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## Reading a Doll's House Through Aristotelian Ideas

Considered the precursor of Western dramatic criticism, Aristotle's notes on *The Poetics* arms modern readers with the language by which tragedy is evaluated and judged. In this essay I will examine how Aristotle's classical vision of tragedy flourishes in modern plays such as Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*. Particularly, I will argue that Ibsen's form of realism employs Aristotle's ideal of plot as "what is capable of happening according to the rule of probability or necessity" to achieve a social or political reaction where tension between Nora and her audience allow her to be portrayed as a tragic character (Aristotle pg. 127). The focus here is not on Nora and Torvald's life story of feminine exploitation, but rather on how the play's three-act plot structure adds to the fear and pity of dramatic tragedy.

From the outset, Ibsen faces a conflict between illustrating a "realistic" story supported by historical, internal, external, and subconscious supporting details between characters and the need to boil down to only the details necessary for the plot to convey a strong social message. Without artistic selectivity, the play would need to elaborate on every detail contributing to Nora's subservient disposition. Nora's father, mother, Mr. Krogstad, Mrs. Linde, and every other character would have an equal right to representation, and Nora would become merely loose connective tissue. Aristotle considers this problem when he states that the beginning of a tragedy "need not necessarily follow on something else" so the plot isn't distracted and lost within a mass of introductory detail. Rather, the play should find a starting point where "after it something else naturally is or happens" (Aristotle pg. 127). By the beginning of the play Nora has experienced a long history of subjugation to Torvald and her father, which Ibsen effectively conveys via a single event, the loan fiasco.

Another Aristotelian element evident in *A Doll's House* is peripety, or the "shift of what is being undertaken to the opposite of the way previously stated" (Aristotle, pg. 128). Ibsen depicts peripety via a series of causes and effects with predictable consequences. For example, Nora's naiveté in signing Krogstad's loan in her father's name and Krogstad's insecure job position create a situation in which Nora's secret may be revealed. The audience can see the inevitable consequence of Nora's actions, feeling Aristotle's "fear and pity" for her.

Each act includes peripety: in the first, Nora and the audience come to understand that Nora's idyllic relationship with Torvald is a farce; in the second, that Nora's wishing away of the problem causes it to come about; in the third, that Torvald will not forgive her, ending the dream of the "most wonderful thing" that necessarily must end their relationship. Ibsen brings about these revelations in only three acts using carefully programmed characters and aesthetic selectivity.

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Nora demonstrates many characteristics of Aristotle's tragic character. While the foreseen disaster within Nora's relationship with Torvald may be said to inspire audience fear, her inability to stop or prevent the collapse inspires audience pity. She is "neither a paragon of virtue and justice," nor does she "undergo the change to misfortunate through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake" (Aristotle pg. 129). Nora truly believes she has committed no crime, rhetorically asking Mrs. Linde whether "it is indiscreet to save your husband's life" in order to "keep up a beautiful charming home" the way he likes it (Ibsen Act 1 lines 411-412, 496-497).

One could say Nora's tragic flaw, or hamartia, is her loyalty; she's willing to sacrifice her individuality, indulgences and hope for financial freedom in order to save her husband's life and maintain her relationships with the men of her life. The audience feels pity for Nora because it can see that by acting independently to be loyal, Nora violates Torvald's belief that loyalty requires complete dependency else it become betrayal. Though Nora cries she has loved Torvald "more than all this world" he repudiates her by calling her a hypocrite, liar and criminal (Ibsen Act 3 lines 432, 444-445). The central peripety of the play occurs when Nora realizes that Torvald is no longer worthy of her loyalty, she turns her loyalty inward and risks her safety in order to find out who she really is.

However, one may argue that Nora exhibits realist complexities when she takes personal pride in the power she believes she has exercised in "saving" Torvald. In her candid discussion with Mrs. Linde, she disdainfully exclaims that there's "no art" to winning the lottery, revealing that she thinks herself to be a "wife with a little business sense... who knows how to manage" the loan with Krogstad (Ibsen Act 1 lines 394, 400-401). If she were singularly loyal (like many tragedian heroes are singularly courageous, quick witted, etc.) she would take great shame in her betrayal of Torvald's wishes. Instead, she appears to revel in her own business savvy. I would argue that this case only magnifies Nora's dependency since the audience is painfully aware of her naiveté in negotiating the loan; her attempts at individuality are marred by a loyalty to Torvald that never allowed her to become educated in the ways of the world nor to properly recognize the mistake she has made. The tension between Nora who believes herself to have acted justly and the audience who can objectively view her mistake further enhances the fear and pity at the heart of Aristotle's vision of tragedy.

Ultimately, Ibsen achieves a marriage between portraying issues and settings pertinent to everyday life while at the same time selectively and artistically dramatizing the play's plot into an Aristotelian tragedy. To call the play a realist production would do injustice to the plot's internal logic and archetypal method of achieving a social message. However, to call it a tragedy would unfairly cheapen the importance of very real and historically timely sexism pervading the average 19th century middle class Norwegian home. Instead, *A Doll House* is to be seen as a melding of the two ideals by seizing Aristotle's tragedian model form with

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adjustments to suit realist content.

## **Bibliography**

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