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# A Doll's House: Marxist And Feminist Perspectives

Norway's Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, published in 1879, is a play about Nora Helmer, who has committed a crime of forgery to repair her husband to good health. As a dramatic play, *A Doll's House* inspects the relationship between Torvald, her husband, and Nora, especially the limited social choices available to women and the roles and expectations placed on women by society as a whole. The central character being Nora is a protagonist and allows viewers to recognize the faults that are vital to humans and proposes that all character's battle against their limitations and the accepted social order. The play is interpreted through a series of events where it offers various interpretations that provide more perceptive aspects of life. As well as critical conclusions of the audience's ideas. This play interprets several critical perspectives, such as the existential, psychological and historical perspectives. This analysis focuses on two: the Marxist and Feminist perspectives.

Marxism is connected with theories that relate to the social and economic conditions known as capitalism, class struggle where the weak and the poor are exploited and the obsession of material possession being materialism. The relationships within the play are challenged through these conditions and that less-fortunate are always oppressed by the richer bourgeoisie. The characters are all affected by the lack of money and spend their entire lives and way of thinking based around it. Therefore, a Marxist theme portrays throughout the majority of the play.

Feminism can be related to the treatment of 'the woman issue' as Ibsen would state. Otherwise revolving around the objectification of women clearly identified between Nora and Torvald's relationship, while the key idea of how one is born, but becomes a woman, which can be applied to Nora as she yearns for recognition and lastly the concept of how Women as 'Other' is portrayed through Kristine and how she breaks the traditional stereotypical role between men and women

## Marxist Perspective

### Materialism

A Marxist reading of this text will provide ideas regarding materialism which shapes stages of history by the economic system. Nora has an outlook on life which is predominantly made up of material wealth and financial conditions. Nora has come to terms that with Torvald's raise that she now belongs to a higher class. The Christmas tree can symbolize Nora's obsession with, money because she used to hand-make decorations and now with her newfound wealth, she believes that by doing the same would be 'thinking poor' in her mind. Therefore, she spends excessive amounts on presents and decorations because they can afford to 'let themselves go for a bit'. Although Torvald's rise has not been implemented yet, she insists that till then they can 'borrow until then' when previously she and Torvald would save every penny they acquired to just get by.

### Class Struggle

The characterization of Nora may also demonstrate class struggle in a capitalist society as she

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becomes more selfish and claims that if something were to happen to Torvald after they had borrowed money, 'It just wouldn't matter' because the people they borrowed from were strangers. Now that they belong to a higher social class, her responsibility has diminished and she only cares for her interest. She doesn't care about what may happen to these 'strangers' she has borrowed from but only on what she can extract from them. She brags to Kristine about her husband's new job and claims how it makes her feel 'so light and happy' because they 'have stacks of money and not a care in the world'. A clear indication of two different classes is where Kristine answers that it would be nice 'to have enough for the necessitates' whereas Nora associates freedom with wealth, saying that money is the only way she can be happy. Nora's entire outlook on life changes with a change in her economic conditions, demonstrating the Marxist belief that people's thoughts are a product of their financial situations.

## **Alienation**

Alienation is illustrated throughout the play through social expectation, pressures and social views which are constantly the way that people think. It affects the way people think and how they act. After Nora saves Torvald's life, he cares more about his honor and about what others think about him than his own life. He is obsessed with keeping up to societal views and expectations. When he finds out that Nora borrowed money from Krogstad with a forged signature, his 'love' for her is completely erased, and he says she's 'ruined all his happiness'. He believes that 'it's got to seem like everything is the same between us-to the outside world, at least' and he only worries about the appearance of his reputation. Once Krogstad reveals that he won't tell anyone about it, Torvald realizes he won't lose his honor and conveniently falls back in love with Nora. Nora realizes that he would rather sacrifice her rather than his honor when she would do the exact opposite for him. Their relationship is ruined because he continues to believe in money and social status as the source of happiness, while Nora comes to realize that money is not that important.

## **Feminist Perspective**

### **Objectification**

Objectification is the inability of the patriarchy to apprehend femineity where their power is challenged. Nora is depicted until the end of the very play as a helpless fool who wastes the money that her husband has worked hard for. She is nothing but a toy to Torvald which comes with the burden and responsibility of taking care of her. Her helplessness was somewhat attractive to Torvald because he demanded to be in control. When he 'forgives her', he says that 'to a man, there is something sweet and satisfying in forgiving his wife,' as he believes that his forgiveness has given him more possession of Nora as he has given her another chance at a new life with him. She becomes an object to him, designed to give life while considering his pleasure.

Throughout the first scene, Nora is never referred to like her name, she is instead given pet names such as 'squirrel' and 'featherhead'. By stating the word 'little' before turning the pet names into more insulting ones. Somehow making her existence based on the nicknames she is given. When she is called his 'squirrel': she is perceived as an innocent, obedient, childish woman which relies dependently on him. Contrastingly when he addresses her by her name, her behavior has severely changed, she becomes more serious, determined and wilful. All of it

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is a role that Nora has been taught to play by society, the behavior expected of all women of the time.

## **One is Born, but Becomes a Woman**

Further to this idea, one is a born, but becomes a woman is an idea which expresses that women rely on men for self-definition. The role previously discussed prior was mere a mask, one that Nora would not be able to live within the end as Torvald views her as a doll, not as an individual but as his prize. On the outside she is entirely obedient to her husband: but on the inside, she desires recognition and love from Torvald which is not necessarily being reciprocated. She expects to be happy with her life, even when it was not in any way fair or equal. When she expresses that she had hoped Torvald would have taken the blame for her crimes, Torvald exclaims that 'no man would ever forsake his honor for the one he loves,' and Nora replies that 'millions of women have done just that'. He breaks down Nora's identity bit by bit since very early on in the play where he does not take anything Nora says seriously and when she can take no longer she decides that she is unable to function as a doll anymore where they are controlled and are not in control of themselves, if anything else, Nora seeks to find what it means to be self-reliant. Obedience is the main factor that defined women as it was what differentiated them from men. When Nora decides to leave, Torvald announces that she is insane, because her 'most sacred duties were to her husband and her children,' and 'before all else, she was a wife and mother'. Therefore, by leaving, she denies the purpose of her existence as women had no other role or function in society.

## **Women as 'Other'**

Kristine, however, is a clear contradiction of a position where women in a patriarchal society as being the 'other of men'. When her father died, she was forced to marry a man who she didn't love to provide for her mother and younger brothers, being seen as an object sold off for money. This may be because she was unable to get a job at this point so her last option was marriage. After her husband had died, she told Nora that 'I feel my life unspeakably empty. No one to live for anymore'. Her entire life up until this point has been revolved around men. Her purpose in existence was to please her husband and take care of her brothers. When that was no longer necessary, her life lost meaning and she becomes independent by looking for a job to provide for herself which breaks the social structure of society in this period. When she is given a job by Torvald, he perceives it as an invitation to control her even outside of the office. He tells her that 'you really ought to embroider, it's much more becoming. Let me show you...in the case of knitting, that can never be anything but ungraceful'. He suggests for her to do something that is more traditionally women's work and thinks that it becomes his duty to correct not only his wife but any woman that he sees doing something 'wrong' or 'other' than what she should be.