Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – *A Doll's House*

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways *A Doll's House* can be considered in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning by giving you an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of this genre. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

Central to Ibsen's play are ideas to do with power and powerlessness. The play, premiered in 1879, is set in the domestic sphere but it also reflects the oppressive rules and expectations of the broader Norwegian and western society. Ibsen's target in terms of political and social protest writing is marriage, financial institutions and the role of women. Most obviously the play explores the repression of women in a society that expects them to be caring daughters, wives and mothers but which gives them little opportunity to take control of their own lives. Ibsen said he wrote the play because 'a woman cannot be herself in modern society'. The play is clearly a feminist text.

The character of Krogstad demonstrates how society's expectations, and the emphasis that is placed on reputation, can also repress people and make them powerless to change their lives. The powerful are represented in the play by the figure of Torvald who not only controls and manipulates his wife but also has authority over Krogstad. By the end of the play Nora asserts her independent thoughts and makes a stand against the oppressive, superficial nature of her marriage. Her exit from the house at the end of the play where she leaves her husband, children and the doll's house itself, still has the power to shock audiences and can excite both admiration and condemnation. The play's resolution is likely to produce lively debates in the classroom.

Power and powerlessness

As a husband who dictates what happens in his own home, even to the extent of controlling what his wife will wear and how she will dance the tarantella, and as a banker who has the power to both hire and fire staff, Torvald represents an authoritative masculine middle class power in the play. He reflects society's belief that those who work in financial and legal institutions are important and that men are masters in their homes and that their wives are under their care

and protection. He is also rigid in his belief that women are subservient to men and should obey them. Torvald's power is bound up with his strict and uncompromising moral values, or more significantly his views on respectability. For this reason, at the end of the play he says he cannot accept or forget Nora's secret past action of forging her father's signature – even though it was to procure money for Torvald's health. After he realises his own reputation will not be harmed by her action, he wields the power of forgiveness on her: "There is something indescribably wonderful and satisfying for a husband in knowing that he has forgiven his wife." However, by the end of the play Torvald's power diminishes as Nora finds her voice and looks forward to independence; for all his power, he is unable to stop Nora leaving him.

Krogstad has a kind of power within the play as he blackmails Nora, and in some respects has the power of the stock villain. However, his position is complex and like her he himself is oppressed and trapped by society's rules and expectations. He too committed forgery, though unlike Nora his crime did not have a "brave" motive and it was discovered. As a result he is defined by his transgression, condemned as a criminal and cannot shake off the yoke. In many ways he is Torvald's antagonist; he despises Torvald but paradoxically craves the respectability Torvald commands – largely because he wants to secure the future of his children. He tells Nora "My sons are growing up; for their sake, I must try to regain what respectability I can." It is his love for his children and growing acceptance of Mrs Linde's love for him that motivates him finally to feel some compassion for Nora. Thus he returns the bond to Torvald thereby confirming that the truth will forever be concealed. In the end, he emerges as a far more humane and charitable character than Torvald Helmer.

Nora is trapped in a society that is run by men who expect her, and other women, to perform an expected role in a clearly defined way. Women are restricted in what they can do and how they should think. Many doors are closed to them. Of particular note in this play is the fact that women cannot take out loans in their own names. As a married woman there are other obligations on Nora; she must behave as Torvald requires. In the dramatic present of the drama, she seems to be the plaything of her husband, petted, dressed and pampered by him, as if she is his doll. It is important to note, though, that Torvald is not a cruel man and he does seem to love Nora. At no point does he say that he does not care for her and he is generous. Such is the complexity of the doomed hero Ibsen creates. Yet, Torvald is possessive (Nora tells Mrs Linde he wants "to have me all to himself") and he does not respect her ideas or encourage the development of her intellect. In no way is their marriage any sort of real partnership; neither is it a grown up relationship. Indeed at the end of the play she declares that in eight years she and Torvald have never spoken of anything important.

Although the play often seems to be about the change of Nora from a position of weakness to one of strength, even when she is weak, her position in the narrative present is undercut with irony. There is much more to her than first appears. As the backstory emerges, the audience learns that in the past she has

acted independently and with some determination; she has secretly made decisions and been proactive in financially supporting their marriage and the health of her husband by taking out a loan to fund his recuperation in Italy. The irony is sharpened by Torvald's recovery which was only possible because of her fraudulent actions and his ignorance of the risk she has taken for him. He is ignorant too of her working for eight years to pay off her debt and of her now being blackmailed by her lender. Although what Nora has done is deceitful and illegal, it does show strength of character and a determination that is at odds with her husband's treating her like a child, calling her his skylark and his squirrel.

What Ibsen dramatises in the play is the collision between Nora's past actions, the pressure of her blackmailer and Torvald's growing awareness of what she has done. When Torvald discovers her deceit she suffers both his condemnation and his judgment that she will no longer be permitted to have contact with her children. When Nora realises that Torvald's concern for appearances and reputation far outweighs all else, she can finally see her marriage for what it is.

Other women in the play are also victims of society's expectations of what is acceptable and desirable for their gender. Although Mrs Linde seems, on one level, to be a representation of a 'new' independent woman, someone who has strength of mind and one whom Torvald has no hesitation about employing in his bank, she is not a happy woman. She is childless and bitter. In Mrs Linde's backstory, the audience learns that, as she herself was economically powerless she had to relinquish her true love, Krogstad, to marry a man who could provide for her family. But the financial security he offered did not last, his 'business was shaky' and after he died, it collapsed altogether: "there was nothing left". She then sacrificed years of her life, in bitter toil, caring for her bedridden mother. Although she is about the same age as Nora, she is physically weakened by the life she has led, and she admits that this life has hardened her: "no one to work for; it makes one so bitter." For Ibsen, happiness and reward only come through love and her being reunited with Krogstad at the end of the play is a neat counterpoint to Nora's striking out for independence.

Nora's nanny has also suffered at the hands of society. Having had an illegitimate baby and been abandoned by its father, she had no option than to leave her child to take up paid employment as she was "a poor girl what's got into trouble."

In a society where status is determined by money, gender and reputation, many of the characters in the play are victims of repressive attitudes.

The power of respectability

The world of *A Doll's House* is comfortable and middle class. In this world those who have the most power are those who are most respectable. Torvald sets great store on respectability. In his two professions of lawyer and banker there are clear rules of conduct and he will not involve himself in anything that is not "absolutely respectable". Torvald equates respectability with integrity and

morality. For this reason he thinks he has the right and power to cast judgment on Krogstad. When Torvald thinks that Nora has ruined his reputation he has a plan to keep the children away from her to save them from being tainted and he wants to preserve the appearance of his marriage for the sake of respectability.

However, respectability in the play is shown to be a façade. Although Torvald sneers at Nora's father, he was happy to accept the money that he believed had been left to Nora in her father's will. And when he finds out the truth of Nora's deception his chief objective is in how he can cover it up to save himself. His relief when he reads Krogstad's note which says he won't expose Nora, is to think of himself: "I am saved!", he says, as if this is all that is important. In the eyes of society, of course, it is important and Torvald's reaction perpetuates the myth.

The power of money and the significance of a piece of paper

Money is power in the world of this play. It is the central means by which the powerful exert control. The characters' lack of money, their need for money, and their desire to get money motivate much of the play's action.

Krogstad's power comes from the two hundred and fifty pounds he loaned to Nora and it gives him the power to blackmail her: "If I get thrown into the gutter for a second time, I shall take you with me."

But the money that Nora borrows has greater significance; it also had the power to save Torvald's life. As Nora tells Mrs Linde, Torvald would never have recovered from his breakdown if she hadn't obtained the money to finance the trip to Italy. Since the family did not have the money themselves and since Torvald would have found borrowing humiliating, Nora took the initiative, found a loan shark and forged her father's signature. This act, to save her husband's life also makes her a criminal.

However, it could also be argued that in committing her criminal act, Nora signed her passport into the masculine world of finance and power. In her conversation with Mrs Linde, Nora expresses some pride in what she achieved: "Ah, but when a wife who has a little business sense, and knows how to be clever–" In a sense this act empowers her and gives her something to build on when she makes her final decision to leave.

Rebellion

The main act of rebellion against oppression and control is clearly Nora's dramatic exit at the end of the play. It was so shocking when the play was written that an alternative ending was also produced, in which Nora is shown her sleeping children and finds it impossible to leave them. Her declaration that her first duty is to herself, not to her husband and children, is an absolute rejection of what society expects of her. A contemporary commentator at the time wrote of the ending that when Nora leaves 'that slammed door reverberated across the roof of the world'.

Earlier in the play, however, there are other rebellions from Nora that suggest she is a stronger character than the simpering, silly woman she can at first seem. She defies her husband by eating macaroons, even though he has said she shouldn't, and, of course, she had the strength of character to get the loan and then to work in secret to pay it off.

But it is at the end of the play that Nora finds a powerful rebellious voice. After Krogstad returns the bond and Torvald tears it up, suggesting that life can continue as normal, Nora defiantly analyses for her husband what she feels her life and marriage has been. She believes that she has done nothing other than perform tricks for both her father and Torvald: "You and papa have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that I have done nothing with my life." She refuses Torvald's offer of education saying that she wants to educate herself. She also stands strong when Torvald throws at her her duty to her husband and children and her position in the respectable world; she simply says she only knows what is necessary for her. Perhaps her most daring act of defiance though is her stand against religion and morality with which Torvald threatens her to try to coerce her into submission. She says she does not know what religion is and that the moral law that says she has no right to spare her dying father or save her husband's life must be wrong. Her final defiance, as she leaves the family home, is to call her husband a "stranger" thereby breaking asunder the marriage bond on which nineteenth century society was so firmly rooted.

Setting

The action of the play takes place in the living room of the Torvald's household and in this respect it satisfies the demands of nineteenth century naturalistic drama. This small domestic setting, in which all three acts take place, helps to create the feelings of oppression and repression that run through the play. Ibsen clearly describes the setting in the stage directions at the start; the presentation of a comfortable middle class home is important to the story. However, although the action is all in one room, society's pressures and expectations, particularly with regard to reputation, press in on the world of the drama from outside and are brought into the home through letters and through the characters who visit.

The title of the play is worth considering here, also, implying, as it does, so many things about the Helmers and their marriage. The indefinite article 'a' suggests their situation is representative of many.

Social commentary

Clearly the play has much to say about late 19th century Western European society, especially for what we might term the middle class. It reflects Ibsen's concerns about women's rights in particular, but also about human rights in general. It is a powerful exploration of how 'free' people can be oppressed by social expectations and what sacrifices might need to be made to truly break free, if such freedom is possible. Indeed this is one of the major questions that the play raises: is freedom ever achievable in civilised society?

Some critics have seen this as a play exposing the oppression of women; others feel that the play is about every person discovering who they really want to be. When Nora says “I believe that I am first and foremost a human being” her comments resonate with everyone.