of its ornaments and with burnt down candle-ends on its dishelved branches.” — Torvald

### Metaphor

Animal imagery: the pet names of Torvald’s for Nora emphasise that he does not see her as an equal. He believes her role is to amuse and delight him. But squirrels, songbirds and skylarks are all wild animals that do not belong in a cage, any more than Nora can tolerate living in the restricted atmosphere of Torvald’s house.

Examples: “Come, come, my little skyward must not droop her wings. What is this? Is my little squirrel out of temper? (Taking out his purse.) Nora, what do you think I have here?” — Act I

### Diction

Function in literature, writers choose words to create and convey a typical mood, tone and atmosphere to their readers. A writer’s choice of words not only affects the reader’s interpretation but also conveys the writer’s feelings towards the literary work.

Torvald: “Is that my skylark twittering out there? Scampering about like a little squirrel? Has my little featherbrain been out wasting money again?”

Nora: “Oh do, Torvald… please, please do!”

“Oh, it’s really wonderful to know that”

“That’s not true! It could never, never be true.”

“You’ve never loved me, you’ve only found it pleasant to be in love with me.”

“He told me it was this that and the other, when I get away from all this, and am on my own, I want to look into that too. I want to see if what Paster Hansen told me was right - or at least, if it was right for me.”

**Language Features/Literary Techniques**

- **Ibsen’s use of dramatic irony** is evident throughout the text to indicate Nora’s exit from the book. An accumulation of her forgery, her lies, and her background made her not only think about the life she’s been living, but also her relationship with Torvald.

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  - In Act I, Nora acts like a silly, spoilt child; later, when she is practicing and dancing for the Tarantella, she acts the captivating, decorative plaything.
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Critical Readings and Perspectives

Critical perspectives:
- No single view is dominant
  - Do not use determinist verbs, use vague "inferred that..."

Early Critics
- Focused in the ending
  - Christian idealistic right wing (who loved Nora until the end) though the ending was
    - Unrealistic
    - A dramatic flaw
    - Needed an uplifting scene
    - Not in the DNA of a woman to do
  - Germany - Ibsen forced to write a happy ending
  - Motherhood put on a pedestal (the reason she stays)
  - Nora is weakened, Torvald is strengthened
  - Left wing thought he was condemning everyday life
  - An 'attack on marriage'

Later critics
- Naturalism (Ibsen's child) had been necessary at the time in order to show the psychological and political limitation of bourgeoisie in domestic life
- Realism = boring
  - People wanted entertainment

Marxist Criticism
- Brecht: the play would lead to society accepting the play, rather than changing anything
  - Thought theatre should be theatre
  - Thought that the play was too covert
  - Contemporary critics: more interested in what the text does not day
    - Whose story does it tell?
  - Is it told at the expense of a lower economic group?
- Nora and Mrs Linde as commodities
  - Nora as a reward
  - Nora as a pet/possession
  - Mrs Linde as an object of exchange
    - Sold to her husband
    - Krogstad criticised her, like it was her fault
- Nora challenged her world
  - No longer an object

Gendered criticism
- Individualism led to the notion that men and women belonged in workplace and home
- Sphere created by Helmer (workplace) is questioned
  - Gender is performative
    - Questions the idea of gender
      - It is not something we are, it is something we do
        - Natural behaviours for genders (apparent within costuming)
  - Gender stereotypes

Preoccupations and Concerns

Gender roles
- Roles of women (as a mother, a wife)
- Male and female expectations
- Stereotypes and constraints
- Female's function as a mother or wife, caregiver, decorator of the home
- Male's provide the income, beholder of family status and reputation, decision maker
- Female's function as a mother or wife, caregiver, decorator of the home

Social Status
- New Bourgeoisie/social climbers
- New "middle" class
- Upper versus lower class (product of industrial revolution)
- Reputations
  - employment and therefore income is indicative of the family reputation
  - "But no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves"

The clash of the individual versus society
- Nora protesting against the expectations of women
  - initially looks after husband, leaves in the end
  - borrowing money without permission

The private, authentic self versus public persona
- Nora is trained and 'prepped up' for appearances in society and in front of crowds of people
- is an 'attraction', an image to be seen, to her husband and for the entertainment of others
  - in private, she contemplates her role in her family and the influence she has on her kids

Marriage
- Wife is dependent on the husband
- Wife is of lower standing than the husband
- Wife functions to entertain the husband and bear children for him
- Wife decorates and cares for the home, while husband works and gains higher social reputation (especially in occupation)

Non-marital relationships
- Ms Linde and Krogstad are representative of a couple of the new age
- Ms Linde is a woman who supports the family

Parental and filial obligations
- Parents immortality is passed onto their children like a disease
- Nora didn't hesitate to leave her children because she felt she wasn't fit to be a mother, didn't want to pass this trait on her children
- Dr Rank has a disease as a result of his father's depravity (immorality), and therefore suffers
- Torvald voices the idea that one's parents determine one's moral character when he tells Nora, 'Nearly all young criminals had lying mothers'.

Appearances versus reality
-Appearances are misleading veneers which mask the reality of individuals
  - Initial impressions change over the course of the play (identity confusion)
  - Nora: initially depicted as childish and silly, as the play progresses she is perceived as an intelligent, motivated, strong, independent thinker
  - Torvald: initially depicted as a strong, benevolent husband, as the play professes he is perceived as cowardly, petty and selfish
  - The presentation of the house at the beginning of the play is a façade of "a doll's house", or a perfect home, (it is an artifice)

Weather
- Warmer environments are representative of upperclass living, with more safety, security, resources, relationships
- Colder environments are representative of lower classes, as they indicate insecurity, lack of possessions, lack of interaction with others, less control over surroundings