

A doll's house history

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Historical Background

- A Doll's House was published in Norway in 1879.
- The play caused an immediate sensation and sparked debate and controversy.
- It was highly provoking: People tended to respond strongly to it whether in praise or censure.
- The play has less shock value today, but in the late nineteenth century, performing it was often, as one critic puts it " A revolutionary action, a daring defiance of the cultural norms of the time." (National Library of Norway, 2005)

The story is set in the context of 19th Century Norwegian society where there are certain predetermined roles for different genders. Meyer (2008) reveals that the story " highlights the cultural conflicts" of the time (p 3). The traditional middle class morality based on the dominance of the male gender bases the institution of the family not on the feelings of love and affection rather it sees the welfare of the family institution in the form of certain established power relationships. Johnston(1989) also indicates that it takes family as a mini state where the authority has to go to some autocratic power. The base of this family institution is not democratic. Here one person has to be dominant- the rule maker who is to be followed by others.

Introduction:

The enforcement of specific gender roles by societal standards not 19th century married life proved to be suffocating. From the very outset the reader can feel that this seemingly simple family drama may turn into a kind of tragedy which may arise some serious questions. The apparent love of the

couple in the opening of the play is further exposed as a compromise relationship between man and wife governed by certain rules imposed by the male member of the family. Ibsen uses the character development of Nora Helmer, the protagonist, and Torvald Helmer, the antagonist, to emphasize the importance of communication in a healthy relationship. The female member changes different roles according to will and choice of the male partner. Sometimes she is a chattering 'skylark', on the other she is a beautiful doll that is decorating the surroundings in which she lives. Gender roles have to be established from the beginning. One of the couple has to dominate the scene; the other should modify herself, sacrifice her inner desires and think only the welfare of the others.

The characters of the play demonstrate masculine and feminine roles and expectations that produce a marriage based on gender inequality. Torvald is the typical masculine stereotype who is expected to control his family's affairs, including his wife's. As a husband and a father, he sees himself as the dominant breadwinner and source of authority in his family. He highly values his role as a breadwinner because in his society, a successful man is someone who has a big income and high social status. He tells his wife: "It is splendid to feel that one has a perfectly safe appointment and a big enough income" (Ibsen Act 1). Society conditions men to think about money most of the time because money gives them power, and so Torvald wants to control the source of money in his household. Moreover, Torvald's patriarchal attitudes can be seen in how he treats his wife, such as when he calls her a "little lark" or a "little squirrel" (Ibsen Act 1). He also believes that it is "like a woman" to not consider the consequences of their actions (Ibsen Act 1).

Torvald sees his wife as a “ little” object, someone who is inferior to him because she is a woman. Moreover, Torvald even thinks that immorality comes from women, not men. He tells Nora: “ Almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother” (Ibsen Act 1). Nora is quite offended with this belief, but Torvald honestly thinks that bad people are generally products of bad mothers, which indicates his poor perceptions of women. Torvald does not want Nora to grow as a person because she might be a threat to his authority. Instead, he keeps her locked up in their house and ensures that she depends on him for money and social relationship.

The writer presents the characters in stereotype form as should conform to the existing beliefs of the Norwegian society which believed in male dominance and gave the husband the role of laborer. The superiority of husband over his spouse is evident in the speech of Torvald and his chosen metaphor that represent women as weak or diminutive creature. The husband of the story has the right to impose any kind of sanctions on his wife. Siddall (2008) explains it in this way, “ Gender in A Doll's House is crucial to the plays meaning. Gender is simplified in order to define the marital roles: men work and women play; the husband is responsible and well-informed, while the wife as grown-up child decorates his life charmingly” (p 13). Woman as a weaker sex, Nora has been described as ‘ little squirrel’, ‘ little skylark’. Such diminutive roles portray her as weaker sex. Torvald assumed notions about the fair sex make him believe that she is a weaker sex which always needs the protection of the male sex. She is a pretty doll and she should be confined to her home. She should think about the welfare

of her home, husband and family. Woman as creature of home Mayer (2008) reflects that “ Ibsen’s Nora Helmer is a doll trapped in her house, a condition underscored by the fact that all the play’s action takes place in her own living room. Repressed by a husband who expects her to fulfill her wifely and motherly roles under strict guidelines of morality and appearance” (p 3).

Male roles are also quite pronounced. Husband is the laborer of the family so is Torvald who thinks that it is his duty to provide for his family. According to his typical male thinking of that time women have no role in family finances. They are just to maintain the household affairs. They need not worry to earn money for the sake of the family even the thought of his wife lending him money may hurt his male. Nora changed this role with Helmer when he was ill. She did sewing work in order to support for her family. But this sacrifice was taken for granted by Torvald and at the time of crisis he even forgot to acknowledge her selfless efforts for the family. That’s why, He is a product of his time.

Ibsen uses metaphors too to explore the theme of marriage and its reinforcement of gender inequality in society. The doll’s house is a metaphor for their marriage, where they are all imprisoned in it, and women are the worse off of them all because their main roles are to serve their husbands and children. Men are trapped, not just women, because they have to meet social expectations. Torvald is overly conscious of how society sees him, which is why he gets so mad at Nora for faking her father’s signature to get a loan. Nora is right in her assessment of how he would have reacted to her “ saving” him, which she tells Mrs. Linde: “ And besides, how painful and

humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything!" (Ibsen Act 1). Nora is trapped in her marriage and is worse off than Torvald because she is his slave. She cannot do anything she wants, not even eat her precious macaroons, as she tells her husband: " I should not think of going against your wishes" (Ibsen Act 1). As a wife, she has no free will, and without any free will, she cannot be a happy human being.

In conclusion,

It can be said that the play Doll's House clearly show the complexities in matrimonial life caused by the predefined gender roles. The matrimonial bond is at the verge of breakage because of the dominant role of male who fails to probe into the inner self of his better half due to the misconceptions about gender roles. This is a tragic play, not because Nora abandons her family, but because society abandoned her first. Every human being has a right to be free and to find the purpose of their existence. For Nora, the first step is turning away her dollness and doll house and acknowledging that she is nothing because from nothing, she can be someone valuable, someone who has self-respect because she finally owns her life.