

How patriarchal ideology impacts on us

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Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men categorically hold more power than women. They occupy powerful positions in society and their actions and decisions carry more authority than those of women. Patriarchy is embedded in society's institutions and the ways in which we interact with each other, even to this day. Feminism has greatly accelerated in the last century, as advocates of gender equality have fought for change and the advancement of women's rights. Patriarchy is heavily represented in English literature, which reflects the realities of people during the times those works were produced. This paper will focus on the plays *A Doll's House* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, both of which bear extensive representation of patriarchal ideology. These plays are primarily about the relationships between two men and their wives, in the context of the society they live in. The stories are separated by many decades – Henrik Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879 Norway, while Tennessee Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* in New Orleans, 1947. Though separated by time and culture, patriarchal ideology is represented through the strong and dominant male characters, Torvald Helmer and Stanley Kowalski, their submissive and objectified wives, Nora and Stella, and the dramatic conclusions to both stories with regard to societal expectations for men and women. This paper will examine the similarities between these stories, characters and the world around them, and show how deeply rooted patriarchy can influence continued belief in those ideals.

Patriarchal ideology is heavily depicted through the use of strong, domineering male characters in both *A Doll's House* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* in very similar ways. Torvald Helmer and Stanley Kowalski are

introduced in a manner that emphasizes their masculinity, power and physical and social strength. In *A Doll's House*, Torvald has been recently appointed bank manager, a high-status position that seems fitting to his strong character. Throughout the play, Torvald keeps himself busy with work, and the importance of his position is emphasized repeatedly. He is regarded with respect by other members of the community, and this is very evident in his manner and interactions with others. In the opening scene of the play, we see the first interaction between himself and Nora, who he refers to as his “ little squirrel”, “ little lark” and “ little spendthrift” (Ibsen, Act 1, pp. 1-3). During this conversation, it is clear that Torvald regards his wife in the same way he would a child – helpless, impulsive and dependent on him for guidance, money and protection. He admonishes her for eating sweets and spending money carelessly, even though she has not actually been unwise with the money he provided her. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley's character is presented as being very macho, aggressive and domineering. He is described as being animalistic at more than one point. In the first scene, Stanley enters, and “ animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes” (Williams, Act 1, Scene 1, pg. 24). He is portrayed as having a commanding presence, both with women and men. It is clear from the way he is described that Stanley objectifies women: “ He sizes women up at a glance, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them” (Williams, Act 1, Scene 1, pg. 24). Both Torvald and Stanley control their wives, albeit in different ways. Torvald's control appears to be in the form of financial support and his role as the provider, with his wife as homemaker. Stanley also financially supports his wife, but unlike Torvald, is prone to fits of rage and is implied to

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hit his wife. In general, he displays a lack of respect for women and uses violence to express himself and his point of view. The use of coercion and violence to control women demonstrate the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology, as men structurally hold more power. Women are expected to be passive, while men are expected to be the decision makers and always get their way. Patriarchy creates a culture in which gender norms perpetuate expectations of male dominance and female subordination (Wilcox, 2015).

The plays continue to bear similarity in terms of patriarchal ideology through the submissive and objectified wives of the two male characters, Nora Helmer and Stella Kowalski. In most interactions with her husband up until the end of the play, Nora is portrayed as seemingly foolish, impulsive and childlike. Torvald belittles her constantly, which she accepts without protest. It soon becomes evident to the reader that Nora is not as silly as she would have her husband believe, and is in fact quite smart and resourceful. In Act One, Nora reveals to her old friend Christine that she incurred debt at a time when Torvald was unable to work, and she looks forward to paying off this debt. She describes wanting to be “ free from care; to be able to play and romp with the children, to be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it” (Ibsen, Act 1, pg. 13). Through this statement, we can see that her idea of freedom is in line with patriarchal ideals as opposed to reflecting wishes and desires to do with her own independence. She understands that her position in society and in her marriage is that of being insubordinate to men and her husband. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella is suppressed by her husband through his rage, belligerence and violence. She constantly runs after him, trying to get

him to behave appropriately in multiple situations. In Act One, Scene Two, Stella tries to pacify her husband when he becomes increasingly agitated, convinced that Blanche is lying to them about the state of the family plantation (Williams, pp. 31-35). Stella quietly admonishes him, trying to get him to be quiet and even calls him an idiot. At first, Stella appears to be more authoritative than Nora, as she argues back with Stanley and criticizes his behaviour consistently. She even leaves for a short time in Scene Three after he hits her, seeking refuge at a neighbour's house. But when Stanley cries out for her "with heaven-splitting violence" from the street, she quietly returns to him (Williams, Act 1, Scene 3, pp. 66-68). The next day, when questioned by Blanche, Stella calmly denies that her husband's violence is a problem in their marriage, and tells Blanche that Stanley's actions weren't serious, and "when men are drinking and playing poker, anything can happen" (Williams, Act 1, Scene 3, pg. 78). Stella's denial of the power imbalance in her marriage reflects the patriarchal ideals of the times, similar to Nora's understanding of her position and opportunities as being lesser than those of her husband.

Both stories are brought to dramatic conclusions within the context of patriarchy, society and expectations for men and women, although in very different ways. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella goes into labour and is kept at the hospital overnight, leaving Stanley at home alone with Blanche. Tensions between the two have been escalating over the summer, as neither like or respect the other. At the end of a heated exchange between the two, Stanley physically overpowers Blanche and rapes her (Williams, Scene 10, p. 162). The act of rape in this case can be perceived as a manifestation of

patriarchal ideals. Stanley wishes to control and subdue Blanche, who has been living in his home, drinking his liquor and challenging his authority during her stay. By raping her, he communicates that he has power and strength over her, and is able to act on his wishes without fear of punishment or judgment from society. These actions tie into patriarchal ideology, wherein indiscriminate sexual behaviour and sexual promiscuity of men are tolerated on the assumption that sexual aggressiveness and inability to control are natural to men (Kochuthara, 2011). Following the rape, the story comes to a morose conclusion where Stella takes her husband's side and believes him over her sister, and chooses to send her sister off to a psychiatric institution. She is quoted as saying, " I could not believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (Williams, Scene 11, p. 165). This further reflects patriarchal society, as Stella chooses to ignore the validity of her sister's experience and continues to excuse her husband's actions. *A Doll's House*, in contrast, ends in a very different way. Nora comes to realize that she has had no autonomy her entire life, and has been at the mercy of men – first her father and now, her husband. In a speech that concludes the play, Nora for the first time speaks openly to Torvald about her feelings. She says, " I have existed merely to perform tricks for you. Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as I was father's doll-child" (Ibsen, Act 3, pg. 66). For the first time, Nora discovers the impact of patriarchal oppression on her independence as a female, and decides she will put up with it no longer. She tells Torvald she is leaving him – and even though her future will be filled with uncertainty, she chooses to pursue her own independence over continuing to live in her husband's shadow. Nora's actions reflect her courage and strength, in that

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she is able to stand up in the face of societal expectations and make a decision about what is best for her.

Patriarchy has been a cornerstone element of human society for generations, in almost every culture across the world. Basic biological differences in terms of strength and power have resulted in the creation of social constructs around gendered behaviour, with very different sets of expectations for men and women. These expectations have become a part of patriarchal ideology for centuries, and are reflected in literary works produced throughout this time. In the modern world, the traditional idea of patriarchy is fading, as advocates for women's rights continue to make great strides in terms of gender equality and creating an even playing field for both sexes. It is important for us to understand the long-standing effects of patriarchy and to recognize the effects of gendered expectations that result in a power imbalance between men and women. It is only through understanding and recognizing social behaviour that enables men and represses women that we can begin to create and advocate for change, so that future generations can experience true equality in every sense.