

Playing a role - female identity in A Doll's House and Like Water for Chocolate

Katy Lee analyses the significance of acting in the stories of Nora and Tita, characters from opposite ends of the earth, united by their fight for independence and rejection of social expectations.

World Literature in the IB and A Level

The World Literature component of the IB requires students to study texts originally written in a language other than English. A Doll's House by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, was first performed in 1879. The Mexican novel Like Water for Chocolate, by Laura Esquivel, is set in the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s and was published in 1989, then translated into English in 1992.

From 2008, A Level specifications also allow students to study texts in translation. 'A Doll's House' is listed as a drama text for the Victorian option for AQA A Literature.

Female roles and social expectations

Though they are set in very different times, places and societies, both texts focus on women who are assigned

Writer

Katy Lee is an English teacher at the British School of Brussels.

This article first appeared in emagazine 41, September 2008.

[Plays](#)

[Writers A-Z](#)

[Print this article:](#)

roles by other characters. These roles are reinforced by the social expectations of 19th-century Norway and early 20th-century revolutionary Mexico. In both texts, the female protagonists not only play their roles, but also use them to their own advantage before finally rejecting them.

Torvald Helmer sees his wife Nora as a housewife and mother whose world is limited to the domestic sphere. She is expected by her husband (and late 19th-century society) to follow a clear set of rules and expectations, which certainly do not involve thinking independently. As Torvald tells Nora, 'you have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband' [my italics]. It is not only the men in the play who confirm these rules; the widowed Mrs Linde states 'a wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent' and cannot understand someone breaking these rules. Nora knows the expectations too, telling Mrs Linde to put her sewing away as 'Torvald cannot bear to see dressmaking going on'; he dislikes seeing mundane domestic activity which undermines his image of what a wife should be.

The language of ownership

Nora's subservient role is further defined by Torvald's language. He repeatedly claims her as a belonging and maintains control over her through possessive pronouns and patronising names like 'my little skylark' and 'my little squirrel', making her seem more like a pet or child than an adult. Indeed, there are frequent references to their relationship resembling one between father and daughter rather than husband and wife. Nora is treated like an object who 'simply transferred from Papa's hands to [Torvald's]' and in her parting speech, she describes herself as a 'doll wife', having been 'Papa's doll child'. She realises she has always been controlled by other people's desires, not her

own.

Role-play and the language of acting

Like *Water for Chocolate* tells the story of Tita de la Garza (the narrator's great aunt), who is assigned a more unusual role than Nora. Her domineering mother informs her that 'being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die.' Tita is given no choice but to follow this long-standing family tradition, at the expense of marrying the man she loves. Indeed, when she leaves the household after her mental breakdown, Tita 'would stare at her hands on end' because 'at her mother's, what she had to do with her hands was strictly determined, no questions asked. She had to get up, get dressed, get the fire going.' Like Nora, Tita has a set of rules which she must follow in order to fulfil her role. Esquivel reinforces the notion of role-play by using the language of acting throughout the novel. Tita 'was not meant for the loser's role' and behaves 'like a great actress' when watching her sweetheart marry her sister. Similarly, Ibsen's stage directions refer to Nora's clothing in a way reminiscent of costume changes as Nora performs a different role depending on her clothing. Her final costume change indicates her resolution to leave the house and find a new life.

Gaining control

Tita's other job is ranch cook. Having been born in the kitchen, she has always felt at home there. Although this is another subservient female role, 'Tita was pleased to receive the post' which empowers her, as the kitchen is 'beyond Mama Elena's command.' She serves others and

spends hours preparing food, yet through this role she gains control of her life, whereas Nora needs to leave the household in order to achieve independence.

The power of performance

Nora and Tita are not, however, helpless victims; both use the roles they are given to their own advantage. Nora employs her skills as an actress to manipulate Torvald and delights in dancing wildly in Act 3, ignoring his instructions. The only time she openly defies him before her parting speech is when she is in role as the 'Capri maiden'. She knows that she holds power over her husband when she performs and tells Mrs Linde she will confess to the loan 'when [her] dancing and dressing-up and reciting have palled on him' and she needs a new way to interest him. When preparing for the fancy dress party, Torvald orders her to dress as his 'little Capri maiden' and perform the tarantella dance and she asks him to 'criticize and correct' her, seemingly playing actress to his director. Here the audience watch another audience watching Nora, reinforcing the centrality of acting. This is role-play in the most obvious sense, complete with costume and audience, yet it is Nora who is in control, not Torvald.

Living a lie

Of course, throughout the play Nora is living a lie, merely acting. The audience are aware from Nora's conversation with Mrs Linde in Act I that she borrowed money to fund a holiday for Torvald when he was ill. His patronising comments in Act 1 telling her she wastes money indulging herself are heavily ironic, indicating just how little he knows of her and how effectively she plays the part of 'doll wife'.

Rather than confessing that she is in debt, she continues to play the role he expects, only revealing to her social inferior, Mrs Linde, that she is in fact 'a wife who has [a] head for business' and 'has to be a little bit clever'. When we consider the position of women in the 1870s, we see just how innovative Nora is; the only way she was able to borrow money was by forging her father's signature - taking on someone else's role - not in her own right. This also helps to explain the outrage expressed by contemporary audiences at Nora's behaviour and Ibsen's questioning of social values in the alarmingly realistic final scene.

Culinary magic

In contrast to Ibsen's realistic mode of writing, Esquivel employs elements of magic realism, particularly to describe the effect of food on those who eat it. Having been denied the chance to marry Pedro, Tita is forced to live alongside him as his sister-in-law, seemingly powerless to act on her desires. However, her job as cook enables her to communicate with him in an unconventional way. On receiving a bouquet of roses from him, Tita clasps them, making herself bleed so much that 'the roses, which had been mostly pink, had turned quite red from the blood'. When she then uses them to make 'Quail in Rose Petal Sauce', Pedro is struck by its aphrodisiac effect, 'as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved [Tita's] entire being in the rose petal sauce'. Esquivel uses sexual language to suggest the food is an alternative to intercourse, where Tita 'penetrate[s] to the farthest corners of his being', taking on a masculine role, 'that was the way she entered Pedro's body, hot, voluptuous, totally sensuous.' She is thus empowered by her role in the kitchen, rather than being trapped by it.

Acting for themselves

Ultimately, however, both Nora and Tita reject the roles their respective societies assign them and act for themselves. In surprisingly similar displays of independence, they abandon their given places. Nora tells Torvald she has duties to herself which she must fulfil - she has not allowed herself to be a 'reasonable human being' and feels the need to 'think over things for [her]self and get to understand them.' The confined doll's house of her family home is no longer enough for her by the end of the play and, despite what it means for her children, she needs to find out 'who is right, the world or [her]'. Equally, when the ghost of Tita's mother returns, Tita has the strength to turn against her, shouting, 'I know who I am! A person who has a perfect right to live her life as she pleases.' In Tita's case, the rejection leads to her union with Pedro, whose passion is so great that ironically they both burn to death. Ibsen, on the other hand, leaves us wondering where Nora may go or what she may become once the door shuts in the final lines of the play. Though neither ending may seem ideal, crucially, both women opt for roles they have assigned themselves rather than those they were given by men and society.