A Post-feminist, Evolutionist Reading of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* has spawned a wealth of differing interpretations over the 130 years since its first performance, being variously analyzed from feminist, anti-feminist, Marxist, Freudian, poststructuralist and realist perspectives (among others). This paper, while acknowledging the play’s original impact and significance in terms of women’s rights and social restrictions in general, attempts to place Ibsen’s play in a contemporary context by re-reading it from a post-feminist, evolutionist perspective. Taken together, these two approaches allow the reader or audience member to see Nora as an individual who was born into a strict, hierarchical society and who adapted to that society by devising survival strategies such as flattery, deception and denial. Rather than praising Nora as a martyr for womankind or condemning her as a selfish hysteric, this way of understanding her situation and that of the other characters sees them all as interacting with and adapting to their environments in ways which aim to achieve the basic evolutionary needs of survival, reproduction, parenting and kinship, and group living. While Helmer, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad prove reasonably successful in achieving these goals however, it is suggested that Nora’s strategies prove ineffective when she is faced with exposure, and that her denial and refusal to compromise in the final scene of the play (as well as her wishing for a ‘miracle’) are backup strategies which frustrate the basic evolutionary needs of Nora and the people around her and contradict the post-feminist rehabilitation of the woman as a homemaker. (248 words)

Keywords: Ibsen, Darwin, evolutionism, feminism, adaptation, environment, women’s rights

INTRODUCTION

Since its first performance at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 21st December 1879, Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House* has been praised by critics and academics as a major work of dramatic art, though many have taken opposing stances regarding its actual message. This paper attempts to synthesize and contextualize some of these differing views by offering a more universal approach to

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1 Joan Templeton (1989:38) states that “Rolf Fjelde, America’s foremost translator of Ibsen, is right: *Et Dukkehjem* is *A Doll House* and not *A Doll’s House*: ‘There is certainly no sound justification for perpetrating the awkward and blindly traditional misnomer of *A Doll’s House*: the house is not Nora’s, as the possessive implies’ (xxv).” Despite this apparent error in translation, this paper continues to use the title *A Doll’s House*, with the understanding that it is the toy-like nature of the house itself (Nora’s environment) that is the subject, rather than the heroine’s position within the house.
the text, while reconsidering women’s-rights aspects of the play in the light of contemporary, post-feminist views of the role of women in society and thus reappraising the meaning and significance of the play for 21st century audiences.

The original ideas for this paper came to the authors while watching the Peter Hall production of *A Doll’s House* at the Theatre Royal, in Bath (UK), in the summer of 2008. Expecting to see Nora depicted as a repressed woman who finally frees herself from unbearable personal and social restrictions and breaks from her family in order to discover who she really is, we were presented instead with a rather volatile and progressively more unstable character, who seemed to take pleasure in deceiving her husband and those around her. This interpretation inspired us to think deeply about the text and its social and historical context and to re-read it in the light of contemporary critical approaches, in particular post-feminism and evolutionism. In this context, it is interesting to note that Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species*, which is considered to be the foundation of evolutionary biology, and which is at the heart of literary evolutionary theory, was published in a Swedish translation in 1869 and in Danish in 1872, seven years before *A Doll’s House* was first performed.

Audiences and critics were enthusiastic about Ibsen’s new stage play when it opened, though his agent in Germany expressed misgivings about the ending. This was a time of intellectual and social turbulence and revolution in Europe; the Danish translation by Georg Brandes of John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* had appeared in 1869 and Mill and Ibsen described the social and moral suffering caused to men and women by the prevailing inflexible patriarchy. From this perspective, women’s issues were symptomatic of society’s problems, which were highlighted by Ibsen “through individual destinies and confrontations” (Hemmer, 1994:82). This dual focus allowed young movements such as Socialism, Marxism and Feminism to claim Ibsen as their spokesman, as evidenced by the famous stage reading of *A Doll’s House* that took place on 15th January 1886, in Great Russell Street, London, in the rented flat of Karl Marx’s youngest daughter, Eleanor (Nora) and her common-law husband, Edward Aveling (Helmer). Bernard Shaw played Krogstad and William Morris’s daughter May, played Mrs. Linde (Kelly, 2004:539). A “plethora of ‘isms’” (Aestheticism, Fabianism, Socialism, Marxism and Feminism) were thus all represented at this evening, which has been described as “an auspicious one for ‘Ibsenism’” (Durbach, 1994:233). It is not surprising that *A Doll’s House* was soon known as ‘the fist feminist play’, an interpretation echoed by Joan Templeton (1989), who points out that Ibsen was very much involved with women’s rights at that time, and was actively communicating with three influential feminists:

*A Doll House* is a natural development of the play Ibsen had just written, the unabashedly feminist *Pillars of Society*; both plays reflect Ibsen's extremely privileged feminist education, which he shared with few other nineteenth-century male authors and which he owed to a trio of extraordinary women: Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen, his wife; Magdalen Thoresen, his colleague at the

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2 These misgivings led to Ibsen being forced to supply an alternative ending, which he later called a “barbaric act of violence” towards the play (Open letter to the Danish newspaper *Nationaltidende*, dated 17 February 1880).

3 Coincidentally, “Ibsen was fond of explaining that his heroine’s “real” name was “Eleanora” but that she had been called “Nora” from childhood” (Templeton, 1989: 35).
Norwegian National Theatre in Bergen, who was Suzannah's stepmother and former governess; and Camilla Wergeland Collett, Ibsen's literary colleague, valued friend, and the founder of Norwegian feminism. (Templeton, 1989:36)

Egil Törnqvist also cites these relationships, stating that, “It was presumably after becoming acquainted with the Norwegian feminist writer Camilla Collett in 1871 that Ibsen became deeply concerned with issues pertaining to man–woman relationships in contemporary society” (1995:4), further referring to Ibsen’s Notes for The Tragedy of Modern Times (Meyer, 2005:476) as being concerned with “how feminine nature (instinct) is pitted against masculine regulative thinking (culture). The ethics of the suppressed female are opposed to those of the suppressing male” (1995:8). Continuing in this vein, Joan Templeton (1997), writing about the women in Ibsen’s plays, sees A Doll’s House as:

… Ibsen’s most explicit treatment of the women question. The conflict is between society’s demand that Nora embrace the women’s role that it has determined for her – “Before all else, you’re a wife and mother” – and her refusal in the name of her own autonomy: “I believe that, before all else, I’m a human being”. Nora does not leave the doll house to find some other role in society, but, on the contrary, to discover the self she refused in living a role. (325)

Ibsen himself commented famously that:

A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It’s an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint. (Meyer, 2005:476)

From the opposite perspective, commentators such as Ibsen’s biographer, M. Meyer and others, dismiss Nora as “an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an "abnormal" woman, a "hysteric": a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness” (Templeton, 1989:29), laying great emphasis on Ibsen’s words in a speech given to the Norwegian Women’s Rights League in 1898, when he insisted that he "must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement," and that he wrote his plays "without any conscious thought of making propaganda," his task being "the description of humanity" (Ibsen, 1898). Other interpretations see Nora as representative of Everyman rather than women in particular (cf. Durbach, 1994:234), while Hermann Wiegand goes so far as to classify A Doll’s House as a comedy (1925:68).

Whatever the view taken of Nora’s actions and the overall message of the play, it is generally accepted that it describes the social, emotional, and spiritual restrictions imposed on women by Norwegian society of the late 19th century and that part of Nora’s battle (whether personal or symbolic) is to become aware of these restrictions and to confront the artificial environment which had been created around her. In this context, Alexander Herzen (writing in 1868) had identified the issues involved in My Past and Thoughts:
A sober view of human relationships is far harder for women than for us; [...] they are more deceived by education and know less of life, and so they more often stumble and break their heads and hearts than free themselves. They are always in revolt, and remain in slavery: they strive for revolution and more than anything they support the existing regime. (1982: 439)

More tellingly, Herzen goes on to describe, in words that might well be applied to Nora and to Mrs. Linde, the effort of awareness needed by women if they were to extricate themselves from this vicious circle:

For a woman to extricate herself from this chaos is an heroic feat: only rare and exceptional natures accomplish it: the other women are tortured, and if they do not go out of their minds it is only thanks to the frivolity with which we all live without over-subtlety in the face of menacing blows and collisions, thoughtlessly passing from day to day, [...] and from contradiction to contradiction. (1982: 439)

It could be claimed that these two excerpts exhibit a rather condescending and patriarchal attempt at objectivity in their ‘them and us’ approach, and that they were written by someone who was part of the problem rather than the solution (Herzen’s life was marred by a number of domestic tragedies and extra-marital affairs), but they do at least highlight the sort of issues that led to the appearance of first-wave feminism at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

FEMINISM

Gail Finney points out that A Doll’s House “was enthusiastically welcomed by feminist thinkers in Norway and throughout Europe” and states that, “In closing the door on her husband and children, Nora opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women’s movement” (91). Matinee performances of Ibsen’s plays in London between 1880 and 19004 were overwhelmingly attended by women, who “had assembled in force to do honour” to the Master who headed the revolt of her sex” (Barstow 387). Thus, in the stage reading in Bloomsbury in 1886, the ‘miracle of miracles’ for Eleanor Marx was “Marxist change with its promise of economic and intellectual emancipation for women and workers alike; and Nora’s predicament read as a metaphor for the exploitation and oppression of labour” (Durbach 234). Unfortunately, Eleanor’s own doll’s-house existence imploded in 1898 when her partner, who was a founder of The Socialist League, a spokesman for Darwinian evolution and co-translator of Volume I of Marx’s Das Kapital, was found to be a bigamist and deeply in debt. Nonetheless, Durbach identifies Eleanor Marx as the first of Ibsen’s feminist critics, classifying her Socialist Feminism (which continues in the work of contemporary dramatists such as Caryl Churchill) as class-based rather than gender-based, in contrast to Bourgeois Feminists, who call for political, economic and social parity, and Radical Feminists, who insist on irreconcilable

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4 “Of the Ibsen plays premiered in London between 1880 and 1900, all but three were originally produced as matinees, and male reviewers often found themselves in an unaccustomed and uncomfortable minority” (Barstow, 2001: 387).

5 Quotations in this paper preserve the original spelling.
conflict between male and female. This first-wave feminism was exemplified in the 19th century literary phenomenon of “The New Woman”, a type of heroine who challenged the restrictions set by male-dominated society and valued self-fulfillment and independence rather than the traditional ideal of self-sacrifice (Finney 95). Ibsen’s plays A Doll’s House (1879) and Hedda Gabler (1890) foregrounded such New Women (cf. Max Beerbohm’s apocryphal joke that, “The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen’s brain”), as did Henry Arthur Jones’s The Case of Rebellious Susan (1894) and George Bernard Shaw’s controversial Mrs. Warren’s Profession (1893) and Candida (1898).

This literary outpouring on the part of Ibsen and others contributed to the success of the late 19th and early 20th century women’s suffrage movement and in 1913 Norway became the second country in Europe (after Finland) to have full suffrage for women. However, the appearance of the jazz-age ‘flapper’ in the 1920s and the international legalization of ‘votes for women’, confirmed by the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, brought this phase of feminism to a close.

Second-wave feminism began in the early ’60s on a more individual level, encouraging women to examine personal and cultural aspects of their lives in the light of sexist power structures and discrimination in the home, the workplace, and in terms of reproductive rights. This type of feminism still continues, but its over-emphasis on the experiences of middle class white women gave rise in the early 1990s to third-wave feminism, with its poststructuralist interpretation of gender, sexuality, contradiction, diversity and change and its focus on the young, the poor, and minority voters.

Backlashes against extreme forms of second-wave feminism and against the extended field of struggle of third-wave feminism led to the emergence of post-feminism, which is based on the premise that first- and second-wave goals of legal, political and sexual equality have largely been achieved. As Mary Hawkesworth points out, there now is a feminist arm of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), “162 nations have ratified the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and women’s rights activists in all those nations are working to pressure their governments to change constitutions, laws, and customary practices in accordance with CEDAW provisions” (Hawkesworth 962). Postmodern concepts tend to defy definition (since definition is a modernist concept) so it is not surprising to find that post-feminism has been described in a number of differing ways, from a reclaiming of traditional gender roles (preserving women’s rights as homemakers), to an attempt to subvert and depoliticize extreme feminism, making it more acceptable to society as a whole. It has even been seen as an evolutionary step on the path to the extinction of feminism and as a revolt against feminists (Hawkesworth 965–966).

In addition to acknowledging the first-wave feminist impact of A Doll’s House, this paper examines the play from a post-feminist, evolutionary perspective (though Hawkesworth states that “evolutionary metaphors of “natural selection” and “the survival of the fittest” are seldom feminist friendly” (965), showing how an approach which is rooted in but goes beyond feminist principles can help to place the play in a meaningful contemporary framework of relevance.
It may not be too much to say that sociology and the other social sciences, as well as the humanities, are the last branches of biology waiting to be included in the Modern Synthesis.


While being quick to adopt Marxist, Freudian, Lacanian and Cultural methods of analyzing and explaining the personalities and driving forces of characters in literature, literary analysts have espoused Darwinian Literary Studies comparatively recently (cf. Carroll, 1996), despite the fact that Darwin’s Theory of Evolution is more than 150 years old and is recognized as one of the most effective descriptions of how organisms (including humans) interact with and adapt to their surroundings and consequently manage to survive (Carroll, 1995: 121). David and Nanelle Barash make this point quite forcefully:

… literary critics might well profit by adding Darwinian analysis to their armamentarium. After all, whereas Aristotle, Marx, Freud, Jung, Foucault, Derrida, and others offer intellectual richness, so does Darwin. Moreover, Darwin has an additional appeal: He was right. To be sure, evolution is only one discourse among many, but there is something to be said for the benefits of basing an interpretive project on empirical validity rather than on idle speculation, airy disquisitions on indeterminacy, or the presumed impossibility of any rational discourse whatever. (2001: 1)

Darwinian literary studies arose as a reaction to poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophies that were prominent in during the 1970s and 80s, in particular the argument that discourse and signs construct reality. Darwinists disagree with language-based and cultural models of human values and behaviors and argue instead that organisms interact with, contribute to, and are part of their surroundings (Carroll, “Organism, Environment, and Literary Representation” 2) and that their perceptual, rational and affective psychological structures have evolved through “an adaptive process of natural selection” (Carroll, “Education and literary theory” 121). These structures regulate the mental and emotional life of living organisms and human beings are not blank slates waiting to be inscribed by language and culture; their role is to structure and describe human experience. Taking the concept further, Carroll contends that post-structural theories are part of the evolutionary process:

“Cognitive and linguistic categories have evolved in adaptive relation to the environment. (…) They correspond to the world not because they “construct” the world in accordance with their own autonomous, internal principles but because their internal principles have evolved as a means of comprehending an actual world that exists independently of the categories” (“Pluralism, Poststructuralism, and Evolutionary Theory” xxx).

From this perspective, literary works reflect and articulate the four basic
behavioral systems (survival, reproduction, parenting and kinship, and group living) that govern the motives and interests of human beings as living organisms:

I contend that innate biological characteristics provide the basis for all individual identity and all social organization [...] and that literature represents objects that exist independently of language. (“Education and literary theory” 123)

An evolutionary view of personality begins at the ‘nature’ end of the nature-nurture continuum, with personality being defined by the individual’s genes, which are the result of centuries of evolutionary adaptation. As the individual grows and interacts with his/her environment, these genes are further modified through sexual and family relations, social organization, cognition, and linguistic representation (nurture). The role of literature in this process is to reflect the growth of personal psychology as people come in contact with each other and interact “with the world in which they evolved and to which they are adapted” (Barash & Barash 2). Even authors and critics interact with and document their realities in a self-reflexive manner, contributing to and changing their environments while observing them6. As Heisenberg points out, “In the drama of existence we are ourselves both players and spectators” (57).

Further justification for an evolutionist approach to Ibsen’s plays derives from the fact that Darwin’s works On the Origin of the Species and The Descent of Man were made available in Danish translations in 1872 and 1874/75 respectively. In addition, Ibsen visited the translator, J. P. Jacobsen, during Ibsen’s second stay in Rome (1878), one year before A Doll’s House was published. The Norwegian writer, Gunnar Heiberg, observed that he frequently listened to Ibsen and Jacobsen discussing Darwin’s theories, though Ibsen’s interest was practical: “he merely wanted to be informed on these issues for purposes of playwriting” (Aarseth 3). Asbjørn Aarseth draws attention to these meetings when considering the “possible influence of Darwin’s scientific ideas on Ibsen’s plays” and concludes that:

The subject deserves attention by anyone interested in Ibsen as a mediator of modernity, since the works of Darwin, and particularly his most famous book, On the Origin of Species (1859), although controversial at first, came to acquire a central position in the modernization of European intellectual life at roughly the same time as the Norwegian playwright became famous in Europe for his works. (Aarseth 1)

ANALYSIS

In order to carry out its post-feminist, evolutionist reading of the play, this paper takes the text as its starting point, though this is not to subscribe to the poststructuralist paradigm of textualism and indeterminacy. Instead, the words of the text are taken for their intrinsic (rather than symbolic, semiotic or cultural) and

6 The ‘Observer Effect’ in physics and in qualitative research states that it is not possible to observe a phenomenon, object, or person without changing its state.
contextual meaning. In doing this, and based on the concepts outlined in previous sections, it is suggested that a reading of A Doll’s House which focuses on the restrictions in Nora’s lifestyle and uses these to attack the mores of a patriarchal society, is over-simplistic and ignores the existence of many other factors and variables. From such ‘black-and-white’ approaches, it is not possible to decide whether Nora is a result of her circumstances, an active manipulator of her situation, or a victim of external forces. Taking a Marxist point of view, she is a victim, ensnared in (and gradually taking on) the values of capitalism, while from first- and second-wave feminist perspectives, she is still a victim, this time of a male-oriented society that is unable (or unwilling) to accommodate the female point of view. The synopsis of the play on Wikipedia (along with others on the Internet) provides an interesting example of this type of interpretation, portraying Torvald Helmer as an inflexible simpleton, a stereotype of unthinking male domination who is unable to accommodate or even comprehend Nora’s desire for emancipation:

Torvald is unable to comprehend Nora’s point of view, since it so contradicts his own ideas about her mind. Furthermore, he is so narcissistic that it would be impossible for him to bear to understand how he appears to her, as selfish, hypocritical and more concerned with public reputation than with actual morality. As Nora lets herself out, leaving behind her wedding ring and keys, Torvald is utterly baffled by what has happened. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Doll’s_House)

In contrast, the feminist-backlash interpretation denounces Nora as “an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an ‘abnormal’ woman, a ‘hysteric’; a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness” (Templeton, “The Doll House Backlash” 29). However, further reading of the text indicates depths of meaning that have been overlooked in such commentaries. For example, Torvald Helmer shows himself ready, eager and even desperate to understand his suddenly changed wife in Act 3 and to work together on a solution:

Helmer: (Sadly) I see. I see. A chasm has opened up between us … Isn’t … isn’t there any way we could bridge it, Nora? […] I’m strong enough to change.7 (174/175)

Helmer: Nora … can’t I ever be anything but a stranger to you?
Nora: (Picking up her overnight bag) Oh, Torvald, there would have to be the most wonderful miracle …
Helmer: What sort of miracle, tell me!
Nora: Both of use would have to change so much that … Oh, Torvald, I don’t believe in miracles any more.
Helmer: But I’ll believe in it. Tell me! (176)

7 In keeping with the wish to place the play in a contemporary context, quotations from A Doll’s House are taken from Christopher Hampton’s adaptation (Ibsen, 1989), based on a literal translation by Hélène Grégoire and first performed at The Play House Theatre, New York. Christopher Hampton was the screenwriter for the 1973 film version of the play, starring Clair Bloom, Anthony Hopkins, and Sir Ralph Richardson.
These are not the words of a narcissistic hypocrite, but of a man who has suddenly been faced with a volte-face by his wife and is struggling to find a way of dealing with it and keeping her in the family (satisfying the basic needs for parenting and kinship). He is ready to change, to listen to her and to help her, even though she is set on abandoning her family and walking out on him without giving him any chance to redress matters.

Strategy 1: Control

*A Doll’s House* begins with Nora bringing in a Christmas tree (or having it brought in) and hiding it from her husband and the children so that they won’t see it until it has been adorned with lights. This might seem insignificant, though a Marxist interpretation, using the interpellation theory of Louis Althusser and the associated mirror-stage concept of Jacques Lacan, would see the tree and the need to dress it as symbolic of commercialism. According to this approach, Nora is a pre-ideological individual who has been overwhelmed by her surroundings and is unable to do anything but submit to and further the dominant ideology (patriarchal capitalism). If we drop the Marxist lenses however and look only at the text, we find that Nora’s goal is to control the Christmas Eve experience for her family and to present them with a product sanctioned by her, rather than involve them in the preparations.

Examples of Nora attempting to control her environment appear frequently throughout the play, gradually becoming more serious in their repercussions. Whereas other interpretations portray her as a helpless victim of male-domination, an evolutionist view identifies the fact that she has adapted well to subordination and has turned it to her advantage. It is no exaggeration to say that she ‘wears the trousers’ in the Doll House, since she manages to get her way in everything, while taking on the persona of the subservient wife, always ready to placate her husband and to make him believe that he is the major decision-maker: “I wouldn’t dream of doing anything you disapproved of” (101). As the play progresses, she disregards Helmer’s wishes about eating sweets, manipulates him in order to help Mrs. Linde (consequently contributing to Krogstad’s loss of employment), flirts with Dr. Rank and causes him to misinterpret her intentions, forces the whole family to be without her while she works on a copying job for three weeks during a previous Christmas, and forces Helmer to take a holiday. Of course, Helmer was dire need of this vacation and Nora was determined to save his life, despite the fact that her uninformed husband was determined not to go:

Nora: It was necessary he should have no idea what a dangerous condition he was in. It was to me that the doctors came and said that his life was in danger, and that the only thing to save him was to live in the south. Do you suppose I didn’t try, first of all, to get what I wanted as if it were for myself? (…) He said I was thoughtless, and that it was his duty as my husband not to indulge me in my whims and caprices--as I believe he called them. Very well, I thought, you must be saved—and that was how I came to devise a way out of the difficulty—(page …)
This extract reveals that in order to satisfy the evolutionary needs of survival, parenting and kinship, Nora was ready to withhold vital information from her husband and to ‘take the law into her own hands’. Christine (Mrs Linde) is shocked when she hears this confession and exhorts Nora to take stock of her actions:

Mrs Linde: Listen, Nora, are you sure you haven’t done something rash?
Nora: Is it rash to save your husband’s life?
Mrs Linde: I think it’s rash if you do it without his knowledge …
Nora: But that was the whole point, to do it without him finding out! […] We never intended him to find out how dangerously ill he was. (109)

This exchange illuminates Nora’s life strategies, her rationale, and her modus operandi. For her, the end justifies the means, and an important condition of those means is that her husband should not find out what she has done. Rather than talking with Helmer and discussing the pros and cons of the situation, her approach is to bypass his uninformed reactions and to exclude him from the decision-making process (in similar manner to her actions in the final scene). Nora’s survival strategy is to control her husband by ignoring him and simply keeping him in the dark when doing things of which he would not approve. Her assurance, “I wouldn’t dream of doing anything you disapproved of” (101) becomes more empty and transparent as the play progresses.

Nora’s unilateral actions take on threatening proportions during the play, as her fraudulent obtaining of a loan from Krogstad (against her husband’s wishes, of course) and her subsequent treatment of Krogstad prompt him to write a letter of explanation to Helmer and to place it in the letterbox of the Doll House, at which Nora becomes desperate and searches for ways to prevent Helmer from opening the letterbox. At this stage in Act 2, the Tarantella plays a prominent role. Gail Finney refers to Catherine Clément’s discussion of the cathartic properties of the tarantella in southern Italy, where it allows “women to escape temporarily from marriage and motherhood into a free, lawless world of music and uninhibited movement” (qtd in Finney 98). On a symbolic level, this appears to provide Nora with much-needed, temporary respite, before she “returns from her frenzied state to her role as wife and mother, but only as a springboard from which to emancipate herself” (Finney 98–99). Just as with the Wikipedia synopsis, however, a closer reading of the text shows that Helmer has (according to Nora) asked her to dance the Tarantella, though it would seem unlikely that his intention was to get her to escape into a fantasy world through it:

Nora: Tomorrow evening there is to be a fancy-dress ball at the Stenborgs', who live above us; and Torvald wants me to go as a Neapolitan fisher-girl, and dance the Tarantella that I learned at Capri.
Mrs Linde: I see; you are going to keep up the character.
Nora: Yes, Torvald wants me to. (page xxx)

Once the dress has been repaired (by Christine), Nora is ready to rehearse her dance, a situation that she turns to her advantage when Helmer tells her that he intends to check the letterbox:
Nora: What are you going to do there?
Helmer: Only see if any letters have come.
Nora: No, no! don't do that, Torvald!
Helmer: Why not?
Nora: Torvald, please don't. There is nothing there.
Helmer: Well, let me look. (Turns to go to the letter-box. NORA, at the piano, plays the first bars of the Tarantella. Helmer stops in the doorway.) Aha!

Having engaged Helmer’s attention and prevented him from finding the letter, Nora begins to dance “more and more wildly”:

Helmer: My dear darling Nora, you are dancing as if your life depended on it.
Nora: So it does. (...)
Nora: You must not think of anything but me, either today or tomorrow; you mustn't open a single letter--not even open the letter-box--

Nora has successfully devised a short-term stratagem for covering up the increasing effectiveness of her earlier stratagems. However, this proves to be unsuccessful in the longer term and she is faced with accountability and with the predictable angry reaction of her husband. This leads to the final scene of the play, which has been much discussed by feminists and anti-feminists alike. On the one hand (a reading which takes Nora’s words at face-value), she has been praised for finally coming to her senses and bravely sacrificing home and family for an uncertain but independent future. On the other hand, she has been attacked on moral grounds and Ibsen on literary ones, the New Woman of Act 3 being “an incomprehensible transformation of the heroine of acts 1 and 2. This reasoning provided an ideal way to dismiss Nora altogether: nothing she said needed to be taken seriously, and her door slamming could be written off as silly theatrics” (Marker and Marker, qtd in Templeton, “The Doll House Backlash” 29).

Templeton points out that the ‘Two Noras’ argument has many supporters, in particular the Norwegian scholar Else Høst, “who argues that Ibsen’s carefree, charming ‘lark’ could never have become the ‘newly fledged feminist’ (...) who coldly analyzes the flaws in her marriage, is psychologically unconvincing and wholly unsympathetic” (qtd in “The Doll House Backlash” 29). From the post-feminist viewpoint, it is true that Nora seems to reject everything that might help her to redefine her role in the household. Nora’s expressed wish to educate herself and to achieve the final level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Self-actualization) could surely be carried out in a revised, collaborative environment, rather than abandoning everything – almost a literal case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Nora: There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself--you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now.

From the evolutionist perspective, the fact that Nora is ready to reject her basic needs and to leave the environment which she has managed to control up to this
point might seem puzzling. However, if we reflect on the fact that her earlier (successful) life-strategies could not adapt to the appearance of Christine and Krogstad, then it becomes possible to reappraise her final words. Faced with Helmer’s discovery of the truth, Nora has the options of i) confessing to him and taking the consequences, ii) dropping the childlike persona which has worked so well and taking responsibility for her actions, constructing a new relationship with her husband, and iii) continuing to control her fate by uncompromisingly dictating the outcome. It is this final strategy that she chooses, apparently on the spur of the moment, perhaps because it continues to place her ‘in the driving seat’, despite the damage and hurt it causes for Helmer and her children. As with the holiday in Italy, Helmer is not given an opportunity to contribute to the decision and must search for any scraps of hope that come to hand. Nora continues to control her environment, but the observer might not be blamed for wondering how effective this latest strategy will turn out to be.

Strategy 2. Deception

A further strategy that Nora has evolved as a means of surviving in her closed environment is that of deception. This is not to claim that she is an innately deceitful person, though the evolutionist approach would suggest that there was a propensity for deception in her genes, perhaps built up by generations of female ancestors who lived in and adapted to similar conditions. Helmer indicates that such genetic influences were also present in her father: “all your father’s want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty” (page) and “Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands” (page). These genetic tendencies were enhanced while Nora was in her father’s house and then in Helmer’s house, where discussion was not a viable course of action (in terms of obtaining what she wanted), since, “Everything you do is quite right, Torvald” (page). In other words, her father was always ‘moralising’ (page) and Helmer was always lecturing her, leaving little room for meaningful discussion:

Nora: We have been married now eight years. Does it not occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, husband and wife, have had a serious conversation? (page)

Nora is quick to blame Helmer for this state of affairs, “you have never understood me. I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by papa and then by you” (page), though it is easy to sympathise with Helmer when he asks: “But, dearest Nora, would it have been any good to you? (page). This raises an important point, since there are no previous instances in the play of Nora expressing any wish to have a ‘serious conversation’. Instead, we see a ‘featherhead’ (page) who is happy to achieve her ends (regardless of her husband’s wishes) through whatever means become available, including deception.

There are many examples of this survival strategy of Nora’s, beginning with the first scene, when she “takes a bag of macaroons out of her pocket and eats one or two” (97), putting the bag in her pocket and wiping her mouth before her husband’s
entrance. Torvald asks her if she has been secretly eating Macaroons, but assures her that, “It’s all right, just my little joke (…) And anyway, you promised, didn’t you? (101). Helmer has asked Nora not to eat sweet things that are harmful for her teeth and she has chosen to ignore him in this, as in other matters. Helmer’s trust in her promise contrasts with the fact that her words, even at this early stage of the play, do not match her actions. The macaroons soon reappear in the presence of the family friend, Dr. Rank, and Nora’s high school friend, Mrs. Linde:

Nora: Dr. Rank, would you like a little macaroon? 
Dr Rank: Ah, macaroons, is it? I thought they were illegal in this house. 
Nora: Yes, but they were given me by Christine. 
Mrs Linde: Me? I … 
Nora: It’s all right, nothing to worry about. You weren’t to know Torvald had outlawed them. (114)

This apparently insignificant scene shows that the Heroine, after 8 years of marriage, has successfully evolved strategies for evading the wishes of her husband, though her false words would seem to be unnecessary in the current circumstance. A similar example of what might be called “learned deception” appears soon after, when Nora introduces her school friend to Helmer and misrepresents Christine’s actions:

Nora: And she’s come all this way to talk to you. 
Helmer: To me? I don’t understand. 
Mrs Linde: Well, that’s not really … […]
Nora: And when she heard that you’d been made bank manager, someone sent her a telegram about it, she travelled up here as soon as she could … (115)

It might be possible to overlook such white lies, but Ibsen gradually takes us deeper into Nora’s psyche and shows us that deception is a way of life for her. Thus, we learn about a deception that affected the whole family:

Helmer: Remember last Christmas? How you shut yourself up till long after midnight every evening for three whole weeks, making flowers for the Christmas tree and all sorts of other wonders you were going to amaze us with. […] (Smiling) Didn’t come to much though, did it, Nora? 
Nora: […] It wasn’t my fault the cat got in and ripped everything to pieces. (101/102)

The audience learns truth some pages later, when Nora is talking with Kristine:

Nora: I was very lucky last winter, I managed to get a whole lot of copying work. I locked myself up every evening and sat up writing long into the night. (110/111)

Nora’s justification for this deception was that she needed to repay the money she had borrowed for the trip to Italy. This borrowing however, provides even more examples of deception, culminating in her fraudulent writing of her father’s signature
as guarantor on the loan contract. One lie leads to another and Nora sinks deeper and deeper into moral poverty.

Continuing the exchange between Nora and Christine, we find that Nora intends to keep the truth about the money away from Helmer for as long as possible:

Mrs Linde: Won’t you ever tell him?
Nora: (Pensively, half smiling) Yes. Maybe one day I will. But not for years and years, […] not until he’s stopped enjoying it when I dance for him, or dress up and recite. Then it might be a good idea to have something up my sleeve. (110)

This is not the expression of a restricted, humiliated, helpless wife, but of a character who has successfully adapted to her environment through evolving strategies of manipulation: she is happy to do whatever makes Helmer happy, but when the mask falls, she wants to have bargaining chips that will help to cover up her continual deception.

Audience members and readers become acquainted with the more serious repercussions of Nora’s actions when she is confronted by Krogstad: “But you were cheating me, or did that never occur to you?” (123). We now learn that Nora’s strategy has led her to perform a criminal act, though she refuses to accept the seriousness of this. Once more, the end justifies the means. As the text continues from this crisis point, Helmer is given an opportunity to observe Nora telling a lie, and one wonders whether she has become a habitual liar:

Helmer: Has anyone been here?
Nora: Here? No.
Helmer: That’s funny. I saw Krogstad leaving the house.
Nora: Really? Yes, that’s right, Krogstad was here for a minute. (124)

Helmer then offers a telling moral commentary which is aimed at Krogstad, but strikes very ‘close to the bone’ for Nora:

Helmer: A man can always regain his moral stature, if he openly confesses his crime and takes his punishment.
Nora: Punishment …?
Helmer: But that wasn’t his method. He got out of it by trickery and deceit. And that’s what makes him a moral cripple.
Nora: Don’t you think …?
Helmer: Think of the way a man with a guilty conscience has to live: lies, hypocrisy, pretence, even those nearest to him, even his wife and children can never see behind his mask. […] lies can infect and contaminate the whole life of a home. […] Nearly all young criminals have had dishonest mothers.
Nora: Why do you say mothers? (126/127)

From this point, Nora begins to see that her actions have undreamed of implications and denial begins to set in: “Corrupt my children. Poison my home …
It’s not true. It could never be true” (127), “It’s going to happen. Catastrophe. It’s going to happen, after all. No. It mustn’t. It can’t” (143).

The play moves into Act 3, and Nora makes her famous declaration to Helmer, before taking her leave. Feminists and women’s rights activists have enthusiastically welcomed her final words, and academic commentators have concluded that she has finally discovered that her “happiness was based on a much more comprehensive masquerade than the one she herself had invented” (Hemmer 82). However, such interpretations all take Nora’s words at face value, despite the lack of any tangible evidence that she means to put her words into actions and despite the fact that most of her utterances up to this point have been ‘economical with the truth.’ This paper suggests that the survival strategies she has been using up to this point have now failed her and she is trying to adapt to her new situation by modifying those strategies; she stays in control by monopolizing the discourse and by uncompromisingly refusing to discuss matters with Helmer (despite her observation that they have never had any serious conversations) and then exiting from her untenable situation.

Hemmer makes the point that Nora can be seen as “a quite immature woman who suddenly wakes up and sees her marital situation, sees the ‘life–lie’ on which she has based her life” (82). However, Hemmer is referring to Nora’s situation rather than her way of dealing with it, and agrees with Nora’s decision to “go out into the real world to discover the truth about herself and her values” (82), on the assumption that abandoning the people who love her is a valid and practical way of achieving her new-found goals. However, one wonders why such actions are necessary or even desirable. When one looks at her ‘restrictions’, they are certainly not as extreme as those faced by Christine, or even by Krogstad, who was exiled and black-balled from society as a result of a ‘mistake’. Nora is not allowed to eat macaroons and is required to agree with her husband’s opinions. However, she has a maid to take care of her children, a cook to provide her meals and a housekeeper to take care of the house chores. In other words, she enjoys an extremely privileged position – one that most women would envy. If she is so keen on self-development, it could be an idea to begin with reading the books that she lightly dismisses (172), talking with her husband seriously about his work and management of the house (a post–feminist alternative), being a mother to her children and getting involved in society as a philanthropist. These options would be more likely to produce satisfactory results in terms of her basic evolutionary needs and her higher need for self-actualization.

THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE

The other main characters in A Doll’s House also show evidence of survival strategies. For Dr. Rank, the ‘Struggle for Existence’* has already failed, since laboratory tests show that he has syphilis of the spine, a genetic deformity resulting from his father’s interactions with his environment: “Oh, it’s a mere laughing matter, the whole thing. My poor innocent spine has to suffer for my father’s youthful

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* This is the title of chapter three of On the Origin of Species and is a fundamental concept in Darwin’s work. One of the chamberlains in The Wild Duck exclaims, “My Lord, it’s all in the struggle for existence”, showing Ibsen’s familiarity with Darwin’s ideas (Aarseth, 2005:3).
amusements” (page). Helmer’s position is not so desperate. He has opted for honesty and morality in order to achieve his basic needs and these have brought him the rewards for which he wished. They have also given him a sweet ‘skylark’ who is everything to him. Helmer is thus a ‘pillar of society’, in contrast to Krogstad, who has fallen foul of that society and is desperately trying to regain status and approval. He and Christine provide an interesting sub-plot, in which her actions (carried out in order to satisfy the evolutionary needs of survival, family and kinship) are seen to mirror those of Nora to some extent and are criticised by Christine’s former lover.

Krogstad: What was there to understand about it? It’s the oldest story in the world. An unscrupulous woman sending a man packing when something a bit more profitable comes along.

(...)

Mrs Linde: Is that what you really think?
Krogstad: If it isn’t true, why did you write me that letter?
Mrs Linde: I had no choice. If I had to break with you, I felt it was only right to destroy your feelings for me.

(...)

Krogstad: So that was it. And all that just … just for money.
Mrs Linde: You must remember I had a helpless mother and two young brothers to take care of. We couldn’t wait for you.
Krogstad: That’s as may be. You still had no right to reject me for someone else. (153/154)

It appears that Nora’s deception is not unique to her, and that even her reasonable, worldly-wise friend has engaged in autocratic deception, taking decisions for her partner without involving him in them, on the assumption that she knows what is best for them both. It is important to ask whether these methods are a result or a cause of the situation in which she found themself, though Christine experienced a reality far more severe than that of Nora: “I have no father to give me money for a journey, Nora” (page). Hers was the struggle to achieve the bottom two levels of Maslow’s pyramid (Physiological and Safety) and her evolution during the play (along with Krogstad’s) can be seen as a climbing of this pyramid, finally achieving the levels of Love/belonging, Esteem, and Self-actualization, where Nora’s path could be described as progressing in the opposite direction.

CONCLUSION

A post-modern or post-feminist reading of A Doll’s House suggests that the title could well be read with an emphasis different those espoused by Marxists, socialists, first- and second-wave feminists, or even anti-feminists. Instead of referring to a prison-like house in which Nora is forced to take on the role of an inert doll, manipulated and controlled by her husband, we might consider her situation and her life-style from a Darwinist perspective, seeing Nora as someone who has adopted the persona of a ‘featherhead’ as an effective strategy for existing comfortably and without responsibility in the society in which she finds herself. According to this reading, the title describes a micro-society in which Nora is able to manipulate her
fellow inhabitants to conform to her preferred lifestyle. It might even be claimed that Helmer is Nora’s doll, since he is subject to her every whim.

It is easy to excuse Nora’s actions by saying that she is restricted by her role as a woman in a patriarchal society and that she has never been given a chance to mature into a responsible adult, due to the overbearing protectionism of her father and then her husband. However, this paper suggests that such a view is over-simplistic. As with other women who have learned to thrive in a male-dominated society (cf. Mrs. Warren’s Profession), the play shows us that the heroine has successfully evolved strategies that provide her an extremely comfortable existence – one that promises to become even more comfortable with the advent of Torvald’s new position. Thanks to these strategies, Nora is able to spend a life untrammelled by the sort of realities to which her school friend, Mrs. Linde has been subjected.

The arrivals of Christine and Krogstad conspire to cause Nora’s strategies of control, deception and fantasy to break down, and she is threatened with accountability. At this point, Nora jettisons her now-ineffective strategies and moves into denial, condemning the law, the mores of society, and all the books that would show her actions to be illogical. Rather than accept the consequences of her actions (as Christine proposes), she chooses to blame her husband for not being able to perform a miracle, and walks out on him, ignoring his pleas for a chance to change and to adapt to her new wishes. There is no possibility of negotiation or discussion at this point: Nora must escape reality, accountability, and especially logical discussion, if she is to preserve her perception of herself (her ego).

Many commentators have taken Nora’s words as an act of faith and have believed that she has really changed her ways. However, if we look to her actions throughout A Doll’s House, rather than her words spoken in desperation when confronted with her life-lie, then we see only deception. The question must therefore be asked how her final words are to be given any credence. Has she really changed, or is she a spoilt girl whose lies have been exposed and who is reverting to a different strategy before making a swift exit? Whatever the truth of the matter, a post-feminist and evolutionary approach questions her actions in the final scene of the play and suggests that, from a contemporary point of view, she might have adopted the more effective survival strategy of negotiating a ‘new deal’ with Helmer, one based on respect, forgiveness, acceptance, mutual trust and openness. This would allow them both to satisfy the basic needs of survival, family, and kinship, and would also empower them to climb Maslow’s Needs Pyramid together, finally achieving the self-actualization that Nora claims she is looking for.

This paper suggests that Ibsen is probing deeper into the human psyche in A Doll’s House than many commentators have recognized and that he is showing what restrictions and hardships do to people’s minds, rather than simply describing the restrictions themselves. From this perspective, his play is “aimed at orienting the organism to its environment – an environment that is in the first place physical” (Carroll, “Organism, Environment, and Literary Representation” 33). From the Darwinist point of view, every character in the play is interacting with his/her environment and attempting to modify it, while at the same time contributing to it and adapting to it. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus pointed out some 2,500 years ago, “A man’s character is his fate” (81). Rather than blaming Nora’s father or Helmer and seeing Nora as a passive tool of circumstance, it is important to acknowledge that she has actively contributed to her surroundings and has been
complicit in framing her existence. In similar manner, Helmer has adapted to and contributed to his environment - one Nora almost destroys, leading him to exclaim “Yes, it is true! I am saved! Nora, I am saved!” (page) when he reads Krogstad’s second letter.

In conclusion, suggests that Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, reflects and articulates “the vital motives and interests of human beings as living organisms” (Carroll, “Organism, Environment, and Literary Representation” 33) and that in addition to its initial significance for feminist and women’s rights activism, the play continues to be relevant and meaningful to 21st century readers and audiences, for whom Darwinism is a familiar and valid construction of reality.

REFERENCES


