Keeping Up Appearances – A Doll's House

Many readings of Ibsen's play make a direct association between the doll of the title and the female protagonist, Nora. John Hathaway argues, instead, that it's Torvald who is more doll than Nora.

Nora famously uses the metaphor of a doll to decry the injustice that has been done to her by patriarchal society:

> *I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to be papa's doll-child.*

The power of this metaphor lies in the somewhat uncanny presentation of humans as dolls that give the impression of life but are nothing more than robotic creations with no humanity of their own. Many have been quick to interpret this realist drama by seeing Nora's cry of 'I believe that I am first and foremost a human being' as a protofeminist statement which tapped into contemporary concerns of 'The Woman Question' and heightened the focus on the issue of gender inequality in Victorian Europe. However, Ibsen himself was very clear 19 years after A Doll's House was first performed that his work was not about advancing the cause of women; rather he said that his task had been 'the description of humanity.' In addition, many translators argue that the title used for this play is incorrect: the Norwegian Et dukkehjem should actually be translated A Doll House, which shifts the focus from Nora alone to the way in which Torvald, just as much as Nora – and indeed,

Writer

John Hathaway is Head of English at Glenalmond College.

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the whole of nineteenth-century Norwegian society – is presented as a doll.

Nora – ‘Your songbird is here!’

Depictions of Nora in this play typically present her as a woman who, much like the ‘skylark’ that Torvald compares her to, is encaged and trapped by her role as a nineteenth-century Victorian wife. However, such a perspective ignores the fact that she is far more than simply some unthinking robot, and that whilst her freedom is clearly curtailed and limited by patriarchal power, she is able to resort to various means of asserting herself. Indeed, her transformation in Act III, far from being sudden and dramatic, is clearly hinted at and foreshadowed from the outset. The very first word of the play, ‘Hide’, hints at Nora’s ability to manipulate and keep secrets, and it is no accident that Nora plays Hide and Seek with her children towards the end of Act I. Whilst her power is sometimes presented in inconsequential ways, such as her consumption of macaroons against Torvald’s wishes, Nora also at times uses flirtation and flattery to achieve her objectives. Thus Nora

> *plays with [Torvald’s] coat-buttons; not looking at him*

in order to obtain more money from him. She happily applies the same terms of dehumanisation to herself that Torvald uses to apparently demean and belittle her, to help persuade him:

> *If only you knew how many expenses we larks and squirrels have, Torvald.*

She deliberately plays the role of helpless female in order to achieve her ends, perhaps most clearly in the Tarantella scene where she implores Torvald to 'Correct me, lead me, the way you always do', to distract him from the letter-box and the ticking time bomb of Krogstad's missive. Nora understands her husband's rigid adherence to his masculine role, and uses this to her advantage.

Not only does she demonstrate some agency – albeit limited – she also possesses an impressive self-awareness of her position and the reality of her marriage with Torvald. One of the reasons she is holding on to the secret of how she acted to save Torvald is to gain leverage over him at some future point when she has lost her sexual allure:

> *...when Torvald no longer loves me as he does now; when it no longer amuses him to see me dance and dress up and play the fool for him. Then it might be useful to have something up my sleeve.*

This is not the language of a foolish, unthinking woman who is unable to survive without the constant guidance and support of her husband; indeed, it displays a very pragmatic understanding of her need to play various roles as demanded of her by society. It also displays an awareness of how eventually those roles will cease to afford her the little power that she has at present, so much so that

she is already thinking ahead and anticipating different ways to protect herself. Whilst it clearly would be inaccurate to view her as dominant in her marriage, it would also be a mistake to judge her as being completely powerless, and the play charts her progression towards the final epiphany of her ability to achieve freedom.

Torvald – 'man enough to bear the burden'

When compared to his wife, it is possible to argue that it is Torvald who is far more of a 'doll' than Nora. Whereas Nora self-consciously plays roles, and through those roles is able to assert herself, Torvald is a man who is blind to the limitations placed on him by society. He doesn't see how he is even more entrapped through the gender role he unwittingly adopts as a man than Nora is as a woman. As a representative of the rising Norwegian middle-class, Torvald values reputation and social standing above all else, even his marriage. Nora confesses to Mrs Linde in Act I that her chief reason for keeping from her husband her involvement in securing the loan is because he has such a fixed idea of what it means to be a man. She fears challenging his understanding of that role:

> *And besides – he's so proud of being a man – it'd be so painful and humiliating for him to know that he owed anything to me. It'd completely wreck our relationship. This life we have built together would no longer exist.*

Torvald, unlike Nora, is unable to see beyond his role as the

man who provides, and the extremity of Nora's language here points towards the inherent fragility and brittleness of the china doll existence of Torvald: he is a man who is so consumed by the role thrust on him by nineteenth-century society that, were he to discover his reliance on Nora, his identity as a male would be irretrievably shattered. It is no accident that Nora uses the verb 'wreck' in this quotation, which anticipates Krogstad and Mrs Linde's description of themselves as two 'ship-wrecked souls'. From the way in which their relationship in Act III is juxtaposed with the relationship of the Helmers, it seems that Ibsen is arguing that a marriage of true equality, or 'the miracle of miracles' as Nora terms it, is only possible once characters have endured a process of 'wrecking' that gives them valuable self-knowledge.

It is this self-knowledge that Torvald so obviously lacks. It is highly ironic that it is he who constantly uses metaphors of masking and acting in his language such as 'how he must wear a mask' and 'Stop being theatrical', as it is he who is blind to the damage caused by his unthinking and automatic performance of his gender role. Torvald presents himself to Nora as the knight in shining armour, expressing his masculinity through the role of saviour:

> *...often I wish some terrible danger might threaten you, so that I could offer my life and my blood, everything, for your sake.*

However, it is clear that when fantasy becomes reality, he is not, in fact, as he so stridently asserted earlier on in the play, 'man enough to bear the burden for us both', and he is unable to act outside of the confines of society's strict

rules and regulations. His own doll-like status is sealed when he unthinkingly applies the animal and bird metaphors he uses to describe Nora throughout the play to himself:

> *I have broad wings to shield you.*

He is completely unaware of how he dehumanises himself through such language, as he confesses his readiness to protect Nora, which was something that just minutes earlier, before the destruction of Krogstad's IOU, he was unable to contemplate.

'First and foremost a human being'

Brian Johnston, in his notes in the Norton Critical Edition of Ibsen's plays, argues that

> *An Ibsen play is the uncovering of an abyss concealed beneath the reality we think we inhabit*

and it would be hard to exaggerate the seismic shockwaves that impacted society as a result of the first performances of A Doll's House towards the end of the nineteenth century. After many years of melodramas and plays that were unrealistic, audiences were confronted with characters they could eerily identify with and whose lives bore an uncanny resemblance to their own. Ibsen used this

realist drama to hold a mirror up to his own contemporaries and challenge them – and us – to see how all of us, both male and female, play roles that are foisted upon us by society, and that we accept these roles unconsciously and unquestioningly. In 1865, Ibsen's friend Bjoernstjerne Bjoernson, had written a play entitled The Newly Wedded Couple, which focused on how it is the male, rather than the female, who is presented as a mannequin. It is hard to ignore the influence of this play on Ibsen's A Doll's House, as it is Torvald who is far more of a doll than his wife, and who is left to languish in this position at the end of the play, unable to understand or comprehend how he is entrapped, while Nora rejects society's constraints and moves towards independence. The true tragic victim of this 'Modern Tragedy' could therefore be seen as Torvald, who is left, as the final curtain descends, aware of the 'abyss' that has opened up between himself and Nora but powerless to do anything about it.