Henrik Ibsen, "A Doll House"

Gender Approach

"From below, the sound of a door slamming shut" (1190). This stage direction, one of the most famous within modern drama, invites to be interpreted from various perspectives. A gendered approach of Ibsen's "A Doll House" thus can offer only partial insight into the intricacies of the directive's true and full scope. Nonetheless, with the help of the uniqueness both of setting as well as characters, the reader is not only able to discover elements of feminism, but should also be capable to uncover tragic elements of purported emancipation.

The initial response to Ibsen's "A Doll House" will no doubt encompass the supposed female oppression within society as well as the inequality of man and woman. These issues are simple to point out by giving evidence of Nora's subservience in her relationship to her husband, Torvald, as well in regards to society's expectations of women during the late 19th century. Among others, Nora must thus not only endure Torvald's constant and demeaning animal pet names but is also expected to fit into the stereotype of a hardworking wife who will fully submit to the needs and demands of her husband: "Helmer: Is that my squirrel rummaging around? [...] Nora, Nora, how like a woman! No, but seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debts! Never borrow! [...] Nora (going toward the stove): Yes, whatever you say, Torvald. / Helmer (following her): Now, now, the little lark's wings mustn't droop. Come on, don't be a
sulky squirrel" (1143). Up until the end of the play, Nora is thus bound to entertaining the role of a child-wife although she is a mature and married woman. In part, it is this game of role-playing between Torvald and herself which slowly seems to gnaw away at her nerves and is at fault for her oppression of personal identity. Only at the end of the drama does Nora feel the courage to drop her mask, display her real character and show her vigor to live a life of emancipation and independence. She presents her despair to Torvald towards the end of the play by admitting that, "I was exactly the same, your little lark, your doll, that you'd have to handle with double care now that I'd turned out so brittle and frail. (Gets up.) Torvald – in that instant it dawned on me that for eight years I've been living here with a stranger, [...] oh, I can't stand the thought of it! I could tear myself to bits" (1189). Many women even today face this same issue: They are trapped in societal expectations of playing certain roles, which are usually defined, by not only oppression but also dehumanization and enslavement. Elements of this can be seen in less developed nations as well as in civilized societies such as the United States or Europe. Further, compared to men, women are universally held to much stricter societal convictions and rules regarding relationships and sexual activities. Thus, while it may be a feat of success for a man to make love to many women, it is generally viewed as shameful and appalling for women to have had several lovers.

Although much of the pressure which rests on Nora can be attributed to outside societal traditions, she must also come to terms with domestic pressure stemming from her husband's success within everything he does: Torvald is portrayed as society's darling to whom she feels compelled to listen and adhere to. This makes it especially difficult for her to not only express herself openly but also to act in an unrestricted manner. Thus, for instance, she cannot bring herself to tell him the truth about the money she received for their trip. Thus, although one may notice that Nora runs the house, she does this subversively in order to not only fit into the afore mentioned stereotype of the submissive housewife, but also to indicate that she feels it is not correct of her to rival Torvald's position as head of the household.

However, despite the evidence within "A Doll House", which alludes to an overall theme of emancipation, this image of orthodox feminist fiction may be misleading. Thus, even though elements of oppression and patriarchy do appear within each act, the reader
of Ibsen's drama may too quickly reach the conclusion that the major thrust of this play is focused on gender relationships within society. Moreover, one might interpret Nora as trying to fulfill less a dream of true emancipation but rather a fantasy of romantic self-realization. She expresses this romantic attempt to live her dreams by showing off her capability to slip into various roles of her liking. While on one hand she wants to be admired for the cunning "rescue" of her husband, she also wishes to play the role of the servant who will not disobey her husband at any cost. Further, in one role she plays the child-wife, while in others she displays herself as adult female tease (with Dr. Rank), the capable businesswoman (in her dealings with the debt), the frantically desperate woman thinking of suicide, and, above all, the coldly independent woman who wants to taste the air of freedom. Therefore, her constant back-and-forth between roles enables Nora to control others, to assert herself without attending to, listening to, learning from, or acting on what other people say. Thus, though a feminist may look with disdain at Nora's dressing up, dancing, and recitation, others will not only recognize that this is what she wants to do, but also understand, that Nora has full control to stop or continue her whimsical actions. Thus, although she lets Torvald belittle her with animal names, she takes advantage of this by demanding more money for her lavish lifestyle. Nora is therefore an emancipated woman from the start who isn't looking for true freedom and independence but is rather on a voyage to live her egoistic dream of self-satisfaction and romantic self-realization through ever-revolving and exotic experiences.

Socioeconomic Approach

While Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll House" may at first remind of the feminist struggle during the late 19th century, the drama also lends itself to a discussion of the socioeconomic circumstances, which existed during this same period of time. Most importantly, Ibsen thus points to class struggle as a central component of social change in today's Western societies. In “A Doll’s House” he displays this with the help of various elements: Among others, and perhaps most pervasive within his play, Ibsen thus points to the chasm between rich and poor. Both Torvald and Nora appear to be leading enjoyable
lives simply because they are wealthy, while Mrs. Linde and Krogstad must fight dearly to be accepted by society. As Nora states in the beginning, she equates wealth with an ultimate achievement in life, which will not only afford her freedom but also allow her to do anything she pleases: “Oh, how lovely to think of that, Kristine! Carefree! To know you’re carefree, utterly carefree; to be able to romp and play with the children, and to keep up a beautiful, charming home” (1151). This happiness, however, is misleading because neither Torvald nor Nora feels completely at ease despite their wealth. Moreover, money seems to be the catalyst of their faltering marital life. Thus, Nora never feels fully at ease because her thoughts rest on the loan she received from Krogstad. In the end, it is not only this credit, which splits Nora from her husband, but also Torvald’s paranoia regarding wealth, which assists in escalating the situation. Thus, when confronted with Krogstad’s letter, Torvald is blinded by both his frugality as well as his pride in being wealthy. As a result, he oversees the importance of what Nora did for him and can only think of the consequences, which follow when society learns of his misfortune.

As we experience with Krogstad and Mrs. Linde, however, cruelty of society is not simply economic although this is the most obvious manifestation of what happens to outsiders and the less privileged. Moreover, those who suffer from this duality of classes must endure emotional hardships as well. Krogstad, for instance, must come to terms with a society, which condemns and looks down on him because of past mistakes he made: “every door was closed in my face from then on” (1156) he says explaining that this condemnation made life difficult for him and his family. Mrs. Linde, who similarly doesn’t have a secure middle-class status, must also suffer under society’s pressure and fight for a subsistence to provide for her three children. With both Krogstad and Mrs. Linde as examples, Ibsen thus points not only to the inequalities among society during the 19th century but also to the associated hardships brought about by economical as well as emotional stress.

Another aspect by which to address economic and social issues within “A Doll’s House” is the importance of one’s occupation. Thus, Torvald appears to be highly regarded within society simply because he has accepted the prestigious position as bank manager. Krogstad, on the other hand, suffers under society’s disapproval of his perhaps equally difficult but none-the-less lower rank professions. As a result, Krogstad lives a
restless life in which his main goal is to regain and recapture prestige and stature among society.

Finally, Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House” illuminates the sense of duty towards society, which seems to be expected of those who strive to belong to the middle-class. Thus, throughout the play, Torvald’s highest concerns are not only to achieve prestige through his occupation but also to live up to these duties, which he believes are demanded of him. As a result, not only is Torvald’s intelligence entirely determined by and limited to his awareness of social rules around him, but it also seems that family concerns thus come only second to society.