

Ibsen: A Doll's House - Speech and Authority

Tony Garland examines how authority and control in Nora and Torvald's relationship is revealed through the subtleties in their use of language.

The relationship between Nora and Torvald Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* could easily have a Trisha tagline 'controlling husbands' or 'deceitful wives'. As much as a leering Trisha audience might want to villainize either the husband or the wife, who exactly in the play is responsible for the state of their relationship? Is Nora the subservient plaything of her domineering and dictatorial husband, who subjects his naive and childish wife to a paternalistic oppression? Or is Torvald, the rigid and functional bank manager, entrapped by his own inability to understand the true nature of his wife and subject to her calculating and flirtatious manipulation? To understand what happens, we need to consider who's in charge and that is no simple matter.

A revolution in drama

Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879 during a period of transformation and innovation in drama. Georg Brandes, a Danish contemporary and acquaintance of Ibsen, gave a series of lectures in 1871 on the connection between individual liberty and the creation of literature that would serve an instructive purpose. Both Brandes and Ibsen were among the many thinkers and writers of the 19th century who were interested in using art and literature to provide people with an emotional and intellectual education. By

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presenting a realistic picture of the world combined with the depiction of current social issues, the audience would better understand the world around them and their place in it. In a letter to a theatre manager, Ibsen stressed the importance of making the audience feel they were 'sitting listening to something that is going on in actual real life' in order to create his desired effect. Like many other writers, Ibsen had both social and aesthetic objectives for literature.

A Doll's House combines complex ideas with characters who talk like real people, in order to educate the audience. Ibsen delivers authentic characters that act and sound realistic, to explore the complexities and undercurrents in a marriage.

Conversation as a battlefield

To understand who's in charge, we need to take a closer look at the characters' speech. A Doll's House has a limited number of characters with a limited number of interactions and there is a lot of sitting around in the play. With an absence of action, Ibsen has left us with only the dialogue to help us understand the dynamics of authority. In his attempt to create 'realistic' characters, he makes that dialogue complex and ambiguous, conveying misunderstandings, incomprehension and a variety of emotions. Like real people, the characters of A Doll's House understand neither themselves nor each other, and their speech reflects this. Conversations are the battlefields where characters fight for authority and strive for understanding.

Act 1 - child-like Nora

The first conversation between Nora and Torvald sets the stage for constantly shifting positions of power between the couple. The use of authentic sounding language does not merely make the characters more convincing, but actively portrays the shifting authority in the relationship. Nora's childlike behaviour is clearly evident from her grouping of short abbreviated utterances and her use of simple vocabulary:

Them? Who cares about them? They're strangers.

The excitable sound of Nora's speech is created through her repetition of words and exclamatory sentences, particularly 'pooh!', but this does not necessarily mean she relinquishes control of the conversation to Torvald.

Nora's childlike speech combines an aggressive with a cajoling tone, and helps her get what she wants. When Torvald asks her what she wants for Christmas she begins with a refusal that she corrects to mask her eagerness for money:

No, I really don't know. Oh, yes - Torvald - !

A reluctance to divulge information prompts Torvald to encourage her which leads to some flirting from her before she enthusiastically pre-empts his refusal:

Oh yes, Torvald dear, please! Please! Then I'll wrap up the notes in pretty gold paper.

Nora's childlike behaviour is part of her manipulation of Torvald but doesn't necessarily mean she maintains control indefinitely. Indeed such attempts at manipulation might be interpreted as a sign of weakness. One of the most frequently noted aspects of Torvald's speech is his use of a variety of pet names for Nora, such as 'skylark', 'squirrel', 'squanderbird', 'songbird' and 'spendthrift', usually with the possessive pronoun 'my' and the diminutive adjective 'little' which generates a subordinate position for Nora. The use of questions in this conversation demonstrates how authority shifts between the characters. Nora's prompting of Torvald denotes her manipulation of him, while Torvald's interrogation of Nora over whether she has indulged in sweets allows him achieve a position of authority. The first act establishes a finely balanced stability in Nora and Torvald's relationship, a stable situation which is soon revealed as under threat.

Act 2 - Nora's fragmented language

Nora's use of abbreviated sentences in the first act illustrates her childish characteristics. In Act 2, however, her fragmented language effectively portrays her turmoil and paranoia. As with any play, after the situation and characters are established, it is time to introduce change and development. Despite employing all the elements of manipulation from the first conversation, in Act Two Nora fails to convince Torvald to grant her request to have

Krogstad reinstated. But Torvald also has a more difficult time asserting his authority. He is reduced to indignation to gain authority over what he perceives to be Nora's defiance when she says his reasons for not liking Krogstad are petty. This conversation between Nora and Torvald presents clear misunderstanding that results in the difficulty both characters have in establishing and maintaining authority. However, as the act ends, there is a return to previous tensions as Nora manages to manipulate Torvald into focusing his attention on her and the tarantella, just as he asserts his authority over her by giving her instructions.

Act 3 - Shifting authority

Ibsen stated of A Doll's House:

I might honestly say that it was for the sake of the last scene that the whole play was written

and apart from a short interval at the beginning of the act, Act 3 focuses on the shifting conversation between Nora and Torvald. A number of features of authentic speech are used to distinguish the shifting characteristics and changing tensions in the relationship. Torvald's use of long sentences displays his frisky drunkenness as he describes his fantasy of seeing Nora at the party and his eagerness to send Mrs. Linde home is portrayed with his incomplete utterance:

I'd gladly - but you haven't far to go.

Nora's desperation to remain at the party is evident from her frantic repetition. Nora's seriousness with Dr. Rank's veiled admission of his impending death is clear from her long, more coherent utterances. This contrasts with her incoherent, incomplete repetitious language, used by Ibsen to portray her fear of the suicide she has chosen:

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

The dramatic culmination of the play and final shifting of authority between Nora and Torvald arrives with Torvald's receipt of Krogstad's blackmail letter. Exclamations, repetition and questions combine in Torvald's speech to illustrate his mixture of disbelief and anxiety and make him sound like he is in shock:

Is it true? Is it true, what he writes? Oh, my God! No, no - it's impossible, it can't be true!

Torvald's shock shifts to anger at Nora with his imperative utterances, 'be quiet', and accusations 'you have destroyed all my happiness'. The second person 'you' is an effective contrast to the first person 'I am saved!' when Krogstad's second letter arrives and produces a tangible sense of relief in Torvald's speech along with an excitable

sound. Against Torvald's rapidly changing emotions and ultimate excitement when he receives the IOU, Nora is composed and relatively uncommunicative. She uses short abrupt statements, usually placidly agreeing with Torvald until her symbolic statement, 'I've changed', which produces a resignation and certainty of action. While it seems as though Nora's certainty dominates the conversation, it is more that she has decided to cut off communication, rather than that she has achieved authority. Torvald's attempt at emotional blackmail by mentioning their children may be considered an attempt to take control of the conversation but it doesn't work because Nora has left the relationship and conversation behind.

A battle for power

So who is in charge in the play? Amid Ibsen's attempt to create both authenticity of character and complexity of social comment, it might be argued that they both are. However, this is not a mutual relationship with equal sharing of power; rather it is an unresolved battle for power. They are both shown to be implicated in the state of their relationship. Nora clearly states in a conversation with Mrs. Linde that she changed to suit Torvald:

When we were first married, he got quite jealous if I as much as mentioned any of my old friends back home. So naturally, I stopped talking about them.

And Torvald clearly has very little idea who Nora is beyond his own conception of her. Now that Nora has changed to

suit herself, the relationship and conversations have come to an end. At the beginning of Act 3, Mrs. Linde says:

There must be an end to these shiftings and evasions.

And with the slammed door the relationship of Nora and Torvald ends, suggesting to the audience potential new beginnings for both characters.