

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 55
A Critical Dismantling of *A Doll's House*

Hi, we have had a very interesting discussion of *A Doll's House* in the previous class. Remember how *A Doll's House* set not just the stage on fire, it set the entire Europe on fire at one point of time. Of course, when you have read the play, you definitely understand the reasons behind its controversial nature, the reasons behind scandals that surrounded the play.

And how the writer refused to even budge an inch. In fact, there was so much of pressure on him to change the ending. And especially during its premiering in Germany, due to the pressure from society and actors when, they were about to change the ending. Nora does not slam the door, she goes towards the door but stops right at the room where her children stay, indicating that probably she changes her mind.

So, the writer was furious and he almost said it looks like garbage now. That is why when he did not budge an inch, the society was absolutely furious with him, and we heard when they sent out an invitation, they did not want anything to do with even a critical discussion of *A Doll's House*. We discussed all that.

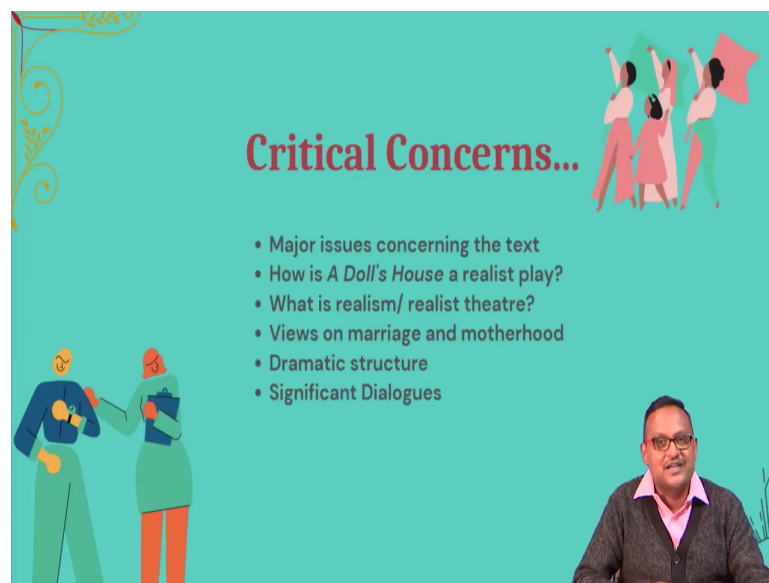
Let us continue our discussion of *A Doll's House* now, having understood the various plot turns and the story line of *A Doll's House* in the last class. Let us try to critically engage with it and because it is *A Doll's House*, we can call it “A Dismantling of *A Doll's House*”. Well, you and I will not be actually dismantling because the house was already in shambles, remember?

Because, if it were a solid structure, it would not have broken so easily; that is why please remember even behind the placid surface there might be several volcanoes about to be burst open. So, just looking at the surface, we cannot say that everything is placid quiet and calm. We do not know what lies hidden, what lies dormant beneath right. So, even in *A Doll's House*, probably the conflict was brewing; family members could not see that it was in the coming.

But finally, when it came, it was a devastating shock for everybody, right? So, let us try to engage with this remarkable text that the West so much admires and many later literary historians call it as a dawning of a new era. And feminists almost hold this text on their head and celebrate it as something that has opened a new door for them.

Let us see why is this particular play was so important for society.

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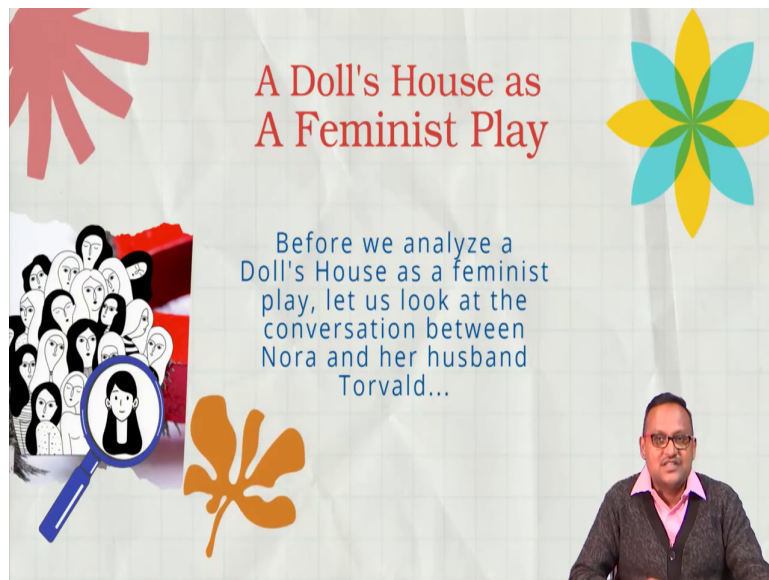
Before that a couple of critical concerns. Well, now we are going to engage with the text and see some of its critical concerns. And we are also going to discuss why it inaugurated or ushered in a new or a fresh lease of life for drama itself. Because, remember until Ibsen's drama, European drama was still under the shadow of Greek drama.

So, now Ibsen inaugurates a new chapter there. It comes to be called a 'realist drama'. So, what are the features of realist drama and why you can call *A Doll's House* an exemplified version of a realist drama we can discuss that. We can also discuss the concept of marriage because marriage is considered a holy institution in India even now; of course, in 19th century, Victorian England considered marriage as a sacred institute and motherhood as a noble thing.

As this play critically throws light on both those concepts, let us see what the play has got to say. And of course, we can also try to understand it in terms of its dramatic structure and

maybe we can take you through some of the significant dialogues, what the character says in this particular play etcetera.

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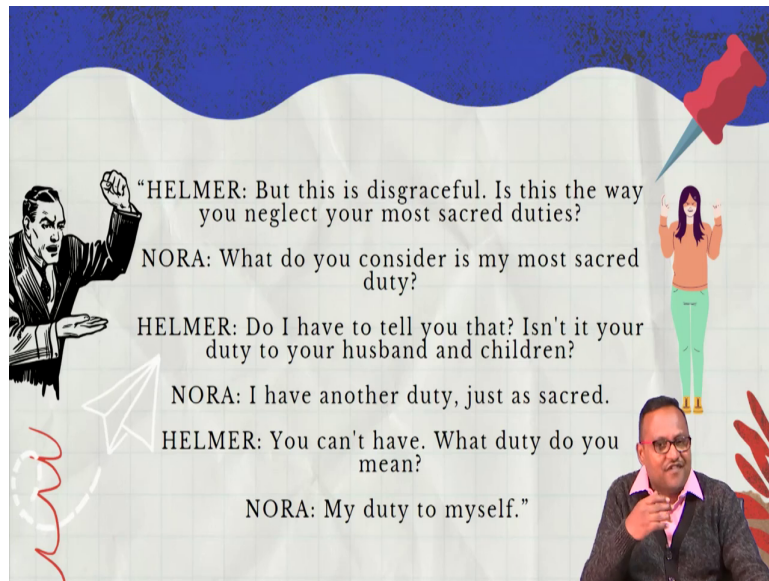


First things first: why is it that *A Doll's House* is considered as a feminist play? Please, remember Ibsen did not want his play to be called a feminist play because he said mine is basically a humanist play.

Nevertheless, feminist thought that this play championed the cause of women in an extraordinary way. Therefore, you find umpteen number of books, research articles that discuss a Doll's House as predominantly a feminist play.

So, in order to understand that we need to take a quick look at an important conversation that takes place between Nora and her husband Torvald. Let us see what Nora says. So, this is the dialogue.

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Helmer: But this is disgraceful. Is this the way you neglect your most sacred duties? Well, it's towards the end. You must have already identified it. When Nora declares that she wants to walk out on marriage, she wants to walk out on family, he is furious. He thought that she is saying something but she would ultimately stay back. But when Helmer realizes that she is really serious on walking out of marriage family and responsibilities, he tries to hold her back by invoking a filial duty in her. He says, you cannot walk out on the marriage, you cannot walk out on children because you have a sacred duty. And Nora asks him, "what do you consider is my most sacred duty?"

She is not angry. I mean, the punch that you find in her dialogue is not from her anger. On the other hand, it's from her realized calmer self. Therefore, she asks as calmly as she could, what is my most sacred duty? What do you think is my duty?

Well, do I have to tell you that? Is not it your duty to your husband and your children? Well do not you owe anything to us? Is not it your duty to take care of your husband and is not it your sacred duty to take care of your children? Who will take care of them? Should I even mention that to you? And again, very calmly Nora replies, I have another duty just as sacred. She does not dismiss her role as wife, her role as mother. But she realizes that maybe she does not know that, maybe if society says they are sacred duties, they may be so. While not discounting that, she says I have an equally sacred duty. What is more sacred than taking care of your family? Very calmly again Nora replies, my duty to myself.

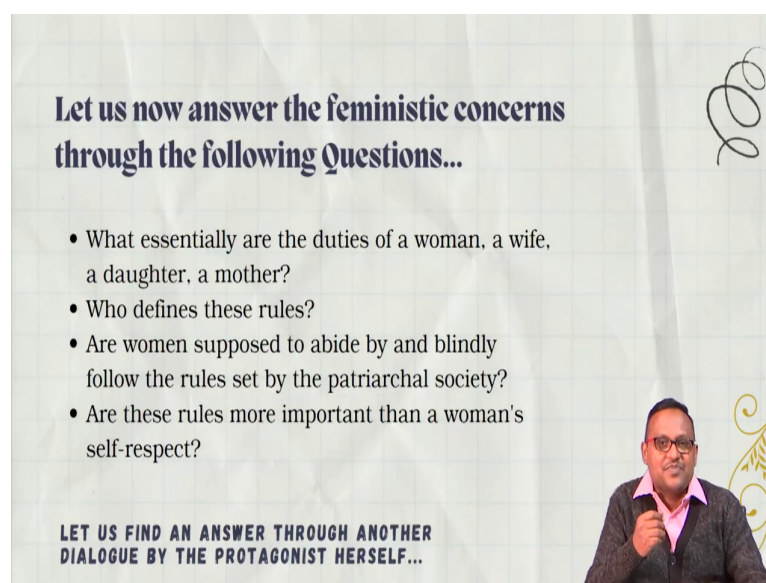
Now, again you have to look at the background. This is the birth of individualism. In fact, today we say, the West champions the cause of individualism, right? Because when you are born, the first sacred duty is towards yourself. Of course, we are not trying to ask you to be selfish. The purpose of the play is to awaken what is called a self-worth, a duty towards oneself.

So, probably she considers it a higher calling. Well, it is debatable. That is why I said, these things are still debatable, although the play was written more than a hundred years ago.

The questions that the play raises on stage as well as within its textual production are still relevant and they still divide society. The entire society is divided in its answers. Much of our society might even side with Helmer and again some part of our society might as well side with Nora.

So, these are debatable questions of course, the purpose of all our classes is not to solve the debate for you and give you a final answer. In fact, do not believe any classes who tell you that they have the final answers. In fact, you should not believe anybody who tells you that they will give you a final answer for all these existential questions. If there is one person who is qualified to give you final answers, that is yourself; your own experience should tell you that. So, you will have every reason to distrust any guy who says he will give you all the answers for all the existential questions. So, you can raise these questions later.

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Let us now answer the feministic concerns through the following Questions...

- What essentially are the duties of a woman, a wife, a daughter, a mother?
- Who defines these rules?
- Are women supposed to abide by and blindly follow the rules set by the patriarchal society?
- Are these rules more important than a woman's self-respect?

LET US FIND AN ANSWER THROUGH ANOTHER DIALOGUE BY THE PROTAGONIST HERSELF...

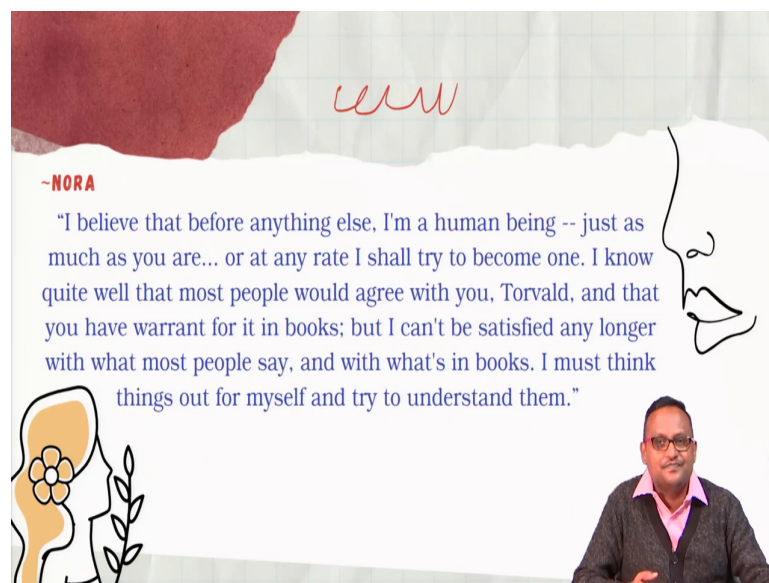
Now let us see what are the feministic concerns in the play. Of course, please recall our second week, where we discussed various approaches to decoding a text and one of them was feministic approaches; feminist literary criticism and why that is relevant even to this day. We discussed it in a very clear and concise manner.

So, let us quickly recall some of the critical concerns of feminism. What are the duties of woman or when you say a wife, a daughter, a mother? These are various roles that a woman performs in her life. What do you think of the duties? A very important question and who defines these duties? You call them duties of women. Torvald says you have a duty towards your husband you have a duty towards your children. Who defines those duties, right?

Who prescribes these roles for women? Has she done it for herself or does patriarchy do that? Just because there are rules followed by majority, should women abide by them and follow them blindly at her own expense just because it's dictated by patriarchal society? Or are these real? Are these rules and duties more important to a woman than her own self respect? Because what would a man do if he were in such a kind of a situation?

So, the questions that feminists ask in general about society are the same set of questions that Nora asks; may not be in the same words, but the spirit of her question towards the end of course, is very clear. And again she seems to give some kind of an answer.

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And this is towards the end in the final act. She says it's more like a soliloquy, though it is not technically a soliloquy because she is responding to Helmer, but she is speaking more to herself than to Helmer. So, she says I believe that before anything else I am a human being just as much as you are or at any rate, I shall try to become one because by then she has even lost respect for Torvald. Until that point of time, she could have even understood and even appreciated Torvald, had his concern been even moralistic because she always believed her husband would be unhappy with her because of his own moral standards, not because it would put him in jeopardy. Well, if a person thinks that it would put him in jeopardy, that means he is not bothered about morality, the broader issues of morality. All that he is interested in is saving his own skin when all that Nora did was forgery was to save the life of Torvald because when Torvald was sick doctors advised him some kind of vacation, a kind of health rest in Italy, and they did not have enough money, and she could not have asked her father because his death bed.

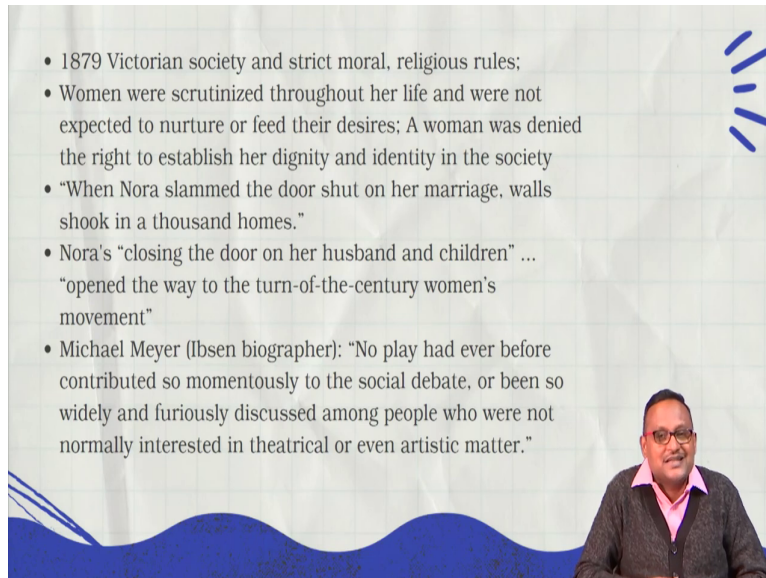
The only option she had was to borrow money at any cost, and when she had to give some kind of surety, she just forged her father's signature. Why did she do all that? She took all that risk to save her husband; because she loved her husband to that extent. And now this guy rather than appreciating her for all the sacrifice she did wants to save his skin, forget the morals.

In fact, he says later towards the end, thank God Krogstad is no more interested in pursuing the case against me, I am saved, we do not need to bother about it. It's alright, what you did is alright. Now let us get back and live the life that we used to live. That is when she realizes that her husband is not the husband that she thought she knew. He is a morally depraved guy, a selfish guy who is interested only in saving his skin.

That is why she says I do not know whether you are a human being or not, but at least I want to be one. I know quite well that most people would agree with you because the entire society is a patriarchal society, and maybe your books also prescribe that because at the end of the day, all of these, whether it is your law book, whether it is your institution such as police or court or anything or whether it is society, these are all patriarchal constructs. All of them are patriarchal constructs. Therefore, she says, it might even be there in your books, but I cannot be satisfied any longer with what most people say and with what is in the books. Well, I am not happy with what the book says, what your institutions say, what your friends say. I must think things out for myself and try to understand them on my own.

So, that is why I said, from the illusion that home is a safe place for her, a new illumination dawns in her that probably it's not all that secure, it's not all that noble. Therefore, she walks out of the door. So, this is how she reasons with herself.

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- 1879 Victorian society and strict moral, religious rules;
- Women were scrutinized throughout her life and were not expected to nurture or feed their desires; A woman was denied the right to establish her dignity and identity in the society
- "When Nora slammed the door shut on her marriage, walls shook in a thousand homes."
- Nora's "closing the door on her husband and children" ... "opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement"
- Michael Meyer (Ibsen biographer): "No play had ever before contributed so momentously to the social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matter."

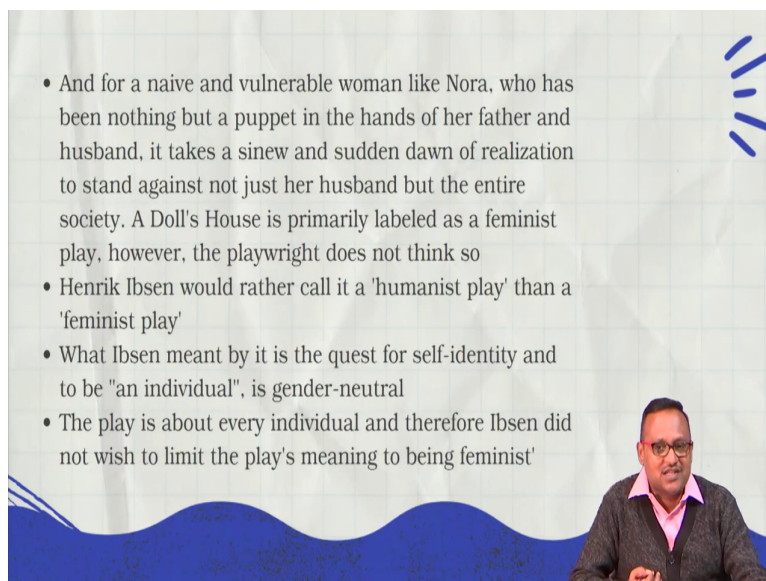
These are some things that we can keep in mind. Remember, when the play was written it was still a Victorian society and industrialization had not yet set in and the background was still conservative. So, the play was setting the bull in the china shop as they say. It was quite destructive, but not in a negative sense because if she exposes hypocrisy in marriage, it's not her fault. If there was no hypocrisy in marriage to expose, the family would not have shattered, right? So, if her husband was not so selfish when all that he had to do was sympathize with her – "well I understand why you did that, but at least in future please consult me I might have a different say" – he could have consoled her. On the other hand, all that he was interested in was saving his skin.

So, these were a couple of things that have to be kept in mind. So, one of the critics later goes on to remark that when a woman was denied the right to establish her dignity and identity in society, she is absolutely right in walking out of such kind of institutions.

And another remarkable critic says that when Nora slammed the door shut on her marriage, walls shook in a thousand homes because she has set the path ablaze for women who are on the path of self-discovery.

And again, as we said in the previous class, she may have closed the door on her husband and children and interestingly that opened the way to the turn of the century women's movement, that gave birth to feminist movement and it inspired extraordinary writers such as Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf. They offer their debt of gratitude to Ibsen and especially *A Doll's House*. Later in the 1960s, commenting on this particular play Michael Meyer (he is a biographer of Henrik Ibsen, a well-known biographer) says that no play had ever contributed so momentously to the social debate or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who are not normally interested in theater or even in any artistic production. So, if there is one play that that made the society sit up and discuss this was *A Doll's House*. And it might even shock you even to this day because to that extent our society is steeped in values of patriarchy, and you and I may not even understand why Nora had to walk out of that institution. I also said right how even a discussion of that play was banned even in social gatherings. So, this shows the extent to which society was almost scared of this play.

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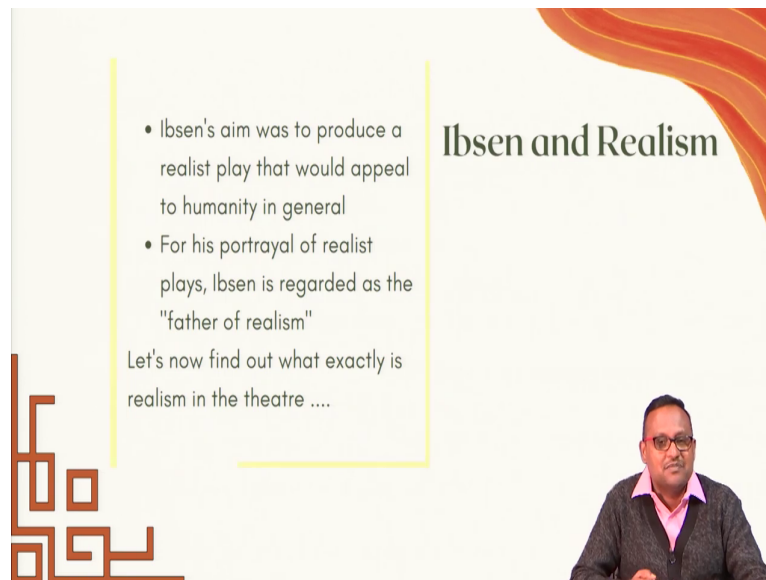
- And for a naive and vulnerable woman like Nora, who has been nothing but a puppet in the hands of her father and husband, it takes a sinew and sudden dawn of realization to stand against not just her husband but the entire society. *A Doll's House* is primarily labeled as a feminist play, however, the playwright does not think so
- Henrik Ibsen would rather call it a 'humanist play' than a 'feminist play'
- What Ibsen meant by it is the quest for self-identity and to be "an individual", is gender-neutral
- The play is about every individual and therefore Ibsen did not wish to limit the play's meaning to being feminist'

Now, as I said Nora's character is one of the strongest characters that you can think of in Western literature or even in Eastern literature for that matter, one of the strongest characters that you can come across.

Well, as I said Ibsen was not happy with the feminist labeling because he believed that Nora's quest is not a woman's quest alone, it's a quest of any individual who is deprived of dignity and truth. However, because of its strong echoes of women's concerns, even to this day it's

called a major feminist text. These are some concerns that can be kept in mind while discussing the play. See if you agree with these or not.

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The slide is titled "Ibsen and Realism" in a bold, black font. It features a list of two bullet points: "• Ibsen's aim was to produce a realist play that would appeal to humanity in general" and "• For his portrayal of realist plays, Ibsen is regarded as the 'father of realism'". Below the bullet points, it says "Let's now find out what exactly is realism in the theatre". The slide has a decorative orange and red wavy shape in the top right corner and a brown geometric pattern in the bottom left corner. A man with glasses, wearing a dark sweater over a pink shirt, is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide, appearing to be the presenter.

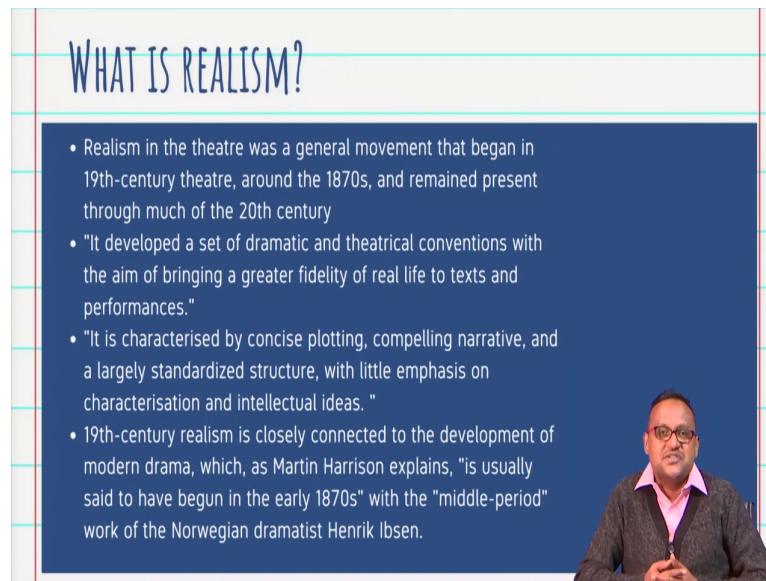
- Ibsen's aim was to produce a realist play that would appeal to humanity in general
- For his portrayal of realist plays, Ibsen is regarded as the "father of realism"

Let's now find out what exactly is realism in the theatre

And the second question is that I said the play inaugurates a new school of drama called 'realistic drama'.


Of course, no writer writes a play in order to inaugurate a particular school of drama when he or she writes. When a writer writes all that the intent is to create a beautiful piece of writing, but it is to the credit of Ibsen and *A Doll's House* that a new school of drama or a new type of drama was inaugurated. Let us see what exactly this realism is and why *A Doll's House* is called a realistic drama.

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WHAT IS REALISM?

- Realism in the theatre was a general movement that began in 19th-century theatre, around the 1870s, and remained present through much of the 20th century
- "It developed a set of dramatic and theatrical conventions with the aim of bringing a greater fidelity of real life to texts and performances."
- "It is characterised by concise plotting, compelling narrative, and a largely standardized structure, with little emphasis on characterisation and intellectual ideas. "
- 19th-century realism is closely connected to the development of modern drama, which, as Martin Harrison explains, "is usually said to have begun in the early 1870s" with the "middle-period" work of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen.



Now, what exactly is this realism, and what is this modern drama, and what is its preoccupation with realism as such? Now, remember we identified in our historical understanding of the evolution of drama that until the late 19th century and the beginning of 20th century drama was still under the influence heavy influence of Greek drama.

And realism is again a movement in literature especially fiction and it's also movement in drama, wherein first time you break away from the stereotype of a protagonist. Until that point of time, when you meant protagonist, all that you mean is a person of a noble birth, aristocratic background.

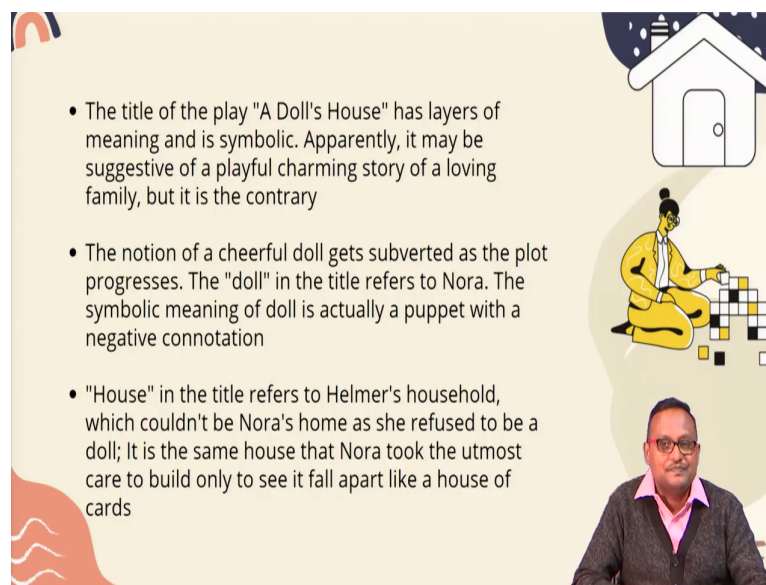
See, in our life each of us is a protagonist. Who is a protagonist in your life? You are the protagonist, right? Therefore, we may not have an aristocratic background, but that does not prevent us from adding dignity to our own life. Therefore, for the first time a commoner gains an entry into the portal of literature and becomes protagonist.

So, his drama inaugurates it. Nora is not an extraordinary character in the sense that she is not any royalty, she is not a princess, she is not a queen, she is not anybody, she is a regular household guy like you and me. So, look how dignified she is in her treatment of her own self and in her sacrifices towards society and how that is not reciprocated by society and her family .

So, these are some things that can be kept in mind. And what are some conventions of this realistic drama? Of course, like you have protagonist of common background, it is also characterized by concise plotting, a very important and a compelling narrative, and a standardized structure with little emphasis on characterization and intellectual ideas. So, these are some things that can be kept in mind.

So, this is about Henrik Ibsen's realism and *A Doll's House* inaugurating realistic drama.

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- The title of the play "A Doll's House" has layers of meaning and is symbolic. Apparently, it may be suggestive of a playful charming story of a loving family, but it is the contrary
- The notion of a cheerful doll gets subverted as the plot progresses. The "doll" in the title refers to Nora. The symbolic meaning of doll is actually a puppet with a negative connotation
- "House" in the title refers to Helmer's household, which couldn't be Nora's home as she refused to be a doll; it is the same house that Nora took the utmost care to build only to see it fall apart like a house of cards

So, from here let us try to analyze *A Doll's House* and the layers of meaning and symbols. A doll here obviously refers to Nora because she is treated like one; like Nora herself says in one of her dialogues to her husband: earlier my father used to treat me like a doll, now you treat me like a doll, like I treat my children like a doll.

So, whenever I feel bored, like I go and play with my three kids, you come and play with me; my father used to come and play with me. You consider me as an immature one. Now, what is a house? House is a place of comfort, a place of security, and how that place of comfort and place of security is subverted because although doll and house are two separate components together, *A Doll's House* has no meaning, right? If it's only a house of a doll, it's just for a show, right? And so is the case with Torvald. When he learns that Nora wants to walk out on marriage, he insists: see, fine I am going to leave you as it is, but at least for the sake of appearances let us retain our marriage.

So, finally, he is interested not in retaining Nora as his wife or as part of his family. He does not want society to think bad of him because if Nora has walked away from him, society might think that he has some kind of a lacuna in him. That is why he says at least for the sake of appearances, at least to maintain our social obligation as husband and wife, let us stay together under the same house; I will not even trouble you in any way, but don't walk out of it. That is his logic and it infuriates Nora all the more. It's not out of love for her, but out of love for himself, out of love for his own image that he wants Nora to be a part of the family.

So, like a house of cards which can scramble any time, it can fall any time. So, the moment Nora realizes that, she thinks that this house has no significance. Therefore, she has every reason to slam a door behind such kind of a house.

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- The title can better be understood from the following dialogue...

"...But our home has never been anything but a playroom, I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to be Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls. I used to think it was fun when you came in and played with me, just as they think it's fun when I go in and play games with them. That's all our marriage has been...." (Nora, Act 3)

So, these are some things that you can think of. And here is a remarkable dialogue that we just discussed: I was papa's doll-child and after marriage I am your doll. Therefore, I want I want to end it. I do not want to play any more games with it. Our marriage has just been a game, it's just been for appearances. Now I want to discover those places, those institutes that are worth exploring; therefore, my first journey is towards discovering my own self. Saying that she walks out of it .

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DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

- The play dutifully follows the formula of Freytag's Pyramid of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution
- It also maintained the three unities (though not strictly)
- Unlike the traditional 5 Act play, this play is divided into 3 acts

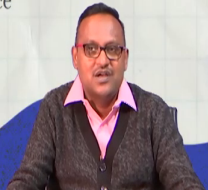
And we have already identified a dramatic structure. It's a play in three acts and very beautifully it follows Freytag's exposition. In the first act, we are introduced to all the characters and simmering tension begins building towards the end of the first act. It rises towards the second act. By the beginning of the third act, there is a climax, and in the middle of the third act there is a falling action and the play ends. There is a resolution to the conflict when Nora walks out of it. So, you can call it a perfect play that follows dramatic Freytag's pyramid.

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SOME THEMES OF THE PLAY

Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen addresses a gamut of other issues like...

- "The theme of the collapse of the parental ideal"
- Critiques the ideals of Victorian marriage values
- Exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchy
- Platonic love of Dr. Rank and Nora
- Consequences of borrowing money and forgery
- Deceit: Selfishness of close associates inheritance and Genetics




And some of the important things the play discusses is how there is a collapse of the parental ideal. And of course, it also critiques Victorian values the undue importance given to marriage institutions and roles such as parenting.

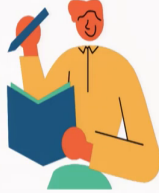

It exposes hypocrisy of the patriarchy. It also explores a platonic love between Dr Rank and Nora. These are some various other dimensions the play also explores. So, these are some things that you can keep in mind while you are discussing the play.

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BEFORE WRAPPING UP
LET'S SEE WHAT SOME OF
THE IMPORTANT CRITICS
HAVE TO SAY REGARDING
THE PLAY...



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<p>Michael Meyer (Ibsen biographer) 1965</p> <p>"The theme of A Doll's House was the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is, and to strive to become that person."</p>	<p>Kate Millett (Sexual Politics) 1971</p> <p>"Nora confronted every convention and the chivalrous masculine prejudice that caged her within a child's toy structure, hoping to ensure that she would remain a house-pet and infant there forever."</p>	
<p>Joan Templeton (The Doll House Backlash) 1989</p> <p>"Ibsen's Nora is not just a woman arguing for female liberation; she is much more. She embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life,"</p>	<p>August Strindberg 1884</p> <p>"Marriage was revealed as being a far from divine institution, people stopped regarding it as an automatic provider of absolute bliss"</p>	

Before we wrap it up, let us take a quick look at what some major critics have got to say about the play and why they consider it as a very important one. We have already discussed Michael Meyer who is the biographer of Ibsen.

Let us take a look at Kate Millett. We discussed Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* during our class on feminism, please recall that. She says that, "Nora confronted every convention and the chivalrous masculine prejudice that caged her within a child's toy structure hoping to ensure that she would remain a house pet and infant there forever."

And later she goes on to even say that marriage as an institution always treats women as house pet. And of course, a husband as a part of an institutional structure would expect his wife to be docile, submissive, and infant forever so that he becomes the father figure.

You have August Strindberg, another very well-known playwright. Maybe immediately after watching the play in 80s, he seemed to have remarked marriage was revealed as being far from divine institution for the first time. We have heard this statement, right? "Marriages are made in heaven." This play exposes the follies and foibles of the institution of marriage and exposes the deceit that is inherent in it.

Why is it a deceit? Because marriage as an institution more often than not only protects the interests of the man. Therefore, rightfully the play exposes all of them. And Joan Templeton

commenting on *A Doll's House* says that Nora is not just a strong woman who argues for female liberation, she is definitely much more than that.

So, she embodies elements of tragedy, she embodies elements of comedy. She is a perfect combination of tragicomedy, and he extols how strong a character that is. So, these are some important things that we can keep in mind while discussing *A Doll's House*.

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James Joyce 1900
"Instead of a drama of action or incident [Ibsen] offers us a theatre of monstrous epiphany, a perception of some illuminating truth arising of dialectical conflict."

Hattie Morahan (actress who played Nora at the Young Vic) 2013
"You try to keep it in its box of 19th-century Scandinavia, but the things Ibsen writes mean it ceases to be about a particular milieu and becomes about marriage and money. These are universal anxieties"

And finally Ibsen says...
"I have never written any play to further a social purpose."

I hope you enjoyed all these things. We have very many other critics; this is just some snapshot of how the play has captured the critical attention of some fellow writers, some fellow playwrights and journalists. You can read the play and explore more of it for yourself.

Next class we come up with something more interesting. Until then, bye. Take care. So far, we have discussed European drama and Western drama. I think it's time for us to explore Indian drama too. So, gear up! May be in the coming classes we will discuss Indian drama.

Thank you.