

## Contradictions of Capital and Care in Ibsen's A Doll's House

Winner, Early Undergraduate Humanities

Author: Claire Standing

An economically balanced capitalist society has never been achieved without exacerbating inequality, and the burden of that imbalance has been largely displaced onto women. This increased weight has placed women in an impossible position simply because they cannot play all of the roles that they are expected to play with the adequacy these roles require. Arguably, the heaviest weight of all is the work of social reproduction, which Nancy Fraser defines as anything from the “birthing and raising of children [to] maintaining social connections more generally” (99). In *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, the main character, Nora Helmer, is burdened so heavily by the work of social reproduction that she faces a conflict: one that will force her to make a decision regarding the quest for the possibility of becoming an autonomous individual. The structure of the society in which this play is set is considered a capitalist patriarchy: a society that reinforces the relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring. This essay will argue that Ibsen's *A Doll's House* represents the impossible position of women under capitalist patriarchy, where the invisible work of social reproduction is obscured as an aspect of the naturalization of women's work. In the figure of Nora, I will argue, we see the impossible contradictions of capital and care—of economic production and social reproduction—as one person tries to play a multiplicity of conflicting roles: mother, wife, daughter, friend and, most complex of all, individual.

The quest for individuality, seeking one's uniqueness as opposed to merely fulfilling a role, is one that arguably every human attempts to embark on. In *A Doll's House*, we see this quest specifically embodied by the character Nora Helmer. However, in her case, it is particularly difficult to attempt such pursuits due to the invariable reality that she is biologically a woman. The image of a woman in a patriarchal society has been reduced to the concept that they exist to serve “no more than a function” (Irigaray, “Women-mothers” 50). In other words, the sole purpose of a woman's existence is that of procreation. Women in a capitalist patriarchy have little ability to create an individual identity. This lack of potentiality reduces the identity of women to the “masquerade of femininity,” defined by Joan Riviere as “the mask that women wear in order to be better accepted in a social world codified by men.” The masquerade may be observed on an everyday basis as taking many different forms: mother, wife, daughter, friend. Women participate in masquerade in order to attempt to recuperate some of their own authentic desire whilst still functioning primarily to participate in men's desire. The position that men have progressively oppressed women into leaves them with no choice but to “be trapped in the role of she who satisfies need but has no [or little] access to desire” herself (Irigaray, “Women-mothers” 51).

The problem concerning the masquerade encompasses the matters of not only femininity, but also of internalization. In the play, internalization is represented by Mrs. Linde. Attempting to fulfill the duties associated with being a social reproducer leads Mrs. Linde to a crisis of loneliness or emptiness when those requirements are gone. The absence of the requirements associated with socially reproducing creates a void that she then attempts to fill through the solution of marrying a man she does not love. This provides evidence to suggest that Mrs. Linde opts for another round of masquerade, allowing herself to be once again oppressed by a man, in the hopes of attaining some pleasure from the joys associated with being a good wife, and a good mother. She states that she “need[s] to have someone to care for” (Ibsen, 235), suggesting that she does not know any purpose in life other than that of a caregiver. Furthermore, this suggests that her individual identity has been lost to the sovereignty of men. Mrs. Linde describes how she feels “only unspeakably empty. Nothing to live for now” (192).

Mrs. Linde has accepted the masquerade of femininity, wrongfully correlated by capitalist patriarchies as being the natural state of a woman to be in. This unfortunate relationship, I argue, is derived from the historical tendency to entrench the idea of an “androcentric hierarchy” (Fraser, 111). This institutionalization of heteronormativity has obscured and normalized ‘social reproduction’ to be the natural work of women. This, in turn, places women in a contradiction of capital and care. The paradoxical aspect of this position is rooted in the reality that the structure of financialized capitalism relies on the work of social reproduction. However, the society depicted in *A Doll’s House* systematically undermines the ability of social reproduction to support capitalism by denying it resources, such as time, money, and respect. Due to the lack of remuneration for the work of social reproduction, women who engage in it have been determined as constitutionally subsidiary to those who earn coined wages, therefore ignoring the fact that their work provides a necessary precondition for wage labor. The entire notion of social reproduction, as being obscured as an aspect of the naturalization of women’s work, has also been integrated into being part of the masquerade of femininity.

In these societies, a similar dynamic exists between men and women. The power that a capitalist patriarchy endows to men, at the expense of women, allows men to believe that they have achieved their quest of masculine autonomy. Masculinity itself is structured on its inability to acknowledge its dependency to women. As a result, the undisclosed and fatal reality of this system is the truth that women are the substratum to the success of the capitalist patriarchy. The greatest issue that we face as a gender divided society is that a man’s idea of what it means to be autonomous is pretending that they do not owe anything to anyone, i.e, a woman or a woman’s body. This very concept is the basis for why society has allowed the idea of individual autonomy to persevere. In reality, men are perpetually indebted to women for the indemnified work of social reproduction; the individual autonomy that men assume under a capitalist patriarchy is markedly impossible, but its illusion persists because the work of social reproduction is ignored.

Much like Mrs. Linde, Nora has sacrificed her own desire and tailored her opinions to fulfill every wish of the men in her life. These men include, but are not restricted to, her father as well as her husband. Ibsen illustrates this concept through the idea of Nora being equated to a doll: "I've been your doll-wife here, just as I was Papa's doll child" (Ibsen, 248). This indicates that Nora has felt like a plaything for the enjoyment of her father, and subsequently, the pleasure of her husband. This comparison of women to a doll puts them into the position of being a body-object; one that does not contravene, assert, or move; one that is ultimately subservient to the "man-father in private ownership" (Irigaray, "Women-mothers" 50). Furthermore, through her husband Torvald's eyes, Nora is an object represented in the forms of a doll and an animal. This can be seen in the play when he refers to her as his "little lark" and "my squirrel" (Ibsen, 185). This conviction to an animal identity can be seen as an attempt to "underscore her inability to understand the ethical issues faced by human beings" (Templeton, 29). This is just another example of how a capitalist patriarchy has undermined the worth of women while simultaneously functioning as a result of their existence.

At the beginning of the play, Nora is fulfilling the duties of an active social reproducer whilst being part of nothing but a family, and she, similar to Mrs. Linde, feels nothing but emotions of emptiness and loneliness. Eventually, however, the confines of her marriage with Torvald push Nora to assert her dissatisfaction of her life through yelling at him, "You're to blame that nothings become of me!" (Ibsen, 248). Nora is about the quest for the possible outside, a life beyond masquerade. She is trying to refuse the notion that there is no outside, refuse the idea that women "submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain 'on the market' in spite of everything. But... [they] are there as objects of sexual enjoyment" (Irigaray, *This sex* 102). Nora doesn't want to be an object. She wants to try and become a subject, an authentic self. The diverging fate of Nora and Mrs. Linde represents different attempts at a solution to a problem that is similar – "the nothing problem," the inevitable emptiness that male-female relationships produce in these systems. By failing to resolve their respective issues they continue to be inextricably fundamental to the system of patriarchal capitalism.

Nora has spent her adult life "by doing tricks" (Ibsen, 248) for Torvald as an attempt to fulfill the multiplicity of her expected roles. As part of Nora's rejection regarding the absence of an existence outside the confines of a capitalist patriarchy, she concurrently asserts the necessity for her individuality. Nora has consistently lived attempting to play the roles decided for her by the dominating presence of men in her life. The moment of rejection is evident in the play when Nora insists to Torvald that her most sacred duty is to herself, by stating "that before all else I'm a human being, no less than you – or anyway, I ought to try to become one" (249). In the context of a capitalist patriarchy, women are so engulfed by the roles of the mother, wife, and daughter that they are not presented with the opportunity to individualize. Nora realizes that the only way she has an opportunity to try to discover herself outside the dimensions of her current life is if she stands alone, apart from the authority of her

husband. In the conclusion of the play, Ibsen composes the disappearance of Nora with no conclusion, and this is because the question of what results of Nora in a life beyond masquerade becomes so complicated that there is no fathomable answer.

The frustration the reader experiences due to the complexity and lack of definitive conclusion at the end of Ibsen's play may be eased through the analysis of Michael Foucault's theory of the individual as an effect of power. There is a terrifying feeling of emptiness that every woman in *A Doll's House* seems to experience. Moreover, there is a disturbing actuality within this play pertaining to the lack of individuality that both Nora and Torvald encounter. I argue, the origin of this issue may be found in the reality that Nora and Torvald are bound within a sovereign-subject relationship, a relationship constituting the complete and utter authority of Torvald over Nora. One may ask why individuality is not merely granted, and furthermore, why it is so painfully uncertain if Nora will succeed in her quest for individualization. Foucault states that "the relationship of sovereignty always bears the mark of a founding precedence" (43). In the case of Nora, who fulfills the role of subject to her sovereign power Torvald, the precedence is her act of submission to him as his wife, which, as a result, grants Nora protection and aid. The sovereign-subject relationship requires re-actualizing in order to be successful. The failure of Torvald to do so ultimately constitutes the deterioration of their relationship. On the outside of the relationship itself, and the concept of re-actualizing, there is always an underlying violence, or threat of such in order to sustain the division that supports the bond. The issue regarding the sovereign's quest for individuality is explained by Foucault, who stated that "the sovereign's individuality is entailed by the non-individualization of the elements on which the relationship of sovereignty is applied" (45). This quote gives us insight into the idea that Torvald's source of individuality is defined by his suppression and annihilation of Nora's. This idea can be supported through the last scene of the play when Torvald experiences the disappearance of his wife Nora, and more importantly, the destruction of the sovereign power he had once asserted: without her, he is lost. In the case of Nora, her quest for individuality could not begin until she broke the bond of the sovereign power burdening her life. In both cases, the idea of what it means to be an individual is, in practice, nearly impossible to achieve. This is due to the contradicting relationship that the sovereign-subject relationship constitutes. Individualization is eliminated the moment it appears due to the self-destructing system it was based upon.

In conclusion, Ibsen uses Nora in *A Doll's House* to embody the impossible contradictions of capital and care as a woman under a capitalist patriarchy, while simultaneously attempting to play a multiplicity of roles. The pressure of such responsibilities has in turn forced women to confine their identity to the masquerade of femininity, a phenomenon created through the oppression of women by the dominant male figures whom encompass their reality. Nora's lack of definitive identity is seen as a recurring theme throughout the play. Although Foucault has given some insight as to why the characters in *A Doll's House* feel such intense emptiness, the question regarding the possibility of individualization is still left unanswered. The precondition of the success of patriarchal capitalism is the suppression and

domination of women through the devaluation of social reproduction. Ibsen's motivation for the disappearance of Nora at the end of the play is because Nora can only embody the problem, and not the answer. This is because the answer is the fundamental collapse of the capitalist patriarchy, which is utterly incomprehensible due to its widespread domination and enormous impact on humanity's written history.

#### Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. "Disciplinary Power." Brightspace, 2004. Accessed 4 Apr. 2017.

Fraser, N. "Contradictions of Capital and Care." *New Left Review*, vol. 100, 2016, pp. 99-117.

Ibsen, H. "A Doll's House." *Plays*, edited by J. Kelly, W.W. Norton & Company, 1979, pp. 181-215.

Irigaray, L. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

Irigaray, L. "Women-mothers, the silent substratum of the social order." *The Irigaray Reader*, edited by Margaret Whitford, Blackwell, 1991, pp. 47-52.

Riviere, J. "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *Female Experience: Three Generations of British Women Psychoanalysts on Work with Women*, Routledge, 1997, pp. 228-235.

Templeton, J. "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen." *PMLA*, vol. 104, no. 1, 1989, pp. 28-40.