



Edvard Munch, The Scream, (1893). Credit: G1 Archive / Alamy Stock, Photo

# A SILENT SCREAM

## A Doll's House and Edvard Munch's The Scream

Did you realise that the painter Munch was a great admirer of Henrik Ibsen's work? Ricky Kingshott draws out fascinating connections between these two iconic works of art and drama.

*The Scream* by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch has become iconic in popular culture, inspiring the *Home Alone* poster, the masked killer in the *Scream* franchise, the *Doctor Who* villains, The Silence, and the 'face screaming in fear' emoji. Munch was a great admirer of his fellow Norwegian, playwright Henrik Ibsen. Throughout his career, Munch produced around 400 works inspired by Ibsen. Both artists resided in Christiania (modern-day Oslo) in Norway and frequented the Grand Café there. The psychological struggles of Ibsen's characters deeply resonated with Munch as he suffered from mental illness throughout his life. Both Nora Helmer, the protagonist of Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House*, and the central figure depicted in *The Scream* suffer inner turmoil due to immense pressure from external forces.

### Suffering in Solitude

In 1892, Munch wrote in his diary about an experience which led to the creation of *The Scream*:

I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.

While many assume that the main figure in *The Scream* is screaming, it seems to be covering its ears to block out the scream emanating from nature. The figure suffers in solitude, distant from the figures in the background. Nora in *A Doll's House* also suffers alone while trying to maintain the image of an ideal nineteenth-century wife and mother. Ibsen was similarly inspired by real life events when he wrote *A Doll's House*. Nora Helmer was based on Laura Kieler, a friend of Ibsen who was committed

to the insane ward of an asylum after it was revealed that she had secretly borrowed money and forged a check to care for her severely ill husband. In the play, Nora commits a similar crime but, unlike Kieler, chooses to leave her husband, Torvald Helmer, and her children, after the truth is revealed and she recognises the loveless and artificial reality of her marriage.

### Claustrophobia and Entrapment

Both *The Scream* and *A Doll's House* create a sense of claustrophobia and entrapment. In Munch's painting, the haunting skeletal figure in the foreground is trapped between the sky, the fjord and the figures on the bridge. There is no escape for the figure, or for the viewer, who is captured by its gaze. For the two figures in the background, it seems that life and the world are continuing as normal, but the main figure is separate from it, unable to focus on anything except for its internal torment. In *A Doll's House*, the three acts take place within the Helmer house. The winter setting heightens the sense of entrapment and emphasises the danger of Nora stepping out into the world to fend for herself. In the 2012 Young Vic production of *A Doll's House*, the use of a revolving stage amplifies Nora's emotional turmoil. Like the beauty of the fjords in *The Scream* being distorted into something terrifying, ordinary, familiar items in *A Doll's House* are distorted, such as the Christmas Tree at the beginning of Act 2 which

stands, stripped and dishevelled, its candles burned to their sockets.

The candles reflect Nora's inner light fading away as the burden of her secret leaves her 'desperate with anxiety'. Her anxiety reaches its crescendo in Act 3 when she realises that Torvald has been a 'complete stranger' to her and she exclaims

I could tear myself to pieces!

### Universal Figures or the Struggle of Everywoman?

One aspect of *The Scream* which has contributed to its iconic status is its universality. The central figure has no gender or ethnicity and can therefore resonate with anyone. On the *In Our Time* podcast, David Jackson describes the painting as a 'blank page' and suggests that 'you can put into that work anything that you like.' Michael Meyer had a similar idea about *A Doll's House*, that the play is about

the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and strive to become that person.

Ibsen himself denied the popular idea that the play was written to promote women's rights, as he explained

my task has been the description of humanity.

Despite this, Ibsen did show sympathy with the female cause, asserting that

a woman cannot be herself in the society of today, which is exclusively a masculine society.

Joan Templeton has suggested, therefore, that the play is not about 'Everybody's struggle' but 'Everywoman's struggle against Everyman' and that the play is 'unimaginable' without Nora's identity as a nineteenth-century married woman.

### The Tarantella – A Silent Scream

In Act 2 of *A Doll's House*, Nora dances the tarantella, a dance originating in southern Italy, which is said to cure hysteria caused by a tarantula's bite through its frenzied movements. In Act 2, Nora uses the dance to distract Helmer from reading the letter which will incriminate her. As she dances, the stage directions describe how she ignores Helmer's attempts to correct her as



Credit: Johan Persson / ArenaPAL

her hair works loose and falls over her shoulders.

In her wild movements, she momentarily shakes off the poison of the patriarchal society which has trapped and restricted her. The dance is Nora's silent scream and is a wordless act of defiance. In Act 3, when Nora assertively rejects Helmer's description of her as a 'possession', he responds by saying

*You've still got the tarantella in your blood*

suggesting that the dance has given Nora a kind of subversive superpower. The chaotic, out of control dance reflects the swirling colours of Munch's painting, signifying the power of the scream of nature.

## The Shadow of Death

A source of Munch's anxiety and psychological turmoil was the omnipresence of death in his life. His mother Laura died when he was five years old, and his sister Sophie died at the age of 15, both victims of tuberculosis. The skeleton-like figure depicted in *The Scream* evokes death, suggesting that Munch was preoccupied by mortality. Death is not directly seen in *A Doll's House*, but its power is felt from two offstage deaths. The first is the death of Nora's father, which instigated her forgery of his signature to borrow the money to care for Torvald. It is also implied that the family friend of the Helmers, Dr Rank, dies following the events of the play, after confessing his love for Nora, leaving her sad and disappointed to be seen as a romantic object in the eyes of someone she values as a friend. The prospect of Nora's death haunts the play as she fixates on visions of 'icy black water', planning to sacrifice her own life to try to save Torvald's reputation when the secret is revealed. When Torvald describes Nora as a 'beautiful apparition' in Act 3, it suggests her death and foreshadows the death of their marriage. Another type of death relevant to the painting and the play is the death of God, declared by Friedrich Nietzsche to describe a society concerned with scientific advancement and with less religious belief. *The Scream* could depict the anguish of a search for meaning in a universe lacking belief, while *A Doll's House* also demonstrates Nora's religious doubt:

Oh, Torvald, I don't really know what religion means.

## Two Controversial Works

When Munch showed Ibsen around an exhibition of his work in Christiania in 1895, Ibsen gave him some advice which Munch treasured for the rest of his life:

'believe me, things will go with you as with me – the more enemies, the more friends.'

Indeed, the work of both Ibsen and Munch had many detractors. When *A Doll's House* was first performed in 1879, one critic deemed it 'illogical and immoral', and a more palatable alternative ending was created for German audiences in which Nora decides to stay with Helmer and the children. When Munch opened an exhibition in Berlin in 1892, his work shocked audiences, was criticised for being 'unfinished' and the exhibition was closed after a week. Despite this controversy, the work of both Ibsen and Munch has endured, with both *A Doll's House* and *The Scream* retaining the power to shock audiences.

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