

# Keeping up appearances



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“A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen, in many ways, addresses the divide between the concept of work itself and the perceptions of one’s own work. In reality, a person’s idea of work can differ from the kind of work actually done. When people think of the word “work,” images that come into mind include physical labor or any type of visible and tangible job or career. Household duties and production, however, is hardly ever accounted for. The emotional and mental labor of being placed in a specific gender role is also hard work. There is no monetary compensation involved. Instead, the protagonist of the play, Nora, is dedicated to the subtle rewards of keeping up appearances, both her own and her family’s. This facade shows how a woman’s place at home or at work is solely based off producing a certain image at all times. Women are trapped by society’s forced idealistic view of who they should be, and true freedom is compromised when a sense of control and individuality is lost.

In the beginning of the play, Nora’s idea of the work she does equates to the work she is expected to do by her husband, Torvald. However, the play gets complicated when this divide is realized. Nora holds the family’s reputation in her words, behavior, and actions. She is dedicated to making her husband happy at all costs and even protects him to do so, much to Torvald’s dismay. Keeping up appearances is itself a form of work in this play and the theme evolves into something that is largely self-destructive. Nora is oppressed not only by both societal forces and her own husband. She is living a life she knows is a lie, and it almost acts as a daily performance. She acts unintelligent and child-like so as to validate Torvald’s masculinity and power. The image of the perfect housewife that she represents replaces her

individuality and personhood with the illusion of a happy family and a husband to be envious of.

Torvald teases Nora and calls her belittling names like his “ little squirrel” and “ skylark.” (Ibsen 4). He toys with her emotions using the promise of money and materialistic items. In a way, Torvald controls Nora. Although, Nora may very well be aware of his control over her, she accepts it and her role as subservient and dependent on the man in her life. She succumbs to the role of the victim and this role becomes her work and her work begins to define who she is. The image she chooses to represent for the sake of a good reputation causes her to lose herself and become only an object of affection and Torvald’s “ trophy wife.”

Nora perceives her work as performance. “ Your squirrel would run about and do all her tricks if you would be nice, and do what she wants...I would play the fairy and dance for you in the moonlight, Torvald.” (Ibsen 39). She also uses her physical appearance and takes advantage of her feminine features in order to get her way. “ If your little squirrel were to ask you for something very, very prettily—?” (Ibsen 39). Nora’s words confirm that she is putting on an act as the woman of the house and acknowledges that her “ tricks” and childlike demeanor serves to please Torvald.. She constantly depends and works on this image of herself and falls victim to the lie itself. The more a person lives a lie, the greater the chance the lie will consume that person. Nora’s manipulation eventually ended up manipulating not only Torvald, but also and more importantly, herself. “ To be able to be free from care, quite free from care; to be able to play and romp with the children; to be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it!”

(Ibsen 17). Here, Nora is addressing her desire for a state of freedom where she will no longer feel anxious or stressed. Ironically, she is referring to all the things that restrict or limit her including her husband who controls her. She thinks she can find true freedom confined in a traditional domestic sphere with Torvald. This quote is critical to her evolution and eventual change in beliefs as the play continues and Nora realizes what freedom really means to her. Thus, the true nature of her work is realized and she grows from it. Nora was manipulated by her own lies and the expectations of others, specifically the men around her. The expectation itself became an emotionally and mentally taxing workload and constraint. It is this sort of oppression from men and society that continue to hurt women and ultimately erase their importance and potential.

Nora's idea of work evolves as the play continues. She has lived her life acting for and pleasing her husband. The climax of the play complicated Nora's idea of working in a specific manner to preserve her marriage when she realize the truth about Torvald's intentions and his relationship with her. When Nora admits to committing a crime to save Torvald's life, he admits that to him, the illusion of happiness was more important than the reality of happiness itself. He stated, " From this moment happiness is not the question; all that concerns us is to save the remains, the fragments, the appearance—" (Ibsen 71). Nora chose to save Torvald's life but Torvald did not reciprocate or show any sign of empathy. In fact, when he received the news that he was in the clear from trouble, he excitedly proclaimed that his life is saved, not Nora's. Nora then realizes the selfish nature of Torvald's affections and how he possesses no real love for her. It is then when the she

realizes that keeping up appearances erases her existence and does nothing for her as an individual. Her idea of who controls her work has shifted from a man's hold to her own.

“ I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.” (Ibsen 74). Nora is aware that putting on an act will only hurt her in the end. She thought she was happy pleasing her father and then her husband when all she truly felt was remorse and emptiness. She understands that her life and behavior has been a performance forced by the pressures of society and her husband in order to create a fabricated image of an ideal family. During this turning point, Nora knows that she no longer has to please men and has the ability to be a real person. She can exist without Torvald's presence and without his subtle or immediate control over her. Nora's perspective on the type of work she does and why she does it changed for the better in Act III.

Henrik Ibsen's “ A Doll's House,” describes work in ways that are sometimes ignored. Nora's idea of work is pleasing her husband and maintaining his version of who he thinks she should be and how she should act. This lie causes her to lose individuality and creates a performance out of her life. Nora worked to be the perfect wife and paid little attention to what she wanted. Her goals and beliefs were set aside for a man. Although in many ways, Nora worked to manipulate Torvald, she still ended up hurting herself in the process of constantly being someone she is not. Her work was defined and orchestrated by a man. Oppressive societal forces directs women to look and act a certain way at all times for the sake of maintaining an image.

Unsurprisingly, Nora was not keeping up her appearance any more than she was keeping up Torvald's.