Literature Review Paper 1.2

Change things

Henrik Ibsen's infamous well-made play A Doll's House is unique in the longevity of its controversy, with it being profoundly scandalous in both the patriarchal society of the time it was written as well as being hotly debated by more contemporary scholars. A Doll's House was scandalous in the time of its original publication (1879 Norway) in that it depicted a woman leaving the domestic sphere along with abandoning all of her wifely duties and maternal responsibilities, a deep cultural taboo for the largely patriarchal society of the time. This decision on the part of Nora has, thus, been described as "the door that slammed across Europe." The play concerns Nora, who starts out as a largely spoiled middle-class wife, and her growing realization of the limited nature of her experience controlled by her husband, her childhood relationship with her father, and patriarchal society at large.

Scholars have long debated whether or not this work is feminist or not for many reasons, including but not limited to how Nora's decision to leave plays into her overall characterization and the illumination (or lack thereof) of her understanding of her existence. While one can provide evidence to refute one position or the other, ultimately, it is most important to recognize the validity in both "feminist" and "not feminist" claims. For when one sees that the work can have more than one label assigned to it, then readers, audiences, and production companies are given the most freedom to interpret and reactivate the piece. When academic scholars are able to see both sides, the artists themselves can be much more liberated. The aim of exploring these two contrasting opinions is to consider how the play lies somewhere in the middle, the idea being that because the work has elements that are considered feminist, alongside elements that are not considered feminist, it does not inherently require that a scholar establishes a restrictive categorical label on the work as a whole. In the following paper, I will illuminate two different perspectives for the purpose of illustrating that there is not one absolute way of viewing and interpreting the piece.

While the work itself cannot be described as purely feminist or not feminist, it is evident that a director's ideas and concepts can sway the portrayal of the play to the audience. In other words, the director can choose to apply a feminist perspective or not by highlighting certain elements of Nora's condition or dialogue over other elements. A specific example of this may be how the symbol of the doorway is framed within the play. The ways in which the message and qualities of the piece are conveyed are dependent on the reactivation of the director and the audience as much as it is based on the original writing.

In his "A Doll's House Revisited", Quigley (1984) asserts that Ibsen's play A Doll's House is not a feminist work. Quigley substantiates his assertion primarily by pointing out Ibsen's own opinion of his work and by illustrating that Nora is no more enlightened to the reality of her circumstances at the end of the play than she is at the beginning. He also examines specific symbols in the play, principally the Christmas tree and the act of entering and exiting the door that separates the "doll's house" from and the "outside world" to demonstrate how these all work in tandem to produce an "image network" for the play as a whole (589).

In pointing out Ibsen's personal view, Quigley chooses to directly quote Ibsen's speech at the Norwegian League for Women's Rights in 1898, stating that Ibsen was "not even quite clear to just what this women's rights movement really is… it has always seemed a problem of mankind in general" (596-597). In pointing to Ibsen's opinion directly, he highlights the idea that the solution to society's gender inequalities cannot be found in solely modeling and replicating Nora's decision to leave. In addition, he emphasizes that her attempt to discover herself independently is an action that will inevitably fail, as "if she is to learn primarily from herself, she can learn only what she already knows" (593).

Quigley demonstrates that Nora does not understand enough about the complexities and subtleties of her condition in society in order to consider herself a feminist: "Nora's determination to see these things now as solely evil causes her to miss as much as she missed earlier when she saw them as solely good" (597). With this, he asserts that Nora's decision to leave the life she has known and to condemn it is an action that, ultimately, continues to define her identity based on what she already knows rather than a new, independent discovery.

In examining the "image market", Quigley specifically addresses two symbols— that of the Christmas tree and of the doorway. In the beginning of the play, Quigley indicates that the Christmas tree represents all that is successful and wholesome about the home, such as the general air of prosperity and family happiness. However, as time progresses, Quigley states that "when Nora later becomes even more insecure and slightly desperate, the Christmas tree again appears this time stripped of its finery and with its candles all burnt out" (587). He points to this to emphasize the fraught nature of Nora's emotional state. It also connects back to the earlier point of that Nora has not gained any overwhelming insight into her existence or grown into her feminist consciousness. Rather, she still insists on seeing elements of her existence as only "good" or only "bad." Another symbol that supports this same assertion is the doorway as "that doorway provides access to a house and a home that she values initially on the basis of one kind of certainty and rejects finally on the basis of another." This again represents Nora's inability to view things as being more complex than purely "good" or purely "bad."

In his "Ibsen vs. Ibsen Or: Two Versions of A Doll's House," Rosenberg (1969) asserts that Ibsen's play A Doll's House is a feminist work. Rosenberg substantiates his assertion primarily by pointing out four principal elements: 1) the decision of Ibsen to base the character of Nora off of a real-life woman that he admired; 2) the intention of Ibsen to write in a manner that generates empathy for Nora and her circumstances, rather than critiquing her; 3) the significance of realistic style and symbolism; 4) the importance of the audience perception of the juxtaposition of the characters.

 In showcasing Ibsen's personal attachment to the issue and dedication to his friend, Rosenberg cites that "Ibsen's young friend, Laura Kieler, had lived through the improbable story that gave him his plot" (187). This personal sensitivity thus contributes to the overall empathy projected onto the debated feminist figure of Nora, as it directly influences how Nora is portrayed as "a good woman, forced into small deceits to conceal the noble act she did" (188). By characterizing Nora as a woman that chooses to uphold positive attributes, the argument is made that he avoids over-simplifying the situation to the stereotype of the helpless woman plagued at the hands of the patriarchal society that surrounds her.

Rosenberg directs his readers' attention to Ibsen's development of the play and how its meaning evolved through Ibsen's changing approach in multiple drafts of the work. With this evolution of the play at large also comes an evolution of Nora: "her first simple, childish nobility gives way to a complex mixture of fineness and cunning, of honesty and dishonesty, of naivete and cleverness" (189). This seeming dichotomy of traits indicates a depth to Nora and her decision-making, one that would most certainly support the assertion of her self-awareness and transformation and, thus, enable her to be characterized as a feminist figure.

 As for audience perception, Rosenberg draws particular attention to the takeaways of the play, writing that Nora's realization of Torvald's nature as "mean, selfish, false, and hypocritical" operates directly in tandem with Ibsen's commitment to the transmission of his ideology that "a woman cannot be herself in this society" (194). This emphasis indicates directly Ibsen's seriousness in his belief that women's self-liberation is a necessary measure, and that he was committed to communicating this to his audience through this work.

Quigley seeks to prove that A Doll's House is not a feminist play by drawing attention to three key elements: Henrik Ibsen's personal opinion of his own work, Nora's lack of transformative understanding about her own condition, and the conglomeration of symbols in the play. What his argument may lack, however, is a recognition of counterargument, as not once does Quigley recognize that perhaps Nora never came to the realization to leave her husband because, in patriarchal society, she never learned that she, as a woman, had the power to do anything other than what was already prescribed.

Rosenberg, on the other hand, aims to prove that A Doll's House is a feminist play by highlighting four principal points: the personal life experience and connection Ibsen has to his story, the empathetic writing style of Ibsen, the significance of realistic style and symbolism, and the importance of the audience perception of the juxtaposition of the characters. Rosenberg does attempt to acknowledge his counterargument by recognizing the perhaps unfair blame that Nora places on Torvald and her father for her actions: "she has learned to practice deception, falsehood, and coquetry, and now she is angry at society for it" (194). However, it could be said that this comment missed an opportunity for a potential discussion of how much Nora is responsible for her own development and, ultimately, her own fate.

In comparing Quigley and Rosenberg's approach, a clear similarity emerges in their shared decision to tackle the significance of the symbols of the Christmas tree and the doorway. How they differ, however, is in the way in which Quigley uses the symbols to assert Nora's lack of understanding of her own condition, while Rosenberg uses the decrepit transformation of the Christmas tree to prove that Nora has decided to abandon her unsatisfactory, limited domestic experience in the doll's house and instead has found her self-worth outside of the sphere of the home and will embark on a journey for true self-fulfillment.

In conclusion, Rosenberg and Quigley present two distinctly different responses to the question of "Is A Doll's House" a feminist play?" through their varying interpretations of the same elements, such as the symbols of the Christmas tree and of the doorway. One question that their work leaves open for their readers, however, is how the approach of the director and the design team can change the nature of how feminism is discussed surrounding this work. Both of these scholars do a very thorough job of discussing Ibsen's intentions as a playwright, and how his writing impacts his audiences, but perhaps what is missing is an expansion on the role of the director and design concepts that can be so critical to a performance.

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**Bibliography**

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Rosenberg, Marvin. (1969). "Ibsen vs. Ibsen Or: Two Versions of A Doll's House". Modern Drama 12(2), 187-196. University of Toronto Press. Retrieved October 23, 2018, from Project MUSE database.

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. -Hannah Rutt