Breaking Out of the Doll House

Although women have long since won the right to vote, the female gender remains largely oppressed and weighed down with expectations pertaining to their gender. Stereotypes are still present to this day in both men and women. Women are particularly targeted because they no longer want to live under the weight of household and family responsibilities and while legally women have the same rights as men, socially that is not the case.

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In [Henrik Ibsen](http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11130435.0)’s play [A Doll House](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2542/2542-h/2542-h.htm), the idea of a woman taking control of her own life is brought to light. Nora Helmer, the ideal, submissive wife – the face of “womanly helplessness” (Ibsen, 1147) – ultimately chooses her own destiny and walks away from the life she has known.  
  
Torvald is not the average husband; the entire population of men does not see their wives as possessions, but *A Doll House* allows the topic of gender inequality to surface. There are expectations for both genders and they are portrayed to the extreme in this play. The husband is expected to provide for his family and show proof of his wealth in his possessions – including a ‘trophy wife.’ The wife is responsible for the children and appearing as a doting wife who would be nothing without her powerful husband.  
  
Torvald does not show his loving and adoring wife any respect and refers to her as a “child” (Ibsen, ) – not his equal – often. Nora is just another possession for Torvald to add to his household of things – as described in the stage directions in the opening of the play (Ibsen, 1092). His wife is someone he can dress up how he likes and show off to his peers, not someone he truly respects as an individual.  
  
Torvald is under the impression that appearing to be high-class will give the illusion of power, which is why they live in a ‘doll house’. Their home is "tastefully" (Ibsen, 1092) decorated and they own many possessions. Everything appeared perfect to the outside world and when Nora’s scandal was at risk of becoming public, Torvald snapped. She had done something behind his back and put her own husband at risk of having his name tainted.  
  
Torvald stated directly to his wife that she should be a "wife and a mother before you are anything else” (Ibsen, 1151).

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held the frame of mind that a woman's responsibilities were limited to the household and would never extend to their own personal goals or interests. This scene in Act 3 is the strongest turning point for Nora because she has come to terms with the fact that her husband would not set aside his obsession with power and status to make a sacrifice for his wife.   
  
After recognizing that her own husband would never make “the wonderful” (Ibsen, 1152) happen, Nora makes the decision to put herself first. This could be seen as a selfish act because she chooses to leave behind her children, but it is clear that it is what she needed to do in order to become a stronger person. She had dedicated so much of her life to pleasing her husband, that she entirely ignored her own needs. In Nora’s decision, Ibsen is discussing the idea of making sacrifices in order to become the best you can be. There is obviously more to Nora than her trophy wife lifestyle implied, and we know that because otherwise she would not have made the choice to leave her cushy lifestyle.  
  
Before walking out of her husband’s life, Nora makes the statement **“I believe I am first of all a human being, just as much as you”** (Ibsen, 1151). This is perhaps the most powerful line in the entire play. As proven by our still-present conflicts that supposedly had been solved many years ago (including racial and gender issues), people do not move on quickly. We cannot simply forget stereotypes and expectations, but we can work our hardest to abolish them. We are all individuals who can choose to live our lives exactly the way we want to. Torvald Helmer could not see his own wife as his equal and in eight years of marriage, only ever had **one serious discussion** with her. Even though women have been active members of society for so long, we have never been able to overcome the obstacles that stereotypes present us with. There are many women who are not content being "just" mothers or housewives. In the past decades, we have seen more women doing big and incredible things – yet women receive considerably less recognition than men for the amazing feats they accomplish.

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Instead of focusing on these [meaningful accomplishments](http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/famous-firsts-in-womens-history), society creates the Hollywood starlet and turns women right back into the doll figure that Nora Helmer busted away from (have you seen a cover of *Cosmopolitan* recently?). When we could be celebrating the success, breakthroughs, and innovation women have in their careers, we choose to instead analyze their wardrobes and appearance. Women are fully capable of making discoveries that will benefit society, yet women are also supposed to remain pretty, fragile, and devoted to their husbands.

***Gender is not the defining trait in what makes a person valuable to society.***

In *A Doll House*, the message Ibsen is trying to spread is that we are all humans and we should all be appreciated for what we accomplish. There should be no debate whether or not we are allowed to be individuals and pursue our own interests. And eat a macaroon or two if that’s what makes us happy!

***Celebrate individuality.***

Nora Helmer was able to leave behind her old life once she realized it was holding her back; she took control of her own destiny and made changes for the betterment of herself. While there is obviously an enormous emphasis on sexism in this particular piece, ultimately what we as readers should take away from *A Doll House* is to simply allow everyone to pursue their own goals and dreams. Women in particular need to continually remind themselves that they are individuals and what they want from life will not always be what their significant other wants. We need to be strong enough to make decisions with ourselves in mind - just like Nora Helmer's decision to pursue her own life without Torvald.

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