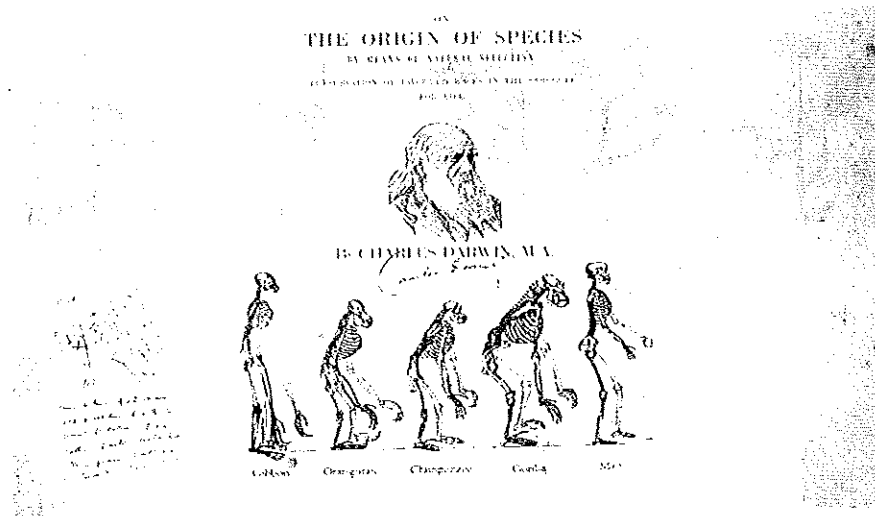


AP EUROPEAN HISTORY
CHAPTER 16 READINGS:
THE BIRTH OF MODERN EUROPEAN THOUGHT

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World War I, many would look back to this period as one of unusual progress. Some of the twentieth-century developments that in retrospect make the second half of the nineteenth century seem such a positive time will be examined in the next chapter.

✧ For Classroom Discussion

*How might some sources be used to reveal the nature of the middle-class style of life? Use the painting by Eastman Johnson, the document "Women as Chemists," the illustration from *The Ages of Woman*, and the analysis by Riemer and Fout.*



Primary Sources

The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man

Charles Darwin

*The nineteenth century was a period of great scientific ideas and discoveries. Perhaps the most important and certainly the most controversial was Darwin's theory of evolution. Charles Darwin (1809–1882), a British naturalist, gathered data while on voyages in the southern Pacific. He used those data to develop his theory of evolution by natural selection. This theory of evolution, particularly as applied to human beings, challenged Biblical accounts of creation. He argued that all life, including human life, evolved from lower forms. Evolution was slow and extended over a much longer period than had been assumed. Natural selection, or survival of the fittest, determined how species evolved. Darwin first formulated his findings and theory in an 1844 essay. However, it was only after 1859, when he published *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, that his ideas became well known and widely controversial. The first of two selections below is from that book. The second is from *The Descent of Man*, which he published in 1871.*

CONSIDER: *Why his ideas might be so welcome by some, so disturbing to others; the possible psychological impact of his ideas; how those favoring Biblical accounts might respond.*

... [C]an we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest. . . .

SOURCES: Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 6th ed. (London: John Murray, 1872), pp. 63, 85; Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1883), pp. 606–607, 619.

Natural selection acts solely through the preservation of variations in some way advantageous, which consequently endure. Owing to the high geometrical rate of increase of all organic beings, each area is already fully stocked with inhabitants; and it follows from this, that as the favoured forms increase in number, so, generally, will the less favoured decrease and become rare. Rarity, as geology tells us, is the precursor to extinction.

The main conclusion here arrived at, and now held by many naturalists who are well competent to form a sound judgment, is that man is descended from some less highly organized form. The grounds upon which this conclusion rests will never be shaken, for the close similarity between man and the lower animals in embryonic development, as well as in innumerable points of structure and constitution, both of high and of the most trifling importance,—the rudiments which he retains, and the abnormal reversions to which he is occasionally liable,—are facts which cannot be disputed. They have long been known, but until recently they told us nothing with respect to the origin of man. Now when viewed by the light of our knowledge of the whole organic world, their meaning is unmistakable. The great principle of evolution stands up clear and firm, when these groups of facts are considered in connection with others, such as the mutual affinities of the members of the same group, their geographical distribution in past and present times, and their geological succession. It is incredible that all these facts should speak falsely. He who is not content to look, like a savage, at the phenomena of nature as disconnected, cannot any longer believe that man is the work of a separate act of creation. . . .

We have seen that man incessantly presents individual differences in all parts of his body and in his mental faculties. These differences or variations seem to be induced by the same general causes, and to obey the same laws as with the lower animals. In both cases similar laws of inheritance prevail. Man tends to increase at a greater rate than his means of subsistence; consequently he is occasionally subjected to a severe struggle for existence, and natural selection will have effected whatever lies

within its scope. A succession of strongly-marked variations of a similar nature is by no means requisite; slight fluctuating differences in the individual suffice for the work of natural selection. . . .

[M]an with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.

Social Statics: Liberalism and Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer

The works of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) epitomize the assertive liberal philosophy favored by successful mid-nineteenth-century industrialists. This was a period in which capitalism was relatively unrestrained and social legislation was only in its infancy. It was also the beginning of thinking from a biological and evolutionary perspective, as best evidenced by the publication of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859. Spencer reflected all this in his massive writings. He rose from being a railroad engineer to become editor of the London Economist—which espoused the views of industrial capitalism—and an independent author. Always a supporter of laissez-faire, he was best known for his advocacy of social evolution and acceptance of Darwinian ideas applied to society (Social Darwinism). Modern scholars consider him a founder of sociology. The following is an excerpt from Social Statics first published in 1851.

CONSIDER: Why Spencer's views would be so appealing to the industrial middle class; on what grounds certain groups might oppose these views; the social policies that would flow from these ideas; ways these views reflect Darwin's ideas.

Pervading all Nature we may see at work a stern discipline which is a little cruel that it may be very kind. . . . It seems hard that an unskillfulness which with all his efforts he cannot overcome, should entail hunger upon the artisan. It seems hard that a labourer incapacitated by sickness from competing with his stronger fellows, should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately but in connexion with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of beneficence—the same beneficence which brings to

early graves the children of diseased parents, and singles out the intemperate and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic.

There are many very amiable people who have not the nerve to look this matter fairly in the face. Disabled as they are by their sympathies with present suffering, from duty regarding ultimate consequences, they pursue a course which is injudicious, and in the end even cruel. We do not consider it true kindness in a mother to gratify her child with sweetmeats that are likely to make it ill. We should think it a very foolish sort of benevolence which led a surgeon to let his patient's disease progress to a fatal issue, rather than inflict pain by an operation. Similarly, we must call those spurious philanthropists who, to prevent present misery, would entail greater misery on future generations. That rigorous necessity which, when allowed to operate, becomes so sharp a spur to the lazy and so strong a bridle to the random, these paupers' friends would repeal, because of the wailings it here and there produces. Blind to the fact that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members, these unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which not only stops the purifying process, but even increases the vitiation—absolutely encourages the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unfailing provision, and discourages the multiplication of the competent and provident by heightening the difficulty of maintaining a family. And thus, in their eagerness to prevent the salutary sufferings that surround us, these sigh-wise and groan-foolish people bequeath to posterity a continually increasing curse.

On Liberty

John Stuart Mill

During the second half of the nineteenth century, liberalism in theory and practice started to change. In general, it became less wedded to laissez-faire policies and less optimistic than it was during the first half of the nineteenth century. This change is reflected in the thought of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). He was the most influential British thinker of the mid-nineteenth century and probably the leading liberal theorist of the period. When he was young he favored the early liberalism of his father, James Mill, a well-known philosopher, and Jeremy Bentham, the author of utilitarianism. Over time he perceived difficulties with this early liberalism and new dangers. He modified his liberal ideas, a change that would later be reflected in liberal political policies of the late

I saw among my coworkers—the despised factory women—examples of the most extraordinary sacrifices for others. If there was a special emergency in one family, then they chipped in their kreuzers to help. Even though they had worked twelve hours in the factory and many still had an hour's walk home, they mended their own clothes, without ever having been taught how. They took apart their old dresses to fashion new ones from the separate pieces, which they sewed at night and on Sundays.

"A good boss"—that was the general opinion of our employer. But in the case of this very factory owner, one can see how profitable is the exploitation of human labor. He, who really did grant his workers more than most other entrepreneurs; he, who would continue for weeks to pay the wages of men and women who were sick; he, who in case of a death made a considerable contribution to the survivors; and he, who almost never rejected a request if someone turned to him in need—despite all this, he had gotten rich through the productive labor of the men and women working in his factory.

(3)

Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things)

In response to the many social and economic changes brought about by industrialization, Pope Leo XIII (pope from 1878 to 1903) issued the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things). In the Catholic Church tradition, popes issue encyclicals as official declarations of the Church's policy on an issue. Encyclicals are specifically addressed to all Catholic bishops, but are also to be read and heard by all members of the Catholic Church, as well as the public at large. *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things) was a very progressive statement for its time. In it, the Pope committed the Catholic Church to supporting policies and movements that would bring improved conditions and social justice, for the poor and workers. It also set the standard for the Catholic Church to make public, moral assessments of social issues and conditions.

Source: Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 275-281; reprinted in *The Western Heritage: Documents Set*, eds. Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, Frank M. Turner, 6th ed., vol. 2 (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), 250-251.

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

1. How does this document define rights in relation to private property, and why are they defined in this way?

2. What was the Church's stance on wages and trade unions? How was this in direct response to workers' conditions in the period when this encyclical was issued?
3. What did the Pope and Catholic Church hope to accomplish by addressing social problems in this way?

PROPERTY

The possession of private property is a right given to man by nature.... There is no reason why the directing power of the state should be brought in; for man is prior to the state, and therefore he must have had by nature the right to preserve his life and person before any community was organized.... The necessary materials for the preservation of life are lavishly supplied by the earth; but the earth could not supply them by itself without man's cultivation, and since man applies the activity of his mind and the strength of his body in the production of the good things of nature, it follows that he claims for himself the portion of physical nature which he has himself tended, which he has in a sense stamped with his own personal impress. And so it should be altogether right for that portion to be possessed by him as his personal property; nor should anyone be allowed to violate that right in any way.... The force of these arguments is so obvious that it seems strange that they are opposed by some people who seek to re-establish worn-out doctrines; who allow individuals the use of the soil and the different products of lands, but say that it is not right that a man should possess, as an owner, the land on which he has built, or the estate which he has cultivated....

WAGES

Man's labour has two inherent natural characteristics; it is personal, since the active force is attached to a person, and is completely the personal possession of the man by whom it is exercised, and is by nature designed for his advantage; and secondly, it is necessary, for this reason, that man requires for his advance labour for the preservation of his life, and the duty of self-preservation is grounded in the natural order. It follows that if we consider merely the personal aspect there is no doubt that it is open to the worker to reduce the agreed wage to narrow dimensions. He gives his services of his free will, and he can, of free will, content himself with a slender reward, or even with none at all. But a very different conclusion is reached when we combined the necessary with the personal element, and indeed they are only separable in thought, not in reality. To remain alive is a duty incumbent on all alike, in fact, and to fail in this duty is a crime. Hence arises of necessity the right of acquiring the materials for the support of life; and it is only by the wage earned with their labour that the lower orders are supplied with these means. Therefore the worker and the employer should freely come to agreement, especially in regard to the level of wages.... But

there is an underlying condition which arises from natural laws, namely that the wage should be sufficient to support the worker, provided he is thrifty and well behaved. If the worker is compelled to accept harsher terms, or is induced to do so by fear of worse hardships, and these have to be accepted because they are imposed by a master or employer, this is submission to force and therefore repugnant to justice.... If the worker receives sufficient payment to maintain himself, his wife, and his children, in comfort, he will be ready to practise thrift, if he is sensible, and will follow the prompting of nature by reducing his expenditure to ensure some surplus by means of which he may attain a modest property.... The right of private property ought to be inviolate.... For the attainment of these advantages it is an essential condition that private property should not be exhausted by inordinate taxation. The right of personal possessions is not based on human law; it is given by nature. Therefore public authority cannot abolish it; it can only control its use and adjust it to the common good.

TRADES UNIONS

That men should commonly unite in associations of this kind [trades unions and the like], whether made up wholly of workers or of both classes together, is to be welcomed.... Natural law grants man the right to join particular associations, and the state is appointed to support natural law, not to destroy it... and the state arises from the same principle which produces particular societies, the fact that men are by nature gregarious. But circumstances sometimes arise when it is right for the laws to check associations of this kind; this happens if ever these associations deliberately adopt aims which are in open conflict with honesty, with justice, and with the well-being of the community.

John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), an advocate of social and political reform, drew on the theory of utilitarianism, in his philosophical works. Mill wrote several essays, articles, and longer works, including his well-known treatise of political philosophy, *On Liberty* (1859). In this work, *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, Mill called for the extension of full legal and political rights to women. As a member of the British Parliament in the House of Commons, Mill also introduced measures that would grant women the right to vote in Britain. These initiatives ultimately failed, but they did serve as an early basis for the women's suffrage movement in Britain. His friendships and collaboration with Harriet Hardy, whom he married in 1851, influenced his ideas about the women and inspired his support for full political rights for women.

Source: John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1991), 7-13.

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

1. What arguments does Mill make in support of extending full rights to women? What examples and evidence does he use to support his arguments?
2. What groups were the main audience for this work? How does Mill tailor his arguments to this audience in an effort to persuade them?
3. What contributions does Mill make to nineteenth century debates on the woman question?

11...The object of this Essay is to explain, as clearly as I am able, the grounds of an opinion which I have held from the very earliest period when I had formed any opinions at all on social or political matters, and which, instead of being weakened or modified, has been constantly growing stronger by the progress of reflection and the experience of life: That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

22...The very words necessary to express the task I have undertaken, show how arduous it is. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the difficulty of the case must lie in the insufficiency or obscurity of the grounds of reason on which my conviction rests. The difficulty is that which exists in all cases in which there is a mass of feeling to be contended against. So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by leaving a preponderating weight of argument against it. For if it were accepted as a result of argument, the refutation of the argument might shake the solidity of the conviction; but when it rests solely on feeling, the worse it fares in argumentative contest, the more persuaded its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper ground, which the arguments do not reach; and why the feeling remains, it is always throwing up fresh entrenchments of argument to repair any breach made in the old. And there are so many causes tending to make the feelings connected with this subject the most intense and most deeply-rooted of all those which gather round and protect old institutions and customs, that we need not wonder to find them as yet less undermined and loosened than any of the rest by the progress the great modern spiritual and social transition; nor suppose that the barbarisms to which men cling longes must be less barbarisms than those which they earlier shake off.

23-5 | An Indictment of France's Military Elite

ÉMILE ZOLA, "J'Accuse" the French Army (1898)

In 1898 and 1899 the case of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army who was falsely accused and convicted of treason on the basis of falsified evidence, split France apart. On one side was the army, joined by anti-Semites and most of the Catholic establishment. On the other side stood civil libertarians and most of the more radical republicans. The support offered to Dreyfus by prominent republicans and intellectuals, including novelist Émile Zola, proved critical to securing the reopening of his case and his eventual exoneration. In this excerpt from Zola's famous letter entitled "J'Accuse," Zola accused the French military high command of conspiracy to subvert justice, an action that opened Zola up to a retaliatory prosecution for libel.

Dreyfus knows several languages: a crime. No compromising papers were found in his possession: a crime. He sometimes visited his native country:¹ a crime. He is industrious and likes to find out about everything: a crime. He is calm: a crime. He is worried: a crime. . . .

I accuse Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam² of having been the diabolical, but I would fain believe the unwitting, artisan of the miscarriage of justice, and thereafter of having defended his unhallowed work for three years by the most clumsy and culpable machinations.

I accuse General Mercier³ of having become, at all events through weakness, an accomplice in one of the greatest iniquities of the age.

From Émile Zola, "J'Accuse" in Armand Charpentier, *The Dreyfus Case*, trans. Lewis May (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), pp. 142–144.

¹his native country: Dreyfus was from Alsace (Alsacia in German), a French province at the time of his birth, but taken by Germany in 1871. For Dreyfus to visit his childhood home, he had to cross the new national border.

²Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam: Armand Mercier Paty de Clam was the French counterintelligence officer who conducted the first accusation against Dreyfus, and who remained convinced of Dreyfus's guilt long after the actual author of the document that began the case was revealed.

³General Mercier: Mercier was the war minister who originated the case against Dreyfus and continued it to avoid political embarrassment after making public pronouncements of his certainty of Dreyfus's guilt.

I accuse General Billot⁴ of having had in his hands sure proofs of the innocence of Dreyfus and of having hushed them up, of having incurred the guilt of crimes against humanity and justice, for political ends and to save the face of the General Staff.

I accuse General de Boisdeffre and General Gonse⁵ of having been participants in the same crime, actuated, the one no doubt by clerical partisanship, the other, it may be, by that esprit de corps which would make the Army and the War Office the sacred Ark of the Covenant.

I accuse General de Pellieux and Major Ravary⁶ of conducting a disgraceful inquiry, by which I mean an inquiry characterized by the most monstrous partiality, of which we have, in the report of the latter of these two men, an imperishable monument of stupid audacity.

I accuse the three handwriting experts, MM. Belhomme, Varinard, and Couard, of drawing up misleading and lying reports, unless, indeed, a medical examination should reveal them to be suffering from some pathological abnormality of sight and judgment.

I accuse the War Office of conducting an abominable campaign in the Press, and particularly in the newspapers *l'Éclair* and *l'Écho de Paris*, in order to mislead public opinion and to conceal their own misdeeds.

I accuse the first Court-Martial of acting contrary to law by condemning an accused man on the strength of a secret document; and I accuse the second Court-Martial of having, in obedience to orders, concealed that illegality, and of committing in its turn the crime of knowingly acquitting a guilty man.

In bringing these charges, I am not unaware that I render myself liable to prosecution under Clauses 30 and 31 of the Act of the 29th of July, which deals with defamation of character in the public Press. But I do so of my own free will and with my eyes open.

As for those whom I accuse, I do not know them, I have never seen them. I entertain for them neither hatred nor ill-will. They are so far as I am concerned mere entities, spirits of social maleficence, and the action to which I have here committed myself is but a revolutionary means of hastening the explosion of Truth and Justice.

I have but one passion, and that is for light, and I plead in the name of that humanity which has so greatly suffered and has a right to happiness. My fiery

⁴General Billot: Jean-Baptiste Billot was a French general and war minister during the later stages of the Dreyfus affair, 1896–1898.

⁵General de Boisdeffre and General Gonse: Boisdeffre was the chief of staff of the French Army—its highest-ranking soldier—at the time of the initial accusation, and according to Zola, a strong supporter of the Catholic clergy in France. General Gonse was the general to whom the counterintelligence division (called for secrecy purposes the Statistical Section) reported.

⁶General de Pellieux and Major Ravary: Pellieux was the general who investigated the accusations against Esterhazy—the man later proved to have committed the crime of which Dreyfus was accused—and found him innocent. Ravary oversaw the handwriting analysts, and reported on their findings, which turned out to be inaccurate.

protest is but the outcry of my soul. Let them drag me, then, into a Court of Justice and let the matter be thrashed out in broad daylight. I am ready.

READING QUESTIONS

1. What risks did Zola take by publishing this letter? What might explain his willingness to take those risks?
2. Based on this document, what was the relationship between the needs of the accused and the needs of the state in nineteenth-century France? How did Zola oppose this conception of justice?
3. Although the actions of the court that convicted Dreyfus were popular, were they compatible with the idea of government by the consent of the governed, which the French Third Republic claimed to embody?

6

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, 1879

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) wrote plays that attempted to provide audiences with realistic depictions of life in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Many of his works, particularly his later plays, challenged social and cultural norms. For example, in his most famous work, *A Doll's House* (1879), Ibsen portrayed the plight of an ordinary middle-class wife caught in an emotionally empty marriage. As you read the excerpt from the play included below, ask yourself how a nineteenth-century audience might have responded to Ibsen's story of social repression.

Act III

Helmer (standing at the open door). Yes, do. Try and calm yourself, and make your mind easy again, my frightened little singing-bird. Be at rest, and feel secure; I have broad wings to shelter you under. (Walks up and down by the door.) How warm and cosy our home is, Nora. Here is shelter for you; here I will protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claws; I will bring peace to your poor beating heart. It will come, little by little, Nora, believe me. Tomorrow morning you will look upon it all quite differently; soon everything will be just as it was before. Very soon you won't need me to assure you that I have forgiven you; you will yourself feel the certainty that I have done so. Can you suppose I should ever think of such a thing as repudiating you, or even reproaching you? You have no idea what a true man's heart is like, Nora. There is something so indescribably sweet and satisfying, to a man, in the knowledge that he has forgiven his wife— forgiven her freely, and with all his heart. It seems as if that had made her, as it were, doubly his own; he has given her a new life, so to speak; and she is in a way become both wife and child to him. So you shall be for me after this, my little scared, helpless darling. Have no anxiety about anything, Nora; only be frank and open with me, and I will serve as will and conscience both to you—What is this? Not gone to bed? Have you changed your things?

Nora (in everyday dress). Yes, Torvald, I have changed my things now.

Helmer. But what for?—so late as this.

Nora. I shall not sleep tonight.

Helmer. But, my dear Nora—

Nora (looking at her watch). It is not so very late. Sit down here, Torvald. You and I have much to say to one another. (She sits down at one side of the table.)

Helmer. Nora—what is this?—this cold, set face?

Nora had illegally taken out a loan by forging her father's signature.

She did this to save her husband, Helmer, who fell ill and could not work.

Ibsen, Henrik, trans. Frank McGuinness. *A Doll's House* (Garden City, NY: Stage & Screen, 1997).

Nora. Sit down. It will take some time; I have a lot to talk over with you.

Helmer (sits down at the opposite side of the table). You alarm me, Nora!—and I don't understand you.

Nora. No, that is just it. You don't understand me, and I have never understood you either—before tonight. No, you mustn't interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say. Torvald, this is a settling of accounts.

Helmer. What do you mean by that?

Nora (after a short silence). Isn't there one thing that strikes you as strange in our sitting here like this?

Helmer. What is that?

Nora. We have been married now eight years. Does it not occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, husband and wife, have had a serious conversation?

Helmer. What do you mean by serious?

Nora. In all these eight years—longer than that—from the very beginning of our acquaintance, we have never exchanged a word on any serious subject.

Helmer. Was it likely that I would be continually and forever telling you about worries that you could not help me to bear?

Nora. I am not speaking about business matters. I say that we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything.

Helmer. But, dearest Nora, would it have been any good to you?

Nora. That is just it; you have never understood me. I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by papa and then by you.

Helmer. What! By us two—by us two, who have loved you better than anyone else in the world?

Nora (shaking her head). You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.

Helmer. Nora, what do I hear you saying?

Nora. It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed

the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you—

Helmer. What sort of an expression is that to use about our marriage? Nora (undisturbed). I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you—or else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which—I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.

Helmer. How unreasonable and how ungrateful you are, Nora! Have you not been happy here?

Nora. No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so.

Helmer. Not—not happy!

Nora. No, only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald.

Helmer. There is some truth in what you say—exaggerated and strained as your view of it is. But for the future it shall be different. Playtime shall be over, and lesson-time shall begin.

Nora. Whose lessons? Mine, or the children's?

Helmer. Both yours and the children's, my darling Nora.

Nora. Alas, Torvald, you are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you.

Helmer. And you can say that!

Nora. And I—how am I fitted to bring up the children?

Helmer. Nora!

Nora. Didn't you say so yourself a little while ago—that you dare not trust me to bring them up?

Helmer. In a moment of anger! Why do you pay any heed to that?

Nora. Indeed, you were perfectly right. I am not fit for the task. There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself—you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now.

Helmer (springing up). What do you say?

Nora. I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for that reason that I cannot remain with you any longer.

Helmer. Nora, Nora!

Nora. I am going away from here now, at once. I am sure Christine will take me in for the night—

Helmer. You are out of your mind! I won't allow it! I forbid you!

Nora. It is no use forbidding me anything any longer. I will take with me what belongs to myself. I will take nothing from you, either now or later.

Helmer. What sort of madness is this!

Nora. Tomorrow I shall go home—I mean to my old home. It will be easiest for me to find something to do there.

Helmer. You blind, foolish woman!

Nora. I must try and get some sense, Torvald.

Helmer. To desert your home, your husband and your children! And you don't consider what people will say!

Nora. I cannot consider that at all. I only know that it is necessary for me.

Helmer. It's shocking. This is how you would neglect your most sacred duties.

Nora. What do you consider my most sacred duties?

Helmer. Do I need to tell you that? Are they not your duties to your husband and your children?

Nora. I have other duties just as sacred.

Helmer. That you have not. What duties could those be?

Nora. Duties to myself.

Helmer. Before all else, you are a wife and mother.

Nora. I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them.

Helmer. Can you not understand your place in your own home? Have you not a reliable guide in such matters as that?—have you no religion?

Nora. I am afraid, Torvald, I do not exactly know what religion is.

Helmer. What are you saying?

Nora. I know nothing but what the clergyman said, when I went to be confirmed. He told us that religion was this, and that, and the other. When I am away from all this, and am alone, I will look into that matter too. I will see if what the clergyman said is true, or at all events if it is true for me.

Helmer. This is unheard of in a girl of your age! But if religion cannot lead you aright, let me try and awaken your conscience. I suppose you have some moral sense? Or—answer me—am I to think you have none?

Nora. I assure you, Torvald, that is not an easy question to answer. I really don't know. The thing perplexes me altogether. I only know that you and I look at it in quite a different light. I am learning, too, that the law is quite another thing from what I supposed; but I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right. According to it a woman has no right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life. I can't believe that.

Helmer. You talk like a child. You don't understand the conditions of the world in which you live.

Nora. No, I don't. But now I am going to try. I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I.

Helmer. You are ill, Nora; you are delirious; I almost think you are out of your mind.

Nora. I have never felt my mind so clear and certain as tonight.

Questions

1. How did Torvald Helmer embody traditional ideas about women and marriage?
2. Why did Nora Helmer find it so difficult to get her husband to take her seriously?
3. What sense, if any, was Torvald able to make of Nora's behavior?
What comment might Ibsen have been making about the limits of men's understanding of women in the late nineteenth century?

This play is a narrative on the belief that "a woman cannot be herself in modern society," since it is "an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint." However, the play's theme is not really "women's rights", but rather "the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person."

"A Doll's House" is one of the world's most performed plays.

In what way is this play a response to the "Cult of Domesticity" that was so pervasive in the Victorian Era?