A DOLL'S HOUSE (Et dukkehjem) Play by Henrik Ibsen, 1879

A Doll's House is a landmark in drama, but it is confined in its range of social setting to the middle class. For Henrik Ibsen, this class denoted a community limited not only in its means of livelihood but also in its outlook. It is preoccupied with work and money, leading to a reversion of values from a moral to a material plane.

Torvald Helmer upholds these values because it is in his interest to do so. He knows that his dominant quality, self-interest, will be protected by his adherence to conventional morality. He imposes it on his wife, Nora, because it satisfies his vanity and makes her subservient to him. To him the man is the superior being, holding the economic reins and thereby concentrating in his hands all power and responsibility in the household, making the woman his slave. This conventional view also applies to the attitude to sex; in the kind of relationship that exists between Nora and Torvald, she is his plaything. Ibsen even adds a touch of perversity to Torvald's character, who confesses that he likes to indulge in fantasies about his wife that will enhance her erotic appeal. His purchase of a fishergirl's costume in Capri for Nora and his insistence that she dance the tarantella in public manifest the same desire.

It is against conventional middle-class values that Nora rebels. Of course, she has been made to believe that she was happy, that she was an ideal wife, and that her husband loves her, and she was living with the belief that an ideal husband like hers would, if the necessity arose, sacrifice his life to save her reputation. It is these illusions that are shattered at the end. In her final revolt against her husband, we see the play as dealing with the subject of freedom for women. It has been said that the banging of the door as Nora leaves the house was the first action of women's liberation. (Ibsen was aware of the controversy surrounding his play, and was obliged to provide an alternative happy ending for its German production where Nora melts at the sight of her children. He described it as "a barbaric outrage").

Ibsen himself tried to bring the controversy to an end. He said: "I . . . must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for women's rights. I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights." This, in fact, suggests the main theme of the play. It is true that the rebel, trying to claim what she considers her legitimate rights, is a woman, but Ibsen also conveys a more general theme
of freedom from constricting circumstances of life, often observing that those circumstances are social in character. Whether they belong to his own century or to some other period, whatever the nature of the circumstances, there has always been a conflict between the sensitive, intelligent individual and social pressures and circumstances. Ibsen invests the topical and the contemporary with a universal significance, succeeding because of the creative force of his play, projected mainly onto the chief character, Nora. Her vitality is evident in the way she reacts to the life around her and the changes she undergoes in the course of the play. In fact, the most fascinating aspect of the play is Nora's consciousness, and an important theme is the development of a mature sensibility.

At the beginning, Nora makes her energetic temperament subservient to her love for her husband, but even at this stage her spirit of independence manifests itself as a kind of irresponsibility, making her forge her father's signature and surreptitiously eat macaroons, which Torvald has forbidden her to do. More remarkable is her deeply passionate and devoted heart. Her crime, after all, was motivated by an unreflecting love for her husband: without his knowledge and for his sake, she raises a loan by forgery. Nora also possesses a developing intelligence which enables her to acquire a mature conception of freedom. These qualities create a complex and many-sided personality and together constitute Nora's morality, fresh, vigorous, and unorthodox, which is pitched against the conventional morality of Torvald. What the play dramatizes is not a clash of characters but of values and of different ways of looking at the world. In Torvald Ibsen portrays a character who is lacking in the vital qualities of the heart and is a victim of social conventions. It is only gradually that Nora acquires a true awareness of her husband's character and what he represents.

The explosive impact of the play tends to deflect attention from Ibsen's dramatic skill. The construction has something in common with the "well-made play," but his technique is generally richer and far more meaningful. Ibsen also employs his characteristic retrospective method whereby he gradually lifts the veil over ominous events in the past, despite the resistance of the main character. Nora conceals her crime from Torvald, but events beyond her control result in his discovering it. She expects Torvald to take upon himself the responsibility for the past, but he does not and is thus stripped of all his pretensions, while Nora is jolted into a realization that she has been living in a doll's house.

Ibsen introduces a sub-plot centring upon two other characters, Mrs. Linde and Nils Krogstad. This is not handled as adroitly as the main plot, but is essential to the play. Ibsen's mode of presentation is realistic, but he
incorporates symbolism and visual suggestion, too. For instance, when Nora dances the tarantella, the frenzied dance is an image of the torment in her mind. Indeed, Nora's very language, though prose, is vibrant with emotion and acquires a poetic intensity. The play confirms Ibsen's view: "I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally suppose."

—D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke

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