

# Awakenings and changes in consciousness

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In drama, plays often seek to achieve one, if not more, of a variety of effects: perhaps to be moralistic, as in many Medieval plays; perhaps simply 'to be' and, in turn, to be art, as in 19th Century drama; more recently, to serve as a visual and theatrical rendering of a playwright's own views on both society of the time and human nature infinite. Though separated by style, centuries and even continents, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* both, through their depiction of the events within the play, are able to critique society and mankind by exploring its effect on a central female character.

This effect is most tangible in the shift of consciousness both experience: Nora, in philosophical emancipation and Blanche in an unfortunate decline into lunacy. These are both anagnorisis and awakenings in their own way: Nora's most literally, as she has a total overhaul of her values and beliefs, while Blanche's change in consciousness is designed to spark an 'awakening' in the audience. These changes of consciousness mentioned, however, are not the only 'awakenings' depicted in either play. What is interesting is the way in which minor changes and awakenings within the text are able to lead to and affect the protagonist's final shift.

If we are to consider Blanche's relationship with Allen, for example, we easily see the ramifications of her own awakening to his 'degenerate' activity. Her disgust leads to his suicide, ultimately contributing to her own demise. When considering 'awakenings', we could perhaps consider the sheer force of her disgust to be exacerbated by the very depth of her own feelings for him and the 'awakening' of love they inspire within her - this is particularly evident in

retrospect, as seen when she talks to Mitch: '[... the discovery - love. All at once and much, much too completely. '

In the context of Williams' own life, her revulsion becomes even more poignant: himself a homosexual, we can see here a symbolic manifestation of his own feelings in the face of others' disgust. Similarly plagued by unsuppressable fears of lunacy, we begin to see a link between emotional distress at external criticism and withdrawing into one's self, as Blanche's insanity eventually forces her to do.

There is something tragic about the series of awakenings Blanche experiences: to love, to the extra-curricular activities of her 'nervous, soft, tender' husband, to reality - these awakenings are experienced rather passively, leaving Blanche to take a back seat in her own life. This lack of control equally is seen simply through her character; her lack of a limit when drinking, for example, or her endless cathartic baths. Her irrepressible trust lends her a certain animalistic quality; not bearlike and bestial like Stanley, but more a wide-eyed critter, in her unflinching faith and inexplicable innocence.

Stella alludes to this characteristic in the line, 'Nobody, nobody was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change. ' A more positive example of a change in consciousness can be found in Krogstad, in *A Doll's House*. Manipulative and unfeeling, he shows no mercy in his extortion of Nora, in attempt to regain a lost job. Here too, we note that this negative behaviour is the result of earlier abuse; the product of a seemingly cold jilting by a lost lover: Kristina.

It is not until they are reconciled and her actions explained that he moves towards a kinder mode of being. This 'cause and effect' can be and is used by Ibsen equally to explain his own philosophical viewpoint. It has been suggested by many critics that *A Doll's House* is a feminist text; more broadly, however, it appears to be almost a paean to individualism. Krogstad's first step towards relinquishing his hold over Nora comes from recognising Kristina no longer as the perpetrator of his misery, but instead as an individual with needs that must dictate her decisions.

As an aside, when considering a lack of emotions, it is interesting to note Stella's explanation of Blanche's marriage to Allan: 'an experience that - killed her illusions! ' Ibsen's support of individualism is sparked primarily by a rejection of the most important social group of the time: the cell unit of the bourgeois family, of which the father was the nucleus.

While initially Torvald seems unable to understand Nora's decision and appeals to her conscience and maternity in an effort to make her stay, it is implicit in the text that, two-dimensional though he may appear, the changes produced by her shift in consciousness will eventually force him into an awakening of his own. Parallels may be drawn between Torvald and Stanley; both see themselves as the head of the family; both have a machismo that expresses itself through pride. This pride can be seen also through their self-assurance and arrogance, particularly apparent in their treatment of the women in their lives.

As Stanley puts it, rather charmingly, 'Remember what Huey Long said - 'Every Man is a King! ' And I am the King around here, so don't forget it! '

They are also largely the triggering factor in a series of events that causes or creates a context for the central female character's awakening. When considering minor characters with the plays, we immediately see a foil to Torvald and Stanley: in *A Doll's House*, it is the affable Dr Rank, and in *Streetcar*, it is Mitch. These characters make a compelling contrast between the more 'macho' males directly eliciting this awakening or change.

Dr Rank, greatest friend of Torvald and tortured syphilis sufferer, is perhaps the only man in the play to treat Nora as an equal. This generates for the audience a clear distinction between how things should be and how they truly are, in terms of human behaviour. Nora has been 'child', 'plaything' and 'squirrel' to both her father and Torvald, each occupying the same patriarchal role. In the same way that Mitch's rejection lays a foundation for Blanche's lunacy, Dr Rank's kind treatment of Nora suggests to her a better alternative which may aid her rejection of the less attractive treatment she receives at home and within society.

Like Dr Rank, Mitch is sweet and trusting, excited and seduced by Blanche's twilight beauty and showy ways - 'In all my - experience - I have never known anyone like you.' His trust in and respect for her provides Blanche with a stabilising force that soothes her prior emotional scrapes and tears. When Mitch is awoken to Blanche's more morally reprehensible actions, his rejection of and lack of respect for her creates a void in Blanche, setting up fecund grounds for that seed of insanity.

Her subsequent breakdown inspires tremendous pity and shame in Mitch, indicating an awakening of his own and an individual open, as Stanley is not,

to the demands of his conscience. Stanley's effect on Blanche's sanity is both direct and indirect. Though it is important to consider her initial abuse, Stanley is nonetheless the triggering factor of her breakdown: primarily through the awakening he thrusts upon Mitch, leading to his rejection of Blanche, and secondly and most tangibly through his rape of Blanche, with that ominous line: 'We've had this date set for some time.'

This rape scene, ugly as it is, is perhaps the saddest of the play, as it confirms to both Blanche and the audience her worthlessness and role only as a sex object. Ironically, it is her own sexual misadventures that lead her to this point, particularly as their inspiration was simply a desire to be needed and wanted. What separates Torvald and Stanley in their understanding of the change in consciousness is the long term effects it may have upon them: Torvald is forced to face the realities of raising motherless 'doll-children' in their 'doll's house'.

Even if he is unable to comprehend exactly the driving factors for Nora's departure, he must somehow reconcile himself to it. In a stunning piece of dramatic irony however, Stella chooses to believe Stanley's innocence; hence, as Blanche is carted off by men in white coats, Stanley remained totally unaffected. The tension between perceived innocence and reconciliation can be equally considered as the tension between the two authors' personal outlooks.

While A Doll's House is hardly buoyant or merry, it nonetheless ends on a hopeful note: Nora about to discover the world and its virtues, having thrown off the shackles of patriarchal oppression. Blanche, on the other hand, is

quite without hope - her sanity and sister's loyalty absent, this change in consciousness can represent only an unstoppable and imminent decline. This may be considered as explanation of the two playwrights' own views and experiences of society; Ibsen hopeful for the change suggested by a new century; Williams abused and lonely, socially and sexually alienated.

The effect produced by these changes, thus, is one that explores not only 'the ideal' but equally the result of society and mankind's own flaws. While the changes in consciousness experienced are clearly visible to the audience, as are their mitigating factors, Williams and Ibsen represent this change also through the use of objects and symbols. In the case of Nora, this is the Christmas tree: a metaphor both for her and her life. Nora goes to remarkable effort to truss it well and obscure its less attractive branches.

Ultimately, however, it is stripped bare, as Nora flings off the illusions and petty decorations obscuring her vision and affecting her life. This is a shift not only of consciousness, but, more importantly, into truth. Blanche is represented by light throughout the play. She covers the lamp with a shade in attempt to shield herself from being totally seen - this is a way to obscure herself and to more easily hide the wrinkles that explain her age and experience.

When seeing Mitch, she picks dimly lit settings for easy concealment of herself and her skin. Stanley rips off the shade violently and almost sexually and all is revealed: her age, her actions and her abuse. In the face of this brutal honesty, as the light burns brightly, she becomes forced to accept the truth, and moves into her final stage of madness. Ibsen and Williams use a

variety of techniques to explore these changes: by introducing minor characters, exploring the effects of the chance and, finally, by depicting them through imagery.

Ultimately, however, it is the final image in each that persists - Blanche's outbursts at the hospital staff, who are not her Texan oil magnate, while Stanley looks on; Nora's abrupt final words to Torvald before leaving into the night. These events and images, punctuating the play, use tremendous dramatic effect not only to illustrate to the audience the awakenings of Nora and Blanche but equally, with hope, to instigate some vicarious awakening in the audience themselves.