

Dressed to impress: the role of the dress in cinderella and a doll's house



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The donning of her [dancing] dress has brought about the turning point of her life.-Barbara Fass Leavy Dress and outward appearance have historically played a significant role in the plot development of fairy tales. Perhaps the most famous dress in our collective memory is that which was bestowed upon Cinderella by her fairy godmother. A less prevalent dress, though by no means less important, is seen in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Nora's Italian tarantella costume is in fact functionally similar to Cinderella's ball gown. Although they are obtained in different ways, and ultimately achieve different ends, dresses in both Cinderella tales and *A Doll's House* serve the same purpose of allowing the heroine to transcend beyond the constraints society has placed on her. In Cinderella stories, elaborate dresses, the presence and absence of them, play a pivotal role in the protagonist's ability to overcome her hardships, and to achieve her true potential. Elisabeth Pantajja, in her essay ³Going up in the World: Class in 'Cinderella,' ² examines the role of clothing as a ³political tool of the petit-bourgeoisie² (99). The removal of certain types of clothes, she argues, is representative of removal of social status. Class, and inferred class by clothing, is the crux of the limitations imposed on a Cinderella character. In many versions, Cinderella's clothes are lost at the beginning of the tale. ³They took away her beautiful clothes, dressed her in an old grey smock, and gave her some wooden shoes,² reads the first scene of the Brothers Grimm version . In ³Donkeyskin² the protagonist's clothes are not forcefully taken from her. Rather circumstances necessitate that she not don them, but instead wear only the old donkey's skin. In both of these cases the removal of fine clothing is symbolic of demotion. Extending that metaphor to a more general interpretation, it is symbolic of pushing the character out of a realm in which <https://assignbuster.com/dressed-to-impress-the-role-of-the-dress-in-cinderella-and-a-dolls-house/>

she once belonged. In the case of Cinderella stories, the realm just happens to be that of a higher social order. In the modern interpretation of the Swan Maiden Tale, A Doll's House, bodily covering is also initially lost. This is inferred at the beginning of Act II in A Doll's House when the Nursemaid says ³I finally found it, the box with the fancy dress costumes² (35). ³Finally², implies that they were being sought, a factor that becomes more relevant when their plot line function is served. Barbara Leavy parallels this brief discovery scene with the point in the Swan Maiden tale when the swan wife discovers her long lost feathers. The fact that the costumes are for a masquerade, not an everyday event, is worthy of note as they thus symbolize entrance into another world that is not the ordinary. That Nora already owned the dress, the feathers per se, indicates that she had once before been part of this other place. Extending the literal imagery of the masquerade to the more abstract realm, one could say that this other place from which she was being held captive, was a world in which she has agency. Unlike Cinderella figures, Nora does not initially realize that she has been held captive in another world. Like the Cinderella figure, though, wearing her special dress facilitates her transcendence of the forces that are in essence holding her captive. The re-discovery, or re-establishment of such clothing is more subtle in the Cinderella tales. In the Brothers Grimm version, beautiful dresses are ³tossed down² from a fairy godmother-esque Hazel tree. In Donkeyskin, as the clothing is never taken away, the re-discovery seems to occur on a weekly basis. ³She cleaned herself, then opened her chest and first put on the dress of the moon² Perrault writes, ³this sweet pleasure kept her going from one Sunday to the next² (112). Through this rediscovery of her gowns, Donkeyskin prepares for the moment when those

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dresses will allow her to overcome her lessened social stature. Likewise, the magical appearance of the classic Cinderella's dress, as well as the re-discovery of the Nora's Italian costume, fashion transformations themselves, foreshadow the more significant non-physical transformations to come. How exactly the various dresses allow the characters to break out of their constrained roles is where the two stories diverge. In the Cinderella tales, the protagonist is passive. In the classic tale, it is the prince who takes a proactive role. Grimm's version tells that She looked so beautiful in the dress of gold that they thought she must be the daughter of a foreign king. The prince approached Cinderella, took her by the hand and danced with her. He didn't intend to dance with anyone else and never let go of her hand. Whenever anyone else asked her to dance he would say: ³She is my partner.² (119) There is a direct link between how beautiful the dress made her look, and the prince's interest in her. The extent to which the prince takes possession of her is important to the story line as it is that feeling of possession, repeatedly asserted throughout the three day wedding affair, which motivates the prince to seek out Cinderella, ultimately bringing her back up the social ladder by marrying her. In Donkeyskin, it is only when the prince sees the princess in her elegant gowns that he is overcome by her beauty, and thus begins his pursuit of her. Though the disclaimer ³No matter what her dress was like, the beauty of her face, her lovely profile, [etc.](moved him a hundred times more² (113) is in the text, it is difficult to discount the fact that she was indeed wearing her special dress when she captured his attention. It is hard to imagine that he would have been equally awestruck had she been wearing her usual donkey skin. In both versions of the Cinderella story, the dress serves a function of capturing attention. This <https://assignbuster.com/dressed-to-impress-the-role-of-the-dress-in-cinderella-and-a-dolls-house/>

attention capture induces the prince to begin the ultimately successful pursuit of the Cinderella character. Through marriage to the prince Cinderella gains noble status, thus, with direct credit to the dress, moving beyond what was originally her constricting social situation. Ibsen's Nora is a much more proactive character than Cinderella though she too uses her festive dress to overcome her social constriction. Unlike the Cinderella characters, the different worlds of social classes are not Nora's concern. Rather, her differing worlds are separated on the axis of gender. Throughout the play Nora exists in a world distinct from her husband. From the overt closed door of his office, to the money-borrowing secret she harbors from him, the two exist in entirely separate planes. The dress itself is one of the few links their worlds have, and even that is quite tangential. In Act II Nora tells Kristine that Torvald wants her to go to the masquerade as a Neopolitan fishing lass and dance the tarantella, the dance she learned when they were in Italy. Moments after she has Kristine help her mend her ³costume² (40) Torvald enters the room: NORA: No, it was Kristine. She was helping me with my costume. I think it's going to look very nice(HELMER: Wasn't that a good idea of mine, now? NORA: Wonderful! But wasn't it also nice of me to let you have your way? HELMER: Nice of you- because you let you husband have his way? All right you little rogue, I know you didn't mean it that way(You'll be wanting to try the costume on I suppose. (40)The presence of the dress, and its associated power struggles are highlighted briefly in this scene. Torvald had wanted Nora to learn to dance in Italy and also bought the dress for her. What Torvald does not realize, and perhaps even Nora doesn't realize at this point is the effect the dress and its associated dance will have on their relationship. Even the presence of the dress in discussion has given Nora

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more agency. Her slip up almost gave Torvald a clue that she knows more than she generally lets on. Though the audience does not see the actual performance of the dance in costume at the masquerade ball, the recount by Torvald highlights necessary elements and indeed it is the aftermath that is more important than the actual performance. ³She dances the tarantella² and ³there was wild applause² (67) describes Torvald. One can imagine Nora performing the frenzied dance, all the while coming to the realization that she must leave the world she knows. Though it is possible, it is hard to imagine the dance being performed without the elaborate costume. The costume serves to transform Nora to a ³beautiful vision² (67), simultaneously transforming her spirit into one of realization, enlightenment of her situation and what options she has. At the end of Act III, Nora has transformed into a much more serious and straightforward character. She speaks conservatively, often in brief sentences compared to Torvald's long descriptions of how he is going to save her. In her book *In Search of the Swan Maiden*, Leavy examines the power struggle and issue of ownership of the costume. ³Insofar as all of Nora's possessions belong to Torvald, they remain in his control² states Leavy (299). They are illustrative of Torvald's control of Nora, the societal constraints that she must overcome. Torvald's tries to exercise his control of the clothes, and by extension Nora, when he learns her secret. ³Take that shall off. Take it off I tell you!² (76) Torvald exclaims. But Nora, having danced the tarantella, and even if momentarily, entered a realm other than the doll's house she knows, has increased her resolve. As the scene progresses, her control over her clothing, as well as her life, increases. When Torvald asks what she is doing, she replies ³Taking off this fancy dress² (78). Torvald is surprised when she is not preparing herself

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for bed, and she then replies ³Yes, Torvald, I've changed² (79). The significance of this statement goes far deeper than changing her dress. In wearing the dress, Nora had an epiphany. She realized that her life was *A Doll's House*, and that she didn't want to live it that way. In removing the dress, she has cast off not only Torvald's ownership, but also the societal constraints holding her within her contrived world. Nora's chronological dress changes, from ordinary to elegant and back to ordinary and her corresponding attitude change indicate that a transformation occurred while wearing the costume. In Leavy's words, ³The donning of her dancing dress has brought about the turning point in her life² (298) Thus, it was the dress itself that facilitated Nora's true change, a realization that perhaps never would have occurred had she not performed the special dance in the special dress. Unlike the Cinderella characters, Nora goes back to her original clothes. This difference can be attributed to the differing societal constraints and outcomes. While the Cinderella characters assimilate into another confined realm - high society culture they enter in marriage, Nora is entering into a world unknown, a world presumably free of the confinement and ownership that her costume represented. When the clock struck midnight in the Cinderella tale, the dress had served its function. It was then the prince's turn to take action. In *A Doll's house*, when the clock struck twelve on the masquerade, Nora's dress too, had served its purpose. However, it was Nora who took the initiative this time. Her dress, like the Swan Maiden's feathers, had reminded her of her own world, her own agency and the realm outside of the dollhouse. Though Cinderella and Nora started in different situations, were victims of different societal constraints, and had quite different ends to their stories, for both it was a dress that provided a window of opportunity, a

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possibility for transcendence beyond their initial circumstances. Perhaps, though, just perhaps both lived happily ever after.