

A comparison of
happiness and power
in paradise lost by
john milton and a
doll's ...



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Happiness is a luxury only the powerful can afford. In light of this view compare representations of happiness and power in Paradise Lost and A Doll's House. (30 marks)

In both Paradise Lost and A Doll's House, to say only those in power truly experience the luxury of happiness would be a somewhat reductive statement. Arguably, there are grounds to argue that Eve, as an embodiment of the weak woman in a patriarchal society, never receives the empowerment she desires, despite all efforts to strive for independence, knowledge and subsequently, happiness. Adam does, however, forgive her towards the end of the poem and their love becomes stronger, perhaps signifying a version of a happy ending. The title of the poem in the first place, however, 'Paradise Lost' suggests a loss of complete happiness and fulfilment and due to their own actions, Adam and Eve's Utopia and Paradise is altered and corrupted. Like Eve, in A Doll's House, Ibsen's Nora symbolises the patriarchal stereotype of a suppressed woman. Nora openly proclaims that she was never truly happy under the restrictions of her role as a housewife and a mother, but as she leaves her family in search of herself she arguably becomes empowered. Despite the lack of resolution at the end we, the reader are given the impression that Nora will find, at least a happier life than the one by Torvald's side. On the other hand, to say Nora's abandonment of her family makes her powerful could be disputed considering the patriarchal context the play was written in. Nora perhaps does find happiness by leaving her family, but from a patriarchal point of view, for a woman to leave her 'duties' as a wife and a mother is a woman

abandoning her purpose which, arguably, renders her weak and disempowered.

Patriarchal and masculine power is a central theme to both texts which arguably leads to misery, not happiness as the repression of women causes their wives to 'stray' in seek of independence. Both men at some point lose the women that they love even if temporarily, thanks to their pride and desperation to hold onto patriarchal power. Arguably, Torvald plays up to this stereotype as the strong heroic protector wishing that 'sometimes [...] some terrible danger might threaten [Nora] so [he] could offer [his] life [his] blood, everything for [her] sake.' Nick Worrall argued that 'his security depends on feeling superior,'; and as Torvald indulges in this patriarchal concept of a male hero, this statement rings true, portraying the idea that for a man to feel powerful, they must lure thus power and 'superior[ity]' over their wives. It appears, however, that Torvald's words are false and empty as when faced with the opportunity to save his wife by providing the 'miracle of miracles,' it seems, he is unable to trade in his pride for the happiness of his marriage. Instead, he declares, 'no man can be expected to sacrifice his honour, even for the person he loves.' Arguably, Ibsen intended to use Torvald to represent the gender inequality in the time he was writing, and the importance of patriarchal male pride placed even above the importance of family and marital love. Perhaps by having Nora leave, Ibsen was trying to say that placing too much importance on being the stereotypical masculine figure and neglecting female rights would only lead to unhappiness. Arguably, this is seen where Torvald's male pride leads to Nora's realisation that he is not able to provide for her (haven't you been

happy here? / No; never. I used to think I was. But I haven't ever been happy') and consequently his misery as she abandons him in search of her freedom.

Likewise, following Eve's transgression (' she plucked, she ate, earth felt the wound') Adam is initially unable to put aside his masculine pride for the happiness of their relationship, and so despite maintaining power he does not seem to be presented as happy. This is made apparent when Adam's address of Eve changes from ' sole Eve' to ' ingrateful Eve' as he blames and reprimands her: ' bad woman.' Like Torvald, Adam is unable to look past Eve's transgression, which causes him to be bitter rather than happy as arguably, he is driven by his sexism and desire for power, and not his love. Weathers was of the opinion ' that bitter antifeminism [...] accompanies young masculinity,' a statement which seems to describe not only Adam's behaviour, reflected by his twisted pet names but Torvald's too as he also mocks Nora's femininity with insulting remarks: ' thoughtless woman.' In both texts, the male characters use the noun ' woman' to reprimand and mock their wife's gender, arguably, to make themselves feel powerful and therefore happy. This attitude of male superiority was common in both contexts, but particularly in the 1600's evidenced in Milton's divorce tracts: ' who can be ignorant that woman was created for man and not man for woman.' Arguably, Milton's views are expressed clearly through Paradise Lost as Eve is suppressed and put back in her place, ' safe and seemliest by her husband's side' and we are given the impression that had she listened to her husband, the fall would never have taken place: " Would thou hadst heartened to my words (Adam)." We see however, that this power, like with

Torvald, does not bring happiness but anger and resentment and it is not until Adam is able to forgive his wife, and let go of his pride that he is able to pass the 'trial of exceeding love' and better their relationship. We see then that for both male characters in these texts, their desire for patriarchal power does not provide them with the luxury of happiness but pushes their wives away and makes them bitter and resentful. For Torvald, he is unable to rectify his relationship and is left at the end of the play miserable, and disempowered, but for Adam, despite the fall and his subsequent disempowerment, his relationship with Eve is reconstructed and we, the reader, is left with the impression that they are happy.

On the other hand, the patriarchal stereotype categorises women as weak, yet in both texts, the female characters empower themselves by striving for independence, knowledge and happiness. Towards the end of *A Doll's House* especially, we are given the impression that Nora will find happiness as she realises that she has 'another duty which is equally sacred, a duty towards [herself].' Jakovlievic argued that 'Ibsen presents the image of a happy household infested with unhappy performatives' but arguably, as the play draws to a close this image is shattered and the patriarchal pretences are revealed as Nora states: 'you were never in love with me, you just thought it was fun to be in love with me.' Nora's realisation that her marriage is a façade arguably leads to her decision to step away from her husband in search of independence, knowledge and the happiness those entail. It could be argued that Nora's search for independence indicates Ibsen's view as a humanist and as some have argued, a 'proto feminist,' who believed that it was not a 'question of women's rights' but of 'human rights.' It seems,

however, that though Ibsen's desire was for gender equality, Nora's freedom would not have been genuinely possible in Ibsen's contemporary society. Ibsen's inspiration for Nora was a friend, Laura Keeler who when stepping out of the confining, patriarchal parameters, was punished by her husband and placed into a mental asylum. It seems then, that though we are given the impression of empowerment and happiness Nora's journey is not a true representation of what was accessible for women in the 1800's. Equally, Eve is repressed by the male figures in her society and expected to 'study household good' under the role of the 17th century ideal housewife. Like Ibsen's, Milton's ideology seems to run through his text through the presentation of Eve as she is prohibited from gaining knowledge such power that comes with it. This seems to mirror Milton's attitude towards women, who in his own life had forbidden his daughters from a full education. As a result, it seems that unlike Nora, Eve does not triumph in her search for independence but instead is laid with the consequences of the fall: pain in child birth, mortality and the gift to future generations of hereditary sin, 'who might have lived and joyed immortal bliss.' Despite these consequences, however, as book 9 commences one of Eve's main arguments for 'divid [ing their] labours' is to escape the threat of the tempter, Satan ('how are we happy, still in fear of harm.') As Satan is the most penalised, admonished to hell, subject to the constant temptation of fruit that turns to ash, despite Eve's inability to achieve independence, the removal and punishment of Satan does dissipate the perpetual fear of 'the evil one' and allow herself and Adam to live together in peace, harmony and happiness. Overall, we are given the impression that through a journey towards independence, Nora will find a sense of freedom and happiness in the future.

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Eve's search for independence is not a source of empowerment as she is ladled with the consequences of the fall and forcibly placed back at her husband's side, we do, however, get the impression that without power Eve is still able to find some peace and happiness, as the threat of Satan is no longer a genuine one and her relationship with Adam is reconciled.

In conclusion, the men in these texts would have been expected by their contemporary audiences to wield masculine power as patriarchal figures. It seems however, that their desire to hold onto thus power restricts them from a happy life, as it drives their wives away in search of independence. Adam is able to reconcile with his wife and ultimately be happy again but arguably, Ibsen uses Torvald to suggest that those who are not willing to share their power will never be able to put aside their pride for the sake of love and happiness. The women in these texts demonstrate that independence and knowledge is a source of power and happiness, but where Nora is able to receive what appears to be a happy ending, Eve is put back in her place and ladled with the consequences of the fall. Eve, though completely disempowered does seem to find some sense of happiness, as she and Adam are able to reconcile their differences, and without the threat of Satan can live their lives in harmony.