

The role of women in "a doll's house" and "ghosts"



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The Role of Women in "A Doll's House" and "Ghosts" The role of women has changed significantly throughout history, driven in part by women who took risks in setting examples for others to follow. During the Victorian era, women were beginning to take a stand for their rights.¹ Even as they struggled with their expected roles as women, a few that managed to escape the demands and expectations of society. Playwright Henrik Ibsen reinforces the idea of women's rights by creating two female characters that embody the struggle for freedom from their restricted roles. In Henrik Ibsen's plays A Doll's House and Ghosts, both Nora and Mrs. Alving deviate from the roles expected of Victorian women. During the nineteenth century, women were expected to marry and remain faithful to their husbands regardless of their situations. There was an "...exaggerated emphasis upon duty, the injunction to stay with one's husband no matter what the circumstances..." (Hunt 111). However, Nora deviates from her expected role and duty as a wife by leaving Torvald at the end of A Doll's House. Her desires and her own happiness are more important to her than the duties to her husband, regardless of "...what people will say" (Ibsen 64). Though Torvald reminds her that one of her most sacred duties is to him, Nora takes her bag and leaves him crying out her name as "the sound of a door shutting is heard below" (Ibsen 68). In Ghosts, Mrs. Alving also leaves her husband despite what is expected of her. It is Mrs. Alving's unhappiness that compels her to leave her husband during their first year of marriage; however, she returns to him after her priest and good friend Manders leads her "...back into the path of duty..." (Ibsen 89). Though it is clear that Mr. Alving was not faithful to his wife and drank excessively, Manders disregards his actions and goes on to lecture Mrs. Alving on her quest for happiness, similar to Torvald's reminder of Nora's

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duties to him. What right have we to happiness? No! we must do our duty, Mrs. Alving. And your duty was to cleave to the man you had chosen and to whom you were bound by a sacred bond (Ibsen 89). Even though it appears that their circumstances and social standings are the same, the key difference between the two women is that Nora is not religious and Mrs. Alving very much follows and obeys the rules set out by the church. Upon leaving her husband, Nora disobeys only the rules set out by society, whereas Mrs. Alving disobeys the more consequential rules set out by the church.¹ Along with being a wife during the nineteenth century comes the role as a mother. It was believed that “women’s God-given role...was as wife and mother” and that “children were to be cherished and nurtured” (Hartman 1). Abandoning her children was unacceptable behavior by a mother, and looked down upon by both men and women. By leaving Torvald, Nora also abandons her children by not taking them with her. Instead, she leaves them with Torvald under the care of the maids. In a less literal sense, Nora does not fulfill her role as a mother by instead giving the responsibility of the children to the maids. Rather than treating them as her children, she treats them as if they were dolls, playing with them when it is convenient to her. When the children wish for Nora to play with them, she dismisses them with the maid and begins decorating the Christmas tree. Similarly, Mrs. Alving forfeits the responsibility of her son Oswald when she sends him away to Paris for schooling. Manderl once again lectures Mrs. Alving on what is expected of her by saying, “...you have forsaken your duty as a mother” (Ibsen 90). It is apparent that she chooses not to fulfill her duty as a mother by putting Oswald in the care of strangers. Manderl’s disapproval of her actions depicts what reactions society would have to such a defiance of duty

during the nineteenth century. Even though both women choose to hand over the responsibility of their children to someone other than themselves, they go about it in a very different fashion. Nora takes her responsibilities as a mother rather lightly by only calling upon her children when she is in the mood to play with them. Mrs. Alving, on the other hand, shelters her son from the happenings within the home and therefore chooses to send him far away so his childhood is not tarnished by the unhappiness within the home. As a wife and mother, a woman was to uphold the family's honour and appearance¹, which often involved keeping secrets about what went on behind closed doors. In *A Doll's House*, the plot revolves around the loan Nora obtains in secrecy, and her attempt to hide the fact that her father's signature on the bond is forged. Nora makes sure that Torvald remains unaware of the loan in order to uphold his honour as the household provider. However, Nora reveals the secret to her good friend Mrs. Linde in an attempt to prove her understanding of "...the burdens and troubles of life" (Ibsen 11), thus diminishing her husband's honour by implying that he cannot support his family. When Torvald finds out about the loan and Nora's forgery, he insists, " the matter must be hushed up at any cost" (Ibsen 60) and that "...it must appear as if everything between us were just as before" (Ibsen 60). As a result of Nora's secret, Torvald's honour is at stake should the secret get out and become public knowledge. Rather than upholding a good appearance, as she should, Nora leaves Torvald, diminishing the family's honour as well as Torvald's. In *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving must keep to herself the fact that her husband impregnated the previous maid, whose child is now serving as her maid. Should the secret be exposed, her family name would be stripped of the honour it has attained. In order to keep up a good

appearance, Mrs. Alving keeps the family secret from everyone, including her own son Oswald. Because of Manders' remarks on her forsaken duties as a mother and wife, she exposes the secret to him in order to justify her previous actions. She then goes on to tell her son and maid of the secret she kept all these years, exposing the truth once and for all. As a result, the honourable name Alving is stained with the act of infidelity and a child born outside of marriage. It was said during the nineteenth century that " a woman cannot be herself in modern society" (Meyer 254), leading to the role as "...the keeper of the household, the guardian of the moral purity of all who lived therein" (Hartman 1). As the guardian, both women conceal secrets and ultimately both of their motives are to protect the family's honour. Nora's secret is to protect her and her husband's social standing by ensuring that their financial problems are not revealed. Upon being confronted about revealing her secret, Nora leaves Torvald. Mrs. Alving's secret, however, is to protect her and her husband's honour and ultimately her child's. Throughout their marriage, she never reveals this secret and does not divulge it to anybody until after the death of her husband. In Henrik Ibsen's plays *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, both female characters, Nora and Mrs. Alving, deviate from the roles of Victorian women. Both women are very unhappy and willing to disobey society's expectations and rules, and therefore suffer the consequences of their actions. Their circumstances are similar, yet the difference between them is that one permanently leaves, while the other only briefly takes a stand, but returns nonetheless. In both plays, Ibsen clearly shows that women in the Victorian era were solely responsible for the image of their family and husbands, and at all times had to sacrifice their own wants and needs to meet society's definition of a

successful marriage and household. The revelation of these characters reinforces women's rights during this time period, setting examples for women everywhere to follow and changing the role of women in years to come. Works Cited¹Hartman, Dorothy. Women's Roles in the Late 19th Century. 16 May 2005Hunt, James. Caitline's Dream: an essay on Ibsen's plays. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Ibsen, Henrik. Four Great Plays. New York: Bantam Books, 1959. Meyer, Michael. Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry 1864-1882. London: Brill Academic Publishers, 1980.