

## **Gender Issues in *A Doll's House***

Brad D. Parker

COM 103

September 15, 2003

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was one of the first works of drama to seriously take on modern social issues from a realistic perspective. The play was shocking to many because it painted characters and situations as they would be in life. The main character, Nora, is neither protagonist nor antagonist, but has a combination of good characteristics and flaws in the same way as any real person. Nora's husband is also a complex character who cannot be called either good or bad. From this perspective, the characters can take on social issues that are difficult and complex as well. One of the most obvious issues that Ibsen brings to his audience is that of late nineteenth-century gender roles.

The first interaction between Nora and her husband Torvald reveals the nature of their relationship. "Is that my little lark twittering out there?" says Torvald (page 250, line 8). He goes on to call her "my little squirrel," "my little spendthrift," and a variety of other diminutive pet names, all preceded with the first person possessive pronoun. After the party, he says her beauty is "mine, all mine" (page 285, line 40). These all go to show how he views Nora's relationship to him. He never consults her on matters of any importance and leaves almost no responsibility to her. About this he says, "Was it likely that I would be continually...telling you about worries that you couldn't help me with?" (page 291, line 1) Nora is more of a possession and an amusement than a companion to her husband. This is not to say that Torvald is a bad man or overpowering husband, but

his actions represent those opinions accepted in the male-dominated society of the late nineteenth century.

Torvald seems to make Nora's one duty clear in Act III when he tries to take her to bed. "You won't ---you won't? Am I not your husband?" (page 286, line 9) Otherwise, Nora's responsibilities in the house are minimal. There are things she does to take care of the household, but as she says, "The maids know all about everything in the house—better than I do." Although Nora usually does some shopping for the children and household, the maids can do that just as well. When it comes to Nora's motherly responsibilities, her nanny spends much more time with the children and is almost solely responsible for raising them. In the brief intervals that Nora does spend time with her children, they are dolls to her in the same way that she is a doll to her husband. She asks the nanny permission to hold her own daughter, and then calls her "sweet little baby doll" (page 261, line 39). Nora also takes pleasure in dressing and undressing her children like a little girl with a doll. However, when it comes time to instruct or discipline the children, they go back to their nanny. Even in this motherly aspect, Nora is given no responsibility.

Nora herself is treated as a child and continues to act like one. This is apparent in the way she sneaks sweets into her pocket and blatantly lies about it to her husband. Then again, she all but throws a tantrum to keep Torvald from checking the mailbox later in the play. In the end, Nora decides that the only real duties she has are to herself. She says that "before all else [she is] a reasonable human being." With this statement, she decides it is best to leave her husband and children. Whether this decision is reasonable or not, it is one she makes because in her house she was never treated as a reasonable

human being. In fact, if she had been given a reasonable amount of responsibility, it would have been nearly impossible for her to leave.

Torvald has no thought of controlling his wife or preventing her from seeking her own fulfillment. He only sees it as his duty to look after her best interests by being her provider and making sure she has nothing to worry about. This was the accepted position of the day. In fact, it is only because she is widowed that Mrs. Linde is allowed to work outside her home. It is not a wife's place to make financial or business decisions. We see Nora's financial decisions have proven to be mostly in bad judgment, but it is likely that this is more of an effect of being excluded from these types of matters than from the deficiencies of her gender.

In this society, women are not seen as independent entities. They are either possessions of their fathers or their husbands. For this reason, Nora could not borrow any money without her husband's consent. On the other hand, a husband could do whatever he pleased with property that was his wife's before the marriage. The entire society of the day was based on the assumption that women were only accessories to a man and would need neither individual rights nor freedoms. Nora also mentions, "when a wife deserts her husband's house...he is legally freed from all obligations toward her" (page 294, line 10). This suggests that the marriage is not a lasting emotional relationship, but a utilitarian contract.

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* reveals many things about the roles of men and women in the society of his day. Men and women had very particular duties that they were expected to fulfill. However, these duties had little to do with love, respect, or trust. Women were viewed as the weaker sex, to be provided for, to be seen and not heard.

This feeling was reflected in the civil law also, as women were not allowed to take out a loan or make major financial decisions on their own. *A Doll's House* is still seen today as a great work of drama because it boldly pointed out the flaws in this way of thinking.