

A doll's house: the subordinate woman

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A Doll House by Henrik Ibsen The Subordinate Woman 4/2/2010 DePauw University Mira Yaseen Mira Yaseen Professor Anthony Comm 214 2 April 2010 A Doll House by Henrik Ibsen The Subordinate Woman In the wake of realism, Ibsen came upon us with an outspoken controversial play that encompassed many realities of the conservative Victorian era.

Presenting a genuine image of the societal issues at the time, A Doll House gives us an insight to the world of women in the nineteenth century; it tells us about their struggles and realizations. Nora Helmer's decision to leave her husband and children to educate and explore herself reflects Ibsen's hope for a reform in women's role in the society. This necessitates a change in the masculine point of view towards women. Nora's characteristics pertain to the stereotypical image of the subordinate woman.

However, Nora's contradictory actions -such as her spendthrift nature and her attempt to buy the 'cheapest outfits', and her ineffectuality yet her ability to save her husband's life regardless of her methods- shed light on these characteristics and show that they are products of the patriarchal society's superiority and its expectations and misconceptions of women (Jacobus 660, 668). We first meet Nora as she enters her house after a Christmas shopping spree. We are introduced to Torvald and Nora's relationship; " is that my little lark twittering out there? he calls on her, " Is that my squirrel rummaging around" (Jacobus 663). The first noticeable thing about the relationship is Nora's inferiority to Torvald. As the interaction continues between Nora and Torvald, her childishness becomes evident. Nora wipes her mouth and puts the macaroons away so that Torvald would not know about them. Later on in the play, when Nora and Torvald finally <https://assignbuster.com/a-dolls-house-the-subordinate-woman/>

have the first serious conversation in their marriage, Nora reveals how her father treated her; “ he used to call me his doll-child” she declares.

Obviously, Nora has been pampered her whole life, first by her father and now by Torvald, who treats her the same way, as his doll-wife. This doll-like lifestyle prevented Nora's maturity and amplified her childishness instead. Therefore, her childishness is a result of the way she was brought up and later treated by her husband. As the audience is introduced to Nora's spoiled nature, it is not surprising to find out that she is a spendthrift. However, this view is challenged once we learn more about Nora's seemingly contradictory behavior.

She is depicted as a wastrel from the beginning of the play. As Torvald just got a promotion and a raise, Nora urges him to give her more money for Christmas shopping, “ Oh but Torvald, this year we should really let ourselves go a bit” she argues. She even suggests that he take a loan just so that she can let herself ‘ go a bit’ (664). Nonetheless, this image is later contested once we find out that Nora found a way to get money to save her husband's life, regardless of her unorthodox methods of getting the money.

Not only did Nora find a way to get the money, but she was also able to make the payments on time by doing some copying to earn money.

Furthermore, Nora is also seen as resourceful and money-smart when she mentions buying the ‘ simplest cheapest outfits’ for herself (668). In addition, although Nora might have been shown as a squanderer, she is still trying to pay the debt and might have been nagging Torvald for more money to secretly save up for the loan's payments. This contradiction in Nora's actions

illustrates society's low expectation of women which reflects on their personalities.

If Nora was given a chance from the beginning she could have excelled. She is only after luxury because this is what the society conditions her to be interested in. It is the life style that both her father and her husband provided her with and expected her to embrace. Thus, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy that did not encourage her to change. The initial image of Nora's personality gradually changes throughout the play from a pampered incapable woman to a seemingly witty and resourceful one. However, her unawareness and inexperience in dealing with situations disadvantage her.

We see Nora's capability in the mere fact that she thought of forging her father's signature to be able to travel to Italy for treatment. Nora remarks that she could not give the trip up, it " was to save my husband's life" (672). In spite of that, Torvald considers her helpless and clueless; " But you think I love you any less for now knowing how to handle your affairs? No, no-just lean on me' I'll guide you and teach you. I wouldn't be a man if this feminine helplessness didn't make you twice as attractive to me" he protests (688).

Nora proves her capability, yet, the novelty of taking charge in a situation complicates it. Nora is not aware of the seriousness of a crime like forgery. She goes further to assume that " somewhere in the books these things are allowed" (672). Moreover, she acts naively when she reveals to Krogstad earlier in that conversation that she did indeed forge her father's signature, " I signed Papa's name" she admits candidly. She reasons that her father

could not sign the papers due to his sickness. Nora thinks that her circumstances justify her actions and does not understand the rigidity of law.

This example accentuates the fact that the gender inequality and the inferior position occupied by women in the Victorian era, denied them rights and chances that would have made them more knowledgeable and capable.

Education, for example was not the same for both sexes. Women's education was focused on teaching skills that would make them better house wives, like embroidery and sewing, while men's education was geared towards preparing them for their future careers, as they were taught law and languages. Work was almost exclusive to men. Nora points that out and expresses that it is a fulfilling experience for women too.

She notes that copying " was wonderful fun, sitting around and working like that, earning money. It was almost like being a man" (668). If we consider Nora and Torvald an average Victorian couple, I assume that if Nora had the same education her husband did she probably would have understood the strictness of the law and the consequences of forgery. A society that did not understand the importance of educating women created a class of ignorant women who could not take action or responsibility for their actions. Torvald and the audience are not the only ones who see Nora as incompetent, Mrs.

Linde, a woman, shares this same view. Nora seems to be very selfish and self-centered. After she learns about Mrs. Linde's dire circumstances after her husband passed away, she starts rambling about her own life and good fortune. " I don't want to be selfish, I want to think only of you today" she says and adds that her husband is getting " a big salary and lots of

commissions. Our lives'll be so different; we'll be able to do whatever we want. Oh Kristine, I'm so relieved, so happy. To have no more worries, all one needs, isn't it wonderful? " (666). Like Torvald, Mrs.

Linde thinks Nora is inept. She thinks that Nora " really knows so little of life's burdens". Nora is aware of the way other people see her and it aggravates her. We see her frustration when she responds to Mrs. Linde: " You're just like the others; you all think I'm incapable of anything serious" (667). The words 'the others' and 'you all' suggest that Nora has been treated this way by almost everyone, starting with her father, later on her husband, and now her female friend as Jacobus points out: " She is made of much stronger stuff than anyone has given her credit for" (660).

This suggests that Nora has been considered inferior and treated as an incapable individual by the whole society. Ibsen makes sure the viewer and reader think of her as incapable too since her behavior at the beginning supports this conception. Nonetheless, this depiction changes when we find out that Nora has gone to great lengths to save her husband's life. The fact that Mrs. Linde sees Nora as incapable is a very crucial point; it represents the way women viewed their selves and their abilities.

They seem to have had low expectations of themselves; they succumbed to the society's conventions like Nora succumbed to her husband's repression. The society's perceptions shaped theirs as well and that is why a transformation of their role in society at that time was needed. All these contradictions in Nora's character imply that Nora did not have the strong will to overcome the limitations set in front of her by the society and her

husband, until the crisis pushes her to make a decision, and leave Torvald and her children. The first audience to watch this play found Nora's reaction preposterous.

Nora goes on a mission to discover herself, outside of the doll house. She realizes that what she has been living is not the real world, that she cannot be a good person, wife and mother if she does not know herself. This play does not only send a message about women's rights, equality and society, but it stresses the importance of individuality and self-discovery in the first place. The primary duty of anyone is to find out who they truly are (Jacobus 661). This play can be interpreted in a humane context rather than a feminine one. The stereotype of the inferior, naive, and incapable woman appears throughout the play. We see it in Nora's actions, which are contradictory to what we expect at the beginning. This progression reaches its peak when Nora finally decides to leave and sets on a journey of self-discovery. Her departure highlights the importance of and expresses the hope for a reform of the repressed and inferior status of women in the society, which was caused by the supremacy of men and the patriarchal society. Works Cited Jacobus, Lee A. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's. Print.