

The themes of
betrayal and
forgiveness in
paradise lost by john
milton and a doll...



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‘ Betrayal of trust in relationships do not deserve to be forgiven’ – In light of this view discuss the themes of betrayal and forgiveness in Milton’s Paradise Lost and Ibsen’s A Doll’s house

The theme of betrayal can be found at the heart of both Milton’s Paradise Lost and Ibsen’s A Doll’s House yet interestingly, the answer to whether these betrayals deserve to be forgiven has changed through time. Where Milton and Ibsen’s contemporary audiences have been shown to shun and refute female abandonment of their families, arguably, more modern audiences can recognise the importance of gender equality and as a result forgive the female characters in these texts. The betrayal that the male characters predominantly display in their relationships is their prioritising of honour and pride over the love for their wives. Yet, whilst in A Doll’s House Nora is unable to forgive this of her husband, in Paradise Lost, Adam does eventually provide the ‘ miracle of miracles’ and his union with Eve is rectified. It could be argued however, that Adam’s greatest sin is not the betrayal of his relationship with Eve, but his relationship with God, a betrayal which is ultimately unforgiveable and riddled with consequences in Milton’s text.

In both texts, the female protagonists betray the trust in their relationships by leaving their husbands in search of independence, knowledge and equality. In A Doll’s House, Nora leaves her husband and her children for arguably selfish reasons as she seeks independence and knowledge in the outside world: “ I must try and educate myself... I must stand quite alone.’ As in Milton’s context, in the 19th century, there were strict patriarchal expectations for female behaviour and as a result Ibsen’s presentation of a

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woman rejecting her 'duty' as a mother and a wife caused great outrage among his audience. Indeed, Niemann the actress for an 1880 German production of the play refused to perform the ending stating, 'I would never leave my children' and caused Ibsen to change the ending, an act which he later referred to as a 'barbarous outrage against the play.' Arguably however, whilst Ibsen's contemporary audience took issue with Nora's decision to leave her home, more modern audiences have been sympathetic to her struggle and forgive her actions. Bravard argued that 'the cause of Eve's fall lies with the husband that sanctioned her' and arguably, this rings true with *A Doll's House* too, where modern audiences struggle to blame Nora for what she is driven to do by her husband's behaviour and the patriarchal structures that restrict her life. These days, there is greater emphasis on individualism over the family unit and perhaps as a result of this, women today can identify with Nora's struggle ('I have another duty which is equally sacred [...] my duty towards myself') and thus forgive her for leaving her children, maybe even celebrating her decision to leave her husband. Certainly, it seems Ibsen was of this view, who has been referred to by many critics as a 'proto-feminist' who championed female independence through his writing. Yet, arguably, this would be a reductive interpretation of Ibsen's stance who himself said, 'I don't even know what women's rights are, I believe in human rights.' We see then, that where Ibsen's contemporary audience could not forgive Nora's betrayal of the trust in her relationship, like Ibsen, a modern audience is sympathetic to Nora's decision and understanding of the importance of gender equality. It could be argued then, that the true betrayal in this instance is not Nora's betrayal of Torvald but Ibsen's betrayal of the representation of his society. The play is founded <https://assignbuster.com/the-themes-of-betrayal-and-forgiveness-in-paradise-lost-by-john-milton-and-a-dolls-house-by-henrik-ibsen/>

on the story of real life Laura Keeler, who, after leaving her family was not able to achieve the same independence that Ibsen suggests Nora will find, but instead is placed in a mental institute by her husband and is publically disgraced. Arguably, then, Ibsen's society was not yet ready for the female strength and determination which features in *A Doll's House*, and where a more modern audience is able to empathise with Nora, the true story behind the play and the reaction from his contemporary audience represents the unforgiving society in which Ibsen was writing.

Equally, Eve is portrayed in *Paradise Lost* to betray the trust in her relationship through her desperation to 'stray' from Adam's side and consequently, 'from her husband's hand, her hand soft she withdrew.' Like Nora, Eve leaves her husband with herself in mind with a desire to be 'render[ed]' 'more equal', but where initially like Nora's it seems Eve's decision to leave her husband is based on a desire for equality, her contemplation on whether to keep 'the odds of knowledge in [her] power without co-partner' and desire to be 'sometime superior' arguably, make her actions somewhat less forgivable and more selfish. In Milton's society, in a time where women were very much considered subordinate to their husbands, Eve's desire to be 'superior' would have arguably been laughable. Milton himself believed that 'wives [were] to husbands as subjects were to king' and wrote extensively in his divorce tracts about the desired family structure ('who could be ignorant that man was created for woman and not woman for man') and so, although critics have argued that Milton, as an advocate for divorce and an individualist would be supportive of Eve's desire for independence, ultimately, it could be argued that Milton

along with his contemporary audience would not be able to forgive Eve's betrayal. Perhaps in reality, it would be more accurate to say his voice is represented by Adam's and his dismissive speech: 'bad woman'. On the other hand, as with *A Doll's House*, today's audience is able to relate to Eve and her power struggle as a woman constrained by the patriarchal parameters of society. Handle writes: 'it is not surprising she wanted to be "sometime superior" given that she had always been treated as an inferior.' It seems however, that where a modern audience is accustomed to a more gender equal society we, the reader is able to see the drastic consequences that living without equality would entail, and thus empathise with Eve's desire for power. Yet, Milton's contemporary society did not have that luxury, and as an audience completely unfamiliar to gender equality, it is perhaps understandable why Eve's consideration of superiority would be deemed so unfathomable and unforgiveable to them. We see then, that in both Milton and Ibsen's texts, women are condemned for leaving their husbands by their respective contemporary audiences, but where these critics cannot see passed these female acts of betrayal, modern audiences have been seen to empathise with Eve and Nora and their pursuit of independence and equality, and consequently have been more willing to forgive them.

As in both these texts the women are shown to betray the trust in their relationships, their husbands are too, yet their betrayal lies not in independence but in pride, where equally, they are shown to selfishly put their own desires first. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam betrays Eve by turning his back on her, and utterly blaming her for the fall: 'Out of my sight though serpent! That name best. Befits thee with him leagued.' During the 17th

century when Milton was writing, the vast majority of people were still fundamentally religious and so the use of the derogatory noun 'serpent' which aligns Eve with the devil, would have been inherently insulting. The juxtaposition between Adam's address of Eve before and after the fall serves to highlight the extent to which he shuns his wife and betrays the trust in their relationship, whilst demonstrating his hurt pride through his animosity towards her. Before the fall Adam refers to his wife as 'soul associate Eve,' 'Virgin majesty of Eve' calling her 'virtuous' and praising her beauty, but once he realises the consequences of the fall his tone drastically changes to blame and acrimony as he curses her, 'ingrateful Eve' and patronises her 'oh woman.' Where a modern audience would arguably be quick to point out that it was Adam's final decision to fall with Eve, Milton's contemporaries like Adam, placed all of the blame on Eve and instantly forgave him for his betrayal. CS Lewis for instance, referred to Eve's transgression as 'murder' and Baldwin declared that 'a woman's consumption of a forbidden food brought disaster to humankind' utterly ignoring Adam's involvement in the fall and blaming the consequences for mankind entirely on Eve. In fact, arguably, Milton's original audience did not see Adam's anger at Eve as a betrayal but as an understandable reaction that did not need to be forgiven, and instead in a time where female vanity and persuasion was of topical discussion the blame is placed on Eve for using her female wiles to manipulate Adam into falling with her, who consequently, 'fell by uxuriousness' (C S Lewis). We see then, that Eve is doubly victimised, for choosing to stray from her 'husband's side' and for convincing Adam to fall with her, and subsequently Eve is seen to doubly betray her husband with actions deemed unforgiveable by Milton's readers. Similarly, where perhaps <https://assignbuster.com/the-themes-of-betrayal-and-forgiveness-in-paradise-lost-by-john-milton-and-a-dolls-house-by-henrik-ibsen/>

initially modern audiences would find Adam's response to Eve inexcusable and 'verbally abusive' [Edmeades] unlike Torvald in *A Doll's House*, Adam is able to perform the 'miracle of miracles' and forgive his wife, re-establishing their relationship and defying the 'trial of exceeding love' before the end of book X. In fact, some critics have described Adam's actions as 'heroic.' However, to say that a modern audience would be completely sympathetic to Adam even after his forgiveness would arguably be too simplistic, given the condescending tone to his speech: 'thy frailty and infirmer sex forgiven,' for the use of the adjective 'infirmer' has implications of female inferiority which would be rejected by modern society. Overall, we can again infer a generational split in terms of audience response, yet where the women in these texts were condemned by their respective contemporary audiences, Adam in this text and equally Torvald in *A Doll's House* are forgiven easily and instead, the woman are seen as the betrayers. In fact, Adam's true betrayal in the eyes of Milton's readership is not of Eve but of his relationship with God, for prioritising his 'lust' [Robbins] over his love and faith for God would have been deemed unacceptable in that period. In terms of his betrayal of Eve, it seems that the readership of that time was familiar with male pride, and thus, the idea of a woman damaging it, as Eve does through the fall would be seen as the ultimate humiliation for a man.

Finally, as with Adam, Torvald's love of pride over his love for his wife can be seen as the greatest betrayal in *A Doll's House* where Torvald cannot even fathom the idea of sacrificing his reputation for Nora: 'No man can be expected to sacrifice his honor, even for the person he loves.' However, what seems to be the ultimate betrayal in this instance is not necessarily Torvald's

inability to put aside his honor but instead the fact that he had given Nora the impression that he would, (' sometimes I wish some terrible danger might threaten you so I could offer my life, my blood, everything for your sake,') and so when he does not fulfil his promise, or as Nora calls it ' the miracle of miracles' all sense of trust within their relationship is lost. Elaine Baruch wrote in 1991, ' once she sees that he is not a hero, she wants no part of him,' and arguably this rings true, as despite Torvald's change of tune when he realises his reputation is in the clear (" I have forgiven you, Nora. I swear it to you [...] No, don't go —"), it is too late as the trust that Nora had previously had for Torvald has been destroyed. Yet, although in the original text Nora is unable to forgive Torvald for his betrayal, in a performance in Stuttgart in 1972 Nora leaves but soon returns with her face pressed against the window suggesting she has forgiven her husband for his betrayal and wants to rectify her relationship. The remainder of performances however, still represent the same strong Nora who like Eve, steps away from her role as a wife in the name of independence: a character who is completely unforgiving of her husband's betrayal. Yet, where Nora's position reflects that of a modern audience as we have seen, Ibsen's society, like Milton's would have understood the importance of male pride understanding his reaction and denouncing Nora for her decision to leave her family. Indeed, one critic argues that where ' Nora speaks for all women at the end of the play, Helmer speaks for society and these two are seen as oppositional'. However, arguably, the idea that Nora speaks for all women is a reductive view as it disregards contemporary female outrage at Nora's abandonment of her children, indeed, what would perhaps be more accurate would be to say that Nora speaks for all individualists of her society, and all women of <https://assignbuster.com/the-themes-of-betrayal-and-forgiveness-in-paradise-lost-by-john-milton-and-a-dolls-house-by-henrik-ibsen/>

the future. We see then, that the audience of today, like Nora, would be unable to forgive Torvald for his love of pride and reputation over his wife, for although Adam commits similar offences he is shown to forgive Eve and ultimately put their love first. Torvald on the other hand, can only 'forgive' Nora once he knows he is in the clear, and consequently the selfishness of his actions could be deemed unpardonable. On the contrary, as with Adam, Ibsen's contemporary audience were accepting of Torvald's reaction and like with Eve, view the ultimate betrayal to be Nora's, for leaving one's husband and children in that time was considered shocking and immoral.

Overall, in both texts both partners are seen to betray their companion's trust, where the women strive for independence at the cost of their husbands, and the men place their love of honour and pride above their love for their wives. Interestingly, it appears that both Milton and Ibsen's respective contemporaries side with the men, and agree with the notion of placing pride and honour above all else. Yet perhaps this is understandable, in such periods where societies were 'exclusively male' (Coyne), where 'laws' were made by men, 'judiciaries' were ruled by men, and most likely, the critics of the time were men. Alternatively, more modern audiences have been seen to support and even champion these female protagonists, as like Ibsen in his time, today's society has recognised the importance of gender equality and independence over any love or relationship trust. We see then that whether these respective characters are forgiven depends entirely on the receiving audience and their opinions on gender. It seems then, that where Ibsen's 'proto-feminist' cosmopolitan views shine through *A Doll's house*, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton's 'turkish contempt for women' (Johnson) and

belief in female inferiority forms a foundation for his writing, as Eve is admonished ' to thy husband's side thou shalt submit, he over thee shall rule.'