A new world for women?
Stephanie Forward considers Nora's dramatic exit from Ibsen's A Doll's House

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During the late nineteenth century many women were seeking independence and greater freedom of choice about their lives. In England several of Henrik Ibsen's plays were staged as part of a privately subsidised feminist experimental project by the Free Theatre movement. A Doll's House had been performed originally in 1879 in Copenhagen. However, the first uncut public performance in England took place only in 1889. Five years before this English production, the author Olive Schreiner enthused about Ibsen's play in a letter: 'It shows some sides of woman's nature that are not often spoken of, and that some people do not believe exist--but they do.'

The drama ends with the sound of the heroine, Nora Helmer, walking out of the family home and shutting the door, deserting her husband and their three young children. Long afterwards, Edith Ellis recalled her reaction to that moment: 'How well I remember, after the first performance of Ibsen's drama in London, with Janet Achurch as Nora, when a few of us collected outside the theatre breathless with excitement ... We were restive and almost savage in our arguments. This was either the end of the world or the beginning of a new world for women. What did it mean? Was there hope or despair in the banging of that door? Was it life or death for women? Was it joy or sorrow for men? Was it revelation or disaster?'

James Joyce said of the dramatist: 'Ibsen's knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes me by his painful introspection; he seems to know them better than they know themselves.' This sentiment was echoed by Irish suffragist Louie Bennett: 'More than any other modern writer he has proved himself a prophet and an apostle of the cause of woman; no other modern writer has shown more sympathetic comprehension of her nature and its latent powers.'

While Ibsen's admirers hailed him as a great moralist for exposing hypocrisy in middle-class family life, outraged critics denounced him. They regarded Nora as an unnatural woman for leaving her husband and children, because such behaviour undermined and threatened the stability of society. In October 1878 Ibsen had jotted down some 'Notes for the Modern Tragedy', in which he observed that: 'A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view.'

We might make the assumption that A Doll's House is a feminist play, but in fact Ibsen stated that it is not about women's rights as such; rather, the drama is about human rights. In a speech at the Festival of the Norwegian Women's Rights League in 1898 he asserted firmly that he was not a member of the league and had no conscious aim of creating propaganda when he wrote A Doll's House: 'I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general.'

In the original Norwegian the play's title actually meant 'a small, cosy, neat home' rather than a house made for dolls. The domestic setting was confined and ordinary, but this was effective because it reflected the homes of the audience members, who could envisage their own houses and therefore might possibly identify with the events unfolding before them. They were, in a way, eavesdropping on their own lives. Theodore Dalrymple (the pen-name of psychiatrist Anthony Daniels) has said of Ibsen: 'It was he who first realised that mundane daily life, relayed in completely naturalistic language, contained within it all the ingredients of tragedy.'

Playing games

When A Doll's House begins, Nora appears to be childish and doll-like, and Torvald addresses her throughout as though she is a small creature: 'my little lark', 'my little squirrel', 'my little spendthrift', 'little featherhead', 'my sweet little skylark', 'Miss Sweet Tooth', 'my little songbird', 'my precious little singing bird', 'my capricious little Capri maiden', 'little featherbrain'. These diminutive terms may become
irritating to the audience, because they are so demeaning; yet Nora seems to accept them, and even uses them about herself at various points in the action.

Indeed, as the action proceeds we might well feel that the two main characters are playing a strange kind of game. Although Nora may come across initially as a doting wife and mother, there are early hints that all is not quite as it seems. It becomes clear that she is humouring Torvald, and we soon gather that she is capable of deceitful behaviour when she eats macaroons surreptitiously, despite knowing that he would disapprove. She assures Torvald: 'I should not think of going against your wishes' (p. 4), then lies again later, telling Dr Rank that Christine Linde gave her the macaroons (p. 16). When Nora asks Torvald for money for her Christmas present the stage directions require her to toy with the buttons on his coat (p. 3). This action could be considered childlike, but, on the other hand, it is possible that the behaviour is flirtatious—even sexually manipulative. Perhaps Nora has devised her own means of coping with her husband, and occasionally she can circumvent his control.

Later in the play she again cajoles and wheedles, when she wants to persuade Torvald to retain Krogstad's services at the bank: 'Your squirrel would run about and do all her tricks if you would be nice and do what she wants ... Your skylark would chirp, chirp about in every room, with her song rising and falling ... I would play the fairy and dance for you in the moonlight' (p. 34). Nora's behaviour with Dr Rank is also flirtatious at times, as when she teases him with her silk stockings.

Between the lines

Ibsen blended realism and symbolism, encouraging audiences to engage with serious issues. Often it is necessary to 'read between the lines' of a text, to consider its subtext. To this end, it is important to think about the impact of semiotics--of signs--and of symbols in the play; to appreciate how words and objects can be used effectively by a writer to represent or suggest something else. Signs and symbols (like the macaroons) can reveal or hint at facets of character. For example, Nora decorates the Christmas tree, determined to make it 'splendid' (p. 25), then at the start of Act 2 we see it 'stripped of its ornaments and with burned-down candle ends on its dishevelled branches'. It would be possible to draw parallels with Nora as we observe the tree's decline.

Brian Johnston has highlighted the significance of doors in the play. One leads to Torvald's study, and 'represents security, authority, patriarchal power'. There is also a door to the outside world, which becomes 'the door of liberation' for Nora. A third leads 'to the nursery and bedroom and the shared sexuality of Torvald and Nora'. Other signs in the play include the locked letterbox, which might convey to us that Torvald has absolute, patriarchal control over the household; and the fisher-girl costume, which could be interpreted as implying a repressed but passionate personality.

There are some rather troubling expressions of sexual power relations by the time Nora performs the tarantella, and it is worth thinking about the significance of the dance. Traditionally it is supposed to be based on the frantic movements of a person who has had a fatal bite from a tarantula spider. It has been suggested that the tarantella expresses Nora's sexual self. Another interpretation is that Nora could be manifesting suicidal impulses at this point; certainly she has considered killing herself. It is possible to see her as a representative figure, mirroring feelings that other women experienced, so her situation might be regarded as something more than a personal, individual problem. Nora is usually obliged to fulfil the limited roles expected of her by society--those of wife and mother--but when she dances her movements are very expressive. There is a degree of ambiguity about all this, however, as it could be argued that even her dancing is controlled by male figures. The feminist critic Toril Moi has explored the tarantella scene, suggesting that it displays the torment of Nora's soul. Perhaps Nora is partly avoiding her guilt, yet also admitting to it.

'It is no use lying to one's self'

Although Nora may initially seem childish and capricious, we gradually perceive that she cannot be written off as shallow and flighty. After all, when her husband had a problem she attempted to devise a solution. It is also apparent to the audience that Nora loves her children, and consequently she is
extremely alarmed by Torvald's assertion that 'an atmosphere of lies infects and poisons the whole life of a home'. He adds: 'Almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother' (p. 27).

After Torvald has read Krogstad's letter he accuses Nora of being like her father, having 'No religion, no morality, no sense of duty' (p. 62), but she ultimately comes to see herself as an object moulded by her father and then by her husband: 'I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll child; and here the children have been my dolls' (p. 67). She needs the opportunity to find her 'self': 'I must try and educate myself ... I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me.' Torvald is shocked that she will neglect her 'most sacred duties'--to her husband and children--but Nora points out that she has other duties that are just as sacred: 'Duties to myself' (p. 68).

Earlier in the play Dr Rank says to Nora: 'It is no use lying to one's self' (p. 37). Nora's eventual realisation that she has been living a lie could be described as an anagnorisis (a term from Aristotle's Poetics), or 'recognition'. This is the moment of illumination, when a character moves from ignorance to understanding. Nora does not know what the future will hold, but she realises that she requires space and freedom if she is to develop morally and spiritually. At the end of the play she resolves to withdraw from the game of 'Happy Families'--she has the courage to take a life-changing decision, to pursue her destiny, to be first and foremost a human being.

A tragic heroine

Ian Johnston has suggested that Nora merits comparison with other tragic figures. He observes that 'at the heart of great characters is a mystery, an ambiguity, something that finally eludes rational interpretation'. There are moments in the drama when Nora seems to be in control and well aware of how to get her own way, but when Krogstad compromises her she no longer feels in control. Questions can be posed about the ending. Is Nora genuinely transformed into a 'new' woman? Or is she being fundamentally selfish and intransigent, just trying to regain control by selecting a new role for herself? Johnston argues that 'it is a great mistake to insist exclusively upon one or the other--to celebrate Nora as a champion of feminist principles or condemn her as an egotist', because 'the ending resists simple moral formulation'. It could be said that 'Nora is both triumphantly right and horribly wrong. She is flee, brave, strong, and uncompromisingly herself and, at the same time, socially irresponsible, naive, self-destructive, and destructive of others.'

In her study of Ibsen, Muriel Bradbrook stressed that Nora's decision to leave her home was a very serious step: 'She was putting herself outside society, inviting insult, destitution and loneliness. She went out into a very dark night.' Back in the late nineteenth century, audience members grasped how momentous this was. Toril Moi claims that Ibsen has been, arguably, the most important playwright writing after Shakespeare. Certainly he was a bold pioneer, whose memorable heroine Nora Helmer has continued to engage and inspire theatre-goers.