Human Rights: Children and the Patriarchy in Ibsen’s *A Doll House*

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Introduction

Ibsen’s *A Doll House* has long been appropriated as a work of feminist literature because of its portrayal of the struggles of a woman caught in the grip of a patriarchal society. The appropriation is rightly made; on its most apparent level, *A Doll House* revolves around precisely such a theme: a woman struggling to free herself from her husband and his society. Her subjection is communicated particularly clearly through the paternalistic and demeaning dialogue the husband directs at his wife, from which the play’s name seems to be derived. Her husband “pinches her ear, and calls her by pet names, such as Squirrel, and Mouse, and Bird”; Helmer’s names for his doll-wife range from “little spendthrift” and “little lark” to “sulky squirrel” and “little prodigal” (Scott 20, Ibsen 1023-1024). He talks to her like one might very well talk to a doll, saying, for example, “you don’t have to tire your precious eyes and your fair little delicate hands” (Ibsen 1026). Salomè ties Nora’s objectification to the temporal and spatial setting—the action takes place at Christmas time, in the decorated house—by saying, “Christmas is a children’s festival, and Nora is a child” (Salomè 155). Bradbrook even suggests that the name she is given in the play is indicative of her trifled humanity. “Her childish pet name (she was christened Eleanora, as Ibsen explained to his family, who gave that name to his grand-daughter) means that to translate ‘Nora’, something like ‘Nolly-dolly’ is needed” (Bradbrook 84).

Thomas situates Nora’s position within the context of a historical Norwegian situation, saying, “Once married, the women find they have a clearly defined and essentially subordinate role in relation to their men, whose property they legally and socially become” (Thomas 177). His objectification of her—like that which she earlier experiences from her father—provides ample fruit for thematic study, as does her eventual self-assertion, culminating in her abandoning her home in favor of a path of self-actualization. *A Doll House* can very well be read as a play about women’s rights. Ibsen himself, however, denied that
the play was about women’s rights, explaining to the Society for Extended Female Education in Vienna that the play was about “the rights of humanity in general” (Bradbrook 81). To understand the depth of Ibsen’s social critique, we must look to the non-woman characters in the play: the men and the children.

Fatherhood

One of the points of thematic focus throughout the play is the recurrent theme of paternal failure. In the patriarchal social order, the father figure is privileged; in A Doll House, the structure of paternal benevolence is repeatedly inverted. Helmer, the central father figure in the text, exists—so far as we know—in a completely alienated relationship to his children. The single instance in the play wherein he comes in contact with his children reveals an explicit desire to remain utterly removed from them. As the children come into the house, Helmer quickly leaves, declaring, “this place is unbearable now for anyone but mothers” (Ibsen 1037). Likewise, Ann Marie’s situation, in which she was forced to leave her children and work for Nora, is attributable in part to the absence of a provisionary father figure. She was poor and in trouble, she says, “Because that slippery fish, he didn’t do a thing for me, you know” (1047). Thus, Ibsen portrays fatherhood in relation to absence.

In addition to the absent father, Ibsen assaults the patriarchy with the figure of the corrupt father who pollutes all those around him. Nora attributes Dr. Rank’s poor health to the influence of his corrupt father. “You know,” she says, “his father was a disgusting thing who kept mistresses and so on—and that’s why the son’s been sickly from birth” (Ibsen 1049). The father is corrupt, and therefore his influence on his children is thought to be one of corruption, as well. Helmer advances the principle as a general maxim: dishonest fathers tend invariably to corrupt their children (1046). He gives the example of Krogstad, whose dishonesty has been “poisoning his own children” (1046). Salomè explains, regarding Krogstad, how “such a person creates a corrupt environment, and how
he spins a web of lies in which his children must grow up” (Salomè 155). Helmer himself, however, is not above corruption. When the news of Nora’s deception reaches him, he quickly determines to live a life of dishonesty himself, concealing the forgery just as he earlier condemned Krogstad for doing (Ibsen 1076-1077). “Helmer is a weakling whose only concern is with his reputation in society” (Salomè 155). In Nora’s case, too, fatherhood is said to have exerted a corrupting influence. When Helmer discovers Nora’s deception, he immediately attributes it to the polluting influence of her father. “All your father’s flimsy values have come out in you,” he says. “No religion, no morals, no sense of duty—Oh, how I’m punished for letting him off!” (Ibsen 1076). When considering her irresponsibility with money, he tells her that she is “Exactly the way your father was” (1025).

The portrayal of fatherhood in conjunction with coldness, failure, and even destruction borders on being a thematic focus of the play itself. In this sense, Ibsen subverts the structural composition of a male-based society.

Nora and her Children

We come to the last term in the social structure: the children. The most powerful aspects of the theme of patriarchal oppression are articulated in regards to Nora’s relation to her children. Nora, in many senses, can be understood as the heroine of the story, as the character that defies the patriarchy and stands for the abolition of dehumanization and oppression. However, her relationship with her children could not be farther from this ideal. Rather, she herself stands in a relationship of dehumanization toward her children. Rather than struggling for her children’s liberation as she does
for her own, Nora places herself in a position of power over them, objectifying them as ‘doll-children’ in much the same way she has been objectified as ‘doll-wife.’

She refers to them as her “little darlings,” speaks about how “lovely” they are, and even refers to one of them as “My little baby doll!” (Ibsen 1037). She treats them as her playthings, as objects to charm or amuse her—literally, as darlings. “The transformation from her carefree days as a girl to marriage meant no more to her than a change from a small doll’s house to a larger one; the main difference was that instead of her customary lifeless wax dolls, she would eventually receive three precious living dolls” (Salomè 155). The language she uses to refer to them is quite literally ‘belittling’: capitalizing on their physical and social stature, she constantly refers to them as ‘little’. When the children recounted a narrowly avoided encounter with a hostile dog, Nora again says, “No, dogs never bite little, lovely baby dollies!” (Ibsen 1038). Her children, of course, are not properly babies; the nomenclature she adopts in relation to them is a function of their position in the hierarchy of the household and of the world—a function of their lack of humanity. Their status as objectified playthings is poignantly depicted when it is time for them to change their clothes. Rather than having their nurse do the job, Nora says, “I’ll undress them myself. Oh yes, let me. It’s such fun” (1038). Nora is quite literally ‘playing dress-up’ with her children, just as a person would do with their collection of toy dolls.

Nora’s dealings with her children continue to lack a basic respect for their human dignity insomuch as she refuses to take seriously the promises she makes to her children. When Krogstad shows up unexpectedly on the scene, Nora breaks off her game with the children, but promises “When he’s gone, we’ll play some more” (1038). When he leaves, the children are quick to remind her, “that strange man’s gone out the door… will you play again?” (1043). Nora—though just reminded of the importance of promises and contracts in her conversation with Krogstad—refuses. The children persist, reminding her that she gave them her word: “Oh, but Mama, you promised”
Rather than dignifying her children by honoring the promise she made them, Nora continues to refuse. Though she acknowledges that she did in fact make the promise, she doesn’t consider it obligatory in any way. Nora approaches her children as something less than human, namely, as her own ‘dolls’ in the broader ‘doll house’ of the home and of society.

Internalization of the Oppressor

Nora’s relationship to her children should not be viewed in isolation. In the first place, the way she relates to children mirrors the way Helmer relates to children. The theme of ‘doll making’ is not limited to Nora; rather, her children are also subject to the paternalistic objectification of the story’s male figures. They too are treated as less than human by a structure of thought that privileges male adults. Helmer considers children to hold a subhuman position in the patriarchal hierarchy. At one point he tells Nora, “You talk like a child. You don’t know anything of the world you live in” (1081). Implicit in this insult is the understanding that a child is inferior to other human beings; his likening her to a child denotes a certain degree of degradation and lowering of status, at least for the duration of the insult. In the midst of a social structure that privileges particular forms of understanding and knowledge, Helmer views children as inferior.

In the second place, Nora’s relation to her children mirrors both her father and Helmer’s relationship with her. Helmer treats and even views Nora as a child. “The child can have her way,” he says of her (1065). In the final, confrontational scene, Helmer explains what, in his view, is excellent about his relationship with Nora, saying, “It’s as if she belongs to him in two ways now: in a sense he’s given her fresh into the world again, and she’s become his wife and his child as well. From now on that’s what you’ll be to me—you little, bewildered, helpless thing” (1078). Salomè views this as a conscious, deliberate form of relatedness. “The self-satisfied and assured adult,” she says, “who has no one to look up to, deliberately chooses for his love-object a toy or doll for the idle hours between
important business. He chooses a ‘squirrel’ that can perform tricks when he is bored; a ‘skylark’ that can sing away a sour mood; and a ‘nibbly cat,’ made sufficiently happy by proffered candy during a light mood” (Salomè 155). In the same way, Nora’s relation to her children closely resembles that of her father’s relation to her. “I’ve been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa’s doll-child,” Nora says, “and the children have been my dolls in their turn. I liked it when you came and played with me, just as they liked it when I came and played with them” (Ibsen 1079-1080). Nora’s father treated her like a doll, her husband treats her like a doll, and now she treats her children in much the same way. In a poignant scene, Nora—who earlier in the play enjoyed ‘playing dress-up’ with her children when they needed to change clothes—offers herself to her husband in much the same way. “You know, there isn’t anyone who has your good taste—and I want so much to look well at the costume party. Torvald, couldn’t you take over and decide what I should be and plan my costume?” (Ibsen 1045). She enjoys dressing her ‘doll-children’ just as Helmer enjoys dressing his ‘doll-wife’.

In both of these cases—Nora’s treatment of the children as reflective of Helmer’s treatment of the children; Nora’s treatment of the children as reflective of Helmer’s treatment of Nora—the central patriarchal figure determines a certain relation to the people around him, and that relation is mirrored in the life of Nora. In the first case, Nora emulates her husband’s relation to children in general; in the second case, Nora treats her children in much the same demeaning manner as she is treated by the two primary male figures in her life: her father and husband. That is to say, the power structure that defines the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is repeated in the relationship between the oppressed and those around her. Why does Nora adopt, participate in, and emulate the very relational structures that hold her in subjugation? Freire observes that the oppressed, rather than striving for liberation, often subject those around them to a power structure similar to that to which they are themselves subjected—they become oppressors themselves. “This
“phenomenon,” he says, “derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor… the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole” (Freire 45-46). Thomas suggests that this ‘adhesion’ or ‘internalization’ to those who have been in power over her is responsible for her behavior. “Nora,” he says, “for her part, has acquired her ‘irresponsible’ attitudes and responses from her father’s treatment of her”—she has internalized the relational structure in which she was situated in regards to her father (Thomas 177). Nora lives in a society that articulates the relationships between individuals in terms of a binary power structure: oppressor and oppressed, male and female, father and household, husband and wife. Nora’s very thought—her understanding of reality, sociality, and interpersonal relationship—has been fundamentally altered or determined by her existential situation; her understanding of what it means to be human and to live in community with others has been transformed by the concrete preconditions of the society to which she belongs and the models of relatedness it provides. Nora exists in the midst of an imbalanced power relationship with her husband and father; her interactions with her children seek only to reverse the terms of the relationship, preserving its essential structure. Rather than seek equality and liberation for her children, she retains the structure of the oppressor.

Conclusion

By the end of the story, Helmer’s degrading treatment of Nora is resolved, though perhaps imperfectly and sadly. Nora asserts herself to her husband, upsetting the terms of the relational structure that defines their interaction throughout the earlier portions of the play. Unfortunately, the plight of the children receives no such solution. In one of her triumphant moments, Nora declares, “I believe that before everything else I’m a human being” (Ibsen 1081). Unfortunately, she refuses to recognize the same of her children, and their tragedy persists, silently.
In Ibsen’s *A Doll House*, the central conflict revolves around Helmer’s controlling, demeaning treatment of his wife, Nora. The real tragedy of the story, however, is not in the supposed superiority of the husband over his wife. Rather, the real tragedy is the dehumanization of the children, who are never given a voice or allowed the possibility of bettering their position. They begin the story under an institution that has marginalized them, and they remain consigned to subhuman status through the last page. In this way, Ibsen’s work—as he claims—goes beyond being a work about women’s rights and becomes instead a work dealing with the rights of all humans struggling under an oppressive, patriarchal society. Why does Nora adopt, participate in, and emulate the very relational structures that hold her in subjugation? The answer seems to be this: the patriarchal power structures that define the male-based society, by altering the concrete conditions in which the individual is existentially situated, serve to alter the way of thinking of those who find themselves in the society. In a world where interpersonal relationships are defined in terms of an oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, the oppressed internalizes that dichotomy and, rather than seeking to destroy the dichotomy, seeks to reverse its terms and themselves occupy the place of oppressor. When humanity is conceived of only in terms of oppression, aspiration to humanization is itself articulated in terms of the oppressive relational structure. Thus, when Nora relates to her children, her relation to them is a function of her enculturation into a thought structure determined by the structural power relations within her society. If this is the case, then Nora’s interaction with her children serves as perhaps the most important articulation of the play’s central theme of patriarchal oppression, because it is in that interaction that the oppressive situation reaches its most comprehensive character. The depth of Ibsen’s work is in its portrayal of what is perhaps most tragic, most insidious, and most powerful in the patriarchal power structures: the internalization of those structures on the part of the oppressed; the inculcation of oppressive values; the formation of patterns of thought and behavior that reinforce and perpetuate oppression through all levels of the social body.
Works Cited


