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The Feminist Value in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a play that revolves around the Helmer family- specifically Nora and her husband Torvald. Torvald and Nora seem to have a happy marriage, with three small children. However, Nora has a potentially ruinous secret. At the beginning of their marriage, Torvald became gravely ill, and the doctors recommended a stay in a warmer climate. Torvald is hesitant to spend the money on a trip, so Nora goes in secret to obtain a loan from Krogstad- a legal counselor who worked with Torvald. Since women were not legally allowed to take out loans for themselves, she forged her father's signature as security. To explain the money, Nora tells Torvald that she inherited money from her father. They take the vacation and Torvald recovers. To pay back her debt to Krogstad, Nora spares a portion of the housekeeping cash and takes on odd jobs whenever she can. At the beginning of the play, an old companion of Nora's, Mrs. Linde, has come to the area to find a job, and Nora makes sure that Torvald gives her employment at the bank. However, this has an unfortunate consequence. Krogstad is fired from his post at the bank, and out of desperation, threatens to reveal Nora's forgery to her husband if she cannot convince him to reinstate Krogstad into his position. While Nora is beside herself at the possibility of being found out, she maintains hope due to her faith in her husband. Nora believes that Torvald will sacrifice himself and take the blame if matters escalate. Nora thinks about asking Dr. Rank, a dear friend both to her and Torvald, for the money. She seems to be about to try when Dr. Rank confesses his love for her, rendering her incapable of doing so.

Eventually, Torvald finds out about Nora's deception, and reacts furiously and selfishly, with no indication of helping his wife. Mrs. Linde, who once had a romantic affair with Krogstead, manages to convince him to withdraw his threats, but by then it is too late for Nora and Torvald. Nora starts to comprehend that her marriage isn't what she thought it was, and over the span of a dramatic discussion with Torvald she realizes that what she craves most is her own identity, and decides that it is her obligation to "bring herself up". Finally, the play ends when she walks out the door and abandons her husband and children. Many readers and critics view this as a feminist piece of literature, and many are adamant that it has nothing to do with women's rights. Ibsen stated outright that he did not consider himself a feminist, and even included things in *A Doll's House* that seem to support the patriarchal society Nora lives in. However, despite these ideas and regardless of intention, by simply writing a character as rich and complex as Nora, Ibsen has given us a work that holds value to feminist ideology.

Ibsen himself denied being concerned with women's rights, and some of the ideas he includes in *A Doll's House* make this clear. At the time of *A Doll's House*'s inception, "British legal reform of marriage had ... accelerated under the pressure to recognize the rights of a wife with respect to her property and her children. Traditionally viewed as private matters and therefore beyond the regulatory realm of secular law, judgments concerning the fairness of existing marriage laws were coming increasingly under judicial scrutiny" (Kelly 15-16). Ibsen seemed to agree with the idea of keeping domestic disputes separate- "The wisdom of continuing to uphold the separation of the public realm of law from the private realm of domesticity grounds the plot of Ibsen's play, in which the heroine's ignorance of the law and her limited understanding of her domestic obligations and rights places her at risk for legal punishment"

(Kelly 16). Nora does not seem to understand the implications of what she's doing. As she says, "Isn't a daughter entitled to save her father from worry and anxiety on his deathbed? Is it a wife entitled to save her husband's life? I might not know very much about the law, but I feel sure of one thing- it must say somewhere that things like this are not allowed" (Ibsen). "Spectators would also have recognized in Nora's entrapment in a doll's life the increasingly contested common law doctrine of 'coverture', by which a wife's legal personality was absorbed in her husband's... Ibsen demonstrates the consequences of this tradition and Nora's failure to develop as an adult woman as the marriage's failure to thrive as a mutual understanding of the husbands and the wife's lived realities" (Kelly 16). In this way, Ibsen shows Nora's inability to function outside of a patriarchal relationship, because that is all she is used to.

Throughout the play, Nora is perpetually trivialized by and condescended to by her husband. He forbids her from eating sweets and calls her diminutive pet names. Despite this, "it is a mistake to think of Nora as having been trapped in an unhappy marriage; the whole point of the play is that she and Torvald have been happy, and that Torvald genuinely loves her, though in a patronizing way. It is worth remembering that Nora forged the note, not to advance herself in some way, but to save her darling husband's life, by financing a trip to sunny Italy, where he could recover far from the severe weather of Norway" (Hornby 471). Hornby points out that "Nora is not a nineteenth-century Everywoman, championing the cause of women's rights, but simply herself, a unique, vital, fascinating creation. We can, and should, generalize from her dilemmas, but the play does not function on the arid level of generalities, like a 1990s performance art piece, but instead on a human level of particular individuals and their relationships" (Hornby 471). Hornby believes that instead of the feminist value residing in the storyline, it is expressed in the depth of Nora as a character and the decisions she makes for

herself. For example, “Nora’s leaving Torvald is not an example for all women, nor an attack on marriage in general. *This* marriage had been a sham, based on the subordination of one partner to another as a child or doll. Nora does not walk out on a male chauvinist pig, but on a gentle, loving, ethical person. In fact, her dissolution with Torvald is not the result of suddenly seeing a brutal side to him, but realizing that he is not the moral paragon he had seemed to be” (Hornby 471). However, “The conflict is not confined... to the marriage of Torvald and Nora. It envelops the entire play, from the sad story of the nurse, a seduced and abandoned servant, to the checkered relationships of Mrs. Linde” (Gelber 360). Mrs. Linde also provides us with an interesting take on a female character. She is a foil to Nora, wishing for domesticity instead of freedom. “Mrs. Linde's decision resolves the battle of the sexes” (Gelber 360), and as she says when she decides to be with Krogstad, “How different! How different! Someone to work for, to live for- a home to build” (Ibsen).

Due to these ideas (and the seemingly popular desire to dismiss feminist sentiment in literature), there are many people who argue that Nora’s identity as a woman is arbitrary, and has no bearing or impact on the meaning of the work. These same people argue that Nora’s gender does not matter because she was written to represent humanity as a whole and function as a sort of ‘everyman’, craving freedom and individuality. But “to say that Nora Helmer stands for the individual in search of his or herself, besides being a singularly unhelpful and platitudinous generalization, is wrong, if not absurd. For it means that Nora’s conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a nineteenth-century married woman, a married woman, or a woman. Yet both Nora and a dollhouse are unimaginable otherwise... let us remove the woman problem from *A Doll's 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 honest response is nothing” (Templeton 31-

32).

Ibsen also seems to invoke a certain amount of Darwinian theory in *A Doll's House*. “By undermining the Divine father, Darwin weekend a significant premise of the patriarchal chain of being which located women lower on the scale than men” (Shideler 242). “A number of Ibsen's dramas portray, first, a weak or displaced husband or father who lives in a world threatened by change, and, second, a woman who challenges the patriarchy. These two themes often intertwined with Darwin's questioning of the Devine patriarch” (Shideler 242). Nora certainly challenges both patriarchs in her life- her husband as well as her father. This implies that “In essence, the social and religious context suggested by Ibsen reflects, first, typical 19th century moral attitudes and, second, the weakening of the European political patriarchy after the French Revolution and of the nuclear family which developed during the 1800”. (Shideler 247). “Ibsen dramatizes, then, both the attempt to cultivate the 19th century family as an institution and the discord that harrows it. Crucial to this dramatization is the battle between the male and female protagonists, for their conflicts represent in society as a whole” (Shideler 247). Torvald and Nora represent the masculine and feminine in society, and in this story at least, the feminine is finding a way to stand up to the masculine and assert its independence.

Nora as a character goes through a massive amount of change throughout the story- from Torvald's childish little “lark” to a woman with resolve about her decisions. This change has inherent feminist value, in that it showcases a woman in several roles: “Besides being lovable, Nora is selfish, frivolous, seductive, unprincipled, and deceitful. These qualities make her the remarkable dramatic character she is, and demonstrate Ibsen's ability to turn polemic into play” (Rosenburg 894). “She blames her father and her husband for making her a simple doll when in fact Ibsen's final draft has made her a shrewd, subtle, manipulative woman. She might better

have blamed her men for that” (Rosenburg 895). This is notable due to the fact that women historically are pigeonholed into certain stereotypes- by breaking out of those traditional roles, Nora demonstrates a woman as a full person, instead of a tired trope. While it can be argued that Nora has no overt interest in the women’s right’s movement and is therefore, not a feminist character, that “conclusion rests on the assumption that women's rights is too limited to be the stuff of literature. The state of being a feminist issued as an uninteresting given, something a woman is, not something she becomes, a condition suitable to flat characters in flat heeled shoes and outside the realm of Art, which treats Universal questions of human life, whose nature is complex and evolutionary. Restricted to works as predictable propaganda, feminist heroines must spring from the creators’ heads fully armed with pamphlets” (Templeton 31).

The moment in the play that is most usually considered ‘feminist’ is at the very end of the play, when Nora leaves Torvald, her children, and her entire life behind in order to pursue herself. This particular moment, while certainly daring and demonstrative of a certain amount of courage, also has implications. Kelly paraphrases Ibsen himself when she explains in reference to Nora, “A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies when she has done her duty by propagating the race” (Kelly 18). This moment of truth, for Nora, is seen by many as a ‘temper tantrum’, and clearly, she is not making the easy decision. As has already been established, Nora does not have any real employable skills or work-related experience. By choosing to leave, she certainly places herself in a tricky predicament. “Nora leaves the domestic space to seek the ambiguous freedom that comes from understanding the nature of her imprisonment, returning to her childhood beginnings, while struggling against the compulsion to repeat the past” (Kelly 18). Rosenburg even goes as far as to say that “Perhaps the real feminist point of the play is that when Nora deserted her house she was only demonstrating a final time

how the male society had corrupted her values” (Rosenburg 895). However, “when Nora goes out of the door at the end of a doll's house, leaving her husband and children, her destiny maybe left vague... but more importantly, she isn't struck down by the playwright's lightning. Her leaving can be, and was, interpreted as a blow for individual freedom, a refusal of the narrow role of doll in a doll's house... Ibsen had no desire to be claimed by feminists and we needn't disturb his shade by claiming him now; his importance lies in the furore his place created, they're powerful expression of a theme already being widely heard, that women were individuals with rights as well as duties. It was a theme which question the permanence, even the desirability, of marriage, and raised the question of the role of the family and women's place in it” (Clarke 93).

A Doll's House wasn't written with feminism in mind, and there are many aspects of the story that could not be classified this way. However, the true feminist value in this story lies in the character of Nora herself. Complex and varied, with a wide range of emotions and control over her sexuality, Nora demonstrates the power of women to be all of these things, and the power women have to make their own decisions about their lives.

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