

The Rise of An Individual: Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Reinterpreted

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to interpret Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as a play where the author portrays a human being who encounters a situation which makes her aware of the position she is in, who then confronts the new person she will be through self discovery. The characterization of Nora is discussed to show Ibsen's purpose behind writing the play. By examining the historical background of the play and some of Ibsen's letters, I've tried to find support for the view that Ibsen truly believes in the freedom of the individual, irrespective of the gender identity. I've, therefore, focused on the fact that there is not much difference between a feminist text and a text which vindicates individual freedom. That Ibsen's aesthetic concerns are sourced by a tragic perception about the human life is also what I've shown.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) portrays a legendary character, Nora, whose decision to leave her family, and along with it the comfort and status, makes her a distinct individual who revolts against the false conventions of society. Thus, Ibsen, a modernist to the bone, wrote about issues where his characters face a situation and come across a sudden realization to rejuvenate themselves in a new way to achieve freedom and individual entity. Nora is a character who was happy and content with her life, but who hides a secret to her husband Torvald, and suddenly gets horrified by the presence of Krogstad, the person who has the document to her committing an act of forgery. Later, she discovers that her values and the values of society do not match, and Torvald stands there as the spokesman of that society which she must confront to choose an unknown life to educate herself.

Before discussing the play itself, we can see in Ibsen the making of the writer who wrote a letter to Bjornstjerne in January, 1865, asking a question: "Do you remember 'The tragic Muse'? No statue has taught me so much as this. I verily believe that it has revealed to me what Greek tragedy was....those eyes, that look inward and yet through and far beyond the outward object they are fixed on, such was Greek tragedy" (*Ibsen's Selected Plays: A Norton Critical Edition* 450) 'The Tragic Muse' seems to have played its invaluable catalytic role in the making of Ibsen, as he produced a play with the same tragic intensity: *A Doll's House*. His other letters showed the same zeal for individual freedom as he wrote about his frustration in a letter to George Brandes (1870 Dec): "At last they have taken

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Rome away from us human beings...Where shall we take refuge now?...I must confess that the only thing I love about liberty is the struggle for it; I care nothing for the possession of it" (*Plays* 451). In the same letter he wrote: "They want only their own special revolutions-...What is all-important is the revolution of the spirit of man" (*Plays* 451-452).

Stockholm, an individualist, who was an inspiration for Ibsen, declares, "The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone" (*Aspects of Modern Drama* 20). A letter to George Brandes (1871 February) by Ibsen shows the same spirit: "Now there is absolutely no reasonable necessity for the individual to be a citizen. On the contrary- the state is the curse of the individual" (*Play* 451-452). Individualism is the church and the state must be supplemented by individualism in the family. This is the significance of *A Doll's House*. Nora must break with the institution of marriage when she finds it incompatible with her free development. The idea is to regenerate the individual, and the society will take care of itself.

Other critics who do not want to see Ibsen as a feminist playwright argue that he wrote beyond sexes. To free Ibsen from the erroneous reputation, his plays have been called 'plays of issues'. He was a poet of the truth of the human soul. Richard Gilman says that Nora's exit from the doll house has long been the principal international symbol for women's issues, including many that far exceed the confines of her small world (Gilman 14).

Robert Brustein writes, "Ibsen was completely indifferent to the woman question except as a metaphor for individual freedom" (Meyer 417). Halvdan Koht, author of the definitive Norwegian Ibsen life, says in summary: "Little by little the topical controversy died away; what remained was the work of art with its demand for truth for every human relation" (Meyer 323). Like angels Nora has no sex and Ibsen wants her to be Everyman.

During the play's performance the ending was being altered in some productions. But Ibsen condemned this change as "barbaric violence" (Meyer 435). He also wrote: "At the time when *A Doll's House* was quite new, I was obliged to give my consent to an alteration of the last scene.....At that time I had no choice. I was entirely unprotected by the copyright law" (*Ibsen's Selected Plays* 436)

With the above critical paradigm in mind suggesting that Ibsen was more of a humanist than a feminist, we can now examine some of Ibsen's notes when he was thinking of portraying a modern female protagonist. In October 1878, he sketched some ideas for what he called 'the modern-day tragedy'. Those notes run like this:

There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in the man and a completely other one in the woman. They do not understand one another; but the woman is judged in practical life

according to the man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man.
(Plays 477)

Ibsen was thinking of a play in which a central character would be a woman. To create a modern-day female protagonist, Ibsen would use the disparity between her innate sense of right and her society's laws which would lead to her dilemma. However, Ibsen indicated that this contemplated female protagonist would not have the requisite purposive vision to be a heroic figure:

The wife in the play finally doesn't know which way to turn in regard to what is right or wrong; innate feelings on the one hand and belief in the authority on the other bring about a complete confusion.
(Plays 477)

Ibsen's notes continue to outline the conflict between two kinds of moral law and conscience, between feminine with love as its highest value, and the masculine, with its social and legal conventions. The conflict leads to depression and loss of faith on the part of the female and it will end in 'desperation, struggle, and destruction' (Plays 477). Ibsen, then, ultimately would embrace an entirely different fundamental premise. Retaining a female protagonist, he created a play based on the premise that though they traditionally inhabit different realms of the social and legal world, males and females demonstrate no essential difference in their spiritual make up..

By the use of the tarantella dance as the occasion that symbolises Nora's disapproval of Torvald, Ibsen then proceeds to map out Nora's journey into freedom. Nora dances the tarantella, a dance of her own self expression whose increasingly wild execution mightily displeases Torvald mightily. The tarantella infuriated Torvald by its abandon and deviation from his careful teaching. The dance also serves as the first point in the play where Nora doesn't obey, at least in some superficial way, Torvald's commands. With absolute bafflement he says, "I would have never believed it. You have forgotten everything I taught you" (81). The dance is the visual embodiment of Nora's response to a reality that lies completely outside Torvald's understanding.

The other device, used by Ibsen, is to eliminate all possible aspects of superiority from his character. Torvald is an ordinary man who has received his new appointment by working hard and by only taking legal cases that would be certain to cast a favorable light on his reputation. He is not motivated by abstract ethical goals; his dismissal of Krogstad has nothing to do with eliminating untrustworthy employees. Just because Krogstad uses the familiar form of address which is an intolerable embarrassment to Torvald who seeks to maintain an immaculate public image, Torvald takes the action against Krogstad.

Another scene that helps Nora to become aware about her position is when Torvald argues with her. Torvald's male egotism is played against Nora's

simplicity. Torvald sees Nora as nothing but his property. Torvald now says since he has forgiven her, "she has become, in sort of a double sense, his possession; he has brought her into the world anew; she is in a way both his wife and child as well" (100). The egotism of proprietorship replaces any potential claim to ethical or aesthetic superiority. This "trajectory of Torvald's descent into mundane egotism" (*Plays* 482) is nowhere so clearly evidenced as in his ecstatic response upon Krogstad's return of the forged document. Torvald says: "Nora, I'm saved!"(104).

Nevertheless Ibsen's skill shows most deftly in making Nora fundamentally transform from essentially a female into a human. In the play, Nora is "first and foremost a human being"; her actions, thoughts, and ideals are not gender-specific (83). Ibsen also explains the reasons of her childish behaviour towards Torvald. He patronizingly teases her about the cat having destroyed her efforts at preparing surprise Christmas decorations, not knowing or failing to realize that in actuality she had been doing paid copy-work. In Act I, she explains to Mrs. Linden why he hasn't been told of the loan: "Torvald with his manly pride—how embarrassing and humiliating it would be for him to know that he owed something to me. It would entirely disrupt the relationship between us; our lovely, happy home would no longer be what it is now" (44).

Nora is fully aware of her practiced self-effacement and her self awareness is revealed to Mrs. Linden: that someday Nora might tell Torvald her big secret that she borrowed money and thereby saved his life, someday, "many years from now, when I am no longer as pretty as now. Don't laugh at that! I mean, naturally when Torvald no longer feels as good about me as now; when he no longer gets pleasure from me dancing for him and my dressing up and reciting. Then it might be good to have something in reserve" (44). Nora presents a childish and self-effacing posture towards Torvald in order to achieve her goals. This scene proves that Nora has this self awareness as the wife of Torvald but the space to express it was not there.

In a scene with Krogstad we see her thoughts that can be related to a general human being rather than to a female. Nora's suicidal thoughts are the result of human, not feminine, desperation. Ibsen uses a lengthy dialogue showing how identical Krogstad's and Nora's thoughts are, and how desperate they are:

Krogstad: Therefore, if you are coming up with one or another wild resolution.

Nora: So I am.

Krogstad: If you are thinking of running away from hearth and home.

Nora: So I am!

Krogstad: Or you are thinking of that which is worse.

Nora: How did you know that?

Krogstad: Then give up such thoughts.

Nora: How did you know that I am thinking of that?

Krogstad: Most of us think of that, at first. I thought of that too; but, Lord knows, I didn't have the courage.

Nora (flatly): I don't either (A *Doll's House* 77)

This dialogue mutually sympathetic intertwines the male and female thoughts of human despair. Though they are fierce antagonists, they reach a momentary communion "on the basis of their common human experience" (*Plays* 485).

Love is another human feeling that Nora is mostly governed by, and the fact of facing death is one of the understandings of human experience shared by Rank and Nora. Love is considered as the highest ideal by Nora, but when Torvald's assertion of love proves to be sheer rhetoric, it is Rank who provides the confirmation that Nora's conception of love is not simply a construct of a feminine mind, but is to be taken seriously as a human ideal too. Ideal love is a shared, supremely valued concept of the human conscience for both Nora and Rank.

It seems that Ibsen is obsessed by the dilemma of how to maintain the integrity of the individual under the impact of the prevailing social atmosphere. Ibsen himself says:

A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view. (Draft for *A Doll's House*, Vol XII 91)

Ibsen believes that the good of the individual is identical with the good of the society. He is a true liberal. Goethe has foreseen that the individual would come to feel increasingly the limitation caused by adjustment to social conditions, but he has not anticipated the frustrations demonstrated by Ibsen, who formulates the predicament of the modern individual. Nora breaks off a relationship in which husband and wife could educate neither each other nor the children to live together equably.

Modern society is not a human society, but it is only a society of males. When she ceases to be her husband's doll and sets out to be herself, she also must sacrifice her children, and the reputation she has. She must give all or nothing. One concern that remains undiminished throughout Ibsen's work is the importance of freedom and self-realization. George Brandes once wrote, "...new ideas which were on the point of manifesting themselves publicly but were not yet perceived by others, had been preoccupying and indeed tormenting him" (*A Doll's House*, Introduction 4).

In a letter to George Brandes (September, 1871) Ibsen wrote: "There is no way in which you can benefit society more than by coining the metal you have in yourself...There are actually moments when the whole history of the world appears to me like one great shipwreck, and the only important thing seems to be to save one's self" (*Plays* 454-455).

Thus, we see the curtain rises, Nora comes in, humming gaily—a happy woman—a happy mother, for with her comes a Christmas tree. It is a charming room. And it is a charming family. We meet the happy couple arguing about money. But this jovial atmosphere turns gloomy by Torvald's affirmation of the ideal he sets for the society, "No borrowing! No Debts" (32-33). Nora loves to dream of having "lots of money" and to have a time when she needs not "to worry about things" (38). These traits show her love for life and vivacity. She bursts with joy and declares, "...what a wonderful thing it is to live and to be happy" (40). Mrs. Linden comes with a sharp contrast. Nora is happy, Mrs. Linden is "downcast and hesitant" (38); she is thin and pale, and looks much older than Nora, though they are of the same age. Mrs. Linden, unlike Nora, perceives her life as "inexpressibly empty" (40). Nora shares the "great thing" (41) of her life. She doesn't find it "rash" (43) to borrow money without the consent of her husband, especially when it is a matter of saving Torvald's life. At the same time she is aware of her husband's egotism and she knows it would be "painful and humiliating" (44) for him with his "manly self respect" (44) to know that he owes something to Nora.

Nora finds it "splendid" to work and earn money and she feels like "a man" (44-45). The frustration is still there when she is not sure "where to turn" (45). Nora waits for the time when she will be "free" (45) from her family with "the spring" and "the blue sky" (45). She affirms her love for life again: "what a wonderful thing it is to live and to be happy" (46). Being unaware of the unavoidable clutch of society she defies it: "What do I care for your tiresome society?" (48). Nora wishes to say "damn it all" (45) questioning all ideals Torvald holds precious. She considers the secret as her "joy and pride" (54).

But Krogstad's threat makes her feel shrunk and to add more to the fear, Torvald tells her that in an "atmosphere of lies" home life is "poisoned and contaminated" (60). She has the fear of something destructive coming: "Worst things might happen" (62). Torvald does not want to be a "laughing stock" (68) to the society. He promises to "bear the whole burden" (69) but fails to do so at the end. To share the burden as "man and wife" (69) was the promise but is not fulfilled. The anticipation to save Nora by trying "body and soul" (96) is mere romantic fantasy. Torvald outbursts in anger and calls her "hypocrite, liar, and an unprincipled woman" who has destroyed his "happiness" and "future" (97). He takes the decision to live under the same roof, without any "outward change."

and not to give the charge of the children to Nora only for saving them from the "the ruins" (98).

As the second letter comes, "the moment of terror" (99) for Torvald is gone and he says that he has forgiven her. With this forgiveness, Torvald believes Nora has become "his property in a double sense" (99). By this time Nora has begun to "understand fully" (97) and says that they must "come to a final settlement" (100). She realizes that in their eight years of marriage they have never talked anything "serious" (101). She has had "a great injustice done" (101) to herself. She was called "doll-child" (101) by her father and then she was passed into Torvald's "hands" (101). On one point she accuses Torvald that it is his fault that her life "has come to nothing" (101).

A human being, earlier treated as a "doll-child" and "doll-wife," now understands that the "playtime is over" and it is the time "for education" (102). She takes an unyielding decision as she says, "I am leaving you," because she knows Torvald is not the person who could "teach" (102) her. One by one she rejects all pleadings by Torvald based on reminding her of her duties towards her children, his privilege of not allowing her to leave, and her "holiest duties" (103). But she now knows her duty towards herself is the first duty that she should perform.

She counters Torvald's insistence on her being "a wife and mother" (103) by saying that "...before all else I am a human being" (103). Religion is something she will think about and will examine whether it is "right" for her (103). Her conscience by which she spared her dying father and saved her husband's life is not right through the lenses of society, so she declares: "I must make up my mind which is right—Society or I" (104).

Nora rejects him outright as she thinks he is not the kind of person with whom she can share her life. Nora releases Torvald from all duties. She believes "there must be perfect freedom on both sides" (106). The reverberating sound of a heavy door closing ends the play where readers/audience become aware of a defying human being emerging.

The same guilt of forgery makes Krogstad "an outcast" (56) in society. She doesn't know that this society does not count "motives" (56). She calls it a "very bad law" (56). She discloses her motive and says, "I did it for love" (57). With the discovery of "forgery" life appears to her as "foolish and meaningless" (57). Rank also shows his desperation: "I'm running down hill" (70). He talks about the inheritance of moral and physical illness where everybody has to pay the "retribution" (71). Talking with Rank she comes out with her frustration "...with Torvald it's the same as with papa" (75).

Mrs. Linden thoroughly contrasts Nora, but helps to develop the plot: "Helmer must know everything; there must be an end to this unhappy secret. These two

must come to a full understanding," (88) she says. But Helmer could not deal with all "the shifts and subterfuges" (88).

From the beginning of the play, Nora perceives that Torvald has faults such as egotism and jealousy, but, understanding that "miracles don't happen everyday," she discounts these faults as being superficial, not essential. And it goes without saying that he gives in immediately to the blackmailing and focuses all his concerns on how to preserve appearances in the eyes of the world. There is never the slightest hint of any self-sacrifice to protect Nora.

But it is not this evidence Nora cites in describing what makes Torvald a stranger to her. He is someone with whom she is no longer able to associate herself because of his hypocrisy. "After your terror was over," she says, "and when all danger was past, then for you it was as though nothing at all had happened. I was, precisely as before, your little songbird, your doll, about whom you had to be twice as protective from now on" (98). If Torvald's first duty isn't to her, then Nora's first duty is to herself.

By the end of Act III, Nora has rationally taught herself to come out of the reality defined by Torvald. She then sets out to define reality for herself. In the last act Ibsen through her makes the declaration more explicitly: "I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, just the same as you are" (103).

The essential definition of a person is humanness, not gender, and that what causes things to appear otherwise are social constructs. The theme of finding one's true vocation recurs throughout Ibsen's life and work, but its full import is revealed only if it seems as part of a larger problem: not merely a subjective quest for personal realization (Fjelde 2).

When Ibsen entered upon the scene of modern drama, he found it impossible to restore the idealistic demand of absolute truth, and he was too critical to accept the traditional code of ethics as an adequate instrument for the regulation of human relations. His aim was to establish "a new truth," which imposes a much greater responsibility upon the individual than submission to the generally accepted codes and norms (*Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays* 19).

As Torvald's attitude towards Nora shows, the external and internal obstacles have turned Torvald into a mere product of society. He is not even an anti-hero. He is too conceited to realize that truthfulness for him is no more than a social formality and that deception and fraud become a problem for him only when his honor and position are at stake.

In the play, the first blow to Nora's happiness falls when the maid lets in Krogstad. Clearly his presence worries her; his presence has chilled her. It is important to grasp this first hint of unpleasant elements which will be followed by another kind of unpleasantness in the person of Dr. Rank.

NORA. Look here, Doctor Rank—you know you want to live.

RANK. Certainly. However wretched I may feel, I want to prolong the agony as long as possible. All my patients are like that. And so are those who are morally diseased; one of them, and a bad case too, is at this very moment Helmer is talking to just such amoral incurable. (47)

This speech equates physical illness with moral illness; so that from this point onwards, Ibsen can use physical illness as a symbol of moral illness. At this early point we are given to believe that Nora has been very fortunate in her sheltered existence. But Krogstad comes, and the terror unfolds itself, because Torvald detests borrowing. Krogstad accuses Nora of forging her dying father's signature to get the money, and threatens to sue her.

Mere assertion that her doll's house values are right and the values of the outside world are wrong is useless. Nora's situation worsens, and she now believes that she is corrupt because of her deceitfulness; she is terrified to think that she may corrupt and poison her own children with a moral corruption as foul as Rank's physical sickness. In Act I Nora still tries to convince herself: "Corrupt my children!--Poison my home!--It's not true! It can never, never be true!" (81). Now she faces two terror-threats of legal action and certainty of moral disaster. She understands at one point that her deceit will ruin not only herself through public disgrace, but her children and her beloved husband will be engulfed, too. This is the last straw. Torvald's self-sacrifice would be wonderful, but at the same time, terrible. At all costs it must be prevented.

Rank suffers for his father's sin, Krogstad's children have been corrupted by their father's moral ambiguity, Nora feels that she will ruin her own children and poison her home. Ibsen is showing us here the bad results of her upbringing, first by her father and then by her husband. She can get her own way with men by cajoling, by teasing and she has learned no other way of self-respecting. Like the tarantella's victim, she can only dance a mad dance in a last, vain effort to expel the poison. The last act opens, and it is a nightmare. The scene of reconciliation between Krogstad and Mrs. Linden tells us in advance the painful void into which Nora consigns herself at the end of the play as she is going to lose all.

Helmer does not perform a miracle when he reads the black-mailing letter. He explodes into a vulgar rage. He calls his wife a hypocrite, a liar, a criminal; he throws her father into her face. Later with the arrival of the second letter comes a surprise for Nora as Helmer says with sickening egotism, "I am saved! Nora, I am saved" (100). Nora realizes numbly that her life has been an elaborate make-belief. She discards her illusion and appears in her every day dress to symbolize her entry into a world of cold fact and commonsense. Helmer's words have made her bitterly aware that the poison did not originate with her: "I have had great injustice done me, Torvald, first by father, and then by you" (101).

It is the men who are responsible for condemning Nora into a stultifying life. It is the doll's house attitude that is the corruption which must not be transmitted. She must go into a hostile world and educate herself. Nora leaves the play as Mrs. Linden enters it--lonely, unhappy, with no one to love or live for, much older. Ibsen has written a modern play about a modern woman in a modern situation. He adds a new dimension to it by suggesting that society works upon Nora like some dreadful, hidden, and inexorable disease. Nora's consistent fight against her situation turns her into "a modern hero" (*Essays* 108).

But the debate goes on whether the purpose of Ibsen was to write for female liberty or to portray a human being. In the essay "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen," Meyer writes:

A Doll House is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine rights of Kings, or *Ghosts* about syphilis...Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and strive to become that person. (416)

Nora's conflict represents something other than or something more than woman's. In an article commemorating the half century of Ibsen's death R. M. Adams explains that "*A Doll's House* represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes" (Meyer 416).

As a satirist Ibsen does not satirize manners or the foibles of human nature, but he reserves his irony for certain conceptions or ideals that men have erected to govern their conduct. "No tyranny is greater," says Ibsen, "than the despotism of a false ideal" (*Aspects* 14). In *A Doll's House*, he applies his satire to conventional conceptions of marriage. The final action of Nora can be seen as a declaration of individual liberty opposed to the restraints and duties enjoined by the most fundamental of institutions.

Since *A Doll's House*, modern drama has delivered far more brutal, and brutalized, shocks to its audience than a wife walking out on a husband and three small children. The fact that Ibsen's play can still grip, stir and unsettle stems not so much from what happens as from the depth of understanding on the part of the central character who discovers herself in an unknown zone but more matured than ever. Like Nora, other characters in the play share almost the same realization about life though not as radical as Nora's.

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