



## A naturalistic study of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's house*

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### Abstract

The purpose of the present study to deal with Naturalism in the plays of the famous Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen who is known for his naturalistic spirit and for exploring social problems during the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century with a view to reform the society. His plays are considered to be landmark in Ibsen's career as a naturalistic playwright. Drama and theatre of that time, likewise was focused on stock situations and predictable responses. But Ibsen offered a different prospective entirely. Naturalistic issues and women questions were the most important points in his plays. *A Doll House* (1879) by him is the best example of his naturalistic problem play based on the social reality of that time. The reality of the play urges the audiences and readers to think deeply about their own situations at home and to be aware of the problems that exist so that we are able to identify and solve the problems early.

**Keywords:** naturalism, social problems, stock situation predictable responses, women's questions, naturalistic issues

### Introduction

Henrik Ibsen is one of the pioneers in the writing of naturalistic or realistic plays in revolt against the romantic drama and the well-made plays. In his hands the theatre began to move towards a naturalistic mode of performance and away from romanticism because it dealt with social problems and realities of life. He gave an entirely new dimension to drama in the later half of the nineteenth century. He strongly contributed to giving European drama, a vitality and artistic quality comparable to ancient Greek tragedies. Ibsen turned the theatre from a place of entertainment and occasional catharsis into a place from which the audience emerged with a compulsive feeling to reconsider basic principles which they had never before seriously questioned. His contributions to the theatre were manifold. Infact, he is the first one to show that tragedies could also be written about ordinary people and in everyday prose or language. His second contribution was that he has thrown away the artificialities of the plot (Shakespearean dramas). And his third contribution is that he developed the art of prose dialogue to a degree of refinement which remains still unsurpassed; that is what explaining the enduring greatness of Ibsen as a naturalist or realist.

English writers of realistic or naturalistic spirit attempted to understand the numerous aspects of individual as well as individual relationship to the society, then they depicted individual's adjusting or not adjusting to the developments and changes that rapidly shaped society because they believed that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood through the study of human beings, they studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters' lives were governed by the forces of heredity and environment. This naturalistic extension makes the logical extension of realism.

Naturalism was a literary movement or tendency from 1880s to 1930s that used detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity and environment are inescapable

forces in shaping human character. It tries to offer a photographic reproduction of reality in order to emphasis the materialistic aspects of human existence. These terms naturalism and realism are often used as synonyms. Even though the terms go hand in hand but they are not fully interchangeable. Emile Zola, who is considered to be the father of Naturalism inaugurates the term in his Preface to the Novel that the writer's task is to dissect the environment and human nature with a clinical precision of scientist.

This movement is informed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century science particularly by Darwin's biological theories *On the Origin of Species* (1859). It asserts that human beings exist entirely in order to nature. They don't have soul or any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the biological realism of nature. The individual's compulsive instincts towards sexuality, hunger and accumulation of goods are inherited via-genetic compulsion and the social-economic forces surrounding his or her upbringing.

This psychology of the character is the basis of Naturalistic drama which gives the impression of continuation of actual reality and intends to mask the process of artistic creation and mediation. Psychology discovered a depth of meaning and human understanding in Ibsen's delineation of characters. Ibsen's superiority lies in his understanding of the labyrinthine human mind and his ability to portray its depth and nuance. Once Ibsen said in a conversation with M.G. Conrad:

"Before I wrote one word, I must know the character through and through, I must penetrate into the east wrinkle of his soul. I always proceed from the individual, the stage setting, the dramatic ensemble all of that comes naturally and causes me no worry, as soon as I am certain of the individual in every aspect of his humanity. But I have to have his exterior in mind also, down to the east button, how he stands and walks, how he bears himself, what his voice sound like. Then I don't let him go until his fate is fulfilled. (Meyer, Michael. *Ibsen*. pp. 580-581)

Various naturalistic elements can be observed throughout

Ibsen's most of the plays. To understand Ibsen's philosophy on his naturalistic plays, it is better to understand *A Doll's House* first. It is a very naturalistic story that portrays the problems within a family, particularly married woman Nora. The play's setting often seems in house which helps to create a more naturalistic setting and the dialogue between family and friends which seem to depict the caused conversation, are many things we do in our daily lives. The issue of marriage is also an issue many people are experiencing in this century where divorce cases have increased year by year. The reality of the play urges the audiences and readers to reflect upon their own situations at home and to be consciously aware of the problems that exist so that we are able to identify and solve the problems early.

As we can say that Naturalism is a type of art that refers to the depiction of realistic objects in a natural setting or way, in *A Doll's House* the setting, costumes and language are close to everyday life. Its theme, Ibsen stressed, is the need of every human being, whether man or woman, to find out who he or she is and to strive to become that person which make the play naturalistic.

The theme of captivity to these naturalistic tendencies has served as a performance guide for the portrayal of Ibsen's characters. Ibsen's female characters are in a bondage to an object or person that manipulates the character's mental and emotional senses. The character's inner captivity reaches a climax where a decision must be taken to abolish the chain of captivity or forever remained captured. One of the best examples in this play is Nora, the protagonist of the play who suffers a lot due to this captivity and presents an inauthentic identity to the audiences and throughout the play attempts to discover her true identity. In the sense, Nora Helmer is a character struggling to realize her authentic identity. Her husband Torvald has always established her identity. Throughout the play Torvald was patronizing towards Nora and forced her to act and look in a way that pleased him. Nora allowed Torvald to play dress up with her and no matter what the situation Nora has to constantly remain Torvald's quiet happy little doll. Nora ends her doll life by leaving her doll's house to learn and discover on her own. She is no longer a doll under the control of her owner. This is when the readers see Nora commences into her transformation of her authentic character. Nora decides that the only way to set up the situation is to leave Torvald and her children and find her individuality independently.

She is also enthralled by the power and freedom of money available to men. Critics believed that Nora, facing other people except Torvald, showed her real self more. As it is evident in the beginning of the play, Nora avoided being seen eating macaroons at home because it was not allowed by Torvald, but she took it for granted in the presence of her friends. It means only Nora's friends could know her true thought whether it was serious or not. She disclosed her anxiety about her marriage and the desire for money naturally in the presence of her friends. It has been remarked that Nora's vehemence while dancing the tarantella, is a pointer to the suppressed passion and energy of her mind that comes out in full view when she confronts Torvald at the end of the play. Nora begins to surrender her will and identify to the comfort and freedom of money. Ibsen has carefully layered Nora's jubilant monetary reactions to portray the illusion of a carefree woman. The illusion is broken by Nora's revelation of the source of her monetary obsession, a secret loan of four thousand eight hundred

crowns to provide for a trip to Italy to save Torvald's life. Nora feels very proud of the fact that she has saved her husband's life despite her illegal act of borrowing money. Nora's apparent obsession with money is truly elated rejoicing at the near freedom from the captivity of the loan. Unfortunately, this freedom does not bloom to fruition as Nora sinks deeper into the monetary captivity.

Nora is also a captive to the male society through the secret loan provided by Krogstad. The money lender Krogstad reveals that Nora had forged her father's signature and committed a crime. Krogstad uses Nora's forgery as blackmail, entrenching this female protagonist in a second layer of captivity to the rules set by the male society. In this way, Krogstad is in a complete control of Nora's fate. Nora begins to understand the consequences of the legal transgression and she tries her best to appease Krogstad by trying to convince Torvald to retain the money lender's position at the bank.

Torvald, a member of the male society, further encapsulates Nora in captivity to male society by enforcing his will. Nora is in danger of undergoing serious legal action that can affect her relationship with Torvald and her children. The captivity to male society proves to be more difficult burden than monetary captivity. Allphin Hoggatt observes that "Nora began as a doll child to her father and is then transferred to the role of doll wife to Helmer. Both men act as a barrier to Nora's growth as a responsible individual". (Hoggatt, Allphin. *Women in the Plays of Henrik Ibsen*. p. 32) Nora is captive to the patronizing expectation of Torvald as well as the moralistic expectations. Torvald's moralistic tirade enslaves Nora in a life of confusion, doubt and self-loathing. Nora is captured by Torvald's moralistic view and is terrified about her influence as a mother, she refuses to interact with her children.

At the climax of the play Nora finally faces the consequences of her forgery and Torvald reacts abominably. Torvald refused to take the blame for his wife, leads Nora to the climax of captivity where she decides to leave her marriage, children and livelihood. Nora takes the decision to break out of the final chains of captivity and leave Torvald. A door slamming shut is heard below from the stage revealing Nora leaving her house.

Moving back to naturalistic study, the play also studies the pernicious effects of money, class and patriarchal ideology in distorting social behavior and marginalizing the lower orders and women in general. Anne Marie, the nurse, has to abandon her illegitimate child and become a household help because of social structure and poverty. Anne Marie her own in comprehensible circumstances that made her leave her family. Circumstances led her to leave her own daughter to strangers and carry on in her life. Her character is quite similar to Mrs. Linde who had to give up her youthful love for the sake of money and security. She has played the substitute of Nora's mother. It seems to be callous of her giving up her own daughter and serving as a mother to another girl, Nora. Here a negative image of the nurse is built, a selfish image of Nurse is conceived i.e. her working for her own life's security and survival.

Mrs. Linde another woman who is a close friend of Nora is shown to be an unfortunate woman who is deprived of money. She tries to seek help from Nora. Widowed at a very age Christine Linde comes with a hope to get a job at Torvald's bank. Nora is moved at her friend's plight and decides to help her as soon as possible. It is later revealed

that Mrs. Linde had married without the aspect of love only to help her mother and her brother and she takes pride in her decision. Mrs. Linde's role is more significant in the final act when she wins over Krogstad with the proposal of marriage, she had the power to change his mind to save Nora from the humiliation she was about to confront, she leaves it to Helmer to discover the truth themselves. Hence money is an important symbol to represent Nora's secondary position in the play and more generally the subservience of all women to men. And there is one of the best examples of naturalistic tendencies in the play, Mrs. Linde's enforced rejection of Krogstad because his lack of wealth so embitters him that he embezzles money and later degenerates into a blackmailer, thereby permanently damaging his reputation and endangering his position at the bank. Money and the need to maintain social status commensurate with their class, also shapes the lives of Nora and Torvald.

Another naturalistic element, the influence of heredity and environment seems to be the strong motif in the play. Nora's father has a corrupting influence, as Torvald keeps on comparing her with her father condemning both of them of being spendthrift. She is her father's daughter in spendthrift ways, her play acting, her irresponsibility and her amorality all run in her blood. Another character Dr. Rank has been affected by his father's corruption, suffering from syphilis that he inherited from his father. Dr. Rank is genetically a victim of his father's profligacy disease.

In this manner, Ibsen portrays fatherhood to the absence. In addition to the absence of the father, Ibsen assaults the patriarchy with the figure of the corrupt father who pollutes all around. The father is corrupt and therefore his influence on his children is thought to be one of the corruptions as well. Dr. Rank ascribes Krogstad's perverse nature to the factors- heredity and environment and suggests that a society that nurtures Krogstad is diseased. Torvald too advances the fact by giving the example of Krogstad. Lou Salome explains regarding Krogstad that how "such a person creates a corrupt environment, and how he spins a web of lies in which his children must grow up." (Salome, Lou. *Ibsen's Heroines*. p. 155) However, Torvald is also not above corruption. When the news of Nora's forgery reaches him, he immediately determines to live a life of dishonesty himself, concealing the forgery just as earlier, he condemned Krogstad for doing. Salome remarks that "Helmer is only a weakling whose only concern is with his reputation in the society". (Ibid)

The portrayal of fatherhood in conjunction with coldness and even destruction borders on being a thematic focus of the play itself. The most powerful aspects of the theme of patriarchal oppression are articulated in regard to Nora's relation to the children. Nora here in many senses, can be seen as the heroine of the story. She defies the patriarchy and strands for abolition of dehumanization and oppression. Even she herself stands in relation to dehumanization towards her children. Salome remarks: "The transformation from her carefree days as a girl to marriage meant no more to her than a change from a small doll's house to larger one : In other way Nora's relation to her children mirrors her father's and Torvald's relationship with her." (Ibid)

And we can see the power structure that defines the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is hereby seen in the relationship between the oppressed and the other around her. One critic, David Thomas believes that

the term 'adhesion' or 'internalization' to those who have been in power over her, are responsible for her behavior. He says: "Nora lives in a society that has articulated the relationship between the individuals in term of a binary power structure: the oppressor and the oppressed, male and female, father and household, husband and wife." (Thomas, David. Henrik Ibsen. p. 177)

Having a deep look, we can find that while portraying his characters, Ibsen has shown them under the strong influence of naturalistic elements i.e. ideological power, money, heredity and environment, patriarchal society, individual quest for existence, self realization etc. And this study proves the fact that human beings are presented as entrapped in their social milieu and determined by 'inevitable laws of heredity and environment'. Thus Ibsen came to the concept that however a man survives against the heredity and environment, it doesn't change anything.

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