In his time, Henrik Ibsen was a controversial playwright who wrote plays on taboo subjects. From banishment (Peer Gynt), to illegitimate children (The Wild Duck), to syphilis and euthanasia (Ghosts), to suicide (Hedda Gabler), Ibsen's characters occupied identities onstage that few in polite Victorian society would dare to mention. Perhaps surprisingly for modern readers, A Doll's House, with its plot centered on a woman named Nora who forges her father's signature, takes a loan without consulting her husband, and leaves him and her children to find herself, was considered equally shocking by its first audiences. The play was deemed so daring that, when performed in many countries, the ending was changed so that Nora returns home, finding she cannot leave Torvald or her three children so great is her love and devotion to them (Templeton 113–114). Nora's quest for her personal identity, while scandalous to some at the time, is exactly what made the play so famous—and why it continues to hold such currency as a drama today.

Critical studies of A Doll's House often center on the ongoing debate as to whether or not the play offers a feminist message, and whether or not Ibsen meant it to do so. Those who oppose such a feminist reading of the text often turn to Ibsen's own words on the play to the Norwegian Women's Rights League in 1898: "I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general" (Ibsen, quoted in Richardson 81). Such critics favor a reading of Nora's transformation as humanist rather than feminist, and Eric Bentley, for example, argues that "the play would be just as valid were Torvald the wife and Nora the husband" (30).

Those who read the play as a feminist piece, such as Gail Finney, however, hold that Ibsen's "sensitivity to feminist issues" is revealed in "his creation of female characters" and "their rejection of a strict division between conventional masculine and feminine behavior" (92–93). Likewise, Joan Templeton contests what she calls "the Doll's House backlash" wherein the feminist aspects of the play are attacked on "literary grounds" under the pretext that Nora's character between act one and act three undergoes "an incomprehensible transformation" (114). Instead, Templeton argues that "[t]he power of A Doll's House lies not 'beyond' but within its feminism; it is a feminist Bildungspiel par excellence, dramatizing the protagonist's realization that she might, perhaps, be someone other than her husband's little woman" (138).

The problem, of course, could be that feminism is often difficult to define, a problem noted by bell hooks and Carmen Vasquez. Vasquez argues that feminism, unfortunately, "has come to mean anything you like [...] There are as many definitions of Feminism as there are feminists" (Vasquez qtd. in hooks 17). Thus, one scholar's humanism may be another's feminism.

Despite these debates, critics spend little time discussing Nora's transformative identity on its own terms. This is unfortunate because Nora, throughout the course of the play, illustrates many of the levels of American psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Moving through the stages of this hierarchy, from physiological elements such as safety, love and belonging, to the desire for esteem and self-actualization, Nora's character exemplifies Maslow's theory that "most behavior occur[s] in response to some kind of motivation, which [is] made up of the interplay among different needs, or drives" (Krapp 309). In her interactions with Kristine, Krogstad, Dr. Rank and, most especially, Torvald, Nora consistently shows how needs—not unconscious, internal motivations—are the key to her growing personal identity.
Abraham Maslow, discontent with psychotherapy of the 1930s, which focused rather exclusively on either Freud's psychoanalysis or B. F. Skinner's behaviorist methods, developed his theory of the hierarchy of needs as a method for understanding what motivates successful, healthy people in the development of their personalities. At the bottom of the hierarchy's scale are physiological needs, such as the need for food, water, shelter, and air. The next level of Maslow's hierarchy, titled safety, consists of the need for financial resources, health, and security. According to Maslow, only after these two stages of need have been successfully satisfied can one progress to the next levels, which consist of the need for love and belonging, the need for esteem, and the need for self-actualization (Krapp 310). Today, the hierarchy is employed in studies of human behavior and identity and even in professional fields such as advertising, marketing, and office relations.

In the first act of the play, Nora returns to her house from shopping in preparation for Christmas festivities. We learn from her early interactions with Torvald that Nora has been concerned about her family's financial situation for quite some time, in part due to her husband's bout with illness in the past. However, with Torvald's new job at the bank beginning in the New Year, the Helmer household anticipates a more stable and affluent future. As Torvald tells Nora, "Ah, it is so gratifying to know that one's gotten a safe, secure job, and with a comfortable salary" (1578). Though Maslow argued that "safety needs are relatively less important for most healthy adults under normal circumstances," there are "exceptional circumstances" that can "activate safety needs in people whose safety needs had previously been satisfied" (Krapp 310). Such is the case with Nora, whose fear for Torvald's health, and by extension her only means of financial security in late Victorian society, prompted her to forge her father's signature in order to borrow sufficient funds to take the family to Italy for Torvald's recovery.

Nora, as Maslow's theory suggests, has been unable to think of much else besides this need for safety, and to keep her attempts to satisfy it a secret from her husband. "You can imagine, of course, how this thing hangs over me," Nora tells Kristine in Act I (1584). As such, all other needs have been put on hold, and Nora details her preoccupation with safety to Kristine, explaining how she has secretly worked, skimped, and saved to pay back the loan and its attendant interest.

Nora's conversation with Kristine also reveals Nora's new and growing desire for esteem, the third level in the hierarchy of needs, which involves both "the need for self-esteem and the need for esteem from others," according to Maslow (Krapp 311). While Nora initially (and rather thoughtlessly, given Kristine's own dismal circumstances) brags to her friend of Torvald's new job, which will bring in "a huge salary and lots of commissions" (1580), she soon feels patronized by Kristine's insistence that she is "just a child" who "really know[s] so little of life's burdens" (1582). To contest this reading of herself, Nora reveals the actions she took to convey her family to Italy and thus save her husband's life. With her need for safety and security fulfilled by the promise of Torvald's new job, Nora now clearly seeks something greater than security: self-worth. Telling Kristine, of course, isn't prudent, but it furthers the plot along, bringing the play into the classic stage of complication, while revealing Nora's "need to feel that other people respect and recognize [her] as worthwhile" (Knapp 8).

However, a visit by her husband's employee Nils Krogstad soon returns Nora to the second stage in Maslow's hierarchy, reconnecting her with her long-held fears for security. Blackmailing Nora with his knowledge that she has forged her father's signature on the loan she took for the trip to Italy, Krogstad tells Nora that he will reveal her secret, thereby opening her up to legal recourse and social shame, unless she can convince Torvald to keep Krogstad at the bank. Ironically, Krogstad blackmails Nora because, he, too, is fearful about his level of security and esteem; this job, Krogstad reveals, is "the first rung" of the ladder he must climb to achieve social acceptance after tarnishing his reputation in an unnamed scandal. "My boys are growing up," he tells Nora. "For their sakes, I'll have to win back as much respect as possible" (1590). Krogstad, like Nora, has been operating at deprivation levels in Maslow's realm of security, and, as Maslow suggests, a person worried about safety and security will "focus on satisfying this need to the exclusion of all
other needs, living 'almost for safety alone'" (Krapp 310).

Just as Nora has set aside thoughts of legal recourse and social shame in her attempts to secure Torvald's health, so, too, has Krogstad sought this same level of security without thought for the impact his blackmail will have on Nora. For these reasons, Errol Durbach argues that "Krogstad is a mirror that throws back at Nora the reflection of a persecuted criminal in an unforgiving society [...] Krogstad and Nora are fellow criminals beneath skin" (78–79). Brian Johnston, likewise, recognizes that "Krogstad's determination to secure the future of his sons is no more ignoble a motive than Nora's past wishes to save her husband's life and to spare her dying father" (150). Nevertheless, Krogstad's intimidations do more than threaten Nora's safety; they terrorize her into pondering suicide as a solution (Ibsen 1619).

Significantly, *A Doll's House* also reveals Nora's desire for the third stage in Maslow's hierarchy, love and belonging, which is equally strong in the first and second acts of the play. Maslow makes a distinction between two types of love, Deprivation-Love and Being-Love: Deprivation-Love, the "essentially selfish need to give and receive affection from others," is a lower form than Being-Love, the "unselfish desire for what is best for the loved one" (Krapp 310). Nora does initially focus on Deprivation-Love, manifesting a desire to garner care and concern from her family (Knapp 310). Basking in Torvald's diminutive nicknames for her, such as "lark" and "little squirrel," Nora centers her existence on pleasing Torvald so that she, in turn, can receive the satisfaction of being desired and cherished. Likewise, Nora's interactions with her children, her "dolls," are similarly motivated. This sense of Nora's love being deprivation-based rather than unselfish is also clearly exhibited by Nora's concern that Torvald might love her less in the future, "when he stops enjoying [her] dancing and dressing up and reciting for him" (Ibsen 1583). However, Nora's fear of this lack is so great she quickly stops herself from such thoughts: "How ridiculous! That'll never happen" (1583).

Nora also exhibits Deprivation-Love in her interactions with Dr. Rank, the Helmers' dying family friend whose love for Nora is more romantic in nature than fatherly. Nora is a rather shameless flirt when it comes to acquiring Dr. Rank's affections, and Ibsen's stage direction for Nora and Rank's scene alone together is filled with appropriately coy instructions: the actress is directed to put "both hands on his shoulders" and to hit "him lightly on the ear with [her] stockings" (1603). The dialogue of the scene is equally flirtatious, with Nora telling him to "imagine then that I'm dancing only for you" before remembering to add, "yes, and of course, for Torvald too—that's understood" (Ibsen 1603). Moreover, throughout the scene, Nora desires Rank's affections not just for her own need for friendship and intimacy, but also in hopes that Rank will ultimately be like her fantasy of an "old gentleman" whom, as she tells Kristine, she has long daydreamed will rescue her from her financial predicaments (1584). Nora's flirtations are thus quite purposeful, performed with the hope of securing "an exceptionally big favor" from Rank to help her escape Krogstad's blackmail (1604).

Yet, Nora also shows her facility for Being-Love in this scene as well, offering the first suggestion that she is capable of greater awareness and self-actualization than has been previously demonstrated by her actions thus far in the play. When Rank confesses to Nora that his affections for her could rival Torvald's, that his "body and soul are at [her] command," Nora is unable to press him into service: "I don't need any help. You'll see—it's only my fantasies. That's what it is. Of course!" (Ibsen 1604). Likewise, Nora obliquely confesses her own feelings for Rank to him, feelings that are beyond friendship or the mere desire to exchange affections. "There are some people that one loves most and other people that one would almost prefer being with," she tells him (1605). To clarify, Nora explains that Torvald, like her father, must be the one she "loves most," but when she lived in her father's house, she actually preferred the company of the maids "because they never tried to improve me." Similarly, Dr. Rank symbolizes Nora's ability for Being-Love, one of the conditions of such love being the capacity to "love and accept a person's failing and foibles rather than trying to change them" (Krapp 310). With Dr. Rank, Nora exchanges this deeper form of love, indicating for the first time in the play, what Brian Johnston calls "the
evolutionary process whereby the ‘mini-Nora’ of the opening scenes becomes the ‘super-Nora' of the close” (137).

Ironically, this "super-Nora" emerges not when the threats to her safety, love, belonging, and esteem are removed, but, rather, when Nora's fears come to pass. When her husband opens Krogstad’s letter, thereby revealing her actions, he reacts with great anger; the "miraculous event" that Nora yearns for, whereby Torvald would "step forward" to take the blame, never materializes. Instead, he worries only about his reputation and social standing, his own need for society's approval and esteem. Nora, however, in having her worst fears materialize, is freed from them. Realizing that they have only been play-acting the perfect marriage, Nora changes, symbolically, out of her dance/performance costume and into her departure clothes, and prepares to leave Torvald. She tells him in what is perhaps the play's most well known scene:

I went from Papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything to your own taste, and so I got the same taste as you—or pretended to; I can't remember. I guess a little of both, first one, then the other. Now when I look back, it seems as if I’d lived here like a beggar—just from hand to mouth. I've lived by doing tricks for you, Torvald. But that's the way you wanted it. It's a great sin what you and Papa did to me. You're to blame that nothing's become of me [...] I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child" (Ibsen 1623).

This key scene, where Nora confronts Torvald and emancipates herself from their child-like play-marriage, still holds great social currency as a feminist manifesto, leading to the play's resurgence in popularity during the 1960s and early 1970s when the feminist movement in the United States began what scholars call a second wave. Nora, in leaving behind a marriage in which she is not an equal but a "doll-child," rejects her secondary status in society. "I'm a human being, no less than you" (1624), she tells Torvald. The scene, too, also reveals Nora's growing desire to move beyond the initial stages of identity, into Maslow's highest realm: self-actualization.

Self-actualization, as Maslow described it, involves "the need to fulfill one's potential, to be what one can be" (Krapp 311). Here, too, Nora demonstrates this yearning for self-actualization, in her desire for education, for time to "think over these things for [her]self" (Ibsen 1624), even at the expense of lower needs such as safety, belonging, and social esteem. Maslow argues that a person moving toward self-actualization would be "often less restricted by cultural norms and social expectations" than others not operating at this level, and this appears to be true for Nora, who rejects Torvald's attempts to keep her through shaming her, cajoling her, even forbidding her departure and declaring her sick with fever (Krapp 311). For Torvald, who is still operating at the level of esteem, social standing is everything. "Abandon your home, your husband, your children! And you're not even thinking what people will say," he tells her (1624). Nora, however, feels a different calling, one less concerned with social norms than with exploring her true identity: "I can't be concerned about that. I only know how essential this is [...] I have other duties equally sacred [...] duties to myself" (1624). For Nora to achieve self-actualization, she must leave behind Torvald, who desires only her willingness to engage with him at the Deprivation-Love level upon which they have built their marriage. As Sandra Saari contends, "At the end of Act 3, Nora has rationally thought herself into freedom from Torvald's interpretation of reality. She then sets out to define reality for herself" (Saari 1994).

Krogstad, Nora's mirror, also seems to move beyond his initial fears for his security and esteem in rekindling his "Being-Love" with Kristine. In another gesture read as a feminist aspect of the play, Kristine proposes to Krogstad that they unite, if not in marriage, then, at least, in forming a union that allows them, "two shipwrecked people," to "reach across to each other" (Ibsen 1613). Errol Durbach writes that this moment, when [Kristine] offers Krogstad not sacrifice, but alliance, a life of mutual support, a joining of forces in which individual need is not subordinated to social or sexual expectations, and where strength derives from channeling energy and work into a common enterprise," is "Krogstad's Metamorphosis" (85). It stands in direct contrast to the Helmers' own version of marriage. Like Nora, in the final scene, Krogstad is moved to find an identity beyond financial security and social standing. He is now more concerned with personal happiness and self-fulfillment.
Throughout the play Kristine serves as a foil to Nora and Krogstad, demonstrating a path away from Maslow's lower needs or drives and onward toward a self-created, self-actualized space where one need not compromise one's identity and self. Of all the characters, Kristine has had the greatest difficulty in satisfying her physiological and safety needs, yet she is also, paradoxically, the character least motivated by these drives. Like Nora at the play's conclusion, Kristine is free of their hold on her. Referring to her first marriage, in which she agreed to forfeit her Being-Love for Krogstad and her personal happiness for her deceased husband's ability to provide for her family's physiological and safety needs, Kristine tells Krogstad that "anyone who's sold herself for somebody else once isn't going to do it again" (Ibsen 1614). For these reasons, it is obvious why Nora's first stop in her journey to self-actualization begins by spending the night at Kristine's rather than staying in the doll's house she has built with Torvald.

Neither Krogstad's nor Nora's self-actualization is performed onstage for the audience; instead, we are left at the curtain's closing with Torvald contemplating "the greatest miracle" that can only be possible when characters "transform" themselves (Ibsen 1626). This quest for personal identity takes place beyond the stage, beyond our view, outside the realm of society, for self-actualization is an internal manifestation rather than an externally motivated drive. Like Maslow, who believed that an important characteristic of self-actualization was the ability to experience and to recognize "peak experiences," so, too, do Ibsen's characters throughout his plays find themselves in "growth promoting" situations that allow them "to look at [their] live[s] in new ways and to find new meaning in life" (Krapp 311). The characters in A Doll's House are no exception to this, offering viewers what Durbach calls "a myth of transformation" whereby Nora leaves behind her childhood identity in order to embrace an independent, self-actualized, autonomous one (133). Whether labeled humanist or feminist, this transformation is perhaps why Ibsen's play still feels so contemporary, why A Doll's House is still so studied and so often performed today.

Works Cited


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