A Doll’s House

Introduction

This is an analysis of *A Doll’s House*, a play written by a Norwegian writer called Henrik Ibsen. It is about a woman, typically a housewife, who becomes dissatisfied with what her husband does. The play is linked to feminism, a social issues not only in those times, but also in modern times. The 1879 play remains very relevant to-date. In this research paper, the play will be discussed in three aspects. These include a brief plot synopsis, characterization and reception. Thereafter, the research is focused on the main social issue that the play depicts. After describing the social issue, its impact on society is discussed, and later its linkages with the play are explored. Lastly, another artistic work that addressed the same issue is scrutinized. The way men treat women were a major impetus to the development of feminism and the fight for women's rights; it was an issue in the past societies as well as today’s society.

The Play

A brief summary of the plot

The play is divided into three acts. Act I is set in Nora Helmer’s house. The time is around Christmas. At the opening of the play, Mr Linde comes around looking for work. She enters the house of Mr and Mrs Helmer. Since Mr Helmer had been recently promoted, it was easy to get some work for the old widow. As she worked, the widow complained how life was hard on her part. Mrs Helmer, also referred to as Nora, confessed to her that life was similarly
hard for her sometimes back when her husband was ill. She forged a signature in order to obtain a loan for her husband’s treatment. She does not want anybody to know about it (Ibsen 30).

In Act II, Nora is trying her best to prevent Krogstad from revealing the truth. He was an accomplice in the forgery of the signature and reception of the loan. She does so by pleading with her husband to keep him on the job; if he lost the job, he would certainly spill the beans to the police. Dr. Rank would also not assist Nora because he was lustful of her. At a holiday ball, Nora performs a traditional dance; but her husband becomes mad at her for forgetting the moves he taught her (Ibsen 56). He is seen publicly admonishing her. Later, Mrs. Linde offers to assist Nora in talking to her husband not to keep Krogstad in his job. Mrs. Linde once had a romantic relationship with Mr Helma. Nora would accept anything, because the revelation of the truth meant that Mr Helma would be imprisoned for the forgery. She would rather die than face the wrath of her husband, who treats her like a “doll.”

In Act III, Krogstad finally incriminates Nora. He does so by writing a note to Mr Helmer. The latter becomes so enraged that he swears not to engage in any romantic relationship with his wife. Contrastingly, he refuses to divorce her; he plans to continue being married to her “in name” but not deed. Moments later, Krogstad drops another note that he has forgiven the Helmers. Ironically, Mr Helmer proclaims how much he loved his wife, calling her a “caged song bird” (Ibsen 110). This makes Nora so mad that she decides to quit the marriage: both Helmer and their three children. She observes that her marriage has been one big deception and decides to go and find out who she really is (Ibsen 110).

Overview of the main themes and characters

There are three main characters in the play: Helmer, Nora and Krogstad. Nora Helmer’s character changes throughout the play. Initially, she is depicted as a happy woman, who did not
care about what her husband called her. She thought that her love for him would overcome all the challenges. However, towards the end, she changes drastically. She believes that she was indeed silly, as her husband described her. She refers to herself so because she secured a loan illegally for her husband, who not only abused but also disrespected her in all ways. She appears to be a victim of circumstances. Moreover, towards the end, she becomes a strong-willed woman ready to patch up her past and rediscover her true self. Indeed, at the end of the play, she becomes rebellious.

Torvald Helmer, Nora’s husband is presented as an uncouth, disrespectful and patriarchal man. He may also be described as a sexist. This is self-evident in the entire play. He does not only mistreat his wife but also calls her all sorts of names. He is a male chauvinist because he believes that his role is to guide the wife and decide for her what should be done. He is also egoistic. This is because he is usually conscious of what other people think about him. He asserts himself in society so that all people may respect him. On the other hand, Krogstad is the antagonist of the play. He is at constant odds with the protagonist, Nora Helmer. He may be referred to as immoral because he participates in illegal businesses. In addition, he is also vengeful. He retaliates because the society stigmatized him so much that he could not move on smoothly with his life. His crime was not a major one. Moreover, he also had a good side. He persuaded Nora not to commit a suicide.

There are several themes such as rights of women or feminism, betrayal, love, social strife, classism, patriarchy among others. This analysis scrutinizes feminism and male chauvinism in detail. In fact, the entire play appears to be based on how women are looked down upon. Nora is constantly abused or ridiculed by her husband, but she remains steadfast in her love. She even sacrifices herself for the sake of her husband’s health. However, chauvinistic
Helmer does not appreciate anything that comes from Nora. However, questions arise as to why Nora remained in that marriage for so long that they got three children. It appears to be a symbolic presentation of the fact that feminism and the fight for women’s rights is long overdue. The irony is that although Nora was the “most empowered” woman in the play, she suffered a lot. This implies that the less empowered women were oppressed by the patriarchal society filled by male chauvinists and schemers.

**Reception**

The play was received with awe and admiration. After it was published in December, 1879, it sold 8000 copies in one month. Another edition followed in January, and 3000 copies were sold. The same happened in March. This is an implication that indeed, the play evoked feelings in the audience. Consequently, several production houses and theatres across the world began to reproduce the work. In a span of two years, the play was already reproduced in Royal Theatres of Stockholm and Sweden, in Germany, Great Britain and later, in 1902, in America (McFarlane 167). Nevertheless, the work was heavily criticized in various fronts. First of all, the 19th century Europeans were so pro-family that they could not take anything like separation. Elsewhere, some characters refused to act as Nora, because they claimed that they could not leave their children in the real life. As a result, the author had to produce another edition with an alternative ending. This ending is the one in which Nora does not leave.

**The Social Issue**

*A description of the issue*

This play presents a social issue worth discussing. This issue has to do with feminism. According to Goodman (10), feminism is the ideology or movement that seeks to fight for women’s equal rights with men. Over time and across space, almost in all societies, affairs of a
society are arranged by men. As a result, they favor men and disfavor women. Consequently, societies whose arrangements place men in the public life and predispose women to domestic chores have led to a counter-reaction from women. This reality was present in past human societies, as well as today.

**Its impact on society**

There are several impacts of feminism in society. They are both positive and negative. For instance, feminists in America (USA) led to the inclusion of voting rights in civil duties of all citizens. Precisely, feminism has contributed to the increased respect for and recognition of women’s rights. Related to this are the issues of children's rights, protection of the girl child, adoption of desired birth control methods and appropriate division of labor (Goodman 15). In essence, feminism utterly challenges or is opposed to patriarchy, chauvinism and sexism. This ideology has led to the entrenchment of women’s concerns by the international human rights instruments.

**How it connects with the play**

There are several directions of analysis associated with this play. First, there are those, who strongly feel that the author indirectly or directly seeks to fight for the recognition of women’s rights. This is evidenced by the fact that Nora was perpetually in conflict with her husband in all aspects. The author “graphically” presents how Nora is mistreated by the husband. This evokes a feeling in the audience that indeed, Mr Helmer was too uncouth. However, a cardinal question arises from this argument. Why did Nora not leave a long time ago if she felt mistreated? Why did she wait till she had had three children already? This brings this analysis to the next direction of the argument. McFarlane (87) asserts that the play is not about feminism but self-search. On this basis, it could be argued that Nora took so long to leave because she was not
in touch with her inner self. She did not know herself. It appears that she was not aware of what she wanted in life. This realization was never manifested until Krogstad helped to bring out Helmer’s character. In fact, Mr Helmer’s character was always explicit, but perhaps Nora expected some change in the future. Therefore, the second perspective considers Nora as the problem and not the husband.

The latter line of thought is supported by Tornqvist (150). It is observed that the author of the play himself confessed that he was writing about the humanity and not feminism. He was presenting the consequences that befall people who live the lives that are not purpose-driven. This view proposed that there was no feminist understanding of what women were subjected to them. If there was such thinking, it was feeble, uncoordinated and subtle. The way feminism is conceived today is in line with what Ibsen presents in his play. Modern feminists insist that women must be treated with all the respect they deserve. In fact, men are not controllers of women but equal partakers and participants in the public life. Therefore, the social issue is highly relevant to the play because it was the latent reason for Nora’s suffering. The truth of the matter is that Nora became free after leaving.

**Other Artistic Work “The Story of an Hour”**

A complementary social issue

“The Story of an Hour” presents the same social issue; the aspect of women being caged by their men. In this story, Mr Mallard is alleged to have died in a train accident. When his wife received the news, she was so happy that she uttered “free” at last. This was contrary to what her sister thought. When they received the news, they were confused on how to break it to Mrs. Mallard, because she had a heart condition. On the contrary, after struggling to break the news, the sister was dismayed. Mrs Mallard went to her room and locked herself in. She was feeling
free. She uttered it vie her lips. Unfortunately, she was so happy that she died. Mrs Mallard did not die because of the bad news, but because of the thought that she was to spent all the summers without being caged any more. Unfortunately again, the husband was not dead: he was away from the accident, he was not even aware of it (Berkove 155).

The story presents the issue of women’s problems in a rather dramatic way. There is a considerable ironic twist in the outcomes of the story. It is expected that if Mrs Mallard was delighted by the death of her husband, she would have rejoiced. Instead, she ironically dies. Although the author says that some joy kills, this view believes that Mrs Mallard died because of her heart condition and not because of the joy of her husband’s death. If she was healthy, perhaps she would not have died. The other irony is that the husband was not dead. These ironies are consistent with those in A Doll’s House. Initially, Nora was afraid of being banished by her husband after he found out the truth. On the contrary, after the truth came out, she learnt, who her husband really was. As a result, she freed herself; without the husband’s banishment. In addition, Mr Helmer, who previously treated Nora unfairly, was the one pleading with her not to go. However, it was too much for Nora, and she had to leave.

**How it links with the first play**

This work perfectly links with the first play. The play presented a woman who was caged by her husband in terms of what she could do. Her husband dictated what she had to do. In the same way, it appears that Mr Mallard did not offer his wife any freedom. From what was presented, it appears that she spent all the summers “under pressure.” It could be said that she was held as a social hostage in her house. This view assumes that the stress from her husband may have led to her health condition that affected the heart. The only difference between the two pieces of art is that Mrs Mallard’s story was tragic. Nevertheless, they present the same pertinent
social issue; the patriarchal control of women by men, a subject of feminism. In “The Story of an Hour”, the protagonist does not exert personal effort to free herself. She was to rely on the circumstances such as the alleged death of husband for her to be free. She was sickly. On the contrary, Nora was an empowered woman with all it took to leave the sexist husband. However, she did not leave until it was too late. The motif that reappears in both stories is the fact that feminism is dynamic. While some women can fight for themselves, others should be helped to fight for their rights.

**Conclusion**

As a matter of conclusion, *A Doll’s House* and “The Story of an Hour” are indeed outstanding pieces of art that present the same main themes in impeccable terms. The first play presents a seemingly empowered woman suffering under the roof of a careless man. In the second short story, the wife dies out of the joy that her husband was involved in an accident and was no more. These art pieces are similar in the fact that they present a common motif but in different ways. Nevertheless, the difference is that while one is tragic, the other is not.
Works Cited


