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A Dynamic Womanhood: How Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*  
Depicts Feminism through Changing Characterization

Second-wave feminism, which began in the early 1960s, was a widespread social movement that ultimately heralded the birth of the modern woman—strong, independent, and possessing aspirations that transcended the cult of domesticity. The movement marked one of the first historical instances where women openly contested the stereotype that they ought to exist solely as mothers and homemakers. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*, though written nearly a hundred years prior, very aptly portrays a fictionalized rendition of second-wave feminism ideals. Over the course of the play, the audience witnesses the transformation of the protagonist Nora, initially depicted as a rather complacent housewife, into an autonomous woman who ultimately leaves her oppressive household in search of self-fulfillment. Through Ibsen's choice of diction, both within character dialogue and within stage directions, the audience is allowed to achieve an understanding of Nora's motivations. This essay will critically examine two excerpts from *A Doll House*—Act 1, lines 97-108 and Act 3, lines 438-447—to explore how the changing dynamics between Nora and her husband Torvald reinforce and substantiate these feminist ideals.

The play opens with the scene of Nora and Torvald's bourgeoisie living room, described as a “comfortable room, tastefully but not expensively furnished.” It's almost

Christmas time, and Nora has just returned from Christmas shopping. She's noticeably excited about her holiday purchases. Torvald enters and begins to playfully reprimand Nora for her spending habits. The two banter a bit, and then the following exchange takes place:

NORA: Oh, but Torvald—

HELMER: Don't deny it my dear little Nora. (*Putting his arm around her waist.*) Spendthrifts are sweet, but they use up a frightful amount of money. It's incredible what it costs a man to feed such birds.

NORA: Oh, how can you say that! Really, I save everything I can.

HELMER: (*Laughing.*) Yes, that's the truth. Everything you can. But that's nothing at all.

NORA: (*Humming, with a smile of quiet satisfaction.*) Hm, if you only knew what expenses we larks and squirrels have, Torvald. (Act 1, lines 97-108)

This excerpt, which occurs fairly early in the play, sets the stage for much of the remainder of Nora and Torvald's interactions. In a few short lines, it becomes very evident that Torvald habitually belittles Nora. He refers to her as "my dear little Nora," which albeit endearing, is saturated with condescension (line 98). The word "little" in particular can be viewed as a subtle assertion of authority. Size is relative, and in his manner of addressing Nora, Torvald implicitly suggests his natural dominance. The stage directions then indicate that Torvald puts "his arm around her waist," as if to emphasize

the fact that Nora is his possession (lines 98-99). He likens the act of giving Nora money to spend to feeding “birds,” and complains that “it’s incredible what it costs a man” to do so (lines 100-101). When Nora argues that she “save[s] everything [she] can,” Torvald simply laughs and dismisses it (lines 102-104).

There are multiple elements in this excerpt that perhaps allude to the play’s otherwise unexpected conclusion. Firstly, it’s notable that Torvald compares Nora to a bird, since birds are typically characterized by their song and their flight. Like a domesticated songbird, Nora is a slave to Torvald’s need for entertainment; she chirps and sings and flatters to please Torvald. And there seems to initially be little purpose to her existence beyond that. In Ibsen’s early depictions of Nora, the audience can see that she resembles a bird in her mannerisms as well. She seems to be full of energy, “humming” and constantly speaking in an exclamatory fashion—She begins many of her lines with “Oh” and concludes with exclamation points. As Nora sheds this persona later in the play, the change in her behavior complements her shifting mindset. Furthermore, in a bird’s ability to fly, it can easily distance itself from adversarial elements, a notion that is suggestive of Nora’s eventual departure. Beyond metaphors, there also appears to be some foreshadowing in Nora’s speech. In the last line of this excerpt, she makes a passing comment: “If you only knew what expenses we larks and squirrels have, Torvald,” with a “smile of quiet satisfaction” on her face (lines 106-108). The tone of this line stands in stark contrast with the frivolity of the previous conversation. In fact, there is almost a sinister tinge to Nora’s statement, suggesting that she holds some significant information that is beyond Torvald’s scope of understanding. As we see later in the play, this could describe Nora’s illicit loan repayments.

As the play progresses, the conditions of Nora's predicament become apparent. Some number of years ago, she committed fraud and forged a signature in order to obtain a loan to save Torvald's life. However, Krogstad, one of Torvald's disgruntled employees, is now blackmailing her to try to save his own job and livelihood. Nora is worried that her husband will suffer in order to protect her reputation. However, when her deception is ultimately revealed, the two simultaneously reach very disparate realizations:

HELMER: No more playacting. (*Locks the hall door.*) You stay right here and give me a reckoning. You understand what you've done? Answer! You understand?

NORA: (*Looking squarely at him, her face hardening.*) Yes, I'm Beginning to understand everything now.

HELMER: (*Striding about*) Oh, what an awful awakening! In all these eight years —she who was my pride and joy—a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal! How infinitely disgusting it all is! The shame! (*Nora says nothing and goes on looking straight at him. He stops in front of her.*) (Act 3, lines 438-447)

In this scene, Torvald's persona undergoes a sudden transformation. Moments prior, he was still incredibly cordial to Nora, referring to her as "little songbird" and "kissing her on the cheek" (Act 3, line 411). However, after reading Krogstad's letter, he instantly begins to speak vile and hateful words towards Nora, referring to her as a "hypocrite, a liar...a criminal" that is "infinitely disgusting" (Act 3, lines 445-446). This entire scene represents the ultimate turning point in *A Doll House*—when the family's carefully

constructed façade crumbles. Torvald realizes that Nora isn't the complacent little doll wife he desired, and Nora realizes Torvald only truly cares about his own well-being. It's notable that Ibsen chooses the term "awakening" to describe these revelations, since the word has heavy religious connotations. An "awakening" is more than a response to a discovery, it's an entire refactoring of one's system of beliefs. A religion is built upon a set of ideals held in high regard, and the audience can see that in this climax, these ideals that formerly governed the Helmer's home life have been entirely subverted. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of "awakening" is "A rising from sleep...[or] inaction," which is an apt description of their transformation ("awakening." Def. 1). It seems as though Nora and Torvald initially coexisted in a heavily contrived equilibrium, wherein they both pretended that she was the complacent trophy wife Torvald desired. However, after the course of events transpired with the loan, it becomes apparent that their marriage can no longer subsist on pretense and "inaction."

The stage directions in this excerpt paint a vivid image of the tense atmosphere in the room, a scene vaguely suggestive of a fighting arena. Torvald "locks the hall door" after reading the letter, as if to trap Nora, and he "strid[es] about," encircling her as he delivers his accusations (line 438, 443). In response, Nora stands her ground, "looking squarely at him, her face hardening" (line 441). Even as Torvald continues to deal insults in her direction, she remains still. Timid no more, Nora's formerly bird-like mannerisms have entirely transformed into silence and steely resolve. Ibsen's use of contrast—movement versus stillness, speech versus silence—serves to emphasize the magnitude of Nora and Torvald's transformations. In a live performance, the contrast would have been instrumental in establishing the play's mood for the audience.

Ibsen's *A Doll House*, written during late 19<sup>th</sup> century Realism period of literature, is defined by the realistic, yet dynamic nature of its characters. Nora and Torvald initially epitomize an ordinary middle-class couple—the husband is the breadwinner, and the wife takes care of the household, and as a result, the wife is naturally more subservient. However, through Ibsen's use of diction in constructing dialogue between Nora and Torvald and in designating their onstage actions, the audience can see the shifting dynamic between the characters as Nora eventually realizes her discontent. Plays of earlier time periods like *Medea* and *Oedipus* toy with the idea of predestination, but Ibsen's Nora has decidedly more free will. As her marriage collapses towards the end of the play, she ultimately makes the decision to leave her family behind to discover herself. A radical conclusion given the literary climate of the time period, the rhetoric of *A Doll's House* predates the rise of second-wave feminism by almost a century, yet, in retrospect, appears to have been oddly prophetic.

Works Cited

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