

Research paper on a doll's house – henrik ibsen

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



In this research paper on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* I will examine the play's plot, central characters and themes and then provide an analysis of its production history and reception. It is a play that continues, through new productions, to engage audiences all over the world and the social dynamic between theater productions and social values is one that is full of interest and not without controversy. The very first production aroused controversy: Jaeger (p. 259) claims that "The close of *A Doll's House* gave rise to dissentient criticism". But even one of the first reviews of the first performance was aware of the ground-breaking nature of the play: "He [Ibsen] has wanted to portray marriage as an arrangement which, instead of educating the individuals... often corrupts them." ('The Country', 1879, review of *A Doll's House*) and Ibsen's presentation of Nora continues to provide a controversial touchstone by which different societies can examine the gender politics of their society. *A Doll's House* is a rich play still capable - in the right production - of challenging patriarchal values.

Norway in the 19th century, like all the countries of Western Europe, was a very patriarchal society. Norway itself had only been independent from Denmark since 1814 and issues of freedom and personal liberty were pre-occupying Norwegian society. There had been some discussion of women's rights, but the pace of change was slow. In 1879 the year of the play's first production woman had no control over their financial affairs and were certainly not allowed to borrow money without their husband's consent - this fact forms the basis of the plot, since Nora must keep secret the fact that she has borrowed money for Torvald's benefit and is further complicated because Krogstad knows about the loan and is blackmailing Nora. Working

opportunities for middle-class women were especially limited at the time of the play, being confined to low-paid clerical work largely. (Larsen, *passim*). Married women were certainly not expected to work at all. Divorce was relatively easy and cheap, but required the consent of both partners - and Torvald makes it clear that he will not consent to divorce - which increases Nora's courage in leaving at the end of the play: she will become wholly isolated from society in leaving her family.

From its first production the play caused controversy, but its importance was also recognized. Moi (p. 264) argues that it is the first text in Western literature to portray a woman as completely and wholly independent; Rekdal (p. 150) goes even further to suggest that Nora becomes an "individual beyond gender" by the end of the play and in one sense this is true. Nora says to Torvald at the end of the play: "I believe that before anything else, I am a human being, just as much a one as you are... or at least I'm going to turn myself into one... I want to think everything out for myself and make my own decisions." (Ibsen p. 64) Larsen asserts:

In no other play has literature exerted such a far-reaching influence on all problems of society. It is therefore natural that the question of women's rights should break through and become a national issue. (p. 471)

The Helmers' marriage is based on deceit and lies. Ibsen's portrayal of the marriage is "to stress the aspects of society and personal dishonesty that hinder personal development." (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). Torvald wants complete control over Nora, whether it is in the matter of macarons or her financial secrets. He treats her like a child and the names he calls her

are symptomatic of her subservient position: “ little songbird”, “ squirrel”, “ lark”, “ little featherhead”, “ little skylark”, “ little person”, little woman” - all have the effect of stressing her subservience and also serve to emasculate her, dehumanize her and infantilize her. They may seem harmless endearments, but they fix very precisely the gender/power dynamics of this marriage. As Yuehua writes of Torvald:

He sees women as both child-like, helpless creatures detached from reality and totally dependent on men for support. His attitude towards his wife is a mixture of a sense of possession and sexual passion. (p. 81)

However, it appears to be a perfect marriage: they are financially well-off; they have lovely children; Torvald has just been made manager of the bank. Indeed, Evans argues that Torvald’s more unpleasant character traits are because of his chosen profession. But Nora is kept in a wholly subservient position by the way Torvald treats her, although she has shown her capacity for independent thought and action, in arranging the loan to help Torvald and in secretly re-paying it. To a certain extent, this could be said to be Nora’s problem - her innocence. She cannot understand why an act that saved her husband’s life should arouse such condemnation, especially as she has worked to pay off the loan. In one sense, despite her flirtatious and coquettish behavior towards Torvald, especially in Act One, she has already shown that she has the capacity to take adult decisions and act responsibly: her marriage with Torvald and the subservient role she plays within it is simply another level of deceit. As Yuehua puts it:

Torvald needs Nora to act out the role of his beautiful and submissive 'doll-wife' whom he can control ideologically. It's obvious that Torvald does not really know her or even care to know her. All he cares about is his manipulation of manly power. (p. 81)

We might add that he also cares about his image and his notion of himself as representing the epitome of the Norwegian bourgeoisie. We might find it astonishing on a simply human level that he never offers Nora any thanks for saving his life or for making the sacrifices she has made in order to pay back the loan; all he cares about are appearances and his own reputation.

It is that act of autonomy (the forging of her father's signature) which so infuriates Torvald and his reaction to her behavior and, in particular, his reaction in the final scene to the news that Krogstad will not press charges against her, gives Nora a moment of epiphany that makes her leaving inevitable. It is because Torvald's response to the news is so self-centered, so obsessively selfish that Nora realizes her marriage with him has been an error: " You and Papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault I've made nothing of my life." (Ibsen 64)

The theme of deception lies at the heart of the play. On the surface, Nora's deceptions are the most obvious: the forging of her father's signature, her falsification of the household accounts, the secret of her jobs to repay the loan - and it these acts of deception which make her vulnerable to blackmail and to Torvald's displeasure. Mrs Linde in Act Two forces Nora to confront the problems of her marriage, but we feel she can hardly have expected the outcome to be as it is. Krogstad too underestimates the influence that Nora

has over her husband, so successful is the appearance of a happy marriage: he assumes that Nora can intervene on his behalf to re-instate him at the bank, but he has no idea of the deceit and real lack of love in the Helmers' marriage. However, Act Three reveals the worst act of deception. Torvald's reaction to Nora has to tell him reveals that all the love and care he claimed to have for Nora was a lie, a myth, part of the appearance of a happy marriage. He does not care for her as a human being but as a doll, a possession and he accuses her of being a hypocrite and a criminal, guilty of forgery. His only concern is for his reputation as a reputable banker. When the maid delivers the note from Krogstad, which is addressed to Nora, but which Torvald grabs and opens, he is wholly oblivious to Nora and her feelings, but relieved and delighted at his own good luck at not being socially disgraced. This is the moment of Nora's epiphany. Torvald talks and talks, reassuring Nora that she has his forgiveness and Nora is uncharacteristically silent. She takes off her fancy dress costume and orders Torvald to sit down before starting the conversation which will lead to her departure at the end of the play:

We have been married now eight years. Does it not occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, husband and wife, have had a serious conversation? (Ibsen, p. 59)

As Larsen puts it, "A Doll's House became a most significant piece of propaganda and won world-wide recognition within years." (p. 471) and it continues to be a widely performed text despite the changes to the position of women in society. However, the very first Chinese production (He p. 120) was not entirely in keeping with the spirit of Ibsen's original, with Nora being

portrayed as a misguided and foolish woman. Russian productions of the play from the Soviet era were more likely to portray Nora as a heroine. (Hollidge p. 23) More recent productions still find exciting and innovative ways to stage the play in order to comment afresh on the continuing problems of gender inequality.

In 2010 a production in London was set in the comfortable suburban world of the 1950s. The review commented: " As Nora skips in with her big skirt and her Christmas shopping, you get a taste of the consumer boom to come. As she stomps out, leaving her children, you feel the first articulation of feminist revolution." (Rep, The Guardian). A more recent production in London earlier this year, directed by Sophie Russell for Theatre Delicatessen, used an all female cast in order to tell Nora's story through the eyes of " a generation of women who were told they could have it all" - the generation of 1970s feminists - who have found that dream (of having it all) is still not possible in an essentially patriarchal world. (Zinman p. 30)

An even more daring production/re-make was Charles F Gordon's 2005 play *A Selfish Sacrifice* in which Nora became Aku the wife of the Nigerian ambassador to the UN. (Zinman p. 32) Her husband, Aki, is notably a convert to Islam and, of course, Aku soon becomes aware of how different her life in Africa is from the lives of American women. As Zinman comments: " This seem to provide a contemporary sociopolitical equivalent to the 19th century's audience-shocking experience of the play's proto-feminism." (p. 32)

And, as long as gender inequality exists anywhere in the world, Ibsen's A Doll's House will remain a seminal and much-performed text. As Yuehua puts it so well:

Ideological power embodied through gender relationships in A Doll's House helps people to reflect on the stereotyping of both men and women in literary works and have a new a rational perception of the gender roles in our modern world. (p. 87)

A Doll's House continues to stimulate the imaginations of theatrical practitioners around the world and continues to challenge audiences through its intellectual assault on male/female gender stereotypes. As long as gender bias and inequality exists anywhere in the world then Ibsen's innovative drama will retain its power and captivation. Even now in the early 21st century women in the USA and the UK do not earn the same wages for doing the same jobs, and they are under-represented on the boards of large financial institutions or, indeed, anywhere where there are senior management positions to be filled. And these are two countries which might consider themselves advanced. Imagine then the plight of women in certain Third World countries where economic necessity and centuries-old traditions deny them basic rights and privileges, or in some Islamic countries where women are denied an education and freedom of expression. While such conditions prevail in the world, Nora's leaving Torvald at the end of the play is likely to be seen again and again on the world's stages until women have true equality.

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