

## A Character sketch for Torvald

Torvald Helmer is the main male character in "A Doll's House", a modern tragedy in which the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen discusses some important themes such as the emancipation of women's character, the husband-wife relationship, hereditary doom, and appearance versus reality. Torvald is a shallow selfish man who seems to be a man of principles but he is, in fact, the opposite.

Torvald Helmer is the husband of Nora, the heroine of the play, a young pretty wife who sacrifices a lot for her husband and her children. Torvald does not appreciate her sacrifices and always accuses her of being a spendthrift. She is very loyal to him and she always stands beside him in his troubles. She has borrowed money from Krogstad when Torvald has been ill and has not told him because debts are against his principles. She works hard to pay Krogstad his money back. She keeps her secret and tries not to make Torvald know anything about this matter, but when he discovers the truth he blames her and does not appreciate her sacrifices for his sake. She knows that he is a shallow character and a selfish man who only thinks of himself. At the end she decides to leave him.

When the curtain closes upon a pathetic, defeated husband, some viewers find that Torvald has received his comeuppance. Torvald's demeaning personality and his hypocritical actions justify Nora's harsh decision to leave. Torvald Helmer possesses many obvious flaws. For one, he constantly talks down to his wife. Here is a list of his pet names for Nora: "My little skylark", "My little squirrel", "My little singing bird", "My pretty little pet", "My little sweet-tooth", and "My poor little Nora". Notice with every term of endearment, the word "little" is always included. Torvald views himself as the emotional and intellectual superior of the household. To him, Nora is a "child-wife," someone to watch over, to instruct, nurture and censure. He never considers her an equal partner in the relationship. Of course, their marriage is one typical of 1800s Europe, and Ibsen uses his play to challenge this status quo.

To Torvald's credit, Nora is a willing participant in their dysfunctional relationship. She understands that her husband sees her as an innocent, child-like persona, and she struggles to maintain the façade. Nora uses the pet names whenever she tries to persuade her husband: "If a little squirrel were to ask every so nicely?" She puts away her sewing needles and unfinished dress because she knows that her husband does not wish to see a woman toiling away. He wishes to see only the final, beautiful product. In addition, Nora keeps secrets from her husband. She goes behind his back to obtain her ill-gotten loan. Torvald is too stubborn to ever borrow money, even at the cost of his own life. Essentially, Nora saves Torvald by borrowing the money so that they can travel to Italy until her husband's health improves. Throughout the play, Torvald is oblivious to his wife's

craftiness and her compassion. When he discovers the truth at the end, he is outraged when he should be humbled.

Perhaps Torvald's most dislikeable quality is his blatant hypocrisy. Many times throughout the play, Torvald criticizes the morality of other characters. He trashes the reputation of Krogstad, one of his lesser employees (and ironically the loan shark that Nora is indebted to). He speculates that Krogstad's corruption probably started in the home. Torvald believes that if the mother of a household is dishonest, then surely the children will become morally infected. Torvald also complains about Nora's late father. When Torvald learns that Nora has committed forgery, he blames her crime on her father's weak morals.

Yet, for all his self-righteousness, Torvald is a hypocrite. In the beginning of Act Three, after dancing and having a merry time at a holiday party, Torvald tells Nora how much he cares for her. He claims to be absolutely devoted her. He even wishes that some calamity would befall them, so that he could demonstrate his steadfast, heroic nature. Of course, a moment later, that wished-for conflict arises. Torvald finds the letter revealing how Nora has brought scandal and blackmail into his household. Nora is in trouble, but Torvald, the supposedly shining white knight, fails to come to her rescue. Instead, here is what he yells at her: "Now you have ruined my entire happiness!", "And it's all the fault of a featherbrained woman!", "You will not be allowed to bring up the children, I can't trust you with them."

Despite his many flaws, some readers and audience members still feel tremendous sympathy for Torvald. In fact, when the play was first performed in Germany and America, the ending was changed. It was believed by some producers that theater-goers would not want to see a mother walk out on her husband and children. So, in several revised versions, "A Doll's House" ends with Nora reluctantly deciding to stay. However, in the original, classic version, Ibsen does not spare poor Torvald from humiliation. When Nora calmly says, "We two have a lot to talk about," Torvald learns that Nora will no longer be his doll or "child-wife." He is astounded by her choice. He asks for a chance to reconcile their differences; he even suggests that they live as "brother and sister." Nora refuses. She feels as though Torvald is now a stranger. Desperate, he asks if there is the smallest hope that they might be husband and wife once again. She responds:  
Nora: Both you and I would have to change to the point where... Oh, Torvald, I don't believe in miracles any more.

Torvald: But I will believe. Name it! Change to the point where...?

Nora: Where we could make a real marriage of our lives together. Goodbye!

Then she promptly leaves. Grief-stricken, Torvald hides his face in his hands. In the next moment, he lifts his head up, somewhat hopeful. "The miracle of miracles?" he asks himself. His longing to redeem their marriage seems sincere. So

perhaps, despite his hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and his demeaning attitude, the audience may feel sympathy for Torvald as the door slams shut on his tear-stained hopes.

To sum up, Ibsen is very successful in portraying the character of Torvald Helmer through "A Doll's House". He lives in complete ignorance of the real worth of Nora. He tells her that his shoulders are broad enough to protect her from the malice of the world. Ibsen tries to discuss several important issues and themes through this central character.