

The depiction of the theme of sacrifice in Ibsen's Doll's House

Life



The premiere of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in 1879 ended with the shutting of a door but started a passionate debate about that controversial action. Ibsen crafted an exposition of the social, economic, and psychological conflicts faced by the women of his time, through a depiction of the hypocrisy within the seemingly happy marriage of the play's principal characters, Nora and Torvald Helmer (Smith, 1992). The play particularly raised questions about the notion of female self-sacrifice in a patriarchal world. The classification of gender in the nineteenth century was characterized by two distinct and opposite forms of masculinity and femininity, resulting in strictly defined gender roles. Women were assigned their duties and obligations by the patriarchy, and in matrimony, women functioned as tools to serve others (Hossain, 2016). This obligation invariably meant that a woman's right to happiness and freedom was almost always completely sacrificed. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's construction of 'sacrifice' through Nora's character illuminates the narrowly prescribed male dominance/female subordination gender roles in nineteenth century Norwegian society. However, Nora's ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice of her children and domestic responsibilities, to discover herself and seek fulfillment, is an act that deviates from all societal expectations of how a woman of those times was meant to behave. Thus, Ibsen challenges these binary gender roles by recasting the type of sacrifice that Nora ultimately makes, to provoke the audience members of the time to question the role of women in marriage and society.

Through the construction of Nora's sacrifice of her own material comforts to repay the loan she procures, Ibsen illuminates the prescribed role of women

as financially dependent spouses. Ibsen introduces a suspenseful flow of events when Nora reveals her secret to Mrs. Linde: in order to save her ailing husband's life, Nora has procured a loan without Torvald's knowledge by forging her father's signature. Nora's revelation about her dishonesty provides a foreshadowing of future events that results in the unraveling of the Helmers' seemingly happy marriage. Nora makes personal sacrifices, saving half of the money Torvald gives her and working all hours of the night in order to repay the loan. Ibsen's use of realistic dialogue between the two women enables the audience to identify with Nora's plight. Ibsen highlights Norwegian society's patriarchal structure wherein women have little economic power when Mrs. Linde exclaims, "A wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent." Additionally, Nora is compelled to make the necessary sacrifices and repay the loan in secret as she asserts, "How painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything!" Thus, Ibsen illuminates the narrowly prescribed gender role of husband as financial provider and wife as dependent through a construction of Nora's sacrifice of material comforts.

Extending beyond material comforts, Nora's sacrifice of her own opinions and desires to please her husband further illuminates the prescribed role of women as submissive wives. Torvald forbids Nora from eating macaroons, and Nora replies, "I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to." Using the everyday issue of food preferences, Ibsen hints at the reality of Nora's unpalatable situation: she lives in a society with a binary power structure wherein the man dominates and the woman submits.

Additionally, Ibsen uses symbolism to convey the psychological state of his

characters. A key dramatic moment in the play is Nora's dancing of the tarantella. It can be viewed as a symbol of Nora herself: the dance is frivolous on the surface just like Nora, who maintains a merry and carefree facade. However, the tarantella has a dark history – victims bitten by the poisonous tarantula spider were thought to be cured by frenzied dancing (Lee, 1910) – just like Nora, who has poison in her veins, be it the terrible secret that she harbors and that she fears will “ sting” her, or the suppression that she has been subjected to throughout her life. The only way that she can express her repressed feelings and desires is through her wild and frenzied dancing. Nora's inner torments are hinted at when Torvald exclaims, “ You are dancing as if your life depended on it.” The tarantella thus becomes a temporary means through which she can liberate herself from her role as the submissive, self-sacrificing wife.

The concepts of honor and sacrifice are inextricably linked in the play as manly honor and feminine sacrifice were prescribed virtues in nineteenth century Norwegian society

(Hossain, 2016). Through Ibsen's construction of Nora's sacrifice of her honor, and Torvald's refusal to do the same, the audience is illumined by the fact that Nora and Torvald are simply playing out their narrowly prescribed roles. Nora sacrifices her honor and secures a loan through illegal means to save Torvald's life, making herself vulnerable to Krogstad's blackmail and Torvald's wrath. Ibsen's psychologically penetrating characterizations make Nora's and Torvald's struggles extremely convincing. When Torvald opines, “ But no man would sacrifice his honor for the one he loves”, Nora responds by

asserting, " It is a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done." Both Nora and Helmer are acting out their own idealist scripts (Moi, 2006). Nora follows the prescribed role of the woman as the noble and pure figure who sacrifices all for love. Even the illegal act of forging a signature is idealized in her mind and reinforces her sacrifice. Similarly, Torvald is following his idealized script of being an honorable and principled man when he rages at Nora upon discovering her secret, calling her " a hypocrite, a liar, a criminal" despite the irrevocable truth that Nora sacrifices her honor to save HIS life. Thus, by juxtaposing manly honor with feminine sacrifice, Ibsen emphasizes Nora's unquestioning following of the idealized script that society has imposed upon her.

As the play unfolds, Nora's realization of the sacrifice of her individuality and independence at the hands of, first her father, and then her husband, is constructed by Ibsen through the use of metaphor, monologue, and symbolism. The doll is the most important metaphor in A Doll's House and as the " doll" of the title, Nora realizes that she has merely been a plaything for the men in her life with the singular purpose of entertaining them. She realizes that throughout her life, she has sacrificed her own opinions and adopted her father's and Torvald's views as her own. Through a seminal monologue crafted by Ibsen, Nora reminds Torvald that she has " existed merely to perform tricks" for him and that their home " has been nothing but a playroom", with Nora being his " doll wife, just as at home (she) was Papa's doll child". The Christmas tree also symbolically conveys the transformation of Nora from a doll to a real person. The tree is meant to serve a decorative purpose, just as Nora is viewed by Torvald as a decorative

household appendage. The tree's disarray as the play progresses parallels the unraveling of Nora's cheerful doll image. Nora then decides to leave the security and stability of her home to reclaim her identity.

Thus, Ibsen recasts Nora's final sacrifice, radically departing from the forms of sacrifice expected of women during his time. Ibsen's construction of Nora's sacrifice of her home and family provoked the audience to question the roles of women in marriage and society. Nora leaving her family to pursue her right to self-fulfillment created a raging controversy and triggered a backlash from men who refused to acknowledge the existence of an oppressive patriarchal society (Templeton, 1989). In fact, Nora was demonized for her obscene selfishness in sacrificing her innocent children. However, Ibsen's play was enthusiastically received by feminist thinkers in Norway and throughout Europe (Creamer, 2016). Ibsen admitted that he detested "the lie masquerading as sacrifice and duty in our social arrangements": he saw "sacrifice" as an imposition on women to ensure their subordination (Goldman, 1914). By crafting a modern, realistic drama set in an ordinary living room, with realistic props, detailed stage directions, everyday language, and identifiable characters, Ibsen held up a mirror to his audience, challenging them to think about the realities of their society. With the staging of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's theatrical images became easily accessible, thus creating empathy for, and identification with, his principal female character (Hossain, 2016). While a realist like Ibsen did not provide solutions to social problems in his theatrical works, he provoked his audience to reflect upon these critical issues.

In the one hundred and thirty nine years since the premiere of *A Doll's House*, there have been innumerable productions and adaptations of the play, and it continues to be performed to date (Sanza, 2017). The effectiveness of a text in translation may be impacted by linguistic variation and cultural nuances. However, the continued relevance of the play to contemporary society bears testament to the fact that Ibsen crafted a deeply absorbing and eminently stageable drama with universal themes. While the present social and artistic environments are not similar to those found in Ibsen's day, the search for love, respect, and individual freedoms still forms the core of humanity (Karim, Fathema, & Hakim, 2015). As Nora declares, one's most sacred duty is one's duty to oneself.