

ENGL1102

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“False Façades in *A Doll House*”

When a young girl plays with her doll house, she imagines a make-believe world full of enchantment. However, little does she realize the false and unattainable image of perfection that lies before her. With every miniature doorway and elaborate bookcase, the doll house disguises reality with a mask of flawless excellence. Similarly, Henrik Ibsen describes many appearances in *A Doll House* as mere façades of deception. These images reiterate the theme that outer appearances are never what they seem. Through his dealing with Nora’s societal role and his use of symbolism, Ibsen effectively contrasts the themes of appearance and reality and suggests that all façades will eventually be revealed.

In society’s view, the marriage between Nora and Torvald is a wonderful relationship. Torvald supports the family through his job at the bank while Nora is the caretaker for the children. However, they have no real communication between them. Torvald commonly refers to Nora as his “little lark” or “squirrel” (1010, 1012). He never treats Nora as an equal marital partner, much less an individual. In the end, the marriage has to end because of its lack of real communication. Thus, a source of deception in the play stems from the fact that the actual marriage between Nora and Torvald is not a healthy relationship, as in society’s view. Furthermore, when Nora decides to go against her husband’s will to borrow the money for the loan, she forsakes her matrimonial bond, yet gains personal independence. Nora considers the loan “something to be proud and happy for” (1017). Yet, in essence, she is pleased with her ability to lie to her husband. Through this circumstance, Ibsen successfully reveals that a relationship built on dishonesty cannot remain. In the end, the marital façade is revealed through Nora’s inability to remain in a relationship that, in her point of view, is not “a true marriage” (1061).

Another form of deception in the play is Nora’s oscillating role between a homemaker and an individual. For Nora’s entire life, society has forced her to succumb to its expectations of a woman’s role as a devoted mother, rather than to her personal desires. However, in raising the children, she continues to reinforce these societal traditions. For example, Nora plays a game of hide-and-seek with her children. Although this amusement may seem infantile, the game itself is based on deception with its emphasis on concealment. Symbolically, Nora continues to hide behind the female persona of a mother. In the game, Nora replies, “Yes, let me hide first” (1023). As a mother, Nora sets the standards for her children. Thus, in essence, she is telling her children that it is acceptable to hide your true, individual desires. She therefore continues the repressive chain through the symbolic game of hide and seek, as she calls her children her “little, lovely doll babies” and encourages them in this entertainment (1023).

However, Nora soon learns of Krogstad’s discovery of her forgery. She then recognizes that she cannot continue to conceal her past with a clear conscience. As a result, she never plays hide-and-seek with the children again, and, as a result, symbolically recognizes the fact that she “*can’t* be together with them as much as [she] was” (1031, *original*). She thus realizes that she must never visit with the children again

in order to break the societal tradition of individualistic repression. In the end, the motherly façade is revealed through Nora's inability to pretend to care for the children. As a result, she departs from the household, leaving the children "in better hands than [her] own" (1060).

Throughout the play, Ibsen employs recurring symbols to emphasize the role of deception in *A Doll House*. The Christmas tree is a dominant figure of disguise that parallels Nora's characterization in the play. In effect, the tree is a holiday decoration meant to add festive colors and beauty to the home. In the play, the tree parallels Nora's role as a trophy wife for Torvald as he insists on her continual appearance as "[a] dream of loveliness" (1049). However, Ibsen soon reveals that images of perfection cannot endure. As Nora slowly recognizes Torvald's impending discovery of the loan, the Christmas tree is described in the stage directions as "stripped of ornament, [with] burned-down candle stubs on its ragged branches" (1030). Along with this description, Nora also strips herself of her prior views and begins to understand her primary obligation to herself.

Another source of deceitfulness originates from the concealment of the Christmas tree. When the tree is first brought to the house, Nora insists on hiding it so that her children will not "get a glimpse of it till [. . .] evening, after it's trimmed" (1010). Similarly, Nora insists on concealing her Tarantella outfit until the night of the party. She tells Torvald, "No one can admire me in my splendor—not til tomorrow" (1043). Throughout the play, Torvald treats Nora like a plaything, a toy with which to entertain himself. Nora's dancing of the Tarantella is the last time that she allows Torvald to treat her as his dancing doll, his "lovely little Capri girl" (1049). In the Tarantella costume, she is a possession of Torvald. Nora is only able to finally leave him after she changes into her regular clothes after the party. In essence, the Tarantella outfit represents her status as Torvald's little doll and repressively masks her true desires for individualism. She thus deceives Torvald by adorning herself with the Tarantella costume.

Furthermore, an additional source of deception in the play stems from the meaning of the Tarantella itself. The Tarantella is a customary ritual that is thought to purify the dancer of the poisonous bite of a tarantula. By dancing the Tarantella, Nora expresses her desire to cleanse herself of the repressive relationship with Torvald. As she "dances more and more wildly," she symbolically expresses her independence (1044). However, the deception of the Tarantella comes from the fact that Torvald sees the Tarantella as a dance for his own pleasure. Although Nora has danced the Tarantella on previous occasions for Torvald, this Tarantella is very different. She does not follow his directions for the dance as he shouts at her to "[slow] down" (1044). Instead, she dances violently as "her hair loosens and falls over her shoulders" as she attempts to rid herself of Torvald's grasp on her life (1044). Thus, Torvald and Nora view the Tarantella very differently. However, Torvald soon discovers the false façade of the Tarantella as Nora expresses her desire for individualism by leaving the marriage.

Through his dealings with Nora's role in society and his use of symbolism, Ibsen emphasizes in *A Doll House* that appearances are often deceiving. As Nora struggles with the façades in her life, she comes to the realization that she must leave her role as a housewife in order to gain "absolute freedom" (1060). Thus, Ibsen effectively portrays appearances as false because of Nora's inability to remain in a relationship that represses her individualism. Through his ability to successfully expose deceiving façades, Ibsen

creatively provides insight into the unattainable images of society in his masterpiece, *A Doll House*.

Works Cited

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll House*. Trans. Rolf Fjelde. *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. 2nd ed. Ed. John Schilb and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford, 2003. 1006-61.