

## **Re-thinking Money as a Determinant for Strained Marriage in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House**

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### **Abstract**

*A Doll's House* is the best known and one of the most popular of Henrik Ibsen's works. It is about the liberation of an individual from restraints of customs and convention due to money issues. It also deals with marital problems and is about the unraveling of a middle-class couple. From Torvald Helmer and Nora's first conversation we see Helmer as the master of the household who earns and controls the money. On the other hand, Nora is the member of the house who spends it. According to Nora's friend Christina. Linde, in her young days, Nora used to spend money greatly. Through this comment Nora is portrayed as a shallow woman who enjoys material delights. Yet, her generous tips to a porter and the gifts for the domestic help during Christmas show her as a giving, unselfish woman. This paper will show how monetary issue can be a devastating outcome of a routine marriage where the couple have different views on money and on life. It will also reveal how money can create self-awareness in Nora about her position in the house.

**Keywords:** Nora, Helmer, money, marital problems, consequences

Henrik Ibsen's landmark play *A Doll's House* is one of the world's most controversial, socially relevant and praised plays. In the theatrical history, this is an impactful drama, which, according to Ibsen's Norwegian biographer Koht, "burst upon the contemporary scene like a bombshell" (1954, p.107). Another Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer also states "No play had ever before, contributed so momentously to the social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matters" (1971, p.104). This realistic Three-Act play is set in the background of the nineteenth century Norway. It is about the life in a well-off, conventional family and it deals with a society where patriarchy is dominant. At first sight it seems women are stereotypically represented as irrational, naïve and dependent on men. At the end of the play the protagonist Nora's "decision to leave her family, and along with it the comfort and status, makes her a distinct individual who revolts against the false conventions of society" (Zaman, 2008, p.207).

The ordinary, middle class couple Torvald Helmer and Nora have three children and they are married for eight years. On the surface, their relationship is successful. Initially, the reader see her as a simple, obedient, money-loving, childish wife who is unable to understand serious matters of life. At the beginning of the plot, she is sweet, and he is a successful banker. For them, money is an agent of marital problem and empowerment. It enabled the couple to travel to Italy for his health problem. Helmer's new salary will also add prestige to the family. At the same time, money exacerbates their relationship. In this play not only, Nora-Helmer couple but also Krogstad- Christina have been affected due to money issues. The aim of the paper is to show how money can affect the institution of marriage and how it can create self-awareness in her about her position in the house as a wife. The aim is also to examine their relation as husband and wife and their views on life and on money.

At the beginning of the play, we see Nora's interest in money lies in her concern for her family's welfare than from petty desires. We realize that she is excited over Helmer's new, well-paying job because more spending means she can finally pay off her debt to Nils Krogstad from whom she borrowed money for her husband's treatment who has "a loathing for debt" (Act I, p.47). Nora and Helmer's views on money is different from each other. She is ready to borrow money even from strangers if situation demands. On the other hand, his principle is "No debts! No borrowing!" (Act I, p. 25).

Helmer accuses Nora of wasting money mostly on "useless things", and he sees Nora as a foolish woman who is ignorant of the way of the world. At the same time, he enjoys her foolishness and ignorance which make her helpless and dependent on him and says to her "Do you know, Nora, I often wish some danger might threaten you, that I might risk body and soul, and everything, everything, for your dear sake" (Act III, p.151). He gains control over her by addressing her "little squirrel" or "precious little singing birds", "skylark" or "Miss Sweet Tooth". These comments make Nora seem more like a prized possession than an equal life partner in their marriage. They have no equal partnership and he rebukes her like a child for eating macaroons secretly. To him she is the bearer and nurse of their three children. Hence she is restricted to the family matters and commitments. In her society a woman exists if she can render service to her husband. Till the end of the play, she gives up seeking for her own identity, and stays in the fold of her marriage because

The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity . . . . A woman in a male-dominated society is thus conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence (Arora, 1991:53).

In Act One of the play, Helmer makes fun of Nora about wasting money but also tries to satisfy her by giving her more money "My little lark mustn't droop her wings like that" (Act I, p.25). Similarly, he finds faults with her but then he says he does not want her to change a bit. His patriarchal mindset wants her to be completely dependent on him so that she cannot

function in the world without him. From the beginning of the play, the reader see, Helmer addresses his wife, Nora, by different pet names which indicates his personal convictions about gender roles in the domestic spheres. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, also argues:

She is called the sex by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex --absolute sex, no less .... She is the incidental, she inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute—she is the other (1968, p.XVI).

As the play progresses, the reader come to know that for Helmer's sickness in the past, Nora was forced to borrow money from Helmer's scoundrel college mate and bank colleague Nils Krogstad. She got the loan without informing her husband as she knows it would be aching and mortifying for him to know about her favour. She first used diplomacy to convince him for going abroad. She also "hinted that he could borrow the money" (Act I, p.46). At this he got almost angry and did not want "to yield to her whims and fancies" (Ibid) as he was unable to suspect how ill he was. As a result, she was compelled to save his life by taking money from Krogstad secretly. To obtain the money legally, she was forced to forge signature of her dying father. Up to a certain time, she kept the money issue all to herself. She does not know that both partners need to be involved in financial issues. Later on when she confides the secret to her friend Mrs. Linde, she is surprised as it is impossible that Nora was able to get the loan. So, Mrs. Linde remarks, "a wife cannot borrow (money) without her husband's consent" (Act I, p. 44) according to the law of that time. From this, we can understand that Nora is a determined individual who does what is needed for her loved ones and she is not hungry for money. She has also proven herself rash who does not think about the consequences of her action and inexperienced about people and deception.

From the plot of *A Doll's House*, we see, the lender Krogstad is one of the employees of Helmer, and he plans to fire Krogstad. Krogstad now starts blackmailing Nora on the condition that if she does not persuade her husband from firing him(Krogstad) from the bank, he would

tell Nora's husband and everyone else that she forged signature of her dying father to get loan. As Nora knows Helmer's abhorrence towards dishonesty and debt, she is frightened of ruining her family image and requests Krogstad helplessly "My husband must never know" (Act II, p.113). What she fears is that her husband will take actions against her for keeping the monetary issue a secret from him. The inexperienced wife forgets that "Communication is the key to most marital financial challenges" (James, E, McWinney, 2017, p.3). Hence, we see, how money can shake the ground of their marriage.

Helmer quickly blames Nora when he discovers the borrowing she did for him. He fails to understand that they went to Italy for the sick husband as per the instruction of the doctor. The money she obtained was not for her clothes or luxuries, it was used for the treatment of her seriously ill husband. Her sacrifice has no value to the insensitive husband who does not want to take the responsibility of the borrowed money although he said earlier "Be at rest and feel secure. I have broad wings to shield you" (Act III, p.159). In the words of Mahaffey "she was certain that he would do the same for her if her well-being was ever threatened" (2010, p.54).

After the revelation of the monetary secret to the reader, they change their perception about Nora. This revelation shows the passive Nora as a strong woman who could be desperate to save her sick husband. She also starts to pay back for a debt which is not hers. As she has no income, she saves half the money given by Helmer for her clothes and by doing a heap of copying and saving money which he gives on the household expenses. She did not let others know of the troubles she had. Instead of asking for help to repay the debt by telling Helmer, she takes all the troubles of working what little she can by earning whatever she can. This shows her exceptionality in her society.

For defending her actions Nora states, "when I look back on it now .... I lived by performing tricks for you, Helmer. But you would have it so" (Act III, p.16). She lied to him by telling

him that she got the money from her father although her motives were absolutely selfless. With the borrowed money she wanted to save her seriously sick husband's life. Now she understands that she is a doll in the house of her husband. When he criticizes her childish behaviour, she reminds him of his admiration for this nature of hers earlier. Instead of appreciating her self-sacrifice, he seeks self-protection.

At the end of the play, Nora shows the hollowness of their marital life which collapses due to money matters. She says, "Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child" (Act III, p.164) and protests ". . . . I think that all else I am a human being, just as much as you are . . . or, at least I will try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Helmer, and that they say so in the books. But henceforth I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books" (Act III. p.167). In the past she was very obedient and was always ready to do "everything to please him(you)" (Act I, p.75). She also sang and danced for him and she was quite happy with it as she did not have the realization that their marriage was based on false understanding and the husband never understood her. The couple also prove that "conflicts over money can occur for many reasons, beyond stresses on marital relationships due to objective levels of economic hardship" ([Lauren M. Papp](#), [E. Mark Cummings](#), and [Marcie C. Goeke-Morey](#), 2009, p.91-103).

In their married life Nora and Helmer also never came together to decide on how to spend their money. This is clear from Nora's statement "ever since the day we first met- we have never exchanged one serious word about serious things" (Act III, p. 162). According to Bach, "Couples who operate as a team are happier than couples who perpetually disagree about finances" (2006, p. N. found). Helmer holds the view that a man should handle the finances in the family and the women should take care of the day-to-day finances. That norm of the society was seen in the nineteenth century Europe. Stanley and Markman (1990,p.659) "specifically found that the most consistent and intense problem for married couples was about

money and over 90% of couples rated this as being their first or second problem area". The reader also see the validity of their statement in the Helmer couple.

Helmer thought that a man's role in marriage is to protect his wife. After the party once he asked Nora, " (do) you know that I've often wished you were facing some terrible dangers so that I could risk life and limb, risk everything for your sake?" (Act II, p.98). In the essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", feminist Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women are taught since their infancy to have the "softness of temper, outward obedience, scrupulous attention" (2000, p.177). These attributes will help them to gain the protection of man. Torvald also echoes the words, "Poor little frightened songbird . . . . Rest assured; my wings are broad enough to shelter you. How lovely and secure our home, Nora. A sanctuary for you. I'll keep you here like a hunted dove. I've rescued unhurt from the hawk's talons . . . . He forgets the saying and blames her for spoiling his happiness, image and social position and says, " No man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves" (Act 3:94) when Nora, unaware of law, expects him to take the blame of her borrowing. Surprising her, Helmer remarks he does not " understand the world in which she (lives)" (Act 1, p.32). When he finds out her so-called crime, he does not trust them (the children) to her" (Act III, :p.186). Sonya Britt points out, " Couples often use harsher language with each other during money arguments, which also tend to last longer" (2012, p.1). Helmer also wants her to remain in the house to save "the appearance" of their household. In the words of Johnston, "Torvald (Helmer) the manly teacher and the protector, becomes the helpless and emasculated disciple learning from his former pupil" (Johnston, 1991, p.317). But she rejects him as she finds him inadequate as her guide and has realized that marital conflicts over money are more stressful, negative and threatening, to marital functioning than other sources of marital disagreements. Nora disclosed the borrowing and the deception of her forgery to her friend Mrs. Linde who told her(Nora) to reveal the money matter to Helmer "you must speak out" (Act III, p.140) but

Nora never told him where the money came from, as his ego would suffer, and he would not like her favour. She mistakenly believed that Helmer loves her enough to take all blame upon himself. In the early part of the play, he wins some of our sympathy for his devotion to his wife. By denying her sacrifice he loses it.

Nora seemed happy at the beginning of the play as she had no realization of their false relationship. If the money matter had not arisen, she could not have got the chance to know both herself and her husband. This issue opens her eyes to her underappreciated potential also. Nora also fails to realize that marriage cannot succeed when husband and wife are not completely honest with money. She also does not know that “Disagreements over money are more likely to be handled the wrong way and be unresolved in marital relationships” (Papp, Cummings, & Corke-Morey, 2009, p.91).

The money issue shows them that despite their eight years’ marriage, they did not understand each other, and the relationship was more of a compromise rather than a blissful bonding. Both fail to handle the issue successfully and prove the validity of the statement: “Disagreements over money are more likely to be handled the wrong way and be unresolved in marital relationships” (Papp, Cummings, & Corke-Morey, 2009, p.91). It also compels Nora “to apply her dormant strength to remind her husband, society and above all herself that she is a human being” (Jahan, 2011, p.104) and she transforms from an obedient wife to a strong one.

Love and respect do not play a pivotal role in Nora-Helmer marriage, but money does. He does not want to understand her side of story. In his eyes she is “a hypocrite, a liar-worse, worse than a criminal” (Act II,p.96). He is worried about simply of the lender Krogstad’s opportunities who “would make (his) position at the bank perfectly unendurable of creating difficulties for him” (Act II, p.96). So, he argues forgetting her sacrifice for him “ You stay right here and give me a reckoning. You understand what you've done? Answer! You

understand?" (Act III, p.187). Nora in her stalwart defiance of the world questions him: "A wife hasn't a right to save her husband's life? I don't know much about laws . . . I did it out of love" (Act III, p.149). When their family friend Dr. Rank confronts her with his moving confession of love as she is about to ask him for the money she desperately needs, she refuses to make use of his feelings and categorically rejects his help: "After that? . . . You can't know anything now..." (166). Tichenor also states "The topic of money can be very emotional, and is closely related to self worth and personal vulnerabilities among marital partners that may trigger defensiveness" (1999, 638–650).

Forgiveness is vitally important to create a happy marriage. Helmer is supposed to work together to get out of debt but after coming to know about Nora's loan for him, instead he allows bitterness in his heart. So, she raises a voice of protest against a patriarchal attitude to women in her society as the husband emphasizes public opinion, social institutions, legality or its appearance.

The play reflects patriarchal society where women are powerless. Women could not earn, but men could exercise power over them as they were the bread earners. So, did Helmer who is the model of the nineteenth century European husband. In the words of Arif Rashid Shah "Helmer has lived according to the reasons and rationality of a man; his point of view is arranged based on power and order. For such a systematized, disciplinary man, reputation is more important than sacrificing himself for the family life" (Shah, 2016, p.346).

Being a social critic, Ibsen portrays the harsh realities of life through the Nora-Helmer couple. *A Doll's House* is a study of marital life where monetary issue leads the couple to unhappiness and pain although financial security cannot buy happiness all the time. In Jane Austen's famous novel *Pride and Prejudice*, we see the loveless marriage of Charlotte and Mr. Collins where money is a binding factor. In this drama, it is a marriage killing determinant. The current paper also offers an insight into the psyche of the couple. Their true

characters and the weakness of their marriage gets revealed through money matter. Nora cannot be fully blamed for creating instability in conjugal life. In fact, she is a victim of her own decision and patriarchy. From the bottom of her, she never wanted to hurt her husband. On the other hand, Helmer fails to exhibit a natural understanding and respect for her. The money puts them to test as a couple who fail to overcome it successfully. He could not have patience with her and can be accused of being an insensitive, selfish, hypocritical husband for not having the money talk maturely as well as fairly with his wife. He fails to understand that to for getting marital success only money is not required. A couple also need to have special attention, energy, and awareness of underlying pitfalls and challenges. In this drama, the husband's injured male ego practices its masculine hegemony by demeaning and paining Nora, finally making her to leave him, her home her children and her financial dependence on him. Thus she becomes self-aware and fearlessly questions patriarchal paradigms and privileges who thinks that patriarchy is due for revision. This self-awakening and awareness of Nora have been possible for the monetary issue which certainly gets in the way of their eight-year long relationships.

**Notes:** All quotations are from Ibsen, Henrik, *A Doll's House*, Penguin Books, Harmonds Worth, 2004.

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