

Nora regaining her independence



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The opening of the play 'A Doll's House' by Henrik Ibsen provides the audience with an introduction to the protagonist Nora and an insight into the nature of her marriage with Torvald. Even from this early point in the play Ibsen explores the constitution of marriage in 19th Century Norway, particularly the rigid gender roles that this created within the society. To an extent, Nora conforms to the role of the typical subservient wife, but the audience also encounters elements of independence in her character that have the potential to prevail later on in the play.

In the opening of the play, there is a sense, albeit subtle, of entrapment whereby Nora is trapped in her marriage and in her home, and indeed subservient to their husbands. The stage directions determining Nora's actions, such as "jumps up and claps her hands" or "tosses her head", are slightly erratic and establish an atmosphere of restlessness, subsequent to Nora being housebound and repressed. Ibsen purposely leads the audience to believe that Nora, to an extent, is actually unaware of her own repression, since she never actually says she feels as such (it is only implied through her movements), and is therefore instructively subservient to Torvald; in no way does she attempt to challenge the inequality in their relationship. In doing so, Ibsen subtly highlights how, because this structure of a marriage was so widespread in 19th Century Norway, women were seemingly oblivious to their own lack of freedom. Even if, at this point in the play, Nora was consciously unhappy in her marriage, divorce would have been financially and emotionally overbearing for a woman living in Norway during the 19th Century and thus it is unlikely that women even considered this a viable choice to make, instead choosing to remain subservient, rather than go

against the social norm. Jenette Lee describes how “ the problem of A Doll’s House, for instance, is not concerned with the marriage relations of Nora and Helmer, but with the character of Nora”, emphasising the idea that women like Nora were perhaps lacking in the strength of character needed to liberate themselves, and thus remained subservient.

Furthermore, throughout the opening of the play, Torvald constantly belittles Nora by repetitively comparing her to small, animals, for instance, when he refers to her as “ my little songbird” or “ my squirrel”. The use of animalistic imagery firmly establishes the power dynamics within Nora and Torvald’s marriage, Nora appearing to be the subservient one at this point. The explicitly patriarchal society in which the entirety of the play will be set is also established, indeed an accurate reflection of Norwegian society in the 19th Century. The extensive use of possessive pronouns is also indicative a stereotypical marriage of the time, whereby men adopted the dominant role that came so naturally to them in such a phallogocentric culture, in which women were denied the same rights as men. Critic Brian Downs states “ When Henrik Ibsen wrote A Doll’s House, the institution of marriage was sacrosanct”, and this notion emphasised by how naturally Nora and Torvald embrace the sharply defined marital roles; Torvald is possessive and patronising towards Nora, who accepts this, even pandering to it when she speaks forebodingly of “ when I’m no longer pretty...when Torvald no longer loves me as he does now”. From this Ibsen makes it explicit that Nora is aware of the shallow nature of her husband’s love and subtly criticises women of the period for conforming to marital stereotype of being a subservient wife.

On the contrary, it could be argued that it is primarily Torvald who fits the archetype of a husband in 19th Century Norway, since Ibsen almost immediately reveals to the audience that Nora has been working to pay off her debt and lying about it to her husband. Indeed, this was not an act done in subservience, but rather independence. Nora even goes as far as to describe the experience as “almost being like a man”. Whilst it is clear that, in lying to her husband, Nora is disrespecting the institution of marriage, the notion of women working became increasingly popular in Norway during the 19th Century, and thus Nora’s actions could be perceived as innovative and admirable, particularly to an audience of the period in Norway, who were gradually becoming more comfortable with the concept of women in the workplace. Ibsen was known for his feminist beliefs, and by portraying Nora as independent, it could be said that Ibsen’s intention was to create a role model for Norwegian women of the time, encouraging them to defy the roles in which society has placed them, as Nora has done through this act of deceit. Hattie Morahan, an actress who has played Nora in ‘A Doll’s House’ described how “there is something timeless about [the play]”, and from this it could be said that Nora’s independence has remained influential, even for women of contemporary audiences.

In conclusion, Nora is shown to be both independent and subservient from her husband in the opening of the play. For the most part she is the latter, indeed conforming to the gender roles that existed within marriage during 19th Century Norway. However, Nora does present elements of independence from her husband and in demonstrating this; it was Ibsen’s

intention to highlight the flaws that existed within the constitution of marriage during the aforementioned period.