

english
interpretation of Ibsen's "A Doll's House"

"A Doll's House" is classified under the "second phase" of Henrik Ibsen's career. It was during this period which he made the transition from mythical and historical dramas to plays dealing with social problems. It was the first in a series investigating the tensions of family life. Written during the Victorian era, the controversial play featuring a female protagonist seeking individuality stirred up more controversy than any of his other works. In contrast to many dramas of Scandinavia in that time which depicted the role of women as the comforter, helper, and supporter of man, "A Doll's House" introduced woman as having her own purposes and goals. The heroine, Nora Helmer, progresses during the course of the play eventually to realize that she must discontinue the role of a doll and seek out her individuality.

David Thomas describes the initial image of Nora as that of a doll wife who revels in the thought of luxuries that can now be afforded, who is become with flirtation, and engages in childlike acts of disobedience (259). This inferior role from which Nora progressed is extremely important. Ibsen in his "A Doll's House" depicts the role of women as subordinate in order to emphasize the need to reform their role in society.

Definite characteristics of the women's subordinate role in a relationship are emphasized through Nora's contradicting actions. Her infatuation with luxuries such as expensive Christmas gifts contradicts her resourcefulness in scrounging and buying cheap clothing; her defiance of Torvald by eating forbidden Macaroons contradicts the submission of her opinions, including the decision of which dance outfit to wear, to her husband; and Nora's flirtatious nature contradicts her devotion to her husband. These occurrences emphasize the facets of a relationship in which women play a dependent role: finance, power, and love. Ibsen attracts our attention to these examples to highlight the overall subordinate role that a woman plays compared to that of her husband. The two sides of Nora contrast each other greatly and accentuate the fact that she is lacking in independence of will.

The mere fact that Nora's well-intentioned action is considered illegal reflects woman's subordinate position in society; but it is her actions that provide the insight to this position. It can be suggested that women have the power to choose which rules to follow at home, but not in the business world, thus again indicating her subordinateness. Nora does not at first realize that the rules outside the household apply to her. This is evident in Nora's meeting with Krogstad regarding her borrowed money. In her opinion it was no crime for a woman to do everything possible to save her husband's life. She also believes that her act will be overlooked because of her desperate situation. She fails to see that the law does not take into account the motivation behind her forgery. Marianne Sturman submits that this meeting with Krogstad was her first confrontation with the reality of a "lawful society" and she deals with it by attempting to distract herself with her Christmas decorations (16). Thus her first encounter with rules outside of her "doll's house" results in the realization of her naivety and inexperience with the real world due to her subordinate role in society.

The character of Nora is not only important in describing to role of women, but also in emphasizing the impact of this role on a woman.

Nora's child-like manner, evident through her minor acts of disobedience and lack of responsibility compiled with her lack of sophistication further emphasize the subordinate role of woman. By the end of the play this is evident as she eventually sees herself as an ignorant person, and unfit mother, and essentially her husband's wife. Edmond Gosse highlights the point that "Her insipidity, her dollishness, come from the incessant repression of her family life (721)." Nora has been spoonfed everything she has needed in life. Never having to think has caused her to become dependent on others. This dependency has given way to subordinateness, one that has grown into a social standing. Not only a position in society, but a state of mind is created. When circumstances suddenly place Nora in a responsible position, and demand from her a moral judgment, she has none to give. She cannot possibly comprehend the severity of her decision to borrow money illegally. Their supposed inferiority has created a class of ignorant women who cannot take action let alone accept the consequences of their actions.

"A Doll's House" is also a prediction of change from this subordinate roll. According to Ibsen in his play, women will eventually progress and understand her position. Bernard Shaw notes that when Nora's husband inadvertently deems her unfit in her role as a mother, she begins to realize that her actions consisting of playing with her children happily or dressing them nicely does not necessarily make her a suitable parent (226). She needs to be more to her children than an empty figurehead. From this point, when Torvald is making a speech about the effects of a deceitful mother, until the final scene, Nora progressively confronts the realities of the real world and realizes her subordinate position. Although she is progressively understanding this position, she still clings to the hope that her husband will come to her protection and defend her from the outside world once her crime is out in the open. After she reveals the "dastardly deed" to her husband, he becomes understandably agitated; in his frustration he shares the outside world with her, the ignorance of the serious business world, and destroys her innocence and self-esteem. This disillusion marks the final destructive blow to her doll's house. Their ideal home including their marriage and parenting has been a fabrication for the sake of society. Nora's decision to leave this false life behind and discover for herself what is real is directly symbolic of woman's ultimate realization. Although she becomes aware of her supposed subordinateness, it is not because of this that she has the desire to take action. Nora is utterly confused, as suggested by Harold Clurman, "She is groping sadly in a maze of confused feeling toward a way of life and a destiny of which she is most uncertain (256)." The one thing she is aware of is her ignorance, and her desire to go out into the world is not to "prove herself" but to discover and educate herself. She must strive to find her individuality.

That the perception of woman is inaccurate is also supported by the role of Torvald. Woman is believed to be subordinate to the domineering husband. Instead of being the strong supporter and protector of his family, Nora's husband is a mean and cowardly man. Worried about his reputation he cares little about his wife's feelings and fails to notice many of her needs. The popular impression of man is discarded in favor of a more realistic view, thus illustrating society's distorted views.

Ibsen, through this controversial play, has an impact upon society's view of the subordinate position of women. By describing this role of woman, discussing its effects, and predicting a change in contemporary views, he stressed the importance of woman's realization of this believed inferiority. Woman should no longer be seen as the shadow of man, but a person in herself, with her own triumphs and tragedies. The exploration of Nora reveals that she is dependant upon her husband and displays no independent standing. Her progression of understanding

suggests woman's future ability to comprehend their plight. Her state of shocked awareness at the end of the play is representative of the awakening of society to the changing view of the role of woman. "A Doll's House" magnificently illustrates the need for and a prediction of this change.

--rhmmmm, that's a paddlin'