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Nora Helmer

Who is Nora Helmer?

- Nora is the wife of Torvald Helmer and the mother of three children. She saved his life by borrowing money to pay for his convalescence, and is now secretly working to repay it.
- The moneylender, Krogstad, is blackmailing her as she forged a signature to get the money.
- When her husband shows he is willing to let her bear the consequences alone, she is disillusioned and leaves him.

A star role

Nora is one of the longest and most complex female dramatic roles. Ibsen's early audiences found her difficult to understand. They expected figures on stage to be consistent. It was rare for any character to take charge of their own growth. It was even rarer for a woman to do so. The change from the flighty girl of Act One to the sober figure seated at the table in Act Three seemed incredible. (As recently as 1977 the director Harold Clurman admitted that for a long time he had seen the rapid change in Nora as a flaw in the play.) Throughout the action, however, we see latent strengths in Nora. The energy of the play lies in her discovery of this strength.

An active character

Ibsen rapidly establishes Nora as someone with a zest for life. She takes pleasure in the Christmas tree. She enjoys macaroons and champagne. She is physically expressive. We see her touching and kissing Helmer affectionately. She plays enthusiastically with her children, crawling under the table to play hide-and-seek. (Given the restrictions of nineteenth-century clothing for women, this suggests she is quite athletic.) Her instinct is to reach out to people. We see her embrace the nurse, Mrs Linde and Dr Rank. She also has a natural democracy. Nora's admission that she enjoyed the talk of the servants in her father's house contrasts with Helmer's bluster about Krogstad's use of Christian names. All this endears her to the audience. It also means that she is constantly seen in motion. This physical vitality suggests that she has the energy to sustain the very difficult inner journey she undertakes.

Nora as actor

Nora's tarantella shows the instincts of a natural performer. Dance lets her express what she cannot say. It confirms what we have already begun to realise: Nora is becoming aware of 'performing' the role of wife which society has scripted for her. The Nora perkily acting out the role of 'skylark' or 'squirrel' in Act One may enjoy the game. She may enjoy the power she has to wheedle money from Helmer by 'playing with his coat buttons' (Act One, p. 26). Nevertheless she knows that this kind of power will be gone 'when I'm no longer pretty' (Act One, p. 36). At some point she may feel resentment at the 'tricks' (Act Two, p. 60) she performs in order to ask Helmer for anything. After all, her problems are the result of his stubborn refusal to look after his health.



Study focus: The actor as Nora

A02

Note the choices available to the actor deciding how and when to show Nora's first signs of discontent. Perhaps her conversation with Mrs Linde, when Nora expresses her pleasure in 'working and earning money ... almost like being a man' (Act One, p. 37), makes Nora feel differently about the way that, only moments later, she flatters and persuades to get her friend a job at the bank. The actress could choose to show such feelings through her facial expression.

On the other hand, she might prefer to express Nora's disquiet later, in the scene where she tries to introduce the topic of Krogstad while requesting help with her fancy dress. Ibsen is careful to arrange the scene so that Nora's **body language** and facial expression are unseen by Helmer as she dresses the Christmas tree. As well as showing the fear and stress she is experiencing, she may indicate that she actively resents and dislikes playing the part of a silly, helpless wife who 'can't get anywhere' (p. 53) without the help of a husband. However and whenever the actor may choose to make it fully clear to us, Nora certainly reaches a point where her feelings and her outward behaviour contradict each other.

Conscience or convention?



Ibsen's first jottings towards the play indicate that he was interested in the idea of 'two kinds of conscience, one for men and one, quite different, for women' (Michael Meyer, *Ibsen*, 1985, p. 321). Helmer is governed by the rules of society and Nora habitually follows her heart. You could argue that, at the beginning of the play, neither of them has a genuine 'conscience' at all. They are not rational and ethical human beings but creatures of convention.

Ibsen gives us the details we need to understand Nora's background. He shows that some of her less attractive qualities are products of her upbringing and its limitations. Her naiveté in assuming that the law will 'understand' her **motivation** perhaps comes from her father, who was capable of dubious behaviour. Her snobbish attitude to Krogstad reflects Helmer's own. Her smug refusal to consider the problems of 'strangers' (Act One, p. 25) stems from an ignorance of the world which Helmer is only too keen to encourage, pushing away worldly friends like Dr Rank. By the end of the play, Nora is actively interested in 'strangers' and intends to do something about her ignorance. She is not only aware that she knows nothing beyond the 'play-room' (Act Three, p. 98), she is well aware that her father and husband have kept her there.

Determined to change

By the end of the play, Nora is aware that her personality has been largely put together by men – the two men who love her, and, behind them, a whole spectrum of masculine authority from the Law to the Church. They have treated her like an object, to be played with or looked at or sold.

A03 KEY CONTEXT

A Doll's House has often been staged with a clear political intent, and such productions centre on the character of Nora. In the 1920s *A Doll's House* was banned in China. Jiang Qing (1914–91), later the third wife of Mao Zedong, was an advocate of rights for women – such as the right not to have their feet bound when young – and made her name as Nora in a 1935 production, seen as the beginning of cultural modernity in China.

KEY INTERPRETATION A05

Ibsen's biographer Robert Ferguson considers the ending to be flawed: 'Dramatically it is necessary. Psychologically it is not. Nora has already proved herself the stronger.' (Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, Richard Cohen Books, 1996, p. 245)

KEY INTERPRETATION A05

Geraldine Cousin's book *Women in Dramatic Place and Time* pays tribute to the central place of *A Doll's House* in the feminist imagination: 'With Nora, at the commencement of her journey, are, potentially, so many other women, and, though the terrain of Nora's future remains unknown, she is the prototype of later travellers.' (Routledge, 1996, p. 1)

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses for AQA/B. AO2 is not assessed by OCR.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked about the roles of women in the play.

Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

'A Doll's House' was a key text for the emerging feminist movement of the nineteenth century because it offers not just one image of female freedom but the sense of multiple possibilities. In the course of the action Nora and Mrs Linde both re-define themselves, in completely different ways.

Nora escapes a suffocating stereotype of feminine helplessness, which she has hitherto felt obliged to act out, and elects to 'try and become' a 'human being'. Mrs Linde opts for a more conventional role as homemaker, but achieves it through radically unconventional actions.

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with inverted commas and capitals as appropriate. For example, *In 'A Doll's House'...*
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about social class in the play:

short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

When Helmer complains that Krogstad 'shows off the whole time, with "Torvald this", and "Torvald that"', it is not simply that he feels he is not receiving sufficient respect. Krogstad's presence reminds people that Helmer's current prestige is very new. The line suggests that Helmer is feeling insecure in his new status and worried at the slightest threat to it.

explicit meaning

inferred meaning

Remember – quotations can be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Stanislavsky') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view ('Nora becomes more aware of society as the play goes on'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

Ibsen conveys the sense of a society in flux, changed unrecognisably by industrialisation and by new political and social ideas. As an audience we are made aware of these through the presence of Mrs Linde, an image of the New Woman.

EXAMINER'S TIP

It's important to remember that *A Doll's House* is a text created by Henrik Ibsen – thinking about the choices Ibsen makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.