

HAMLET, NORA,
AND THE CHANGING FORM OF TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's influence on the genre of tragedy is both powerful and undeniable, while contemporary notions about tragedy have shifted into a modern light through the influence of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. This study concentrates specifically on Hamlet and A Doll's House in order to indicate the ways in which ideas of tragedy have evolved. By investigating the effect of religion in Hamlet and the absence of it in A Doll's House, I will argue that the main shift in tragedy is the loss of God. This thesis examines the transformation of the two heroes throughout the course of their respective plays and, in doing so, identifies the formal features which mark their claims to tragedy. While their processes differ greatly—Hamlet's transformation is through a super-textual and self-analytic process while Nora's process is one that emphasizes action over thought—both of their journeys are tied to the crucial and utterly tragic truth that they must face: the breakdown of their family.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The genre of tragedy continues to fascinate and intrigue both playwrights and audiences alike. Pitiful and catastrophic tales of ancient Grecians remain as heart-wrenching and compelling today as they did over 2,000 years ago. After the Greeks, no playwright is more at the forefront of tragedy than William Shakespeare, who was to set the tragic marker for centuries. In his Poetics, Aristotle provides a very detailed, almost formulaic equation for writing tragedy. He writes that tragedy assumed “a tone of dignity” (tr. Bywater [1909]. Poetics 1449a 23), and this is indeed true of Shakespeare. The actions of his noble kings, princes, and state senators shook the foundations of society and left their respective worlds in near ruins. Shakespearean tragedy has become a unique genre, which no other playwright since Shakespeare has mastered.

In the 400 years between the time of the Renaissance and that of the modern era, the tragic genre saw many modifications and transformations. When Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen begins writing dramas in 1849, tragedy begins to experience a truly dramatic shift. Ibsen takes the tragic predicaments of nobility and places them within the home of the woman next door. The calamities that previously threatened only big names now loom in the hearts and minds of our neighbours, our friends, ourselves. By utilizing and then building upon the tragic form, Ibsen pushes the genre forward.

Like the Ancient Greeks and the French Neo-Classicalists, the complex works of both Shakespeare and Ibsen contain their own distinctive characteristics. An understanding of Shakespearean and Ibsenian elements is essential in defining both the subtle shifts as well as the major changes in tragedy. A notable change may be found by focussing on the concept of God. Shakespeare places the individual in a God-centred or supernatural realm. This undergoes a

significant change by the time we reach the dramatic age of modernism with Ibsen, who places the importance on the self rather than on a divine force. By titling A Doll's House “the modern tragedy,” he creates a new type of tragedy. The shift from god-centred to god-less marks the most significant change in the tragic genre.

Another notable change in the tragic genre concerns the death of the hero. While not all tragedies witness the death of the tragic hero at the close of the play, all Shakespearean tragedies do. Similarly, many of Ibsen's heroes reach their end as in Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder, and Rosmersholm. Ibsen, however, focuses more on the death of an ideology rather than the literal death of a person. Death and loss are notable characteristics of tragedy, and we will see how this theme evolves from the death of a hero to the death of an ideal.

Despite centuries separating these two great playwrights, their stories share notable thematic commonalities. The notion of family is one that has held importance throughout the ages and is a favoured topic of playwrights from Ancient Greece to modern times. Shakespeare and Ibsen, too, create dramas that revolve around the key concept of the family. When the foundation of a family is threatened, this in turn greatly affects each individual member. Both Shakespeare and Ibsen set their stories within the structure of a family unit that is threatened by forces both outside of and within that unit. Because of this, family ties—and the subsequent severing of those ties—play an important role in both Hamlet and A Doll's House.

1.1 NARROWING THE SCOPE

Critics both old and new have attempted to define, categorize, and challenge the many intriguing characteristics of the tragic genre. Once we add the equally grand concepts of Shakespearean and modern tragedy, the range in theory and thought becomes nearly impossible to manage. It is therefore necessary to limit this study to only one play by each playwright in order to give adequate weight to each dramatist's claims to and upon the tragic genre.

The name "Shakespeare" is synonymous with theatre and is widely known throughout the world. In his essay "Shakespeare and Ibsen," Halvdan Koht writes that "all modern drama has stood under the power of his genius" (79). Indeed, it might be safe to say that all drama has stood under the power of Shakespeare's genius creation, Hamlet. No other dramatic tale has had such an effect as the story of the Danish prince, tortured at once by philosophical musings and murderous promptings to kill the king. His speeches and soliloquies are familiar in ears all around the world, their overused one-liners and worn-out monologues fallen sadly into cliché. But the sheer beauty that forms the language of Hamlet's poetic and profound speeches contains meaning and motive rich in both gravity and wisdom.

My decision in choosing Hamlet as a model for Shakespearean tragedy was based on a few key factors. Like many before me, I was drawn to the poetic language of the play, what Joseph Krutch calls "the pensive majesty of Hamlet" (84). His many soliloquies have inspired generations of performers and scholars, and have made the play a joy to study. On stage, however, I felt quite the opposite. The hero's lack of action throughout the play frustrated me as an audience member and made me shy away from a very close study of the Danish Prince. A.C. Bradley states that "the whole story turns upon the peculiar character of the hero" (79). Hamlet is at the very centre of the tragedy,

indeed where he should be, peculiarities and all. His lack of action and constant reflecting upon his duty pervades the story. The result is a dilemma in itself: what attracts readers to the play might also deter them from seeing a performance of that same play. This was the case for me and, in choosing Hamlet, I will investigate the riddle of the Hamlet question and discover what finally drives the hero into action.

In finding a modern tragedy to contrast Hamlet, my decision to focus on A Doll's House was fairly clear. In Ibsen we find a great shift from nobility to the commoner. And while this change might seem like devolution, Arthur Miller justifies the subject in his article "Tragedy and the Common Man": "It is time, I think, that we are who without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man" (7). Nora Helmer's role as domestic Norwegian housewife is as average a person as any. In addition to her unassuming status as middle-class wife, Nora's actions throughout A Doll's House provide a stark contrast to Hamlet's hesitancy and delay. The constant inaction of the title character in Hamlet differs greatly from the active role of Nora. In fact, her life seems full of acting and she takes great effort in hiding the secrets of her past from Torvald by living the double life of a perfect wife and macaroon-hoarding sneak.

Nora's final action, which sent shockwaves around the world, defines A Doll's House as a groundbreaking example of modern tragedy. She stops acting without purpose and comes to the blunt realization that her life has been a lie. Ibsen's heroine, the unassuming housewife, chooses to leave her comfortable dolly interiors and slam the door on a life of pretence. In doing so, she realizes the failure and death of the doll ideology. While the soliloquies of Hamlet will continue to be cited on stages around the world, the effects of Nora's final action will also continue to challenge our notions of duty to one's family and duty to one's self.

CHAPTER 2 ON TRAGEDY

Tragedy is huge in its breadth and scope. Man's struggle against the gods, Fate, and the society in which he lives is a compelling subject that has continued to intrigue theatre audiences throughout the ages. Our notions about the genre are as diverse as the characters and stories we revere: from kings to soldiers, from incest to adultery, from noblemen to salesmen.

In order to understand how tragedy has evolved, it is first necessary to investigate some early theories of tragedy. All methods of tragedy have derived from Poetics, written by Aristotle around 339 BC. In a very detailed, almost formulaic account, he explains the key concepts in tragedy, namely that of imitation. He asserts: "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation" (tr. Bywater [1909]. Poetics 1448a 5-8). By stating that man is naturally inclined to imitate, he rationalizes that people are naturally drawn to the theatre, where they can see their own stories re-enacted on stage. In writing specifically about tragedy, he explains:

Poetry, however, soon broke up into two kinds according to the differences of character in the individual poets; for the grave among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble personages; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble. (1448b 25-30)

Here we have our earliest reference to the importance of the "noble man" as a subject for tragedy, a claim which critics since Aristotle continue to support as well as challenge.

In his "formula" for writing tragedy, Aristotle outlines the six elements of the genre (plot or story, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody), but maintains that story is the most important, indeed the "life and soul" of tragedy:

The most important of the six is the combination of the incidents of story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. (1450a 15-23)

Aristotle points out the importance of action in tragedy, making it the perfect device for the Greek tragedians. The Hellenic audiences seated in the great amphitheatres of ancient times could relate to the spectacles of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides by relating to the action experienced by their mythic heroes. Not only were they moved by their stories, but they could picture themselves in their situations and hence were moved to pity and fear: “The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by work of imitation” (1453a 14-15). Viewing ancient tragedy at the City Dionysia, the audience experienced a catharsis of emotion.

In his discussion of the tragic character, Aristotle describes the notion of *hamartia*. While some have come to define this as the hero’s tragic flaw, it is defined in Poetics as an error in judgment:

There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity. (1453a 35-37)

This error, he maintains, causes the character to move from a state of happiness to misery. Aristotle’s notion of *hamartia* is especially relevant in our examination of Hamlet and Nora, both of whom encounter an error in reasoning, either through prolonged procrastination or false action.

While Aristotle focuses on the element of story, Friedrich Nietzsche, in The Birth of

Tragedy, bases his arguments on the element of melody. In this nineteenth century philosophical work, Nietzsche anchors his arguments on the idea of the Dionysiac and Apolline, drawing on the Greek gods of theatre/revelry and music/light to develop his theory. He maintains:

The two deities of art, Apollo and Dionysos, provide the starting-point for our recognition that there exists in the world of the Greeks an enormous opposition, both in origin and goals, between the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor (*Bildner*) and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos. These two very different drives (*Triebe*) exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them, an opposition only apparently bridged by the common term 'art' – until eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'Will', they appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure:

Attic tragedy. (Nietzsche 14)

By focussing on ancient Greek or Attic tragedy, Nietzsche argues that the Dionysiac and Apolline work both with and against each other to create a sense of balance which in turn forms the concept of tragedy. While he argues that the Dionysian element can be found in music, he more importantly emphasizes the oppositional structure of tragedy. Conflict between the Dionysiac and Apolline creates an inner battle, as we will see in both Hamlet and Nora.

Nietzsche further argues that Dionysos is the true hero of the tragic stage. He is careful to point out that man must be able to participate in the art form, tying his argument to Aristotle by emphasizing the idea that the audience must relate to the suffering onstage in order to experience a

sense of pity and fear. The audience witnesses and participates in the suffering of the theatre god, Dionysos—the true tragic hero. Nietzsche writes: “It is a matter of indisputable historical record that the only subject-matter of Greek tragedy, in its earliest form, was the suffering of Dionysos, and that for a long time the only hero present on the stage was, accordingly, Dionysos” (51). In watching a tragedy then, our suffering is tied to the events on stage as well as to the imagined sufferings of Dionysos. Nietzsche argues that this is true of present-day tragedy since the spirit of Dionysos remains within tragic stories.

Notions of modern tragedy are equally diverse as those of classical tragedy. In his book The Death of Tragedy, Steiner borrows from and then reverses the concepts put forth by Nietzsche. He examines the history of tragedy: from its beginnings with the ancient Greeks, through Shakespeare, and up to the French neo-classicists. The crux of Steiner’s argument lies in his requirement of total catastrophe for tragedy. This catastrophe must be so great, he claims, that it cannot be tied to notions of forgiveness or improvement inherent in the ideas of God and faith. He argues that tragic drama is mainly distinctive to the Western tradition: “All men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal” (3). He calls this idea a Greek one, emphasizing the fact that tragic forms are Hellenic in nature. Steiner cites Homer’s Iliad as “the primer of tragic art”:

the shortness of heroic life, the exposure of man to the murderousness and caprice of the inhuman, the fall of the City. Note the crucial distinction: the fall of Jericho or Jerusalem is merely just, whereas the fall of Troy is the first great metaphor of tragedy. (Steiner 5)

In contrast to the Hellenic world, Steiner makes the distinction that tragedy is not part of the Judaic or Christian faith. He insists upon the notion of the just versus the tragic and points out that the demand for justice makes up the burden inherent in the Judaic tradition. While the ancient Greeks

suffered from vengeful or indifferent gods, the Judeo-Christian tradition—with its notion of Christian redemption—is based on the idea that man can improve and perfect his condition. Steiner asserts: “Real tragedy can occur only where the tormented soul believes that there is no time left for God’s forgiveness” (332). Hence the difference between Oedipus and the non-tragic Everyman, who can change his fate by placing his faith in a benevolent and forgiving Saviour. If man is able to find salvation there is no disastrous end, and therefore no tragedy.

Steiner emphasizes the necessity of catastrophe in tragedy by maintaining: “I believe that any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe” (8). He calls a temporary disaster or resolution of the conflict “serious drama” rather than tragedy. The final moments of great tragedy involves “a fusion of grief and joy,” which Steiner believes is accomplished in plays from ancient Greece until Shakespeare, and experiences (somewhat of) a revival with Racine. But since then tragedy, he claims, is “blurred or still” (10). While his argument seems to hold up in his discussion of tragedies written from ancient times up to the French neo-classicists, it becomes ambiguous and problematic in his discussion of modernist playwrights such as Ibsen, Chekov, and Strindberg. While he recognizes Ibsen’s technical improvements to the genre, he is hesitant to place him the category of what he calls “true tragedy.”

Where Steiner focuses on the tragic situation, embedded in what he calls “catastrophe,” Arthur Miller centres his argument on character. In his article “Tragedy and the Common Man,” Miller places “ordinary man” in the tragic situation. He addresses Aristotle’s idea of the tragic hero’s noble status: “I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were” (3). His view on tragedy is refreshingly uplifting and optimistic. Miller addresses what he sees as an unfortunate fallacy of tragedy: “the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism” (6). By focusing on the main character in the tragedy, Miller highlights the fact that

every person—regardless of nobility or rank—is potentially subject to tragedy as well as capable of transcending that tragic experience. He asserts:

As a general rule to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society. (Miller 4)

The notion of personal dignity need not be tied to royalty, but may also be applied to the common man. The individual struggling to find his or her place in society is something we will return to in our investigation of A Doll’s House.

Throughout history, there has been a sense that the tragic world is one in which the fates or gods exist only to torture and test humanity. Miller brings this idea into a different perspective when he discusses the notion of *pathos* in his article “The Nature of Tragedy.” Miller writes:

the essential difference, and the precise difference, between tragedy and pathos is that tragedy brings us not only sadness, sympathy, identification and even fear; it also, unlike pathos, brings us knowledge or enlightenment.

(Miller 9)

This struggle for enlightenment gives the genre of tragedy a sense of hope rather than despair. Instead of the catastrophic world which Steiner depicts, Miller’s view of tragedy has a sense of reason and purpose. Man’s existence in a modern tragic world is no longer futile.

The genre of tragedy is indeed a compelling one which continues to inspire scholars of every age. Whereas some critics set out strict requirements, others highlight key factors; some impose rigid

categories while others maintain an essence of the tragic. Despite these many characteristics and differences of opinion, the idea of tragedy continues to appeal to playwrights throughout the world. The list of tragic requirements seems to change with each play, both old and new. It is our task to discover what makes our key texts specifically tragic and why.

2.1 SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

In his famous lecture series Shakespearean Tragedy, A.C. Bradley identifies the time frame of 1601 to 1608 as “Shakespeare’s tragic period” (72): the years when Shakespeare produces Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Timon of Athens, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, and Coriolanus. Bradley points out that Shakespeare would have been middle aged—between 27 and 44—and that “the world had come to look dark and terrible to him” (72). In a span of less than ten years, Shakespeare produced eight landmark plays which continue to prevail as true examples of the tragic genre.

Shakespeare drew upon several sources in his plays, including Ovid’s Metamorphosis for his main source of classical myth, and many of Christopher Marlowe’s plays. In The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays, Kenneth Muir highlights Marlowe’s influence on Shakespeare: “But, as everyone recognizes, his debt to Marlowe was more profound. His own blank verse was developed from Marlowe’s ‘mighty line’ and his own conception of tragedy was evolved from Marlowe’s” (Muir 8). His sources for Hamlet, specifically *The Spanish Tragedy* and the *Ur-Hamlet*, are somewhat untraceable. Whatever his specific sources for tragedy and Hamlet may be, Shakespeare succeeded in creating a highly unique form with its own specific characteristics.

There are technical factors in Shakespearean tragedy, some of which Shakespeare models after Roman playwright Seneca. These include the five act format, technical devices such as soliloquies and asides, and scenes of violence and horror onstage. Steiner remarks: “The Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists ransacked Seneca. They took from him his rhetoric, his ghosts, his sententious morality, his flair for horror and blood-vengeance; but not the austere, artificial practices of the neo-classic stage” (Steiner 21).

Bradley posits the complex question: “What is Shakespeare’s tragic conception, or conception of tragedy?” (15). He outlines the characteristics of the genre by highlighting some major traits. Bradley goes into detail about the hero of the story, clarifying that “Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of ‘high degree’: often with kings or princes” (18). He suggests that there is a definite sense of nobility in Shakespearean tragedy, whose focus always turns around noble characters such as kings, princes, senators, and politicians. Bradley further states:

His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence - perhaps caprice - of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival. (Bradley 19)

Since this fall has to be so great, the victim must be a person of considerable greatness. For this reason, Shakespeare places nobles at the centre of his tragic stories for, even though they come from a time and tradition far removed from our own, their plummet from their high thrones is something to which everyone can relate.

Bradley maintains that Shakespeare often represents abnormal conditions of the mind and introduces the idea of the supernatural. Ghosts, fairies, and witches play an important role in the action, as well as add to the moral dilemmas of the story. With the idea of the supernatural and ghosts comes the idea of religion. In ancient tragedy, mortals were subject to the inexplicable will of the gods. Their lot in life was to suffer through whatever injustices the gods could devise and become victims of, and perhaps survive, their divine power. The notion of the supernatural established by the ancients is further developed and present in Shakespeare’s tragic works. In the Elizabethan world, man was still subject to the supernatural — first in the form of Fortune’s Wheel

and later with the Christian ideal of God. Kings, Queens, and noblemen were as high as the ranks of man could go, but were still no match for the Divine. Bradley is careful to point out that these supernatural elements do not cause the tragedy; rather it is caused by the consequence of the actions of the tragic hero.

Steiner too argues that the presence of God is necessary in tragedy:

Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is *l'autre*, the “otherness” of the world. Call it what you will: a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush at the crossroads. It mocks us and destroys us. In certain rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose.

(Steiner 8-9)

Tragedy then is the search for meaning in a world controlled and dominated by a super-human force. In Hamlet, Shakespeare gives us a god-centred world and a hero who tries to make sense of that world.

Bradley focuses on the central character in the story: the tragic hero. He is clear when he states: “The story, next, leads up to, and includes, the death of the hero” (17). While Greek tragic stories do not necessarily end with the death of the main character (as in the cases of Oedipus or Orestes), Shakespearean tragedy ends with the hero’s death. Bradley also harkens back to Aristotle when he specifies that Shakespearean tragedy invokes in the audience tragic emotions, especially that of pity. We recognize the former glory of the noble hero, witness his great calamity on stage, and experience a catharsis in understanding his journey and ultimate death.

In an attempt to simplify his earlier question of “What is Shakespeare’s tragic conception, or conception of tragedy”, Bradley very neatly summarizes:

we may now alter our first statement, ‘A tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate,’ and we may say instead (what in its turn is one-sided, though less so), that the story is one of human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of such a man.

(Bradley 23)

Here then is our model for judging and assessing Shakespearean tragedy, as well as a point of reference from which to base the way that tragedy has changed and how it has stayed the same.

The characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy are complex and varied. They have become a formula which Shakespeare unknowingly created, paving the way for later playwrights to honour and uphold. In modern times, however, this genre has been re-examined and modified. Some purist scholars, such as Steiner and Krutch, believe that modern works of tragedy cannot exist and that Shakespeare (or Racine) was the last writer of true tragedy. This does not negate the fact that modern works of tragedy do in fact exist.

2.2 MODERN TRAGEDY

The idea of modern tragedy has been supported as much as contested, and no writer is more famous for penning and paving the way for the genre than Henrik Ibsen. In the late nineteenth century, the Norwegian playwright sought a different type of drama, one that challenged the ideals of his society and offered audiences an alternative to the stock mindset of melodrama and the well-made play. In The Playwright as Thinker, Eric Bentley discusses the genre of *tragédie bourgeoise*, or “bourgeois tragedy,” in relation to both older and more contemporary forms of tragedy. The genre developed in eighteenth century Europe and featured ordinary citizens from the bourgeois class as its heroes. Bentley goes on to describe the “four great men of the German theatre”—Richard Wagner, Georg Buchner, Friedrich Hebbel, and Otto Ludwig—and their influence on Ibsen, highlighting Herman Hettner’s Das Modern Drama as an especially important source for the dramatist. Bentley writes:

It would be foolish to make of Ibsen a purely Hebbelian, a purely German dramatist, though of the three springs from which Ibsen drank—the Scandinavian, the French, and the German—the last had been the most overlooked in non-German countries. He drank equally deeply of all three, and his synthesis of Norwegian romance, French realism, and the spirit of Hebbel is the first fully realized “bourgeois” tragedy. (Bentley 32)

Ibsen was influenced by and borrowed from many different writers and philosophers to create something new and unique. Bentley states: “Ibsen used many current modes and methods as every artist does; but he twisted them out of shape, imposed his own different meaning upon them” (102). It is because of this that he has come to be known as the Father of Modern Drama.

Ibsen subtitles his play A Doll's House "the modern tragedy" and, by doing so, simultaneously creates a new genre of drama and opens his works up to criticism. Despite the debate, the modern tragedies of Ibsen (and others) have been performed, studied, and challenged. Perhaps the most striking area of debate revolves around the notion of the modern tragic hero. Since we no longer live in the world of kings and princes, modern man (and woman) has become the focal point of the tragic story.

Miller discusses the importance of the central character in modern tragedy. He argues that the hero evolves from noble king to common man, and that this is a worthy and valid transition. Steiner argues that the catastrophe in tragedy needs to be absolute and total. This type of absolute catastrophe is by no means restricted to the realm of kings. The fact that we no longer have kings and great kingdoms to uphold does not mean that tragedy and great calamity no longer exist. The important thing to note is that man, common or otherwise, is able to transcend these calamities and that he continues to attempt to do so. Miller addresses the idea of *hubris* or the ancient notion that tragic man suffers an inherent fault from which he cannot escape. He emphasizes that "The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing - and need be nothing - but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status" (4). He modernizes Aristotle's notion of *hamartia* by asserting that man need not remain a passive victim of this character flaw. Tragedy then is tied to the notion that man refuses to accept his position and challenges the fate which befalls him.

The modern tragedy not only deals with common man but also common woman. Ibsen takes a revolutionary step forward by placing the female at the centre of the tragedy. Many of Ibsen's plays revolve around strong and wilful women, including Hedda Gabler, Rebecca West, and Nora Helmer. The heroic quest for one's rightful place in one's society is by no means limited to the male

population. It is important to note that the society in which Nora is caught and from which she emerges is the middle-class. In his article “Openings for Tragedy in Ibsen’s ‘Social Problem Plays’,” Thomas Van Laan says A Doll’s House is “an attempt to create a new kind of tragedy especially suited to modern middle-class experience” (227). This notion of middle-class is decidedly different from the battlefields of England or the fortresses of Elsinore. Ibsen sets his story within a scene from contemporary life by focusing on Nora Helmer, the epitome of middle-class: a housewife and mother, controlled and kept closely guarded first by her father and then by her husband. She knows little of the world beyond her four apartment walls and at the same time is lost inside the domestic prison they create.

In his article “Ibsen’s Search for the Hero,” John Northam notes that Greek and Shakespearean tragedy both contain the idea of man against the divine: “In both Greek and Elizabethan tragedy, man is in some way in conflict with forces that are divine and which therefore work in ways not fully comprehensible, and certainly not controllable, by him” (93). And while, as Bradley notes, the supernatural is an element rather than the cause of the tragic action, it nevertheless plays a large role in the unfolding of the drama. In Ibsen’s works, however, and those of other modern writers, the world is one in which there is a distinct loss of religion. This places the emphasis on the hero of the play – what is man to do without the perfectibility of God’s image? While the Greeks had their righteous deities and the Elizabethans had their Christian God, the modern tragic hero has only herself. While Ibsen places A Doll’s House within the framework of Christian ideals by setting the action at Christmas time, we will see how these ideals fail for Nora. Northam asserts: “She must go into a hostile world and educate herself” (107). She rejects traditional belief and this faith system and instead chooses to make her own decisions. Hence the focus is on the self in society rather than God.

Bradley is very clear about stating that Shakespeare's tragedies show the death of the hero. While the death of the hero is central in many of Ibsen's plays, it is not necessarily a requirement of modern tragedy. Instead, what lies at the centre of his stories is the death of an ideal. Steiner recognizes the genius of Ibsen and his ability to move the genre forward. He asserts:

He made the precariousness of modern beliefs and the absence of an imaginative world order his starting point. Man moves naked in a world bereft of explanatory or conciliating myth. Ibsen's dramas presuppose the withdrawal of God from human affairs, and that withdrawal has left the door open to cold gusts blowing in from malevolent though inanimate creation. But the most dangerous assaults upon reason and life come not from without, as they do in Greek and Elizabethan tragedy. They arise in the unstable soul. Ibsen proceeds from the modern awareness that there is a rivalry and unbalance in the individual psyche. The ghosts that haunt his characters are not palpable heralds of damnation whom we find in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. They are forces of disruption that have broken loose from the core of the spirit. Or, more precisely, they are cancers growing in the soul. In Ibsen's vocabulary, the most deadly of these cancers is "idealism," the mask of hypocrisy and self-deception with which men seek to guard against the realities of social and personal life. When "ideals" seize upon an Ibsen character, they drive him to psychological and material ruin as the Weird Sisters drive Macbeth. Once the mask has grown close to the skin, it can be removed only at suicidal cost. (Steiner 293-4)

The individual's inner conflict, rooted in the notion of an ideology, is the real conflict in modern

tragedy. The hero places faith in and oftentimes becomes a victim of this ideology, like Nora in A Doll's House. The end of the play sees not her own literal death, but rather the death of a belief system which clings to ideals of saviours and miracles, and a rejection of the social forces that determine the individual as the “new” gods of heredity and environment.

Miller insists:

Tragedy enlightens - and it must in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies us. In no way is the common man debarred from such thoughts or such actions. (Miller 5)

This “questioning” is exactly what Nora does in A Doll's House. Her dilemma involves the crushing discovery that her surroundings are far from stable and her subsequent decision to leave is nothing short of heroic. Miller asserts that the exalting quality of tragedy lies in this “thrust for freedom” – even if the hero may fail at the attempt, their effort in attaining that freedom is key.

This world of modern tragedy lies in stark contrast to Shakespearean tragedy. Although not a member of the monarchy or affiliated with kings, the modern tragic hero is nevertheless noble in his or her actions. The tragic world moves from a god-centered universe to a world which places (wo)man at its centre. The focus shifts from the nebulous supernatural forces to the problems of the individual in society. And rather than ending with the death of the hero, the modern tragic tale instead examines social problems without definite solution.

CHAPTER 3 HAMLET

3.1 THE RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK OF HAMLET

According to critics such as Steiner and Krutch, the elements of God and faith are essential to tragedy. They claim that truly tragic works contain a sense of faith and a situation where man's actions are controlled, at least in part, by an element of the supernatural. Steiner emphasizes that this supernatural element must be an unforgiving and perhaps unjust god, while Krutch emphasizes that "A tragic writer does not have to believe in God, but he must believe in man" (87). The important thing to note is that with the idea of a spiritual or religious order, man becomes a victim of its power.

Hamlet is a thinker, not a fighter—a university student rather than a soldier like Macbeth or Othello. In creating a character such as Hamlet, Shakespeare gives us a picture of a genuine philosopher and a pensive soul. His first soliloquy reveals his true feelings on recent events. His mother and step-father have urged him to shake off his grief and instead take comfort in the celebration of their marriage. For the hero, however, life is meaningless:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. (I.ii.129-132)

Hamlet's thoughts turn to suicide and yet he knows it is a sin. The world of Hamlet is set within a Christian framework. His mind is tormented with thoughts of ending his life, but still he has an awareness of the moral world and the consequence of this mortal sin. His father is dead, life seems pointless and futile, and he has no real direction. Aid comes to him in the form of his father's ghost.

Of the thirty-seven plays written by Shakespeare, only four contain ghosts: Julius Caesar, Richard III, Macbeth, and Hamlet. The idea of the supernatural is at the forefront of Hamlet, acting as the catalyst for the hero's dilemma. The ghost of Hamlet's father shapes the play in a specific way and sets the context for the entire drama. He appears at the very start of the play, armed in "fair and warlike form" (I.i.47). Hamlet Senior's spirit is upset and cannot find peace in the afterlife. Thus, the play opens with a clear sign of trouble in Denmark and creates psychological upset in Hamlet. When the Ghost reappears in Act I, scene 4, he makes his motives known to his son: your uncle's actions are not what they seem; avenge my death by killing the king. Prior to its appearance, Hamlet has been trying to deal with several life-altering events including his father's death, his mother's hasty remarriage, and the coronation of his uncle as the new king. Now, with this new information from the Ghost, he must put aside his grief and pursue another course of action: revenge. He sees his path beginning to unfold.

In The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy, G. Wilson Knight examines the character of the Ghost and his motives for lingering in the world of the living. He argues:

This spirit speaks to Hamlet alone both because he is his son and because his consciousness is already tuned to sympathize with death. Two things he commands Hamlet: (i) vengeance, and (ii) remembrance. The latter, but not the former, is, from the first, branded most deep on Hamlet's mind.

(Knight 44)

The Ghost demands that Hamlet avenge his name. One assumes that the knowledge of his father's murder and his uncle's crime is enough to see Hamlet charge sword-first into the King's chambers. Instead, our hero delays.

Our main concern with the appearance of the Ghost is its effect on the tragic hero. By

appearing at the very start of the play as well as in a few key moments during the drama, he shapes the moral universe of Hamlet. By revealing the true nature of his death, Hamlet Senior makes known the gravity of the situation. Hamlet considers the spirit a “host of heaven” (I.v.92) and claims to have no other purpose but his father’s command: “thy commandment alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain” (I.v.102-3). While his father compels him to obey his command, Hamlet struggles with the fact that murder goes against the Christian commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” The appearance of the Ghost forces Hamlet to consider another realm that exists after death: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (I.v.166-7). After his first encounter with his father’s spirit, Hamlet is filled with a sense of purpose that contrasts his previous grief and brooding. He has been given a clear and direct mission by the Ghost and yet he laments the weight of his task: “O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right” (I.v.188-9). He now faces a dilemma which can easily ruin him. He is unsure of the Ghost’s validity and tortures himself by contemplating the matter over and over.

The start of the play sees Hamlet stuck in thoughts of self-slaughter. While it is evident that he is aware of the power of the divine in his world, he is trapped in his own grief concerning his father’s death and—more importantly—his mother’s true character. Although the task weighs heavily on him, the appearance of his father’s Ghost, and the truths he reveals, offers Hamlet a clear path to follow.

3.2 A MORAL DESIGN

Despite the clear path laid out before him, Hamlet becomes wrought with uncertainty. His mind becomes melancholic and filled with doubt. The weight and gravity of Hamlet's dilemma makes him pessimistic and sceptical. He undergoes a transformation which concerns the court: his mother, King Claudius, Polonius, and even his love Ophelia suspect that he has gone mad. Knight argues that this madness is both feigned and in accordance with Hamlet's temperament:

On all other occasions his abnormal behaviour, though it certainly tends towards, and might even be called, madness in relation to his environment, is yet rather the abnormality of extreme melancholia and cynicism. Throughout the middle scenes of the play we become more closely acquainted with Hamlet's peculiar disease. He is bitterly cynical. (Knight 22)

This cynicism leads him to delay in his plan for vengeance. Before committing the grave crime of regicide, he must ensure the validity of the Ghost's tale. What he previously believed was a "host of heaven" he now considers to be a demon spirit: "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil" (II.2.610-1).

When the player troupe arrives he finds in them a welcome distraction. He realizes their visit can be a useful tool in his plot for revenge. In order to "out" the king's guilt, Hamlet compels others to act it out for him in the *Murder of Gonzago*. Bradley states: "He planned it, according to his own account, in order to convince himself by the King's agitation that the Ghost had spoken the truth" (84). The play is intended to convince Hamlet as much as identify the king's true nature. Once he is convinced of Claudius' crime, he seeks a way to exact revenge. Still, he cannot simply walk up to and stab the king. Bradley writes: "But what Hamlet wanted was not a private revenge, to be

followed by his own imprisonment or execution; it was public justice” (83). Hamlet’s family dilemma is tied closely to the well-being of the state and this sense of public justice. The politics and family values of the play cannot be separated, making the hero’s task even more difficult.

Once he is alone, he reproaches himself for delaying:

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing. No, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward? (II.ii.576-582)

Hamlet curses himself for being slow in action, for brooding on the matter rather than acting on it. He then resolves that the play is the device which perfectly suits his purpose. *The Mousetrap* becomes yet another form of procrastination on his part and also a valuable device he can use in his favour. By manipulating it so that others do the acting, he can remain passive but will have the proof he needs to once and for all reveal the king’s murderous crime.

In Hamlet’s next and most famous soliloquy, we find that the hero’s mind is so divided that his thoughts return to suicide. Earlier, he recognized the moral consequences of suicide and yet he returns to the notion here. He has become a victim of suffering and questions the nature of the task. He admits to himself that death holds no reprieve, for he is both frightened and wary of what the afterlife holds for him. He is still ruled by the notion of God in the universe and his small place in the world. Hamlet ponders what deed is nobler: to pursue violent and murderous action or resign himself to passivity. The crux of Hamlet’s dilemma is the injunction to kill to avenge his father when the Church dictates that murder is morally wrong. The Christian ideals which he has come to know

and trust oppose one another. Hamlet laments that, once again, he lacks direction and does not know which way to turn:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. (III.i.83-8)

Even though we set our minds to do something, we often do not follow through. Instead, we lose bravado and faith, as Hamlet has here. Where does his loyalty lie: to his father? to God? to himself? His plight is not simply personal; it affects the entire kingdom and country.

The "To Be" soliloquy is filled with language dealing with burden and duty: "suffer," "bear," "oppressor," "grunt and sweat." There is a definite sense of suffering on Hamlet's part. The weight of the task placed upon him by his father's Ghost is simply too much. It seems easier in Hamlet's tormented mind to commit suicide. This is not simply cowardice on his part. There is too great a burden on Hamlet since he is now morally responsible for releasing his father's spirit from Purgatory and putting his soul to rest. He sees that not only is there a Christian framework in the world, but also a specific moral design. Bradley comments that there is a sense of sickness in the character of Hamlet which in turn affects the entire mood of the play:

Here is a sickness of life, and even a longing for death, so intense that nothing stands between Hamlet and suicide except religious awe. And what has caused them?...It was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was aching with love, and

his body doubtless was weakened by sorrow. (Bradley 101)

The hero questions his faith, and with it his entire being. This self-doubt and indeed self-loathing makes him bitter with melancholy and cynicism regarding the universe. He very slowly comes to the realization that something is wrong in his world. This is tied to his refusal to admit to his “mother’s true nature.” Bradley calls this neglect: “In Hamlet there is a painful consciousness that duty is being neglected” (28).

After the *Murder of Gonzago*, Claudius’ guilt is clear and undeniable. Hamlet, therefore, can no longer doubt the Ghost and must turn his thoughts to his task of vengeance. He vows blood revenge and violence, switching again from thought to action. He chooses not to kill the seemingly reverent king while he prays, but slaughters Polonius only moments later. In the domestic scene between Hamlet and his mother (III.iv), the two confront each other in the queen’s chambers. Hamlet urges his mother to acknowledge her part in the tragedy of his father’s death while she pleads with Hamlet to explain his own erratic behaviour. We also see the hero commit his first act of murder by stabbing Polonius behind the arras – an impulsive and rather unheroic deed. Nevertheless, this proves he is indeed capable of killing and is not simply the coward he has accused himself of being. In the confusion that ensues, Hamlet verbally attacks his mother as he previously did Ophelia. Knight writes: “He tortures both of them, because he once loved them. They agonize him with the remembrance of what they once were to him, of what he himself is now” (26). The Ghost reappears, in normal dress rather than in armour, and completes the family portrait. He urges Hamlet to leave his mother unharmed, and inadvertently convinces Gertrude of her son’s madness. Hamlet obeys, but appeals to his mother to own up to her sins:

Confess yourself to heaven,

Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come,

And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue.
For in the fatness of these pury times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good. (III.iv.150-6)

His words, full of religious language, demand that the queen acknowledge her sins. It is clear that he is concerned with religious salvation and he tells his mother to consider her actions—as well as the consequences of those actions—beyond this human realm. He views himself as Heaven’s “scourge and minister” (III.iv.176) and finally begins to engage in his role as his God’s agent.

3.3 FAMILY TIES

Hamlet's dilemma is tied to a religious conflict but also to the conflict of his family. Aristotle comments on the notion of domestic or family tragedy in Poetics. He writes:

Whenever the tragic deed, however, is done within the family — when murder or the like is done or mediated by brother on brother, by son on father, by mother on son, or son on mother — these are the situations the poet should seek after. (tr. Bywater [1909]. Poetics 1453a 22-26)

The reason the poet should seek after these “situations” is because the idea of the family is something to which everyone can relate. This universal theme is the perfect subject with which to address the emotions of pity and fear. When the family structure breaks down, the hero is left to recognize and come to terms with this failure, and then seek an alternative in order to survive.

There are many reasons for the hero's misery in Hamlet: Bradley says it is in his melancholic nature, Knight claims that his melancholy is mixed with cynicism. A large reason for the hero's despair is that the themes in the play dramatically converge in the character of Hamlet, forcing him to try and make sense of the events in his world. Jan Kott in Shakespeare our Contemporary highlights the fact that politics lie at the forefront of the play. Hamlet has a duty to his family which conflicts greatly with his duty to the state: avenge the wrongful death of his father by committing regicide. Kott emphasizes the fact that family and politics are closely tied together in the play. He writes:

Hamlet, envisaged as a scenario, is the story of three young boys and one girl.

The boys are of the same age. They are called Hamlet, Laertes, Fortinbras.

The girl is younger, and her name is Ophelia. They are all involved in a

bloody political and family drama. As a result, three of them will die; the fourth will, more or less by chance, become the King of Denmark. (Kott 67)

His fairytale-like description of the characters serves as a reminder to the viewer that the play is after all a multiple-family drama. The family ties in Hamlet are unmistakable: Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras have all lost a father and the dramatics of the play are wrapped up in this fact.

Hamlet is in the unfortunate position of being an only child torn apart by two opposing parents. Once Hamlet learns the truth of the situation, the murder and adultery become distressingly real and he faces great inner turmoil. On the one hand, his mother urges him to forget his father's memory. Hamlet wears black and mourns the loss of his father while Gertrude seeks comfort in the arms of Claudius. She urges him, "Do not forever with thy veiled lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust" (I.ii.70-1). On the other hand, his father's spirit—ill at ease and unable to find rest in the afterlife—commands him to do the exact opposite. His parting words to his son are "Remember me" (I.v.91). Hamlet's tormented mind becomes even more troubled with the contrasting commands from his parents: one says forget while the other says remember.

The relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet is a close one. She shows genuine concern for her son throughout the drama. As her only child and son, Hamlet has no doubt come to rely on his mother and their bond is strong. She knows of his relationship with Ophelia, perhaps because he has engaged in talks with her about his love. Bradley writes of the connection between mother and son:

The truth is that, though Hamlet hates his uncle and acknowledges the duty of vengeance, his whole heart is never in this feeling or this task; but his whole heart is in his horror at his mother's fall and in his longing to raise her.

(Bradley 116)

Hamlet is forced to deal with many misfortunes in the play: his father's death, his new step-father in

the form of his uncle, the knowledge and consequent burden of avenging the Ghost of his father. But above all other catastrophes which have plagued Hamlet, the truth of his mother's adultery is by far the worst. Bradley asserts: "She did not merely marry a second time with indecent haste; she was false to her husband while he lived" (136.) Hamlet's misery is rooted in his mother's betrayal, which is evident in his first soliloquy, before he learns of his father's murder: "O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason, / Would have mourned longer" (I.ii.150-1). He verbally abuses her so harshly that his father's Ghost makes another appearance, this time to urge him to stop his abuse. Hamlet lashes out at his mother, accusing her of living

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty— (III.iv.92-4)

The reason for his abuse is that Gertrude has fallen so far from her pedestal. He used to idolize her and cannot accept that she is a mortal and has sinned. It is always difficult for children to accept flaws in their parents – like Cordelia refusing to speak when she begins to see inklings of Lear's old age in his speech and behavior. Here, Hamlet reacts in the opposite way, berating his mother and speaking cruel and hurtful words to her.

The first half of Hamlet sees the hero stuck in a moral and familial dilemma. His thought process is not simply to convince himself of the Ghost's validity. In recognizing that the spirit is in fact speaking the truth, he must also recognize the flaws in his world, both political and personal. Believing in the Ghost means that he must admit the breakdown in his family life, love life, and personal life. His entire faith system and what he has come to believe as spiritual order is threatened.

If he is to succeed in killing the king, it is absolutely necessary that Hamlet admit to his family's flaws. In order to do this, he must face some difficult truths. Knight states:

He suffers from misery at his father's death and agony at his mother's quick forgetfulness: such callousness is infidelity, and so impurity, and, since Claudius is the brother of the King, incest. It is reasonable to suppose that Hamlet's state of mind, if not wholly caused by these events, is at least definitely related to them. Of his two parents, one has been taken for ever by death, the other dishonoured for ever by her act of marriage. To Hamlet the world is now an 'unweeded garden'. (Knight 18)

His close relationship with his mother makes it even more difficult for Hamlet to accept and admit to her sins. Shakespearean tragedy is meant to show us exceptional calamity, contrasted with previous happiness and glory. Once he learns the truth of his mother's actions, there is an inkling that Hamlet's previous happiness was contrived or false. This is something he simply cannot face. Hamlet berates her, abuses her, threatens her – all in an attempt to convince himself that she too is human.

The first three acts of the play see Hamlet vacillating between action and thought. He convinces himself of his task and then talks himself out of it. His dilemma is closely tied to his ideas about Christian faith and the divine universe in which he lives. It is also embedded in his family situation, and he fluctuates between the vengeful spirit of his father and the moral short-comings of his mother.

Through a super-textual process of thought and over-contemplation, Hamlet begins to view himself as an agent of God. He sees not only a Christian framework, but also a moral design. While he accepts his role as avenger, and the burden of suffering that it brings, he is apprehensive of the consequences of acting out this vengeance. Death is constantly on his mind and yet he fears it. Once he comes to terms with death and truly looks it in the face, then he can embrace a noble death.

3.4 HAMLET'S ROLE IN THE MORAL DESIGN

Act IV shows Hamlet beginning to take control of his life. Claudius sends Hamlet away from Denmark, supposedly for his own safety. Before he leaves for England, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras marching to Poland. In this encounter, Hamlet receives a new sense of determination. This change in his demeanour is tied to a sense of religious Fatalism, and he accepts the idea that his actions have been pre-determined by God whose knowledge is infallible. Bradley remarks that “In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* not only is the feeling of a supreme power or destiny peculiarly marked, but it has also at times a peculiar tone, which may be called, in a sense, religious”(142). He is inspired by the example of the Norwegian prince, who is leading his army on to battle and death. In his final soliloquy, the hero undergoes a change:

Witness this army, of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,
Makes mouths at the invisible event;
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. (IV.iv.47-56)

While Hamlet is lost in a sea of confusion and self-doubt, Fortinbras marches on with resolve. He is plagued by fear and duty while Fortinbras can take his own destiny in his hands and lead his country

on to victory. He calls Fortinbras' sense of determination "divine ambition," showing his own willingness to tie his faith to a higher order. Fortinbras shows Hamlet that there is honour and nobility in taking decided action rather than remaining passive, even if death is the consequence.

There are a few key factors that contribute to Hamlet's acceptance of his purpose in God's moral design. The first is not an action on stage, but rather the missing action that occurs during his sea voyage. We learn that he evades Claudius' death command, turns the tables on his traitors, and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. We hear of his boarding of the pirate ship, being taken as their sole prisoner, and his seemingly miraculous salvation. Not only do they spare his life but they drop him conveniently back on the shores of Denmark. His brushes with death seem too much of a coincidence and more like divine plan. Hamlet seems to recognize this and begins to act with purpose and meaning instead of vacillating between procrastination and delay.

Hamlet's new sense of resolve occurs once he has returned from England – which leads the audience to question what happened on that journey. In regards to the "missing" chunk, where Hamlet is on board the pirate ship, Bradley writes:

with the events of the voyage Shakespeare introduces that feeling, on Hamlet's part, of his being in the hands of Providence. The repeated expressions of this feeling are not, I have maintained, a sign that Hamlet has now formed a fixed resolution to do his duty forthwith; but their affect is to strengthen in the spectator the feeling that, whatever may become of Hamlet, and whether he wills it or not, his task will surely be accomplished, because it is the purpose of a power against which both he and his enemy are impotent, and which makes of them the instruments of its own will. (Bradley 142)

There is indeed a sense that Hamlet is willing to accept and put his trust in the hands of

“Providence.” As opposed to his tormented thoughts of earlier acts, he acts with a sense of Fatalism. Earlier he struggled with the validity of that “host of heaven,” his father’s Ghost. Now that Claudius’ crimes are undeniable, he acknowledges his lack of free will and his role in God’s plan. Nothing is left now but the task God has assigned. Upon his return, his fixed resolution is so striking mainly because it stands in great contrast to his previous inaction. Unlike the musings and ponderings in the first four acts, Hamlet delivers no soliloquies in Act V. Now he acts boldly, as if he believes his salvation is in the hands of a higher power.

Act V opens in a churchyard as Hamlet stops to look upon two gravediggers who are preparing for Ophelia’s funeral. They remark that she is to be given a Christian burial, despite the fact that she took her own life and is therefore guilty of mortal sin. The Hamlet universe is plagued with thoughts of morality and God. Knight uses this scene to explain that the real theme of the play is death. He argues:

In the exquisite prose threnody of the Graveyard scene the thought of physical death is again given utterance. There its pathos, its inevitability, its moral, are emphasized: but also its hideousness. Death is truly the theme of this play, for Hamlet’s disease is mental and spiritual death. So Hamlet, in his most famous soliloquy, concentrates on the terrors of an after life. (Knight 28)

He notes that death has been present throughout the entire tragedy. In contrast to the world in which he lives, Hamlet is “the ambassador of death walking amid life” (32.) Earlier, he feared the forbidding unknown of the afterlife. Here, however, holding skulls and standing in graves, he looks upon death without fear.

In his discussion of Dionysus, Nietzsche sees a commonality in the figure of Hamlet:

In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet, both have gazed into the true

essence of things, they have acquired knowledge and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion – this is the lesson of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom about Jack the Dreamer who does not get around to acting because he reflects too much, out of an excess of possibilities, as it were. No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action, both in the case of Hamlet and in that of Dionysiac man. Now no solace has any effect, there is a longing for a world beyond death, beyond the gods themselves; existence is denied, along with its treacherous reflection in the gods or in some immortal Beyond. (Nietzsche 40)

Hamlet has seen the world in a brighter light and can recall a time only a few months ago when all seemed well in his world. Now, he experiences utter and unabashed sadness when he realizes the grave is being prepared for Ophelia's body. Beside her grave, he pauses to reflect and concludes that all things turn to dust. There is no sense that he fears death, as he has earlier in the play. Here he reconciles himself to the fact that death is inevitable: Yorick, Alexander, and Caesar have all returned to dust and eventually he will too. Hamlet has lost his father to murder, his mother to adultery, and finally must come to terms with the loss of Ophelia, his true love. He knows that the course laid before him does not lead to a happy family unit of his own, but rather to his own inevitable death.

In contrast with the rest of Hamlet, the final scene of the play is full of action. The hero's sense of resignation and acceptance of his duty is apparent when he admits to Horatio that God has a

plan for all of his beings:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special
providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now,
'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now;
if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is
all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves knows, what
is't to leave betimes? Let be (V.ii.220-5)

After escaping death, he recognizes his role as God's agent. Once he has looked death in the face, there is no sense of fear in the hero. He speaks with insight and resignation, telling his friend that he is ready to be an instrument in the moral plan of the Everlasting. He recognizes that death awaits him no matter what actions may come to pass. In the climactic duel between Laertes and Hamlet, the hero finally manages to complete the task of killing Claudius. His own death is close and he delays no longer. The tragic hero falls and the kingdom goes to Fortinbras of Norway. Fortinbras orders his captains "Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage" (V.ii.397). Indeed he has finally acted like a soldier by accepting his fate and allowing himself to be a vehicle for divine ambition.

Hamlet has not undergone a religious conversion so much as he has returned to a faith system in which he can now trust. He recognizes the flaws in his family unit, and has finally admitted that he can never return to the sense of family that existed when his father was alive. Bradley remarks:

[There is] a sense in Hamlet that he is in the hands of Providence. This had, indeed, already shown itself at the death of Polonius and perhaps at Hamlet's farewell to the King, but the idea seems now to be constantly present in his mind. (Bradley 120)

There is an unremarkable shift in Act V, which sees Hamlet acting out a Fate which he knows he is

meant to embrace. Here then is the beginning of the real action in the play: Hamlet begins to accept the things which he now knows to be true. He sacrifices his love Ophelia, his friendships, his relationship with his mother, all so that he may complete his task.

We have seen how the context of religion frames the entire play. The figure of the Ghost introduces, from the very start, the idea that the world is governed by a spiritual design that is greater than the crimes of Claudius or the musings of Hamlet. The hero must reconcile himself first to the fact that the moral order of his world requires he commit a grave sin, and then allow himself to act out his role in that moral order. After this comes the more difficult task of admitting to the sins of his mother. These threats to his world—both moral and personal—lead Hamlet to brood and deliberate, wavering between conviction and indecision. Once he realizes God's plan, he learns to see death as a natural and inevitable consequence of Fatalism. He accepts his role as God's agent and faces a brave and noble death. He may not be able to change events of the past, but there is a definite sense that he is ready and willing to face the path which God has set before him. When he finally meets his end, he does so with active and deliberate purpose, with a sense that he has finally completed what he set out to do. Bradley notes that the death of the hero is necessary in Shakespearean tragedy. The audience does witness the eventual death of the hero (and many others), but there is value and nobility in this death.

CHAPTER 4 A DOLL'S HOUSE

4.1 THE COMMON WOMAN

In his article entitled "Shakespeare and Ibsen," Halvdan Koht discusses the influence of Hamlet on Ibsen. He writes that Ibsen went to see several of Shakespeare's plays performed in Copenhagen in 1852.

No doubt, of all these plays *Hamlet* impressed him the most strongly. More than forty years later, he still recalled the two performances with great pleasure and said he had learned much from the comparison of the actors who had the leading part. In 1857, in a detailed review of a new Norwegian drama performed at the Christiania Theatre, he inserted an allusion to the same drama: "In *Hamlet* it is just the lack of active energy of the hero that determines the dramatic effect of the whole work." (footnotes omitted, Koht 80)

It would be incorrect to assert that the genius of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and its hero's "lack of active energy," had a direct influence on Ibsen's own overly-active heroine in A Doll's House. It is important, however, to note that Ibsen was impressed by Shakespeare's works. Koht further states: "Shakespeare helped him find himself. Shakespeare entered his life as a force of liberation" (82).

There is also a notable shift from Shakespeare's noble man to Ibsen's common woman. A Doll's House is set not in the castle at Elsinore or the large sweeping battlefields of Denmark. Rather, Ibsen stages his play in the Helmers' small apartment home. In his very detailed opening stage directions, he precisely describes the set. In his essay "*Ghosts*: The Tragic Rhythm in a Small

Figure,” Francis Fergusson comments on Ibsen’s settings: “Ibsen always felt this exhilarating wilderness behind his cramped interiors” (118). The Helmer house is indeed cramped with chairs, table, sofa, stove, even a piano. While she calls outdoors to her children and others, Nora does not leave the stage for the first two acts. Instead, she paces about the small space making the room seem even more confined. By containing the action to one room with a few different exits, Ibsen creates the feeling that the audience is looking upon one family’s closest interactions. The action is contained to one room, the cast is pared down to nine members, and the majority of the action is performed by only five of those characters. There is also, unmistakably, a sense of no escape for Nora.

In his article “Ibsen’s Family Drama,” Mitsuya Mori draws the relationship between Nora’s family and her home. He notes the importance of setting A Doll’s House within an apartment:

It is no coincidence, perhaps, that Nora’s family, the first nuclear family in Ibsen’s modern dramas, lives in an apartment house in a city; the apartment house here appears for the first time in Ibsen’s drama and, for that matter, in Scandinavian drama. (Mori 160)

The idea of an apartment building as opposed to a house is a modern notion; Mori notes that Nora’s apartment complex is perhaps the first one in Scandinavian drama. This shows one example of Ibsen’s forward thinking and the reason he is known as the father of modern drama. He breaks away from the style of the time and of his predecessors and instead paves the way for a new form of drama: Realism.

Michael Meyer effectively summarizes key moments in Ibsen’s life and discusses how they reflect his works in his essay “Ibsen: A Biographical Approach.” He addresses Ibsen’s new form by discussing his rejection of the old:

He threw out the old artifices of plot which are usually associated with the name of Eugene Scribe but of which Shakespeare and Schiller were also guilty: mistaken identities, overheard conversations, intercepted letters, and the like. It was a slow and painful process for Ibsen to rid himself of these; something of the old machinery is still there as late as *A Doll's House*; but his last ten plays are free of it. (Meyer 15)

Ibsen utilizes the devices and innovations of Shakespeare and others and builds upon them. During the time of his writing *A Doll's House*, Scribe had made the constructs of the *piece bien faite* or “well-made play” famous. The nineteenth century audience would have expected and been accustomed to the five-act structure, the climactic scandal or quarrel, and the nicely tied-up happy ending. Ibsen rejects this formulaic and predictable structure, opting instead to create what he calls “the modern tragedy.”

Meyer notes: “There was no place in Ibsen’s plays for the old operatics” (16). Instead, his plays did away with asides and soliloquies, incorporating realistic dialogue instead. Ibsen himself comments on his choice of realistic language in a letter to the *Spectator*:

‘The illusion I wanted to create,’ he declared, ‘is that of reality ... We are no longer living in the age of Shakespeare... My new drama is no new tragedy in the ancient acception; what I desired to depict was human beings, and therefore I would not let them talk in “the language of the gods”.’ (Meyer 22)

He does in fact succeed in creating the “illusion” of reality, and paves the way for Realistic drama. The fourth wall is lifted on the action and the audience learns of the characters’ motives through their words and actions. The play is shortened to three acts instead of five, and the conclusion is anything but resolved. *A Doll's House* transcends the genre when, after incriminating papers are

recovered, Nora rejects the expected return to normality. In The Quintessence of Ibsenism, George Bernard Shaw notes Ibsen's movement towards a new type of drama:

This, then, is the extension of the old dramatic form effected by Ibsen. Up to a certain point in the last act, A Doll's House is a play that might be turned into a very ordinary French drama by the excision of a few lines, and the substitution of a sentimental happy ending for the famous last scene: indeed the very first thing the theatrical wiseacres did with it was to effect exactly this transformation, with the result that the play thus pithed had no success and attracted no notice worth mentioning. But at just that point in the last act, the heroine very unexpectedly (by the wiseacres) stops her emotional acting and says: "We must sit down and discuss all this that has been happening between us." And it was by this new technical feature: this addition of a new movement, as musicians would say, to the dramatic form, that A Doll's House conquered Europe and founded a new school of dramatic art. (Shaw 175)

Ibsen employs old techniques throughout and up to a certain point in A Doll's House. He then deliberately alters the form in order to show the audience that the heroine of the play is forced to make her own decisions and in turn accept the consequences of those decisions.

In many of his works Ibsen focuses the viewer's eye from noble man to common woman. While many have argued that A Doll's House is a play that deals with feminism, Fergusson maintains that "Ibsen himself protested that he was not a reformer but a poet" (110). Nora comes to some difficult realizations throughout the course of the play, all of which contribute to her desire to begin the search for her true self. In relation to feminism and the search for one's self, Esslin writes:

If one looks at the underlying theme of Ibsen's *oeuvre* in this way, his

preoccupation with the problem of women's rights, which so scandalized his contemporaries, also appears in a different perspective: Ibsen himself repeatedly insisted that in writing *A Doll's House* he had not, basically, been concerned with feminism, but merely with the problem of Nora's self-realization as a human being. If Hilda Wangel destroys Solness by imposing upon him the self-image of a conquering hero unafraid to ascend to the highest tower, so Helmer has imposed upon Nora the degrading role and self-image of a child-wife; and in walking out of the marriage she merely - that seems to have been the point Ibsen was concerned with - asserts her human rights to fashion her own self-image and to create her own integrated self.

(Esslin 78-79)

By shifting the focus away from kings and gods, Ibsen allows us to see ourselves more clearly reflected in the action. He depicts human beings in their common homes, and shows that their inner struggles are as striking as those of nobles and kings.

4.2 THE ABSENCE OF GOD

While Shakespeare's places Hamlet in a God-centred universe, Ibsen sets his modern drama in a world devoid of religion. That is not to say that all of his plays are without God – in fact religion is a strong element in Ghosts with the character of Pastor Manders as well as in The Master Builder. But Nora has no moral force guiding her, which makes A Doll's House a very good point of comparison for Hamlet.

Hamlet is faced with a dilemma when his father's Ghost appears, but Nora has no real role model, divine or otherwise. Her father's death happens long before the events of Act I, and she has no mother to rely on for a parental example. The absence of God in the play is so great that it seems strange that religion is at times even briefly mentioned. Esslin very adeptly summarizes the idea of God and salvation by writing:

As long as man was deemed to have an eternal essence, a soul which had been especially created for him by God and destined to persist - in Heaven or Hell - for all subsequent eternity, there was no problem about the nature of human identity. Each individual was believed to have his own special character and potential, which he might or might not fully develop to its utmost realization, but which eventually would emerge into eternity. (Esslin 76)

The focus here is on the individual's own potential and not the perfection of God's ideal example. Nora's challenge is to make sense of her own possibility without the aid of God or religion.

There is a sense of religious context within the play, primarily because it takes place at Christmas time. Ibsen chooses to set his play at a time when the miracle of Christ's birth is prominent in the minds of Christians. The symbol of the Christmas tree stands on stage as a constant

reminder of the family spirit invoked by the season. It also mimics the action of the play: in Act I it is brought in undecorated, signifying potential and possibility. When Mrs. Linde unexpectedly drops in to see Nora at the start of the play, she (in her travelling clothes) stands in sharp contrast to the cosy household setting in which she visits. Without a home, husband, or children, Kristine Linde is the very opposite of Nora, a woman brimming with happiness and excitement, eager to unwrap the magic of the Christmas season. Mori writes that “the most significant innovation in *A Doll’s House* was that the so-called nuclear family was presented on stage as symbolizing modern society in miniature” (156). Nora’s happy family reflects the society of her time: the father as caregiver, the wife devoted to her children, and to top it all off it is Christmas. But by Act II the tree “now stands ripped of ornament, burned-down candle stubs on its ragged branches” (72), and we see how Nora’s perfect life is slowly beginning to fall apart. In Act III, the miracle of Christmas has done nothing to aid Nora in her search for herself and the tree is not mentioned at all.

In contrast to Hamlet’s lack of action, in *A Doll’s House* Nora is overacting. She has performed the part of dolly-daughter for her father, and now acts the part of dolly-wife for Torvald. Nora is eager to act the part of Torvald’s little pet, be it skylark, squirrel, or songbird. But she acts without purpose or authentic feeling. Nora’s words and actions boast that she is a willing participant in the drama—the melodrama—that is unfolding. She tells Kristine about the “miracle” that will happen when Torvald will come to her rescue:

Nora. Oh, how could you ever understand it? It’s the miracle now that’s going to take place.

Mrs Linde. The miracle?

Nora. Yes, the miracle. But it’s so awful, Kristine. It mustn’t take place, not for anything in the world. (89)

The miracle she imagines is not a religious occurrence or display of divine intervention. Rather it is tied to her idealistic view of Torvald. When Krogstad has revealed the truth of her forgery, she believes her husband will save her from the slander and honour her name. Nora constantly refers to Torvald as her “saviour” and believes she will find strength and salvation in him. Rather than sully her husband’s good name, she vows to die in order to save his honour. While Hamlet sees suicide as a mortal sin, Nora romanticizes it. Since she has no viable religion to uphold, she disregards the consequence of her actions. The miracle she anticipates is not a mystifying religious experience but rather embodied in the fairytale idea that Torvald, her saviour, will come to her rescue.

In his book *A Doll’s House: Ibsen’s Myth of Transformation*, Errol Durbach discusses Nora’s willingness to play a part in her own unfolding drama:

Part of Nora’s difficulty is that she succumbs too readily to the melodramatic frame of mind, not only in her evaluation of people but in her code of conduct. For if Nora’s value system has been shaped by the cultural philosophy of the *piece bien faite*, her behavior betrays many of the technical features of melodramatic theatre—the broad gestural emoting, the scaled-down telegrammatic style of her utterance, the self-dramatizing heroics, the fantasy of suicide. (Durbach 69)

Nora does not see the seriousness in committing suicide; instead she focuses on the dramatics of the act. At the end of Act II she claims: “Five. Seven hours to midnight. Twenty-hours to the midnight after, and then the tarantella’s done. Seven and twenty-four? Thirty-one hours to live” (93). By melodramatically counting down the remainder of her life, she shows that she believes in the fantasy and heroic rescue by Torvald. When this fails to happen, Nora realizes that their roles of dolly and master have utterly failed and her notions about miracles and salvation come to a crashing halt. The

truth of her crimes and the threat to his reputation are out in the open, and Torvald will have none of her theatrics: “No more playacting” (105), he orders her.

Unlike the world of Hamlet, there is no divine force in A Doll’s House to dictate which path is right or wrong. Nora has no father figure, in the form of a Ghost or otherwise, to tell her which course of action to take. In fact, she has no religious model with which to guide her or tell her what is good and moral. This element has been absent throughout the play and Nora explains it herself in her exchange with Torvald before she leaves:

Helmer. Why can’t you understand your place in your own home? On a point like that, isn’t there one everlasting guide you can turn to? Where’s your religion?

Nora. Oh, Torvald, I’m really not sure what religion is.

Helmer. What—?

Nora. I only know what the minister said when I was confirmed. He told me religion was this thing and that. When I get clear and away by myself, I’ll go into that problem too. I’ll see if what the minister said was right, or, in any case, if it’s right for me. (111)

In a desperate attempt to make her stay, Torvald throws in Nora’s face the issue of religion. This argument, like all the others he offers, fails as it has the entire play. The universe of A Doll’s House is one that is devoid of God: she has been told what religion is but doesn’t fully understand it. It cannot, therefore, be an “everlasting guide” for her. Instead of relying on religion in her life, she has relied on the example put forth by her father and her subsequent relationship with her own family. All she has is wrapped up in her family values, namely her relationship with Torvald. When the miracle Nora dreams of does not happen, she begins to see her family for what it really is.

4.3 FAILED FAMILY

Mori very effectively sums up the nature of a healthy family and the large role it plays in A Doll's House:

Family can be maintained only when the interrelationships of family members are functioning in a positive force which causes them to develop their personalities. If the functioning is not as such, the family is not a genuinely unified one even though it may appear so. (Mori 167)

The Helmer family is anything but healthy. If we look into her past we can see a picture of Nora's family. The examples of her own upbringing mainly by her nurse Anne-Marie, her relationship with her father, and her life with Torvald are what she has come to recognize as family. The instability and unhealthy nature of these relationships are all points of reference for her and have contributed to Nora as a person.

Nora's example of parenting has been handed down to her from her father. When the audience meets Nora she is a mother and wife. We do not see her as a daughter but we can ascertain much about her relationship with her father from references to him throughout the play. At the very opening of the play, when Nora coaxes money from Torvald, he remarks: "You're an odd little one. Exactly the way your father was" (46). Later in the play, Mrs. Linde refers to Nora as "your father's daughter." Her relationship with her father is the one in which she has learned how to become a doll. She has learned nothing from this negative example of parenthood; her father did not invest the time necessary to show her the ways of adulthood because he regarded her as a simple, non-thinking doll. When Torvald learns of Nora's forgery, he seethes at her:

Helmer [*striding about*]. Oh, what an awful awakening! In all these years—

she who was my joy and pride—a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal! How infinitely disgusting it all is! The shame! [*NORA says nothing and goes on looking straight at him. He stops in front of her.*] I should have suspected something of the kind. I should have known. All your father’s flimsy values—be still! All your father’s flimsy values have come out in you. No religion, no morals, no sense of duty. (105)

He accuses Nora of being without morals, a result of her father’s own “flimsy values.” The idea of the sins of the father being passed on to the child is most apparent in the character of Dr. Rank, who remarks: “My poor, innocent spine, serving time for my father’s gay army days” (81). He has inherited his disease by way of physical disability, much like Oswald’s syphilis in Ghosts. Torvald is making the point that Nora cannot escape her hereditary and true nature: an immoral parent leads to an immoral child. But Ibsen, by having his heroine leave her dollhouse, makes a different point. He shows how Nora has been nurtured in this way by her father, and how she might inherit his “flimsy values.” He subsequently rejects this notion by allowing his heroine to choose to live a different life.

This negative parental example of her father is compounded by the absence of a mother in A Doll’s House. When Krogstad first appears on stage in Act I, his interactions with Nora set off a chain of events which force the heroine to examine her past actions. She continually maintains that she forged her father’s signature to both spare his ailing mind and save her husband’s life. But now she begins to worry about the legal consequences of her criminal act. In a conversation with her old nursemaid Anne-Marie, she says:

Nora. Do they ask much for me?

Anne-Marie. They’re so used to having Mama around, you know.

Nora. Yes, but Anne-Marie, I can’t be together with them as much as I want.

Anne-Marie. Well small children get used to anything.

Nora. You think so? Do you think they would forget their mother if she was gone for good? (73)

The brief interchange points the audience to her past actions with her children and perhaps makes us realize the truth of her words. We recall Nora's own childish delight at hiding the Christmas tree and her take-them-or-leave-them attitude toward the children – she plays with them when she wants and keeps them confined in the nursery when it suits her. She treats them like playthings rather than children, perpetuating sexist stereotypes by giving them typical gender-specific gifts: a sword and horse for the boys, a doll and cradle for the girl. Although Nora has been on stage and in the forefront of the action for the majority of the play, we never see her acting as a mother. Her idea of mothering and nurturing her children is simply hiding treats for them on Christmas and entertaining them for a few moments a day. Sadly, Anne-Marie would make a better mother for Nora's children, for Nora fails to realize the duties involved in truly nurturing her children. She has had no mother and she in turn has not been a good mother to her three children.

Nora sees herself acting out the same example of an unhealthy family relationship with her own three children. This notion is present in her mind as early as the end of Act I where she states, "Hurt my children—? Poison my home?" (71). At first she dismisses the notion, continuing on with the melodrama of her life. Eventually, however, she recognizes the crimes of her father and her own crimes against her children. By living in her doll's house she is perpetuating a false sense of family, the same ideals that were passed on to her, and raising little dolls for others to manipulate and control in the future. Mori summarizes this by stating:

Nora comes to realize that she is in a family structure of male-led pseudo-unity. She does not make scapegoats of her children to maintain balance with

her husband, but breaks up the relationship. (footnote omitted, Mori 169)

Rather than repeating the pattern of making dolls of her children, she begins to realize the need for change. Her own nurturing reflects her father's, and she realizes the danger in giving her three kids the same life that she has had.

Nora's interactions with her husband are by far the most destructive example of family relations in A Doll's House. Throughout the play, both husband and wife have been acting out their parts: he as breadwinner and husband, she as dolly and wife. They have lived the past eight years in a delicate balance of role-playing. He has enjoyed having her at home as his little pet, not to mention the rewards of sexual pleasure he revels in once she has performed to his standards. She in turn has found fulfilment and contentedness in pleasing him, in gaining his favour, and in using her sexual wiles to eke money out of him to pay off her secret debt. When the delicate balance of their false marriage is shaken, Nora is so tied up in her romantic ideals that she refuses to see the brutal truth of the matter. She constantly makes reference to "the miracle," assigning it romantic notions over religious importance. She clings to these notions beyond reason but eventually they fail. When her crime of forgery is out in the open, Torvald's first and only concern is not for Nora, but himself.

Nora's romantic ideals are dashed when Torvald instead berates and abuses her, accusing her of ruining his life after having finally secured an important post at the bank. In a state of panic and rage, he shouts at her: "I'll be swept down miserably into the depths on account of a featherbrained woman!" (106). Her miracle has not happened and she is instead left with the sobering truth about the nature of her husband and their sham of a life together. Moments later, when Krogstad's letter arrives along with his dismissal of the whole ugly mess, Torvald once again changes in an instant. He rejoices in the turn of events, burns the evidence, and wishes the situation would "fade like a dream" (107). His troubles are far from over, for Nora has seen her relationship with him in the plain

and stark light of day. She cannot stay in this house any longer; she must go out and find herself.

Torvald soon realizes the futility in trying to convince her to stay. He switches to a pathetic man, pleading to be any part of her life as a friend, brother, or even financial supporter. She must and does refuse his offers of help. Mori ties the notion of power to money:

Money belongs to men, and so Nora prides herself on being equal to men by earning money herself...She refutes all this power structure at the end; she even refuses Helmer's offer of financial aid after she leaves home. This was, and still is, the real threat to male dominance. (Mori 166)

While the issue of money has played an important role throughout the play, the real conflict for power is not male over female, but rather individual over individual. She admits that her treatment as a doll was simply transferred from her father to Torvald. In sharp contrast to the nervous bird flitting about, she says to her husband with great composure: "I've been wronged greatly, Torvald—first by Papa, and then by you" (109). Because of her father's treatment, it has been easy for her to slip into a similar role with Torvald. Nora decides to reject this lifestyle and chooses to live alone rather than acting as a personal plaything. By placing his heroine in a god-less world without a proper parenting example, Ibsen makes clear that religion and parenting have failed for Nora.

Now that Nora's path is clear, she—like Hamlet—must act. What prompts her to slam the door on this life of pretence is the realization that her entire thought system has died. Like Hamlet, Nora's catalyst to leave at the end of the play is rooted in the breakdown of her family. Ibsen has left Nora without a moral guide, without a strong father figure, and without a loving marriage partner. She slowly begins to see the breakdown of her family: her father was a poor role model and she herself is a less-than-perfect mother. When Torvald's true nature becomes known, Nora realizes the death of an ideology. She has not had a proper union or partnership in marriage. Torvald fails to act

out the role of her saviour and hence, her role as the doll ends. She calmly leaves the room to take off her fancy dress and packs a small suitcase, each calculated movement signifying the death of her dolly ideology. Meyer notes that the play “was not about women’s rights but human rights, the need for every being, be he man or be she woman, to find out who he or she really is and to become that person” (22). Nora has realized that there is a person outside of her home, waiting to be discovered: that person is herself.

4.4 DEATH OF AN IDEOLOGY

While the conclusion of A Doll's House and Nora's decision to leave both seem sudden, there are key moments in the play that hint at her true feelings. Much of Nora's actions throughout the play exhibits her need to please Torvald by being his little dolly. There are several scenes, however, which demonstrate her own feelings and motives, including the famous scene with Dr. Rank and the silk stockings. When Nora's secret crime is about to be exposed, she shares this interlude with Dr. Rank, her husband's best friend. She attempts to coax money out of the old, ailing doctor while her husband rests next door in his study. The scene has always been peculiar in that Nora, who acts delicately with her husband, approaches the doctor here with such blatant sexuality. There are many things wrong with the circumstances leading up to this scene: Nora is a married woman attempting to seduce her husband's best friend; Torvald is mere steps away while this is all happening; it is clear that Dr. Rank is in love with her and would willingly give her anything she desires; he is much older and is dying of an incurable disease. Nora dismisses these many details and instead uses her sexual prowess to entice and seduce the old doctor. At the end of the scene, when Dr. Rank admits his love for Nora, she instantly sobers and the charade ends:

Nora. Ah, dear Doctor Rank, that was really horrid of you.

Rank. That I've loved you just as deeply as somebody else? Was that mean?

Nora. No, but that you came out and told me. That was quite unnecessary—

Rank. What do you mean? Have you known—? [*The MAID comes in with the lamp, sets it on the table, and goes out again.*] Nora—Mrs Helmer—I'm asking you: have you known about it?

Nora. Oh, how can I tell what I know or don't know? Really, I don't know

what to say—Why did you have to be so clumsy, Dr. Rank! Everything was so good.

Rank. Well, in any case, you now have the knowledge that my body and soul are at your command. So won't you speak out?

Nora [*looking at him*]. After that?

Rank. Please, just let me know what it is.

Nora. You can't know anything now.

Rank. I have to. You mustn't punish me like this. Give me the chance to do whatever is humanly possible for you.

Nora. Now there's nothing you can do for me. Besides, actually, I don't need any help. You'll see—it's only my fantasies. That's what it is. Of course! [*Sits in the rocker, looks at him, and smiles.*] What a nice one you are, Dr. Rank.

Aren't you a little bit ashamed, now that the lamp is here? (83-4)

Here it becomes very clear what Nora's motive are and what drives her. The only way she knows how to get her way with men—be it her father, her husband, or her friend—is to use her sexuality. We have seen how she sneaks macaroons and money from Torvald and now we see how very inappropriate her behaviour can be. She toys with an old man and then quickly stops the charade once it becomes too real for her.

While there are many things in the play that confirm that she is a “doll” living as her husband's play-thing, this scene very clearly shows that she knows how to use her femininity and sexuality to get what she wants. Northam discusses this scene and makes the connection between Nora the flirt and Nora the hero:

All this sexual teasing of Rank, for example, with her stockings and her

tasteless jokes about his disease—as I read it, Ibsen is showing us here the bad results of her upbringing, first by her father and then by her husband. She can get her own way with men by cajoling, by teasing—and she has learnt no other way more self-respecting. That is why she flirts so cruelly with Rank—not because she gets fun out of it, but because it is the only way she knows of dealing with men. It is the spoilt Nora who does the flirting—it is the heroic woman underneath, the woman of fundamentally sound principles who puts a stop to the nonsense when it begins to offend her sense of rightness. She puts an end to the interview even though it means throwing away her last chance of salvation from a fate that she sees as dreadful... That is why the scene is important—another instance of heroism. (Northam 105)

In realizing the error of her actions with Dr. Rank, and by ending the scene with the call for light, Nora starts down the path in her journey to becoming a true hero. She takes a step toward becoming free from her doll's house and breaking out into the real world.

Nora's dolly status and true self converge in the scene where she dances the tarantella. The dance encompasses many ideas implicit throughout the play. We know the costume is a souvenir of the Helmers' trip to Capri: a reminder of their sojourn and Torvald's recovery. No doubt it is also a reminder of the sexual romps that happened between husband and wife; a little dress up fantasy that Torvald has constructed and furthered with his notes of choreography and repairs to the costume. Torvald shares his trained doll with the audience at the Stenborgs' party, indicating that this is not the first time he has paraded her in this way.

Nora's rehearsal begins as a means of distraction from Krogstad's letter. She begins slowly, taking her master/husband's direction and moving about with controlled and deliberate motions.

Soon her actions become wild and uncontrollable. In an attempt to act out her inner turmoil, Nora breaks free from the confines of her doll house and circles the stage in a wild and frantic way:

Helmer [*stopping*]. No, no, that won't do at all.

Nora [*laughing and swinging her tambourine*]. Isn't that what I told you?

Rank. Let me play for her.

Helmer [*getting up*]. Yes, go on. I can teach her more easily then.

[*RANK sits at the piano and plays; NORA dances more and more wildly.*

HELMER has stationed himself by the stove and repeatedly gives her directions; she seems not to hear them; her hair loosens and falls over her shoulders; she does not notice but goes on dancing. MRS LINDE enters.]

Mrs Linde [*standing dumbfounded at the door*]. Ah—!

Nora [*still dancing*]. See what fun, Kristine!

Helmer. But Nora darling, you dance as if your life were at stake.

Nora. And it is.

Helmer. Rank, stop! This is pure madness. Stop it, I say! [*RANK breaks off playing, and NORA halts abruptly. HELMER goes up to her.*] I never would have believed it. You've forgotten everything I taught you. (91-2)

Nora's desperate actions harken back to the mythic notions associated with the tarantella. Like the victim of the spider's bite, Nora strives to free herself from the poison that has plagued her for years. She does dance as if her very life depends on it – for if she can free herself from her controlled cage she might have a chance to survive as a free woman. Durbach says of the dance: “It is, indeed, a death. But it is also a change to the full and suffering life of a self-reliant, responsible free spirit” (53). In this one climactic scene, Nora acts out, trying wildly to break her dolly shell exterior.

In her book Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy, Toril Moi discusses the tarantella scene and claims: “In Nora’s tarantella, then, Ibsen’s modernism is fully realized” (241). She argues that, as Nora dances, we see her in an act of wild abandon and truly look into her soul. By watching this display, the two men theatricalize and subjugate Nora; she becomes the subject of their almost pornographic gaze. Nora invites Kristine to look as well; and while the men see her sexually, Mrs. Linde sees her pain. Moi writes:

But Nora tells Mrs. Linde to watch, look at, see, the fun going on: what Kristine is to see is not just Nora, but the relationship between Nora’s performance and the men’s gaze ... This scene, then, invites the audience to see Nora both as she is seen by Helmer and Dr Rank, and as she is seen by Mrs Linde. While the former theatricalize her, the latter sees her as a soul in pain. But the scene does not tell us to choose between these perspectives. If we try, we find that either option entails a loss. (Moi 240)

Nora rejects these two perspectives by leaving her role as dolly, wife, and mother. Instead, she chooses to define herself not as a sexualized object of men’s desires or as a woman trapped in her own domestic prison, but as an individual.

Nora breaks away from her former self by performing her final and most shocking act: she leaves. She faces catastrophe at the end of the play when she is not saved by Torvald. Instead, he berates and abuses her verbally, claiming that she has ruined him rather than saved him. When the truth is finally out, he puts an end to her melodrama once and for all with the command: “No more playacting” (105). In this sobering light, Nora realizes that Torvald will never act the part of the saviour. He orders her to stop her dramatics and she begins to see things as they truly are. Northam states: “Her miracle has not happened. Nora realizes that she has been living an illusion; and one

does not die for illusions if one recognizes them for such” (107). The thing that prompts her to stop acting is the sombre fact that her entire life has been one silly act. Unlike Hamlet, who reflects rather than acts, Nora acts but without purpose. She has been made to perform as a plaything, first for her father and now for her husband. Worse yet, she is passing these traits on to her own children.

Northam maintains:

They have both treated her as a doll-child. It is the men who run society who have condemned Nora to a stultifying life. That is the real crime, the real corruption, as she clearly sees, not her forgery or her little lies, but the male conspiracy to debase the female; and she now recognizes that she had begun to bring up her own children as if they too were dolls. It is the Doll’s House attitude that is the corruption which must not be transmitted. (Northam 107)

Many have argued that Nora’s departure is overly drastic: she is not abused in any way physically and her existence in the Helmer house is quite a nice one. More importantly, she leaves her three children, abandoning them in favour of forging her own identity, without the title of mother or wife and without the responsibilities and expectations they bring. But Nora knows that the “miracle” will never happen, that she and Torvald will never be able to have a real partnership in marriage. Rather than adults and individuals, Moi writes: “They have, rather, been like children playing house together” (234) Her choice for leaving is straightforward and clear; now all that stands between her and her freedom is the door.

A Doll’s House sees a shift to the common woman in her middle-class society, within a larger context of a world where religion is absent. While there are hints at a Christian structure with the implications of the Christmas setting and Nora’s references to “the miracle” and her “saviour,” the focus is not on God’s will but rather on the decisions of the individual. When Nora faces the

undeniable truth that her husband sees her only as a doll and a plaything, she must acknowledge the failure of her family. She begins to see that her ideals in placing her life in Torvald's hands have been pointless and futile. Without religion or family, she is left to act out her own life, without the doll ideology. As long as the doll survives, Nora is unable to truly become a fully realized, thinking, feeling individual. And so the doll must die.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Tragedy has been a long-standing and compelling genre which has experienced much change throughout the centuries. Playwrights from every age have felt compelled to embrace and also alter the tragic form, including both Shakespeare and Ibsen. The universe of Shakespearean tragedy is one that focuses on the noble man in a God-centred world, and sees the events leading up to the fall and eventual death of that man. In Ibsen and modern tragedy, that world shifts to focus on the common woman and her reliance on the self in a world devoid of religion. While the death of the hero is not necessarily a characteristic of modern tragedy, Ibsen's plays often contain the death of an ideal. The tragic hero shifts from prince to housewife; from a God-centred world to a human-centred world; from a man tortured by questions to a woman who makes a definitive choice with the slam of a door.

Miller writes that "Tragedy arises when we are in the presence of a man who has missed accomplishing joy" (11). In the course of their respective journeys, both Hamlet and Nora realize that they have foregone some vital opportunity. Hamlet submits himself to God's will in order to carry out the orders of his father's ghost. Instead of existing in the vibrant world of Elsinore, he instead relates to and becomes nearly obsessed with thoughts of death and mortality. In Hamlet, the hero transforms through a process that is introspective and self-analytic.

In A Doll's House, Nora has missed the chance to become her own person. She has acted as a dolly and plaything to both her father and later her husband, and runs the risk of passing on this example of failed parenting to her own young children. In Ibsen's world, Nora faces her challenge also through self-analysis, but her process is one that is sub-textual. She reacts to the world around her by over-acting in a role that is false, contrived, and simply not her true self.

While the tragic genre has continued to evolve in form and subject matter, it has retained a

key link to the family. Both Shakespeare and Ibsen's works contain themes and motifs that are rooted in the notion of complex family ties. Hamlet and Nora both experience missed opportunities, and their real catalyst for change is tied to the breakdown of their family units. When Hamlet recognizes the real nature of his mother, he turns back to a sense of religion in order to complete his task. He delays in performing any action in order to make sense of the world. Once he accepts the breakdown of his family he is able to carry out his part in the moral design. Similarly, when Nora's husband fails to come to her rescue and save her, she turns to her own method of coping and regaining order by relying on herself. In the godless world of the play Nora rejects Torvald's pathetic pleas to honour her religion as well as Torvald himself, and comes to terms with the fact that both god and family have failed. She puts an abrupt end to their life of play-acting and kills the doll's house ideals.

Many critics agree that tragedy is mistakenly tied to a sense of negativity and pessimism. Steiner asserts that "Tragedy is irreparable" (8): Hamlet cannot bring back his father or undo the wrongs of his mother, just as Nora cannot stay in Torvald's house and continue to live with a stranger. Despite this, there is a definite sense of renewal in the human spirit in tragic works, and this sense of restoration is evident in Hamlet and A Doll's House. Both heroes refuse to accept the wrongs done to them and instead choose to take action, even if it results in the utter and total destruction of their family or themselves. By refusing to remain static in the face of tragedy, Hamlet and Nora each find a way to break free of their situations, uplifting the human spirit in the process. We are left with a sense of catharsis and fulfilment after digesting plays such as Hamlet and A Doll's House. For it is in these great works of tragedy—be it Shakespearean or Ibsenian—where the tragic spirit is both contained and set free.

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