

How does Ibsen use motifs throughout the play to emphasise change in Nora's character...



Henrik Ibsen in 'A Doll's House' written in 1879 uses the repetition of motifs throughout the course of the play to emphasise how the characters go through a series of changes in their characteristics and relationships. Ibsen makes use of motifs such as a Christmas tree, fancy dress, macaroons and doors to highlight changes throughout the play. We see how many of the motifs stress how important Helmer sees appearance to be in order to have a good life; we see Nora complying with his rules. However, by the end of the play the reader can see the changes in Nora and Helmer that have taken place as the way that Ibsen uses the motifs has changed. In the exposition of the play we see Ibsen use the motif of the Christmas tree to represent the Helmers family household.

At the beginning of the play the Christmas tree helps represent the family unity and celebration within the household. When the Christmas tree is first brought into the house Nora makes a big deal about its appearance: "The children mustn't see it before I've decorated it this evening" <sup>1</sup> By using the motif of the Christmas tree, Ibsen is showing how important appearance, celebration and family life are to Nora and Helmer. The children seeing the Christmas tree before it is decorated would mean that they would be exposed to an undressed, plain tree which is synonymous to the ugly, bare truth which is what Nora is hiding from throughout the play. Throughout the course of the play Nora allows herself to be sculpted by Torvald into the beautiful wife that he wants her to be, Ibsen uses the motif of the Christmas tree to symbolise Nora, how she is an object of Torvald's and how she changes throughout the play. Torvald often even refers to her as his "Squirrel" <sup>2</sup>, "Skylark" <sup>3</sup> and "Songbird" <sup>4</sup>. At the exposition of the play

stage directions tell us that Nora says 'I'll wrap up the notes in pretty gold paper and hang them on the Christmas tree'<sup>5</sup> This quote is fairly ironic as Nora is dressing the tree that Ibsen uses to represent her being dressed up by Helmer throughout the play.

The stage directions show how Nora at the start of the play is still willing to be dressed up by Torvald in order to make him happy however this changes at the start of Act 2, when we start to see the decline in Nora's psychological, Ibsen uses the motif of the Christmas tree to symbolise this again in the stage directions by saying "The Christmas Tree is in the corner by the piano, stripped of its ornaments with..... dishevelled branches'<sup>6</sup>, this shows Nora's gradual decline in both her psychological state and her willingness to be Torvald's doll.

By the start of Act 3 the Christmas tree is no longer mentioned at all, showing how Nora has changed from the beginning of the play and how the tolerance of being Torvald's dolls is no longer there. The clothing that Ibsen uses can be seen to signify Nora's change throughout the course of the play; we can see Nora in three stages throughout the play simply by looking at her clothing. Firstly she appears in her outdoor clothes, then changes into her tarantella fancy dress costume and then reverts back into her outdoor clothing again. Read also about Ibsen uses the repetitive changes in her clothes to symbolise how she is changing as a character, the outdoor clothes she is wearing when she first enters the play and the fact that she is re-entering the house shows the state of her relationship with Torvald at the time. Nora's outdoor clothes signify where Nora really belongs, that she is a force of nature and she doesn't belong inside of Torvald's 'Doll House'.  
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During the course of the play she changes into her costumes that Torvald chooses for her showing that she loves him enough and is willing to keep him happy by letting him dress her up. The fancy dress that Nora wears helps show that Nora still loves Torvald as is willing to dress up for him and be his 'doll'<sup>7</sup>. Ibsen uses clothing to symbolise the exact moment that Nora and Torvald's relationship changes inside the play. "Yes Torvald, I've changed"<sup>8</sup> Literally these words mean that she has changed out of her fancy dress costumes back into normal clothes however they also signify how Nora's character has changed. As she has witnessed Torvald's reaction to him finding out about the forged signature she has realised that Torvald isn't the man that she thought he was.

She no longer loves him and therefore no longer willing to dress up for him in the fancy dress clothes, she has changed into her normal clothes symbolising how she is no longer his toy. In the denouement of the play Nora changes back into her outdoor clothes which signifies how she is no longer loves Torvald enough to allow herself to be treated like his toy. Similarly to the exposition of the play the outdoor clothes symbolise how she does not belong in the house and is instead, a force that is returning to natural world instead of the materialistic world that Torvald created for her inside of his 'dolls house'. He shows Nora's changes by showing how she used to be willing to dress up for him, pretending to be his doll, until the turning point in the play where Ibsen uses her clothing to clearly portray that she has lost her affection for him and that he wasn't the man she thought he was.

Another motif that Ibsen uses throughout the course of the play to emphasise change in Nora's character is what she classes as 'freedom'. This

definition varies throughout the play depending on Nora's state of mind and relationship within the household.

At the start of the play Nora agrees with Torvald as he says: " There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. " 9 The way that Nora agrees with the fact that there can be no freedom when debt is looming over her head shows that she thinks she will be free when all of her debt is paid off. This also shows how, at the exposition of the play she is reliant on Torvald; she even depends on him to define her own freedom. However, as the play develops the audience see Nora's definition of freedom change as she starts to deteriorate mentally. She begins to question whether she is free, or happy, in the ' dolls house' that Torvald has created for her and questions the way he treats her. This change in her definition shows how her relationship with Torvald is gradually deteriorating and she is beginning to find her own meaning to the word ' freedom'.

By the denouement of the play, Nora's definition has completely changed in comparison to what she believed at the exposition of the play. At the end of the play she says: " I'm not fitted to educate them. There's something else I must do first. I must educate myself. And you can't help me with that.

It's something I must do myself. That's why I'm leaving you. " 10 We see now that Nora has her own definition of freedom and that is outside of Torvald's house, without the obligation to him or to her children and only to pursue her own ambitions. The way that Ibsen uses this motif of the definition of

freedom helps the audience understand the growth and change in Nora's character throughout the play.

She goes from depending on Torvald in everything she does into being an independent woman. Through the use of this motif the audience gradually begins to see Nora find herself throughout the play and realises that she doesn't belong in Torvald's 'doll's house'. In conclusion, Ibsen uses various motifs in 'A Doll's House' throughout the play in order to emphasise change in Nora's character. Firstly the motif of the Christmas tree symbolises Nora and her relationship with Torvald.

The changes that the Christmas tree goes through are mirrored in the changes in Nora. As the Christmas tree deteriorates and finally disappears, so does Nora's willingness to put up with the way that Torvald treats her, her love for him. Secondly the motif of clothing and its emphasis throughout the play helped clearly show how Nora was willing to be Torvald's doll as she loved him so much. However, clothing also helped to symbolise the clear turning point in her love for him and her clothes change when her attitude towards Torvald changes and realises that he wasn't the man she thought he was. Lastly the motif of 'freedom' and how Nora chooses to define it throughout the play helps the audience see a clear change in Nora in the course of the play. Firstly she relies on Torvald to define her freedom for her as she was willing to do whatever he wanted, however by the end of the play after his betrayal towards her, she defines her own freedom and becomes an independent woman.

I think that Ibsen's use of motifs successfully emphasises the changes in Nora's character as they clearly allow the audience to see the contrast in Nora's character at the exposition and denouement of the play and how she has gone from being Torvald's 'doll' into discovering herself, leaving the household and becoming her own woman.