



HJRS Link: [Journal of Academic Research for Humanities \(HEC-Recognized for 2022-2023\)](#)

Edition Link: [Journal of Academic Research for Humanities, 3\(1\) January-March 2023](#)

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Link of the Paper: <https://jar.bwo.org.pk/index.php/jarh/article/view/247>

A SYMBOLIC PERSPECTIVE OF HENRIK IBSEN'S "A DOLL'S HOUSE"

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Paper Information

Citation of the paper:

Aziz, A., Akbar, N., Aziz, A. (2023). A Symbolic Perspective of Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House". Journal of Academic Research for Humanities, 3(2), 118–124.

Subject Areas:

1. Postmodern literature
2. English literature
3. Humanities

Timeline of the Paper:

Received on: 06-04-2023
Reviews Completed on: 08-05-2023
Accepted on: 10-05-2023
Online on: 15-05-2023

License:



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Published by:



Abstract

The art or practice of using symbols, especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing invisible or intangible through visible or sensuous representations is called symbolism. The focus of this study is to analyze the symbols used by Henrik Ibsen in "A Doll's House" according to Arthur Symons' views which he discussed in his book, "Symbolist Movement in Literature." Qualitative research is used to analyze the symbols employed in this play. The symbols make the plot of the play effective and the situations become more meaningful using this literary device. The findings reveal that throughout the play writer has used symbols on different occasions either it is Nora's confusion about the secret that she is trying to hide from her husband, Dr. Rank's disease or it is Nora's dress, every situation is depicted symbolically. The symbols like 'macaroons', 'Christmas trees', 'shawls', 'stoves', 'doors', and many others in the play have been discussed. This work also examines the inner conflicts of the characters and discusses them by looking at the symbols associated with them. All the circumstances are narrated with the help of particular symbols and these certain symbols make them more meaningful.

Keywords: Symbolism, Symbols, A Doll, House, Christmas tree

Introduction

Symbolism is a literary device in which things appear to represent something else that is not apparent in the text and the reader has to perceive that. It is usually an abstract idea that is depicted through a concrete thing. There are different ways of symbolizing something, sometimes it is done through images and sometimes it is achieved through indirect suggestions to some secretive ideas and thoughts. For example, if someone enters a garden and focuses on a flower, he/she derives the meaning of fragrance and beauty from a flower and also the meaning of love because the flower is clearly understood as the symbol of love almost in almost all cultures. But it is not easy to understand the hidden symbols. This is the concept of symbolism that a concrete thing in a literary work has some hidden meaning.

Henrik Ibsen is called the 'father of modern drama. Ibsen is one of the most important figures of the twentieth century in the world of drama writing. He wrote his first play in 1849, *Catiline* which could not gain fame. In 1862, Ibsen left Norway and settled in Italy for a time where he wrote *Brand* (1865), a tragedy that consist of five acts. After two years, Ibsen wrote *Peer Giant* (1876), one of his masterpieces. Ibsen moved to Germany in 1868, where he wrote *The Pillars of Society* (1877). This play was performed in Munich theatre and helped him to create his most famous work *A Doll's House* (1879). This play highlighted the social malpractices which were prevailing in the society and it created a huge impression through the character of Nora.

A Doll's House (1879) has a lot of aspects and distinct major themes regarding social, feminist, and Marxist patterns. The story revolves around the husband, Torvald Helmer, and the wife, Nora Helmer. Torvald is a worker in a bank while Nora is a housewife and is called spendthrift by her

husband. In the end, there is a clash between the two because of a letter by Krogstad, who is the antagonist of the play. In the letter, he reveals the secret that Nora not only took money from him but also forged the signature of her dead father. Actually, she lent the money to save her husband who was extremely ill. So, by using that money, she took him to Italy for the sake of his health. At last, Nora leaves her husband, Torvald Helmer with the children by saying that she has always been a doll for her husband as she was a doll for her father.

Significance of the study

This paper will help to discover which symbols are used by the writer in the play and how these symbols are associated with different situations experienced by the central character of the play.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the symbols used by Henrik Ibsen in "A Doll's House".
2. To analyze the meaning of the symbols found in Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House".

Research Questions

This research will respond to the following questions:

1. Which symbols are present in Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House"?
2. What is the meaning of the symbols found in Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House".

Literature Review

Kadhim (2022) states that through symbolism, a reader can have a syntactic and communicative point of view. She is of the view that literature is a written language and the symbols enhance the meaning of that particular language and it connects the readers with the idea. The readers have to give more attention because it is figurative language and to have a clear idea about the symbol, the readers are supposed to look deep into the text.

Elmahdi et al. (2020) explain the importance of hidden symbols in *Men in Sun* (1962), a

novel that narrates the story of the three Palestinians. He clears that the usage of the hidden symbols urges the readers to understand the difficulties of the main characters in a better way. He says that the literal meaning does not have an emotional effect as the symbolic meanings do.

In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a lot of symbolism is used in the view of Akbar (2020). 'The Scarlet Letter 'A'' stands for Hester and Dimmesdale's adultery. 'Forest' stands for darkness. 'Prison door' symbolizes Puritan society's rigid laws and regulations.

Iseni (2014) is of the view that Ibsen shows a realistic attitude toward the upper class of the nineteenth century in *A Doll's House* (1879). Ibsen has shown through the character of Nora not only contemporary feminism but also universal feminism. Through symbolic realism, Ibsen has shown the problems of women and his art of characterization clearly depicts the social difficulties.

Mohammad (2014) analyzes *A Doll's House* (1879) by discussing the masculine character of Helmer and the feminine status and role of Nora. He says that Nora wants to be free as any other woman in the society. But, every time, her husband becomes a hindrance in the way of her social life and she is compelled to live in the four walls of the house.

In the views of Brunner (1953), the use of symbolism has made George Meredith an exceptional sort of writer. It is because the service of this technique is unique, so he systemized and extended this special and elaborative technique of symbolism.

According to Shahid (2021), the different writers distinctly use symbols to leave a lasting impact of their writings on their readers' minds and thoughts. He further explains that symbolism plays a vital role in comprehending the themes of the poetry. This is why great names like Shakespeare

and William Blake and lots of others used symbols in their poetry.

Muhammad and Yahya (2017) state, "Symbolism in writing is the profundity and shrouded significance in a bit of work. It is frequently used to speak to a good or religious conviction or worth." Without symbols or imagery, the words do not create an everlasting effect. They are of the view that symbolism becomes more interesting when a writer needs to utilize specific inclinations in his/her writings.

Methodology

Qualitative research is used to analyze various symbols in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). It has been analyzed from the perspective of the concepts which were given by Arthur Symons (1865-1945) in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). He was of the view that symbols were the base of literature and language and all true imaginative writers were symbolists. So descriptive approach has been utilized in this paper.

Analysis

Symbolism was first introduced in France by French writers. This concept was given by Frenches Stephane Mallarme and Charles Baudelaire in the late nineteenth century. They gave the world one of the most effective and expressive literary device that is useful till now and any piece of literature seem to be incomplete without the usage of symbols. In English language, symbolism was introduced by Arthur Symons, who was the writer of the book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). In his book, he gave the practical application of this device and connected it with the real world by saying that literature and language are incomplete and the meaning is unclear without using symbols. So, in English literature, symbolism is given certain significance and a lot of literature is written using this special technique. Poetry, dramas, prose, novels, or

any other piece of literature does not have a pure charm until the usage of symbolism.

So, keeping in view these certain points, Henrik Ibsen made the practical application of symbols in his play, *A Doll's House* (1879). Ibsen discussed the evils of society that were prevailing and harming society. Whether it is a misunderstanding between the people or it is the hypocrisy of a person, he discussed every aspect by getting the aid of symbols. It makes him a unique writer that he was aware of this special technique. Because of these special qualities Ibsen possesses, he is given the title of "the Father of Modern Drama."

First of all, by taking a glance at the title of the play, it is clear that the title is symbolic. It consists of two parts, *a doll*, and *a house*. From the beginning of human history, there has always been a clash between the rights of men and women. It is perceived that woman has not been given the right status in society throughout human history. She always struggles for her proper rights in society. Man becomes supreme in a patriarchal society and controls everything giving nothing to woman. In the Western world, women were given the right to vote in the 19th century after a hard struggle. After that, the feminist movement started and woman's voice was raised on higher forums. Although women have been given a lot of rights in Europe and America, there are still problems in third-world countries regarding women's rights. Torvald Helmer always considers his wife, Nora Helmer *a doll* and does not give her the love she deserves. He never understands her importance for himself and his children. She is treated like *a doll*; everyone can throw her wherever they want. *A doll* is a motionless and passionless being without any feelings, it is just a toy in everyone's hands. *A doll* is a source of joy for children, they play with it, love it, and create an emotional affiliation with it. But, when they are tired of playing with it, they throw it

somewhere without considering its importance. They never care what would be its condition if they are not interested in taking care of it. They ignore it until they need it again when they are tired of playing with the other things. It is clear that they only come towards it merely for the cause of happiness and when their desire is fulfilled, they again ignore it.

The same is the case with Nora Helmer. Helmer, her husband treats her like *a doll* although she does everything to please her husband, he always takes her as a fool. She takes loan to save him when he was about to die. She uses that money to have a trip to Italy to change the environment which was quite necessary for Helmer's health. But he does not understand his wife's love for him. He berates her saying that she does not deserve to raise the children, when he comes to know about the money she borrowed from Krogstad and forged her father's signature. But he does not realize that she did everything to save him. When he comes to know that she is right and he is making a mistake, he tries to stop Nora but till that moment she has decided to leave him with the children. She has realized that she has always been a toy in the hands of her husband and before that in her father's hands. She was *a doll* for her husband, Torvald Helmer. As she says: "But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll child" (108).

The second part of the title *house* symbolizes insignificance because there is a difference between a house and a home. A house is a place to take shelter and to live in. On the other hand, a home is a place of love and harmony, and family lives with the view of understanding one another in a home. A house is an emotionless word as compared to a home as Nora realizes at the end of the play that Helmer's house has never been a home for her. She tries her utmost to make

it home but she never succeeds because Helmer does not want that. So, in the end, she leaves that *house*.

Another important symbol is the *Christmas tree*, used effectively by Ibsen. There are important festivals and days in every culture and religion. The purpose of these festivals is to spread love and happiness among the people who are sick of their daily routines. They take comfort for a little time by taking part in these festivals. Christmas is an important religious event for Christians all over the world. Nora is also about to celebrate this important event with her family. Here, the *Christmas tree* symbolizes family gathering and happiness. Nora wants to give her family a surprise so she hides the *Christmas tree*: "Hide the Christmas tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it till this evening when it is dressed" (8).

The *Christmas tree* appears in the play on three different occasions. At the beginning of the play, Nora asks the maid to hide the *Christmas tree*, here it symbolizes the family's love and security. Nora is happy with her family by doing everything her family demands and is satisfied with her husband and the children. She considers herself the central person of the family because everything is arranged according to her desires. The second time, the *Christmas tree* appears when Krogstad threatens Nora to stop her husband, Helmer, as he is going to fire him. Nora orders the maid to put the Christmas tree on the table. She looks at it and feels some kind of comfort. Here, the *Christmas tree* again symbolizes family union, security, and love. She is thinking about her family because her family is her world and she does not want to lose her loved ones. On the third occasion, the *Christmas tree* is shown at the beginning of the second act. On this occasion, the situation has become very serious and Nora is in distress. The *Christmas tree* is not in its

proper condition, its decoration is not in the condition it was at the beginning of the play. Here, the *Christmas tree* symbolizes the state of mind of the main character, Nora.

Another important symbol that discusses Nora's character is the appearance of the *macaroons*. At the beginning of the play, we see that Nora is hiding *macaroons* from her husband, Helmer, and cleans her mouth so that he may not see her eating something he prohibited. It symbolizes Nora's innocence and her childish behaviour because she was acting like a child as a child hides something from his/her parents thinking that he/she will be punished if his/her parents see him/her. Nora was also acting like that child. *Macaroons* again appear on an occasion when Nora offers *macaroons* to Dr. Rank saying that those were brought by Mrs. Linde. Here, it symbolizes that Nora's husband has been promoted and she is feeling elevated as she thinks that her days are going to be changed. So, she is in a jolly mood and tries to explain to Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank that she is living an independent life by the act of eating *macaroons*. On the third occasion, *macaroons* appear when Nora is not successful to stop her husband, Helmer, from dismissing Krogstad. So, she is in anger and asks the maidservant to spread the *macaroons* on the dinner table. Here, the *macaroons* symbolize Nora's distressed mind.

The *stove* is a source of warmth and it keeps the temperature moderate in severe weather conditions. When Krogstad comes to meet Torvald Helmer, Nora looks perplexed and she closes the door behind Krogstad and sees the *stove*. Here, the *stove* is not only providing physical warmth but also mental calmness as she is seeking it because of the arrival of Krogstad. She is in fear and her mental condition needs some peace which the stove is providing. When Dr. Rank declares his love for Nora and interrogates that when she was going to ask

him to help her, the *stove* again appears. Here, the *stove* again symbolizes Nora's mental discomfort. She says to Dr. Rank while walking to the *stove*: "Oh, dear Rank, this is really horrid of you" (64). Here, it symbolizes Nora's confusion because she was in fear that Krogstad was going to destroy her family life, and now, Dr. Rank's declaration of love has increased her confusion.

Another important symbol used by Henrik Ibsen in *A Doll's House* (1879) is the *doors*. The *doors* are seen in the play opened in the beginning and closed at the end. These *doors* symbolize the opportunities and possibilities that are sometimes opened for a person and if he/she does not avail the chance, there is no other option for the person. As Nora says: "I must stand on my own two feet if I'm to get to know myself and the world outside. That's why I can't stay here with you any longer" (109).

Tarantella is a sort of dance that is performed by the victim of the tarantula, a poisonous spider. Krogstad posts the letter and to deviate Helmer's attention, Nora performed *Tarantella* wildly. Here, the *Tarantella* symbolizes Nora's struggle against fate. She is trying hard to avert the situation and give her best to change the circumstance but, in the end, everything failed. The *color of the shawls* also symbolizes different situations in the play. When Nora practices the dance, she wears a *multi-colored shawl* that symbolizes her desires and emotions about her life to live it beautifully. At the party, she wears a *black shawl* as it symbolizes death. Helmer will read the letter soon and there is no escape for Nora, so she decides to commit suicide because it is the only option for her. When she is about to tell Helmer that she is leaving him, she takes off her fancy dress and wears a simple one which symbolizes the seriousness of her decision to leave the house and Helmer.

Light symbolizes Nora's awareness in the play about life as she is ignorant in the beginning while at the end, she is aware of the bitter facts of life. On different occasions in the play, *darkness* comes in the way of light which is the symbol of evil. When Dr. Rank expresses his love for Nora, she considers it an act of darkness, although she was going to use him for paying the debt she owed to Krogstad. The symbol of *light* again appears when Dr. Rank takes a cigar from Helmer and Nora lights it with a match. Here, the *light* symbolizes Nora's sympathy for dying Rank because she has been the only source of happiness and love in his entire life and he seeks comfort in her company.

Dr. Rank's disease symbolizes the deteriorating social norms of society and the insecurity one can feel while living in it. There is a connection between the death of Dr. Rank and the breakup between Nora and Torvald, which is the death of the relationship between the two. The names used by Helmer to call his wife are also important symbols in the play. Torvald Helmer used different birds names for Nora like the *skylark*, *songbird*, and *dove*. These names symbolize Helmer's possessiveness because he wants to keep her as his prisoner in his cage but she flies for her freedom in the end.

Conclusion

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) discusses the main social issues that are prevailing in society and causing damage to social life. To sum up, the writer has used a lot of symbols in the play that make a unique appearance and everything is assembled in a perfect sense whether it is the title of the play which is highly symbolic and perfectly explains the symbolic theme of the play or it is the characters who are discussed in the manner of the symbols associated with them. Most of the symbols discuss different situations experienced by Nora, the central

character, and the protagonist of the play. Every fact in the play is described with the help of symbols and these symbols elaborate those facts impressively. Ibsen used every symbol with a real character, so he brings originality to his work and demonstrates it perfectly. The symbolic approach in *A Doll's House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen is that he made every character apparent and each of them is connected with the plot that even a minor character has a unique part in the play's story and the readers can imagine the realistic views of the writer.

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