

## The Artios Home Companion Series

### Literature and Composition

#### Units 10 – 14: *Play Writing*

#### *A Doll's House*

by Henrik Ibsen

Literature for Units 10 – 14

Over the next five units, the focus will be on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a play which had a great impact on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This curriculum will cover this one play by Ibsen, but in order to enhance or deepen a study of modern plays, Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* can also be read in conjunction with it. Here is a link to Chekhov's play: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7986>. At the end of Unit 14, you will have written your own play based on a theme chosen from *A Doll's House*, but if you choose to read *The Three Sisters* along with Ibsen's work, an alternative assignment would be to write a compare/contrast essay discussing how each author tried to enact change in their societies.

#### Author Spotlight

Henrik Ibsen was born in Norway in 1828. He did not have a glamorous life and had to work hard for his success. He wrote many plays that were criticized for their "radical" themes. He is often called the "father of realism." The realistic movement in theater consisted of focusing on regular people with regular problems. Whereas most of the previous theatrical movements focused on royalty or aristocracy, the realistic movement brought theater into the homes of the masses. Ibsen was a huge part of the movement spreading across Europe.

- For more information on Ibsen, please visit:  
[http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0406585/bio?ref=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0406585/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm)

#### Unit 10 – Assignments

- Unit 10 Assignment Background.
- Read Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Act I.
- In your Reading Journal answer these questions:
  1. What names does Torvold use for Nora? How does this describe their relationship? Do you believe this is a good way to live?
  2. What does Nora's careless spending reveal about her character?

3. What struggle can you see in Nora’s character? (Think about how she hides her macaroons but feels no shame in eating them).
  4. What else is Nora hiding from her husband?
  5. At the end of the act, Torvold says that lies in a family “corrupt the children.” Do you agree? Is Nora justified because her ‘lie’ came from wanting her help her husband?
  6. How does the last scene of the act reflect the first scene?
- After you’ve read Act I, list ways in which a play is different from the poetry and prose read earlier this semester.

## Unit 10 – Assignment Background

Similar to Harriett Beecher Stowe, Henrik Ibsen wrote in response to his society. He detested how dependent people had become on cosmetic respectability. A large chunk of European society at that time suggested that as long as a family looked good from the outside that was all that mattered. Ibsen, through the medium of the theater, wrote many controversial plays in which secrets were unearthed (*Ghosts*), one man held to his convictions even when an entire town was against him (*Enemy of the People*), and two people are forced to stop playing at marriage and start living it (*A Doll’s House*).

Each of Ibsen’s plays was met with both excitement and criticism. *A Doll’s House*, which you will be reading over the next two weeks, is no exception. In order to understand why it was controversial, you need to have a view of society in that time period.

The place was Germany. The time, late nineteenth century. The society was a patriarchal (male-driven) one. Women, for the most part, did not work to earn a living, but relied on their husbands for financial stability. The home was the woman’s domain. It was her responsibility to create an atmosphere of peace and tranquility for her family.

The opening of *A Doll’s House* portrays this society perfectly. Nora comes home from shopping and gives a large tip to the porter who helps her carry in a Christmas tree. Her children are with their nanny, and her husband is at work. She has a few moments to herself in which she admires her purchases and sneaks a bite of her favorite treat, macaroons.

Nora and Torvold both put themselves into molds with one another. Their relationship, while sweet on the surface, is shallow. By the end of the play, they are both confronted with their own struggles and have to come to terms with the superficial quality of their marriage.

What made Ibsen’s play so controversial was that Nora decides to take matters into her own hands at the end of the play. She decides it is time for her to gain perspective and independence, and the way in which she accomplishes this provided an uproar among audiences.

In fact, because copyright laws were not the same in Germany as in other parts of Europe, when Ibsen’s play premiered in other countries, it came with a re-written ending. At first, Ibsen was horrified that they’d tampered with his play, but then he decided to write an alternate ending to the story. If the story had to have a ‘happier’ ending, then he wanted to be the one to provide it.

As you read through the play, imagine being in the society in which this was written. What would your reaction have been to the ending?

## Unit 11 – Assignments

- Read Unit 11 – Assignment Background.
- Read *A Doll's House*, Acts II - III.
- In your Reading Journal, answer the following questions:
  1. In the opening of Act II, Nora is feeling restless and like her life is in disarray. What about the setting of this scene is a visual clue to those emotions?
  2. What purpose does the character of Dr. Rank serve in the story?
  3. Why does Nora tell Dr. Rank that she usually avoids the company of the ones she loves?
  4. Why does Torvold want to fire Krogstad?
  5. Why doesn't Nora listen when Torvold is trying to help her with the tarantella?
  6. Why would Mrs. Linde encourage Krogstad to let Torvold find the letter explaining Nora's deception?
  7. Torvold says Nora "played with him like a puppet." Considering their relationship to this point, do you believe Torvold is justified in that accusation?
  8. What do you think of Nora's decision at the end of the play? Do you believe she was right? What other decisions could she have made in her situation?
  9. What is the last sound the audience hears in the play? What emotional impact could this have on an audience?
  10. What do you think Ibsen was trying to say with his ending?
- Make a list of possible themes or main ideas Ibsen's work portrays.

## Unit 11 – Assignment Background

Over the next four units, you will choose a theme from *A Doll's House* and use that to create your own short play. As was discussed earlier, a play is different from poetry or a novel in the way it is constructed, and how it is received. Reading poetry or prose is a private thing for the most part, but theatre is a public medium of art, and therefore must be treated differently.

For more information about the format of a play, please see the "Writing a Play" document at [www.ArtiosHCS.com](http://www.ArtiosHCS.com).

There are three main elements each play needs to have. These will be discussed in brief here and elaborated on in later units.

- **Character** – a protagonist and antagonist. Development of these two characters is key for a play to succeed.
- **Conflict** – Something (or someone) needs to be in the way of the protagonist getting what he or she wants. How the characters react or handle the conflict will lead to the resolution of the story.
- **Change** – In order to show the progression of character and conflict, there needs to be a change at the end of the story. This is the resolution of the conflict, and normally shows the protagonist overcoming an obstacle, or gaining new personal insight.

The aim of a stage play is to tell a story through action and dialogue. It is not up to the writer to fill in the thoughts of the characters, nor is it up to the writer to pen paragraph upon paragraph of elaborate setting or character description. The author of a stage play provides the

structure of the story, then gets out of the way to let the director and actors bring the story to life.

Because of the nature of the stage play, an author must bring as much life to the story as possible with the dialogue spoken and the action taken.

Think about the first scene of *A Doll's House*. Nora is fussing about like a bird trying to get everything ready. She hides her macaroons, and is obviously being careless with her money. Already we get hints of Nora's character, and she hasn't spoken a word. This is story-telling through action.

In the last scene, when Torvold confronts Nora and accuses her of "playing him like a puppet," the dialogue sends a clear message to the audience. Torvold spent most of the play speaking to Nora as if she were a child. He expected her to obey societal norms. His accusation brings to light his character flaws and gives the audience a solid reminder that both of these characters need to mature.

## Unit 12 – Assignments

- Read Unit 12 – Assignment Background.
- Choose a theme from *A Doll's House* and write a rough draft of your play. You need to tell a complete story, but try to keep the story centered on one day. This will help keep your play focused. Your finished product should be between 7-10 typed pages. Use the "Writing a Play" packet to help you as you compose your rough draft.

## Unit 12 – Assignment Background

### Character:

This week, the focus will be on the nature of Character in a stage play. Characters drive the ideas and worldview of stage plays. Authors have a chance, with the character they create, to speak out against a social evil, or to shed light on an issue facing the world today. Characters can be humorous, tragic, and anywhere in between. Compelling characters draw the audience into the world of the play.

A character is only as good as their action and dialogue in a play. Unlike a novel, the audience does not get to spend two hundred plus pages with your character. A playwright needs to establish character motives quickly, and accomplish growth or change in around two hours of stage time.

Remember, in a play, dialogue = subtext.

Subtext is what is meant but not said. For example, if a character has a hard time expressing emotion, and are confronted by a confession of love, they won't come out and say "Um, I have a problem admitting that I'm emotionally connected to people." The exchange could go like this:

- Character A: I love you.
- Character B: I think I left the water running in my apartment.
- Character A: Didn't you hear me?
- Character B: . . . And the electric bill is on my desk . . .

While you write your rough draft this week, focus on bringing your characters to life through their action and their dialogue, and remember to use subtext whenever possible.

## Unit 13 – Assignments

- Read Unit 13 – Assignment Background.
- Compose a second draft of your play focusing on the conflict and the change of the story.

## Unit 13 – Assignment Background

Now that you’ve spent time developing your characters, it is time to focus on the conflict and change (resolution) within the story.

### **Conflict:**

Each play needs conflict. If there is no conflict, the story is boring because the characters are not challenged, and they cannot grow.

Audiences get to see the true nature of a character when they see how he or she handles conflict. The higher the stakes of the conflict, the more the true nature of the character will be revealed.

Think up a central conflict to your play. How will this conflict reveal the nature of your main character(s)?

### **Change:**

At the end of a stage play, something needs to have upset the status quo, made a character re-think their decisions. This “something” is called change, and often the change or resolution follows directly from the conflict. How the conflict is resolved will determine what sort of change happens in the story. For example, if the conflict in a play is that a secret is being kept, then the change will be that the secret is revealed and what happens after that will determine the ending of the play.

While you compose a second draft of your play, make sure that the conflict has brought about a change by the end of the story.

## Unit 14 – Assignments

- Using the information on playwriting you’ve learned over the previous four units, compose a final draft of your play. Make sure you follow the format, and that your work is error free.
  - To enhance the experience, grab some friends or classmates and perform your play in front of your parents or teachers. Plays are meant to have an audience!