**Comparative Study: Theme or Issue**

Each of the characters has a moment of revelation

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| **Room** | **A Doll’s House** |
| The biggest blow to Ma’s sense of who she is comes about when she allows herself to be interviewed for a television show. The interviewer asked her if she ever considered asking Old Nick to take Jack to a hospital and leave him there so he could be put up for adaption, claiming, ‘Every day he needed a wider world, and the only one you could give him got narrower’. Ma had always considered herself a good mother and had shaped her identity for five years around the belief that she was doing the best she could for Jack. Until the interview, she had never thought that she was the one keeping Jack imprisoned in Room and she is utterly heartbroken at the suggestion that, far from being a good parent, she was possibly no better that Old Nick, in her own way. Ma, of course, is so vulnerable at this stage in the text that she is incapable of separating her sense of self from the interviewer’s analysis of her situation. Not only has she made Jack the focus of and reason for her life, but she has never had that belief challenged up to this point. Ma is so distressed by this view of herself that she attempts to take her own life. | **The principal difference between the moment of revelation in Room and A Doll’s House is each character’s reaction to the belief that they have been living a lie. Nora comes to see that sacrificing her sense of self has led to a shallow existence with no strong foundation, while Ma is horrified to learn that building her life around Jack may have harmed him. Both women see that their shaping their identity around the needs of others may have had the opposite effect to that they had intended.**  Nora’s sudden realisation that Torvald is more concerned with saving ‘the remains, the fragments, the appearance’ of a marriage and happy family life than he is in understanding the reasons for her taking out the loan shows her that she can never be true to herself if she stays with him.  **While Ma’s distress leads her to attempt to leave the world altogether, Nora chooses to leave her husband.**  She refuses to accept being treated like a ‘doll-wife’ any longer and to exist ‘merely to perform tricks’ for Torvald. She tells him that she must ‘stand quite alone’ if she is to understand herself at last. Torvald objects, saying Nora is a wife and a mother above all else, but Nora says she is ‘a reasonable human being’. Her moment of revelation has shown Nora that she needs to make up her own mind about matters and form a strong, independent identity. |

The ending of each text contributes to our understanding of the theme.

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| **Room** | **A Doll’s House** |
| When Jack and Ma are reunited after her overdose and her stay in hospital, they both learn that the need one another a little less than they did when they first escaped Room, and that is a good thing. The novel shows that in order for people to have a clear sense of their identity they need to pull apart a little. Jack, during his time with Grandma, has learned that he is capable of living without Ma, and she is coming to terms with her adult self in the world outside Room. The title of this last section of the book is ‘Living’, and both Jack and Ma discover who they are and who they want to be. Both have had their development stunted by their captivity and must now pull away from their reliance on each other in order to be strong, independent individuals with a clear sense of self. Ma is not the same person she was when she went into Room and is concerned that she has become reclusive and content with Jack’s company only. However, as Dr Clay and Noreen tell her, she ‘had to change to survive’ and ‘wouldn’t have stayed the same’ even if she hadn’t been imprisoned. Because Room was the place in which Jack’s identity was formed and Ma experienced life-changing events, the visit to their former prison at the very end of the book is a significant moment for both. Ma sees Room from the outside in daylight, and although she is distressed, she rises to the occasion because she knows Jack needs this experience. Jack realises that he can let go of his former emotional attachment to Room. The leave, as free as they can be in body and spirit, and ready to move on with the next chapter of self-discovery. | **The ending of A Doll’s House also shows us that it is essential to stand alone and not to shape an identity around another person.**  Nora learns, over the course of the novel, that a person who is not true to themselves will never be truly valued.  **This is a more negative view of identity than in Room because Ma and Jack love one another dearly at every stage, even if they have not yet become all they could be.**  Since her early childhood, Nora has been the person others wanted her to be but has never been loved for herself as a result. She tells Torvald that when she lived with her father, he ‘told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the face, because he would not have like it’. Nora brought this same approach to her marriage and now sees she has ‘made nothing’ of her life and has never been happy. Despite creating a persona that she believes will meet the needs and expectations of her husband, Nora is betrayed when Torvald turns on her in fury on discovering that she is being blackmailed because of a secret loan she took out in order to save him from ill health. The realisation rocks Nora’s sense of self and, even though Torvald forgives her on learning that Krogstad has withdrawn his threat of blackmail, Nora decides to leave the man she now views as a stranger.  **Like Ma and Jack, Nora has been living a restricted life, albeit metaphorical in her case.**  Still, the result has been similar: Nora has been unable to develop to her full potential. At the end of the text, she realises that she can no longer love her husband, as he has shown that he puts himself first and foremost and loves her only when she conforms to his idea of what a perfect wife should be. **As in Room there is some uncertainty about the future.** We don’t know how successful Nora will be in her quest to stand on her own two feet and establish an identity separate from that of her husband, but her spirited denunciation of Torvald’s treatment of her gives us hope. Our final sight of Nora is as she walks out the door of the Helmer home, leaving behind her husband and children. Although this is a heart-wrenching decision, it is essential if Nora is to have a chance of living life on her own terms. Nora admits that she does not know exactly what she is going to do when she leaves Torvald, but she is ready to face the challenge nonetheless.  **As the door closes behind her, we feel that for the first time, Nora, like Jack and Ma, has the chance of a meaningful, fulfilling life and a better future. Sadly, Nora has to leave her family in order to find herself, while Jack and Ma continue their voyage of self-discovery together.** |

The theme of identity is presented differently in each text

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| **ROOM** | **A Doll’s House** |
| Room presents us with an original but disturbing view of the theme of identity. It shows us how difficult it is to develop an identity without being part of a wider community. Jack grows up and forms his sense of self in an entirely artificial environment until he is five years of age. He believes the tiny world in which he lives is the real world and everything else is ‘outside’. Emma Donoghue explores what it is that makes us who we are and shapes our sense of self. Ma and Jack’s identities are intertwined. Everyone needs a sense of purpose to give their life meaning, and Jack’s birth – albeit in horrific circumstances - provides that for Ma. In the five years since Jack’s arrival, Ma has shaped her identity around being the best mother to him that she can be, under the circumstances. She tells Jack that before he was born, she was sunk in abject misery and cried until she ‘didn’t have any tears left’. Later in the novel, Ma explains to a television interviewer that Jack was everything to her during her captivity and that when he was born, she felt alive again because she mattered to someone. We never learn Ma’s real name because that is all she is to Jack for a long time: his mother. That she might have another identity and be someone’s daughter, sister or friend is shocking to him when he and Ma eventually escape, and Ma too struggles to regain a sense of herself and her place in the world. Jack is equally shocked to discover that he is not the centre of a small universe but just one among many. However, he is at least young enough to learn and to develop a sense of self that is not connected to Room and his overly-dependent relationship with Ma. Still, his journey of self-discovery is far from straightforward. Jack may be adaptable, but he has been damaged by his time in Room and is far behind a typical five-year-old in many ways. Now Jack has to discover not only who he is but also learn to recognise that others are different to him physically and emotionally. | **In A Doll’s House, the situation is far less restrictive than that in Room, but Nora is also prevented from realising her full potential.**  In her case, it is a decision to appear as obliging and pleasing as she can that ultimately leads Nora to see that she has been living a lie.  **Ibsen initially presents us with a far more pleasant and seemingly happy domestic situation than that in Room.**  Nora, it appears, is happily married and the mother of three charming children. **However, this is merely a façade and, while her life is much easier that Ma and Jack’s it is also restrictive. Torvald is nothing like as abusive as Old Nick, but he is equally convinced that he should be in absolute control.**  He wants to be in charge of everything in the Helmer household, from the way money is spent to Nora’s indulging her sweet tooth. Torvald’s use of the word ‘my’ when referring to his wife – ‘my little skylark’ and ‘my little squirrel’ shows that he believes Nora is his to manipulate and that she should not have an identity of her own.  **While Emma Donoghue shows us a blatantly cruel and obviously appalling setting in which her characters must struggle to find a sense of self, Ibsen is more subversive.**  He presents us with a seemingly idyllic situation but gradually reveals how damaging coercive control can be, particularly when it is disguised as loving care. Torvald treats Nora like an errant child and expects her to obey his wishes and seek his approval and permission for every action, all the while supressing her individuality and independent identity. How we view this presentation of the theme depends on our attitude. At the time the play was written, audiences would have been inclined to believe that Torvald, as the man of the house, was in the right. Indeed, such was the fuss when the play was released a German theatre company changed the ending to have Nora remain with Torvald. Ibsen was shocked and disgusted when he learned of this amendment to the most important and significant moment in the play, calling it ‘a barbaric outrage’. The whole point of the play was to show how a seemingly perfect scenario could nevertheless restrict a person’s ability to find and express their true sense of self. |