

Ibsen's portrayal of women



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' Ibsen's knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women' (Joyce). Discuss and illustrate: In his often quoted 'Notes for a Modern Society' Ibsen stated that, ' in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a man - a woman cannot be herself in modern society'. These thoughtful reflections attracted much positive acclaim from feminists at the turn of the century, despite Ibsen's emphatic declaration that ' I am not a member of the Women's Rights League' (McFarlane, p. 90). The extent to which Ibsen did directly sympathize with the feminists is still debated today, but this is largely irrelevant when considering his portrayal of women. More engaging is the idea that Ibsen did indeed have a vivid insight into women's nature, and a fervent interest in the manner in which it was affected by contemporary society. This resulted in the creation of colorful female protagonists such as Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler, whose character traits are not only entertaining for the purpose of the drama, but also remarkably well-observed. Ibsen's equally convincing portrayal of marital relationships should not be overlooked; his emphasis on the Victorian husband's attitude towards his wife is particularly telling. The manner in which the behavior of married couples was dictated by society is explored by Ibsen in *A Doll's House*, partly through Torvald's blind determination to adhere to the right set of rules. David Thomas goes so far as to say that ' Torvald unthinkingly lives out his role as the authoritarian husband' as ' men were far more likely to be dominated by the social prejudices of their day' (p. 73). Ibsen highlights this notion by giving Torvald a dominant role over Nora which is sometimes almost comical in its intensity. He takes delight in perceiving his wife as a silly childlike figure, affectionately taunting her by referring to ' you and your

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frivolous ideas', and moaning in what is clearly an approving manner that she is 'just like a woman' (p. 2). When she takes an interest in Dr. Rank's health matters, Torvald exclaims gleefully, 'Look at our little Nora talking about laboratory tests!' (p. 71). He is not unlike a proud father, amused that his daughter has expressed naïve curiosity regarding a matter of which she clearly understands nothing. This interpretation of Nora's words enhances his status of power and gives him the satisfaction that his wife is as unknowing as she should be. It could be argued that throughout the play Torvald is subconsciously deluding himself by understanding Nora's actions in this inaccurate way. He is certainly disgusted by the idea of her secret involvement with Krogstad's business matters, warning her that 'little song-birds must keep their pretty little beaks out of mischief' (p. 31). This allegorical language is probably for his benefit as much as hers: he is reluctant to address directly the possibility that his wife is intrigued by matters which, under society's rules, should exclude her completely. When he discovers the extent of her deception, he is moved by his anger and fear by describing the situation as 'utterly squalid' (p. 75), but upon realising that he is 'saved' his first inclination is to comfort 'poor little Nora' (p. 77). Torvald is clearly anxious to return to the previous state of decorum in which his wife was simply his little pet, flattering himself that 'I wouldn't be a proper man if I didn't find a woman doubly attractive for being so obviously helpless' (p. 78). Here Ibsen reminds the audience of Torvald's main aspiration: to live the life of 'a proper man'. With Jorgen Tesman, Ibsen portrays a husband who succumbs less obviously to society's expectations of a good marriage, but who is nonetheless always quietly encouraging his wife to act more appropriately. Elizabeth Hardwick even suggests that 'Hedda's

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husband is much more of a girl than she is' (McFarlane, p. 100), and it is true that he is fascinated by 'medieval domestic crafts' (p. 202). Perhaps he is subconsciously trying to make up for the lack of domestication within the household of a woman who is disgusted by the 'smells of lavender and pot-pourri' (p. 207). More obviously, Jorgen has a habit of constantly seeking Hedda's approval and attention, encouraging her to 'think of that, Hedda' three times in a few lines of text (p. 182-3). Her mechanical response of 'yes, I'm thinking' to these appeals clearly reflects her disinterest, and yet poor Jorgen is never deterred from trying to obtain his wife's devotion.

Similarly, his allusions to her suggested pregnancy are an almost pathetic endeavor to encourage discussion of the topic within the household. 'Isn't she blossoming?' (p. 192), he asks Brack suggestively, trying to portray her as a healthy mother-to-be. This recalls Torvald's comment to Mrs. Linde as Nora greets the children, proclaiming contentedly that 'the place now becomes unbearable for anybody except mothers' (p. 22). Like Jorgen, he revels in the idea of his wife being preoccupied by her maternal instinct, as in the eyes of society this is a perfect demonstration of the good wife's most essential quality. Ibsen's understanding of different types of women is very apparent in his female characters' various attitudes towards pregnancy and motherhood. On the rare occasions when Nora refers to her children, she speaks of them as 'such sweet little things' (p. 15), 'my sweet little darlings' (p. 22) and 'my pretty little dollies' (p. 22), suggesting that while she is not lacking maternal feeling, she sees her children primarily as toys to play with and show off when it suits her. Her final decision to leave because of her 'duty to [her]self' (p. 82) is unhampered by feelings of true guilt towards her children, in striking contrast to the alternative German ending to the play

when, ' trembling', she declares that ' I cannot leave them' (p. 88). The fact that Ibsen dubbed this conclusion ' a barbaric outrage' (Thomas, p. 74) shows that he specifically intended for Nora to be portrayed as a woman who was not exhaustively dedicated to family life: he knew that not all women share the same priorities and wanted to make society aware of this. Ibsen's sensitivity concerning the thought process of women is made apparent with the contrast between the approaches of Hedda, Miss Tesman and Thea Elvsted to pregnancy. Jorgen's old aunt has devoted her life to raising him, asking insistently ' Isn't it the only joy I have in this world, to help you along your road, my darling boy?' (p. 174). Her maternal instinct is never questioned, from the moment when she eagerly prompts Jorgen about the pregnancy, asking for news of ' any prospects' (p. 172). As for Thea, her childlessness causes her to cling onto Lovborg's manuscript: Ibsen neatly demonstrates that some women will always need something to nurture. Her reaction to Lovborg's account of destroying the manuscript is striking, as she ' shrieks' and declares, ' For the rest of my life it'll be as though you'd killed a little child' (p. 243). This dramatic reaction to the destruction of something which is not, after all, even human contrasts effectively with Hedda's cool detachment from the notion of pregnancy. She almost seems sickened by the idea, irritably begging Miss Tesman to ' leave me be' (p. 178) when she is questioned about it. Her reaction to Brack's hints of ' a natural aptitude' for a certain ' vocation' which ' most other women' (p. 209) possess is a similarly rankled ' Oh be quiet I say!' (p. 209). Perhaps Hedda realises she is not like ' most other women' in this sense and at moments like these vents her frustration at being different and misunderstood. Hedda Gabler is certainly one of Ibsen's most complex female characters. It seems clear that

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she is hungry for power, to such an extent that she wants Tesman to go into politics, simply 'because I'm bored' (p. 207); her fervent curiosity about a world that 'a young girl - isn't supposed to know about' (p. 219) explains her time spent with Lovborg. Her love for pistols is surely representative of her desire to be part of the man's world she has so little access to - the fact that at one point Brack has to 'ease the pistol out of her hand' (p. 199) shows her reluctance to release this method of escapism (which is ultimately permanent) from her mundane life. She is very unsure of her own character, unable to explain her bitchiness towards Miss Tesman concerning the hat. 'These things just suddenly come over me. And then I can't resist them. Oh, I don't know myself how to explain it' (p. 206). This confusion renders her less cruel, explaining her snappiness and making her a more sympathetic character. With this portrayal Ibsen demonstrates an understanding of the thought process behind women's actions: her behavior, although often rash, is never simply cruel or violent for the sake of it. The depth of Nora's character is a final example of Ibsen's perception of the less obvious elements of a woman's personality. Her manipulative powers are almost admirable; she manages to make the most of her role as Torvald's frivolous doll wife to obtain certain rewards. For instance, she offers to 'wrap the money [which she is requesting] up in some pretty gilt paper' (p. 4), knowing expertly how to make her ideas superficially more acceptable to Torvald, who soon agrees to hand over the money. Ibsen is clearly a sharp observer of women's coyness as is apparent in his stage directions which show Nora 'toying with her coat buttons, and without looking at [Torvald]' (p. 4) ñ the playwright seems fully aware of the double sided nature of a woman's charm. One of her most impressive achievements, gaining enough money for

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her husband's recovery, arguably depicts her as a heroine who bravely takes the initiative when circumstances dictate it, despite her 'featherbrained' exterior. 'I believe that first and foremost I am an individual' (p. 82) is surely the most significant line in the play. Not only does it reflect Ibsen's admirable open-mindedness for his time, but also a real understanding of women and their desire to be seen as something other than half of a marriage. By portraying his male characters, especially Torvald and Jorgen, as rather dull conformists who do not (or will not) understand the potential of women, Ibsen makes his own perceptions particularly convincing and refreshing.

EDITION USED: Ibsen, Henrik. *Four Major Plays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.