

Henrik Ibsen's  
description of  
women's rights as  
depicted in his play, *A Doll's House*...



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Most works of literature are heavily influenced by the time in which they were written. They often become subject to multiple interpretations based on historical significance. In *A Doll House*, written in 1879 by Henrik Ibsen, much of the emphasis is placed on the gender roles present in that period of time. Gender roles have only recently evolved from what they were for many centuries. In the first years in which this play was performed, viewers were quite offended by some of the choices that Ibsen made. In fact, some directors opted to change the ending so that Nora returned to her husband. This alternate ending fit better within the expectations of society at the time (Brunnemer 9). Although Ibsen claims he did not intentionally write this play as a catalyst for women's rights, it has since become a major theme in discussions about this text. The main character, Nora Helmer, is central in developing theories about gender roles in this play. Commentators generally classify Nora as "(1) a feminist heroine; (2) a courageous, possibly tragic, human being; (3) [or] a spoiled brat whose decision to leave her home and family is just playacting" (Lingard). Ibsen uses each of his characters to portray the zeitgeist of his time period; one where women were subject to their husbands and the laws of society.

The theme of feminism seems abundantly clear and intentional throughout the play. Ibsen begins the story with Nora being a stereotypical housewife in the 1800s. In Helmer's first line, he refers to his wife as a "lark". He goes on to call her other pet names like "squirrel" and "spendthrift" (Ibsen, "A Doll House" 1598-1599). He appears to be talking down to her in order to exert his authority over her. By establishing their relationship in the beginning,

Ibsen paints the picture of a typical household during this time period and allows the ending to be that much more dramatic.

It is important to establish Nora as a typical wife early on in order to achieve the full effect that Ibsen intended with the ending. In the final scene, she realizes that she does not have to remain as her husband's "doll," she can be independent. The courage that it would take for a woman to leave her husband in a time where women were so oppressed is what convinces me that feminism is a central and intentional theme in *A Doll House*.

According to Professor Joan Templeton of Long Island University, Ibsen's life serves as a testament to his real motive in writing *A Doll House*. The story is based off of Ibsen's good friend Laura Petersen Kieler. Laura was married to a man with an extreme fear of debt. She borrowed money in secret to finance a trip to Italy, hoping the vacation would help her husband recover from tuberculosis. Although she worked hard to repay the loan, it was not enough. She forged a check, and her husband soon discovered her crime. Her husband left her, claiming she was "an unfit mother" and she was placed in an insane asylum (Templeton, "The 'Doll House' Backlash" 35).

Knowing that Ibsen wrote this story about an event so near to his heart, it is difficult to believe that he did not have some anger about how unfairly his friend was treated because of her gender. He blamed her husband for allowing her to do "unworthy work" and for not caring about her physical well-being. She did everything in love, yet she was treated like a monster (Templeton, "The 'Doll House' Backlash" 35).

Critics of the feminist theme in *A Doll House* often cite Ibsen's own words at a Norwegian Women's Rights Festival in 1898. He says, "I thank you for the toast but must disclaim the honor of having consciously for the women's rights movement." Instead, Ibsen goes on to say,

"To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. And if you read my books carefully you will understand this. True enough it is desirable to solve the problem of women's rights along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity" (Ibsen, *Speeches and new letters* 65).

This statement brings up the theory that *A Doll House* is not really a play about feminism, but rather a greater message about humanity in general. In this theory, Nora represents Everyman. Supporters of this viewpoint, such as Eric Bentley, claim that "the play would be just as valid were Torvald the wife and Nora the husband" (qtd. in Brunner 10).

Templeton makes one of the best cases for the feminist theme. She has spent much of her life studying the text and researching Ibsen's life to develop her argument. One statement that I was particularly impressed with was her idea to remove gender altogether. What, then, would remain of the story? She says,

"Now let us remove the 'woman question' from *A Doll House*; let us give Nora Helmer the same rights as Torvald Helmer, and let him consider her his equal. What is left of the play? The only honest response is nothing, for if we emancipate Nora, free her from her dollhouse, there is no play; or, rather, there is the resolution of the play, the confrontation between husband and  
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wife and the exit that follows, the only crisis and denouncement that could properly conclude the action" (Templeton, "The 'Doll House' Backlash" 32).

If *A Doll House* is about the everyman, then why is it so important that the main character is a female? If she were given no gender identity, there would be no story. Her departure is only significant because it was so uncommon for a woman to leave her husband in those days. Had a man left his wife in this play, critics would still be talking about the wife and what a tragedy it is to be a single mother in a time where women had so few rights. Either way, there is a focus on the fact that Nora is a woman; that is the backbone of this story.

Other critics find their evidence within the play. In comparing the first two acts with the final act, there seems to be a disconnect between the "two Noras." The first viewers of the play responded that "A Doll House did not have to be taken as a serious statement about women's rights because the heroine of act 3 is an incomprehensible transformation of the heroine of acts 1 and 2" (qtd. in Templeton, "The 'Doll House' Backlash" 29). By this reasoning, Nora can be dismissed altogether and her exit in the last scene becomes merely "silly theatrics." There are certainly some qualities about Nora that can be used to discredit her as a feminist heroine. For example, in the first act she is eating macaroons, but when her husband asks if she has been eating sweets, she lies. Even when asked multiple times, she continually denies having had any sweets (Ibsen, "A Doll House" 1601). On one hand, one might say that her eating what she wants despite her husband's orders alludes to her feminist acts to come. However, others say,

“ Even Nora’s sweet tooth is evidence of her unworthiness, as we see her ‘ surreptitiously devouring the forbidden macaroons,’ even ‘ brazenly offer[ing] macaroons to Doctor Rank, and finally lying in her denial that the macaroons are hers’; eating macaroons in secret suggests that ‘ Nora is deceitful and manipulative from the start’ and her exit thus ‘ reflects only a petulant woman’s irresponsibility” (qtd. in Templeton “ The ‘ Doll House’ Backlash” 30).

Another argument against Nora’s role as a “ heroine feminist” is her flirtatious exchange with Doctor Rank. Using sexuality to one’s benefit is the exact opposite of feminism. This is one point on which I am willing to concede. I do not fully understand how this fact supports the proposed themes of feminism or humanity; this seems to support the claim that Nora is merely a selfish individual. However, Ibsen is certainly entitled to add details for the sole purpose of creating drama, even if it somewhat contradicts the underlying theme.

The final argument against Nora is that, upon leaving, she abandoned her children, leaving them with the very man who treated her as a doll. In response to Templeton’s article, “ The ‘ Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen’s Life, Betsy Bowden of Rutgers University wrote”

“...Nora slams that door and runs away, leaving her beloved children in the hands of a monster, to be distorted as she says she has been. If one imagines the children, awakened by that slamming door, coming in to face their father across the room, one sees that the male-oppressive cycle must begin all over again if there is no heroic woman in the house to resist it.

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Deserted Little Ivar and Bob will be clones of Torvald, little Emmy doomed to repeat her mother's sad story" (qtd. in Templeton, "Ibsen's Nora").

It is certainly difficult to imagine how a mother could leave her children. It may not have been the most honorable thing to do, but do not forget that Ibsen was modeling Nora after his dear friend. In real life, Laura lost her children because she had no choice. Ibsen simply wanted to give Nora the power in this scenario while still achieving the same effect of losing everything. It seems unfair that people often criticize a man that leaves his children less than a woman that does the same. Just because Nora is a woman does not mean she should have to stay in an emotionally abusive marriage for the sake of her children, and taking the children away from their father at this time would have been nearly impossible.

There certainly are valid cases for each side of this argument. It seems evident that Ibsen was making a greater statement when he wrote this play; either about women or about humanity in general. It is possible that Ibsen was apprehensive about overtly supporting such a controversial issue in his time. Or, perhaps he knew that focusing the play on such a prominent issue would help draw attention to his underlying theme. Either way, it seems that *A Doll House* will always be a widely disputed historical play. Despite how far the world has come in establishing equal rights, gender will always be a controversial subject in literature.