

Research proposal on the sacrificial role of women in Ibsen's A Doll's House

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



Henrik Ibsen was a 19th century Norwegian playwright who is considered to be one of the pioneers of Modernist theater, inserting some of the more harsh realities of family life into his works. After a grueling childhood that involved a depressive father, an oppressively religious mother, and an extremely poor family in general, he picked up writing, beginning to write his own plays and work at the Det norske Theater in Bergen. His real masterpieces came after his move to Germany, where he wrote the 1873 play *Emperor and Galilean* and *A Doll's House*. He wrote realistic, contemporary dramas with a tragic edge, all with an eye toward ideology and the shaking up of social and familial values. (UNESCO 2001)

The titling of the play as “ *A Doll's House*” is significant, as Nora is kept like a doll, not really allowed to have a life of her own or any sense of self-respect. She is stuck in this fragile, clean home that is offered as a status symbol for Torvald, Nora being just another piece of his property. Like a doll, Torvald treats her like he owns her, ordering her around and making her do things without any consideration to her wants and needs. Describing their marriage as a doll's house is very apt as well; it is something that looks nice to the eye and seems pleasing, but is ultimately hollow and lifeless. (Tornqvist 1995)

Torvald consistently uses nicknames and pet names for Nora, as if to further dehumanize her by calling her a singing bird or a sky-lark. At the same time, when Nora uses them back at Torvald, it can be seen as a shift in power, where Nora attempts to assert herself. At the same time, this power is never permanent, and she is forced to maintain the “ child-wife” persona she is asked to portray. (Johnston 2000)

Setting the play entirely within the house makes Nora's suffocating life all

the more ubiquitous and omnipresent, as both Nora and the audience are never rid of the house that she has to keep up and be trapped in. All of the elaborate furnishings and trappings give the illusion of a fulfilling, prosperous life, when in fact Nora is completely miserable and hates being under her husband's thumb. The immaculate nature of the living room is indicative of the illusion Torvald wants to portray that his life and his marriage is perfect, and Nora is simply expected to go along with it. (Torqvist 1995)

There are two very significant symbols in this play, both of them related to holidays or landmarks. The Christmas tree is just like Nora is supposed to be in the marriage; pretty, decorative, and without movement or opinion. It is dolled up just like everything else in this house, and Torvald treats both Nora and the tree the same way. The state of the Christmas tree also reflects Nora's mood, as it gets more offset and dirtier as Nora becomes more unhinged and fed up with what has been happening, showing that "this flippant creature has been carrying for years a secret and a burden that would have wrecked a heavier nature." (Lee 1910)

Another symbol is New Year's Day, which takes place not long after Christmas. It symbolizes a new beginning, particularly when Nora decides to leave Torvald. They can make a clean break at this universally recognized date for restructuring of one's life, making it especially poignant and important that they break up at that moment. It further brings home the consequences and gravity of Nora's decision to the audience, as they feel a greater sense of permanence to this decision. (Torqvist 2000)

One of the biggest themes to be found in this play is that of women's roles and rights in the late 19th century; women were expected to sacrifice any semblance of individualism or autonomy in favor of supporting their husband, who was the real power in the family. Nora states that " thousands of women have" had to sacrifice their integrity to stand by a man that they did not necessarily love. (Torqvist 1995) Mrs. Linde, for example, could have married Krogstad, as she loved him. However, since he did not have any money, it would not have been socially acceptable to marry him, and so she went for someone who was more well off financially. Despite all of this, these women often consider themselves fortunate, because at least they found a man to take care of them, at the expense of their own individuality.

According to society's rules, there was no way for Nora to exert her dominance over Torvald, though she obviously wanted to, as she knows more about the business than he does and could run it more effectively. She must sacrifice her assertiveness in order to play the doll to the doll master (Torvald). She also makes the controversial choice to abandon her children, sacrificing her ability to raise them. However, she does so with good reason, as she believes that she is incapable of raising the children in that sort of environment, and that it would do more harm than good to them. Instead, she opts to have the more well-equipped nanny look after the children. (Johnston 2000)

Nora is trapped by societal rules that say that she cannot have any influence or power, or even any say in her own choices. As the man, Torvald has to look after her and chastise her when she has done something wrong, all the

while taking little chips at her identity and individuality. This is one of the factors that finally makes her decide to leave, as she feels she can do better on her own without needing to be tied to a man. (Johnston 2000)

She begins to be incredibly jaded by the conduct of men, from what she has seen of both Torvald and Krogstad, who are both ineffectual but boorish characters who bluster about with no real bite behind them. (Yuehua 2009) At the same time, she would even sacrifice herself rather than allow Torvald to be blamed for what she did (forging his name to a document in order to get a loan from Krogstad). At the same time, she realizes that Torvald would not do the same for her, as his honor would need to remain stubbornly intact.

In *A Doll's House*, the audience sees a portrait of a woman kept against her will by a patriarchal society that will not trust her with decisions and freedoms, even when the men prove themselves to be bad at those same decisions. We also see this one particular woman refuse to sacrifice any longer, cutting her losses and moving on in her search for happiness, leaving her husband and children behind. While this may seem like a selfish act on the outside, we see Nora taking care of the family dutifully and taking dramatic measures to deal with Torvald's problems, like taking a dangerous loan to settle his debt. It is only when Nora realizes this hard work and dedication is not being paid in kind that she opts to leave. She must sacrifice the life she had before, but with the promise to move on to a new one where she can find greater freedom and autonomy.

Works Cited

" Henrik Ibsen: A Doll's House." (UNESCO) United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2001. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

Johnston, Ian. " On Ibsen's A Doll's House." Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC. Canada. 2000. Lecture.

Lee, Jeannette. " A Doll's House: An Illustration of Symbolism." The Ibsen Secret: A Key to the Prose Drama of Henrik Ibsen. New York: G. p. Putnam's Sons, 1910. 8-19. Print.

Tornqvist, Egil. Ibsen: a doll's house. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

Yuehua, Guo. " Gender Struggle over Ideological Power in Ibsen's A Doll's House." Canadian Social Science 5. 1 (2009). Print.