

ENGLISH ADVANCED: A DOLL'S HOUSE

How have dramatic techniques been used to convey memorable ideas in Ibsen's A Doll's House?

Dramatic techniques such as dialogue, setting and symbols are used to convey memorable ideas in Henrik Ibsen's 'A Doll's House'. These ideas include that of determinism as opposed to individualism as well as the entrapment of women in the bourgeois world of Ibsen's 19th century context. Regardless of the change of context, these ideas remain universal themes in society because they are associated with the human condition. Furthermore, Ibsen manipulates the dramatic techniques of the *Piece Bien Faite*, shifting emphasis onto contemporary social and moral questions, discomforting the audience to consider deeply the issues he raises in his play.

In 'A Doll's House', the problem is seen to be the social order itself for it stifles individual freedom. Ibsen uses naturalism and realism to scrutinize this social order and expose the world's hypocrisy and corruption rather than paint a gilded image of the world. One way Ibsen portrays this social order is through the comfort of the "Wendy house". Through the stage directions "A cabinet filled with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with expensively-bound books", Ibsen illustrates the bourgeois household in which the entire play is to be set. Ibsen has done this deliberately to signify the entrapment of the domestic household. Additionally, the associated comfort of the patriarchal relationship is demonstrated through Nora, the subservient wife to husband Helmer Torvald. Helmer is an emblem for determination, reinforcing his role as the protector and provider through referring to Nora as "Featherbrain" and "Songbird" while holding all the financial power in the relationship. However, through Nora's criminal offence of forging her father's signature, Ibsen subverts these gender roles. Here the "songbird" proves to be a life-provider who saves her husband from dying, Dr. Rank's sickroom and even from his own noisy children. Joan Templeton supports this idea in her article, stating "Buried in Nora are an intelligence, a courage, and a pride in accomplishment that make her doll-identity absurd and demeaning, that prove that her brain is not an organ of her sex."

If an individual such as Nora is marginalised by society, she cannot participate in it in the way society expects her to. Ibsen uses Nora as his ideology of humanity so women are awakened about their choices. As Nora's self-awareness grows, she finds herself caught in the conflict between freedom and entrapment. This involves the choice of remaining in her comfortable role as an unfulfilled doll wife or casting herself off the fetters of a socially predetermined role to find out who she is. In Act one Nora's dialogue with her friend Mrs Linde reveals unexpected aspects of her personality "But it was thrilling too, to be sitting there working... almost like a man." This unconscious revelation suggests that Nora has the desire to be independent and have equality as she describes the means by which she achieved money to Mrs. Linde, a representation of an individual who broke free from the fetters of determinism.

As the play progresses, Nora's developed self-awareness is more apparent. In Act two, when Helmer refuses to give Krogstad his job back because "we used first names. And that tactless oaf won't let it lie", Nora "can't believe you're [Helmer] so small minded". This illustrates Nora assuming her own voice within the relationship for the first time. Krogstad as a catalyst makes Nora aware of her inner conflict. Having threatened to reveal Nora's criminal offence of forging her father's signature, Nora is forced to question whether she should leave the comfort of her house in order to save her husband's reputation.

In the closing scenes of Act three Nora realizes that "We've been married eight years. And this is the first time we've sat down together, you and me, husband and wife, to talk seriously". It is in this scene that the level of tension in the play is at its highest, as Nora changes her clothing "No more fancy dress", symbolizing her readiness for reality and the harshness that accompanies it. This is also symbolized through the repeated stage direction of the black shawl, which represents Nora's

seal of departure and the tragic death of her marriage. In her conversation with Helmer, Nora also acknowledges the fact that “I lived here hand to mouth, like a beggar. I’ve existed to perform for you, Torvald... You and Daddy: you’ve blocked my life”. It is through the use of symbolism and dialogue that Ibsen has conveyed the memorable idea about the repercussions of determinism as opposed to individualism. Because Torvald and Nora’s father are products of determinism, Nora has never been encouraged to develop as an individual and she now sees the impact of this. Despite this she is willing to seek equality and independence, as is she “A human being, the same as you [Torvald]”. It is at this point in the play that the audience is aware Nora will break free from the stability of her bourgeois world to find her place as an individual in society. This is because, “The miracle didn’t happen. You weren’t the man I’d imagined”. Therefore, through Ibsen’s use of symbolism and relationships, the tension between freedom and entrapment is revealed. Additionally, Nora’s internal struggle is shown through the tarantella dance, a visual metaphor for Nora’s anxiety, also symbolic of her cathartic release from all the tension built up to this point of the play.

As a result of Nora’s point of realization, a power-shift occurs between herself and Torvald, where she assumes the power. This is evident in the closing scene where Helmer asks “can I write to you?” and Nora responds ‘icily’ “No. It’s forbidden”. Here, Nora has completely abandoned the stability of the doll house and is ready for change. Furthermore, this response is predicted by the audience through the threads of Nora’s self-actualization throughout the entire play. The purpose of the closing scene is to reinforce the shattered marriage of Torvald and Nora, giving the audience a loss of hope for Nora and Helmer’s relationship. The audience also loses hope for Helmer because he is a victim of his patriarchal society and doesn’t understand how to change. This is supported by David Thomas, who says while “Nora consciously acts the part of a doll wife, Torvald unthinkingly lives out his role as the authoritarian husband [which] explains why Nora achieves insight at the end of the play, while her husband remains bewildered and confused.” Furthermore, although the audience is unaware of the harshness which Nora is about to face when she leaves the household, there is a great sense of liberation once she leaves and the audience therefore does not lose hope for her. Her final goodbye in the play is dramatized through “A door slams”. The audience accepts Nora’s slamming of the door because they are aware of the fractures in her marriage and the need for personal discovery associated with them.

Overall, dramatic techniques such as dialogue, setting and symbols are used to convey memorable in Ibsen’s ‘A Doll’s House’. Through these techniques, Ibsen highlights the issues of determinism as opposed to individualism as well as freedom and entrapment. More importantly, Ibsen challenges the audience, forcing them to consider how precarious the social order is that has been established in the world, and how close society always is to disorder.