

Rethinking Language in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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1. Abstract

Henrik Ibsen is deemed as the father of modern drama, and one of the major Norwegian playwrights of the late 19th century. Among Ibsen's vast corpus of literary creations, *A Doll's House* is a highly acclaimed play which gave rise to controversy and criticism. *A Doll's House* is generally discussed through a feminist point of view as many believe the main concern of the play to be women's right or emancipation. However, this paper aims to explore the usage, function, and the impact of language in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by conducting a qualitative analysis.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, logocentrism, marginalized, phallogocentrism

2. Introduction and research problem/issue

The play *A Doll's House* focuses on Helmer family, who seems to be living a perfect, ideal life. The initial opening of the play depicts an ordinary day in their life as it begins with the preparations for Christmas Eve. However, as the play progresses, the audience witnesses the dark and gloomy aspect in the characters which later leads on to the climax. The climax of the play which entails the departure of Nora, not only from her husband and children but also from the comfortable life she had as Helmer's wife, largely resulted the controversy which surrounds this play. Henrik Ibsen, deemed as the father of modern drama, and one of the major Norwegian playwrights of the late 19th century, focuses on

“a new order of moral analysis”, which is acutely depicted through this play (Torkamaneh & Hooti, 2011). *A Doll's House* is generally discussed through a feminist point of view as many believe the main concern of the play to be women's right or emancipation. However, this paper aims to explore the usage, function, and the impact of language in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Literature Review

A Doll's House is one of the highly criticized literary works as many have attempted to analyse its thematic concerns, character portrayal and dramatic techniques. Further, many researches have attempted to decide whether *A Doll's House* is a feminist text. For instance, the paper

written by Rajpal Kaur on “Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* as a feminist play” clearly argues that the particular play is chiefly about Nora’s attempt in seeking individuality and autonomous selfhood (Kaur, 2016). Further, the paper on “The women’s right in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*” by Fatemeh Ghafourinia and Leila Baradaran Jamili substantiates my claim, as the paper analyses the play in a feminist perspective. It discusses the untrue system of marriage, stressing on individuality of women who fight for their freedom, protesting all restrictions in society (Ghafouriniam & Jamili, 2014). In this context, limited research has been conducted on the grounds of language; its function and impact in this play, which tempted me as a researcher to focus on this matter through my study.

Research problem

This paper intends to question the usage of language in the play *A Doll’s House* and identify its impact on the main characters. This is based on the contention that language is phallogocentric.

3. Research Methodology

The paper explores the function and impact of language in the play *A Doll’s House* by conducting a textual analysis. The selection of this particular text is based on personal preference and immense popularity gained by the play. Data is gathered by conducting a qualitative analysis, where the primal focus is on characterization and the usage of language by each main character.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on theorists such as Peter Kunsmann and Robin Lakoff, who discuss the relationship between gender and language. Further, excerpts from the text *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir are used in order to substantiate my argument.

I would also focus on the theorists such as Luce Irigaray, who critiques the Western phallogocentrism. The term phallogocentrism was created by Jacques Derrida by combining the two words, phallogocentrism and logocentrism. The definition of phallogocentrism is as follows.

“A word formed by combining phallogocentrism (literally, “centering on the phallus”), and logocentrism (that which is “word-centered”). “Logos” implies a rational, singular linguistic meaning or aim, logocentrism thus indicating the masculinist system of thought predicated on

such unitary meanings. In phallogocentrism, it is the phallus that is the logos at the center of Western metaphysical thought. (Wallace, 2009)”

Luce Irigaray, in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) describes how phallogocentrism paves the way for men to dominate the Western discourse (Felman, 2014). In Western Metaphysics, meaning is structured through binary opposites. In this system, the pole signifying ‘presence’/immediacy/speech is valorized and the pole signifying ‘lack’ is devalued. Therefore, the latter is subordinated to the pole signifying presence. The same notion of the subordination of ‘lack’, to the privileged presence, is applied to the Masculine/Feminine polarity. Due to the repressive subordination of the pole signifying lack to the privileged presence, the woman is not considered to be the immediate opposite of the man; instead she is the devalued/inferior Other.

“Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being.....She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (Beauvoir, 1956).

Thus, she is not regarded as an autonomous, unique entity compared with men. This grants men the power to dominate fields such as the legal, the social, discourse, language and Philosophy. This perception excludes women from the domains that require logical thinking, intelligence and being in the pole that signifies ‘lack’, she is associated with devalued attributes such as sentiments, irrationality, insanity, and illogicality. She is thus the devalued, inferior Other who is constantly dominated and ‘spoken for’ by men.

Results and findings

When analyzing the play *A Doll’s House*, the readers’ attention is instantly drawn towards the language which is used by Ibsen. Amongst all thematic concerns that could be studied by students in terms of this play, language is a prominent aspect to be studied. From the very opening, it is possible to identify a male oriented language strain that is used by the playwright. For instance, the opening scene in Act one is a clear example of phallogocentric language.

“HELMER. [In his room.] Is that my lark twittering there?
NORA. [Busy opening some of her parcels.] Yes, it is.

HELMER. Is it the squirrel frisking around?

NORA. Yes!

HELMER When did the squirrel get home?

NORA. Just this minute. [Hides the bag of macaroons in her pocket and wipes her mouth.] Come here, Torvald, and see what I've been buying" (Ibsen, Henrik; William Archer (Ed.), 1941).

This is a clear example of how Helmer dominates Nora and household through his language. From the opening of the play it is evident that he addresses Nora by using words such as squirrel, bird, lark etc. These words are dehumanizing as they deprive Nora of her identity and selfhood.

"HELMER. Nora, Nora! What a woman you are! But seriously, Nora, you know my principles on these points. No debts! No borrowing! Home life ceases to be free and beautiful as soon as it is founded on borrowing and debt. We two have held out bravely till now, and we are not going to give in at the last.

NORA. [Going to the fireplace.] Very well- as you please, Torvald.

HELMER. [Following her.] Come come; my little lark mustn't droop her wings like that. What? Is my squirrel in the sulks? [Takes out his purse.] Nora, what do you think I have here?

NORA. [Turning round quickly.] Money!

HELMER. There! [Gives her some notes.] Of course I know all sorts of things are wanted at Christmas.

NORA. [Counting.] Ten, twenty, thirty, forty. Oh, thank you, thank you, Torvald! This will go a long way.

HELMER. I should hope so" (Ibsen, Henrik; William Archer (Ed.), 1941).

Similar to the earlier instance, Helmer constantly uses words such as principles and morals in his speech. By using such words he reminds and reaffirms his character as being morally upright. This undermines Nora's character as it projects her in a negative light.

Further, by referring to her as a lark, Helmer attempts to internalize the fact that Nora is in a lower standards than a human being. By listening to such references constantly, she nuterlizes and internalizes that fact that she is deprived of basic human rights. This hinders her selfhood and personality as it makes her unable to function as a unique entity in a house which is governed by phallocentrism.

Conclusions, implications and significance

Based on the findings it is concluded that the language used in the play *A Doll's House* is a conscious effort on the part of the play wright, as it enables him to portray stereotypical gender norms in the society. The impact of language use on the main characters is significant as the language they use helps to mould the nature of the characters.

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