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Breaking Out of Her Chain:

Feminist Criticism in “A Doll House” by Henrik Ibsen

“A Doll House,” written by Henrick Ibsen is about a housewife, Nora and her husband Torvald Helmer. On the surface, the marriage seems to be filled with love, but in reality, the marriage is filled with childish pet names and secrets. Society prevents women from being individuals, especially in a marriage, the women only have what their husbands give to them. The play deals with how women are oppressed by men in economic, social, and political societies. The men in “A Doll House” do not know the sacrifices that the women must make in order to survive. Mrs. Linde had to abandon Nils Krogstad, her true love, to marry for money in order to support her mother and brothers. Anne-Marie, Nora’s nanny, gave up caring for her own child to work so she could support herself. Nora cannot tell her husband that she borrowed money for the fear of upsetting him. Nora’s Husband does not treat her as his equal, he sees her as his property. Henrick Ibsen’s “A Doll House” is about women’s status in society and her treatment by men; the absence of love, disrespect for a wife, and the lack of dignity in the treatment of women in society.

In act one of “A Doll House,” the reader can see how belittling Nora’s husband is to her by giving her pet names and treating her like a child. Nora comes home, secretly eating macaroons, and her husband greets her with pet names. Helmer does not approve of his wife doing anything without his permission. Nora quickly eats a macaroon before her husband has time to come out of his study. She knows that he would not allow her to eat a macaroon, so she eats one and then quickly wipes her mouth. Helmer does not allow his wife to eat candy because he wants his wife to be perfect and untainted by sweets. He does not want the candy to rot her teeth, “you see, he’s worried they’ll ruin my teeth” (Ibsen 1665). He wants his wife to look beautiful and perfect. Helmer calls Nora by pet names that dehumanize her, “Is that my little lark twittering out there” and “is that my squirrel rummaging around” (Ibsen 1655). Her husband, Torvald Helmer does not see her as a human being, but as an animal. Nora’s husband does not see her as a capable person, he thinks that she is only capable to spending money, “has the little spendthrift been out throwing money around again” (Ibsen 1655). Helmer sees his wife as someone that goes out and spends money whenever she can. He does not think that she can do anything else, stating, “you’re never at a loss for scaring up money; but the moment you have it, it runs right out through your fingers” (Ibsen 1657). Helmer believes that his wife is not responsible, she will spend money the moment she has some. He keeps comparing her to a spendthrift, how she is sweet but spends a large amount of money. Helmer sees Nora as a bird, stealing from him. However, Nora uses the money to pay off a substantial debt left from a life-saving vacation to Italy and to buy their children presents for Christmas. Her husband does not notice is that she does not spend any of the money on herself. She is spending the money on toys for their children, “But come here so I can show you everything I bought. And so cheap! Look, new clothes for Ivar here – and a sword. Here a horse and a trumpet for Bob. And a doll and a doll’s bed here for Emmy” (Ibsen 1656). Nora spends her money so that her children can have toys, but Helmer only sees her spending money.

Henrik points out the flaws in society, by how women are treated in the play. Nora acts like a child because her husband treats her as such. When Nora’s childhood friend, Kristine Linde, stops by to ask for a job, Mrs. Linde talks about how she is a widower and her husband left her with nothing. Nora tells her how sorry she is to hear about it, but then quickly tells Mrs. Linde that Helmer was made manager of the bank. Nora talks about how they will have more money and live the life that they want, “from now on we can live quite differently – just as we want” (Ibsen 1659). Nora is acting like a child, that the money they have now is not enough, and all she wants is stack of money. Nora says that she wants more money to her friend, who needs a job, so she can survive. She talks about having to work stereotypical female jobs, work consisting of needlepoint, crocheting, and embroidering. These are not hard, demanding jobs, they are hobbies that women can do on their free time. Mrs. Linde comments on Nora’s jobs, “well, me heavens – a little needlework and such – Nora, you’re such a child” (Ibsen 1661). Mrs. Linde thinks that she is a child because Nora believes needlepoint and crocheting are real jobs. Nora has never understood what it means to have a hard and demanding job, to have to save money in order to support oneself. When Mrs. Linde calls Nora a child, Nora gets defensive, “you don’t’ have to act so superior…your just like the others. You all think I’m incapable of anything serious” (Ibsen 1661). Nora knows how everyone sees her, she knows that they see her as someone who should not be taken seriously. Nora claims that she raises the money, so that her and her husband could travel to Italy. Mrs. Linde states that Nora could not have borrowed the money, “A wife can’t borrow without her husband’s consent” (Isben 1662). This lets the reader in on how society has treated women. This statement also lets the read know that Mrs. Linde understand the rules that society has placed on women. Women can work to support themselves, but if that women has a husband, then she must answer to him.

In the second act, Nora is filled with dread and guilt that her husband will find out that she borrowed money from Krogstad. She keeps pacing the room, to see if Krogstad would appear at their house. Anne-Marie enters the room to bring Nora a box of masquerade clothes. Nora asks about the children and asks Anne-Marie how she could give her child to a stranger to raise. Anne-Marie explains that she had to work, to support herself and daughter, “A girl who’s poor and who’s gotten in trouble is glad enough for that. Because that slippery fish, he didn’t do a thing for me, you know” (Ibsen 1675). Anne-Marie had to get a job to support herself and daughter, so she could not raise her own daughter because the man in her life did not provide for them. Henrik points out the sacrifices that women have to make in order to support oneself.

Nora confides in her friend, Mrs. Linde when dealing with Krogstad. Mrs. Linde believes that Nora should tell her husband about the money that she borrowed. A real loving husband would stand by his wife because she borrowed the money out of love. Nora does not know how to tell her husband that she borrowed money, “A man handles these problems so much better than a women” (Ibsen 1677). Nora does not even believe that she is capable of telling her husband. Nora believes that a man is stronger than a women, therefore he would be able to handle any problem. The reader can see that society has taught Nora that men are more powerful. Henrik points out that society has made women believe that men are the stronger sex. Women cannot handle situations like these because they are fragile and hysterical.

Nora tries to convince her husband that he needs to give Krogstad his job back. But Helmer dismisses her, he says that he already told the bank that Krogstad was losing his job. He could not go back on his word, definitely because his wife told him to, “What if it’s rumored around now that the new bank manager was vetoed by his wife…give people the idea I can be swayed by all kinds of outside pressure” (Ibsen 1678, 1679). Helmer does not want his co-workers that his wife has any influence in his business. He does not hold any respect for women, so he does not want his wife giving him advice about his job. Helmer believes that he can do his job well, not needing the mind of a women influencing his job decisions. Throughout the play, Helmer calls Nora “you little helpless thing” (Ibsen 1687). Helmer sees her as someone that needs help and the help needs to come from her husband. He sees her as a child that needs to be taught a lesson from a man, “the child can have her way” (Ibsen 1688) and “it’s nothing more than this childish anxiety” (Ibsen 1689). Helmer thinks that his wife is a child, he believes that women are no more than dolls that he gets to play with.

In act three, Mrs. Linde confronts Krogstad about her feelings for him. She explains that she had to abandon him so that she could marry for money. Mrs. Linde did not have the luxury to marry for love, she knew she had to marry for money. She needed to support her ill mother and two brothers. Krogstad does not take in consideration why she made the sacrifice, but only of his feelings. “But you still hadn’t the right to abandon me for somebody else’s sake” (Ibsen 1690). Krogstad believes that Mrs. Linde had to ask for permission, but she did not. She did what she believe to be the right thing to do. She married for money so that she could support her mother and brothers. She wanted her mother’s last days free of care. Krogstad only considers how her actions have affected him. Mrs. Linde learned from experience that life is not going to hand you anything, but she has to go out and grab it herself, “I’ve learned to be realistic. Life and hard, bitter necessity have taught me that” (Ibsen 1690). Mrs. Linde has had to learn the reality of life because of the life that she lived. She could not live in a fantasy because she knew that it would not get her anywhere. From a feminist view point, Mrs. Linde should have gotten a job or had her brothers get a job. She could have supported her family herself, but her solution was marrying for money. Society had rooted in Mrs. Linde’s brain that only a man could help.

At the end of the third act, Helmer reads the letter from Krogstad telling him of his wife’s crimes. Nora wants to leave, to get away from her husband. She does not want him to be associated with her crime, “Just let me loose. You’re not going to suffer for my sake. You’re not going to take on my guilt” (Ibsen 1697). She loves her husband so much that she does not want him to suffer because of her actions. Helmer does not let her leave, he locks her in the room. Helmer yells at her and she sees him in his true light, “In all these eight years – she who was my pride and joy – a hypocrite, a liar – worse, worse – a criminal” (Ibsen 1697). Helmer does not understand that Nora did it to save his life, out of love. He is only thinking of himself, how this is going to affect him, “Now you’ve wrecked all my happiness – ruined my whole future” (Ibsen 1697). He says “my happiness” and “my future,” he is not including his wife. He is only concerned about how he is viewed by society. Helmer should find a way to fix it, but instead he is just blaming his wife. He sees only how society is going to view him if the word gets out that his wife borrowed money. He tells her that she cannot leave but she is going to be able to see her children, “but you can’t be allowed to bring up the children; I don’t dare trust you with them” (Ibsen 1698). Helmer believes that Nora is going to fill the children’s minds with corrupt thoughts. Nora acted out of love, as any women would have, borrowed money so that her husband could get well. But all Helmer cares about is how he asserts his male dominance.

The maid brings in another letter from Krogstad telling the Nora and Helmer that he will not tell anyone about the money. Helmer is immediately relieved, “I’m saved. Nora, I’m saved” (Ibsen 1698). His image is saved, he can be the man of the house again and not have anyone spreading rumors about him. He quickly goes to his wife and asks that she forgive him. That is was in a heat of rage that he put all the blame on her. Nora does not forgive him, “you don’t understand me. And I’ve never understood you either – until tonight” (Ibsen 1699). Nora is finally seeing Helmer as the man that he is. She now understand that Helmer never loved her, that he only loved the thought of her. Nora talks about how she is a doll in Helmer’s house, “I’ve been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa’s doll-child” (Ibsen 1700). Nora is realizes that she was only Helmer’s doll that he could play with. She does not want to be a doll anymore, she wants to be her own person, “I have to stand completely alone, if I’m ever going to discover myself and the world out there. So I can’t go on living with you” (Ibsen 1701). After her husband would not defend her, she understands that her husband has never been in love with her. Nora leaves her husband so that she can become a successful member in society.

From a feminist view point, Henrick Ibsen is pointing out the flaws in society. That women cannot be themselves in society, they need to hide what they do even if it is out of love. Henrik Ibsen made a character realize what a horrible situation she is in. She is dehumanized by her husband and not thought of as an equal. Henrik Ibsen has written a play that deals with the social, economic, and political oppression of women. The men are portrayed to disrespect the women because of what society has taught them. Reading this play in a feminist view point, the readers can see all the little things that the men do to the women that is oppressing them. At the beginning, Nora was hiding who she was to please her husband. By the end, she realizes that her husband is not someone she can love. Nora changes into a women that wants to be treated equally. Women are more than just mothers and wives, they are human beings with the right to be individual people.

Work Cited

Ibsen, Henrik. “A Doll House.” 12th ed., The Norton Introduction to Literature, 2016.