

7

# How are women marginalized in *A Doll's House?*

English A1

Word count: 999


Serve some purpose as rationale -  
'front loads' the examiner with what to  
focus on

- The prescribed question is: Which social groups are marginalized, excluded or silenced within the text?
- The title of the text for analysis: *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen
- The part of the course to which the task refers: Part 3 Literature Texts & Contexts
- Points that explain the focus of the task:
  - Explore how women were presented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century
  - Explain why injustice in the inequality of power and opportunities between genders exists in the play
  - Explain how struggles of women of the Victorian era were a result of a patriarchal society

The values of the Victorian era encompassed bourgeois morality and patriarchal ideology in which women played a subservient role to men. In response to the rules and conventions adopted by Northern European society, Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House*, in which he suggested that society was unfair and restricting. While our social context may have changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the universality of the issue of gender equality persists. Although society has become more flexible in terms of the independence and job opportunities offered to women, a division between genders in terms of roles remains in certain countries and cultures.

One way in which Ibsen marginalizes the main female characters Nora and Mrs. Linde in *A Doll's House* is through the belittling and patronizing dialogue directed at them by the male characters. Torvald's relationship with Nora appears to be rather paternalistic as he addresses Nora with diminutive pet names such as "little squirrel" (25), asserting his authority in the household. Moreover, Torvald dominates the majority of conversation, and the contrast in lengths of dialogue, until the last half of the last act, reflects the relative position of women in society.


The social structure of European society also imposes the political, economic and legal marginalization of women. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, men were viewed as being the breadwinners of the family. Standards were set for middle class behaviour in which men were to be held up as the superior being in the household, and women, "spendthrift[s]," (24) as demonstrated in *A Doll's House* by Nora's obsession with having "lots and lots of money." (24) Ibsen criticizes these societal values by highlighting the prevalence of male dominance and the disregard expressed towards



women. Difference in male and female attitudes to spending is at the level of comedic stereotyping but there are indications of deeper issues beneath the comic surface.

Women were excluded from decision-making and important matters. Ibsen uses Nora as an unconventional protagonist to challenge Victorian society's definition of a woman as her actions oppose societal and gender norms, including handling debts, which is typically perceived as a man's duty. Mrs. Linde has a traditional function as a confidante, but also plays a more active role as she is much more independent. Although the two female characters, Nora and Mrs. Linde are sharply contrasted, Mrs. Linde is also submissive and turns to Torvald for help as he "may be able to find some job for [her]." (42) However, Torvald treats her very casually as she is relatively unimportant to him, and this demonstrates that the reliance of women on men for financial resources also marginalized them, as there was a disregard for women concerning monetary control and employment.

Nora takes pride in her involvement in obtaining a pecuniary advantage as she believes it proves her capability as an independent woman and shows that she is not "completely useless," (36) delineating the way in which she is regarded by others because of her gender. Individual freedom is a thematic focus in *A Doll's House*. Torvald encourages Nora to be confident with regards to physical appearance, telling others to "take a good look"(85) at his "most treasured possession" (87), reinforcing the social norms where women were objects of desire. This suggests that they were exposed to limited opportunities and their individual expressions were dismissed as only male opinions were respected. The objectification of Nora as a "doll-wife" (98)

 symbolizes a prison built on patriarchy in which women are bound and confined to the house to perform their “sacred duties” (100), and in which “first and foremost [Nora is] a wife and mother.” The repression against women is reflected in her secret indulgence in “macaroons” (27), which is representative of her hidden desire for independence and to be “free” (78). However, there is a hierarchical shift as the act progresses, demonstrated by the increasing strength in the power of Nora’s dialogue and she embodies the characteristics of being an untraditional woman by breaking societal conventions in which women were expected to yield to men. Towards the end of the play in the third act, Nora begins to display some independence and is finally acknowledged by Torvald when she says, “I’ve a lot to say to you” (97). Although there is still uneven turn taking between her and Torvald, she dominates the volume in the conversation, through the use of the imperative phrases such as “don’t interrupt me” (97) and an increasingly assertive tone, which foreshadow her rising to power and beginning to take control in the relationship.

Despite this, Torvald tells Nora she is “blind” as she has “no experience of the world” (99). This vulnerability was present in women during this era, as they were viewed as unintelligent and having no concern with the public sphere. Arguably, this vulnerability is a product of the women being treated as insignificant beings and lesser than men, as men were presented with more opportunities than women and were seen as more influential.

To conclude, the female characters in *A Doll’s House* were marginalized by the values and restrictions imposed by a society dominated by men. The patriarchal social structure resulted in women’s roles revolving around the household and they were



perceived as having no concern for a realistic approach to life. *A Doll's House* expresses Ibsen's beliefs of individualism and freedom. Ultimately, Nora is a strong character who, by defying Torvald, has the opportunity to explore her identity. On the other hand, Mrs. Linde serves as an example of women's dependence on men, as she identifies Krogstad as someone to "live for" (84), highlighting men's power in society as Mrs. Linde feels that without a husband she cannot be content in life. The contrasts between the two women offer different perspectives towards gender inequality and the marginalization of women. While the play is often regarded as a feminist statement, Nora's character and actions exceed this and display not only the universality of her struggle but also rebellion against social standards as the play ends with Nora a dignified woman with her own free will.



Some used citations  
but in reality there is  
little time for lit cit  
in 1000 words!

WORKS CITED

Ibsen, Henrik, Michael Levenson, Meyer, Nick Worrall, and Non Worrall. *A Doll's House*. London: Methuen Drama, 2008. Print.