

About *A Doll's House*

Creative process

The earliest notes for *A Doll's House* are dated October 19th 1878, just after Ibsen had moved from Munich to Rome.

Under the heading "Notes for the contemporary tragedy" he writes:

There are two kinds of spiritual laws and two kinds of consciences - one for men and one for women. They do not understand each other, but in the practical matters of life women are judged by men's law, as if they were not women, but men. In the end the wife in the play is at a loss to know what is right and what is wrong; she is totally confused by natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other.

Ibsen knew of what was called the Laura Kieler affair, and this played some part in his drawing up of the dramatic conflicts in the play. Laura Smith Petersen - her later married name was Kieler - had had a novel published in 1869. The title was *Brand's Daughters: a Picture of Life*, and it was a kind of sequel to Ibsen's *Brand*. The following year she got to know Ibsen and the two of them became friends. She visited him in Dresden in 1871 and five years later - with her husband Victor Kieler - in Munich. In 1876 Victor Kieler developed tuberculosis and his doctor advised a stay in a more southerly climate. Unknown to her husband, Laura Kieler borrowed money to finance this, but gradually got into such trouble with her creditors that...she committed forgery in order to get hold of some money.

The affair ended in tragedy as the forgery was discovered, her husband demanded a divorce, her children were taken away from her, and the strain on her nerves led to her being committed to a mental hospital for a time. Ibsen knew about all this when he was working on *A Doll's House*.

Ibsen made changes continually, even when working on the fair copy, which was completed in mid-September. The finished manuscript was sent to Frederik Hegel from Amalfi. On October 6th 1879 Ibsen left Amalfi to return to Munich.



Laura Kieler

A Doll's House became the object of intense debate, both publicly and in private, and was Ibsen's first international success, with which he entered the sphere of world literature.

<http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=11998>

Nora is the beloved, adored wife of *Torvald Helmer*. He is an admirable man, rigidly honest, of high moral ideals, and passionately devoted to his wife and children. In short, a good man and an enviable husband. Almost every mother would be proud of such a match for her daughter, and the latter would consider herself fortunate to become the wife of such a man.

Nora, too, considers herself fortunate. Indeed, she worships her husband, believes in him implicitly, and is sure that if ever her safety should be menaced, *Torvald*, her idol, her god, would perform the miracle.

When a woman loves as *Nora* does, nothing else matters; least of all, social, legal or moral considerations. Therefore, when her husband's life is threatened, it is no effort, it is joy for *Nora* to forge her father's name to a note and borrow 800 crowns on it, in order to take her sick husband to Italy.

In her eagerness to serve her husband, and in perfect innocence of the legal aspect of her act, she does not give the matter much thought, except for her anxiety to shield him from any emergency that may call upon him to perform the miracle in her behalf. She works hard, and saves every penny of her pin-money to pay back the amount she borrowed on the forged check.

Nora is light-hearted and gay, apparently without depth. Who, indeed, would expect depth of a doll, a "squirrel," a song-bird? Her purpose in life is to be happy for her husband's sake, for the sake of the children; to sing, dance, and play with them. Besides, is she not shielded, protected, and cared for? Who, then, would suspect *Nora* of depth? But already in the opening scene, when *Torvald* inquires what his precious "squirrel" wants for a Christmas present, *Nora* quickly asks him for money. Is it to buy macaroons or finery? In her talk with *Mrs. Linden*, *Nora* reveals her inner self, and forecasts the inevitable debacle of her doll's house. After telling her friend how she had saved her husband, *Nora* says: "When *Torvald* gave me money for clothes and so on, I never used more than half of it; I always bought the simplest things. . . . *Torvald* never noticed anything. But it was often very hard...For it's nice to be beautifully dressed. Now, isn't it? . . . Well, and besides that, I made money in other ways. Last winter I was so lucky--I got a heap of copying to do. I shut myself up every evening and wrote far into the night. Oh, sometimes I was so tired, so tired. And yet it was splendid to work in that way and earn money. I almost felt as if I was a man."

Down deep in the consciousness of *Nora* there evidently slumbers personality and character, which could come into full bloom only through a great miracle--not the kind *Nora* hopes for, but a miracle just the same.

--Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914)