

The Enduring Effect of the Past in A Doll's House

How did Henrik Ibsen, a playwright from a small coastal town in Norway, write one of the most radically controversial plays ever put on stage? This article by Olympia Severis explores how Ibsen's childhood and relationships affected him and then broadens out to consider whether the socio-political context of nineteenth century Europe contributed to Ibsen's writing of A Doll's House.

Ibsen's Childhood – The Past Influencing the Present

During the explosive confrontation between Nora and Torvald in Act 3, Nora realises that her upbringing 'as Papa's doll child' has moulded and permeated her sense of being. Ibsen here is posing a question as to how far a person's past, specifically their childhood, impacts their present day. What happens if we ask this question of Ibsen himself?

Famously, Ibsen's early childhood was marked by his father's financial ruin in 1835 when Ibsen was aged seven. However, one must be careful not to overstate the much discussed poverty of Ibsen's family. In reality, Erica Wagner notes that the Ibsens had been very wealthy and 'they became not poor, but much less wealthy; and yet they were keen to keep up appearances.' The keeping up of appearances and the ongoing tension between reality and semblance became a crucial influence on Ibsen's writing. His family's private financial difficulties became public shame when his father's possessions were publicly auctioned and reported in the Skien and District Weekly Journal. It is this shame, rather than the financial losses,

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that greatly impacted Ibsen and the effect of this on his writing is obvious in his damnation of bourgeois respectability. Bourgeois respectability encompasses the accepted conventions, morals, values and traditions of middle-class society. In this world, domestic harmony and honour are crucial factors. The loss of respectability in society is precisely Torvald's focus in Act 3 when he learns of Nora's deception. He worries about the judgement of others 'the eyes of the world' and their interpretation of the scandal

Very likely people will think I was behind it all.

He insists that

The matter must be hushed up at any cost

and

all that concerns us is to save [...] the appearance.

Ibsen's family's past and their shame is directly reflected in this confrontation as the actual secret is not deemed as important as its impact on the social acceptability of the family. In this manner, Ibsen's personal past influenced his understanding of the harsh mechanisms of bourgeois society and thereafter appear in the dynamics of A Doll's

House.

Art Imitating Life

Ibsen was further inspired by the story of Laura Kieler (née Petersen), a literary fan who became a close family friend in 1871. Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer notes that

they saw a good deal of each other [...]he called her his 'skylark' and encouraged her to write more.

Kieler's husband contracted tuberculosis in 1878 and was advised by his doctors to travel to a warmer climate in the south. Due to financial constraints, Kieler took out a loan secretly but was unable to meet the repayments. This led her to forging a promissory note and her husband's eventual rage when the truth came to light. Kieler was forbidden access to her children, admitted into a mental hospital and completely overwhelmed by the emotional burden of her actions to save her husband's health. Kieler became the inspiration for Nora as we can clearly see Ibsen's using his friends' painful past for artistic purposes. The Kielers who were reconciled by the time of *A Doll's House's* publication in 1879 never forgave Ibsen for unearthing their past in such a public manner.

Socio-political Events in Europe

Ibsen strongly maintained that his 'task' was 'the description of humanity'. This ideological intention and

humanist perspective can be explored alongside the effect of Europe's recent socio-political past. In 1848, a series of revolutions spread across Europe as a consequence of economic crisis and the emerging power of the bourgeoisie. The role of ideas played a substantial part in these revolutions as the bourgeoisie demanded political, economic and social liberalism which had hitherto been denied. The idea of breaking free from the past, of freedom of expression and liberalism overtook the continent for a short while. Liberalism stood for: delete colon the consent of the governed in a republican government as well as freedom from the institutions of the church and state. This amounted to freedom for the individual. According to his biographer Ivo de Figueiredo, young Ibsen's thinking was greatly influenced by the spirit of 1848 as he avidly read newspapers relaying news of the uprisings. As Ibsen wrote:

The times were in foment. The February revolution, the uprisings in Hungary and elsewhere, the Schleswig war – all this gripped me powerfully and became part of my maturing progress.

While the uprisings were mostly unsuccessful in political terms, the ideas which had proliferated became part of the cultural zeitgeist. The effect of these historical events impacted Ibsen's ideological outlook and he grew to regard personal liberty as vital:

*There is nothing else and nothing better for us
all to do in spirit and in truth to realize
ourselves.*

Ibsen believed that the individual should be at the centre of society rather than the institution of family which required repression of the self. Nora comes to understand this at the end of Act 3 when she realises how little she knows herself:

*I must try and educate myself--you are not the
man to help me in that. I must do that for
myself. And that is why I am going to leave
you now.*

Nora is willing to sacrifice her role and duty as wife and mother to seek the personal freedom to understand who she truly is. She is breaking free from the constraints of patriarchal society and the church. In this manner Nora becomes a symbol of nineteenth century liberalism and the aim to create a new emancipated present from a dysfunctional and constraining past. In exploring *A Doll's House*, it is valuable to study the personal biography of the playwright as well as gaining an understanding of how the socio-historical context could have inspired him. All these different strands help to illuminate the play and the manner in which it came to be.