

HENRIK IBSEN MAKES USE OF SYMBOLS IN ORDER TO REVEAL CHARACTER IN "A DOLL'S HOUSE"

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen is the most famous Norwegian playwright of the modern times, is often referred to as "the father of realism". Ibsen's well-known work "A Doll's House" is a controversial play focusing on the marriage of Nora Helmer and Torvald Helmer, implies reality by applying symbolic realism. Symbolism a literary element is the use of symbols that the writer employs in order to generate not only the interest in one's work but also to create another level of meaning. The play is filled with many symbols that represent abstract ideas and concepts. Ibsen in the play in order to reveal character has also made plentiful use of the device of symbolism to add to the realistic effect. He makes use of several symbols such as The Title of the play, The Macaroons, The Stove in the room and the description of the room itself, The Tarantella, The Christmas tree, The Light, The Black Shawl, and The Door. Each of the symbols has become an integral part of the play that imparts a deeper significance to the various situations. Most of the movement in the play is directed towards these symbols, everything hinges on it. Symbols illustrate the inner conflicts that are going on between the characters is the superficial motive of the play.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, A Doll's House, Play, Victorian era, Symbols, Symbolic Realism, Symbolic Meaning, Delineation of Characters, Inner Conflicts, Transition from a Tradition.

The idea of equality for a woman is not a new concept in today's society, but it was in that of 19th century Norway. This is the world of noted playwright Henrik Ibsen, credited as the creator of the modern, realistic prose drama. Ibsen is a forward thinking individual, makes the drama a vehicle to explore the ideas that challenged the restrictions of society, time and time again. Ibsen the greatest and most influential dramatist is a forerunner in the women's rights movement. In "A Doll's House" Ibsen employs symbols that suggest for something abstract and universal and focuses on the dangers of a patriarchal society, through the evolution of its protagonist, and even conveys his expected meaning to his readers the transition from a traditional Victorian woman, Nora.

Symbolism is one of the common devices used in drama and in other forms of literature also. The use of symbols may heighten the emotional effect of a situation or a remark; the use of symbols may reveal characters, but the use of symbolism always imparts an additional layer of meaning to the writing. While the apparent meaning lies on the surface, the symbolic meaning which is often hidden from view because it always lies deeper.

"Symbolism is no mere idle fancy or corrupt degeneration; it is inherent in the very texture of human life. The language itself is a symbolism."(Alfred North Whitehead).

Ibsen makes use of symbolism in "A Doll's House" chiefly as a means of character-revelation. Ibsen always said that he aimed at drawing the living creatures and that any symbolism was purely incidental. However, it is this incidental symbolism or visual suggestion which helps him in his delineation of the characters. The Title of the play, The Macaroons, The Stove in the room and the description of the room itself, The Tarantella, The Christmas tree, The Light, The Black Shawl, and The Door all these have a symbolic significance. Symbols in the play, "A Doll's House" is constructed on the idea that symbols first stands for a character of the play; and second for the meaning of the play as a whole. An object or an event is employed as a central theme or motive of the play. Towards these symbols the ostensible action of the play moves and from it, it recedes.

The title of the play, "A Doll's House", itself symbolizes the dependent and dehumanized role of the wife within traditional middle-class marriages. The play revolves around the two main characters Torvald Helmer and his wife Nora Helmer. The title symbolizes that Torvald treats Nora like a doll, he plays with her when he chooses and ignores her when he has something else to do. For him, Nora is no more than a doll.

She feels that both her father and Torvald have treated her like a baby-doll. She considers her marriage with Torvald is a mere change of possession. Nora was not given an opportunity to take a serious decision or never consulted her for opinions. Instead, she was often molded either by her husband or her father in their own decisions.

It symbolizes a male supreme power in society that a woman is a mere puppet in the hands of the possessor. They use her as they find it fair and they seek their own benefit, neglecting her feelings and desires. The Macaroons symbolizes Nora's acts of independence and deception. It also exposes Torvald's efforts to control Nora and to treat her like a child. At the very opening of the play, Nora is described as eating one or two macaroons, taking care at the same to hide the bag of macaroons from being seen by her husband. This action by Nora shows that she is somewhat childish, that she stands in fear of her husband, and that she does not mind indulging in a bit of deception. The macaroons appear again at least twice. On one occasion she offers a macaroon to Doctor Rank, saying that the macaroons have been brought by Mrs. Linde. Here her husband's new power as the next manager of the bank, or her own sense of power derived from her husband's new appointment, has considerably diminished her fear of Krogstad and aroused a feeling of self-confidence in her. As a result of this feeling of self-confidence, she revolts against the authority of her husband by eating a macaroon and offering one to Doctor Rank and another to Mrs. Linde. On the second occasion, after Nora has failed to protect Krogstad from dismissal and when she thinks that suicide would be the only right course of action for her, she tells the maidservant at the end of Act II to put plenty of macaroons on the dinner table. Here the macaroons symbolize to serve as a means of showing the desperate state of Nora's mind.

The stove is a conventional source of heat but, in Nora's actions after Krogstad has gone into Helmer's study to have a talk with him in Act I, the significance of the stove is extended to include emotional as well as physical warmth. Nora nods indifferently as she closes the hall-door behind Krogstad. Then Nora walks across the room and "sees the stove". There is no real need for Nora to touch the stove but her action reveals the state of her mind. Krogstad's visit to Helmer has given rise to a vague fear in her mind, and so she makes up the fire, instinctively seeking a physical remedy for a nervous discomfort. Similarly, after Doctor Rank has declared his love for her, she walks over to the stove saying: " Oh, dear Doctor Rank, this is really horrid of you!". Here in Act II, she seeks mental comfort from the stove in her state of mental disturbance caused by Doctor Rank's unexpected declaration, oh his love and the consequent giving up by her of her original plan to ask Doctor Rank for money and pay off the balance to Krogstad. Thus Ibsen makes use of a symbol stove, as a symbolic device to establish the emotional state of Nora. Then there is the Christmas tree, a festive object, which we see at the beginning of Act I, then towards the close of Act I, and then again at the beginning of Act II. Christmas is a family festival, mainly devoted to the happiness of children; and the tree is this festival's symbol representing family happiness and security.

At the beginning of Act I, we just see the tree and then it is taken away by the maid who is asked by Nora to hide it. We have just been given a glimpse of it, so that we may perceive the feeling of household joy which is associated with Christmas. The Christmas tree, which we

here see only for a moment, establishes both the time of the year and Nora's involvement in her family's well-being and also her position in her house as the plaything that serves the purpose of adding visual appeal who adds charm to the home. Later, when Krogstad has left after giving a threat to Nora, she orders the maidservant to bring the tree and place it in the middle of the room. Here too the Christmas tree represents family security and happiness as Nora tries to concentrate upon its decoration, also wishes to forget Krogstad's threat. But when we see the Christmas tree at the beginning of Act II, Nora's state of mind is conveyed to us by the altered look of the tree. The tree is now described as standing in a corner, stripped of its decorations, and with its candles burnt out. It is clear from the bare look of the Christmas tree that Nora has not been able to allay her fear and her anxiety. Thus here too the Christmas tree gives us a peep into the state of mind of Nora.

The Tarantella, too, apart from serving another purpose in the action of the play, is used as a symbol of Nora's anxiety and fear regarding Krogstad revealing to Helmer that she had taken the loan. To keep Helmer's mind off the incriminating letter lying in the letter-box. Nora rehearses a wild dance which Helmer himself had once taught her.

Helmer: Slower, Slower!.

Nora: I can't do it any other way.

Helmer: Not so violently, Nora!.

Nora: This is the way. (A Doll's House)

Nora's wild dancing shows a physical manifestation of her desire to quell this fear. We have already been made aware of the increasing torment in Nora's soul, but the play demands that, at its height, this torment should be concealed from the others in the play though not concealed from us. And so Nora's frantic struggle against fate is represented through a symbolic action, through the rapid movements of the Tarantella which was traditionally a dance performed by those who had been stung by the tarantula, a poisonous spider. Nora's dancing at this time heightens the pathos and irony of her situation to free herself from the poison which Krogstad brought in, in her life.

Light symbolizes Nora's state of awareness. At the beginning of the play, she is innocent and not matured. With the advent of incidence, Nora is getting mature. Light becomes enlightenment of her mental consciousness. Also light appears to symbolize hope and spiritual redemption of being saved when Doctor Rank is talking to Nora about his upcoming death. Light begins to spread dark, symbolizes that Nora using her to be sexually alluring to manipulate the dying Doctor Rank into giving her money to pay off her loan. The darkness is a mark of evil. Darkness induces towards wrongdoings. Nora wants to create an ambiance so that Doctor Rank agrees with giving her money.

She implies that his declaration of love was a deed of darkness, even though she had been prepared to exploit that darkness for her own purposes. She had been planning to ask Doctor

Rank for money but had been prevented from doing so by his declaration of love. Thus the light serves as a symbol of open dealings which do not require darkness or concealment, while the darkness had served as a kind of cover under which Doctor Rank had felt emboldened to declare his love. There is another kind of light also serving as a symbol. When Doctor Rank obtains a cigar from Helmer, Nora offers to light the cigar. She then strikes a match and holds it close to Doctor Rank who lights his cigar at it. Here the light of the matchstick symbolizes the fact that Nora has been the only light in Doctor Rank's gloomy existence. There has always been a very close sympathy between Nora and Doctor Rank, and the latter has always found her company to be a source of comfort to him in his miserable life.

Shawls in the play have symbolic significance. When Nora rehearses the Tarantella, she is wearing a long, multi-colored shawl; but for the actual performance of the Tarantella at the party, she wears a big black shawl over her fancy-dress. This difference is of crucial significance. The multi-colored shawl represents a desire to cling to the many delights of life in the midst of the Tarantella which is a dance of life and death. By contrast, the black shawl symbolizes Nora's death-wish. she had already made up her mind at the end of Act II to put an end to her life after the fancy-dress ball, and she had said at that time that there were only thirty-one hours more for her to live. When afterward it seems to Nora that Helmer would take upon himself the blame for her guilty action, she picks up the black shawl and gets ready to rush out of the house in order to commit suicide. Later, when she is about to tell Helmer of her decision to leave him, she has removed the fancy-dress and put on her everyday clothes. This kind of visual symbolism certainly deepens the emotional effect of a situation.

Doors in the play have a symbolic meaning. References to doors opening and closing in the play serve a symbolic purpose. The play begins with a door opening, and it ends with a door slammed shut. The imagery of the doors throughout related to themes of caged and free. It also relates to open possibilities and closed possibilities.

At the end of the play Nora's slamming the door shut behind her symbolizes the New woman's leaving behind of the male-made homes, and society, male-made tradition, and laws, and male- made values and mentalities like that of Nora's husband, Helmer. This action symbolically represents the modern women's revolutionary step of seeking challenge, identity, and dignity at the cost of some risk. It relates to a sense of choices made freely and to break choices determined by heredity and by social compulsions.

To conclude the title "A Doll's House" of the play is most appropriate because it signifies the kind of life that Nora has led for eight years in her husband's home. Her exit from Torvalds house is a new turning point for Nora in her life. Ibsen with more skillful use of symbols in his play has a close application in detail and fits the play in its essential points. The

playwright allows him to give a powerful portrayal to symbolize aspects of characters to each other. To sum up the symbols in the play are representative of Nora's life. Finally Ibsen's use of symbolism in his play "A Doll's House" shows originality in his respect. The manner in which Ibsen's use of symbols in the play gives us an idea of the effect he was aiming the realistic details is used to lead the readers into a close identification with characters.

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