

A DOLL'S HOUSE

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*“A woman cannot be herself in modern society,
with laws made by men and with prosecutors and
judges who assess female conduct from a male
standpoint.”*

-Henrik Ibsen

SYNOPSIS

When a secret loan she took to save her husband's life comes to light, Nora Helmer, a seemingly carefree housewife, confronts the constraints of her marriage and societal expectations.

“Nora Helmer, a childlike wife and mother accustomed to an existence built around her husband Torvald, comes to confront the truth of her marriage, in Henrik Ibsen's groundbreaking 1879 play.”

- 2023 Hudson Theatre's Production of *A Doll's House*

In 1871, eight years before he wrote *A Doll's House*, Ibsen met a Norwegian girl called Laura Petersen. Ibsen took quite a fancy to her, and called her his 'skylark.' In 1872 she married a Danish schoolmaster, Victor Kieler, who subsequently contracted tuberculosis. His doctors prescribed a warmer climate, but they were poor, and Victor became hysterical at the mention of money. Laura arranged a loan without her husband's knowledge, for which a friend stood security. The trip to Italy thus financed was successful, and Victor made a good recovery. Two years later, however, repayment of the loan was demanded. Laura did not have the money herself, dared not tell her husband and, worse, still, the friend who had stood security had himself fallen on hard times. Laura attempted to pay off the loan by forging a check. The forgery was discovered, the bank refused payment, and Laura was forced to tell the whole story to her husband. Despite the fact that she had done it purely to save his life, Victor Kieler treated Laura like a criminal. He claimed that she was an unfit wife and mother and, when she suffered a nervous breakdown, he had her committed to a public asylum, and demanded a separation so that the children could be removed from Laura's care. She was discharged after a month, and managed to persuade Victor to take her back for the children's sake, which he eventually, but grudgingly, agreed to do. In September 1878, only a couple months after hearing about Laura's committal to the asylum, Ibsen began work on *A Doll's House*. In his notes he wrote the following: A woman cannot be herself in modern society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess female conduct from a male standpoint.

- *A Doll's House* Preface

HENRIK IBSEN



- March 20, 1828 - May 23, 1906
- Born in Skien, Norway
- Father was a Merchant
 - 1836 went bankrupt -> Extreme poverty
- Left home at 15
 - Grimstad (70 miles away, 800 ppl)
- In Grimstad he:
 - Was an apothecary's apprentice (made and sold medicine)
 - Studied to attend the university
 - Wrote *Catalina* (1849)
 - Had a son with a maid (1846)
 - Provided some financial support, did not meet the child

- Moved to Christiana (now called Oslo) (1850)
 - Wanted to prepare for University of Christiana
- First play was published
 - Had some positive reviews but not much commercial success.
- Hired as Writer and Manager for the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen
- Went back to Christiana (1857)
 - Managed another theatre
 - Married Suzannah Daae Thoresen (1858)
 - Had a son, Sigurd (1859)
 - Wrote *Loves Comedy* (1862)

- Italy (1862)
 - *Brand* (1865), *Peer Gynt* (1867)
- Germany (1868)
 - *The Pillars of Society* (1877), ***A Doll's House*** (1879)
 - Rose in popularity
- Rome (1879)
 - *Ghosts* (1881), *Enemy Of The People* (1882), *Lady From the Sea* (1888)
 - While it started with *A Doll's House*, Ibsen became even more controversial and faced backlash due to the content and themes of his works
- Return to Norway (1891)
 - *Hedda Gabler* (1891), *The Master Builder* (1892), *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)
 - Series of strokes in 1900
 - Unable to write
 - Died in 1906

PRODUCTION HISTORY

- First Production
 - December 21, 1879
 - Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark
 - Nora was played by Betty Hennings.
 - Torvald was played by Emil Poulson.
- Most Recent Broadway
 - March 9, 2023
 - Hudson Theatre, NYC
 - Nora was played by Jessica Chastain
 - Torvald was played by Arian Moayed.

- Early Productions
 - Stockholm, Sweden
 - Christiana, Norway
 - Bergen, Norway
- **Flensburg Germany - January, 1880**
 - Hedwig Raabe (actress) refused to perform as written
 - Ibsen made an alternate ending where Nora does not leave
 - Didn't want to, but chose to rather than another playwright doing it
 - This version was also performed in Hamburg, Dresden, Hanover, and Berlin
- Residence Theatre Munich - March 1880
 - Back to the original ending
- **Louisville, Kentucky, 1883**
 - First US production

- **Torquay England - March 1884**
 - *Breaking a Butterfly* - adaptation by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman
 - Made to be more palatable for British audiences
 - More traditional morality play - The protagonist (based on Nora) stays with her family.
- The original in London
 - Two private productions pre-1889
 - June 1889, Novelty Theatre
- Australia 1889
- **Palmer's Theatre , NYC - December, 1889**
 - First Broadway production
 - Beatrice Cameron as Nora
- France 1894
- Other US productions
 - 1902, 1937, 1971

- **1997 Broadway- Frank McGuinness Adaptation**
- London, England - May 2009
 - New translation
 - Donmar Warehouse
- March 2011
 - 24/6: A Jewish Theatre Company
- **New Adaptations:**
 - Young Vic - 2013
 - La Boite Theatre Company - September, 2014
 - Space Arts Center - June, 2015 - Alternate Ending
 - Toronto - 2018 - Tamil
 - Lyric Hammersmith - 2019 - Set in India
- **2023 Broadway Revival**

FILM ADAPTATIONS

- *A Doll's House* (1922) - Lost Silent Film
- *Nora* (1923) - German Silent Film
- *Casa de Muñecas* (1943) - Modernized with Alternate Ending
- *Nora* (1944) - Adaptation following Nazi ideology, Nora stays
- *Casa de Muñecas* (1954) - Several changes to the story
- *A Doll's House* (1973) - Directed by Joseph Posey, American (Filmed in Norway)
- *A Doll's House* (1973) - Directed by Patrick Garland, British
- *Sara* (1992) - based on *A Doll's House*, takes place in Iran
- *Nora* (2012) - Young Vic Theatre, What a modern Nora may look like

RECEPTION

- Very Controversial
- The Premier production sold out and received Critical Acclaim
- Faced lots of backlash
 - Real women are noble and maternal
 - Any real wife would 'throw herself into her husband's arms'
 - The play's 'screaming dissonances' defied common sense
 - The lack of a reconciliation scene was a serious flaw. [The play is] 'ugly' and 'distressing'
 - Illogical and immoral
 - 'Our own life, our own everyday life, has here been placed on stage and condemned!'
 - An attack on marriage
- Pressure to change the ending -> Ibsen wrote an alternate ending for some productions
- Many people loved the play and many people hated the play

“Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda...I am not even quite clear as to just what this women’s rights movement really is.”

-Henrik Ibsen

CONTEXT

SETTING

- Christmastime
- Late 19th century
 - 1879 - Same year it was published
- An unspecified Norwegian town

1879

- Few career opportunities for women
 - Financial dependance on men
- Slow rise in feminist thinkers advocating for gender equality
- Realism and naturalism in theatre
 - Moving away from romanticism
- Norway moving toward independence from Sweden
- Different cultures
 - Ibsen traveled, studied, and worked abroad which introduced him to European ideas different from Norwegian culture.
- Darwinism (introduced 1859)

CHARACTERS

- Nora
 - Our protagonist, a seemingly naive housewife who is hiding a secret from her husband.
 - Controlled and Naive -> Independent and Empowered
- Torvald
 - Nora's husband who takes pride in his status and role as provider for the family.
 - Authoritative and Devoted -> Exposed and Stagnant

- Krogstad
 - A desperate man who is trying to secure his reputation and job even if it's through morally gray means.
 - Desperate -> Relenting
- Kristine Linde
 - Nora's realistic and grounded friend from her childhood.
 - Practical -> Open
- Dr. Rank
 - A close family friend who is secretly in love with Nora.
 - Cynical -> Vulnerable

- Anne-Marie
 - The Nanny
- Helene
 - The Maid
- The Messenger
- Bobby and Ivan
 - The Helmers' children

THEMES

- Gender and Gender Roles
 - The way Nora is treated
 - Treated like a child, a pet, and like property
 - Nora is treated like she's not smart enough to handle money and responsibility.
 - Women abandon their dreams and ambitions for families.
 - Women are not individuals but extensions of their husbands.
 - Nora is dissatisfied and frustrated with her status as a woman.
 - Men are ambitious.
 - Provide for families
 - Achieve a higher status

- Marriage
 - What is the relationship between love and marriage?
 - Can there be love in marriage?
 - Marriage out of necessity
 - Nora acts out of love to save Torvald even if it breaks the law/societal norms putting love over the rules of marriage.
 - Nora is convinced Torvald will take the blame for it.
 - Torvald puts his reputation first rather than sacrificing it to protect Nora putting the rules and societal norms over his love for Nora.
 - Nora leaves.

- Appearance vs Reality
 - Many different examples of things not being what they seem
 - Nora and Torvald's marriage seems happy but is based in control and gender roles.
 - Nora is outwardly carefree but is actually unfulfilled and is hiding secrets from Torvald.
 - Dr. Rank's unspoken love for Nora
 - These things may be unspoken but have always been true/under the surface
 - Nora finally rejects prioritizing appearances and leaves.

SYMBOLS

- Macaroons
 - Deceit/Disobedience
 - Torvald doesn't allow Nora to eat macaroons
 - Nora claims to not have eaten them, which is untrue.
 - A desire for something more
 - A desire for something forbidden.
 - A desire she hides from her husband.

- The Christmas Tree
 - Top of Act One, a messenger brings a Christmas tree
 - Unity in the family
 - Nora finds joy in making the house a pleasant place.
 - Top of Act Two, “The Christmas tree stands, stripped of presents, disheveled, and with the remains of burned down candles”
 - Loss of innocence
 - Downfall of unity in the family

- Torvald's nicknames for Nora
 - “My little skylark”
 - “My little squirrel”
 - “My little singing bird”
 - “My pretty little pet”
 - “My little sweet-tooth”
 - “My poor little Nora”
- These symbolize his view of his wife as inferior and the power Torvald holds in their relationship.

- Letters
 - Used as a catalyst for the conflict
 - Torvald controls access to the letters
 - Dominance in relationship
 - Role of being the one in control
 - Force characters to face the truth
 - Can represent deceit and lack of communication

- Dolls/Doll House
 - Nora is treated as a doll
 - No freedom or agency
 - Strict roles
 - Decorative and controlled in their marriage
 - The fragile nature of their marriage
 - Facade
 - Looks perfect from the outside
 - Lack of authenticity inside

STRUCTURE

WELL-MADE PLAY

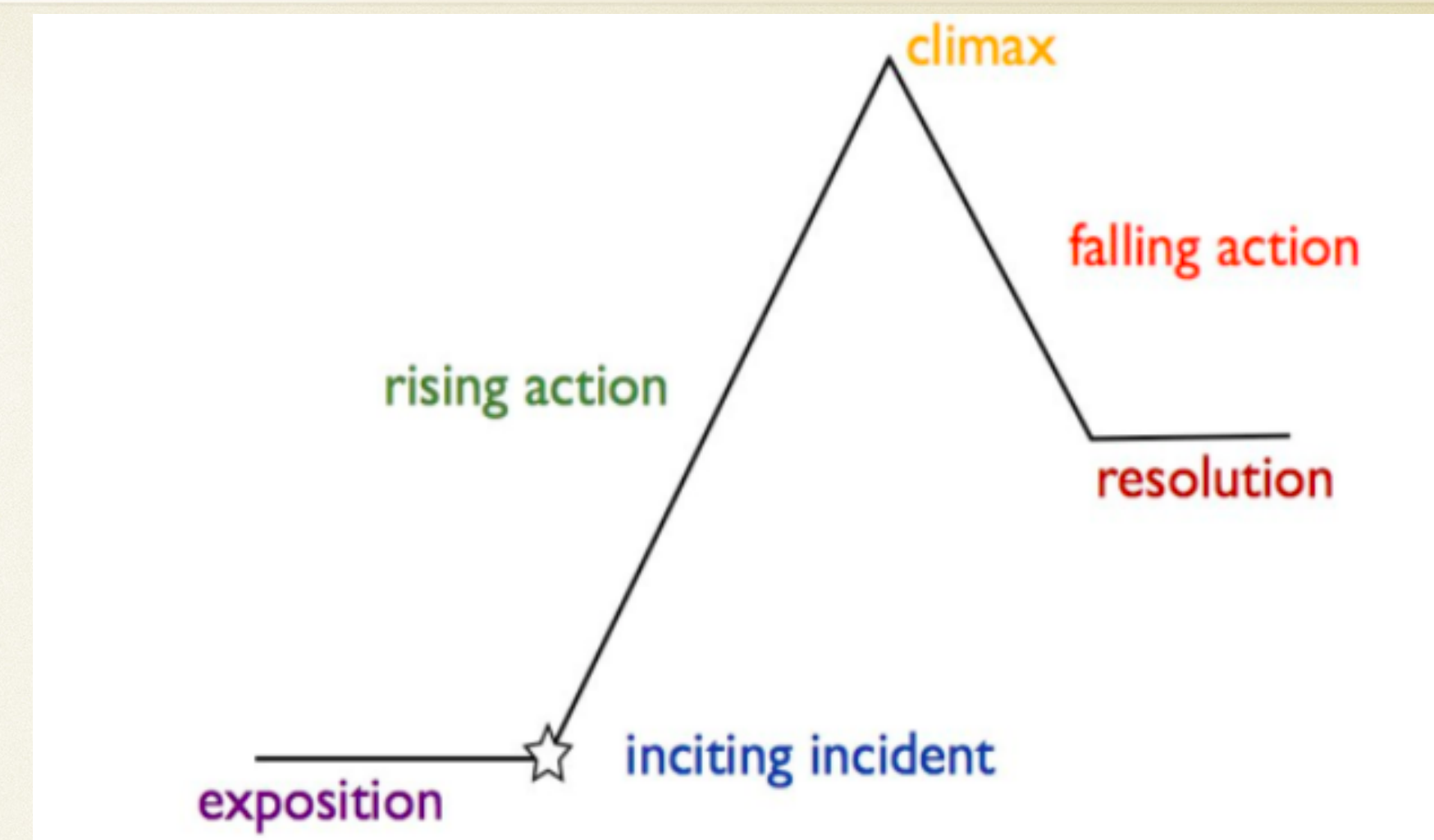
- dramatic genre from nineteenth-century theatre - Eugène Scribe (a French dramatist and librettist; known for writing "well-made plays")
- “A dramatic structure [designed] to provide a constantly entertaining, exciting narrative which satisfyingly resolved the many complications and intrigues that drove the story ... characteristically based on a secret known only to some of the characters” -The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance (2004)
- Steven Stanton’s Seven key points of the genre
 - a plot based on facts known by the audience but not known by some or all of the characters
 - a pattern of increasingly intense action and suspense
 - a series of ups and downs in the main character's fortunes
 - the depiction of the lowest and the highest point in the main character's adventures
 - a central misunderstanding, clear to the audience but unknown to the characters
 - a logical and plausible dénouement
 - the overall structure is reflected in each act.
- *A Doll’s House* differs because it subverts the typical happy ending

THREE ACT STRUCTURE

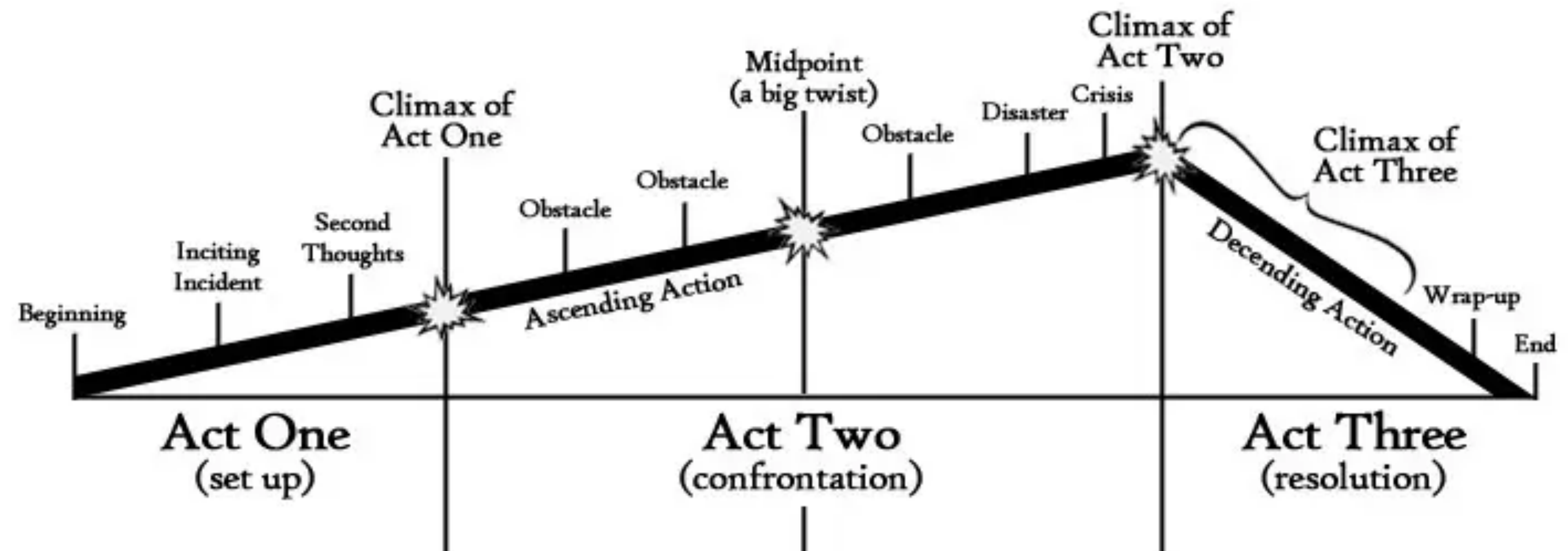
Setup- Exposition, Inciting incident

Confrontation- Rising Action

Resolution- Climax, Falling action, Resolution



Three-Act Structure



ACT ONE

- Exposition
 - Introduction to characters and family dynamic
 - Introduction to Nora's secret loan
- Inciting Incident (Climax of Act One)
 - Krogstad blackmails Nora
- Rising Action
 - Nora tries to convince Torvald not to fire Krogstad

ACT TWO

- Rising Action
 - Dr. Rank is in love with Nora
 - Krogstad drops a letter into the letter box.
 - Nora tells Kristine about Krogstad, and Kristine goes to talk to him.
 - Nora distracts Torvald
- Climax of Act Two
 - Krogstad drops a letter into Torvald's mailbox.

ACT THREE

- Rising Action
 - Kristine talks to Krogstad.
- Climax
 - Torvald reads the letter.
 - Torvald's angry reaction.
- Falling action
 - Krogstad's second letter and Torvald forgives Nora.
 - Nora see's Torvald's true colors.
- Resolution
 - Nora leaves.

OTHER RESOURCES

- For more historical context refer to the following.
 - <http://shsdavisapes.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/103421843/Doll-s-House%20Version%202.pdf> (Author unknown)
- Celebrities who have starred in A Doll's House
 - <https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/theatre-news/news/all-the-celebrities-who-have-starred-in-a-dolls-house>
- Nora: A Short Film Responding to Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House
 - <https://youtu.be/8CY8s2MqPyM>
- Theatre and individualism
 - <https://youtu.be/qL3rOHqSsIQ>

“I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement...True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity.”

-Henrik Ibsen

THANK YOU!

Sources

- <https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/theatre-news/news/everything-you-need-to-know-about-a-dolls-house-on-broadway-starring-jessica-chastain>
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- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henrik-Ibsen>
- <https://playbill.com/production/a-dolls-house-broadway-hudson-theatre-2023>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Doll%27s_House#Film
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- <https://studycorgi.com/ibsens-a-dolls-house-as-a-well-made-play/#:~:text=A%20well%20made%20play%20uses,built%20into%20the%20play%20itself.>