

Personal freedom in
a doll's house, a
room of one's own,
and diary of a
madman te...



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In the literary works *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, and *Diary of a Madman* by Lu Xun, each protagonist struggles to achieve personal freedom from a confining and oppressive situation. Two of the protagonists represent females who attempt to realize their dreams, ambitions, and sense of self direction during the heavily sexist social mores and parochial way of life that dominated much of the late 19th and early 20th century.

The third protagonist is a revolutionary minded male, living in China during the revolutionary period of the early 20th century. All three works exude the pristine quality of a historical document in which no detail has been expunged, manipulated, or updated. All three are very much documents of their time, and as such, give readers magnificent insight into long dead social and political eras, and how they affected the human beings on the ground that lived through them.

In Chapter Three of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the protagonist attempts to make sense of the nonsensical elements of female history, namely, how it could be that "in Athena's city, where women were kept in almost Oriental suppression as odalisques or drudges, the stage should yet have produced figures like Clytemnestra and Cassandra Atossa and Antigone, Phedre and Medea, and all the other heroines who dominate play after play of the "misogynist" Euripides...where in real life a respectable woman could hardly show her face alone in the street, and yet on the stage woman equals or surpasses man" (Woolf 20).

Woolf's protagonist is a wildly intelligent and scholarly woman cursed with indefatigable powers of logic. The absence of women from the history books coupled with their paradoxical treatment at the hands of artists and scholars throughout the ages drives her almost to distraction. " A very queer, composite being thus emerges.

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant...Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband" (Woolf 20).

For thinking women, personal freedom took on a different meaning in a time when women were not expected to possess the same brain power as their male counterparts. In essence, the protagonist of *A Room of One's Own* seeks personal freedom not only from the gender politics indicative of her age, but also from her own obsessive need to understand them.

" It was disappointing not to have brought back in the evening some important statement, some authentic fact. Women are poorer than men because – this or that. Perhaps now it would be better to give up seeking for the truth" (Woolf 20).

In Henrik's Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the main character, Nora, differs from the protagonist of *A Room of One's Own* significantly. Nora is not an intellectual, and spends no time scouring books or libraries or trying to make sense of her situation. She does however feel the double standard that exists between herself and Helmer, as evidenced herein:

HELMER: I would gladly work night and day for you, Nora – bear sorrow and want for your sake. But no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves.

NORA: It is a thing hundreds of women have done.

HELMER: Oh, you think and talk like a heedless child.

NORA: Maybe. But you neither think nor talk like the man I could bind myself to. As soon as your fear was over – and it was not fear for what threatened me, but for what might happen to you – when the whole thing was past, as far as you were concerned it was exactly as if nothing at all had happened...I was your little skylark, your doll...so...fragile. Torvald – it was then it dawned upon me that for eight years I had been living here with a strange man, and had borne him three children – Oh! I can't bear to think of it! I could tear myself into little bits! (Ibsen 112).

Nora's disillusionment resembles the "waking up" moment for women in similar oppressive situations, those of Nora's time who realized they were locked in a role, locked in a doll's house, with each move they made scripted by custom, sexism, and the implicit entitlement of a traditional marriage. At the end of the play when Nora leaves, she takes a revolutionary step forward for all the women of her time.

In *Diary of a Madman* by Lu Xun, the main character becomes obsessed with the notion that his neighbors and members of his family have set about to eat him. Cannibalism, in *Diary of a Madman*, largely symbolizes the

repressive quality characteristic of Chinese Confucianism in the days before the revolution in China.

In *Diary of a Madman*, the religious culture as exemplified by the main character's neighbors resembles a "man-eating" civilization, wherein the dominant members of the community prey on its weaker elements.

Since the main character lives in a disordered state as a result of his mental illness, he feels decidedly vulnerable. "In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: "Virtue and Morality." Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words—"Eat people." (Lu Xun 4).

Diary of a Madman reflects the spirit of revolution from the perspective of a revolutionary. The main character's drive to save himself from his neighbors, while still simultaneously setting himself apart from them, echoes the progressive atmosphere indicative of any era of great reform, at the political, personal and social levels.

The story resembles an ironic tale, given that the main character seeks personal freedom from his illness itself, since it has given him insight into his oppression which may not have been available, had he been in his right mind.

The three pieces detailed in this essay, *A Doll's House*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *Diary of a Madman*, represent classic works that reflected the

honest experience of protagonists caught in oppressive social systems or political regimes. Each protagonist's struggle for personal freedom is different; yet, their defiance toward and ultimate rejection of the roles assigned to them by their society remains the same.

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Rockville, Maryland: Serenity Publishers LLC, 2009. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Susan Gubar, ed. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2005. Print.

Xun, Lu. "Diary of a Madman." *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*. Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1960. Print.