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Modern European Drama

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Krogstad: A Lad With a Tad of Bad and Sad

With every intention to transcend the bourgeoisie moral values of the time, *A Doll's House*, written by Henrik Ibsen is a modern drama that examines the marriage between Nora and Torvald Helmer, members of a rising middle class family. We follow the marriage's dissolution in light of clashing values and beliefs on how a marriage should function which is all exposed by Krogstad, who at first seemed to be destined to be the villain of Nora's nightmares. As a blackmailer and criminal that is set to ruin the marriage, Ibsen initially paints a picture that Krogstad will be the central villain in the drama. It does not help that his name roughly translates to "a crooked person" in Norwegian, a choice that was likely intentional by Ibsen. Then why, when we reach the finale, do we not feel like Krogstad is the villain he was bound to become?

Through his role in the drama, Krogstad exemplifies the round character in contrast to melodrama's stock characters with his multifaceted personality. His deep moral ambiguity throughout his dealings with Nora in comparison to his righteous motivations spur questions in the audience's mind about who should be vindicated. Though Krogstad was determined to blackmail Nora for the wellbeing of his family, his handling of the revelatory letter and its effects free Nora of her chains in her relationship representing a deviation from traditional styles of drama (The "Well-Made Play") where the letter leads to a calm resolution. In unison, Ibsen's portrayal of Krogstad encapsulates these modernist elements that help bring struggle and

rebellion to the forefront of the stage while making the audience question the collision between the ethic of care and the ethic of justice.

From the start of the play, the audience gets the feeling that Krogstad must be the antagonist from viewing the reaction Nora has when he is first introduced on stage. Her line reads “Ah! What do *you* want?” with the stage directions being “*with a muffled cry, turns, startled*”(130). This intimidating entrance to the drama creates a villainous atmosphere about Krogstad, as does his threatening lines like “It’ll be up to you how merry your Christmas is” (130). However, a hallmark of modern dramas lies in their sloughing off of stock characters who represent the one dimensionality of melodrama and clear moral boundaries. Ibsen helps Krogstad escape the confines of a stock character by extensively, but subtly, developing his background. For example, in the scene where Kristine approaches him for a second chance at love, she says about their first encounter with love: “I had a helpless mother and two little brothers. We couldn’t wait for you Krogstad; your prospects were so far off back then” (166). These lines paint Krogstad as a victim of circumstance, a man who was never at the right place at the right time. Similarly, because of the strict societal values at the time, Krogstad feels he was punished extensively for a petty crime. “I think I can say I have not been amongst the worst. But now I must get out of all this” (132). Krogstad himself believes that his crime was not destructive enough to lose all his social standing, adding to his troubled background that is a series of unfortunate events that are out of his control. As an audience, we begin to feel like this is what might have driven him to blackmail and shoddy dealings; often we may even consider his criminal actions justified.

Krogstad’s intricate personality and history are what help us justify his actions. Another trademark of modern dramas lies in their confrontation of societal issues, an air of moral

ambiguity harnessed to leave the audience with questions about the values in their head. In Strindberg's theoretical treatise about the making of modern characters for the stage ("Preface to *Miss Julie*"), he asserts that "I have not even preached morality - this I left to cook in the absence of a minister" (373). Pushing people to question their own values is the first step to change, and this concept is employed by Ibsen to propel *A Doll's House*'s themes of the conflicting ethics of care and justice into debate. Krogstad embodies this conflict with his motivations for blackmailing Nora and reveals it so when he explains "My sons are growing older; for their sake I must try to reclaim all the social respectability I can"(132). On one hand, he is holding Nora accountable for her forgery, a direct reference to the ethic of justice so often embodied by masculine figures. However, Krogstad manipulates the ethic of justice in such a way that it dissolves into the ethic of care because he wants to use his bank job to sustain his growing sons. This particular instance casts Krogstad and Nora into equal light as Nora's "immoral" action was done to save Torvald from his disease while Krogstad's "immoral" action was done to keep his family alive. Just as Strindberg outlines that "'vice' has a reverse side closely resembling virtue," Ibsen blurs the line between a hero and villain when illustrating Krogstad as a criminal with virtuous motives behind him (374).

As an audience, we are fooled into thinking that Nora's forgery and her handling of it with Krogstad is the main conflict in the drama, but Krogstad's delivery of the incriminating note and the subsequent delivery of the bond helps cast light on the real problem: Torvald's treatment of Nora like a doll in his house. When Torvald comes to find out what Nora had done for his good, he flings into a rage calling her a "creature of ill-fortune" and disowning her (177). However when Krogstad delivers the bond (the evidence of Nora's crime) back to the residence at the dead of night, Torvald exclaims, "I'm saved! I'm saved!" to which Nora responds, "And

me?" (179). Torvald's selfish turn of emotion and lack of thought for his wife's future reveals his true colors. It becomes clear to the audience that Nora was an accessory for him, an expendable being who could be tossed around like a doll. The delivery of the bond happens off stage, a nod to another trait of modern drama where many of the most crucial moments of the drama are handled off-stage. After this pivotal scene in Act III, Krogstad can almost be viewed as a liberator who freed Nora from her marriage. His actions over the course of the play help Nora realize that she must escape the confines of her marriage and become her own woman rather than stay a doll. Thus, she seeks self-actualization and leaves her family, a shock to the bourgeoisie values of the time regarding familial life.

The portrayal of Krogstad in various theatrical possibilities expands the reach of his character and the themes he helps explore. At the time, he must have been a wildly controversial character who collided with the beliefs of the majority. This ambivalence can be exemplified when Krogstad is seen in the intimate venues that were prominent for modern dramas. His internal struggle can be better understood through slight facial expressions and tonal shifts that lose meaning in large venues where the audience is distanced from the actors. Krogstad is often shown in ruffled or messy outfits, a signal to his conflicts that shows he is in disarray, desperate to get his job back for the sake of his family. Film versions, like Joseph Losey's 1973 take on the drama, add scenes that put more focus onto Krogstad as a character. Losey's adaptation includes scenes like one where Kristine convinces Krogstad to do the right thing and deliver the bond back to Nora. These choices bring out more of his goodness and character because they are in stark contrast to Torvald, who will not let a woman influence him because of his patriarchal beliefs. This attention to detail when realizing Ibsen's work onto the stage or film helps demonstrate the character-driven nature of modern dramas and the themes of equality and

individualism for all that were beginning to become prevalent at the time of the drama's conception.

The portrayal of Krogstad within *A Doll's House* marks a stark departure from the villains in the melodramas of the past. So much so that the drama is one of the first to be characterized as a Modern European Drama because of its boundary bending characters. Krogstad stands as a strong representation of this new genre and makes the audience wonder, "Is he that bad?" He is the character that sets off the timer (often seen in the "well-made play") in the form of the revelatory letter's delivery. He is the troubled lover with a tragic backstory. He is seldom on the stage but still he has an looming effect on the characters we observe. He is the one who helped Nora realize the doll's house she was trapped in. Krogstad is a medium for love, crime, struggle, and care to shine in a melting pot of moral confusion and morphing societal ideals. By employing Krogstad as a tool to express these conflicts, Ibsen successfully questions the bourgeois values of the time and proposes a new moral framework that considers men and women equally.

Works Cited

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