# Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House: A Marriage Built to Fail

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Produced towards the end of Norwegian Victorian Society, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has gained international fame due to his leading female character, Nora. Seen as an attempt to gain freedom, Nora leaves her husband, children and marriage behind. Her actions have caused many feminist scholars to praise Ibsen "for his creation of female characters" who overcome the social oppression of women (He 134). Unni Langas, a Norwegian literature professor, claims "how gender and gender subordination are produced" when Nora walks out of her life (148). Kristin Ørjasæter, a Norwegian literary scholar, analyses Ibsen's close friendship with Camilla Collett, a famous Norwegian feminist and author, in hopes to connect Nora's actions with their discussions of "the oppression of women and women's right to freedom" (19). Nora is seen as a symbol of hope for women oppression, a success story in gaining freedom, and a hero for recognizing herself before her duties. However, after further analysis, there are troubling blind spots in feminist's scholars' claim to "Ibsen's presentation of the case on behalf of women" (Stetz 152). Through the Helmer's crumbling relationship, Ibsen challenges his audiences to appreciate one another by understanding the individual instead of living up to what is expected or demand.

Firstly, Nora is only able to liberate herself from her upper-middle-class oppression because of the employment of the Helmer's lower-class maids, Anne Marie, and Helen. Both women have given up personal lives to domestically serve the Helmer family. *A Doll's House* only shows "one strain of class-specific late-nineteenth century feminism" (Stetz 152). The argument for feminism found in Ibsen's work is "more or less limited by class biases" instead of a call to free all women from the domestic sphere (Stetz 153). Additionally, Ibsen personally claims he never meant "to write a play about the highly topical subject of women's rights"

(Templeton 28). As a matter of fact, Ibsen despised "the idea of reforming organized institutions and above all of bringing about political reforms" (Neserius 26). On May 26, 1898 at a seventieth birthday dinner hosted by "Norwegian Women's Rights League," Ibsen made it very clear he did not write *A Doll's House* in support of the women's movement (Templeton 28) Written in *Letters and Speeches,* Ibsen addressed the assumed ties of his play to feminism and attempted to explain his duty as a writer:

> I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. . . True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (Ibsen 337)

The dramatist saw his role as a playwright to aid "society in finding its weak point, by shattering its long cherished idols" (Nerserius 26). To claim Ibsen was only in support for female revolution is only half the argument. Ibsen equally crafted his male characters to "both take advantage of the power rendered them by the patriarchal system and are at the same time restricted by the prevalent concept of the manly ideal" (He 135). Although he is said to possess freedom, Torvald is expected to become an "ideal man in the urban, capitalist society [who] is first of all someone who can earn a good salary and support his family" (He 136). He is limited and locked into a designated role designed by his society just like Nora.

With *A Doll's House*, Ibsen staged a "revolt of individual against existing society and against the conditions such society creates" (Neserius 26). In crafting an overly prideful male lead and a rebellious female, he alludes to the flawed implications of Victorian Society, a social construct of the 1800s that clearly outlined conduct for both genders demanding each possess great poise and respect. On the outside, Torvald and Nora Helmer appear to be a respectable

couple of Victorian society when in reality they do not understand or respect each other because they allow a social system to dominate their marriage. By exploring Victorian Society's expectations, Nora and Torvalds's lack of respect for each other, and Ibsen's rewrite of *A Doll' House,* Ibsen merely points to understanding how a lack of individual respect in a relationship will lead to its downfall.

First of all, the society that Ibsen produced *A Doll's House* was marked by various economic successes that caused "a rapidly expanding bourgeoisie possessing the means, but not the social decorum, either to carve out a new position of ascendancy or to assimilate with the aristocracy" (Maunder 48). Coined as the Victorian Era, this society placed its members into social classes based on family wealth and proper ways of behaving. Respectively, those who had the pleasure of being born into a wealthy family dominated that it meant to be socially acceptable. To help integrate this new found middle-class into high society, there were large scale productions of etiquette books that outline the proper poise and manners members of social elite needed to possess. These books offered little bits of social information "which fed into the 'age of information' noted by *The London Times* in 1853" and became a huge success (Weller 666). In the *Bibliotheca Londinensis* of 1848, a list of over 430 book titles can be found in "its section on 'Morals, Etiquette, Etc.' spanning the years 1814 to 1848 (Weller 664). These little books and their authors dominated what to respectable do when "dealing with a particular area of behavior such as introductions, dinners, marriages, smoking, dress, dancing, dealing with trades people and so one" (Weller 665). Even though most etiquette books only offered tips for proper behavior and hygiene, Victorian society allowed them to influence their understanding of others. However, Ibsen saw right through this high society's "role of puffery, advertising, and

promotion" and used A Doll's House to allude its oppressive nature that restricted respect for an individual person ultimately causing relationships to crumble (Weller 672).

Furthermore, Victorian etiquette books during this time offered pointers on how women should dress by offering advice like "ladies 'of short stature should never allow the trimmings of their gowns to trespass halfway to the knee. It dwarfs them'" (Weller 669). Women were called to be proper hostesses by paying attention to small details such as the correct amount of butter to spread onto a biscuit at tea time. They were supposed to possess "grace, graciousness and elegance" in all aspects of life (Martin). Moving with poise and dignity, a Victorian lady was expected to "be modest and inconspicuous in her speech and behavior" to show she possessed great respect for others around her especially anyone who might give her a new last name (Martin). By understanding Victorian etiquette for women, Ibsen created Nora, who struggles with following social etiquette exposing her disobedient personality.

Additionally, Victorian men had similar rules that applied to them like "'as a rule, tall man require long clothes . . . and short men short clothes,' and boots, canes, gloves, and scarves all had practical considerations" (Weller 669). They were the head of the household and held a job that supported "his wife and family without her having to earn a penny" (He 137). Victorian men were supposed to become perfect gentlemen in regards to dealing with the opposite sex. Even though men were called to be the ones in charge, they still had to respect Victorian ladies by following a strict etiquette that included standing when a lady enters a room, offering her your seat if all others were taken, and offering "to bring a lady refreshments if they are available" (Barrett). A Victorian gentleman could not even smile towards a Victorian lady on the street unless she smiled at him first. This society expected men to dominate their households yet still

cherish the lovely lady that made it all possible. Ibsen used these ideas to crafted Torvald as a superficial male figure who crumbles at the sight of adversity.

With his "desire to capture the 'human description' to display the 'human destiny' on stage, and to speak to the substantive issue of his time," Ibsen crafted what appear to be a highly respectable upper-middle-class couple (Plung 123). The Helmer couple respond to each other in "a stereotypical view of the idealized wife-husband role" determined by Victorian Society (Stantzy 74). Through "the idealism which both Nora and Torvald approach each other's characters", Ibsen attempts to create a marriage that ultimately will crumble if either character relived their true personalities (Stantzy 74).

"When we first see Nora and Helmer, the two are acting as ideal husband and wife" preparing for the upcoming Christmas holiday (Stantzy 75). To set the perfect ideal Victorian household, Nora hums to herself sparking Torvald to refer to her as his "little lark twittering out there" (Ibsen). The two converse back and forth about Nora's spending habits which Ibsen uses to establish Torvald as dominate, rational businessmen, and Nora as the cheerful dreamlike poised lady. To fit into the stereotypes of Victorian wife and mother, Nora "pretends to be a helpless, child-like creature in order to preserve her husband's illusion that he alone wields the power in the family" (Stantzy 75). At the beginning of the play, Nora appears as an even-tempered, well-respected, lady even if she often needs stern guidance when it comes to spending money or indulging in sweets. She unconsciously allows Torvald to treat her as if she were a doll to depict the Victorian society's understanding of how "men must be the source of power and authority" (Stantzy 75). Her "innocence as the little squirrel and the little spendthrift in the conformity while her husband's expectations is complemented by Helmer's patronizing attitude" (Stantzy 75).

After just receiving a big promotion at the Bank, Torvald supports “the family by working long hours outside the home” (He 136). Like a respectable man of high society, Torvald labors “in order to maintain the idealized home” complete with three children, several housemaids and a respectable Victorian wife (He 136). At first, Torvald is seen as financial support, and an intelligent and hardworking protector who “regards his wife as a delicate bird which he must protect from harsh reality” (Rossi 140). He properly entertains his guests, runs his bank with ethics and pride and guides his family into following suit. In turn, Nora and Torvald are interdependent to continue to play this Victorian game. Torvalds’s “sense of masculinity depends on Nora’s performance of helpless, childlike femininity” and if one side is not correctly following the rules, the whole game will come crashing down, and it most certainly does (Moi 264).

Toward the end of Act One, Ibsen slowly starts to disintegrate his shallowly constructed marriage. Krogstad, an employee of Torvalds’s bank whose employment is on the line, comes to the Helmer household to see Nora. He explains how he caught Nora’s forgery of her father’s signature on a loan that Nora used to fund a vacation which supposable saved Torvalds’s life. Having experienced the social exile that comes from committing forgery, Krogstad threatens Nora by saying “if I lose my position a second time, you shall lose yours with me” (Ibsen). Not only does this threat shake Nora’s core and reflect on its impact on herself and her family, but Ibsen also creates this conflict to shatter Nora and Torvalds’s fantasized Victorian marriage.

To save her relationship, Nora “attempts to play the same role of innocent, helpless women that persuaded her husband to grant Mrs. Linde her job in the first place” in hopes Torvald will give Krogstad his job back (Stantzy 76). Playing into her understood stereotype, Nora starts weaving her innocent act by asking, “if your little squirrel were to ask you something

very, very, prettily--?" and play into her pet names (Ibsen). Continuing with the act as the dominant figure, Torvald finally commands Nora to "speak plainly" (Ibsen). Nora delicately tries to bring up the subject of Krogstad's impending termination and to inquire "of Torvald whether forgery is a crime of serious import, expecting some relief for her own situation" (Plung 126). When her doe-eyed act does not seem to budge Torvald, she turns to retelling a story of how her father experienced malicious news reports in the paper and how Krogstad could possess that capability to do the same to the household (Ibsen).

However, Torvald does not cave to Nora's attempts of persuasion. To him, Krogstad is a man with an unrespectable reputation for he was caught in a forgery scheme when he was younger. Torvald feels a man who "has been persistently poisoning his own children with lies and dissimulation" should not keep his position at the bank and has already made it very well know at work he plans on letting Krogstad go (Ibsen). Even though Nora tries to convince Torvald to reinstate Krogstad, he responds by asking, "Do you suppose I am going to make myself ridiculous before my whole staff, to let people think that I am a man to be swayed by all sorts of outside influence?" (Ibsen). With their conversation, Nora "discovers a chink in the idealistic armor that she has built for" her husband (Stantzy 76).

Although at this point in the play Torvald knows nothing about Nora's forged signature or hard work to pay off her loan, Nora feels betrayed by him which "evokes particular anxiety because human relationships involve emotional investments" (Haynes 71). Despite a relationship built upon idealistic characteristics, she took matters into her own hands to protect their upper-middle class lifestyle and save Torvalds's life to continue the charade of their perfect Victorian marriage. Torvalds's flawed ideas of shameful acts effect on children convince her "that [she] is ill-equipped to continue in the role of mother" (Plung 126). In combination with his lack of

understanding a man who broke the law to keep up with Victorian society, Nora gets a glimpse of Torvalds's true nature. She also discovers if he were to discover her forgery and get a glimpse of her real character that he would no longer play their game of house. Despite her concern, "Nora imagines once Helmer learns about her crime, he will generously and heroically offer to rescue her by sacrificing himself" because as a proper Victorian man that would be the honorable thing to do (Moi 264). However, Nora's fantasies of her ideal protector are nothing more than a façade Ibsen created to shatter under pressure.

By placing his character into an extremely stressful situation upon their return from an upstairs party in Act III, Ibsen starts tearing down their marriage. Nora reluctantly waits for Torvald to discover the letters that will expose her forgery. Ibsen uses Nora's understanding of how Torvald will act once hears of her heinous crime to show how their delicate game of marriage the two have partnered in for around eight years will inevitably come crashing to the ground. With one last attempt to distract Torvald in hopes that Mrs. Linde successful convinces Krogstad to take back his letters, Nora pleads with him to go back to the party at least another hour. Not persuaded by the argument, Torvald pushes Nora into their house. His action serves as Ibsen's shuttle hit that the Victorian couple will not last much longer. (Ibsen)

From here, Ibsen turns up the suspense by having interruptions from Mrs. Linde, who tries to get Nora to confess to her crime one last time, and Dr. Rank, who Ibsen uses to foreshadow the impending termination of the Helmer's marriage by stating "one cannot have anything in this life without paying for it" (Ibsen). Through all this, Ibsen has Nora and the audience waiting on edge for the truth to come out. At this point in the play, her anxiety of the approaching end of her relationship weights so much upon her that Nora starts to reveal her real personality. Instead of giving into sexual stereotypes of women, she denies Torvalds's request to

make love that night and suggests he reads his letters instead (Ibsen). Ibsen shows how Nora is starting think about willingly leave their marriage game. Torvald follows Nora's request and retreats into his room.

With the shutting of his door, Ibsen shows how "the entire house. . . is on trial, the total complex of relationships, including husband, wife, children, servants, upstairs and downstairs, that is tested by" the inescapable reality that is sure to transpire (Tufts 141). Buzzing from what is to come, Nora fears the actual nature of Torvald and how he will respond when he finds out his little lark is no more than a common criminal. Ibsen uses Nora's fear to illuminate the cracks in their perfect marriage. As if she can feel the very moment their frail marriage shatters, Nora states, "he has got it now—now he is reading it/ Goodbye, Torvald and my children" (Ibsen).

Within seconds and full of mixed emotions, Torvald slams open his office door to confront Nora about the letter's claim to her forgery. For Torvald, Nora's interference "with the family's financial affairs, resorting to an illegal fraud that threatens the family's reputation" triggers him to see Nora for who she is (Rossi 142). Instead of being his little squirrel who need protection from the outside world and its trials, in Torvalds's opinion, Nora has become one of its many common delinquents. Ibsen has successfully wounded his perfect marriage.

Trying to understand his delegate rose is not who he thought she way, Torvald asks Nora to confirm the accusations. By having Nora desperately attempting to rely on her helpless Victorian act, Ibsen shows how their act has come to an end. Nora responds to Torvald by saying "it is true. I have loved you above everything else in the world" in hopes this plea will tug at Torvalds's heartstrings so he will step in to protect her as a proper Victorian man would. However, her act has no effect on Torvald for he "is a creature of fantasy, constructed partly in accordance with his idea of himself, partly out of [Nora's] own ideal requirements" (Stantzy 77).

Instead of holding true to his protective, respectable, even-tempered, gentlemen stereotype, Ibsen has Torvald reel with his "horrible awakening" (Ibsen). Just like Nora felt throughout of the play, Ibsen shows how he is trying to deal with feelings of betrayal that come from a shattered expectation and a realization of false respect.

As Torvald thinks through Nora's actions, Ibsen has him says "all these eight years—she who was my joy and pride-- a hypocrite, a lair—worse, worse, -- a criminal" to express the hurt that comes from understanding his wife went behind his back and lied to his face (Ibsen). He then starts processing Nora's disgraceful deeds by saying "I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. . . all your father's want of principle has come out in you" (Ibsen). Ibsen further smashes Nora's idea of Torvald by having him conveys his lack of respect for her real personality. Torvald explains to Nora how she has ruined his happiness, his future, and is now "in the power of an unscrupulous man" (Ibsen). Within Torvalds's hate, Ibsen has completely devastated the Helmer's marriage.

Trying to figure out a plan to rid the family of Nora's bold actions, Torvald starts listing guidelines into how they are to act so no one catches word of the crime.

> As for you and me, it appears as if everything between us were just as before- but naturally only in the eyes of the world. You will remain in my house that is matter of course. But I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not trust them with you. To think that I should be obliged to say so to one whom I have loved so dearly, and whom I still—No, that is all over. From this moment of happiness is not the question; all that concerns us is to save the remains, the fragments, the appearance (Ibsen).

The Helmer's must continue playing into their stereotypes to be seen as respectable from the outside world. It is the same game Nora and Torvald have been playing their whole lives, except this time they aware they are playing it.

To further complicate his dollhouse, Ibsen has the maid bring in "a letter for the mistress" (Ibsen). Instinctively, Torvald grabs the letter and finds it is from Krogstad. He opens it and read that Krogstad is no longer going to blackmail Nora with her forgery. Quickly reading over the letter a second time, Torvald shouts for joy by saying "yes, it is true! I am saved! Nora, I am saved!" (Ibsen). Krogstad has mailed Nora's loan back due to "a happy change in his life" seen earlier in Act III when Mrs. Linde agrees to marry him (Ibsen). Tearing up the letter and throwing in into the fire, Torvald explains how "the whole thing shall be nothing but a bad dream" (Ibsen).

Willing to step back into playing the Victorian game of house, Torvald tries to embrace Nora and understand how much she must have gone through these past three days. He attempts to cherish her like a proper Victorian man by saying "you have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband" (Ibsen). He understands Nora committed this crime to save their household. Offering protection from his broad wings of shelter, Torvald expounds line after line about how good it feels to forgive her and get their home back. He will protect Nora "like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claw" (Ibsen). Over time, peace will be restored to Nora's heart and their household.

However, Nora's "assumption that Torvald would bear the responsibility for the forgery and the resultant professional ruin" and how quickly he is willing to forgive her show Nora both characters do not respect each other's actual personality (Stanzty 78). Torvald is "a central male spouse who invests his energies conventionally but unwisely and fails to appreciate his wife"

(Haynes 76). Furthermore, Nora knows she uses Torvald to support her and her children instead of respecting his actual person.

To undermine Victorian ideals and shatter audiences expectations of normal social constructs, Ibsen has Nora explain to Torvald how she must leave him in order "to educate herself: not from what people say, not from books, but by herself" (Rosenberg 188). She admits that "her husband is a stranger to her, she is leaving her children with him. . . frees him from the responsibilities of a husband and promises never to come back unless a miracle happens and they both change so much" (Rosenberg 188). With this, Ibsen's "domestic drama reveals the superficiality of the fundamental human relationship in a middle-class, nineteenth-century Norwegian home which must have resembled many others across Europe and in America" (Haynes 72). By having Nora walk out of the door, Ibsen showed how many Victorian marriages appeared to be perfect, but in reality was a relationship built on false ideals. Ibsen uncovered Nora's eyes to see how she "has painted an unrealistic picture of a man whose character has clearly shown that he would be incapable of such self-sacrifice" and how Torvald has a false idea of who she is (Stantzy 78). For their whole life and eight years of marriage, Torvald and Nora have allowed Victorian society to tell them how to behave, how to present themselves, and how to structure their marriage. Instead of growing to love and respect the other person for who they are, the Helmer's created fake personas to fit into the model of being a proper Victorians ultimately causing their relationship to crumble when faced with adversity.

This claim that Ibsen used his play to comment on Victorian relationships can be proven by comparing the first draft of *A Doll's House* to its final version. With the first draft of the play, Ibsen had "long set piece discussion, of: divorce, the care of children, suicide, society, carried on mainly between Nora and her friend Kristine, and the doctor, Rank" (Rosenberg 188). Nora was

fragile, pale and anxious causing many of the characters to be concerned about her heath especially Torvald as he was sympathetic towards Nora and "knew [she] worked hard at her copying" (Rosenberg 192). In the end, Nora leaves her family because "her eyes are now open to her doll-like life" and she must escape in order to gain freedom (Rosenberg 188).

However, Ibsen felt that the ending of his play "had not been prepared for, that it did not culminate from the life of flesh and blood he wanted incarnate in his dramas" (Rosenberg 188). With the final version of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen cut out many speeches, shorted the passage of time, and alluded "behind the masks of the characters themselves [were] the troubled, stormy depths of concealed, confused motivation" (Rosenberg 189). His new Nora quickly lies to land Mrs. Linde a job at the bank and boasted to Krogstad over the influences she has over Torvald. She "prepares coquettishly to ask Dr. Rank for money, and flicks a pair of stocking at him in a strange, erotic teasing way, then she blames him for the confession of love she has provoked" (Rosenberg 190). Rewritten Nora is considered a wild creature by Dr. Rank and Mrs. Linde for she is cunning and strong while still appearing as a lovely songbird using her Victorian stereotype to get what she wants. From there, Ibsen crafted a new Torvald who "spies on Nora's little purchase, her little secrets, [and] her thoughts" (Rosenberg 192). He takes delight "in correcting Nora; in reminding her of her mistakes, of things she has forgotten" (Rosenberg 192). He attacks Nora's late father, whom she was deeply fond of, by constantly commenting how untrustworthy he was. Revised Torvald possess a certain level of "cumulative fastidiousness, a daintiness, and unmanliness" despite trying to appear as a dominant figure (Rosenberg 193). He is "concerned with the details of the house. . . with Nora's clothes" and with directing Mrs. Linde to take up embroidery instead of knitting (Rosenberg 193).

By rewriting the two lead characters, Ibsen "made husband and wife two incompatible individuals whose inevitable clash has nothing to do with the issue of woman's rights" (Rosenberg 194). Instead of being a work of feminism, *A Doll's House* is a play that comments on the adverse effects of a couple who allows society to dominate their understanding of each other and how this domination causes a lack of respect for each other's true nature. Ibsen uses Nora's awaking to the fact Torvald "is mean, selfish, false and hypocritical" and Torvald realization that Nora is not the Victorian lady he thought to allude the flaws Victorian etiquette possessed when implemented (Rosenberg 194). It is important to understand Ibsen intentions with his play *A Doll's House*. By only looking into one side of his complex argument, actors may miss the deeper meaning of his play which will cause Torvald to be seen "as merely the rather harmless, fumbling husband of the first version and Nora is made a doll, instead of the charming, complex, cunning women she is" (Rosenberg 195). With *A Doll's House*, Ibsen foreshadows the impending destruction of a relationship that lacks respect.

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