Infection: The Motivating Factor Behind Nora’s Flight in A DOLL HOUSE

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Nora Helmer is without a doubt one of the most widely interpreted characters in Western literature. Characterizations of her range from a childish neurotic to a “romantic standard bearer of the feminist cause” (Tufts 140). According to Ibsen scholar Joan Templeton, most interpreters have been highly critical of Nora, attributing to her “the most perfidious characteristics of her sex; . . . denounced [her] as an irrational and frivolous narcissist”; an “abnormal woman,” a “hysteric”; a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness (29). Some of these views focus on the deception of her husband, some on her dramatic antics to keep her secret intact; but what seems to have disturbed audiences most is this last quality: the abandoning of her family, and especially her children, at the end of the play. So much has it disturbed audiences that a few well-known productions changed the ending to have her return before the curtain falls. They realize what she faces by staying with her husband, but they often feel her departure is irresponsible, a betrayal of a mother’s commitment to her family.

This view is understandable—our social values, as in Ibsen’s time, teach us that no true mother leaves her children, under any circumstances. If she does, she is a monster. One reason viewers cannot accept her action as heroic self-sacrifice is that they have already written her off as a character. First, they are too convinced by Nora’s performance as Torvald’s skylark—she spends so much of her life in that persona they cannot see how any other aspect of her character exists. Second, it is abundantly apparent by the end of the play that Nora’s children would be better off with her than with her husband, who has sufficiently revealed how weak and selfish he is despite
his meticulous attention to propriety. If she cannot see this, she fails in our estimation to meet the expectations of a heroic character. Finally, viewers have also seen her distance herself from her children early in the play. When the children first appear with her, she engages playfully with them as they come in from the cold. But from the moment Krogstad interrupts them with his plan to blackmail Nora, she shoos them away; whenever they are brought up again, even when their nurse emphasizes that they repeatedly ask for her, she refuses to play with them. One could easily get the impression that she does not care that much about the children at all, but this is far from the truth. Nora separates herself from her children because she fears she is infecting them with moral sickness every minute she is with them. Both her husband and Dr. Rank have inadvertently revealed to her that because she, like Krogstad, has committed a forgery, her diseased character will infect her children. An exploration of several scenes that address “moral sickness” will help to clarify Nora’s character and demonstrate that her leaving is an act of love and sacrifice rather than irresponsibility and selfishness.

In his first entrance, Dr. Rank interrupts a conversation between Nora and Kristine Linde. Nora invites him to join them and introduces him to her friend. After inquiring about Kristine’s health, Rank introduces a parallel between physical and moral sickness, a topic motivated by having just seen Krogstad in Torvald’s office. Rank and the upright in the community regard Krogstad as a “terminal moral case” whose character is “rotten right down to the roots” (Ibsen 159). Krogstad is presented as morally corrupt but more in a manner of a man with a medical condition rather than someone who has a flawed character or shows bad judgment.

Then Krogstad, convinced by his interview with Torvald that he will be fired, returns to try to compel Nora to help him keep his job at the bank. Nora has begun a game with her children, which he interrupts. She immediately sends the children to their nurse. After Nora rather easily admits to her forgery, we learn that Krogstad’s bad standing in society, the cause of his moral disease, results from committing the same crime. He tells her that “what I once did was nothing more, and nothing worse, and it destroyed me” (Ibsen 166). What Ibsen makes evident to his audience in these two scenes is that Nora, the wife of a promising and respectable member of the community, is as guilty of a crime as Krogstad and would presumably be judged according to society’s standards as morally corrupt as well, if the forgery were made known. Nora finds the linking of his action to hers repulsive, and she insults him for comparing their situations, but the fear that there may be some truth to Krogstad’s claim has clearly entered her mind,
as her defensiveness when he leaves demonstrates: “Nonsense! He’s trying to frighten me! I’m not all that naïve. (Starts gathering up the children’s clothes, but soon stops.) But—? No, impossible. I did it out of love” (Ibsen 167).

The scene that follows reveals just how serious the consequences of her deed will be for her. Torvald returns and questions Nora, having seen Krogstad leave the house and suspecting he has been trying to enlist her support. In telling her the story of his moral breakdown, Torvald says, “Imagine what life is like for a man like that: he has to lie and dissemble and cheat everyone he meets—has to wear a mask in front of his nearest and dearest—yes, even his wife and children” (Ibsen 169). Nora suddenly realizes that she is like Krogstad in an additional way: she too wears a mask in concealing the truth of her action from her family, and her masquerade is infinitely more elaborate than Krogstad’s. She has been posing as Torvald’s skylark to coax money from him, acting the elaborate spendthrift while secretly hoarding what money she can scrape together to make payments on her loan.

But most frightening for her is the possibility that she is harming her children—even by being in their presence. Torvald tells her “an atmosphere so filled with lies brings pestilence and disease into every corner of a home. Every breath the children take carries the infection” (Ibsen 169). He comments further that Krogstad has been “poisoning his own children with lies and deceit.” Modern audiences will recognize the use of infection here as a metaphor; Torvald, we assume, is speaking figuratively. Nora does not take it this way, however, and not only because she is unversed in such scientific matters. Torvald and Rank both employ repeated use of the language of infection to describe the origins of immorality, which reflects the late nineteenth-century obsession with disease and how it is spread.1 The language of infection is so pronounced that one might question, in fact, whether they even intend their comments on moral disease figuratively. For Helmer, moral infection is a matter of fact that every lawyer knows to be true; perhaps he intends it literally.

Nora clearly takes it that way. Act 1 closes with her forbidding the nurse to let the children come to her. Trying to convince herself, she ponders desperately, “Harm my children—! Poison my home? It’s not true. It could never be true!” (Ibsen 170).

But even in the last scene, after the smallness of Torvald’s character is revealed, Nora still has no way of knowing that she is not endangering her children with her presence. While she may now have a basis for questioning
her husband’s and society’s values, she still has no grounds for questioning
the truth of her moral disease and its possible transmission to her children.
In the end, she feels impelled to leave, and her decision is less an act of
defiance against her husband and society than an attempt to save the lives
of her children.

Note

1A detailed general discussion of the nineteenth-century debate on disease and infection can be found in
Winslow. Both Helmer and Rank reflect the commonly held anticontagionist view that exposure to miasma, or
noxious matter, can lead to disease, without necessarily having physical contact.

Works Cited

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