Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.

2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.

3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

**Why *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen is More Relevant Than Ever**

**The Guardian – Susanna Rustin August 10, 2013**

When, next Wednesday evening, Hattie Morahan picks up an armful of Christmas shopping and steps on stage to open a run of Ibsen's A Doll's House, it will be for the third time in just over a year. Morahan first starred as Nora, the 1870s Norwegian wife and mother who realises her life is a sham, [at the Young Vic last July](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jul/10/dolls-house-young-vic-review), but such is the production's popularity that this is its second revival. Moreover, two other, brand new productions have been seen in recent months: in May an adaptation by Bryony Lavery received rave reviews at the Royal Exchange in Manchester, and in April Zinnie Harris's version, set in Edwardian London and [first seen at the Donmar Warehouse](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/22/a-dolls-house-royal-lyceum-review) in London with Gillian Anderson in the lead role, [was staged by the National Theatre of Scotland in Edinburgh](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/22/a-dolls-house-royal-lyceum-review).

Three such high-profile productions in the space of a few months is unusual. Morahan has already won the Evening Standard and Critics' Circle awards for her performance and was unlucky to miss out to Helen Mirren at the Oliviers. But the combination of the play's brisk and thriller-like plotting, and the sense shared by everyone involved that the play still speaks to audiences in ways that feel fresh and interesting, means there is no fear of overkill.

In fact, Morahan, speaking to me just before Thursday's dress rehearsal, says she feels "liberated" to be occupying the role again, while director Carrie Cracknell says that even the last few days of rehearsals have thrown up new insights into Ibsen's endlessly complex characters. "There is something timeless about it," Morahan says, "which is what's so shocking. 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 (or partnership) and money. These are universal anxieties, and it seems from talking to people that it resonates in the most visceral way, especially if they are or have been in a difficult relationship. Someone said to me the other night, 'That's the play that broke my parents' marriage up.' It shines a very harsh light on the messy heart of relationships, and how difficult it can be to be honest with another human being even if you love them."

The play, hugely controversial when first published and performed in Copenhagen in 1879, is about the unravelling of a family. Nora and Torvald Helmer believe they are happily married and on the brink of a blissful new phase of life: Torvald has been promoted to bank manager and their money worries are over. But Nora has a secret debt, incurred with good intentions and a forged signature, and with her husband's new power comes the threat of blackmail.

Over three acts the illusion of bourgeois contentment unravels, and the play culminates in a spectacular scene between the couple as Nora's lie is exposed and Torvald first blames, then forgives her – and is finally abandoned as Nora recognises the truth of her situation. She accuses her husband, and her father before him, of having used her as a doll, and declares herself unfit to be a wife or mother until she has learned to be herself. Ibsen's final stage direction, of the door closing behind her, is one of the most famous ever written.

Unsurprisingly, feminist contemporaries of Ibsen welcomed the play, although, as theatre critic Caroline McGinn points out, when he was invited to speak at a women's congress, he told them he wasn't a feminist himself. The first German production notoriously altered the ending so that Nora did not leave home, when leading woman Hedwig Niemann-Raabe refused to act the part as written, an amendment Ibsen later described as "a barbaric outrage". In the century and more since, the play and the role of Nora have taken on iconic status; [Unesco's Memory of the World register calls Nora](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-4/henrik-ibsen-a-dolls-house) "a symbol throughout the world, for women fighting for liberation and equality".

She is also a symbol for female actors, both of what is possible and of how much they still have to fight for, when most plays and films still feature more male than female characters and work famously dries up for older women unless they are among a lucky handful of national treasures. Cush Jumbo, star of the Royal Exchange's production, says "it's a role a lot of actresses have on their list – if they have a wish list – because it's a very challenging part. It's Ibsen's Rosalind [the heroine of Shakespeare's As You Like It], I suppose. You never leave the stage and the journey she goes on is epic."

"I would compare it to Hamlet," says Morahan, whose interpretation has been described as a career-changing breakthrough – in the way that Hamlet [and now Iago have been for her exact contemporary Rory Kinnear](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/apr/23/othello-iago-adrian-lester) (both are 35). Janet McTeer experienced a similar effect two decades ago when her tempestuous, 6ft Nora, deeply in love with her husband and completely broken by his betrayal, won plaudits in London and then on Broadway, where the New York Times theatre critic Ben Brantley called McTeer's "the single most compelling performance I have ever seen".

McTeer's take on the play was to sweep away some of the feminist baggage it carried – it doesn't work for Torvald's "sweet little skylark" to suddenly turn into Emily Pankhurst, she decided – and to treat it as the story not of a woman, but of a marriage. Anthony Page, who directed, says "she was very unexpected casting, being tall and strong-looking, but it heightened the idiocy of the false identity she was living under. She had a wonderful way of playing it very naturalistically, and she and Owen Teale [as Torvald] were playing off each other. Sometimes it got a bit out of hand. They were throwing chairs at each other, which had to be stopped, but they were remarkable."

But it is hard to ignore the play's strong feminist resonances in a culture where it is blindingly obvious that any woman who puts herself in the public eye will become a target for abuse. Some complain that social media have given misogynists a platform they don't deserve. Others argue they have simply revealed a woman-hating streak that has always been with us. Either way, it seems difficult to deny that virulent prejudice against women and the pressure on them to behave in certain ways still exist. Ibsen himself wrote in a note on his work-in-progress that women can't be themselves in an "exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint.”

Which is why some of the current generation of women acting, directing and adapting A Doll's House have sought to reassert its feminist credentials. [Director Carrie Cracknell made a short film](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/17/nora-dolls-house-film-modern-world?CMP=twt_fd) that imagined Nora as an overstretched modern mother, her life a nightmare of spilled porridge, missed appointments and hurriedly applied makeup. She says working on the play made her acutely aware of the ideas about gender that shaped her parenting of her two young children. "We live in a culture in which the way we represent women is becoming narrower. I think we have a generation of women growing up who understand that power is linked to how we look."

But all those I spoke to agree that the central dilemma the play presents, of how to be yourself and true to yourself, while being married and being a parent, is not exclusive to women. "In a sense," says Caroline McGinn, "Nora's famous dramatic exit [leaving home and children to work and pursue self-fulfilment] is something many parents do five days a week."

And perhaps this is the play's most radical aspect: that it presents a woman's dilemma as a human dilemma, relevant to both sexes, when so often women's stories are treated as a special subject of concern only to women (evidence of which can be seen everywhere in culture, from the small number of men who read books by and about women to the girl-heavy audience for the RSC's smash-hit musical Matilda, when there is no equivalent gender bias at Charlie and the Chocolate Factory down the road).

"I feel really strongly that we still obsess around male protagonists," Cracknell says. "There's a thousands-of-years-long legacy of storytelling in which men have been the protagonists – we go back to telling their stories over and over." McGinn says A Doll's House remains thrilling as a critic because "you go to new plays all the time where the ratio of men to women is 80/20".

Jumbo, who is currently starring in [her own play about the singer Josephine Baker](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jul/28/josephine-i-barnum-hush-review) at the Bush Theatre in London, also acted in [Phyllida Lloyd's all-female production of Julius Caesar](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/dec/05/julius-caesar-review) earlier this year and found "it opened people's minds to the idea that it's not that there aren't any roles for us, it's that plays aren't produced in that way. Quite a lot of the time you are the minority sex in a cast, because most stories that are told are male-driven. So it's a case of telling more women-driven stories, or being open to being casting things in different ways."

Or, as Zinnie Harris puts it: "Nora's departure started a journey, and it's incumbent on us to keep going."