

A doll house by henrik ibsen: an issue of the relationship between men and women

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House* focuses on a Norwegian middle-class family whose very survival is threatened by long-held secrets revolving around family dynamics. The characters portray the complexities underlying the relationships between men and women. Some aspects of the play mirror certain elements in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. This analysis focuses on the theme of the relationship between men and women as portrayed in Ibsen's *A Doll House*.

A common thread that runs through all the relationships between the male and female characters is the power dynamics between the genders, which generally work against the women. Therefore, both plays can be conceived to be treatises in feminist thought. The thematic analysis undertaken herein will focus on four areas of concern: sexism, economic disparity, the role of love in marriage, and identity. Instances of sexism in which women are viewed unfavorably by the men on the basis of their gender are common in *A Doll House*. For instance, throughout the play, it is clear that the dominant men in Nora's life expect her to conform to their perceived standards of femininity. Her father and her husband have certain expectations in regard to how she ought to behave herself and what she is capable of doing with her life. Torvald, Nora's husband, asserts that it is costly to keep a woman such as her as he has to keep spending money on her. This implies that Nora is unable to properly manage her finances simply because she is a woman. During the final confrontation with her husband, Nora also makes it clear that her own father viewed her as nothing more than a toy with which he could amuse himself.

All these instances illustrate that some of the men in A Doll House maintain an archaic view of women that reeks of blatant sexism. Another instance of blatant sexism appears when Krogstad is appealing to Nora to save his job at the bank by convincing her husband not to fire him. The logic of his request is that as a woman, Nora has an inexplicable influence over her husband that can make him do her bidding.

Krogstad. Mrs. Helmer, will you have the kindness to employ your influence on my behalf?

Nora. What? How do you mean?

This conversation speaks to a prevailing notion at the time that women can get what they want from the men with whom they are romantically engaged by employing their 'feminine charm.' The idea recurs when Krogstad suspects for a moment that the only reason Mrs. Linde wants to get back together with him is to help her friend Nora out of her fix. It is worth noting that this depiction of women is humiliating, as it casts them as purely manipulative individuals who exploit their sexuality to get their way in life.

Trifles contain scenarios that echo the sexism in A Doll House. In several instances, Henderson, the County Attorney, muses that the women helping them to scour for evidence in the Wrights' residence are preoccupied with mundane issues that only women can be obsessed with. These sentiments are supported by Mr. Hale who asserts that "women are used to worrying over trifles". Throughout the play, the men's attitude towards their female counterparts is condescending and patronizing. This stems from the

worldview that permeated much of the 20th century regarding a woman's place supposedly being in the kitchen. In both *Trifles* and *A Doll House*, the assessment of women's worth by men and society at large is based on their ability to effortlessly keep a home. Sexism is, therefore, one of the main factors connecting the two texts.

The relationship between men and women in *A Doll House* is marked by a glaring economic disparity between the genders. For instance, the Helmers' relationship is shown to be sustained by Nora's dependence on her husband's financial ability. This makes her eager to please him even in instances where they disagree on financial matters. The economic disparity between the couple therefore radically alters the power dynamics in favor of Torvald. Similarly, Mrs. Linde leaves her true love to marry a rich man so that she can be able to support her ailing mother and take care of her two brothers. The experiences of Nora and Mrs. Linde show that women have to sacrifice personal interest and integrity just to survive in their patriarchal society, while the men leverage their financial to compel women to submit to their will. Both *Trifles* and *A Doll House* illustrate that love plays a fundamental role in the success of a marriage or the romantic relationship between men and women. Relationships that lack this crucial ingredient appear to be unsustainable over the long term, often occasioning misery to the unloved party. In *A Doll House*, Mrs. Linde makes it clear that her marriage to her rich suitor was a loveless union as her true love was Krogstad. It is, therefore, unsurprising that she was emotionally unfulfilled and unhappy after her husband's death. These feelings eventually push her

to reconnect with Krogstad and re-establish their relationship. Similarly, the Helmers' marriage eventually crumbles because Torvald is more obsessed with the mere appearance of happiness rather than happiness itself; causing him to be selfish towards Nora. The implication here is that marriages of convenience cannot last long because they are founded on falsehoods.

A more tragic outcome of a loveless union is portrayed in *Trifles* when Mrs. Wright is revealed to have murdered her husband after years of emotional neglect. Ultimately, the lack of love in a marriage is shown to be the primary cause of the marital collapse and emotional unfulfillment between men and women. A key theme regarding the relationship between men and women in both plays is identity or a conceptualization of the self. Oftentimes, one's sense of identity is impacted by close romantic engagement, such as is in the case of marriage. Owing to the intimacy shared between two romantic partners, one can lose themselves in the union by allowing it to define who they are. For example, in Nora's moment of epiphany after speaking her mind to her husband, it is clear that the marriage caused her to maintain a façade over such a long period of time that she eventually convinced herself that her identity revolved around pleasing Torvald. Alternatively, adverse emotional events in marriage, such as emotional neglect and abuse, can also negatively impact how one view themselves. This is illustrated in *Trifles* by Mrs. Wright's transformation from a happy and lively young lady to a sad loner after her marriage. The implication here is that it is important for both men and women to establish a strong sense of self before getting into a romantic union with each other if the union is to survive the vicissitudes of

life. The relationship between men and women has informed many literary works for decades.

Trifles and A Doll House are part of this literary tradition as they contain the vividly illustrate the factors that influence this relationship and the dynamics that underlie them. Common trends that emerge in the portrayal of the relationship between men and women in both plays include sexism, economic disparity between the two genders, the impact of love or its absence in the sustenance of romantic engagements, and development of identity within the context of marriage. Each trend has been analyzed exhaustively. Ultimately, Ibsen and Glaspell skillfully weave narratives that shed light on the exploitative dynamics underlying the relationship between men and women in a patriarchal society.