

Cambridge IGCSE World Literature (0408)

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Coursework 1: Critical Essay

Drama Text Title: 'A Doll's House' by Henrik Ibsen

Chosen focus of investigation: How does the ending of the play reveal the growth of Nora's character?

In Henrik Ibsen's 'A Doll's house', written in 1879, the protagonist Nora is presented as a woman who initially appears to conform to societal expectations by focusing her life on caring for her family. However, she eventually strives to find her own identity and decides to leave her marriage to pursue a journey of self-discovery.

In the opening act of the play, we are introduced to Nora and her husband. We initially see their relationship as one of enjoyment. In their first conversation, we see Torvald referring to Nora as his little "songbird", "skylark", and "squirrel". These names connote his feelings towards Nora's personality as one of gentleness, and fragility. These are common traits that women were expected to possess and how society expects women to act during the marriage. Nora's lack of response is significant to her growth as she excitedly responds to his name with "Yes!". This shows the audience that these names have no adverse effect on her. The exclamatory short sentence connotes her feelings of excitement towards Torvald. In the following discussion, the stage direction, "(goes over to her and takes her playfully by the ear)". The diction "playfully" illustrates an aspect of the relationship between Torvald and Nora as one of entertainment for Torvald and that their relationship has an element of father and child to it. Later, in the same conversation, after Nora has talked about borrowing, Torvald says "How like a woman!". He uses a simile to describe her actions as feminine. Ibsen, again, uses another exclamatory sentence where he intends to show his firm idea of not borrowing and running his reputation. This is significant to the play as it informs the audience that Nora's, just like any other woman's, thoughts first go to borrowing rather than earning, showing her following expectations. Through the use of this introduction, the audience initially sees an enjoyable Nora in the house and has a naive understanding of society.

In the following act, after Torvald has revealed his feelings of hatred for Krogstad due to his criminal past, Nora is now paranoid and concerned about the situation. As Torvald has just left the room, Nora is "(restlessly)" walking "(to and fro)". The stage direction "(restlessly)" connotes her feelings of paranoia and fearfulness of Krogstad shedding light on her secret. In the same act, during their conversation, Krogstad says that there will be a "little domestic explosion". This connotes how when he reveals their secret, of forgery and lending money, to the town there will be an "explosion", a public revelation which will destroy Torvald's reputation and respectability. Towards the end of

their conversation, Krogstad says "A pampered little pretty like you" mocking her threats about suicide. The adjective "pampered" provides emphasis for Ibsen's view of Torvald only treating Nora as an object. Overall, Nora is now concerned about her place in society if and when her secret is revealed. This shows her growth to realise what she's done and all the repercussions that come along with it.

In the concluding act of the play, as soon as Torvald has discovered Nora's "big" secret, Nora is now ready to find her true identity as a human being rather than a doll. As Torvald receives Krogstad's letter, he is indulged by a fiery rage as he feels that his reputation is tarnished and no one will ever respect him anymore. This can be seen in the play as his dialogue is longer, 24 lines long, whereas Nora's dialogue is usually one or two words. This is because Nora realises that she has done something wrong and feels that she is in no position to argue. Slowly as the length of their dialogue evens out, we see that Nora has been building the courage to finally show that she is not just a wife but also a human. Eventually, her dialogue starts to increase, growing to 7 or 8 lines at a time, showing her determination and striving for independence. This can also be seen when, in response to Torvald's idea of her role, she says "I am first and foremost a human being". This shows her Here, Nora is claiming the right to create herself rather than remaining in a doll's house, showing her existentialist point of view, which is the idea that one's personality is not shaped by their innate characteristics but through the choices that they are free to make. Nora does not want herself to be restricted by staying in a doll's house. We can also see the choices Nora makes throughout the play shape and builds her personality and the effects these choices have on her character.

Nora finally understands that she, like most women during Ibsen's time "passed from papa's hands into Torvald's" revealing how women were treated as property. Nora's tone becomes increasingly powerful as she states, using the metaphor, "I've been your doll-wife...used to be papa's doll-child", revealing her decision to become independent. Nora uses the phrase "doll-wife...doll-child" to enhance her realisation that her entire life has been the same and how she has not been allowed to grow up as the word "doll" is associated with the lack of choice and lack of freedom to act. However, Torvald refuses to accept Nora's explanation and uses a condescending tone to try to convince her to stay by insulting her with: "you think and talk like a stupid child". The phrase "stupid child" reveals Torvald's view of Nora to the audience as it informs the audience how he thinks her decision is reckless, alongside the use of "child" which highlights how he feels about her as simply a child and not a woman. Torvald further attempts to keep her in the house by making her feel guilty for thinking about her family, particularly her children, as he asks her "Can you neglect your most sacred duties..? Your duties towards your...children?" The adjective "sacred" shows what a woman, at that time, was supposed to care for the family and how it was their only role. Nora then refers back to herself referencing Ibsen's extended metaphor of her being a songbird as she explains calmly "I was just your little songbird... your doll...care to protect...so weak and fragile". Here, she uses Torvald's own words against him because she wants him to realise that she is no longer his "songbird" and longs to be an independent woman. The finality of Nora's decision is shown through the stage direction "*The...slammed shut downstairs*" to emphasise her decision of leaving. The slam of the door is the sound of Nora *slamming* the door on her marriage and her life in the "doll's house".

In the beginning act of the play, Nora reveals herself to the audience as one of many women of the time, but, as the play progresses, she starts to realise this is not the life she wants to lead. This is because she lacks an understanding of how society functions and is restricted by her husband in her actions. In the concluding act of the play, she has gained confidence and the courage to leave Torvald to discover in herself who she is, therefore finding her own identity and showing her growth.

Word Count:1,197 words (excluding bibliography)

Bibliography:

Ibsen, H. (2009). *A Doll's House*. (Original work published in 1897). ISBN 978-1-4081-0602-0