

---

## Ibsen's A Doll's House and Therese Raquin: Critique of Christian Morality

Both Ibsen and Zola were firm believers in portraying their characters and works from a realistic perspective. Zola founded the naturalist movement in fiction and shared the same general perspective on society as Ibsen, who was the first of a new generation of naturalistic modern playwrights. In both *Therese Raquin* and *A Doll's House*, the alleged central place of Christianity in 19th century European society is indirectly subverted through subtle suggestions of its irrelevance, or lack of importance, in the characters' lives. Because of the already morally controversial nature of both Ibsen's play and Zola's novel, thanks to their subversion of traditional gender roles, an obvious critique of the Church or of normative religious opinion in the 19th century would have landed both writers in difficult situations. Thus, by use of indirect yet carefully aimed references, both Ibsen and Zola allude to Christianity as a hollow institution, serving merely as a specious societal value, which is largely ignored in practice. Zola, coming from Catholic France, portrays the Church as an impersonal, mechanical tyranny looming in the background of his characters' lives. Ibsen, coming from Protestant Norway, takes a more direct yet understated approach, purposely setting his play around Christmas, while having his characters mention only the materialist aspect of the holiday.

As Ibsen's play opens, a quarrel occurs between Nora, the main character, and her husband, Torvald, over how much money should be spent buying presents. (Act I, Page 10) Whilst he demands economy, she is eager to spend. Both characters see the exchanging of gifts on Christmas as a familial and social obligation, the basis of which is the spending of money, not the honouring of a religious event. Similarly, Zola portrays the Church as a place not for divine worship, but rather attended only when necessary for events such as marriage. When Therese and Laurent are being married in church, their conduct is business-like, their "quiet and modest" (Chapter 20, Page 153) bearing being "noticed with approbation" (Chapter 20, Page 153). The irony of this, considering that their marriage has been made possible thanks to their murder of Camille, is hard to miss. Both Zola and Ibsen were self-proclaimed 'naturalists' (observers of nature) and atheists who put themselves in the same category as Darwin and other prominent scientists. However, living in 19th century Europe, both authors had to convey their renegade beliefs diplomatically.

The idea of Christianity as an obsolete establishment is furthered by the two writers' representation of religious and moral feeling as something mechanical and impersonal. Neither Therese nor Laurent feels any real guilt or remorse for the cardinal 'sins' they have committed, which include breaking the commandments regarding coveting thy neighbour's wife and

---

### Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

committing adultery, not to mention killing. Zola is at pains to make clear that all they care about is not getting found out. As for Nora, she feels that she is a tainted, sinful woman, unfit to be a mother. Yet the 'crime' she has committed was an altruistic and ostensibly 'Christian' act, borrowing money illegally and thereby risking her own security to save her husband's life. Is Torvald prepared to demonstrate 'Christian' forgiveness when he finds this out? Not at all, he judges and condemns his wife for her self-sacrifice. At the end of *A Doll's House*, when Nora makes clear her intention to leave her home because of his total lack of gratitude or sympathy over her sacrifice for him, Torvald inquires acidly whether she has "no religion, no ethics, no sense of duty" (Act III, Page 77). He relates religion to societal obligations, referring to it as a duty rather than an act of faith or love. Religion, to him, is only a set of social rules he has never once thought to question along with his own moral and religious hypocrisy. Nora later comments, (almost sarcastically) "miracles don't happen everyday, God knows" (Act 3, Page 84), in reference to her diminished hope or Helmer's support for her sacrifice on his behalf. Coming after she has just stated that she does not understand religion, this gives the comment an almost mocking tone.

Zola mirrors this type of irony in his description of Madame Raquin's situation after her paralysis. The use of opposites insinuates the imbalanced and contradictory nature of divine worship; Madame Raquin's face is depicted as with "flesh hung loose and grimacing" (Chapter 26, Page 204), yet in the midst of this ugliness, her eyes are of "heavenly loveliness" (Chapter 26, Page 204). Moreover, the lower part of her face described as "bleak and colourless" (Chapter 26, Page 204), while the upper part filled with "divine radiance" (Chapter 26, Page 204). Zola is associating pious spiritual beauty with physical grotesqueness, as if the two go hand in hand. Advancing on this comes Zola's most obvious attack on religion, where even the most pure and devout character is turned sour and distrusting, thinking that if she could, she would have "cursed God". This goes on to become increasingly bitter because of His "deceit", and culminates in a simple yet groundbreaking statement; "God was wicked" (Chapter 26, Page 206). Thus when Madame Raquin opens up to reality, she sees through the façade to the true hollowness of the Church.

Ibsen's attack on the emptiness of religious values is furthered when Nora rightly replies to Helmer's accusations of impiety and sinfulness, "I don't know what (religion) is" (Act 3, Page 83), elaborating that she knows only what the clergymen have said about it. She says, "he told us religion was this, and that, and the other" (Act 3, Page 83), her very diction indicating the domineering, mechanical nature of the church. Helmer replies that this dissent from conventional gender roles, as stipulated by religious authority, is occurring because she "does not understand the society (she) lives in" (Act 3, Page 84). What this implies is that the Norwegian Protestant Church, like the Catholic Church in Zola's France, is a statutory institution, a domineering power that commands instead of guiding and is largely ignored or misunderstood. This is the direct opposite of what Christian spirituality was originally supposed

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

to be—a faith taken up as a matter of personal conscience, rather than a machine for enforcing social conformity. Ibsen illustrates his troubled protagonist as a truly honest character who does not understand or approve of religion as she has been taught it, but has merely been pretending to her whole life.

Zola, on the other hand, subverts religion in a different, more sporadic way, the constant usage of God's name in vain continually reinforcing the main characters' disregard for religious morality. Any time the murder of Camille is directly spoken of, Therese exclaims, "Oh God! Oh God!" (Chapter 28/29, Page 218/229) as a kind of empty reflex. This notion is amplified throughout the rest of the novel as neither Therese nor Laurent ever considers the presumed divine consequences of the murder for their souls. Only at a point where they feel overwhelmed by fear of worldly punishment do they invoke the Lord's name in a seemingly pathetic attempt at finding an easy way out of their dilemma out of pure desperation. Finally, Therese and Laurent commit double suicide, a religiously interdicted act and an illegal one, and do so not out of guilt, but rather only as an alternative either to murdering one another to prevent mutual betrayal of their murder of Camille; or to actually betraying each other, being arrested, tried and duly murdered by the state. Notably, Nora too contemplates suicide without regard for its supposed divine consequences, but with plenty of consideration for avoiding social humiliation.

While Ibsen exposes the vacancy of feeling in socially imposed religious mores through a blunt admission by Nora, which is actually a reflection of her own enlightenment and her emergence as an intelligent, self-aware character; Zola instead makes use of short, quick insinuations to reveal the absence of any reflection and conscience, religious or otherwise, in his main characters to display the depth of their depravity and desperation.

Another way that Zola and Ibsen allude to the emptiness and irrelevance of religion in the society they are depicting is by not mentioning it, or doing so sparingly. In *A Doll's House*, the moral dilemma of the play would, in 19th century European culture, naturally involve an extensive discussion of religion. However, Ibsen ensures that this always remains merely as a backdrop, not as an intimate, important part of Torvald and Nora's lives. To reiterate, this is the source of the irony of the play's taking place on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day, all religious holidays, yet no character ever mentions the religious dimension of these events, while the prevailing actions being displayed on these holy days are threats of blackmail, marital duplicity, thoughts of suicide, lack of empathy for loved ones or spite and envy. The deterioration of the Christmas tree is also emblematic of the ethical issues faced by Ibsen's characters, as it serves to compliment their own moral decay as time progresses.

Similarly, Therese and Laurent never weigh up the ethical, much less the metaphysical implications of murder and for both of them. Everything is subordinate to gratification of their selfish desires. Thereby, Zola uses the absence of a moral framework in his main characters'

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

lives to imply the hollow, obsolete, irrelevant nature of the Church's moral teaching in his society. Neither author could be accused of criticizing Christianity directly, yet both Zola and Ibsen present the audience with a world in which religion is identifiable with social conformity rather than personal conscience, and is complied with out of habit and necessity, if it is even remembered at all.

Therese Raquin,

Emile Zola,

Translation by Leonard Tancock

Penguin Classics

1962

A Doll's House,

Henrik Ibsen,

Translation by Kenneth McLeish

1995

gradesfixer.com

---

**Need help with the assignment?**

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**