

Reflective Statement: A Doll's House

Question: How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral?

Thanks to the interactive oral discussions, I was able to develop a profound understanding of the cultural and contextual elements surrounding A Doll's House, by Henrik Ibsen, and realized the play's precise portrayal of a 19th century scenario. The setting is Norway, 1879. During this era, the Industrial Revolution was thriving. We discussed that the wealth of the protagonists Nora and Torvald highlights the economic prosperity of this historical period. However, I felt shocked when learning that treating a woman as an object, or a "doll-child" as Nora calls herself, was completely normal at the time.

It was highly improper and humiliating for a wife to hold more power than her husband. Initially, I could not thoroughly comprehend this fact, since I cannot personally relate to this custom. Throughout the discussion, however, my peers mentioned several historical facts that indicated the substantial gender inequality of the era. By the end of the 19th century, the feminist movement began to develop, and women gained considerable rights between 1979 and 1990. The question of whether the play made some contribution to this phenomenon arose, although as we shared our thoughts we conceived the presence of a greater contextual development of which A Doll's House was only one part.

The thought-provoking reactions to the play revealed the cultural accuracy of the storyline. Due to Nora's independence and individual initiative, which did not suit the acceptable customs of the era, the audience remained shocked. While feminist contemporaries enthusiastically appreciated the play, the majority of the people considered it controversial and "barbaric," since the main purpose of A Doll's House was to critique the male-dominated society. What I found remarkable is that not only men were outraged by the play, but most women (excluding feminists) also were scandalized. The class concluded, through the consideration of other historical revolutions, that social attitudes and habits are not easily shifted, even if they are for the better.

The in-depth class discussions made me reflect and consider various cultural and contextual aspects of the era and their relevance to the play's storyline. This experience was particularly enlightening and introduced me to a new perspective regarding women's difficult struggle to gain equality. Many say that the play A Doll's House has transformed dramatic theatre, as it proposed unaccepted customs rather than, as most contemporary art forms, celebrate contemporary society.

[Word Count: 389]

Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House:

The Role of Symbolism in the Portrayal of Female Submissiveness and Male Superiority

All the best toys come with accessories. In the play A Doll's House, which is set in Norway in 1879, Henrik Ibsen includes certain recurring objects and actions that enrich the dramatic storyline and mirror the characters' complex internal convictions and disputes. Analogous to a veritable children's toy house, these symbols are the images that hover in the reader's mind long after the play, or game, has ended. Although subtly introduced, they represent major motifs and foreshadow Nora's unexpected final decision to abandon Torvald. Henrik Ibsen reveals the themes of male power and female submissiveness, which are engraved into 19th century society, through the considerate insertion of macaroons and a black shawl, as well as the frequent use of diminutive names by one of the main characters—Torvald.

The macaroons are the introductory insight into the relationship between Nora and Torvald. The fundamental disquiet of their relationship is revealed as the two characters first interact. While Torvald is closed inside his study, Nora sneaks macaroons into her mouth. However, as Torvald “opens the door and looks into the room” (Ibsen 12), Nora's instinctive reaction is to “puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth” (12). The guilty, child-like response illuminates her fear of Torvald while portraying her feelings of restraint. Although macaroons emerge only twice in the play, they appear during moments of clear defiance to Torvald's authority. While this literary technique highlights the scarcity of Nora's independence, it also reveals that macaroons are a symbol for Nora's personal initiative and disobedience towards male superiority. The prohibition of macaroons emphasises the inferior weight of Nora's decisions within the household and, consequently, underlines the widespread female submissiveness of the era.

The macaroons' symbolism is further conveyed in the scenes with Dr Rank. Nora provocatively "puts a macaroon into his mouth" (26). Her flirtatious attitude, that is conveyed by the playful tone of the dialogue in this section, is an example of rebellion towards the strict demeanour that Torvald imposes on her. Again, the macaroons are presented in a moment of insubordination towards her husband. Dr Rank responds by telling her "I thought they were forbidden here" (26). Dr Rank's reply is contradictory. His relationship with Nora is clearly undermining Torvald's authority; however, the serious tone of the phrase suggests a concern for Nora's compliance to Torvald's rules. This sudden interest in Nora's rebellious behaviour implies Dr Rank's regard for the potential conduct of Nora as his partner. Nora's immediate response to his statement is to invent the excuse that "these are some Christine gave me" (26). She is aware that her status as a woman will prevent her from escaping society's concept of male hierarchy, and denies her small act of defiance. In another scene with Dr Rank, and in the absence of macaroons, Nora exclaims that she is "in a silly mood today" (49). The straightforward language and informal register that Nora uses while communicating with Dr Rank implies a childish attribute, and adds contrast to the subsequent shift in her behaviour. Once Dr Rank admits that he "would give his life" (50) for her, she immediately becomes rigid and accuses his statement of being "horrid" (51). The symbolism tied to the macaroons is further revealed through the striking contrast in word choice since, in the previous scene with Dr Rank and in the presence of macaroons, there is no regression from Dr Rank's flirtatious acts. However, in the scene without macaroons Nora ends her relationship with Dr Rank, retreating to the status of a faithful wife. Lastly, the small acts of disobedience connected to the macaroons also foreshadow Nora's departure at the end of the play. The macaroons are the subtle symbol for a gradually increasing feeling of defiance.

Henrik Ibsen uses an everyday object—a black shawl—to symbolise Torvald's dominant role in the marriage. The shawl first makes an appearance when the couple goes to the neighbour's ball, and it symbolises the safety and protection that Torvald offers Nora. After the dinner party, Nora and

Torvald return home and “she is in an Italian costume with a large black shawl around her” (65). At the party, Torvald had been affectionate and contented with Nora, which is why she returns from the ball wearing the black shawl. However, Nora knows that Krogstad’s letter had been “[dropped] into the mailbox” (55), and for this reason she unsuccessfully insists on going back to the party to prevent Torvald from opening it. She is afraid of Torvald’s reaction to the information contained within the letter; Nora knows that a signature forgery is considered unacceptable, especially if done by a woman. Her futile efforts to return to the party portray the unimportance of her demands. Subsequently, as Torvald is “taking off Nora’s shawl” (65), Ibsen foreshadows Torvald’s initially aggressive reaction to the content of the letter. When Torvald says “Goodnight my little singing-bird” (71) and goes to his room, Nora instinctively “puts her shawl over her head” (72), as if she were asking for Torvald’s protection and love one last time. Simultaneously, Nora exclaims “Never! Never! ... never again!” (72), since she believes that the signature forgery will end the lovable and paternalistic character of Torvald. As soon as Nora is wearing the shawl again, Torvald trudges out of his room and exclaims “Is this true, that I read here? Horrible!” (72) referring to the letter’s content. As he reprimands Nora for her actions, he orders her to “Take off that shawl. Take it off, I tell you” (73) as if he were denying her his love and protection because of the signature forgery. The shawl portrays Torvald’s authority over Nora, as he has the power to take the shawl, or protection, off Nora’s shoulders. Torvald’s hostile reaction to the letter prevents Nora from taking back his protection, and she promptly removes her shawl as Torvald has ordered her to do. This instant response illuminates her submissive behaviour as, rather than a woman, a “doll-wife” (77).

Throughout the play, Torvald often calls Nora by diminutive names. He repeatedly calls her “my skylark” (46) or “my little squirrel” (46), even while discussing important matters with her. This attitude suggests his feeling of superiority towards Nora. Such names are often used to address children. Therefore, when Torvald calls Nora by diminutive names, he is demeaning her. Moreover, Nora has to beg Torvald to give her some money, as if it were her allowance. As they negotiate the

sum, he keeps calling her a “little spendthrift” (14). Initially, Nora uses this attitude to her advantage by persuasively remarking “You haven’t any idea how many expenses we skylarks and squirrels have, Torvald” (14) while trying to obtain the most money from him as possible. However, by the end of the play Nora has started to comprehend her husband’s belittling attitude towards her. After Torvald reads the letter about the signature forgery, he soon forgives her and calls her “a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk’s claws” (75). This moment is the turning point for Nora, as she realizes that her entire life had been a “playroom” (77). For her father, she had been a “doll-child” (77) and now she is Torvald’s “doll-wife” (77)—a concept that is reflected through the numerous diminutive names. Nora finally decides she “must try and educate herself” (77), and declares her intention of leaving her husband. Immediately after she does this, the language employed by Torvald shifts as he calls her a “blind, foolish woman” (77). Nora’s initial acceptance and compliance to Torvald’s degrading conduct is an indicator of her submissive and inferior role. However, Torvald’s seemingly insignificant acts of superiority, that demonstrate his dominance as a male, are what leads to Nora’s profound decision to leave him.

In A Doll’s House, Henrik Ibsen includes several symbols that significantly add to the message of the story by representing key motifs. The symbols also foreshadow Nora’s final decision to abandon Torvald and underscore the main criticism of the play—that 19th century society valued male superiority. The macaroons symbolize Nora’s rare mischief and disobedience towards Torvald, as they appear during moments of slight defiance. The black shawl represents Torvald’s protection and power over Nora, as he is the only one who has the power to place it or remove it from her shoulders. Lastly, Torvald’s frequent usage of diminutive names emphasises his arrogance and belief that he is superior to Nora. The theme of female submissiveness is conveyed through Nora’s initial tolerance of these behaviours. However, by the end of the play, she rebels and abandons him. This final act is foreshadowed by each of the analyzed symbols. In everyday life, many people do not realize that small objects or actions can be unexpectedly significant. The common proverb “little

things in life are the most important things in life” adequately summarises Ibsen’s symbolic approach to the play. Ultimately, it is the little things that pushed Nora to abandon her status as a “doll-wife” (77) and seek adulthood.

[Word Count: 1498]

Works Cited

Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll's House. Trans. James McFarlane. Clayton DE: Prestwick House, 1910.

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