

Analysis of social stratification in A DOLL'S HOUSE by Henrik Ibsan

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Abstract: *This research paper delves into the analysis of social stratification within Victorian society, with a specific focus on how class distinction, often involving the powerful oppressing the less privileged, is portrayed in Henrik Ibsen's play, "A Doll's House." The research study further investigates the conditions faced by servants and widows in this Victorian context. The primary objective of this research is to employ the Social Stratification Theory to examine the multifaceted aspects of class differentiation within the play. The chosen research methodology is analytical and qualitative analysis. The study's findings reveal that "A Doll's House" highlights discrimination based on wealth, gender, and societal norms, challenging these discriminatory elements as subversive to the broader society.*

Keywords: Literature, Class distinction, Doll's House, Victorian Society, Social Stratification Theory

Introduction

The process of social stratification involves social inequality taking the shape of structurally arranged hierarchical strata that are arranged one above the other. Sutherland and Maxwell define social stratification as a process of difference that elevates certain individuals over others. Sociologists consider stratification as both a social process and a tool for comprehending social inequalities. Slavery, estate, caste, and social class and rank are the four primary forms of social stratification. Social classes and status groupings exist in industrial societies. According to Sorokin, stratification is necessary for the existence of any civilization. Sort of like social differentiation, that is. When individuals are arranged in a hierarchical manner based on the prejudice of social distinctions, social stratification results.

Social stratification was a hallmark of Victorian society because social disparity had a significant impact on it. The high class, middle class, and lower class made up the three primary divisions. The Upper Class was a Royal Class by inheritance. Many aristocrats did not work because, over many generations, their families had amassed sufficient wealth to allow each generation to live in luxury. The next socioeconomic class was the middle class. The middle class had great prosperity during the Victorian era. Large corporate empires were also owned and operated by middle-class individuals. The working class was at the bottom of the social scale. During the Victorian era, this class experienced the greatest hardships and continued to be susceptible to exploitation by the affluent. In the civilization, male domination was very much in place. They could only do housework and nothing else. They were expected to follow the instructions of the guys. Without their man, they had no identity of their own

and had no life other than to adore him.

Karl Marx was in favor of the working class. He was against capitalism. He promoted a classless society devoid of social inequality and differences. He believed, A nation progresses on the basis of the working class. They are the backbone of the economy. In third world countries workers are looked down upon, exploited and deprived from their rights. Victorian society was not in favor of the working class. They worked in the factories but they were not given proper rights. He gave the theory of Struggle and he told that human beings are at war with others. Rich want to deprive the poor from their rights. Exploitation is there. There is a war of interests.

Ibsen was a well-known 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theater director, and poet. As one of the forerunners of modernism in theater, he is often called "the father of prose drama." Among his most well-known works are Hedda Gabler, Brand, Peer Gynt, An Enemy of the People, Emperor and Galilean, A Doll's House, Ghosts, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, and The Master Builder.

Ibsen is often ranked as one of the truly great playwrights in the European tradition. Richard Hornby describes him as "a profound poetic dramatist—the best since Shakespeare". He influenced other playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Eugene O'Neill. Many critics consider him the greatest playwright since Shakespeare.

Doll's House is a three-act play written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. It concerns the lives of a group of middle class Norwegians in the 1870s, and deals with themes such as appearances, the power of money, and the place of women in a patriarchal society. Nora and Torvald Helmer are a typical bourgeois Norwegian household in the late 1870s, but the visit of an old friend of Nora, named Kristine Linde, and an employee of her husband, Nils Krogstad, soon exposes the cracks in their picture-perfect union. When Kristine needs a job, she asks Nora for help interceding for her with her husband. Torvald consents, but he does so because he fired Krogstad, a lowly employee. When Krogstad finds out, he threatens to expose Nora's past crime, a signature she forged to obtain a loan from Krogstad himself in order to afford treatment for her then-ailing husband.

The problem facing Victorian society was that the working class did not enjoy equal rights. It was also widely present in their literature. One of the most well-known plays that highlights the pervasive socioeconomic divide in Victorian culture is HENRIK IBSEN's A DOLL'S HOUSE. Despite his Victorian birth, he wrote in a contemporary and realistic style. The author of this play emphasised the everyday issues that faced common people in Victorian culture, such as gender roles in the community, social divides, and the misery of subordinates. This research will primarily concentrate on the terrible life that the impoverished, oppressed, and women in the play "A doll's house " lead through application of social stratification

Research question

How does the play A doll's house reflect the idea of social stratification by marx ?

Research design

Analytical, qualitative analysis has been taken up as the method of research.

Theoretical framework

The thearetical lens used to analyse the play A dollar house is **Social stratification first propounded by Karl Marx.**

He based his philosophy on the idea that society consists of two factions: the owner and the workers. The owners are the businessmen who have control on factories and on different businesses. Workers have to work in their factories and their conditions are going to be worse day by day. Karl Marx contends that bourgeoisie does not provide enough sources for proletariats to survive in the society and the workers are exploited by the bourgeoisie.

In conclusion Marx said that workers should rise in the form of revolution. As the owners of factories became richer, Marx suggested that workers should develop a true sense of awareness in order to get their proper rights. Karl says that when workers will get the awareness then they will be able to get their status in the society. As the society consists of wealthy class and rich individuals want more power in order to deprive the poor from their rights.

Marx has given a few points on social stratification theory and the following are a few important points given by him.

1. Marx stated that the working class can get their rights by standing against the upper class in the form of revolution and as a result everyone will have equal access to wealth.
2. For this revolution the workers should develop a true class consciousness in order to stand against the bourgeoisie.

Data Analysis

"A Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen can be analyzed through the lens of social stratification using Marxist theory. The analysis of the play using the concept of social stratification by Marx involves analysing the characters' lot and the themes of the play. There are various aspects of Marxist theory that are reflected in the play. A Marxist reading of the play involves taking into account certain important key features, i.e. define the class conflicts within the play. Torvald and Nora represent the Bourgeoisie class while the other characters represent working class. Another key notion that can be analysed in the play is economic determinism, that is how the characters' lives and relationships are shaped by the influence of social economic conditions. Alienation is another Marxist concept that is prevalent in the text as it reflects how some characters experience alienation due to socio-economic conditions. The concept of false consciousness can also be analysed in the text, that is to see whether the characters are aware of their exploitation or not. The ignorance of Nora at the beginning of the play about her subjugation reflects this concept. The play also reflects the Marxist idea of revolution that is to overthrow the existing social order.

In the play, the characters and their relationships reflect elements of class struggle and societal hierarchies. In Victorian culture, the upper class behaved extremely impolitely towards the lower class. In every aspect of life, they attempted to subjugate them. Their richness is the source of their domination. The concept of money consumed the upper class, and this was mirrored in their social behaviour. In a society like that, widows and servants' lot was far worse. Henrik Ibsen uses a variety of characters to illustrate this socioeconomic divide, which is made clear by specific passages from the text.

‘Helmer: I’ve asked the retiring Manager to give me full authority.....’

Helmer as character represents the bourgeoisie class. Statement can be seen as an analysis of how power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of bourgeoisie. His statement about full authority shows and signifies the economic power he holds. In a Marxist framework it is the Bourgeoisie class that makes decisions in society and holds the power. Statement about attaining the power draws a parallel with Bourgeoisie full control over the power and economic resources. The retirement of the manager symbolises the struggles of the working class. Helmer's request about attaining full authority in contrast to the retiring manager illustrates the power imbalance in the society.

Henrik Ibsen's play "A Dolls House" has another recurring theme, that is a fixation with material possessions. The acquisition or lack of money has an impact on each character in "A Dolls House," and it shapes their entire worldview and manner of life.

After telling Kristine that she borrowed the money for the trip to Italy and detailing all of her "hard work" to pay it back, Nora informs her that her anxieties are now unimportant because she is now free. She claims that the only way she can be "carefree and happy" is if she has money, and she equates freedom with accumulating fortune. When Nora's financial circumstances change, her entire perspective on life also shifts, illustrating the Marxist theory that people's ideas are a result of their financial circumstances. Like Torvald, he views money as a symbol of freedom and will not surrender it by taking out a loan. He too then mentions that it is **"a wonderful feeling" to know that "one's got a safe secure job with a comfortable salary,"** similar to Nora's claim that she's now "carefree and happy" because of it.

Henrik Ibsen discusses widows' circumstances in *A Doll's House*, reinforcing my earlier point that the Victorian age bears some responsibility for the predicament of widows. In his play, he uses MRS. LINDE as a victim and explores the complaints of Victorian-era widows. In the provided lines, he talks about MRS. LINDE's struggles.

"Oh, poor Kristina, what you must have gone through. And he did not leave you....."

The state of MRS. LINDE is depicted in the given line. She no longer has someone to live for and is too wealthy to have a comfortable life as a widow.

Ibsen depicts the pathetic life of widows in a more appropriate way. He portrays that it was common in the Victorian era for the widows to live alone and in vulnerable conditions. In the selected passages from the text, he makes reference to this idea.

"MRS LINDE: No... just unspeakably empty- I've no one to live for any more..."

In this play characters' lives and choices are influenced by their socio-economic conditions. Mrs. Linda expresses a sense of emptiness which is a form of alienation. This also hints at the idea of class struggle she may feel empty because she has lost her husband and economic security, placing her in a vulnerable economic position. Hence the play represents a contrast between economic classes that of Helmer's and Mrs. Linde's.

"Nora: tell me' Nanny..... I've often wondered, how did you ever have the heart to hand over your child to strangers.....?"

Nora's question to Nanny again reflects the influence of socio-economic structures on the lives of individuals. Nora, who is from a privileged background, questions Nanny, who belongs to a relatively lower socio-economic class. The passage reflects disparities in class in how they affect the lives of individuals. Nanny's decision to hand over the children to a stranger can be seen as a reflection of economic necessity. In capitalist society, the working class struggles hard to make the ends meet, which makes them make difficult choices such as rearing children to strangers. The choice of Nanny to hand over her children to a stranger also depicts the sacrifices that the lower class have to make in order to make the ends meet.

Krogstad, a subordinate character, represents the proletariat's struggle for social mobility. He is a lower-class worker who has faced hardship and seeks to improve his situation by obtaining a better job in the bank. His actions to secure his position are a reflection of the desperation that many working-class individuals experience in a capitalist system.

"KROGSTAD: would you be so kind as to see that I keep my subordinate position at the Bank.....?"

In the given line, Krogstad's request to keep his subordinate position at the bank reflects a hierarchical structure in which he occupies a lower social and economic position. Krogstad's plea to maintain his subordinate position determines that he is aware of his position as a member of the working class. It depicts that he might fear losing his job, which is essential for his livelihood. This also highlights the vulnerable

position of the working class in society. Also highlights power imbalance and dependency on the Bourgeoisie. He is ready to compromise his dignity for his job.

What a difference! what a difference! Someone to work for and live for — a home to bring comfort into

The mention of "someone to work for" reflects the idea that in the context of the play, a person (likely a husband) provides the economic sustenance for the family. This is in line with the capitalist structure where the bourgeoisie, who owned and controlled the means of production, were the primary earners. The quote highlights the notion that economic dependence was a key aspect of marriage and family life in that era

Nora :“But surely you can understand that being with Torvald is a little like being with papa —

The character of Torvald is depicted as the breadwinner and the one responsible for the family's economic well-being. Nora's statement suggests that being with Torvald is akin to being with her father because, in both cases, her status and security are dependent on male figures who control the economic resources. This underscores the capitalist notion that women were economically dependent on men, which was prevalent in the 19th century when the play was written.

As the play progresses, Nora's character undergoes a transformation, ultimately seeking personal identity and liberation from her confined role in a capitalist, patriarchal household. The quote can also be interpreted as a turning point in Nora's realization that she needs to change more than just her possessions; she needs to change her entire life and societal position to escape the constraints of her time

Nora : I have changed my things now

Nora's adherence to traditional gender roles as she thought that her primary duty was to be a good mother and a good wife, this notion seems to be a form of false consciousness. She is unaware of the nature of her role in the marriage and in that particular society. Torvald's Treatment of Nora reveals the inherent oppression and exploitation within their marriage. This dynamic depicts the way the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat where Torvald represents the upper class and Nora represents the lower class. It is because of her economic dependency upon her husband that leads to her subjugation. Her awakening and realisation of her own subjugation is akin to a movement of class consciousness. Towards the end of the play where Nora begins to realise her subjugation and oppression, she decides to walk away from her world. This symbolises the potential for revolutionary change. Her decision to leave her family and her husband can be seen as a metaphorical act of rebellion against the norms and expectations. Which is exactly similar to how Marxists envision the working class to stand against and rebel against the oppressive bourgeoisie class.

Conclusion

To conclude "A Doll's House" is a compelling exploration of social stratification through a Marxian lens. It underscores the disparities between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and emphasizes the potential for individuals to break free from the confines of their class. The play serves as a powerful critique of the societal norms and class-based oppression of the time, which remains relevant in our understanding of social stratification today.

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