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Nora: Birth of a Free Soul

Abstract

Nora is one of the most complex characters in the realm of 19th century drama. At the beginning of the play, *A Doll's House*, we find that Nora doesn't realize that she has got a self of her own. Rather, the purpose of her life is to please Torvald or her father and to raise her children. But, by the end of the play, she discovers that her "most sacred duty" is to herself. After the epiphany, she leaves her home to find out who she is and what she thinks. In the play, *A Doll's House*, we learn and discover many things about the protagonist as Nora is presented differently at various stages here. We notice how her character changes as a result of Ibsen's approach to creating her personality and the way in which she is presented. In this paper, I will be looking for how both Helmer and the society spark the beginning of the journey through the search of her inner self and how Ibsen is giving us an insight into Nora at each stage of the play. Through her, Ibsen portrays not only the universal position of women, but also of their life-long search for independence and renewal of an individual which seems to be a very important development for human beings. I don't want to see Nora as a free woman, rather as an independent individual – a human being - a free soul, Ibsen is not a feminist, rather a humanist. This paper is also a study which compares and contrasts Nora with other powerful characters in the dramatic literature like Antigone, Clytemenstra, Medea, and Lady Macbeth to show that Nora possesses totally different attitude towards life. I won't call *A Doll's House* a tragedy; rather, it proclaims an epiphany for Nora as well as for the mankind who are in chain. The main notification of this paper is to back up the concept that in Henric Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora symbolizes not only a woman's quest for freedom, but also that to free one's soul.

Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879 when women's suffrage was at a recognized focal point. It's not only a social drama on marriage; it also raises questions about the importance of independent identity of the individual. Ibsen seems to be saying that one's greatest duty is to

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understand him/herself. At the beginning of the play, Nora doesn't realize that she has got a self. She is just playing a role. She is hiding her character and personality throughout the play under the pretence of the ideal 19th century wife who completely abides by her husband. We find the play focuses on the typical Victorian housewife Nora who has nothing truly personal to her character as she has been morally moulded and being taken care of first by her father and, later, by her husband. She exclaims once: "I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child" (Ibsen 226). She lives in the world of predetermined social and societal constraints that made her deprived of her freedom and happiness. The society in which she lives wants people to live according to the rigidly set norms and standard of the society. Nora Helmer finds herself in such a world of suppression. She is supposed to live a quiet life in a world that is dominated by her husband Torvald Helmer. But, by the end of the play, she realizes that she could no longer be able to surrender to the constraints of the society while discovering that her most sacred duty is "duty to myself" (Ibsen 228). So, she leaves her familiar world to find out who she is and what she thinks. The journey of her soul is not so plain or an easy one. The character of Nora is quite tough to interpret as she is made out of a combination of different traits. Even though she is found to be playful and silly in certain places, she appears very differently in certain other places. She is, indeed, a hero as she is successful in her attempts to become a strong individual even though she was being locked in a male-dominated world and is now being able to enter a world of freedom by breaking off her captivity.

Being one of the most complex characters of world literature, Nora prances about in the first act, behaves desperately in the second, and gains a sense of reality during the finale of Henric Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. We first see her when she returns from a seemingly extravagant Christmas shopping excursion. She eats macaroons which she has secretly purchased. When her husband Torvald asks if she has been sneaking macaroons, she denies it whole-heartedly. Through this minor act of deception, we learn that Nora is quite capable of lying. She behaves playfully, yet obediently, in her husband's presence, always coaxing favours from him instead of communicating as an equal. Torvald gently chides Nora throughout the play, and Nora good-naturedly responds to his criticism as though she were a loyal pet.

In the male-dominated society, women are thought of as mere objects. Most of the women have no real social status and are not allowed to express themselves freely. Her husband treats Nora more as a possession than as an equal partner. In the Victorian age, it was not only unheard of to walk out on your loved ones, but unethical as well. Though there are many different

things that force Nora to leave her family, many people found it difficult to understand how Nora could leave her husband and children. But, we know that there are many incidents that inch-by-inch make Nora come to the conclusion that she must leave her home and family. In the first two acts of the play, Nora is obviously under the control of Torvald. She is not acting in her own way at all, but is being manipulated instead. For example, when she borrows money for a noble intention, she conceals it from Torvald just because he doesn't like it. The act of revealing may probably ruin the fantasy marriage that he wants. It shows that Torvald is taking over Nora. Whatever Nora does, she does it to please Torvald. She exclaims: "I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to...I've lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald. That was how you wanted it" (Ibsen 226). In this sense, Nora isn't free at all. Throughout the play, Nora interprets "freedom" differently. At first, Nora remarks that when she could pay back all the debts she would be "without a care To be able to romp with the children and having things just as Torvald likes to have them...And then it'll soon be spring, and the sky'll be so blue, and perhaps...Oh, isn't it wonderful to be alive and happy " (Ibsen 163). She considers herself to be carefree then even though she is still restricted by her roles, as she later realizes. Only at the end of the play, Nora is able to pursue her true freedom – individual self-fulfillment – by acting subversively against the social conventions. This self-awakening of Nora is exceptional among the human beings in general. And, she sets an example in this regard.

Ibsen initially deceives the audience; the opening act seems to reinforce the social hegemony of the late 1880s, in which women were seen as subservient. But, as the play progresses, a paradigmatic shift reveals Ibsen's true intentions. Initially, women are presented here as doing little more than serving and Nora is always busy to satiate her husband's needs, with little knowledge of the important issues of the world. Torvald remarks: "I would not wish for you to be anything but just what you are, ... You did your best to please us – that's the main thing" (Ibsen 152), which seems to reinforce the dominant social ideology of the time that men are "superior" and that women should act as Nora appears to be. As such, the character of Torvald represents the prevalent societal trends of the time, while Nora ultimately comes to symbolize the opposed emergent feminist ideology.

The precept that women are passive is opposed through the character of Christine Linde who is driven to activity through her husband's death. Thus, Mrs. Linde and Nora are diametrically opposed to each other. Nora is the content housewife, while Mrs. Linde is unhappy and solitary. This opposition, no doubt, forms the crux of Ibsen's initial representation of women. The introduction of Mrs. Linde allows for a greater sense of

balance than is previously apparent. We do learn that Nora has, in fact, worked, although never in a 'professional' sense, and when in dire financial straits, her father was able to assist her. Mrs. Linde, conversely, must work for her money, and seemingly has no other outlet to rely on. Mrs. Linde is the initial independent woman, although such a claim is perhaps dubious when one considers that she was driven to independence through the death of her husband. Even Mrs. Linde married for money rather than for love. She claims that her life as a widow is "unspeakably empty". Such remarks would suggest that Mrs. Linde's "independence" is an institutionalized role, and, thus, she is no freer than Nora is.

There is a paradigmatic shift in the middle of the first act as it is learned that Nora borrowed money in order to maintain financial stability through her husband's illness. Nora speaks of Torvald's "manly independence" and that if he were to know of her act, it would disturb their "mutual relations". Such remarks usurp the "big spender" caricature that was telegraphed in the opening moments of the play. It is at this point in which Ibsen's true presentation of women begins to manifest itself.

Nora subsequently proclaims: "It was really tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was almost like being a man" (Ibsen 162). Such comments reveal Ibsen's presentation of women to be positive. Nora enjoyed working because it empowered her. While accepting the andocentric hegemony of his times, Ibsen portrays women as active – as human beings who are struggling in an unequal system. Nora, the sheltered, feeble, and meek wife, proves here to be a resourceful "masculine" life – provider, who literally saves Torvald's life. Furthermore, when Dr. Rank enquires as to whether Nora has any concept of society, she retorts: "what do I care about tiresome society?" (Ibsen 165). Nora's response, espoused with such conviction, cements the concept that she has an active mind. Her subversive opinion, spoken with such surety, presents her not as an ignoramus, but as a well-spoken individual.

Subsequently, when Nora falls victim to a blackmail threat from Krogstad, she does not yield at all, thus exhibiting further strength of her character. Even when Nora's deception is revealed that she forged her father's signature to obtain money, she faces Torvald boldly and remains sentient and certainly not a "little songbird". She declares: "it's not so very late. Sit down here, Torvald – you and I have a lot to talk over" (Ibsen 224). She says: "You've never understood me. I've been dreadfully wronged, Torvald – first by papa, and then by you ... You've never loved me, you've only found it pleasant to be in love with me" (Ibsen 225). All these comments exhibit an air of inner-strength in her.

Mrs. Linde's wish to "be a mother to someone" seems to envision another paradigmatic shift. She is making attempts to adopt a typically

feminine role embracing the seemingly institutional concept of motherhood. Thus, the systematized and man-made society trap human beings in this or that way from where escape is almost impossible. But, Nora proves herself different by choosing "the one (road) less traveled by / and that has made all the differences" (Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken" L 19-20). Unlike others, she is able to listen to her soul. She undergoes an apparent transformation: "I must try to educate myself. And, you're not the man to help me with that; I must do it alone. That's why I'm leaving you...I'm a human being – just as much as you are ... but I can't be satisfied any longer with what most people say, and with what's in books. I must think things out for myself and try to understand them" (Ibsen 228). She proclaims that her leaving Torvald and the children is "necessary" for her - a notion that is typically assumed by males (i.e. to consider one's interests first) and that she must find out "which is right –the world or I" (Ibsen 229). So, she rejects the male ideology which says that men expect women to live for love while they themselves will never do so. Nora wishes Torvald to sacrifice his honour for her "(but) that you would come forward and take all the blame that you'd say 'I'm the guilty one'" (Ibsen 230). When he refuses to do so by saying that no man would sacrifice his 'honour' for the one he loves, she asserts that "thousands of women have" (Ibsen 230) performed similar sacrifice all around the world. She also says : "You don't talk or think like the man I could bind myself to. When your first panic was over – not about what threatened me, but about what might happen to you – and when there was no more danger, then, as far as you concerned, it was just as if nothing had happened at all. I was simply your little songbird, your doll, and from now on you would handle it more gently than ever because it was so delicate and fragile.(Rising) At that moment, Torvald, I realized that for eight years I'd been living here with a strange man, and that I'd borne him three children. Oh, I can't bear to think of it – I could tear myself to little pieces!" (Ibsen 230). She feels that Torvald should treat her as a human being as she treats him. And, he should fully realize that he is not a creature of one superior species 'Man', living with a creature of another and inferior species, 'Woman' (quoted in Templeton119). She understands that this is not possible with Torvald. So, her exit is a must.

From the beginning, Nora believes that Torvald will remain morally upright. He, on principle, defends Nora's honour and does not allow Krogstad to blackmail the Helmers. Nora also believes that Torvald would sacrifice his own reputation and future to save her. But he would not make the sacrifice, thus shattering Nora's dream-world. At this point, it becomes clear to Nora that she had been living all these years with a strange man. This realization forces Nora to return into the real world. Now, she ceases to be a doll any more.

Nora's epiphany occurs when the truth is finally revealed about her position in the family as well as, in the society. Like Stephen in James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* she realizes her destination. Torvald's hypocrisy sparks the beginning of Nora's rebirth, as he unleashes his disgust towards Nora and her discovery that her husband is not the person that she once assumed. Torvald has got no intention of taking the blame. And, there is no indication that he would selflessly give up everything for her. When he fails to do this, she accepts the fact that their matrimonial devotion has been merely play-acting. She has been his "child-wife" and his "doll". Nora spends most of her on-stage time as "a doll, a vapid, and a passive character with little personality of her own" (quoted in Templeton 121). Until she comes to the realization that her life is a sham, she spends her whole life in a dream-world. In this dream-world, Nora does not take life seriously.

It is not only that Torvald would not sacrifice himself for her that opens Nora's eyes to reality. She understands that Torvald loved her as a thing – a status symbol – a whim – a vanity. Nora serves as a wife and mother, but not as an equal to Torvald. It is his self-love or worship: "You've never loved me, you've only found it pleasant to be in love with me (Ibsen 225) . And, "when the miracle didn't happen – because then I saw that you weren't the man I'd always thought you" (Ibsen 229). All these things open up Nora's eyes to her absurd position in the family and in the society. The next thing Nora does is change out her fancy dress. Torvald bought this dress because he wanted her to appear as a "Neapolitans fish girl". As one would put clothes on a doll, Torvald dresses Nora as we dress a doll. So, when she sheds this dress, symbolically she is shedding a trapping of her doll-like existence.

Now we find, Nora as an independent adult who is able to dominate Torvald, which also heralds her potentiality that she is able to dominate the world . In comparison to the "real" Nora, Torvald is nothing more than a doll/puppet in a pretentious world, who is also playing a role that the society has set up. One can think each of Nora's illusion as a wall of her dollhouse each time Nora recognizes the incongruity between reality and her dollhouse. At the beginning of the play, the house has got three walls (the fourth wall being open to the audience); thus and at the end of the play all the walls have been razed, leaving Nora free both outwardly and inwardly. Finding the truth in her marriage life, which I call epiphany of Nora, she struggles to find her liberty and she knows that she will have to experience real life to gain her freedom. Her dilemma reflects her mental or inner conflict and, finally, she decides to choose the proper way and, like Stephen, she sets herself free from the bounds to assure discovering herself.

G.B. Shaw comments: "the moment she (Nora) leaves her home is the moment her life begins" (quoted in Example essays).

No doubt, Nora is an image of a rebellious soul who bravely defies the society to seek freedom as an individual by breaking away all the standards and expectations her husband and the society set up for her. Her rebellions are deliberate and well-planned. She knows what is expected from her and she still does what she thinks is right. The author uses these rebellions to show the faults in the society. Here we find her similarities with Antigone and Medea. Sophocles presents the case of Antigone, who breaks a martial decree. Antigone is solely devoted to dying for her principles, and can "suffer nothing as great as death without glory." In a philosophical sense, Ibsen argues, like Sophocles, that the premises on which laws are based are more important than the laws themselves. Like Nora, Antigone is shown to have a strong sense of morality and courage, stating that she is "not ashamed for a moment, not to honour my brother, my own flesh and blood," despite the fact that by doing so she commits treason. Neither Antigone nor Nora ever acts in defiance of her own principles. Nora is fighting for her own right. And, Ibsen is concerned with the deeper issues of the individual, the society, and psychological truth.

We can compare Nora with Clytemnestra and, with Lady Macbeth as well. Clytemnestra is the most powerful figure in the *Oresteia*. She is one of the most powerful ladies, indeed, in all dramatic literature. Homer gives only a meager statement for which she was universally known that she plotted with her lover to murder her husband. However, when we meet Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*, we find her as vivid and fully developed a personality as the great heroes of the *Iliad*. Clytemnestra is not merely a murderess - the horrifying instrument of pitiless justice. She is also the mother of Iphigenia, and in that character, "a symbol of all wives and mothers who suffer from the inferior status of the women in marriage" (quoted in Vellacott 22). She is driven to her murderous act "not only by love of Aegisthus, hatred of Agamemnon, jealousy of Cassandra; the deepest spring of her tragedy is the knowledge that she, who has it in her to be the head of a kingdom, if need be, as well as of a family, can be freely ignored as a wife and outraged as a mother by a man she knows her inferior" (quoted in Vellacott 22).

Clytemnestra abhorred Agamemnon, argues R.P. Winnigton-Ingram, "not simply because he had killed Iphigenia, 'not because she loved Aegisthus, but out of a jealousy that was not jealousy of Cassandra, but of Agamemnon himself and his status as a man'. The *Agamemnon* is replete with instances of male superiority" (quoted in Ray 151). Clytemnestra was jealous of Agamemnon who went to Troy and returned as a victor. Meanwhile, she, being conscious of herself of having a towering

personality, was left to perform womanly duties at the palace. But, she is of manly temper - "manish-woman". It is true that she attempts to free herself; but we know that she is the personification of the ancestral curse and a puppet of gods. She has avenged the murder of Iphigenia. She declares that she is not Agamemnon's wife, but the incarnation of the ancient savage avenger of Atreus, the cruel banqueter. Here Clytemnestra is, says Prof. Murry: 'conceived as being really 'possessed' by the Demon of the House when she commits her crime' (quoted in Ray 140).

Clytemnestra is a 'manish-woman' - and to her the dominance of a man is revolting. At the time of murdering her husband, John Herington observes: 'she intuited something more terrifying even than murder: a universe divided by open war between the male and the female.' So, when she murders Agamemnon, it is not only an act of an eye for an eye, 'but also a blow struck for her personal liberty,' opines R.P. Winnington-Ingram (quoted in Vellacott 22). But, Clytemnestra needs a man. We find that her love for her paramour is a necessary means to her end a measure for her own protection. Aegisthus is seen in the vision of Cassandra as 'a cowardly lion, tumbling in the bed'; he 'stayed at home' while the Greeks went to fight at Troy. This womanly-man is selected by the manly-woman to be her lover to demonstrate her superiority over Agamemnon as a necessary tool for her masculine will. She murdered Agamemnon because he was a man and in order to avenge herself upon his male supremacy. The *Oresteia* deals with the relationship between man and woman and of the institution, of marriage. Against this institution Clytemnestra revolts because her husband has violated the basis of mutual respect upon which marriage should stand.

A generation after Aeschylus, "Euripides spoke explicitly for women in the person of Medea, who, like Clytemnestra, satisfied her indignation by murder. Aeschylus does not justify his murderers, any more than Euripides justifies his Medea or Ibsen his Hedda Gabler; but he reiterates the dangerous anomalies which must occur when in a social framework giving every freedom to men and none to women, a passionate and strong-willed wife confronts a weak but arrogant husband" (quoted in Vellacott 21)

Clytemnestra has often been compared to Lady Macbeth - another powerful lady of dramatic world. It is not easy to think of one without the other. Unlike Nora, both of them exercise their manly influence upon their husbands. Both of them plan, perpetrate, and exult in the preparation. Lady Macbeth instigates the deed, prepares; and she would even have done it had not Duncan looked like her father as he slept. Shakespeare's creation is more feminine than that of the pagan poet because before the play ends she is broken forever. But, Clytemnestra never falters in her resolution. When the deed is accomplished and the strain relaxed, then instead of yielding to historical collapse, she is superbly collected. Clytemnestra is unshaken;

Lady Macbeth is broken by it. Shakespeare is painting human nature – weak and fickle even in the strongest. Aeschylus is showing us the wrath of gods, which is simple, direct, and unrepentant. They are not like Nora. They are guided either by revengeful passion or lofty ambition or under the direct influence of supernatural agents, i.e. witches or supernatural agents. But, Nora is concerned about individual freedom. She challenges authoritative power. She has a definite goal – fight for liberation. Therefore, her aim is clear and definite.

Out of these four plays, four strong female persons arise, i.e. Antigone, Clytemnestra, Medea, and Lady Macbeth. From the very beginning of the play *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as an extremely strong female character who undoubtedly controls her husband's thought and actions. She orders Macbeth to become the king just as the witches have foreseen. Lady Macbeth's burning ambition to be the queen drives her to the point of insanity. She stops at nothing to gain power; and she uses Macbeth as the enforcer for her plans.

Antigone is fighting against the bad rule of the kingdom/state whereas Clytemnestra and Medea suffer directly by their husbands and indirectly at the hands of the Furies or by the wrath of gods /laws of Fate. Through their revengeful attitude, they suffer and act as the horrifying instrument of pitiless justice. Clytemnestra declares, "...Dressed in my form, a phantom of vengeance: ... i.e. I am but an instrument of the living curse that haunts our house." (quoted in Vellacott 189)

But, Nora's case is totally different. She is the first modern individual who, discovering the absurd position, fights against the unlawful law of the whole world. Unlike us, she does not only comprehend the consequences, but also takes steps to overcome her position, which is unique to Nora. Rebirth of her soul explains the necessity of rebirth of every individual's soul - as also urged by the great philosopher Socrates who says: "Know thyself". Nora is the first modern hero who understands her needs, i.e. freedom of one's soul. She wants to live her own life as a responsible human being.

After Nora's epiphany, she realizes that her husband is a very different person that she once believed. Torvald has no intention of taking the blame for Nora's crime though she believed for certain that he would selflessly give up everything for her. When he fails to do this, she accepts the fact that their marriage has been an illusion. Their false devotion has been merely play-acting which should be not allowed to be continued. The monologue in which she calmly confronts Torvald serves as a symbol of her resurrection, which I mark as Nora's epiphany. Here, we can say that her epiphany is a sudden spiritual revelation or manifestation which Nora experiences at the moment of crisis. It is as if a veil is lifted and she is being able to see her

position clearly. Nora suddenly sees herself clearly for the first time and she knows what she must do. There is no turning back after this point. This realization announces an impending spiritual rebirth for her and in that very moment she realizes her destination. She feels that her soul has received a call to life that she is raising from the grave of her doll-like life.

Nora's exit is almost Medean in its delivery, although Ibsen's text imbues its protagonist with considerably more sympathy. Nora is free from her obligations and she rejects Torvald's further assistance. Moreover, unlike Euripides' titular character, Nora doesn't have to endure madness to find freedom. Nora, the "doll", now leaves her house and is free to "seek a fuller life as a human being," being no longer a malleable doll under the control of her "master" (quoted in Example essays).

So, when Nora shuts the door behind her, she isn't just a woman leaving her family. She was a human being seeking independence from the strictures of the society and the rule of men, which is placed upon her because of gender. She is the representation of Everyman, illustrating the need of everyone, no matter what his/her or her background is for freedom. Like Nora, people live in a world of predetermined social and societal constraints that make them deprived of their freedom and happiness. The society wants people to live according to the rigidly set norms and standards of the society. Subjugation and oppression are the themes of the society. Men and women are supposed to play the role that is assigned to them. Nora finds herself in such a world of suppression. She can now no longer surrender to the constraints of the society. She attempts to become a strong individual even though she is being locked in a male-dominated world. This makes her break off from captivity. She enters into a world of freedom. She is, indeed, a hero as she was successful in doing so. When Nora sheds her doll's dress and steps out into the real world, she opens up a new realm of possibilities of all women – of all human beings. What Nora seeks after is nothing, but the right to be a human being. She is the symbol of the liberation of the individual. She paves the path for everyman. Now it's their task whether to walk on or not in the path shown by her. Nora's progress from a submissive housewife to an open-minded, independent woman represents not only the emancipation of her own soul, but also that of the future progress of human beings in general.

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