Gender Roles in “A Doll’s House”

Nineteenth century society “codified different roles for men and women” (Innes 11) by viewing men as “‘defenders of the nation’” and women as “‘[having] their special function in the … home’”. The hatred of the female gender permeated so deeply that two Swedish economists once wrote “wom[e]n [are] the household beast of burden and the slave of man.” With his play “A Doll's House”, Henrik Ibsen unintentionally “coincided with the fight for women’s rights [by] foster[ing] the demands for legal equality [and] financial independence …” (Innes 8). Ibsen portrays his female characters “without moral bias” (Innes 9) and as beings that are fully equipped with traits that only men were thought to have during this period. Ultimately, Ibsen challenges the ideology of gender roles through the character Nora Helmer.

Nora Helmer is among the millions of “middle-class” women that are “restricted of freedom” because of the “institution of marriage” (Gale 114). Introduced as the “‘doll’ wife of Torvald” (Gale), “she is sensitive [and] sensible” (Gale) yet is “secretive and hides her thoughts and actions” (Gale); the duality of her characteristics inform the reader that Nora is a round character with the internal conflicts and unpredictability (handout 1102). Torvald Helmer, the “autocratic” (Gale) husband of Nora, is the “symbol of [the male dominated] [and] [authoritative] society” (Gale) of the Victorian era. Nora being treated as “subservient” and
having to “beg” (Gale) correlates to the ideology of the “supreme virtue [of] obedience” (Innes 10). As her husband symbolizes the oppressive “social structure” (Gale), Nora, in turn, symbolizes both “women’s…and human rights” (Metzger) to independence and liberation.

As heroines often do, “[Helmer] embodies the issues that [women were] confronted [with]” (Gale); “women …were limited socially prescribed behavior and … considered to be little more than property” (Gale). Torvald especially displays this concept of ownership over Nora in Act II as she attempts to dance the Tarantella. The dance of the Tarantella in Act II symbolizes the states of her mind for her mortality:

   HELMER: My dear darling Nora, you are dancing as if your life depended on it.

   NORA: So it does.

   As her husband comments that she “will want a lot of coaching”, he suggests to the reader that Torvald has control over not only her actions, but her life as well. Although, like many women, Nora “had no power” over herself; so Sheri Metzger suggests that “[Nora] must reject the life that society [Torvald] mandates” in order to take her life back,

   Nora Helmer seems naive and is even thought of as “flighty” (Gale) by her husband; however, the great attribute of Nora character is sacrifice. Secrecy and “deception” (Hemmer) are her allies to preserve her husband’s in finding out about his debt to her; as a result she “[takes] odd jobs … to earn extra money” in order to “repay the loan at great … sacrifice” (Gale). As well, she wears cheap clothes in order to preserve money as she states to Mrs. Linde, “I have always brought the simplest and cheapest things….any clothes look well on me.”

   Like many women in the 19th century, Nora can be seen as a “submissive” (Elliott 2) wife throughout the play. This can be seen in her refusal to reveal Torvald’s debt to her in Act I:
MRS. LINDE: And since then have you never told your secret to your husband?

NORA: How could you think so? A man who has such strong opinions about these things! And besides, how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald….

This shows that Nora understands her role in this society, just as her husband’s. Not only does she understand it, but she accepts it for the sake of keeping the peace and continuing to live comfortably.

As opposed to her “childlike” nature, as she is thought to possess, Nora shows her maturity as she accepts her struggles: “I was the one responsible for it.” Nora takes responsibility for her actions as well as attempting to keep peace amongst her home: “our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is now.”

Nora is a determined woman, willing to go to many lengths to find peace within herself. According to an article by Gale, “Nora’s problems arise because as a woman she cannot conduct business without [a male figure]”, this rule of thumb does not deter Helmer from “conduct[ing] business” in order to afford to take care of her husband. Acknowledging the situation of Mrs. Linde, Nora is determined to keep her husband alive as to keep from becoming widowed. While she refuses to let Torvald die of tuberculosis, so Nora presumably left Torvald in the play’s end. In this moment, Nora switches the roles: just as Torvald presumably controlled her life, Nora controls how he would leave it.

Henrik Ibsen wrote Nora’s character with “equal weight to those of men” (Innes 9). Her character is “brave and dangerous” (Gale 114) as she shows little to no fear in the face of struggle and sacrifice. As an attribute to her sacrificial characteristic, is her departure from
Torvald in the finality of the play. The situation of the “divorce... was... socially stigmatized” in the 19th century “and so Nora’s alienation from society would be even greater”. The shutting door represents Nora’s demand for respect. According to the “Women’s Rights” article in the Gale Virtual Reference Library database, “there was no organized feminist movement [during] 1879” so “Nora’s exodus... was a brave and dangerous act” since she would be “completely alone” (Metzger).

In the third act, Ibsen begins to reverse the traditional gender roles. As Nora realizes that Torvald has no intention to “suffer” (Ibsen) in her place, she “finally sees clearly” (Elliott 4). She loses her “submissive” nature and replaces it with the “authoritative” (Gale) demeanor of her husband. Her words are absolute and unquestionable when she declares to Helmer: “I must take steps to educate myself. You are not the man to help me there ... That’s why I’m leaving you.” Just as Nora “begged” (Gale) for “treat[s]” in the beginning, Torvald begins to “beg” Nora to stay in the end.

Torvald possesses very little respect for his wife, just as many men would have in th 19th century, as his immediate reaction upon learning that Nora saved his life was not gratitude, he “scolded” her and questioned her intelligence. While Nora, initially, held such a high regard for her husband that she planned to take her own life to save his reputation. Her abrupt and sudden readiness to leave him, for her own sake, is the first time in the play that Nora finally thinks of herself.
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