

Literary Analysis of a Drama

INTRODUCTION

Identification of the play's title and author

Brief summary of the plot

Thesis statement

BODY

First major point

Literary evidence from the primary source that supports the first major point

Cash and Conflict in A Doll's House

Often called the father of modern drama, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen stunned audiences in 1879 with his realistic portrayal of marital life and marital strife in A Doll's House. The husband in the play, Torvald Helmer, is a lawyer who believes himself to be the moral pillar of his family. His wife, Nora, is his "skylark," (1072) a flighty woman who seems preoccupied with spending her husband's money. Their life appears to be a picture of happiness until another character threatens to reveal a secret about Nora's past. Years before, in a secret attempt to save her husband's failing health, Nora had committed a crime by forging her father's signature to take out a loan. The resulting conflict over Nora's money reveals the deeper conflict within the marriage, the troubling conflict within Nora herself, and the larger social and political conflict between men and women that Ibsen observed in Norwegian society.

From the beginning of the play, Ibsen uses conflicts over money to reveal the inequality in Nora and Torvald's marriage. The play opens as Nora tries to wheedle money out of Torvald so that she may secretly repay the loan she has secured from Nils Krogstad, a lawyer who has recently become Torvald's employee. Nora is not allowed to earn money of her own, but she does work secretly whenever she can and uses the money her husband gives her for new dresses to repay her loan. Torvald, however, believes that Nora is incapable of understanding the

Literary Analysis of a Drama *continued*

Elaboration—
explanation of how
evidence supports
major point

Second major point

Literary evidence

importance of work or the principles behind saving money, and he tries to monitor her spending carefully. After she buys Christmas presents, Torvald chides her, “Has my little squanderbird been overspending again?” (1073) Nora assures him that she hasn’t been overspending, and when he asks her what she wants as a Christmas present, she asks for more money. “The squanderbird’s a pretty little creature, but she gets through an awful lot of money,” he tells her. “It’s incredible what an expensive pet she is for a man to keep.” (1074) Although Torvald eventually gives Nora some money, this response clearly shows that he regards her more as his possession than as his partner.

The conflict over money also reveals Nora’s inner conflict—a conflict that she tries to hide even from herself. By taking the loan, concealing it from her husband, and proving to herself that she is capable of repaying it on her own, Nora experiences the feeling of independence that the ability to earn one’s own money often brings. She is proud that she has found a way to help her husband, and she even tells her friend, Mrs. Linde, that she likes making money. “It was great fun, though, sitting there working and earning money,” she says. “It was almost like being a man.” Although Nora enjoys the freedom of having her own money, however, she values her husband more, and she knows that he considers it his duty as a man to earn and control all of the money. She expresses these feelings to Mrs. Linde as well: “. . . it’d be painful and humiliating for him to know that he owed anything to me.

Literary Analysis of a Drama *continued*

Continued support for second major point

Elaboration—
explanation of how
evidence supports the
major point

Third major point

Literary evidence

It'd completely wreck our relationship." (1080)

Nora is able to put her own desires aside in order to please Torvald, whom she believes would do the same for her. In fact, she is certain that, if Torvald were to find out about the loan, he would try to protect her by taking the blame himself. Nora is so convinced of Torvald's loyalty to her that, when Torvald finally discovers her secret, she tries to slip away in disgrace. Torvald catches her on her way out, though, and calls her a criminal, shouting "Shame on you. Shame!" (1117)

When Nora learns that Torvald has no intention of protecting her by sacrificing his own career, her belief system crumbles. She had believed that her role as a woman was to please her husband and that his role was to protect her from harm. She had accepted the limitations he placed on her because she trusted that he loved her and would do anything for her. However, when Torvald fails to protect her, the inner conflict spurred by money comes rushing into Nora's conscience. When Torvald tries to convince her to stay by arguing that her duties are toward her husband and her children, she replies that she also has another duty—a duty to herself (1121).

By exploring Nora's inner conflict, Ibsen reveals the conflicts between men and women that raged within the Norwegian society of his time. When *A Doll's House* was written, a wife could not borrow money without her husband's approval (1079). Had this not been true,

Literary Analysis of a Drama *continued*

Elaboration

the main conflict in the play, Nora forging a document to take out a loan, would never have occurred. Also, had Nora been able to openly work to raise money, the conflict would never have arisen. Nora's restrictions were common to many nineteenth-century European and North American women. In many ways they were treated like possessions, with important aspects of their lives controlled first by their fathers and later by their husbands. Many men during Ibsen's day assumed that women were incapable of thinking rationally and that women should work only in their own homes. Torvald expresses this belief when he tells Nora, "First and foremost you are a wife and a mother." (1121) Some women were able to accept a life lived within these clear-cut roles, trusting that they were fair and just. Others, however, recognized the inequity and weakness of the system.

Continued support of third major point

Nora discovers an ironic weakness in her society's rules when she learns that the laws that prevent her from obtaining loans thus prevent her from protecting her father and her husband, which is supposedly the principal duty of a daughter and a wife. Just as Nora's discovery mirrors the discoveries made by many women during the late nineteenth century, Torvald's reaction to it reflects some of the more typical responses to women's unconventional behavior at the time. When he learns of Nora's ideas, he exclaims, "But it's unheard of for so young a woman to behave like this!" (1122) Later, when Torvald tries to explain his own actions, he tells her that "no man can be expected to sacrifice

Literary Analysis of a Drama *continued*

Elaboration

his honor, even for the person he loves." Nora replies, "Millions of women have done it." (1122-1123) By recounting these heated exchanges between Nora and Torvald, Ibsen illustrates the powerful social pressures that are applied to men and women, and draws attention to the overwhelming constrictions of behavior that result. In the end, however, Ibsen breaks with tradition and provides hope for the individual who strives to overcome the pressure to conform. At the end of the play, Nora chooses to defy convention and leaves Torvald, slamming the door solidly, and unambiguously, behind her.

Summary

Throughout *A Doll's House*, Ibsen focuses on differences over money and proper behavior to expose the serious conflicts that lie deep within the marriage of Nora and Torvald. However, at the same time Ibsen uses these tensions to illuminate even deeper problems, and to expose the contradictions inherent not only within Nora's own conscience, but within the society as a whole. In so doing, Ibsen creates a drama that not only provides insight into one troubled marriage, but also serves as a powerful social commentary, as well as a thoughtful treatise about the importance of knowing oneself and staying true to that knowledge.

Literary Analysis of a Drama

Definition

A **literary analysis** of a drama is a close examination of the elements that make the play work. A good literary analysis looks at literary elements such as conflict, plot, and character, as well as theatrical elements such as props, movement, and costumes.

Many literary analyses use the structure illustrated in the framework below. Print this framework and use it as a guide when you write your own literary analysis.

Framework

Directions and Explanations

Introduction

- Identify the literary work's title and author.
- Supply background information or a brief summary of the work.
- Provide a clear thesis statement.

Give important background information Summarize the play's major action and important themes, and include basic information like the name of the play and the playwright.

State your thesis Anchor your paper with a clear and concise thesis statement.



Body

- State major points supporting your thesis.
- Provide evidence (details from the primary source and possibly from secondary sources) that support each major point.

Support your thesis Write at least one paragraph for each major point that supports your thesis. Be sure to organize your points in either order of importance or in chronological order.

Offer literary evidence Provide examples from the play to support each of your major points. Then, explain how the literary evidence supports your point.



Conclusion

- Summarize your major points and restate your thesis.

Put it all together Restate your thesis and summarize your main points. Try to leave your readers with something to think about.