Part Three: Characters and Themes

Who is Nora Helmer?

- Nora is the wife of Ivar Helmer and the mother of three children. She has saved their life by borrowing money to pay for their education, and is now secretly working to repay it.
- The monomaniac, Krogstad, is blackmailing her as she forges 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 was enormous. (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 entire play, however, we see latent strengths in Nora. The energy of the play lies in her discovery of this strength.

Ibsen's character

Ibsen's biographer Robert Ferguson considers her ending to be flawed: 'Dramatically it is necessary. Psychologically it is not.' Nora has already proved herself the stronger. (Robert Ferguson, Henrik Ibsen, Richard Corben Rooks, 1930, p. 242)

KEY INTERPRETATION

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A Doll's House has often been staged with a clear political intent, and such productions center on the character of Nora. In the 1930s 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 first birth when young - and made her name as Nora in a 1935 production, seen as the beginning of cultural modernity in China.

Study focus: The actor as Nora

Note the changes available to the actor deciding how and when to show Nora's first signs of discontent. Perhaps her conversation with Mme. Lindo, 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 her friend to get her 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 discusses the Christmas tree. As well as avoiding the fear and stress she is experiencing, she may indicate that she becomes resentful and dislikes playing the part of a silly, helpless wife who can't get anywhere (p. 53) without the help of a husband. However, whenever the actor may choose to make it fully clear to us, Nora certainly reaches a point where her feelings and her outward behavior contradict each other.

Conscience or convention?

Ibsen's first笔记本 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 Mayer, 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 snobbish refusal to consider the problems of strangers (Act One, p. 36) stems from an ignorance of the world, which Helmer is only too willing 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. 50), 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.
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.

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 remember 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:

> "otten complaints that Krogstad shows off the whole time, with ‘froval tone’, and ‘froval true’, it is not as though he feels he is not receiving sufficient respect. Krogsland’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."

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, ‘paradigms’, ‘archetypes’, ‘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’, ‘ain’t got’, ‘ok’ and so on.
   - Use terms such as ‘conveys’, ‘suggest’, ‘implies’, ‘infers’ to explain the writer’s methods.
   - Refer to ‘when discussing the audience/reader.
   - Avoid assertions and generalisations; don’t just state a general point of view (‘Nona 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, changing 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.