***NAME: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_***

**IB DP Language & Literature**



***A DOLL’S HOUSE***

**by Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906)**

**written (circa) & first performed in 1879, in Norway (translated from Norwegian)**

***A DOLL’S HOUSE***

**Background**

During the nineteenth century, most middle-class European and American women were economically and legally dependent on their husbands. Realistic writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Guy de Maupassant, and Thomas Hardy wrote works sympathizing with defiant, unconventional women, but their rebellious female characters usually came to ruin. In *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen creates a modern tragic heroine and allows her to achieve independence. Upon its publication in 1879*, A Doll’s House* was widely translated, read, discussed, attacked, and performed. The portrayal of marital conflict in the play was considered so scandalous that the producers of the German version changed the last act. Ibsen himself, under considerable pressure, wrote an alternate ending. He later regretted this, stating that the entire play was written for the sake of the final scene and its famous “slamming door.”

In *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen imitates the technique of analysis and retrospection first developed by Sophocles in ancient Greece. The major events affecting the characters have already occurred before the curtain is raised; the action of the play serves to expose these events. Ibsen’s contemporaries were startled by the detailed set descriptions, the natural dialogue, and the use of real-life situations. In fact, modern drama is often said to date from the appearance of *A Doll’s House*.

**Overall Literary Focus**

Characterization is the process by which an author reveals the personality of the characters. In drama, characterization occurs mostly through dialogue, a form of indirect characterization. We make up our minds about the characters by listening to the things they say and how they say them, what they look like, and how they act.

**Questions**

**ACT 1**

**First Thoughts**

1. Do you believe that Nora is as happy as she claims to be? Why or why not?

**Interpretation Questions:**

1. What does the stage description of the set suggest about the characters we are about to encounter and the lives they lead?
2. From the beginning of Act I, Torvald calls Nora several pet names. Skim Act 1 and note down the names used (nouns), as well as the adjectives, and consider their connotations. What do these names suggest about Torvald’s perception of his wife, her role, and their relationship? (see chart on next page)

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| **Page(s)** | **Pet Name** | **Connotations** |
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1. Compare and contrast how Nora and Torvald view money. What might this foreshadow?
2. Compare Nora’s and Christine’s lives since marriage. Who is better off? Explain.
3. What might be the link between Nora’s “forbidden” macaroons and her desire to say “Well, I’ll be damned!” to Torvald?
4. What crime has Nora committed?
5. Do Nora’s motives for committing the crime excuse her in some way?
6. What does Nora’s tree decorating and chattering at the end of Act 1 reveal about her character?
7. How is Torvald depicted in Act 1? What are his views on morality? Do you agree or disagree with his ideas?

**Applying Meanings**

1. Do you think the marriage of Nora and Torvald Helmer could be used as the basis of a play about a modern couple? What aspects of their relationship wouId you change in order to update it? What aspects of their relationship could be kept unchanged? Connect to real life and/or other textual or film examples.

**\*this could be an interesting starting off point for a WT 1 or 2!**

**ACT 2**

**First Thoughts**

1. How do you think Torvald will respond when he reads the letter from Krogstad?

**Interpretation Questions**

1. Why does Torvald make such a decisive show of mailing the letter firing Krogstad against Nora’s pleas? Do you agree with Nora that Torvald’s reasons for firing Krogstad are “petty”? Why or why not?
2. Dr. Rank has inherited a fatal illness from his father. Bitterly, he tells Nora that “in every single family, in one way or another, the same merciless law of retribution is at work.” In what way is retribution for past deeds at work in the Helmer family?
3. Near the end of Act 2, Nora believes that a “miracle” will happen. What is the miracle that she hopes for?
4. Foreshadowing is the use of clues to hint at what is going to happen later in the plot. What do you anticipate will happen?
5. When Nora sees the box of masquerade clothes, she wants to “rip them in a million pieces!” What does Ibsen symbolize with this characterization?
6. After Dr Rank professed his love, Nora demands that the lamp be brought in. Why? Is this real light or artificial? What might Ibsen be suggesting about truth and light in the Helmers’ household?
7. Some histories of the Tarantella dance explain that it is used to fight off the venomous effects of a spider bite. Other interpretations suggest it represents a woman’s frustrations in oppression/ Which of these explanations best fits Nora’s violent practice at the end of Act 2? Might both apply? Explain.

**ACT 3**

**First Thoughts**

1. Do you think that Nora made the right decision? Will a reconciliation between Nora Torvald be possible in the future?

**Interpretation Questions**

1. Why is Christine willing to “risk everything” for Krogstad?
2. Mrs. Linde could stop Krogstad’s letter from reaching Torvald, but she decides that Torvald should know the truth about Nora’s actions. What is her motive? Do you approve or disapprove of her decision?
3. Ibsen Creates an extended metaphor in Act 3—the “doll’s house”—which gives the play its title. What does this metaphor suggest about Nora’s relationships with her father, husband, and children?
4. Torvald and Nora have very different ideas about what is moral and just. What do their opinions about the forged note reveal about their attitudes toward law and society? With whom do you agree more? Why?
5. Why does Nora call her husband “a strange man”? Do you think she is justified in using that term? Why or why not?
6. Discuss the irony in Torvald’s accusation that Nora has played with him “like a puppet”.
7. Helmer’s pronouncement that “before all else, (Nora) is a wife and mother” is contradicted by Nora’s “before all else, I’m a human being”. How is this view of women’s roles significant today?
8. In Act 2, Nora hopes that a “miracle” will take place. Near the end of Act 3, she tells Torvald that in order for their marriage to be restored, “the miracle of miracles” will have to take place. What does Nora mean by “the miracle of miracles”? How does it differ from the miracle she hoped for earlier?
9. Briefly summarize Nora’s reasons for leaving Torvald. Is this her best option? What has Nora gained that might make up for the loss of her marriage and her children?
10. Act 3 ends with the sound of the front door slamming as Nora leaves her husband; this is the last sound the audience hears. Some critics have said that the echo of that slamming door is still sounding in our world today. Explain the comment, and state whether you agree or disagree, and why.

**Imagery & Motifs**

Add to the following chart each time you notice an image. Look out for these motifs:

dolls / light / animals / nature / sickness and disease / domesticity / entrapment

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| Page | Image/Idea | Related Character | Connotations |
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**Entrapment**

**Arachne**

****Read the summary of the Greek myth about Arachne, a skilled female weaker who is turned into a spider by the goddess Athens for daring to challenge her defined role as a lower class, mortal woman.

(From Wikipedia)

In Greco-Roman mythology, the mortal **Arachne** [/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help%3AIPA_for_English)[əˈrækniː](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help%3AIPA_for_English#Key)[/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help%3AIPA_for_English) was a great weaver who boasted that her skill was greater than that of [Athena](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena), goddess of wisdom, weaving, and strategy. When Arachne refuses to acknowledge that her skill comes, in part at least, from the goddess, Athena takes offense and sets up a contest between the two. Presenting herself as an old lady, she approaches the boasting girl and warns: "You can never compare to any of the gods. Plead for forgiveness and Athena might spare your soul". "Ha, I only speak the truth and if Athena thinks otherwise then let her come down and challenge me herself," Arachne replies. Athena removes her disguise and appears in shimmering glory, clad in sparkling white chiton. The two begin weaving straight away. Both are very skilled with a loom, but clearly Athena is better and swifter. Athena's weaving represents four separate contests between mortals and the gods in which the gods punish mortals for setting themselves as equals of the gods. Arachne's weaving depicts ways that the gods have misled and abused mortals, particularly [Zeus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeus)' tricking and sexually abusing of many women. Athena sees that Arachne has insulted the gods and rips Arachne's work into shreds. Arachne hangs herself. Moved to mercy, Athena bids Arachne life, but sprinkles her with [Hecate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hecate)'s potion, turning her into a spider and cursing her and her descendants to weave for all time.

**Discuss:**

1. In what ‘web’ of her own design does Arachne ensnare herself? Examine the question literally and metaphorically.
2. Why does Athena choose a spider for Arachne’s new form? How is this choice appropriate on more than one level?
3. What parallels can be drawn between this myth and Nora Helmer’s story?
4. Examine this line from Sir Walter Scott’s *Marmion*:

*“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!”*

* How is the metaphor of a web effective for the topic of deceit?

Here is another quotation, this one from Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It:*

*“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”*

* Is human existence simply a matter of playing parts?
* What seems to be Ibsen’s view of this attitude to life?

**Representation of entrapment**

**Costume Props Dialogue**

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**Set Stage directions**

**Character/ Foil table**

Character foils provide contrasts that help illuminate different aspects of each of the characters. There are a whole series of them in *A Doll’s House* and they are an important feature of the play.

Take notes on the contrasts that exist between the pairs of characters below, then consider any parallels that exist between the two characters. Think about Ibsen’s purpose in creating these foils, and the effect on the audience.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Characters** | **Contrasts** | **Similarities** | **Purpose/Effect** |
| Torvald and Dr Rank |  |  |  |
| Torvald and Krogstad |  |  |  |
| Mrs Linde and Nora |  |  |  |
| Nora and Krogstad |  |  |  |
| Nora and Dr Rank |  |  |  |
| Torvald and Nora |  |  |  |
| Krogstad and Mrs Linde |  |  |  |

**The function of minor characters**

Explore the function of one of the minor characters from this list:

* Dr Rank
* Mrs Linde
* Nils Krogstad

Make notes under the following headings, working closely with the script.

1. What type of person (class, social standing, typical role) within 19th Century European society does s/he represent?

By what means (costume / music / actions / speech mannerisms / props / set / lighting) is this illustrated?

1. What does this character suggest about the society in which he or she lives?

By what means (costume / music / actions / speech mannerisms / props / set / lighting) is this illustrated?

1. What does this character reveal about Nora in terms of her background, childhood, parenting, marriage, aspirations etc?

By what means (costume / music / actions / speech mannerisms / props / set / lighting) is this illustrated?

1. How does this character help us understand the values of this society/

By what means (costume / music / actions / speech mannerisms / props / set / lighting) is this illustrated?

1. Complete a SEE (Statement, Example Explanation) x3 paragraph, using the statement below as your topic sentence:

The function of in *A Doll’s House* is …..

**Symbols**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **SYMBOL** | **RELEVANT QUOTATION** | **PURPOSE & EFFECT** |
| Christmas tree | *We can see a porter carrying in a Christmas tree.**Nora decorating the tree at the end of Act 1.* *“Hide that Christmas tree’**“stripped and dishevelled, its candles burned to their sockets” (Act 2)* | Represents the stages in Nora and Helmer’s life.Identifies the time of family celebration.Creates a festive mood, symboliing Nora’s happiness in the opening scene. Decorating the Christmas tree shows her belief in the happiness of the family. She carefully creates an appearance of happiness.Introduces theme of secrets and hiding. There are hidden aspects to this family.By the time the Christmas tree is stripped of its ornaments (disintegration of appearances) several unsettling events have occurred; things are unravelling. |
| Light |  |  |
| Macaroons |  |  |
| Doors |  | Escape and intrusions. Avenue for retreat.  |
| Fire |  | Comfort, warmth and security.  |
| Tarantella |  |  |
| Pet names |  |  |
| Children’s game |  |  |

**Structure**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS** | **EXAMPLES** | **EFFECT** |
| Parallels of characters |  |  |
| Parallels of situations |  |  |
| Entrances |  |  |
| Exits |  |  |
| Opening scene |  |  |
| Foreshadowing |  |  |
| Exposition |  | Retrospective. By innuendo and dialogue (gives background or relationships & power dynamics). Continual, fragmentary and inferential. |
| Complication |  |  |
| Denouement |  |  |

**Theatrical Elements**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Device** | **Example** | **Effect** |
| Set | Unusual setting for a play of its time, but one that would have been quite recognizable to the audience. The “comfortably and tastefully, but not expensively furnished room” afforded no surprises. | The surprises and meaning lie beneath the surface, suggesting that the appearance could well belie the reality.The set suggests warmth and comfort and contrasts with the cold outside the window.Detail – meaning attached to furniture and props. E.g Christmas tree and books (like Helmer, give the appearance of goodness within). |
| Title |  |  |
| Costume |  |  |
| Dialogue |  | Used to disclose events retrospectively.Contemporary, everyday language. Economic. Short, crisp speeches. Interrupt each other, incomplete sentences. Authentic realism.The style of language used by each character differs, reflecting their personalities, responses and backgrounds.Dialogue loaded with additional meanings, e.g. Nora’s conversation with Anne-Marie (Act 2).Three-way scenes where one character is unaware of the significance of dialogue of the other two characters, e.g. Nora, Dr Rank and Torvald (Act 3) |
| Lighting | The set darkens. | Sense of impending doom is heightened. Reflects tension. |
| Sound | Final slam of the door. | Finality. Echoes. Out into the world. End of the marriage. |
| Symbols | Christmas tree, books, doors, macaroons,  |  |
| Structure |  |  |
| Imagery |  |  |
| Stereotypes |  |  |
| Irony | Nora’s nurse had to give up her child and Nora wonders how she could bear it. Then Nora gives up her own children.Christmas time - family celebration | Painful cost of realising independence. |
| Dramatic irony |  |  |

**Post Reading: Overall Discussion Questions**

1. What is the French ‘well-made play’? What are its defining features?
2. In what ways was *A Doll’s House* startlingly different from the style of the ‘well-made play’?
3. In what ways does *A Doll’s House* follow conventions of classic theatre? How does this contribute to achieving Ibsen’s purpose for the play?
4. What situation parallels are developed? What is their purpose?
5. What character parallels are developed? What is their purpose?
6. Where does the action begin, in terms of unfolding the plot? What is the effect of conveying events retrospectively, through dialogue?
7. What examples are there of Ibsen subverting the audience’s expectations of a happy ending? What do you think is his purpose in doing this?
8. What examples are there of Ibsen subverting the audience’s expectations of stock characters? What do you think is his purpose in doing this?
9. List the features of the dialogue written for each main character. Explain what the features show of the character’s personality and background. Think back to what we learned about language and identity and language and gender. What does the characters’ use of language reveal about them? Use specific examples.

You may use the Devices Table found on the previous pages in this packet to answer these questions.

1. *How does Ibsen create a set that is realistic? What is his purpose in doing this?*
2. *Briefly note the symbolic significance of the fire, Christmas tree and macaroons.*
3. *Give two examples of how lighting is used to convey meaning.*
4. *Give three examples of how costume is used to convey meaning.*
5. What roles does Nora play in her relationships with others? What are the most significant features of her final conversation with her husband?
6. How does Helmer see himself? In what ways does he control Nora? What underpins his sense of security and selfhood? What weaknesses are in his character? In what ways in Helmer a tragic figure?
7. What elements of the stereotypical villain are conveyed in Krogstad? How is sympathy developed for him? What is his purpose in the play?
8. What are Dr Rank’s primary characteristics? What is his purpose in the play?
9. In what way are the choices Nora makes ironic, when compared with the life of Mrs Linde? What is her purpose in the play?
10. What was Ibsen’s response to the suggestion that *A Doll’s House* is a play about feminism? What were the main concerns about that he wished to explore in the play?
11. To what extent does the play promote and/or subvert traditional morals and values?
12. What is the significance of the play’s title?
13. What contrast is established between the world outside the house and the set of the play? What comment is being made?

**Discussion Topics**

To what extent, and by what means, are you **positioned** to agree or disagree with each of the following topics?

* Nora is complicit in her own entrapment.
* Christine’s reconciliation with Krogstad negates Nora’s bid for freedom.
* Torvald is contemptible.
* Ibsen contends that there is no hope for women.
* The impending death of Dr Rank is irrelevant to the main plot.
* The play ends happily, at least for Nora.
* Torvald is as much a victim of cultural norms as Nora.
* The play has little relevance in the 21st century.
* Morality and right/wrong are inflexible.
* Money is the root of all evil.

**A Well-Made Play**

Read the following:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Well-made_play>

Answer these questions:

1. What are the requirements for a well-made play?
2. How does *A Doll’s House* fit into the requirements of a well-made play?
3. How does A Doll’s house subvert the conventions of a well-made play?

For more information, check out the following link:

<http://www.screentakes.com/a-wellmade-dolls-house-the-influence-of-eugene-scribe-on-the-art-of-henrik-ibsen/>