

Deception and Role-Playing in All My Sons and A Doll's House

Alison Ross uses the linguistic concept of 'status role-playing' to chart the shifting family relationships in A Doll's House and All My Sons.

Tragedy ... works on the see-saw principle: its subject is the ousting of a high-status animal from the pack.

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Family hierarchies

Neither A Doll's House nor All My Sons are tragedies in the classical sense, involving the downfall of powerful rulers.

The setting for both dramas is the world of an ordinary family. The first acts present scenes of domestic relationships, 'an atmosphere of undisturbed normality ... even boredom', as Miller comments.

But even in the smallest social unit of a family there is a hierarchy, some playing the 'ruler' over their obedient subjects. In late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Western society, elder males conventionally have a higher status. And it is this unequal balance of power in nineteenth-century Norway that the playwright Ibsen challenges. In A Doll's House, his character Nora is initially presented in an apparently submissive role, subordinate to her husband Helmer. However, gradually, over the course of the drama Ibsen challenges this presentation,

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developing Nora's character. There is no such development for the male character, whose assumption of absolute authority does not waver till the final scene. The husband's role in the dialogue is often that of a parent to child, or a teacher to pupil:

*Hasn't Miss Sweet Tooth been breaking rules
in town today?*

Playing a role

In *All My Sons* the male character Keller also has a conventionally high social status as husband, father and owner of a thriving business in post-war America. But it is important to think of each character's potential for 'playing' different roles in the drama. Miller shows Keller playing low-status: the uneducated self-made man. He engages in childish games with neighbouring children, defers to his wife and son, and appears bewildered reading the newspaper:

*You look at a page like this you realize how
ignorant you are.*

In drama, as in life, an apparently unpretentious character like this might arouse our suspicions: is it an artful strategy designed to throw the other characters, and audience, off track? In this case, Keller is a character with a secret that could destroy him. To maintain his role, he must deceive almost everyone: his son, neighbours, society at large.

Secrets and self-deceptions

So are these high-status males the central tragic characters - the nineteenth and twentieth century equivalent of the powerful rulers of the classical world? By the end of the drama, each is brought low through his own fault, once the deception is uncovered. But there is also a tragic focus on the female characters in each play. Both wives play low-status roles for their own reasons - not only, as we discover, to please their husbands, but also to protect them. The women know something they must not reveal.

You might consider the effect of deception, about actions, crimes, lies, not just status, on the shifting status of key characters in each play. Successfully deceiving others may raise a person's status temporarily, but the threat of exposure makes them vulnerable to being brought low. Self-deception is, perhaps, the most dangerous threat to a person's status, threatening their deeper understanding of themselves and their place within their families and worlds.

In Act 1 of *A Doll's House*, Nora plays the subservient role of child-wife to her complacent husband, almost to the point of caricature. In their interactions he asks all the questions and she wriggles and shrieks.

HELMER: And what is in this parcel?

NORA: [crying out]. No, no! you mustn't see that till this evening.

Using hints, Ibsen suggests her deception in the opening scene when she sneaks illicit sweets (macaroons) -

subverting her husband's control over her in a trivial way.

NORA: It's perfectly glorious to think that we have - that Torvald has so much power over so many people. [Takes the packet from her pocket] Doctor Rank, what do you say to a macaroon?

RANK: What, macaroons? I thought they were forbidden here.

NORA: Yes, but these are some Christine gave me.

MRS. LINDE: What! I? -

Power games

But the true extent of her deception is gradually revealed. Nora has been the 'power behind the throne', borrowing the money needed to pay for her husband's medical treatment. Tricking her husband out of small amount of money to repay the debt shows her desperation and her need to continue with her low-status game playing:

NORA: [Playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his] If you really want to give me something, you might - you might -

HELMER: Well, out with it!

NORA: [Speaking quickly] You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it.

When another woman accuses Nora of being a child, a more edgy side is revealed:

NORA: You are just like the others. They all think that I am incapable of anything really serious.

Nora's relationship to Krogstadt is more complex. He knows her secret, so has personal power over her, but she wants him to adopt his socially lower status. She hopes that her higher status might give her some protection.

NORA: What right have you to question me, Mr. Krogstadt? You, one of my husband's subordinates!

Ibsen creates a climax in which it is Krogstadt who has the power to reveal the fraud that Nora has been hiding (even from herself, perhaps?). Her desire to believe that good intentions over-ride the crime of forgery pleads a childish innocence that is no longer so convincing.

NORA: Is a daughter not to be allowed to spare her dying father anxiety and care? Is a wife not to be allowed to save her husband's life? I don't know much about law, but I am certain that there must be laws permitting such things as that.

Powerful revelations

Once it is inevitable that the secret will be revealed, however, Nora is not crushed but becomes decisive. The final scenes shows the status roles reversed between wife and husband. All deception is abandoned and Ibsen's controversial resolution shows her able to speak like an adult woman with power over her own actions.

NORA: No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never been so.

NORA: Alas, Torvald, you are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you.

In All My Sons, it is also the female character who appears to have the lowest status. Miller constructs 'Mother' (significantly not assigned a name as the other characters are) playing the role of grief-stricken, unstable mother almost till the last moments of the drama. Her husband and son humour her in her delusion that Larry is still alive. She is often off-stage - resting or doing housework - her actions and feelings being reported by other characters.

All My Sons is a more diffuse drama than the claustrophobic A Doll's House, involving minor characters that seem peripheral to the plot. Rather like a murder mystery game, however, Miller reveals each one to be holding some card to unravel the key questions:

- Is Larry dead or alive?
- Did Keller know about the shipping of the dangerously faulty parts?

The surviving son, Chris, plays a peace-keeping role that may pass as merely harmless deception. By the conclusion of the drama, the audience may recall his unexplained reluctance to add his name to his father's business. His brother Larry's - soon to be his - fiancée, Ann, only challenges him on relatively minor points and does not reveal the crucial letter from Larry till the final scene. It is the entry of Ann's brother George in Act 2 that sparks confrontations and revelations. The high-status verbal behaviour of this character shows that he holds a high card: knowledge without the need to maintain a comforting façade.

He hates your guts, Joe. Don't you know that?

But in the pivotal second Act Miller also reveals that Mother has held the key information all along. She knew her husband was not ill on the night in question - with all the implications resulting from that fact. In the light of that, we should reconsider her role-playing: why does she maintain the illusion of believing her son Larry is alive?

The obvious answer is that she must protect her family/husband. She cannot bear to admit what her husband has done.

As her neighbour Jim explains:

It takes a certain talent - for lying. You have it, and I do. But not him [Chris].

Shifting status

Mother's speech becomes more decisive once the low status role-playing is no longer an effective strategy to protect her husband. She speaks her mind in order to destroy the relationship between Chris and Ann:

She doesn't belong here.

As the secret comes out into the open, her husband has to rely on her for guidance:

Then what do I do?

And her answers explore the moral dilemma of both dramas: are criminal actions forgivable if they were done for the benefit of the family?

A tragic exit

The end of the play leaves the audience reflecting on the significance of Miller's title.

KELLER: I'll feel better if I go.

MOTHER: You're so foolish. Larry was your son, too, wasn't he? You know he'd never tell you to do this.

*KELLER: ... Sure he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were. I'll be right down.
[Exits into house.]*

Each play ends with a central character 'exiting'. All My Sons takes the traditional tragic resolution with the powerful but flawed character's death.

Although Ibsen plants hints that Nora intends to kill herself (and may have considered it as one possible resolution?), instead she takes the decisive step of walking out of her house and marriage. This ending was considered shocking, so much so that when it was staged in Germany, Ibsen was forced to present an alternative:

NORA: Motherless! [After an inner struggle, she lets her bag fall, and says] Ah, though it is a sin against myself, I cannot leave them! [She sinks almost to the ground by the door] [The curtain falls]

He described the alteration as 'a barbaric act of violence' and refused to allow this version to be staged elsewhere.

Once the playwright's intended resolution is re-instated, we have a tragedy with a difference. It is the alpha-male character who is left behind in A Doll's House. The see-saw

movement of this drama can be seen as a low-status character achieving high-status and 'ousting herself from the pack'. Perhaps not a tragedy - for women.