How to Get into *A Doll House*: Ibsen's Play as an
Introduction to Drama

June Schlueter

As a student and teacher of modern and contemporary drama, I have often
heard colleagues scoff over the corpse of Ibsen, admitting Ibsen's seminal
position in the development of modern drama but concluding that from the
vantage point of the 1980s, the only proper place for an Ibsen play is the
morgue. When I read Peter Handke or Sam Shepard, I feel inclined to
agree, but come fall, and the first half of the modern drama course I teach,
I am once again surprised at the continuing vitality of Ibsen's plays. And I
am excited by the range of effective approaches to teaching them.

*A Doll House*, in particular, offers such accessible riches for undergraduates that it has remained a favorite of both of ours. I continue to teach the
play, not only because it holds so important a place in literary history or
because the issues of individualism and women's choices are anything but
dead but because it offers the best initiation into drama I know. In my
modern drama classes as well as my introductory literature classes, I suggest
three ways of getting into *A Doll House*: the first through the front door,
the second through the back door, and the third through the chimney.

The front door, of course, is the door Nora slams, and strictly speaking, it is the door that ends the play, though not for students: the temptation to speculate about what happens to Nora after she slams the door is simply too appealing. Predictably, they speak of the difficulties facing women in the
nineteenth century, of the fragility of Nora's personality, of how ill-equipped she is to make it on her own. Some argue, however, that she has just
demonstrated how capable and independent she is and that despite the odds set by society her chances of survival are high. Before the discussion has
gone too far, I share with them my own somewhat imperfect recollection of
"To Norway—Land of the Giants," the delightful Monty Python scenarios,
each only several seconds long, of what happens to Nora. In one, a group of suffragettes marching by just as she exits tramples her; in another, she
slips on the icy stairs and slides headfirst into an open manhole; in a third,
she opens her umbrella and is next seen flying above the rooftops, Mary
Poppins style; and in a fourth, my favorite, Nora does not really intend to leave after all but is simply playacting again: she hides behind the door as
Torvald charges after her, pushing against the door and flattening her against the wall. Since *A Doll House* is the first play of the course, the Python skits prove a great icebreaker and an effective way of suggesting how fatuous an endeavor such speculation is. The play, after all, has ended, and Nora has no life beyond it.
What I am doing here, of course, is introducing students to the limits of literary criticism. If we are not justified in speaking of Nora’s postplay existence, are we in speaking of her preplay existence? I tell them of the Jane Fonda film version of *A Doll House*, which spends the first twenty minutes on material that precedes the opening scene of the text. But Nora and Torvald’s trip to Italy, her father’s death, her arrangement with Krogstad are not speculation: all are revealed in the text, but through exposition rather than dramatization. We deviate for a few moments then and look at how Ibsen uses the uncomplicated but certain technique of the old school chum’s return so that Nora might plausibly reveal the facts of her recent past, which will prove essential to the development of the plot.

Once students understand the boundaries of a play, we can then move on to the limitations prescribed by the text. We cannot, for example, infer from Nora’s forgery that the money was not obtained from her father at all but from a lover, though we might be justified in speculating a bit about Nora’s relationship with Dr. Rank. Students are eager to suggest possibilities and have others decide how responsible those readings are. Inevitably, they come to see the legitimacy of variant readings: one student might see love as Nora’s motivation for concealing the forgery from Torvald, another might see egotism, a third moral carelessness. I move then to the macaroon scenes and ask how those scenes support each of the interpretations.

In the first of these two early scenes, Nora has been surreptitiously devouring the forbidden macaroons. When Torvald asks whether his little “sweet tooth” has been breaking rules, she denies that she has. He becomes more specific and asks whether she “didn’t drop in at the confectioner’s.” “No, I assure you, Torvald—,” she replies. “She didn’t nibble a little candy?” “No, really not.” “Not even a macaroon or two?” “No, Torvald,” she retorts, “I assure you—really—,” and even after Torvald turns his questions into a joke, she continues to insist, “It would never occur to me to go against your wishes” (*Le Gallienne, Six Plays* 6–7). Is Nora so intent on pleasing her husband that she tells him what she knows he wants to hear? Is she so full of self that she delights in deceiving the imperceptive Torvald? Or is she so morally irresponsible that she will lie whenever lying suits her convenience?

In the second of the scenes, Nora brazenly offers Rank some macaroons and easily lies, saying, in Kristine’s presence, that Kristine brought the macaroons. As the three of them eat the cookies, Nora exclaims over her happiness but admits, to Rank’s astonishment, that her one wish is to tell Torvald “damn it all!” (*Six Plays* 20–21).

Those who saw Nora as the innocent wife, motivated by love of husband, begin to reconsider. By now they are beginning to understand how an interpretation of an individual scene commits them to a particular interpretation of a later scene and, ultimately, to the entire play; if Nora is deceitful
and manipulative from the start, as these scenes suggest, then perhaps her leaving reflects only a petulant woman's irresponsibility rather than a maturing vision of self.

The "back door" through which I then enter the play is a back door in the metaphoric sense. This entrance is through a scene that is not in the play, or at least not in the Eva Le Gallienne translation, which I intentionally use. The scene is the silk- stocking scene between Nora and Dr. Rank, present in the original and in every other translation. Le Gallienne's decision to omit it seems an act of charity toward Nora, who has a much more difficult time defending her innocence when it is left in. In the scene, Nora suggestively queries Rank whether a pair of silk stockings will fit her:

NORA. . . . Doctor Rank, come and sit down here, and I will show you something.
RANK *(sitting down)*. What is it?
NORA. Just look at those!
RANK. Silk stockings.
NORA. Flesh-coloured. Aren't they lovely? It is so dark here now, but to-morrow—. No, no, no! you must only look at the feet. Oh well, you may have leave to look at the legs too.
RANK. Hm—
NORA. Why are you looking so critical? Don't you think they will fit me?
RANK. I have no means of forming an opinion about that.
NORA *(looks at him for a moment)*. For shame! *(Hits him lightly on the ear with the stockings.)* That's to punish you. *(Folds them up again.)*
RANK. And what other nice things am I to be allowed to see?
NORA. Not a single thing more, for being so naughty. *(She looks among the things, humming to herself.)* *(Sharp 38–39)*

Those who thought Nora morally irresponsible earlier are convinced this scene confirms their interpretation. But those who saw Nora as an innocent argue that only one so naive as she could dare to be so reckless. I like to remind students at this point of Torvald's sententious warning against morally corrupt mothers, which at first sounded so silly, and suggest that it might deserve a second look here. Though Torvald knew nothing of the macaroons or the stockings, he still, ironically, identifies the dangers of moral degeneracy to Nora. By going back to Torvald's speech, students can consider the extent to which they should trust the assessment of one character by another.

I now have the opportunity to discuss ways in which a playwright creates character and introduce the students to Alvin Kernan's classic essay in Char-
acter and Conflict (7–23). We spend a fair amount of time looking at what other characters—particularly Torvald and Kristine—say about Nora’s character and at what Nora’s actions and speeches—especially in the traumatic tarantella scene—say about her. In the initial meeting between Nora and Kristine, Kristine speaks of Nora’s chronic immaturity, which is enough to prompt Nora to reveal the story of the borrowed funds. The scene proves productive, since students become aware of the subtext that is operating: the moment is not so much the sharing of intimacies by old friends as it is an expression of Nora’s egotistical need for an audience: she is both defending her maturity and, by boasting as she does, confirming her immaturity, which has been previously revealed by her insistence on speaking of her own good fortune in the face of Kristine’s difficulties.

By now, the little lark has managed to win the students’ disapproval on several counts, despite their obvious admiration for her at play’s end. This is a perfect moment to talk about complexity of character and about character development and to let the students decide whether the Nora who slams the door on the dollhouse is consistent with the early Nora. Those who insist she has changed may at first think consistency irrelevant, until others remind them of the revealing moments that suggested Nora had the capacity for such independent action from the start.

The cast of complementary characters in A Doll House is also worth discussing here, for the Ibsen play, more than any other modern play I know, orchestrates its characters so that they illuminate the protagonist—in much the same way that Shakespeare’s Lear or Middleton’s The Changeling creates a subplot with a Gloucester or an Isabella whose actions parallel the actions of Lear or Beatrice-Joanna. Kristine, for example, though somewhat colorless, is a mature, independent woman who for years sacrificed herself for others. Not only does she suggest the potential of Nora, but her former situation suggests that Nora, too, has been involved in self-sacrifice, not in the consciously selfless actions of her school friend but in the relinquishing of her personal identity by playing Torvald’s squirrel. Krogstad’s situation, of course, also parallels Nora’s: in Torvald’s judgment, both forgers are moral degenerates, unfit to bring up their children. Similarly, Rank has inherited a physically debilitating disease, just as Nora, according to Torvald, has inherited her father’s immoral disposition. As Rank’s condition deteriorates, so does Nora’s, with Rank announcing plans to be invisible (i.e., dead) at the next masquerade ball just as Nora is planning her suicide. Rank’s black-cross calling cards mark not only his imminent death but Nora’s (which, of course, does not occur) and the imminent death of the relationship between Nora and her husband as well. Even Anne-Marie’s situation parallels Nora’s, for she abandoned her child for its own good, just as Nora finally abandons hers.
The third way into *A Doll House*, through the chimney, needs some explanation. For decades, Ibsen has been seen as a realistic social playwright, a believer in the law of causality in dramatic structure. But as Robert Brustein has noted in “The Crack in the Chimney,” Ibsen has himself, on occasion, repealed that law. In *The Master Builder*, Solness notices the crack in the chimney flue but does nothing to repair it, knowing it might result in a fire. A fire does indeed destroy the family home and change Solness’s personal and professional life. But the crack in the chimney had nothing to do with the fire, which inexplicably began in a closet. We review *A Doll House*, then, with causal construction in mind, noting the dramatic question each scene raises and resolves and charting the movement of the play from point A to point B to point C.

I want students to see that in dramatic terms the ending of *A Doll House* is perfectly appropriate. At a showing of *A Doll House* in a college film series once, a group of older-generation viewers insisted Nora was wrong in leaving her husband and, particularly, her children. I allowed them this judgment but distinguished between moral rightness and dramatic rightness, suggesting that all the action in the play justified Nora’s departure. Since many of my students are familiar with *Oedipus Rex* from their high school days, we speak of inexorability, asking whether the same deliberateness of action that characterizes the Greek play is present here. All agree that the sense is stronger in *Oedipus*, noting the inescapable oracle under which Oedipus must operate. Though Oedipus’s character and decisions coincide with the prescription of destiny, students feel the power and presence of the edict that will destroy him. In *A Doll House*, by contrast, an early modern play in which moral imperatives may successfully be denied, Nora’s choices alone prescribe her fate.

For a fairly long time in act 3, though, Ibsen has us believe that Nora will take the path of the nineteenth-century fallen woman and commit suicide. She discusses this intention with Krogstad and, indirectly, with Rank, and she is headed out the door toward the river when Torvald stops her. Ibsen seems here to be offering alternative endings for his audience: one that a nineteenth-century audience might expect, the other that would shock it. Dramatically, though, either fits the causal construction of the play. Nora’s suicide would have confirmed her immaturity, her inability to be honest, her unwillingness to endure the consequences of her actions; it would have meant that her romantic vision of marriage had failed and that she was unable to rearrange her marriage on adult terms. Her previous emotional immaturities, reflected in her games with Torvald, her selfish chatter with Kristine, and the manic tarantella scene, would all come together to confirm the dramatic rightness of the suicide. Nora, however, gets a second chance, but this ending too is dramatically justified, since throughout the play and par-
particularly in her final dialogue with Torvald Nora shows the potential for mature action. Indeed, early productions in England and Germany sanitized the last act by having Nora yield to Torvald’s pleas and remain his wife, yet another ending that might be justified in dramatic terms.

There are several moments in the play when the action might have gone one of two or more ways, but none of these moments reveals a crack in the chimney. Krogstad, for example, might have withdrawn the letter, putting Nora in the position of returning to her marriage as though nothing had disturbed its security or of telling Torvald herself. Krogstad even offers to withdraw it, but Kristine, seeing the importance of honesty in the Helmers’ marriage, will not hear of the idea. In each of these critical moments, Ibsen presents his audience with a dramatic question: What will happen now that Krogstad is not home to receive Kristine? What will Nora do now that Torvald will read the letter? Will Torvald do the “wonderful thing,” that is, accept the blame and the responsibility, as Nora wishes he will?

The play is a deftly constructed series of such questions that are answered by subsequent scenes, which themselves raise new questions. But unlike Oedipus, A Doll House does not create an inexorable movement to the end. At any point, we feel, justifiably, that disaster might be avoided. What is important is that given the way in which each dramatic question is resolved, the particular ending Ibsen chose is not inconsistent with earlier action. An older generation may be offended morally by Nora’s choice, but they must agree that given all they have seen of Nora’s character and the progression of the plot, the ending, though not the only possible one, is dramatically right.

Having invaded the dollhouse through the front door, the back door, and the chimney, I feel as though I am in, and the students are there with me. Not only have the students done a thorough job of analyzing the play itself, so also have they been initiated into drama through a play that can serve as a model for the creation of character and dramatic action. Through controlled discussion, which, depending on the loquaciousness of the group, can take anywhere from three to six fifty-minute sessions, the students have dissected the corpse of this 1879 play and found it decidedly alive.