Feminist Analysis of *A Doll’s House* by Henrick Ibsen

In *A Doll’s House*, Henrick Ibsen portrays his beliefs about the patriarchal society and how it affected women of that time period, through Nora’s search and realization of who she really was. Written in 1879, a period where women were treated as possessions, not individuals, Ibsen’s used the symbol of a “dollhouse” to demonstrate the inability women had to act as individuals. A doll only does what the controller has them do, they appear the way that the owner wishes, and are silent without opinions – unable to do anything without assistance. “Ibsen was well aware of the current of contemporary ideas regarding women’s issues,” (Otten 6) and used his portrayal of Nora Helmer, to introduce what he saw as social issues to the theatre.

At the first of the play, Nora and Torvald’s relationship appears to be happy. It is quickly evident that Nora is treated like a child and her role is to be the obedient and loving wife. Torvald’s use of nicknames like “my little squirrel”, and “my little lark” (796) shows that he not only feels superior to Nora but that she is nothing more than a possession to him. Whenever Nora tries to voice an opinion, Torvald uses these pet names and demeans her as a woman with comments like; “Nora, the same little featherbrain!” or “that’s just like a woman!” (797). Torvald’s tone could be seen as playful, but the words he uses speak down to her. Not only does Torvald act as though Nora can’t think for herself, but it is implied that he also has certain expectations. “Has my little Sweet Tooth been breaking our rules in town today?” (799), and again when Nora tells Mrs. Linde that she will be able “to…keep the house beautifully and
hav[e] everything just the way Torvald likes it!” (807). These expectations make Torvald a classic example of a husband that denies his wife the right to act or think the way she wishes, with his view being the only correct way of thinking.

Despite Torvald’s views, Nora’s dynamic character changes throughout the play as she becomes aware of how others see her and her true feelings. Slowly she begins to understand her identity had been falsely placed in Torvald’s care. Voicing her frustration at being considered helpless, she tells Mrs. Linde “You’re just like the others. They all think I’m incapable of anything really serious”. This recognition shows Nora’s discomfort with the role of helpless wife that Torvald has made her into. Later, in her conversation with Dr. Rank, she has yet another realization that Torvald has replaced her papa in the way that he treats her. She shares this discovery with Torvald in the final scenes of the play saying: “Our home’s been nothing but a playroom. I’ve been your doll-wife, the same way that I was papa’s doll-child.” (854) These insights allowed Nora to see the difference between living the way that Torvald and society expected and living independently.

Independence was a new concept for Nora. Her devotion and willingness to sacrifice herself for her family were based on what she thought were shared feelings by Torvald. He tells her things like: “you can rest assured that I’ll have both courage and strength if necessary. You’ll see that I’m man enough to take everything on myself.” (828) or “I’ve often wished you were in some kind of danger, so that I could risk everything, even my own life, to save you.” (840) leading Nora to believe that their love was reciprocal. It wasn’t until the end when Torvald failed her, claiming she had ruined his reputation that Nora began to understand everything. It wasn’t so much that her forgery was a mistake because it was illegal, but because it was for an
undeserving cause. At this point Nora saw her purpose as a human being, as she left her husband and children behind to find her true identity.

The dramatic ending to *A Doll’s House* showed women of all time periods that they can be so much more than a doll wife. A feminist critic could view this play as means in helping women to “define themselves and articulate their roles, values, aspirations, and place in society” (Bressler 182). Ibsen used the character of Nora Helmer to depict the different ways that a patriarchal society gives power to men while depriving women of their individuality.
Works Cited


