

A doll's house, henrik johan ibsen



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Henrik Johan Ibsen was an extremely influential Norwegian playwright writing around the turn of the twentieth century, and is considered by many to be largely responsible for the rise of the modern realistic drama. His plays were considered scandalous in much of society at the time, when Victorian values of family life and propriety were still very much the norm, and any challenge to them was viewed as immoral and even outrageous. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many of his plays act as an attack on the society he inhabited, and his characters often choose to free themselves from its restrictions, sometimes passively, some times violently but always dramatically.

Ibsen's personal struggle to realise himself in spirit and in truth coincided most productively with his efforts to effect a 'revolution of the human mind' and subsequent sociological changes. Ibsen's society appears both affluent and agreeable yet only for those who understand how to operate it successfully. The Helmers, for example, in *A Doll's House*, live well. Their house is "tasteful" ii, with Porters and Maids to help set up a "Christmas Tree".

When we first meet Nora she is reprimanded by her husband Torvald for "squandering money", and yet Torvald's subsequent and consistent use of pet names, "pet", "songbird" and (my personal favourite) "little squirrel" convey an air of joviality regarding her spending. But we learn quickly that such benefits come at a price, and that in exchange for societal involvement, one must conform to a view of proper conduct which is, in many respects, extremely narrow, savagely enforced and unforgiving. For a man of Ibsen's generation, the great opponent of man was seen to be societyiii The society

Ibsen creates also offers us a picture of the patriarchal nature of the world he himself inhabited. In Hedda Gabler we are aware of the social status Tesman has over his new wife, although we are painfully aware that she is much more powerful and magnetic a figure.

In A Dolls House Torvald's control over Nora lends the book its title. She is a porcelain doll in his wooden house that he expects to dance at his command, " Why don't you run through the tarantella and try out the tambourine", an offer presented as a question but with an authoritative rhetoric behind it. He talks to her with dripping patronisation, " my little spendthrift", and then delights in his masculinity as he stands " quite alone with your young and trembling loveliness" at the end. It is a society which Ibsen himself may well have wished to be free of.

Shortly after his birth his family's fortunes took a significant turn for the worse. While his mother took up work and turned for solace to religion, his father declined into alcoholism and severe depression. It is, therefore, quite understandable that he chooses to attack the male supremacy which deserted him and his family, and yet still appeared to him quite prevalent in the old fashioned society. Like Hedda Gabler he wanted colour to come into the black-and white photograph of his society.

Read also about Hedda received this in the form of the Dionysian Eilert Loveborg who brought with him poetry and love, dying when " he was shot in the abdomen", from where blood would have flowed freely, giving even more " beautiful" colour noticeable to the world. Starved of the luxury of colourful figures from his past, Ibsen instead created pseudo-societies with

exaggerated stifling environments and, in them, characters keen to experience real life by freeing themselves from the claustrophobic conditions of their captivity. A Dolls House features perhaps the most patriarchal society. In Hedda Gabler the supreme male has been described variously as “ a wet fish”, “ limp and useless”, and “ a pain in the ass”. Tesman, though dominant in his society, is still a child to his “ Aunty Julie”, the rhyming first and second names adding something to his juvenile dependence, and takes “ the enchanting Hedda Gabler” iv on a honeymoon and chooses to spend his time in research for his book.

Torvald in A Dolls House is quite different. In a production I saw, which I have learned from my reading seems to be a normality, he was a tall strikingly attractive man. He is the alpha male in his society, and certainly in the sample of society Ibsen permits us to see. His competition consists of the dying Rank and the slightly unstable Krogstad. In the production I saw his authority over Nora was a mixture between latent aggression on his part and sexual fascination on hers.

What we see on stage is a societal-oppressed milieu in which characters are imprisoned. Their attempt at freedom, therefore, is an attempt to be free from their situation and the situations of society. The plays are not merely a subjective quest for personal realisation but also an objective effort towards imaginative insight into the main tendencies of an age and a civilisation. v Dr Rank is an interesting case to consider first. Although not keen to try and be free of his surroundings he is a rather eloquent testimony to what the society adds up to, and could, consequently, stand as a warning to Nora.

By external measures he is a successful figure, rich and well respected, and yet, despite his role as a doctor, he is unable to cure himself from syphilis, which, as a mirror to the Helmer's marriage (and indeed that of the Gablers), does not affect any "well-groomed", "prosperous" and "respectable" exterior but which eats away at vital organs leaving him "rotten to the core". In Dr Rank, whose name simultaneously means both high social status and foul smell, we see a personification of the destructive elements of the society, and as Nora talks to him, "I always think it's tremendous fun having you", flirts with him, "I am yours body and soul" and watches him, "He was going to shut himself up and die", she becomes aware of his condition as a foreshadow of her own, "This ugly thing has come between us... thoughts of death and decay", and she decides to act, "We must try to free ourselves from it." In Dr Rank we have encapsulated the destructive ironies at the heart of this middle-class ethic, presented to us as an inherited, incurable, fatal infection.

One cannot relieve themselves of it, only attempt to avoid contracting it. vi Kristine Linde also offers an intriguing impetus to Nora as well as being an interesting comparison. When we first encounter Nora she is bustling round her rooms efficiently and happily, she begins humming to herself, and talks gaily with the people around her, "Come on out Torvald, and see what I've bought". Kristine, on the other hand, appears a more forlorn character. Her first line is to be delivered "subdued and rather hesitantly", and her words echo her manner and she stands stripped of everything she had, left with "nothing at all."

.. not even a broken heart to grieve over. ” In sharp contrast to the apparent joviality and health of Torvald and Nora, Kristine, comparatively young, seems to have prematurely aged, so much so that Nora has trouble placing her at their first meeting, “ I’m afraid you don’t recognise me”. In a recent production I saw this difference was made perhaps overly clear. The actress playing Kristine wore heavy eye shadow and white base on her face, giving her a thin, drawn look.

The savagery she has been forced to endure on the outskirts of society, “ opening a little shop, running a little school”, “ these last three years have been one long relentless drudge”, manifest themselves both in her appearance, and in her desperate desire to be re-admitted into the ranks of accepted middle class citizens, “ I couldn’t stand it any longer being cut off up there”. She stands as a doll herself, a figurine which Ibsen holds up to illustrate a potential consequence of the freedom Nora so craves by the end. Her condition seems to quite oppose Sartre’s comment at the opening of this essay, as the characters freedom seems to have forced life from both her and her husband leaving her little more than a porcelain shell, unrecognisable as her former self, and eager to re-admit herself into the society she strove to be free from. She has tried an alternative life, and the experience almost killed her.

It is a point which, as we see as the play develops, casts an all important ironic shadow over Nora’s emancipatory departure at the end. As I have already mentioned, Torvald is a very different creature to George Tesman, and Nora’s reaction is equally distinct. In Hedda Gabler Hedda’s escape at the end is, in an audiences eyes, more understandable perhaps than that of <https://assignbuster.com/a-dolls-house-henrik-johan-ibsen/>

Nora. I will explore later the idea of suicide and death as a means of freedom, but for the meantime we can consider them both a release from societal constraints.

Hedda suffers the indignity of a boring husband, “ the whole of that case was crammed full of nothing but notes”, an overbearing in-law, “ Well, of course I had to come and see how you’ve settled in”, a vibrant former associate who draws attention to the freedom she craves, “ it must be beautiful”, and a sexually predatory neighbour, “ Dearest Hedda... believe me...

I shall not abuse my position. ” Her situation is one of all consuming claustrophobia as, one by one, all these factors move in upon her. This was demonstrated with some beauty in a production I saw some years ago in which the walls were moved in a foot at a time during the black out between each act. By the end Hedda physically had to squeeze herself into her anti-room where she shot herself surrounded by Tesman’s books, loose leaves of Loveborg’s manuscript, a dying rose from Brack and Miss Tesman’s hat. It was a very powerful moment when you watched her raising the gun to her temple with physical difficulty due to the lack of space. Nora does not find herself in this kind of claustrophobia.

The conflict in A Dolls House is due to the way characters, specifically Nora, hide their true selves from each other and society. The claustrophobia and feeling of imprisonment, therefore, is as much internal as external. As Hedda strives to free herself from the oppression manifested in the characters around her, Nora strives to free herself from the lies and deceits that have become evident in herself and those around her. Characters in A Dolls House

willingly exist in a situation of untruth or inadequate truth which conceals conflict and contradiction. vii But what exactly does Nora strive to be free from? What causes these internal “ conflicts and contradictions”. An easy answer might be that of Torvald’s patriarchal supremacy.

The title of the play pays homage to the position she holds in the house, and her husband calls on her for light amusement, sex and dancing. And yet the opening scenes may call this into question. For we see, in action, Nora controlling Torvald expertly. He may adopt a controlling tone, “ Ah, but that doesn’t mean we can afford to be extravagant”, “ You didn’t go nibbling a macaroon or two? “, yet she is still getting her own way, both “ nibbling” macaroons and spending money.

There may even be a sense that Torvald knows this and that part of their relationship requires him to set the rules and Nora to flout them. One production beautifully displayed this quality by Torvald’s brushing sugar from Nora’s lips and collar as she denies eating macaroons. There is also no evidence of Nora ever feeling patronised by Torvald’s names, indeed she uses them herself to retain control over him. The answer might be that both are role playing, and over the years have developed a highly attractive and, initially, warm bandage based on this sense of identity adoption.