

A Doll's House Teaching Guide

Teaching Ibsen's Play with Confidence

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Approaches and Discussion Questions

Theme of Women as Possessions: One of the most central themes of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is the concept of women as possessions in marriage and society as a whole. Highlight how the play's title alludes to this theme—Nora is Torvald's "doll" and not his equal. Emphasize how the play is concerned with how all of its characters, but especially women, are forced to keep up appearances in order to fit into society's roles. Focus on how Torvald refers to Nora with "pet" names, and how his relationship with Nora develops throughout the play.

- **For discussion:** What language does Torvald use when speaking to and about Nora? What language does Nora use when referring to herself? Does this language change over the course of the play?
- **For discussion:** Contrast Torvald's attitude towards Nora with Dr. Rank's attitude. How are they similar? How are they different?

Theme of Deception: Naturally, the unyielding expectations of society necessitate deception as characters struggle to force their outward appearances into these unrealistic, repressive standards. Not only must Nora be a doll but also she must live in a doll-home, successfully convincing Torvald and their social world that both her marriage and household are perfectly happy and problem-free. Just as social norms require deception on the part of all characters, non-inclusive and unjust laws elicit deception for the marginalized, forcing arguably "honorable" people to commit crimes or to keep secrets.

- **For discussion:** Is it ever okay to lie to keep other people happy? What does Ibsen teach us about deceit?
- **For discussion:** Examine the physical setting and objects of the play. What role do doors, locks, and keys have in the play? What about letters, documents, and money? How do these physical objects influence and support the theme of deception?

Theme of Growth and Identity: Nora's exit at the play's conclusion has been criticized by some as a perceived abandonment of her children and marriage. However, her exit may also be viewed as an act of immense courage, in that Nora defies social norms to seek out her own identity beyond that of mother and wife. Ask students to trace Nora's development from the beginning of act I to the final moments of act III, noting the differences in her language choices and intentions.

- **For discussion:** Do you agree with Nora's decision to leave at the end of the play? Why or why not?

Additional Discussion Questions:

- Examine the letters and other documents present in the play. What roles do these have? How do they support the play's themes?
- Highlight the centrality of financial matters in the power dynamic between Torvald and Nora. What is the difference between Torvald and Nora's attitude to money? What do these attitudes reveal about who has the power in the relationship?
- Highlight the way Nora addresses her children. Are there certain similarities with the way Torvald relates to Nora? Consider the implications of these similarities.

Alternative Approaches to Teaching *A Doll's House*

Mrs. Christine Linde as a Foil to Nora: The two couples of the play essentially act as foils to one another. While Nora has lived a life of leisure and privilege, Mrs. Linde has lived through struggle and toil as part of the working class. Conversely, while Nora is first introduced as a wife and mother, Mrs. Linde is presented as childless and widowed. This opposition is reversed at the play's conclusion, as Mrs. Linde finds happiness in her relationship with Krogstad and the possibility of building a family, whereas Nora chooses to leave her family behind in search of self-discovery and independence. Ibsen's portrayal of Mrs. Linde demonstrates that he does not condemn the traditional role of women in the home, as long as the woman has made the active decision to fulfil this role—not forced by society's expectations.

- **Focus on each woman's journey to their eventual decisions:** How do they influence one another? How do both find fulfillment in very different roles?

Nils Krogstad as a Foil to Torvald: Comparably, Krogstad offers a foil to Torvald Helmer. While Torvald is presented as a respectable, upstanding citizen, Krogstad's status is that of a lowly blackmailer. However, when Torvald goes along with Krogstad's blackmail, we see Torvald lacks true integrity. Similarly, while the ending sees Torvald left alone, Krogstad appears destined for a more hopeful future with Mrs Linde.

- **Focus on Krogstad and Torvald's contrasting roles at the beginning and end of the play:** Why does it seem like Krogstad's future is more hopeful? How has Torvald lost respectability over the course of the play's events?

Texts that Go Well with *A Doll's House*

Anna Karenina is a realist novel by Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. The narrative is told in eight parts and will force readers to once again consider the conflict between societal values and personal desire.

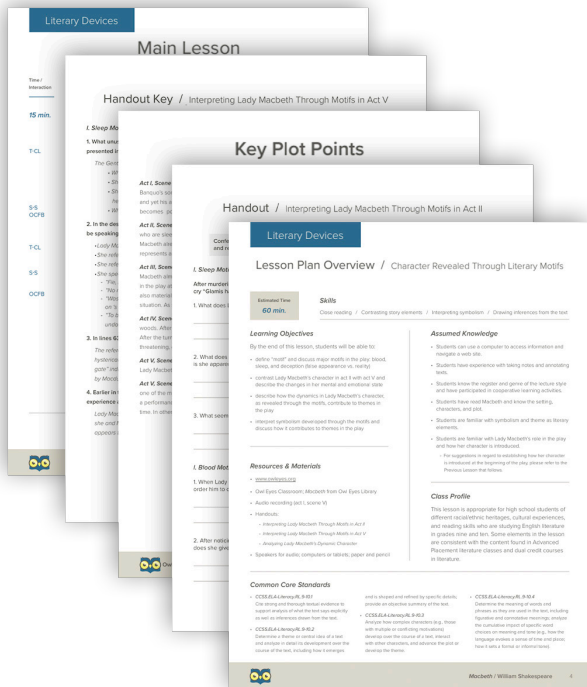
Hedda Gabler is another play by Henrik Ibsen. The play contains many parallels with *A Doll's House*: chiefly, its concern with protagonist Hedda and her struggle to find independence and identity in a world governed by strict gender roles.

Pride and Prejudice is a romance novel by Jane Austen. The story follows protagonist Elizabeth Bennet and her developing love affair with Mr. Darcy. Central to the narrative are themes of social class, wealth, gender roles, and family.

The Cherry Orchard is a play by Russian playwright Anton Chekov. The play follows an aristocratic Russian landowner who is faced with financial strife and forced to sell her family estate. Chekov deals skillfully with concerns of class, wealth, gender roles, and modernity.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood. Events take place in a world where women have been stripped of all rights, dictated by supposedly Christian "family" values. The more modern novel may provide a useful counterpoint for students struggling to connect with an older setting.

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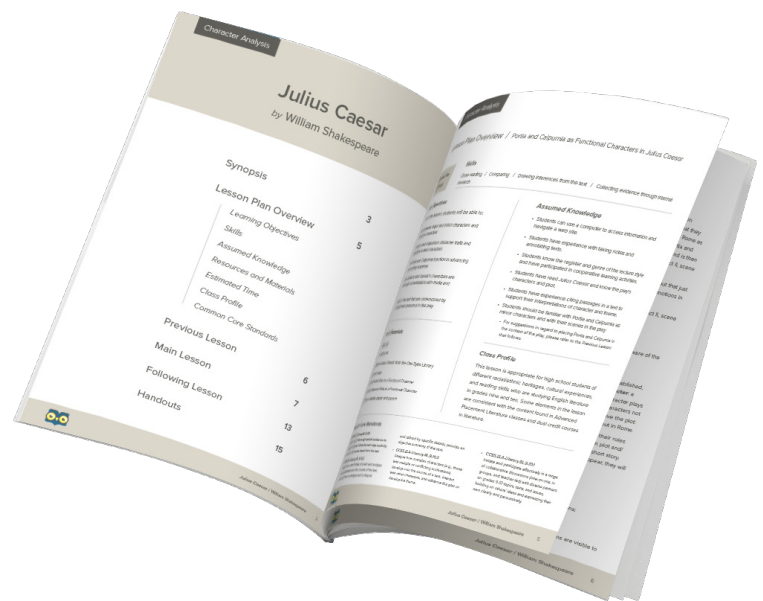
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