
Symbolism in a Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen is perhaps one of the most hotly debated plays to come out of the 19th century. The 19th century continued the process of the demystification that began with the Enlightenment. Because of the discoveries of the Enlightenment, humans could no longer be sure about their place in the universe. This, of course, had an impact on the theater. The movement toward realism, which, like the 19th century in general, was an attempt to become more scientific. Ibsen is considered by many as the father of realism, and one of the plays that belong to Ibsen's realism period is A Doll's House. But the play would come to be noted for more reasons than its style. The play would be remembered for its social impact as well as its artistic achievement: "Even Strindberg ...admitted...that, thanks to A Doll's House, 'marriage was revealed as being a far from a divine institution, people stopped regarding it as an automatic provider of absolute bliss, and divorce between incompatible parties came at last to be accepted as conceivably justifiable'" (Meyer 454-455). Therefore we can see that Ibsen's realism contributed to the demystification of Western civilization.

Indeed, the final scene produced the door slam heard around the world and the play is still the object of debate today. But Ibsen was not interested in becoming a spokesman for feminism. He just wanted to create a great play that dealt with the liberation of human beings, and he did. We are led to believe that Ibsen was more interested in art than social change. Perhaps, as his notes state, he was looking for a modern tragic hero. And what we know from Greek tragedy and Shakespearean tragedy is that the hero is always partly trapped by forces from without. And who could be more trapped by outside forces than a wife and mother in a Victorian household: "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view" (Ibsen 90). In order for Ibsen to create a modern hero out of a Victorian housewife he had to rely on all the tools of the trade. One of these tools that he employed in this and in other plays was symbolism.

Mining symbolism in Ibsen can be a difficult task indeed. Ibsen is first and foremost a poet; to the point where even his prose sounds like poetry. Every line and every phrase comes across as packed full of meaning and symbolism. It has been observed about A Doll's House, "that literally not a phrase is without its direct contribution to the structure" (Bradbrook 85), and that "One of the marvels of Ibsen's craft is that he hardly wastes a word" (Clurman 112). Symbolism in Ibsen is not limited to the set devices, such as the Christmas tree. But because we are dealing with realism, even phrases that come across just as ordinary every day speech are symbolic: "In Ibsen's theatre the symbolic is always the real seen from another perspective--often a perspective a play's characters try to evade...Such symbolism...permeates

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Ibsen's dramatic method because, to the 'awakened' imagination, it permeates reality" (Johnson xiii). This paper will discuss symbolism in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. But one must keep in mind that every phrase and every nuance can be mined for symbolism. After all, what are words if they aren't symbols? A word can never be anything but a symbol, as Nietzsche said: "What is a word? The image of a nerve stimulus in sounds" (Kaufmann 45). A word is not the thing it represents and we are forced as individual human beings to express ourselves with words. But this is the beauty of drama and poetry. The writer plays with the words in order that they may convey to the reader what meanings they may symbolize.

The first words that the reader confronts are the words that make up the title. Nora is the doll to which the title of the play refers. The symbolic nature of the title is drawn out over the course of the play. The play forces the reader, or viewer, to look beneath the surface of what appears to be a perfect Victorian household. Ibsen, through the use of realistic stage setting, can show a typical Victorian household and marriage fall to pieces: "He means to make a modern home go to pieces before our very eyes, from necessity within itself. It must contain everything that can attract: Simplicity, gladness, power of work, good temper, gentle and strong regard, love of beauty, merry little children, friends, well-managed servants, good habits, good reputation, a position which has at length been won by praiseworthy endeavors, etc.; but also a husband who has such an essentially false idea of happiness between man and woman, that it has practically undermined this delightful home, and it is ready to fall in, at any moment" (Lord 96).

The picture of the perfect household that is contained in the setting is symbolic for both Nora and Torvald. It is symbolic for Nora because it is her job to keep the surface of their lives clean and tidy. But is also symbolic of her attempt to hide the secrets she has inside. By the play's end Nora will emerge as the person she really is, a person stripped of the mask of the perfect Victorian household: "At last, in an extraordinary scene, she declares that she can no longer live in her doll's house; husband and wife sit down at opposite ends of a table and argue out the situation...Nora dashes out into the city, into the night; while the curtain falls as the front door bangs behind her" (Gosse 85).

The setting is also symbolic of Torvald, who may be considered as the quintessential Victorian man. He is a practical man who furnishes his house "with taste but not expensively" (Ibsen 234). The setting also provides him with a study, a private room only for him. Of course, Nora doesn't have a similar room because she is kept in the main room "with china objects and various bric-a-brac" (Ibsen 234). She is like a toy or a doll, one of Torvald's possessions. But Torvald's taste in furnishings is symbolic of the kind of man he is: "Helmer goes in for outward show and window dressing--for the charm that promises excitement. He uses Nora to be productive in an interesting way and to introduce a pretty, decorative element into his existence. This has the added attraction of turning her into his own creation, for she radiates exactly the colors that most enhance his life" (Meyer 49).

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As I mentioned earlier, Nora's exit has always been referred to as the door slam heard around the world. The impact of the "door slam" is still being heard today. And indeed, Ibsen's stage directions call for a powerful slam of the door. The stage direction is symbolic of the impact the door slam will have on the lives of Nora, Torvald, the children and the audience: "[From below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing]" (Ibsen 282). Today it is hard to appreciate how extremely dangerous Nora's decision to leave her husband was at the time. Though it is implicit in the play, one may fail to realize how marginalized women were in society (legally as well as socially), especially a woman that did not have a husband: "She was putting herself outside society, inviting insult, destitution and loneliness. She went out into a very dark night" (Bradbrook 87). Ibsen carefully chose the word "reverberation" to go beyond dramatic effect. Reverberation is not only the sound created by the slam of the door but is the word the reader sees in the last sentence of the play. It may also be seen a symbol for the social reaction to the play and even of the 100 years of critical reaction afterward that continues to this day. But also, as pointed out by feminist critics, the stage direction symbolizes the newfound strength of Nora as she marches out into a world she doesn't know: "The poetry of Nora's leave-taking lies in the hint of strength and the certainty of struggle as she shuts the door on the doll house to enter the night of the open world. The famous last stage direction is the final flourish in the play's consummate destruction of the ideology of the two spheres through its systematic exposure of the foolishness of chivalric ideal and the notion of a female mind" (Templeton 145).

Probably the most sober, though often drunk, character in the play is Dr. Rank. Dr. Rank is the symbolic personification of that which lies below the surface of the play. He is a dying man who has inherited his physical illness from his father. This theme, which will occur again in *Ghosts*, is very important for this play. At the end of the play Nora feels, following her husband's lead before he finds out that Krogstad will no longer be a threat, that she is a threat to her children. She is afraid of the moral illness which may be inside of her, not unlike the physical illness that is inside of Dr. Rank. Northam sees Dr. Rank as an extremely important dramatic role: "His function is to act as the physical embodiment, visible on the stage, of Nora's moral situation as she sees it. Nora is almost hysterical with terror at the thought of her situation--almost, but it is part of her character that with great heroism she keeps her fears secret to herself; and it is because of her reticence that Rank is dramatically necessary, to symbolize the horror she will not talk about" (Northam 103).

Northam states that Dr. Rank's physical disease is a symbol for moral disease. He does so by pointing out the speech in which Rank expresses that despite his illness he wants to live. In the same speech Dr. Rank goes on to say that "All my patients have that feeling too. Even the morally sick seem to share it" (Ibsen 244). In this speech Dr. Rank makes the connection between moral and physical illness, a connection Northam sees as vital for an appreciation of Nora's heroism: "Now this speech is very important for two reasons: First, because it shows that Rank, like Nora, has a hidden source of disquiet, a physical one--he is wretched in a way that

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threatens his life; and second, because his speech equates physical illness with moral illness; so that from this point onwards, Ibsen can use physical illness as a symbol for moral illness" (Northam 101).

The whole scene is, in fact, symbolic of Nora's attempt to cover all her problems with the pomp and circumstance that surrounds a happy Victorian Christmas. But like Dr. Rank's disease, the reality of her troubles will remain and finally, through the events in the play, will out. At this point in the play Nora is still trying to protect her doll's house from the problems that threaten to destroy everything. As Northam points out, Nora's insistence on hiding her troubles is symbolized by the Christmas tree: "We, the audience, can see the tree, suggestive of family security and happiness, set defiantly in the center of the stage to dominate it, as if its mere presence could banish Nora's troubles. It is a visual equivalent of Nora's obstinate, but uncertain persistence that everything will be all right, merely because she says so" (Northam 102). And if the visual representation of Nora's desire to repress her problems is not obvious enough, then her conversation with herself while she is dressing the tree creates an undeniably powerful effect: "We'll put a candle here--and some flowers here--that dreadful man! But its just nonsense! There's nothing to worry about. The tree will be lovely" (Ibsen 251). But Nora's desire to repress that which is threatening to destroy her doll's house is futile. Her futile attempts to drown her problems in the pomp and circumstance of Christmas is symbolized once again by the Christmas tree, which we see in an entirely different light in the beginning of Act II than we saw it in the previous scene: "the Christmas tree has been pushed into a corner of the room, it is stripped of ornament, and the candles are burnt out. What a fine symbol of dejection" (Northam 103).

Needless to say, the secret that Nora has been so desperately trying to keep from her husband has to come out. But this is not before her one last attempt to cover her secret. Once again Ibsen employs a highly useful dramatic technique to symbolize Nora's last effort to hide her secret: her clothing. This is not to say, however, that Nora is fighting solely to keep her husband's illusions intact. At this point in the play she still believes in the illusions of her doll's house and one of these illusions is that Torvald will take the blame for the crime she committed when she forged her father's signature. As Northam points out, this is symbolized by "the Italian costume with a large black shawl over it" (Ibsen 270) that she wears to the upstairs party where she is to dance the tarantella: "The fancy dress suggests to us that she still inhabits the world of make believe, the Doll's House, with its fictitious values; the black suggests to us her thoughts of suicide to end her sickness. And the costume suggests this without Nora having to say one unrealistic word of self-revelation" (Northam 106). The black part of her dress does indeed suggest to us her thoughts of suicide and death. It directly relates to Dr. Rank's notion that he will be invisible at the next masquerade party by wearing "a large black cloak--you've heard of the invisible cloak, haven't you?" (Ibsen 274). In fact it seems as if Dr. Rank and Nora are having a symbolic conversation above Torvald's head right before Rank's final exit. They wish

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for each other that they might both sleep well, and it takes no in-depth symbolic mining to realize that they are talking about death. Nora's illusions are finally dashed when she realizes that "the wonderful thing" did not and will not happen. The death of Nora's illusions is, once again, symbolized by her clothing: "But her costume speaks for her. As she discards her illusions, so she discards her fancy-dress and her black cloak and shawl, and appears in her everyday dress--to symbolize her entry into a world of cold fact and commonsense" (Northam 107).

In conclusion, one can see that an interpretation of symbols in Ibsen can be achieved at different levels. Ibsen's writing creates the necessity to see every word, nuance and stage direction as symbolic. And perhaps this is the reason Chekhov thought that Ibsen's well made plays were too well made to be considered realism. But for a truly conscious and awakened mind even everyday reality can be seen as symbolic for something deeper. When, in Shakespeare's play Troilus and Cressida, Troilus says of Cressida's letter, "words, words, mere words," he is pointing the way towards the idea that words may just be that which a person uses to cover up deeper and hidden meanings, meanings of which the speaker might not even be aware.

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