

“Getting out of my costume”: The Many Layers of *A Doll House*

If I were a woman living in 1879 Norway, the year and location of Henrik Ibsen’s masterwork *A Doll House*, I would not be allowed to write this paper. It was not until 1882 that women were granted legal permission to pursue secondary education. This world that severely limits women’s rights is the world in which Ibsen’s protagonist, Nora, finds herself. As a playwright in 1879, Ibsen found himself in a world of limitations as well. The dominant mode of theater at the time was Eugene Scribe’s Well-Made Play, a restrictively formulaic model that posited theatre to be a realm of escapism and relaxation. Ibsen took issue with both the present theatrical landscape and the societal landscape that oppressed women like Nora. Thus, in *A Doll House*, he set out to obliterate them both. At the play’s start, Nora appears to fulfill the role of a submissive housewife, and *A Doll House* appears to fulfill the expectations of its audience. Ibsen’s methodical deconstruction of the Well-Made Play parallels his deconstruction of the role Nora is forced to play as a woman in 19th Century Norway. In due time, Ibsen fully reveals Nora to be a strong-willed woman with a mind of her own, and *A Doll House* to be a modern drama in a Well-Made Play costume.

In Act I of *A Doll House*, Ibsen appears to present his audience with the recognizable elements of The Well-Made Play and an acceptably feminine heroine. He sets up a clear secret, Nora’s forgery of the loan, that is hidden from Torvald, her prominently featured husband. The play has an acceptably late point of attack, as nearly all of Act I is exposition. Throughout this exposition, Nora is given an appropriate number of lines akin to “Yes, whatever you say, Torvald” that indicate her subordinate position as a wife (7). In short, a person sitting in the audience of *A Doll House* would’ve been led to believe that this play is no different than the Scribean escapism to which they were accustomed.

However, from page one, Ibsen already shows Nora to be a woman that quietly undercuts her husband's authority. This appears in a little device that will arise again and again at key moments of the play: the Macaroons. On the very first page, Nora eats a few macaroons before sneaking over and eavesdropping on her husband's study. Later, it is revealed that Nora eats these macaroons in spite of her husband's wishes. This small act of defiance may seem inconsequential to an audience at first glance, but it serves the purpose of establishing Nora as an agentic and rebellious character early on.

As Nora undercuts the authority of Torvald through her consumption of the macaroons, Ibsen subtly undercuts the authority of Scribe by exaggerating the conventions of the Well-Made Play. Directly after Nora's giddiest, most feminine moment thus far...

...now I'm free...to be able to romp and play with the children, and to keep up a beautiful, charming home---everything just the way Torvald likes it!...Oh yes it *is* so marvelous to live and be happy! (19)

...the presumed Scribean adversary Krogstad just so happens to ring the doorbell, bringing with him a 180 degree reversal of Nora's fortunes. Ibsen whacks us on the head with this reversal so hard that I find it difficult to believe he is not mocking the Well-Made Play at this moment. This reversal is not only structural, but brings about more nuance in Nora's character. In her negotiations with Krogstad, Nora's frivolous femininity shifts to the intense desperation of a woman with the weight of the world on her shoulders. Thus, at the very moment Ibsen mocks the Well-Made Play, Nora is shown to be more than a two-dimensional Scribean character.

Another instance of this parallel occurs in a scene in which the more worldly characters of Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank discuss the issue of the poor in society. Nora, clearly distracted by Krogstad's arrival, picks the wrong moment to laugh. Rank responds:

Rank: Why do you laugh at that? Do you have any real idea of what society is?

Nora: What do I care about dreary old society? (21)

Nora's dismissiveness of social issues can be read as an allusion to Scribe's sentiment that no one wants to see "dreary old society" on a stage. In the same breath, Nora's disobedient tendencies are revealed as she eats a macaroon and asserts that she has, "...a consuming desire to say so Torvald could hear...to hell and be damned!" (22). Mind you, this glee in disobeying her husband occurs just moments after she claimed that her deepest happiness is in maintaining his home. While Nora may not yet be aware of this, Ibsen is beginning to reveal that there is a vivacious, determinedly macaroon-eating woman underneath her performance of the dutiful wife. Again, Ibsen marks this hint of another Nora within the Nora we see with another obnoxiously Scribean coincidence: The entrance of Torvald. Ibsen's construction of these parallels is not as serendipitous as the entrances and exits of his characters. By placing obvious Scribean conventions next to a distinctly non-Scribean female character, Ibsen exposes the fallacies of the Well-Made Play. In this mockery, the seeds of rebellion against Scribe and patriarchy are planted.

In Act II, Ibsen moves beyond hints of mockery and begins to separate himself and his plot from Scribe. First, Ibsen presents Nora with an opportunity to "solve" the play in a Scribean manner. He crafts a scene in which Nora attempts to ask Dr. Rank for the money that would pay off her loan. After she flirts with him rather obviously, Dr. Rank reveals that he "...would gladly give up his life for [her]" (48). Punctuated by the fact that Nora asks the maid to bring in a lamp, the secret of Rank's love is now in the light. In a Scribe play, the disclosure of secrets allows for a high point in the hero's fortunes, but for Nora, Rank's disclosure brings about the opposite. In the following exchange, Nora firmly rebukes him not for his feelings, but for being open with her about them:

Nora: Ah, dear Dr. Rank, that was really mean of you.

Rank: That I've loved you just as deeply as somebody else? Was *that* mean?

Nora: No, but that you came out and told me. That was quite unnecessary. (49)

If this were a romantic Scribe play, Nora would happily take advantage of the man that's in love with her who just so happens to have a hefty inheritance. But as a human being in a naturalistic world, Nora has too much compassion and respect for this man to capitalize on the fact that his "body and soul and at [her] command" (49). The reveal that he loves her shifts Nora's relationship to him from a romantic and playful fantasy (a la Scribe) to a relationship grounded in the very real thing that they share. In the real world, Nora could never ask that much of him, even though his money would save her and bring about a happy denouement. Here, Nora's reaction to Dr. Rank drives the plot further away from Scribe.

Ibsen reveals even more of Nora's true self in the final scene of Act II. While the drama of a Scribe play originates in simple misunderstanding, Nora's manipulation of Torvald in this scene is purposeful. To force Torvald away from the mailbox with the letter that will reveal her secret, she performs a childlike innocence that she knows will distract him, pleading "Oh, sit down and play for me, Torvald. Direct me. Teach me, the way you always have" (57). This seemingly simple performance of innocence is complicated by Nora's intense distress. She hints that she can't contain her performance of femininity any longer as her dance becomes more and more out of control. When Torvald reprimands her for her violent movements, Nora responds that it "has to be just like this", implying that she has no choice but to let herself be seen (57). This signifies awareness of her situation and the choice she must make to either submit to or escape from Torvald. The true conflict that Ibsen portrays in this scene is not just conflict with an adversary, as Scribe would have it. It is Nora's internal conflict that takes center stage, the

conflict of her performance and her personhood. As Nora's true self begins to escape the costume she is wearing, it becomes harder and harder to pretend that the play remains within the constraints of its costume as well.

It is this conflict that propels the play into Act III. In a particularly telling passage, Ibsen both references Nora's newfound agency and passive-aggressively addresses his critics:

Torvald: She danced her tarantella and got a tumultuous hand---which was well earned, although the performance may have been a bit too naturalistic---I mean it rather overstepped the properties of art. But never mind---what's important is, she made a success, an overwhelming success. (65)

Here, Torvald's critique of Nora's performance as too naturalistic is the same critique that Scribean playwrights would have of *A Doll House*. Although this reference is masked within the context of Torvald's evaluation of Nora, it's far more direct a call-out than Ibsen's subtle mockery in Act I. He may as well have directly quoted a line from a review of *Peer Gynt*. In the context of Nora's unhinged dancing in Act II, this line also divulges that Nora's true, strong-willed self is continuing to emerge.

Despite the famously modern ending of *A Doll House*, the final scene of Act III first appears to follow the structure of a Well-Made Play. When Torvald learns of Nora's forgery, the audience would recognize that moment as the peripeteia, or the lowest point in Nora's fortunes. After Torvald's seemingly endless tirade, the recognizable device of the letter appears again. This letter bears the fantastic news (for Torvald) that Krogstad does not intend to ruin his reputation. The audience would most likely think that this is the scene a faire, or the most joyful moment for Nora. Knowing these conventions of the Well-Made Play, the audience would expect *A Doll House* to end right here. Torvald is clearly in agreement with the audience, as he exclaims:

No, we're not going to dwell on anything unpleasant. We'll just be grateful and keep on repeating: it's over now, it's over! You hear me, Nora? You don't seem to realize---it's over. (74)

In fact, Nora doesn't hear him, because this is not a Well-Made Play. While the dutiful heroine of a Scribean drama would accept Torvald's forgiveness and life would go on happily as before, Nora is not a dutiful heroine. Torvald's play may be over, but Nora's play is not. When Torvald performs his last line, Nora knows that the Well-Made Play of their life together is complete.

What does an actress do when the play is over? She takes off her *costume*. That is exactly what Nora does next. The removal of the costume represents both Nora's shedding of her submissive feminine role and winks at the death of the Scribean play. From here on out, Nora fully embraces her agency. The play actually ends when Nora asserts "Well, now it's all over", right after the couple exchanges back their rings. This further proves that *A Doll House* is Nora's play, because the story is only over when *she* says it is.

Ibsen reveals the true nature of *A Doll House* and his heroine Nora scene by scene. Nora's character arc parallels the play's structural development, combatting patriarchal gender roles alongside Scribean conventions. Throughout, these revelations of structure and character compliment and emphasize each other. Despite this steady progression, Ibsen's deft skill and deep knowledge of the Scribean formula allow him to trick his audience (and his character Torvald) into believing that *A Doll House* is a Well-Made Play until the very last scene. With the five simple words "Getting out of my costume", Ibsen reveals that both Nora and her story contain more than what meets the eye (75). With this revelation, there is no doubt that Nora's story is that of a modern drama.