

Rossetti Poems & A Doll's House: Comparative Context & Critiques

I. Shared Historical Context: The 19th Century

Both texts are products of the Victorian era (Rossetti, British Empire) and its close European counterparts (Ibsen's Norway), sharing key societal values and anxieties.

Area of Comparison	Christina Rossetti's Poems	Henrik Ibsen's <i>A Doll's House</i>
Patriarchy	Women are often depicted in confined roles or yearning for escape/death (<i>From the Antique</i>). The male gaze and control are subtle but pervasive.	Explicitly dramatised. Torvald controls Nora’s life, money, and reputation. The “angel in the house” ideology is central.
Religion	Deeply Christian focus. Salvation, sacrifice, and duty to God are paramount. Religious framework often dictates moral choices (<i>Up-Hill, Good Friday</i>).	Secular focus. The characters’ morality is determined by social standing and law, not religious belief. Ibsen critiques conventional morality.
Reputation/Social Standing	"Fallen women" are a key concern. Reputation determines a woman's worth (<i>Maude Clare</i>).	Obsession with public appearance is Torvald’s main motivation. Scandal and forgery threaten the Helmers' "perfect" façade.
Gender Roles	Explores limited agency; women use subtle power (withholding feelings in <i>Winter: My Secret, No, Thank You, John</i>).	Focuses on one woman's radical rejection of her prescribed roles as "wife" and "mother". The door slam is a loud, definitive break.
Genre	Lyrical poetry, often allegorical or narrative ballads. Focus on inner	Realist prose drama. Focus on external social interaction and the

psychological states and spiritual conflict.

"well-made play" structure that Ibsen subverts.

II. Key Comparative Themes

Theme	Rossetti	Ibsen
Autonomy & Agency	Female speakers often achieve agency through rejection, death, or devotion to God, as earthly love is imperfect (<i>No, Thank You, John</i>).	Achieved through a radical physical departure; Nora reclaims her identity by leaving the domestic sphere entirely.
Sacrifice	Often presented as a noble Christian virtue, particularly for women (e.g., Laura saving Lizzie in <i>Goblin Market</i>).	The characters who sacrifice are often exploited (Kristine Linde) or the act is shown to be a social necessity rather than a virtue.
Deception & Lies	Characters may hide feelings (<i>Winter: My Secret</i>) or secrets of the past (<i>Maude Clare</i>).	Lies are the foundation of the Helmer marriage; a necessity for survival in a rigid society. The play exposes the hypocrisy of keeping secrets.
Duty (to Self vs. Other)	Duty to God often supersedes duty to man. Women sacrifice themselves for family/reputation.	Nora concludes her duty to herself and her humanity ("first and foremost a human being") is more important than duty to her husband or children.

III. Critical Approaches for Comparison (AO5)

Critiques can be applied to both texts, revealing shared Victorian anxieties while highlighting different narrative expressions.

Feminist Criticism

- **Rossetti:** Critics like **Simon Avery** highlight her "uncompromising analysis of women's place," showing speakers aware of limiting social expectations.
- **Ibsen:** **Kate Millett** views Nora's exit as revolutionary political statement. The "doll's house" is the patriarchal prison.
- **Comparison Point:** Both offer stark critiques of women's confinement. Rossetti explores the internal psychological struggle, while Ibsen dramatises the external, explosive break.

Biographical Context

- **Rossetti:** Worked with "fallen women"; her religious devotion shaped her views on sin and redemption (*Goblin Market*).
- **Ibsen:** His play drew inspiration from real-life friend Laura Kieler, whose life mirrored Nora's forgery plot.
- **Comparison Point:** Both authors used their observations of real-world Victorian injustices to fuel their art, grounding their work in realism and social commentary.

Marxist Criticism

- **Rossetti:** Economic vulnerability is a quiet backdrop. Women often lack the means to support themselves (*From the Antique*).
- **Ibsen:** Money is a central motivator. Krogstad and Kristine are desperate due to lack of capital. Nora gains power by secretly acquiring money.
- **Comparison Point:** Ibsen is more explicit in linking financial independence to personal freedom, whereas Rossetti explores the spiritual poverty linked to material limitations.

A.C. Bradley / Character-Based Criticism

- **Rossetti:** Critics like **C.M. Bowra** focus on characters' melancholy and 'renunciation' of earthly love.
- **Ibsen:** Early critics debated Nora's character—was she selfish to leave?
- **Comparison Point:** Both texts focus on complex, internal character psychology (Rossetti in poetry, Ibsen in realist dialogue) that broke ground for their respective forms.