A Doll's House

Subverting the Well-Made Play

Former A Level student Amelie Addison wrote this piece during her gap year. She shows how Ibsen used, played with and subverted the conventional drama of his time, to powerful and shocking effect.

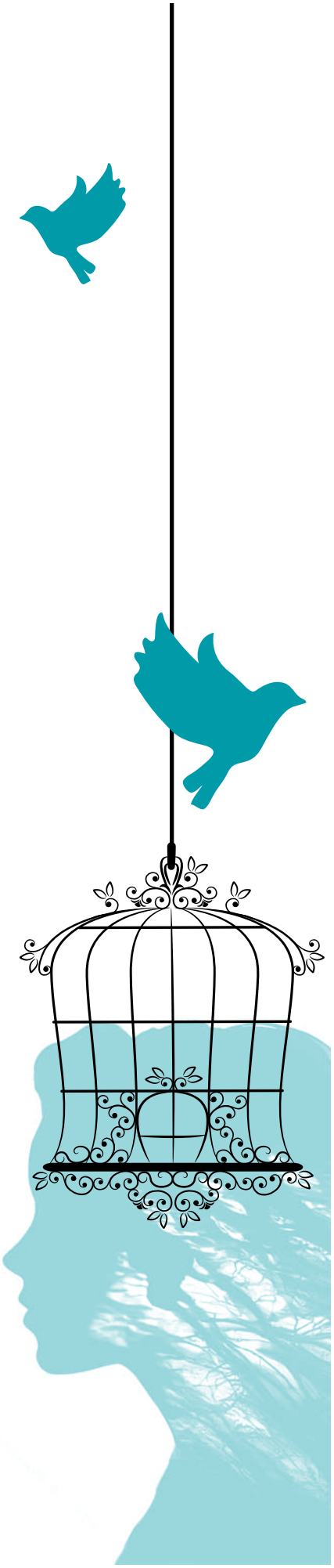
The well-made play was a dramatic structure developed by dramatist Eugène Scribe in the early 1800s as a

> mould into which any sort of material, however extravagant... could be poured
>
> Russell Taylor

By 1879, both audiences and critics had come to expect its trademark format – that there was to be a plot based on facts not known by all characters, presentation of the highest and lowest point of the main character, a central misunderstanding of identity, only very superficial characterisation and exponentially increasing suspense which feeds into a 'plausible and logical denouement' (Brittanica). Whilst in *A Doll's House* Ibsen did conform in some ways to the strict requirements of Scribe's dramatic creation, it is interesting to look at how, and to what extent, he flouted the dramatic conventions of the day.

Nora's Secret – Suspense and Anxiety

A Doll's House opens with the classic feature of the well-made play, as Nora's secret – that she has recklessly broken the law and borrowed a loan 'without her husband's consent' – is revealed through her proud, and then profoundly shocking declaration that 'it was I who found the money'. An intense air of secrecy dominates the scene – the audience is dragged into the depths of Nora's secret life, in a manner which is almost conspiratorial. The choice to stage the action of the play entirely within one room also heightens apprehension as we see that this explosive secret will detonate in a highly enclosed domestic space. Secondly, the play resolutely satisfies the expectation that there is to be increasingly intense suspense as Nora's performance as the perfect bourgeois housewife rapidly disintegrates. As she dutifully decorates the Christmas tree with 'candles here – and flowers there' in much the same way



as she costumes herself as the happily submissive wife, we can see a poignant symbolism developing. As Nora's mental state becomes increasingly agitated, the stage direction tells us

> The Christmas Tree stands stripped and dishevelled, its candles burned to their sockets.

The collapse of the pretence which she so desperately seeks to maintain is heavily foreshadowed by Ibsen, with the 'candles burned to their sockets' indicating that Nora's time is running out. This sense of impending, inevitable destruction is exacerbated through a marked change in Nora's language – exclamations of despair, disjointed speech and breathless pauses punctuate her lines:

> Oh – the icy black water! Oh – that bottomless – that –! Oh, if only it were all over!

The audience again are made to bear a heavy emotional weight by Ibsen as we alone hear Nora's outbursts of suicidal despair and panic. As she 'dances more and more wildly', 'as if your life depended on it', during the Tarantella, we are shown the huge gravity of Nora's downward spiral. Where in her opening duologues she was playful, exuberant, childlike, she is now a woman dancing for 'your life!', driven almost to madness itself by her secret, and the confines of her existence. The suspense and anxiety of the play has grown exponentially, in line with the well-made play structure, and has now reached breaking point.

What Are the High and Low Points?

However, there are also moments in which Ibsen takes the framework of the well-made play, but adapts or subverts it for his own dramatic purpose. Nora's life in the play certainly undergoes much change, and there is significant emotional turmoil. However, pinning down her highest and lowest points may be more difficult than it first seems. For example, the play's first audiences may have been tempted to judge Nora's 'highest' moments to be in Act 1, where she seems to inhabit the traditional role of the doting wife, living in relative bourgeois luxury, receiving gifts and affection from her husband. However, we might today see this as amongst Nora's lowest moments as a woman – she must dehumanise herself, using the same animalistic terms as Torvald, and wield power over her husband as a sexualised and aesthetic object, only directing her circumstances through sensual promises to

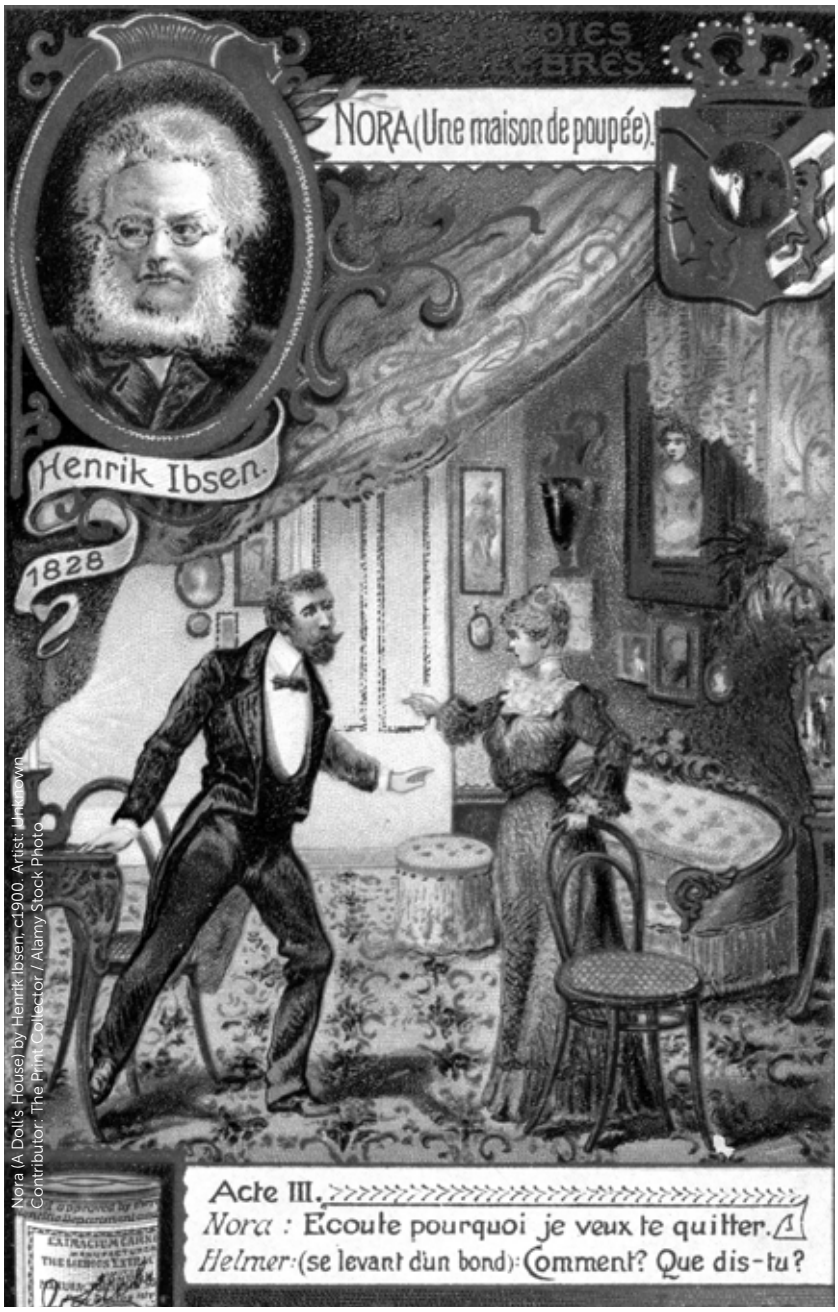
> turn myself into a little fairy and dance for you in the moonlight.

Moreover, a modern audience might then see Nora's decision to leave Torvald at the end of the play as her highest moment as a newly empowered woman exercising autonomy for the first time. To most contemporary critics, however, this marked the most morally deplorable action of all. They found it, as Torvald exclaims 'monstrous' that she could 'neglect your most sacred duties' as a wife and mother and defy the social norms of the day.

Ibsen, though of course not writing with our modern feminism in mind, nonetheless does seem to manipulate the well-made play and quite deliberately invite such speculation, himself highlighting the ironic duality of Nora's life, as she relays her feeling of 'living here like a pauper from hand to mouth' in the bourgeois luxury of her home. It is perhaps this constant questioning of the status quo, and a lack of a firm didactic message by Ibsen, which has enabled the play's enduring popularity.

The Quiproquo – Misunderstood Identity

Furthermore, in the play, Nora is for Torvald 'my secret mistress, my clandestine little sweetheart' 'young and beautiful and trembling'. He objectifies, sexualises and diminishes her, and from this stems his own sense of masculine dominance. However, both Rank and Krogstad's views of Nora are very different, and are much closer to the truth of Nora than what Torvald ever achieves. We see the classic misunderstanding of identity (or **quiproquo**) at work. For example, Krogstad knows Nora has taken a loan (she has borrowed the money from him!) and the two have a hostile, business-like dialogue, most striking to the audience in that it is conveyed using the language of equals; whilst Krogstad holds power and fear over Nora, his sense of superiority is not explicitly linked to his masculinity, nor undertones of sexual violence – it is 'pure business, Mrs Helmer, nothing more'. Moreover, Rank's euphemistic exchanges with Nora, discussing 'asparagus and foie gras' demonstrate her worldliness (these were thought to be aphrodisiacs, and so



Nora (A Doll's House) by Henrik Ibsen, c1900. Artist: Unknown. Contributor: The Print Collector / Alamy Stock Photo

what Nora and Rank are discussing here is prostitution and syphilis) – she is not simply the innocent, childish 'squirrel' which Helmer believes himself to be married to.

What differs here from the classic quiproquo is that Rank and Krogstad are both heavily aware of Helmer's blindness as to his wife's true identity, her actions, and her capabilities; it is Torvald and Torvald alone who still remains in the dark, thereby isolating him and undermining his masculine authority in his own home. The expected patriarchal domestic structure is deconstructed with an agonising dramatic irony as we see how the classic comic misunderstanding has been transformed into something altogether more meaningful. Topics such as prostitution were considered heavily taboo, and were not presented in the conventional theatre of the day – Ibsen's willingness to confront them head-on and 'cross the line' as it were, demonstrates his determination to push theatre into new territory.

No Neat Conclusion

Finally, there are some powerful ways in which Ibsen diverts entirely from the well-made play. Traditionally, the **scène à faire** brings a neat conclusion, and the ending the audience 'ardently desires' (Brittanica). This was the most critical aspect of Scribe's proposed structure. However, Nora's decision to leave her home and her husband was, and remains, shocking to most audiences. Nora's 'coldly calm' rejection of her marriage –

I shall not feel bound to you

I don't want to see the children

was seen as many contemporary critics as 'psychologically implausible' (Scott), marriage and motherhood then being seen as the pinnacle of a woman's existence. This, then, was not the 'plausible and logical denouement' (Brittanica) of the well-made play, but something far more radical.

Additionally, in a well-made play there must be

no time [...] for philosophical musing, no matter how enlightening.

However, Nora's decision to leave at the end of the play as she states 'my duty to myself', and claims the need to know 'which is right, society or I', cannot be said to comply with this. Nora's existentialist reflections pose serious questions about marriage, motherhood, and the façade of domestic harmony so crucial to so many in the Helmers' social class.

Rejection of Stock Characters

Ibsen, determined on verisimilitude, rejects the superficial, and refuses to offer simple stock characters such as the villain or the hero – he crafts characters just as complex and perplexing as his audience. For example, Krogstad is at once a villainous figure who threatens Nora, however he also confesses to be a 'shipwrecked man' acting for the sake of his children to

regain what level of respectability I can

in an unforgiving world of money and status. Similarly, we may be tempted to see Torvald exclusively as a tyrannical figure of patriarchy, treating his wife in an abhorrent manner. However, Ibsen does not let us forget that he is also in many ways a vulnerable figure, a product of his conditioning and environment, and in this way, someone to be pitied. The final lonely stage direction as he 'sinks down into a chair', left isolated onstage in the deafening silence of the slammed door, evokes pathos as we see that Torvald is utterly confused as to where he has failed as a husband – whilst

beginning to construct her own new belief system, Nora has simultaneously destroyed Torvald's. Having lived in the bourgeois world under immense pressure to prove his status, wealth, and masculinity, and in a role in many ways as soulless as Nora's, Torvald is left with no sense of true identity, and is also a victim of 'The Doll House'.

Championing Realism

We can see how the 'well-made' play affords *A Doll's House* a great deal of its suspense and tension, through secrecy, dramatic irony, and heightened emotion. However, Ibsen ultimately deviates from this structure because it did not adequately allow him to explore what theatre should, and ultimately could do. As a champion of realism, Ibsen saw his task as being 'the depiction of humanity' and believed that verisimilitude brought the greatest drama of all. He needed a new and innovative theatrical design in order to fully demonstrate the complexity of his characters and their lives, to show that there are no easy answers or neat endings, and thus to ask what he considered to be the most important questions of his audience. Rather than being viewed as a dramatist who subverted form simply to push us towards a feminist conclusion, Ibsen can be seen as one who radically transformed the well-made play structure in order to push the capacity of theatre beyond predictable melodrama –

> the theatre, through Ibsen, had shaken off its insignificance... to become a major...force in modern culture.
>
> Johnston

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