
Ibsen and Larsen and Women

Though written almost fifty years apart, and by two authors from completely different backgrounds, Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* and Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (also known by the title *A Doll House*) address similar issues concerning the oppression of women by society, and particularly by the institution of marriage. The paths that Helga Crane of *Quicksand* and Nora Torvald of *A Doll's House* follow throughout their respective works are related in theme but vary in events. However, each travels the other's road backwards. Nora lives most of her life under her husband's control but leaves him by the end of the play to seek a free life, while Helga begins the novel deserting Naxos for a free life, only to end in an even worse oppression as the wife of a minister in Alabama.

It is hard to imagine that these two women could possibly have anything in common when one considers their backgrounds. Nora is a pampered Norwegian housewife, married to a successful bank man with three children. She initially comes across as a lighthearted, inexperienced child. "What do I care about tiresome society?" she asks Doctor Rank in the first act (Ibsen 134). While she does not seem to mind the way her husband Torvald patronizes her, guiding and teasing her the way a father would a silly child ("Look, Nora, in lots of things, you're still a child. I'm older than you in many ways and I've had a little more experience" [Ibsen 184]), she does try to rebel in small, significant ways, like eating macaroons, even though he has forbidden them, and admitting: "I've the most extraordinary longing to say: 'Bloody hell!'" Though she may not initially realize the weight of her actions, Nora has also rebelled in a major way by taking pride in how she had illegally procured the money for the family's trip to Italy, and how hard she has worked to pay it off (both things that Torvald considers disgusting and unwomanly, respectively). "It was tremendous fun sitting there working and earning money. It was almost like being a man." (Ibsen 162) As the play progresses, and Nora becomes more aware of the injustice she lives under with Torvald, she reveals that she is much more than the frivolous outward persona she projects when she finds the courage to confront and leave him. "But you don't talk or think like the man I could bind myself to. . . 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... I realized that for eight years I'd been living her 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 320) Helga Crane, though, is first introduced as a teacher at Naxos, a school for black Americans devoted to racial uplift based on the Tuskegee Institute. Helga is from a lower-middle-class background, with an absent black father and a deceased white mother. Unlike Nora, she begins her novel relatively free as a single woman, becoming even more independent when she leaves Naxos because of its regressive philosophy. "This great community, Helga thought, was no longer a school. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of

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the black man's inefficiency" (Larsen 4). She is also a great deal more experienced and "modern" than Nora, having the opportunity to travel to other cities and states-even other countries-and she knows more people than Nora is allowed in her sheltered life. Helga, however, travels because she feels that she does not fit in any of these places. When she reaches Harlem, she initially feels "that magic sense of having come home" (Larsen 43), but it eventually fades, and she leaves again, this time for Copenhagen (where she cannot find happiness either). Even the feeling of "simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she has known" (Larsen 114) she feels at her "conversion" is lost as she longs to escape the "oppression, the degradation that her life [has] become" (Larsen 135) as the almost literally barefoot and pregnant wife of a minister. Both Nora and Helga are oppressed, one can argue, primarily because they are women in a man's world, although the factors that complicate their lives are dissimilar: in *A Doll's House*, it is money, in *Quicksand*, it is race.

However, upon a close reading of both works, one can clearly see parallels between Nora and Helga. They are both intelligent, ambitious and determined to achieve their goals (even if Nora must achieve hers in secret). They both feel a need to rebel against their oppressive circumstances; Nora's need for rebellion and freedom grows: she first imagines freedom as freedom from Krogstad's debt. "To be free, absolutely free. To spend time playing with the children. To have a clean, beautiful house, the way Torvald likes it" (Ibsen 163). But as the play goes on, she realizes that true freedom is much more than leisure time, it is a chance to live her life as her own. Helga, meanwhile, changes her definition of freedom as she tries to become comfortable in different situations, but her need for rebellion is always present, especially when she is dissatisfied, though it stems more from a sense of not belonging anywhere. Rather than a direct oppression by one certain person (like Nora and her husband), almost everyone Helga meets tries to control and manipulate her. "This knowledge, the certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive... and mentally she caricatured herself moving shuttle-like from continent to continent." (Larsen 96) Both women are, however, taken advantage of by specific people, especially men. Nora is patronized and coddled by Torvald and then blackmailed by Krogstad; Helga is manipulated by men like James Vayle and Doctor Anderson, and disrespected by Alex Olsen. As Nora is forced to "perform tricks" (Ibsen 181) for Torvald, Helga is put on display as "attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage kind of way" (Larsen 70) by her Danish relatives.

There are other minor similarities between them as well: both women have absent fathers that have affected their lives in negative ways. Nora "was Papa's doll child"(Ibsen 186); Helga's lack of family "[is] the crux of the whole matter. For Helga it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville." (Larsen 8) They are also both heavily concerned with appearances, which deteriorate through their respective works: Nora's personality, like her

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Christmas tree, begins impeccably groomed but slowly becomes disheveled, and Helga, who is first seen in her lushly decorated personal quarters at Naxos, is, by the end of the novel, stranded in small-town Alabama.

But the most significant parallels in the lives of Nora and Helga are issues of identity. Both of them are suffering from a confusion of identity, leading "double lives." Nora's dichotomy is metaphorical; she lives one life as Torvald's perfect "doll-wife" (186), and another as a frightened woman in debt with the burden of her crime on her conscience. Helga, as a mulatto, has a more literally division. "Why couldn't she have two lives, or why couldn't she be satisfied in one place?"(93)

It is interesting to note that both Ibsen and Larsen use dancing as a symbol of defiant, purely emotive expression. Ibsen uses Nora's tarantella as a symbol of her resistance against Torvald as she refuses his instruction while practicing and then deliberately uses the dance to distract him. ("Nora, darling, you're dancing as if your life depended on it!" [204]) Larsen uses the dance Helga attends in Harlem as a symbol of the half of herself Helga is constantly trying to escape from. "[She was] filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget." (83)

At the end of A Doll's House, Nora tells Torvald that sacrificing honor for love is "a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done." (Ibsen, 186) But she and Helga were forced to sacrifice their dignity for something much less romantic than love; in reality, they have been sacrificing it to fit into the roles society demands of them, like generations of women before them.

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