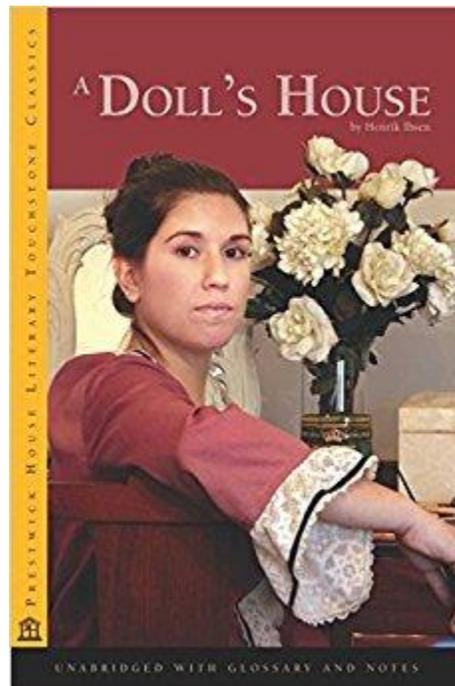


Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

Dollish Existence of Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

S. Gomathy, M.A. (M.Phil.)



Abstract

A doll, a child's plaything, dances and tunes to the wishes of the player. It does not have originality. This paper tries to highlight the Dollish existence of Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Nora, the protagonist of the play does not seem to mind her doll like existence in the beginning of the play. But exactly the opposite of what it happens in the climax of the play. She breaks down the societal norms and walks out of the house to assert her individuality and self-respect.

Key Words: Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, Doll, Forgery, Individuality, Societal Norms, Self-respect.

Henrik Johan Ibsen

Henrik Johan Ibsen's career as a dramatist spans a period of fifty years. His creative period covers the second half of the nineteenth century. During this long period, he wrote twenty-five plays. His plays are characterized by various phases or stages of his artistic development. These changes are clearly reflected in his plays and it is roughly divided such as Nationalistic Plays, Poetic Plays, Modern, realistic, 'moralist' or problem plays, or 'the drama of ideas', Psychological or 'humanistic' plays, Metaphysical, spiritual, or 'visionary' plays.



Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)

Courtesy: http://www.wikiwand.com/it/Henrik_Ibsen

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A Doll's House

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* belongs to social or realistic drama. It is the most famous and best-known among Ibsen's plays. He deals with contemporary social issues such as the place of women in this play. The heroine, Nora Helmer, is guilty of committing forgery, for which she is being black-mailed by the villain, Nils Krogstad. This she had done in order to save the life of her husband, but he, instead of appreciating her act, denounces her as a liar and criminal. However, she is ultimately saved by the intervention of her old friend, Mrs. Linde, who brings about a change in Krogstad's heart. But Nora does not stay with her husband; she leaves her home and children to learn the ways of the world.

Nora Helmer, the Protagonist

Nora Helmer, the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is one of the most complex characters of 19th century drama, prances about in the first act, behaves desperately in the second, and gains a complete sense of reality during the final act of the play.

At the beginning of the play, Nora seems completely happy. She responds affectionately to Torvald's teasing, speaks with excitement about the extra money his new job will provide, and takes pleasure in the company of her children and friends. She does not seem to mind her doll-like existence, in which she is pampered, and patronized.

As the play progresses, Nora reveals that she is not just a "silly girl," as Torvald calls her. To preserve Torvald's health she incurs to take out a loan without the knowledge of her hard-headed husband. This reflects her smartness and ability beyond mere wife hood. Nora's fierce determination and ambition is quite visible from the years of secret labor which undertakes to pay off her debt. That she was even willing to break the law in order to ensure Torvald's health shows her courage.

Krogstad's blackmail and the consequence that follows do not change Nora's nature. Even it has opened her eyes to her unfulfilled and underappreciated potential. At the end of the play in the climatic confrontation with Torvald, Nora says, "I have been performing tricks for

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you, Torvald” (*A Doll’s House*, 75). She comes to realize that in addition to her literal dancing and singing tricks, she has been putting on a show throughout her marriage. She realizes the fact that she has pretended to be someone and she has not lived her life. She has led a life in order to fulfill the role that Torvald, her father, and society at large have expected of her.

Husband Torvald Helmer, Patronizing Nora

Nora Helmer and her husband Torvald Helmer, two important characters in the play have considerable difference among them. They live their lives in such a way that they are oblivious to their true desires and needs in life. In the beginning of the play, Nora, the protagonist of the play, seems simple and unknowledgeable of the world outside her home. Though she appears happy she is subconsciously unhappy and not as innocent as she seems. In contrast, her husband Torvald is a hard-headed, serious-minded, so-called principled man who believes that a man's role in marriage is to protect his wife and guide her almost as a father would. The dissimilarities between their attitudes towards each other, which eventually leads to Nora separating from the household, a tragic event for her kids as well as to Torvald’s reputation.

Torvald treats Nora as a child by patronizing her and calling her like his “little squirrel”, his “little lark”, “a featherhead”. But Nora is much smarter than he perceives. She hides the macaroons from him and she lies and from this we sense that she is unhappy and defies Torvald in many ways. In reality, Nora possesses an intelligent, manipulative side that Torvald doesn't realize. By secretly saving money to pay off the loan, Nora reveals that she had to keep this secret from Torvald a long time and one day hoped that by doing this heroic act, he will still be faithful to her even as her attractiveness fades .

Childish

In the beginning, Nora exhibits many childish qualities. It is evident from her extravagant Christmas shopping. She eats a few desserts which she has secretly purchased. When her supercilious husband Torvald Helmer, asks if she has been sneaking macaroons, she denies it whole-heartedly. With this minor act of deception, we learn that Nora is quite capable of lying. She is most child-like when she interacts with her husband. She behaves playfully yet obediently

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in his presence, always coaxing favors from him instead of communicating as equals. Torvald gently chides Nora throughout the play, and Nora good-naturedly responds to his criticism as though she were some loyal pet.

A Little Secret

When Nora's old friend Mrs. Christine Linde arrives, she divulges a little secret. She's not just cheating off her husband, on the contrary, she saved his life. Without the knowledge of Torvald, Nora borrowed money so that they could afford a year-long trip to Italy and this trip was suggested by the doctor to recoup from his illness. Torvald and Christine accuse her of being spendthrift but she is actually quite thrifty indeed. She has been secretly working odd jobs and even skimming money from her allowance to pay back the debt. Later on we come to know that Nora was so determined to save her husband that she even committed forgery to get the loan. This action shows that Nora is both daring and tenacious. She values love over the law. When her secret is revealed we know that, besides the childish character she plays for her husband, there is a whole other Nora emerging out. When Nils Krogstad threatens to reveal the truth about her forgery, she realizes that she has brought down Torvald Helmer's good name. She begins to question her own self something she has never done before. Nora contemplates suicide in order to eliminate the dishonor she has wrought upon her family. She also hopes to prevent Torvald from sacrificing himself and going to prison in order to save her from persecution. During the climactic scene in Act Three, Nora seems to stall before running out into the night to end her life. Torvald stops her all too easily, perhaps because she knows that, deep down, she wants to be saved.

Nora's Epiphany

Nora's epiphany (“a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.” www.dictionary.com) occurs when the truth is finally revealed. As Torvald unleashes his disgust towards Nora and her crime of forgery, Nora realizes that her husband is a very different person than she once believed. Torvald has no intention of taking the blame for Nora's crime. She thought for certain that he would selflessly give up everything for her. When

he fails to do this, she accepts the fact that their marriage has been an illusion. Their false devotion has been merely play acting. She has been his "child-wife" and his "doll." When Nora comes to the realization that her character was little more than a composite of societal and others' expectations, she recognizes that the strong, staunch, principled Torvald she thought she was married to was only a character formed out of her own expectations. Their marriage was a doll marriage: he a doll husband, she a "doll wife", and their children destined to be "doll children". In regard to the children, Nora realizes that if she continues the pattern of instilling societal norms on her children, they too will fall into the trap of doll hood.

Final Catalyst for Nora's Awakening

Torvald's severe and selfish reaction after learning of Nora's deception and forgery is the final catalyst for Nora's awakening. But even in the first act, Nora shows that she is not totally unaware that her life is at odds with her true personality. She defies Torvald in small yet meaningful ways—by eating macaroons and then lying to him about it, for instance. She also swears, apparently just for the pleasure she derives from minor rebellion against societal standards. As the drama unfolds, and as Nora's awareness of the truth about her life grows, her need for rebellion escalates, culminating in her walking out on her husband and children to find independence. The anguish of Krogstad's blackmail starts the process, but the final blow is Torvald reaction when he finds out the truth. When the wonderful thing doesn't happen, when Torvald fails to attempt to sacrifice himself for her, Nora realizes that their relationship has been empty. The love she imagined never existed. There was never any chance of the wonderful thing she had hoped and feared. She tells her husband, "Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child" (*A Doll's House*, 75). In the end, Nora has a sort of spiritual awakening. She walks out into the night alone but, for perhaps the first time in her life, she is on the path to becoming a fully realized, fully independent human being.

"I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you wanted it like that. You and father have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life. our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have

been your doll-wife, just as at home I was father's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald.” (*A Doll's House*, 76)

In a seminal speech that explains the play's title (*A Doll's House*), Nora realizes the truth about her marriage, which has been not a meeting of minds and hearts, but a performance. She blames her husband and, before him, her father for treating her as a doll and a plaything for their own amusement. They wanted her to be ignorant and helpless, and thus far she has only tried to please them, missing out on any opportunity to educate or improve herself.

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S. Gomathy, M.A. (M.Phil.)
Assistant Professor in English
KG College of Arts and Science
365, Thudiyalur Road
Saravanampatti
Coimbatore 641035
Tamil Nadu
India
gomathy.s@kgcas.com