

Worksheet 2 – *A Doll's House* on the Victorian Stage

Review: Lecture 1

In the first lecture of the course, Dr Sophie Duncan discussed naturalism as a style in art, and how Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is an example of a naturalistic play.

- ✓ Based on what you learnt in the last lecture, name two features of naturalistic plays.

Recall: Lecture 2

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.

1. Which of the below is not a feature of melodrama?
 - a) stock characters
 - b) unresolved endings
 - c) simplistic contrasts between good and evil
 - d) music and special visual effects
2. Why did melodramatic actors use such exaggerated gestures and expressions?
 - a) They weren't trained formally, and so didn't have much performance skill.
 - b) They were performing to large audiences and needed to make themselves understood.
 - c) Melodramatic performance is comedic, and actors wanted to make audiences laugh.
3. How did Ibsen's use of dialogue differ from that in melodramatic theatre?
 - a) Ibsen used dialogue to make his characters' feelings and motivations clear to the audience.
 - b) In melodrama, characters often behave irrationally, whereas Ibsen's characters have logical discussions.
 - c) Ibsen used subtext in his dialogue, to imply that characters' feelings differed from their outward behaviour.
4. "In the 1880s, there were more women in the audiences at matinée theatre performances than men." Is this statement true or false?

Analysis

5. During her lecture, Dr Duncan references the research of Professor Julie Holledge, who has discovered that Ibsen always places Nora center stage during the main action (*see 3:07-3:28*).
 - a) How might Ibsen's use of staging in the play have impacted nineteenth-century audiences?
 - b) Challenge: Include at least one example of historical context about nineteenth-century Norwegian society in your answer.
6. Ibsen was famous for the use of **subtext** in his plays, which he described as being exemplified by "seemingly easy but concealing conversations". Look at the section of dialogue, below, which is from a conversation Nora and Mrs Linde have about Dr Rank, in Act 2. Then:
 - a) Highlight the sections where you think Ibsen is using subtext.
 - b) Annotate your highlighted sections to explain the subtext. What do you believe the characters are actually thinking or feeling?

NORA: He's got a terrible disease -- he's got spinal tuberculosis, poor man. His father was a frightful creature who kept mistresses and so on. As a result Dr Rank has been sickly ever since he was a child - you understand –

MRS LINDE: (*puts down her sewing*). But, my dear Nora, how on earth did you get to know about such things?

NORA: (*walks about the room*). Oh, don't be silly, Christine – when one has three children, one comes into contact with women who – well, who know about medical matters, and they tell one a thing or two.

MRS LINDE (*sews again; a short silence*). Does Dr Rank visit you every day?

Evaluation

7. Re-watch 3:28 – 5:17, where Dr Duncan explains the influence that melodrama had on *A Doll's House*. Identify three ways in which Ibsen included melodramatic tropes in *A Doll's House*.
8. Dr Duncan claims Ibsen includes melodramatic conventions only to 'savagely undermine' them.
 - a) In your own words, explain what you think Dr Duncan means by this statement, using a quotation from the play as evidence.
 - b) Why do you think Ibsen chose to 'savagely undermine' melodramatic tropes in *A Doll's House*? Write a paragraph discussing your response.

Extension: Imagine you are a nineteenth-century theatergoer in Norway, who has just seen a performance of *A Doll's House*. Write a short diary entry discussing your initial reaction to the play.

Glossary

- **Melodrama** – a sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions.
- **Sensational** – causing great public interest and excitement.
- **Stock character** – a stereotypical fictional person or type of person in a work of art such as a novel, play, or a film, who the audience recognises from their predictable characteristics (e.g. the brave hero; the evil villain).
- **Climactic** – acting as a resolution to a series of events; forming an exciting climax.
- **Convolved** – (*esp. of a story or sentence*) extremely complex and difficult to follow.
- **Pejorative** – expressing contempt or disapproval.
- **Legible** – easy to understand; clear.
- **Subtext** – an underlying and often distinct theme in a piece of writing or conversation.
- **Trope** – a significant or recurrent theme; a motif.
- **Bourgeois** – belonging to, or characteristic of, the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes.