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‘SLAMMING THE DOOR ON PATRIARCHY’
THE TREATMENT OF TRANGRESSIVE WOMEN IN HENRIK IBSEN’S WORKS

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This thesis examines patriarchal society, and the role of transgressive women portrayed in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, *Hedda Gabler* and *Rosmersholm*. Ibsen, a nineteenth-century Norwegian playwright, was often referred to as the father of modern drama, and one of the greatest allies to women. He denied being a feminist and preferred the term ‘humanist’ explaining his treatment of women in his works. There are certainly feminist elements in his play, as the female characters are portrayed as transgressive, breaking the boundaries of the masculine social construction called patriarchy. Each woman violates the perceived codes of femininity, in her desperation for freedom and individuality. As a humanist, Ibsen was interested in the harmful restrictions in society, which are important social issues explored in his plays. He used the plight of women to convey his message and develop a deeper understanding of the inner workings of hegemony in regards to the male construction of women in human civilisation.

Keywords: feminine, patriarchal society, feminist, transgressive.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There have been many questions about Ibsen and his relationship with feminism. As Joan Templeton states in her article *The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen*, Ibsen had been ‘resoundingly saved from feminism,’ or as it called in the latter nineteenth century, ‘the woman question.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 28). Those who argue that Ibsen’s social concerns were not specifically feminist, but focused on the spectrum of humanity, cite the statement he made on 26 May 1898 at a seventieth-birthday banquet given his honour by the Norwegian Women’s Rights League:

I am not a member of the Woman’s Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must distain the honour of having consciously worked for the woman’s rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what the woman’s rights movement really is. To me, it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 90)

Ibsen’s claimed ignorance towards the women’s rights movement is not a suggestion that he was against feminism, but rather that he viewed the woman’s cause and the human cause to be a mutual exclusive social issue. As a humanist, he wished to look at society and observe the consequences of it. It just so happens that the woman was a conspicuous example of a repressed human being. He conveyed themes of individuality and freedom through his female protagonists. Despite his comments at the banquet, Ibsen’s younger and perhaps less contained self made numerous statements that encouraged the progression of women’s rights. In notes made for *A Doll’s House* in 1878, he writes that ‘A woman cannot be herself in the society of today, which is exclusively a masculine society, with laws written by men, and with accusers and judges who judge feminine conduct from the masculine standpoint’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 28). A year later, Ibsen encouraged the Scandinavian Society in Rome that the post of librarian should be a woman, and that female members of the organisation...
should be granted voting rights during meetings. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 90). In 1884, Ibsen supported a petition in favour of separate property rights for married women. He believed men should have no impact on the women’s rights bill, as ‘to consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection for their sheep.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 90).

Whether one regards Ibsen’s works as feminist or not, there is no denying that much of it— if not all was widely revered by feminist thinkers in Norway and throughout Europe. A significant element of Ibsen’s relationship with feminism is his connection with actual feminists in life and work. His wife Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen, and her stepmother, Magdalene Thoresen, who was a novelist, dramatist and translator of the French plays that a young Ibsen staged at the Norwegian National Theatre in Bergen. She was presumably the first ‘New Woman’ Ibsen had ever met and an influential role model to Suzannah. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 91). Camilla Collett, who is often considered to be Norway’s first and most significant feminist, was often credited for Ibsen’s progressive views on issues such as marriage and the roles of women in society. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 91). Collet’s novels echo similar themes to Ibsen’s works. Her realist novel The District Governor’s Daughters (1854-5), rejected the institution of marriage because of its neglect of the woman’s feelings and its association with the destruction of love. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 91). Ibsen’s appreciation for Collet is evident in a letter written to her in 1883, where he predicts that future of Norway will change due to her ‘intellectual pioneer-work,’ and later credits her a longstanding influence in his writings. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 91).

In regards to his political philosophy, Ibsen was certainly a radical thinker and was arguably an anarchist. In a letter to George Brandes, following the defeat of Napoleon III, Ibsen wrote concerning the State and political liberty: ‘The State is the curse of the individual. How has the national strength of Prussia been purchased? By the sinking of the individual in a political and geographical formula... The State must go! That will be a revolution which will find me on its side’ (Goldman, 1914). Ibsen was determined to demolish all social shams, hypocrisy, and unravel every element of society’s social structure. (Goldman, 1914). According to Emma Goldman, an anarchist known for her political activism, Ibsen detested the four cardinal sins of modern society: the lie masquerading as sacrifice and duty in our social arrangements, the ‘twin curses’ that pander to the spirit of man; the triviality and narrow-mindedness of Provincialism, that prevents evolvement; and the lack of passion and purpose in work which transforms life into misery and despair.
Ibsen felt so strongly about these matters that all of his works at least focused on one of these issues. The theme of sacrifice and duty and their contribution to the female oppression featured prominently in his plays *A Doll’s House*, *Hedda Gabler* and *Rosmersholm*. These issues formed the basis of the revolutionary significance of his dramatic works. What made Ibsen’s plays historically important was his refusal to stage them for merely entertainment purposes. Ibsen was concerned with portraying the realistic aspects of society, no matter how bleak. Irish playwright and critic, Bernard Shaw once claimed that ‘attending an Ibsen play was like the fascinating but painful experience of going to the dentist.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 172).

In an essay published in 1900, James Joyce expressed his admiration for Ibsen and the demonstration of his ‘extraordinary knowledge of women’ in his plays. (Eyre, 2015). ‘He appears to have sounded them to unfathomable depths,’ he wrote. Ibsen’s women are utterly radical, infuriating and amazingly frank, both about their search for freedom and the actions taken to achieve those desires. To put it simply, they are transgressive. Ibsen’s female protagonists fit the criteria for them to be ‘monster women’, according to Toril Moi’s definition in *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Moi states, ‘The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her.’ (Moi, 2002, p. 57). These women are exceptional due to their violation of the political and social boundaries in nineteenth-century patriarchy. Ibsen uses theatre as a social and political tool against European bourgeois culture and gender specific terms and representations.
CHAPTER 2: IBSEN AND PATRIARCHY

The Origins of Patriarchy

It is important to understand the definition of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a social construction in which men hold the primary dominance in politics, social privilege and legal property. In regards to the domestic household, the father is the enforcer in the marriage, and the husband holds authority over the wife. The husband also controls the majority of basic material in family’s necessity, and the wife is submissive, permanently weakened by the husband’s influence. How does this system work? How did it originate?

The encounter of patriarchy goes beyond the birth of Christ to when Aristotle’s theoretical ideas formed. It was his assumption that women were humanity’s defect, having only existed due to low temperature during conception. (Jóhannsdóttir, 2009). The Greek philosopher’s ideology was prominent during the Middle Ages and served as justification for the male’s superior attitude toward their female counterparts. Amongst these beliefs, many assumed women to be less intelligent than men and driven by their sexual libido. As Ancient Greece evolved, it became increasingly misogynistic in its patriarchal society. These developments can originate in the creation of the polis, a type of democracy which gave men all of classes, equal rights. The transition was deemed fairer considering only privileged men held power in the previous system of aristocracy. While all men were given more power, greater restrictions were placed on the women. Marta Arthur explains in her essay From Medusa to Cleopatra, that as the middle class rose in importance, the household unit, or oikos became a significant aspect of patriarchy. The nuclear family, which was originally a biological and social unit, now functioned politically and economically. (Radek, 2008). According to Arthur, ‘Women were prohibited from achieving the status of fully autonomous being.’ (Radek, 2008). The traditional roles of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ became a legal duty, and the ‘failure to perform them has legal and moral consequences.’ (Radek, 2008). A woman could not inherit, own property or engage in any large scale business transactions; she was the legal ward of either the father or the husband; a woman who
committed adultery would lose her citizenship or be executed. Adultery was a crime and therefore a corruption to the *oikos*. Therefore, most Greek women were trapped within their own homes by a political and legal system crafted by man.

Not only were women suppressed, but the patriarchal system created a fictional gender to replace their own, in order to justify the female isolation. Sue-Ellen Case investigated the initial feminist observations about the history of Greek theatre and noted the lack of women within the tradition. Greek tragedy was performed and written by men and targeted only the male audience. Case affirms that the portrayal of women by men in classical plays had been distorted and did not relate to the lives of actual women. It must be assumed that the images of the women produced in plays are represented fictional women constructed by patriarchy. Case’s assumption originates from the central system within classical cultures: the division between the *polis* and *oikos*. (Case, 1986, p. 318). Within theatre practice, the most prominent example of the division is in the tradition of an all-male stage. Women were banned from the stage as men dressed in drag played ‘Woman’. The public life, belonging to men becomes privileged in classical plays while the household remains hidden and unnoticed. According to Case, ‘the result of the suppression of actual women in the classical world created the invention of a representation of the gender ‘Woman’ within the culture.’ (Case, 1986, p. 318). This ‘Woman’ commonly fit a misogynistic narrative and portrayed villainous roles such as ‘the Bitch, the Witch, the Vamp, or the Virgin/Goddess.’ (Case, 1986, p. 318). What was originally interpreted as a representation of real women can be now viewed as an insight into the classical male playwright’s dangerous perspective of women. Historical evidence demonstrates that classical plays and theatrical conventions were active supporters in the project of female oppression and the replacement of women using false patriarchal illusions. (Case, 1986, p. 318). In the nineteenth century, feminists considered Henrik Ibsen a revolutionary as he challenged the long constructed fictional image by patriarchy, with his transgressive female characters.

**Patriarchal Critical Theory**

From the beginning of patriarchy, women were placed into inferior categories through the use of manmade terms and language. The uses of storytelling forced the separation of male and female roles and reinforced the ideas of the patriarchal language throughout the
ages. Hélène Cixous utilised her own theory about the inner workings of the patriarchal ideology. She maintains in her 1975 essay *The Newly Born Woman*; that thought has always worked through opposition. For society to accept a concept, one must be aware of its antithesis. There is a hierarchy that arranges opposite pairs and each side correlates to male or female. In this system of hierarchy, the female is destined to lose, and the male element always triumphs. Cixous describes maleness in terms of activity, while femaleness in terms of passivity. Cixous refers to the logocentrism which is a Greek term for speech, thought, loyalty or reason and is the central principle of language and philosophy. Logocentrism limits all values, concepts and thought to a binary system that centres around the ‘couple’ man/woman. Since organisation hierarchy ‘makes all conceptual organisation subject to man,’ man’s considered ‘superiority’ is shown in the opposition between activity and passivity. Victory is awarded to the him through the male’s ‘action’ overpowering the female’s ‘inaction’. It is important to note that Cixous does not label the individual man as the ‘enemy’ of women, but blames patriarchy for imposing male privilege and suppressing the female. The text introduces another term called phallocentrism which refers to the masculine order that is both privileged and reproduced in the belief that the ‘phallic’ is the primary signifier and therefore by logic, the feminine is subordinate to the masculine. She is on the side of negativity and is lacking (a phallus). (Belsey & Moore, 1997, p. 255). If logocentrism assigns meaning to the world, then phallocentrism chooses the method of interpretation.

When discussing male and female roles, Cixous claims that ‘She, (the woman) does not exist, she can not be, but there has to be something of her.’ (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 350). The woman is not allowed to escape this manmade construction, but she has to be of some use otherwise, why should she be kept around? He restricts her as this doll, always ‘passive’, virginal, compliant and shaped by his wants and needs. She exists to contribute to the man’s fulfilment, and that is all. A woman is to be ‘subjected to the desires he wishes to impart’. (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 350). Cixous uses literary history as further evidence of her theory. Since literature is under the command of the philosophical, it panders to the phallocentric with its use of female characters. ‘It is the same story. It all comes back to the man- to his torment, his desire to be (at) the origin’. (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 350). How can this be achieved? By stripping the female characters of their agency. The story exists because of the man. The woman does not exist because of the story. Characters without agency have no control. Imagine a female character as a paper boat bobbing down a river of the male’s
making. She cannot steer. She cannot change the course of the river. The river is an external force, moving the character in any direction it pleases. The female character is a puppet, made to do and say whatever is necessary to service the plot in favour of the phallocentric machine. The river is the logocentrism.

‘One upon a time…’ Cixous muses. She references the fairy tales Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. The female protagonists, Snow and Aurora both sleep in the woods, waiting for their princes to come and wake them up. Beautiful, desirable, mysterious but most importantly; passive. ‘She sleeps, she is intact, eternal, absolutely powerless. He has no doubt that she has been waiting for him forever.’ (Cixous, Clément, & Gilbert, 1986, p. 66.). His decision affects the story. His motivations are what matter- for her to be his wife or not his wife? He is active, and she is reactive. He pushes the plot, but the plot pushes her. Cixous narrates the end of the story; the prince makes his decision and ‘leans over her… Cut. The tale is finished. Curtain. Once awake (him or her), it would be an entirely different story… You never know with women. And the voluptuous simplicity of the preliminaries would no longer take place.’ (Cixous, Clément, & Gilbert, 1986, p. 66). In reality, If the woman lacks the passive qualities that her manmade representations hold, then she does not exist- she cannot be allowed to exist as it would threaten the stability of the masculine structure. Cixous famously refers to women as ‘the dark continent.’ ‘Where is she?’ Cixous asks, at the beginning of her essay. Where is the real woman? She is in the shadow that was thrown on her. Night to his day. Black to his white. Passivity to his activity. She is suppressed.

**Nineteenth Century Patriarchy**

Whether a claimed feminist or not, Ibsen certainly challenged the phallocentric narrative, through his female protagonists. It is important to note the historical context of women’s oppression during the 1800s. Wives were considered the personal property of their husbands; children belonged solely to the father, and women had fewer grounds for divorce than men. The gender roles of 19th-century patriarchy can be interpreted in two ways: as a social system which reserved power and privilege for men; or a process of gradual female
rejection and challenge to their exclusion. (Marsh, 2013). A process of determination began as many attempted to change the traditional ideas of ‘natural’ male authority towards a more modern view of gender equality. The Industrial Revelation inspired change as many lower class women were employed in factories. Women began to fight for equal rights and campaigned for female suffrage. Although the period recognised distinctive shifts in their opinions of gender relations, it was still a time of notable female oppression. The so-called ‘woman question’ was vigorously contested and by no means achieved. (Marsh, 2013). Legal, professional, educational and personal changes may have taken place, but by 1901, gender equality remained almost as unrealistic as in 1800. As women achieved more autonomy and increasing opportunities, men’s dominance prevailed. Perhaps most importantly, the democratic quality in the parliamentary system was deliberately and repeatedly withheld from women. (Marsh, 2013).

The European context of patriarchy explored in Ibsen’s works can be effectively explained using nineteenth-century British cultural theory. John Ruskin discusses the separation of gender roles in his essay *Of Queen’s Gardens*. Ruskin’s philosophy was originally a public lecture, before being published in a two-essay collection, *Sesame and Lilies* in 1865. In modern times, the lecture is regarded as a representation for the conservative Victorian ideology which defined women as passive and belonging to a separate sphere from men, the domestic. Despite Ruskin’s self-proclaimed love and admiration of women, he misses the point of equality between the sexes when he described the role he believed women should play in the revival of society’s hypothetical reconstruction and the type of education that would stimulate women’s ‘natural’ traits. He creates a guide for women based on his ideal medieval gentlewoman, similar to the one described by the early fifteenth-century French writer Christine de Pisan in *The Treasure City*. (Lloyd, 1995, p. 332). Pisan suggested four principles of worldly wisdom for women: ‘to treat their husbands with love, respect and fidelity, to manage their households competently and carefully, to refrain from overindulgence, and to avoid blame and dishonour. A woman must be knowledgeable enough to take charge of her husband’s affairs in his absence, but in his presence ‘she will humble herself towards him in deed and word and by curtsying; she will obey without complaint, and she will hold her peace to the best of her ability.’ (Lloyd, 1995, p. 332).
According to Ruskin, women are equal to men but different. Men and women are nothing alike, and each has what the other has not, in order to make a complete pair. (Bartleby, 1993). The man belongs in the public sphere and is ‘active, progressive, defensive...He is the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender’. (Bartleby, 1993). But a woman’s power is for ‘sweet ordering and arrangement’ and her greatest function is praise. (Bartleby, 1993). While he considers women to be dignified creatures and equal to their male counterparts, his ideology is far from progressive and incredibly restricted. He councils women to willingly take their places within the gender binary as their primary function is to be moral guides for men. The male is impulsive and active, therefore, cannot be responsible for consequences that women should find predictable. Ruskin believes it is the woman’s role to hinder the male’s desire for conquest and war. If she fails, it is her fault and her fault alone. This principle perpetuates the idea that women are the cause of all evil in the world, an opinion that originated from the first woman Eve, in the creation myth of the Abrahamic religions.

‘There is not a war in the world, no, nor an injustice, but you women are answerable for it; not in that you have provoked, but in that you have not hindered. Men, by their nature, are prone to fight; they will fight for any cause, or for none. It is for you to choose their cause for them, and to forbid them when there is no cause. There is no suffering, no injustice, no misery in the earth, but the guilt of it lies with you’ (Bartleby, 1993).

Many initially read Ruskin’s lecture as pro-feminist. However, further analysis reveals contradictions throughout his work that uncovers his unequal rules for men and women. He maintains that women are equal to men, yet their duty is to serve as secondary tools for men’s needs, wants and desires.

In response to Ruskin’s theory, John Stewart Mill published his essay The Subjection of Women, three years after Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies and analysed the oppression of women and debated an argument in favour of equality between the men and women. Mill progressively argued that social and legal terms which restrict the liberty of women serve as one of the ‘chief hindrances to human improvement’. (Smith, 2001, p. 181). Similar to Ibsen, Mill was a self-proclaimed humanist, less conscious of the feminism as a whole, but interested in the battle for equality between the sexes. One could argue that each issue has the
same agenda, but one was simply more socially acceptable than the other in that era. Unlike Ruskin, Mill does not promote the patriarchal system as positive and rejects Ruskin’s believes that men and women are naturally suitable for different roles in society. As a humanist, Mill wanted the [T]he legal subordination of one sex to another, to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." (Mill, 1997, p. 1). According to Mill, society would vastly improve from allowing women the liberty in controlling their own destiny and obtaining an equal position in society. Among these benefits are: improved conditions in the marital relationship so that women are no longer legally subjected to the will of their husbands and are equal partners; the removal of the conditioned ‘superiority’ instilled in men merely because of their gender; the creation of the family as a model of the ‘virtues of freedom’; and most importantly, the avocation of human progress for all sexes through the addition of ‘new and diverse intellectual forces which will result from improved and equal educational opportunities for women.’ (Smith, 2001, p. 181-182).

Mill acknowledges that his ideology challenges the traditional views and practices (i.e. the patriarchal hierarchy) but argues that the pre-modern system is based on a law of force, not on the modern use of reason. Therefore, the practices and conditions that subject women to subordination are outdated and do no coincide with modern day society. He dismisses the theory that women are the ‘weaker’ sex as it has never been proven and cannot be if the practice of gender equality is not allowed. How can society know the appropriate roles for women when it does not know what they are capable of due to their restrictions? Any assumption of women’s weaknesses is simply speculation. Mill argues that the only way to determine the differences between the sexes as ‘moral and rational beings’, one must have an extensive understanding of character; and since no-one yet has that knowledge, no-one is yet entitled to claim accurate opinion about the issue. (Mill, 1997, p. 13). Building a social construction based on unproven assumptions is rather redundant and a disservice to humanity. As Mill states, ‘The anxiety of mankind to interfere in behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do; it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing’ (Mill, 1997, p. 15).

Using a controversial analogy, Mill when likening the role of women in society, particularly their position in the nineteenth-century marital relationship to that of a slave
subordinate to their master. (i.e. domestic marriage is the equivalent to slavery). (Smith, 2001, p. 181). Unlike the slave ‘want not only the obedience of women but also their sentiments’. (Mill, 1997, p. 9). He desires a willing participant, a female who is unaware she is enslaved in the patriarchal system. She grows up believing these values are her own, and the master and her children should instinctively be her first and only priority. Rather than an individual, she is a servant as ‘all the moralities tell [her] that it is [her] duty, and all the current ideas about feelings tell [her] that it is [her] nature, to live for others—to set aside [her] own wishes and interests and have no life but in their affections.’ (Mill, 1997, p. 9). The male domination over the female appears to be natural and perhaps even well intentioned, instead of socially constructed. Through the use of a combination of nature and education, the master rewrites the woman’s apparent true nature. But who the women are as individuals cannot be verified as their ‘active’ traits are suppressed, and the ‘passive’ traits are unnaturally stimulated. Therefore, women cannot testify to their own natures, and are forced to live under male descriptions. The inner workings of nineteenth-century patriarchy perpetuate the polarisation of gender conventions, forcing men and women in opposite roles. Since women have not been allowed to function without the interference of repression, stimulation, and a system of subordination founded on women’s ‘natural’ sensitivity and lack of more ‘active’ qualities, then according to Mill, patriarchy cannot be inherently superior to any other system established on an unsubstantiated theory.
CHAPTER 3: NORA’S DOLL HOUSE

Using his plays as a political platform, Ibsen explores the nineteenth-century patriarchal world discussed by Ruskin and Mill, through his transgressive female characters, none more famous than Nora Helmer. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* explores idealism, love, modernity and mobilises all these features in a contemporary setting, while focusing fundamentally on a modern theme: the situation of women in the family and society. (Moi, 2006, p. 225). The play was enthusiastically received by feminist thinkers in Norway and throughout Europe with the Act widely credited as the first virtual invention of the emancipated woman. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 93). Disappointed with her domesticated isolation, the protagonist Nora leaves her husband and children in an effort to discover her true identity. In closing the door on her previously restricted life, Nora ignited a turn-of-the-century woman’s movement. Amalie Skram, Norway’s first author to treat female sexuality, praised the play’s dramatic and psychological elements, and saw it ‘as a warning of what would happen when women, in general, woke up to the injustices that had been committed against them.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 91). A Doll’s House aroused great controversy from critics at the time, to which Joan Templeton called ‘a gentlemanly backlash’ from men who dismissed women’s rights and refused to acknowledge the existence of oppressive patriarchy. (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). Rather than being viewed as a transgressive woman, Nora was demonised and ironically labelled to fit the ‘Woman’ image constructed aeons before by classic Greek Theatre. Critic Hermann Weigand made many attempts to dismiss and trivialise Nora’s character:

‘[Nora is] a daughter of Eve.... [A]n irresistibly bewitching piece of femininity.... [Her] charge that in all the years of their marriage they have never exchanged one serious word about serious things is incorrect: she has quite forgotten how seriously Torvald lectured her on the subjects of forgery and lying less than three days ago.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 29).

For over a century, Nora was interpreted as an example of the most ‘treacherous’ characteristics of her sex. The controversy in the 1880s caused a mighty chorus of female blame. The woman who rejected her patriarchal position was denounced as a ridiculous, and a frivolous narcissist; an ‘abnormal’ woman whose vanity and unloving egotistic tendencies
caused her to abandon her family in a moment of selfishness. (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). In an attempt to protect the patriarchal construct, the first attacks from the outraged reviewers made references to Eve, the woman who committed the first sin, according to man. Templeton believed the critic’s dismissal of Nora, implied the opinion that she was Ibsen’s intentional creation of a housewife Medea, whose atrocities against her husband andchildren were downplayed to fit the domesticated society of nineteenth century Norway. (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). The former Greek princess, Medea served as one of the first male inventions of the fictional gender representation ‘Woman’ to which Susan Ellen Case references in her essay *Classic Drag: The Creation of Female Parts*. Commonly described as an evil witch, Medea takes revenge against her former husband Jason, by killing his new wife as well as her own children. Afterwards, she escapes to Athens to form a new identity and begin a new life. Nora Helmer may not have murdered her children before leaving her old, but to these nineteenth-century critics desperately try to dissect and analyse Ibsen’s narrative to find a version of the Medea their male ancestors constructed long before. All guns must blaze in order to defend the validation of masculinity.

Perhaps known as Nora’s most relentless criticiser, Weigand in 1925, wrote a forty-nine-page classical study that attempted to prove Ibsen conceived Nora as the stereotypical fickle and lovable female. In the beginning, Weigand admits to being momentarily shaken by the play possible pro-feminist message: He confesses sarcastically, ‘Having had the misfortune to be born of the male sex, we slink away in shame, vowing to mend our ways.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). However, his male ‘remorse’ is short-lived as he gains a revelation from another critic’s opinion: The meaning of the final scene is represented through Nora’s remark about her changing her dress. With this in mind, Weigand spent an entire night combing through Ibsen’s text, searching for the slightest evidence to belittle Nora’s search for independence. By morning, his male respect was restored. Nora’s departure in the final scene was left ambiguous and therefore open to interpretation. Weigand chose to see only one explanation for the revolt of ‘this winsome little woman’ and her childish tantrum: Ibsen had intended *A Doll’s House* to be a comedy. (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). Nora’s hysterical behaviour as the curtains fall is meant to arouse laughter in the audience as they assume she will return to home to ‘revert, imperceptibly, her role of songbird and charmer.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). Weigand cannot and will not accept Nora as transgressive, and would rather assume she returns to her appropriate womanly position in society as soon as her overreaction is finished. Accepting Ibsen’s idea, that Nora did not need her children or her husband to
define her as a human being, would force Weigand to rearrange his entire perception of the male and female hierarchy. His masculine pride is dependent on Nora’s helpless femininity.

Nora’s self-realisation occurs near the end of the play and critics used this against Ibsen on based literary grounds and unrealistic character development. Upon her transformation into the transgressive, Nora was initially very childlike and whimsical. The furious reviewers at the premiere of *A Doll’s House* claimed that the play could not initiate a serious discussion about ‘the woman question’ as the heroine seen in Acts 1 and 2 is irreconcilable to the emancipated woman ready to depart Torvald’s home. Therefore, Nora’s departure need not be taken seriously, and her silly door slamming is mere theatrics. Norwegian scholar Else Host argued that Nora was never capable of becoming a ‘newly fledged feminist.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). The dismissive and anti-feminist criticism does not acknowledge that she was arguably playing the passive female role her husband wanted, that she was conforming to the position assigned to her by patriarchy. As the play progresses, Nora demonstrates that she is not totally ignorant towards the fact her life as a ‘doll’ contradicted her true identity. She defies her husband in subtle yet meaningful ways- by, for instance, eating the ‘forbidden’ macaroons and lying to Torvald about it. She also announces that ‘she is dying to take in her mouth some ‘ugly’ swear words,’ expressing her desire to rebel against her delicate womanly image, and image her husband constructed and incessantly obsesses over. She uses the macaroons as a ploy to show her guests her ‘naughty’ nature by breaking her husband’s or as John Stewart Mill would claim- master’s will. She even bends the truth when she showcases her ability to work around her restrictions; Doctor Rank states, ‘What, macaroons? I thought they were forbidden here?’ ‘Yes’, Nora replied, ‘But these are some Christine gave me.’ (Ibsen, 1965, p. 166). Nora also pretends the macaroons belong to her, indicating a growing desire to own something for herself, and herself alone.

Ibsen uses the doll symbolism, which becomes a powerful tool in expressing the fixed passive position. Nora is forced to play by her husband, father and society. Ibsen portrays a doll’s life as a combination of marriage and motherhood. Nora plays with her children just as Torvald and her father played with her. While Nora desires to have possessions of her own, she herself is a possession of Torvald. When she asks Torvald to stop looking at her in a certain way, he stakes his claim, stating ‘Why shouldn't I look at my dearest treasure? -at all the beauty that is mine, all my very own?’ (Ibsen, 1965, p. 166). Torvald sees her as a piece
of property that he must protect from damage so he restrains her with rules, like a father would a child, forbidding her from pursuing temporal pleasures. (Wiseman, 2010). Nora makes the connection between her Father and Torvald as they both served as her ‘master’. According to Nora, she would modify her beliefs to suit her fathers, therefore burying her true identity under her father’s preferred version. She claims that her husband is guilty of similar actions: ‘I’ve been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was papa’s doll child’. (Ibsen, 1965, p. 226).

Torvald insists Nora wears costumes to parties and expresses disappointment in her inability to grasp the tarantella. (Wiseman, 2010). It is important to note that Torvald is not evil, but rather an ignorant man conditioned by society to believe that women are ornaments or property. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft states in one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, that society believes ‘She [the woman] was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears, whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.’ (Wollstonecraft & Tomaselli, 1995, p. 67). Nora’s costume and tarantella dance are part of Torvald’s fantasy of who he wants his wife to be. Torvald forces Nora to take on a false and exotic identity; He used her like a doll. (Wiseman, 2010).

With careful examination, one can notice the entire play revolves around Nora’s progression from doll to adult- which is not as smooth and uncertain as many critics would like to assume. Nora’s role as the delicate female is not natural as she is an actress who plays the role of the little ‘skylark’ and ‘squirrel’ cast by Torvald through his infantilisation. In light of the revelation that Nora forged her father’s signature in order to obtain a loan save her husband’s life and that she has secretly done side work to raise money, her childlike pose appears highly ironic as she swears to him; ‘I would never dream of doing anything you did not want me too’; ‘I never get anywhere without your help.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 91). Nora’s transformation from doll to a human being is symbolised from the first scene when Nora decorates the Christmas tree. The tree is a festive object meant to serve a decorative purpose, similar to Torvald’s view of Nora and her position in the household. Initially, the tree is bare, and Nora demands that it stays hidden from family; ‘Hide the Christmas Tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it until this evening when it is dressed.’ The tree without its sparkles and false glamour is a representation of Nora’s true personality that she
represses. As the play progresses, the stage directions indicate the Christmas Tree’s slow dishevelment, paralleling the deconstruction of Nora’s cheerful doll image.

Rather than viewing Nora’s small defiance’s as indications of her eventual transgression, Evert Sprinchorn used it as evidence of her unworthiness as a character. Nora’s sweet tooth and untrustworthy nature causes her to devour the macaroons. (Templeton, 1989, p. 30). Again, this is another correlation between Nora and the first perceived sinner Eve as the macaroon become the forbidden apple [by god]. Sprinchorn misses the point and forgets to ask the question as to why the macaroons were forbidden in the first place. Nora states it is because Torvald was afraid sweets would spoil her teeth. Nora’s body parts are owned by her, yet her ‘master’ controls or rather attempts to control how she uses them. The fact that the majority of reviewers see dishonesty and scheming from a woman using her body as she wishes highlights the male superiority complex in patriarchy. Nora’s denial in thinking the macaroons are hers is in Sprinchorn’s opinion, a showcase of her irrationality, a stereotypical trait associated with the female sex. Sprinchorn believed that her lies to Doctor Rank and her eating the macaroons in secret suggest that ‘Nora is deceitful and manipulative from the start.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 30).

Upon Nora’s self-awakening in the final scene, critics could assume that A Doll’s House would end with Torvald’s generous forgiveness and all normality would resume in the household. However, Nora strips them of their expectations and refuses to allow their conventional happy ending. With an authoritative voice, Nora commands her husband, ‘Sit down, Torvald…we have a lot to talk over.’ (Lewis, 2010). While Nora’s exit seems certain, it is apparently ambiguous enough for commentators to make speculations to suit their own agendas. Edward Dowden mockingly suspected that Ibsen had an unpublished manuscript hidden in his residence entitled Nora Helmer’s Reflections in Solitude. According to Dowden, it would be a document that would probably conclude with the words, ‘Tomorrow I return to Torvald; have been exactly one week away; shall insist on a free woman’s right to unlimited macaroons as a test of his reform.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). John Chamberlain used moral grounds to demean Nora’s character and interpreted her exit as an unbelievably selfish act and that abandoning one’s family to go out into womanhood in search of her real identity, embodies the ‘shallowest notion of emancipated womanhood.’ (Templeton, 1989, p. 29). Chamberlain remained ignorant to the question Ibsen intended to raise when exploring the themes of sacrifice and duty in the play -Why did children and the husband serve as
chains to her freedom in the first place?’ Bernard Shaw recognised this debacle perfectly in his book *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*: ‘The sum of the matter is unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself.’ (Shaw, 2009, p.46-47).

Other criticisms attacked Nora over her act of forgery to get a loan that essentially saves Torvald’s life- ignoring that the well-intentioned act was only a crime due to her gender. Perhaps, through their condemnation, these critics did not pay sufficient attention to Ibsen’s well-placed hints, nor to the overall context of late nineteenth-century society.

Amalie Skram passionately defends Nora in a commentary on *A Doll’s House* in a Norway magazine *Dagbladet* published in 1880. Skram completely identifies with Nora’s actions: Torvald, and by extension men, ‘rages at the hypocrite, liar, criminal, yet the essential truth is she risked everything to save his life.’ (Moi, 2006, p. 229). The anti-feminist arguments referring to what a ‘normal’ woman is, and the claims of Nora’s abnormalities as a female are prominent examples of the patriarchal ideology and highlights Ibsen’s statement; ‘a woman cannot be herself in an exclusively male society…with councils and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view’. As Nora walks out the door for the final time, she not only turns her back to her husband, but she also turns her back on the male reviewers. They cannot see what she does next, nor can they critique her later actions. She is gone from their sneering gaze, and they are furious.

Nora considers herself to be in the midst of the transformation from doll to human being. She is now a blank slate who questions every aspect of society, from the viewpoint of someone who has undone all of her conditioning. Torvald reminds Nora of all the aspects that make up patriarchal society, beginning with religion: ‘Ah Torvald, I don’t really know what religion is, Nora replies, ‘I only know what Pastor Hansen told me…I want to see if what [he] told me was right’ (Ibsen, 1965, p. 228). Nora has truly emancipated herself from society, refusing to take the word of man as definitive proof of the world. Seeing that he is failing to change her mind, Torvald attempts to appeal to her morality regarding law and order: ‘I simply can’t convince myself that the law is right. That a woman shouldn’t have the right to save her husband’s life! (Ibsen, 1965, p. 228). Ibsen through Nora, expresses his detest for the ‘twin curses’ sacrifice and duty that pander the men in society. Torvald states, ‘No man would sacrifice is honour for the one he loves,’ announces Torvald; ‘Thousands of women have,’ Nora answers. (Ibsen, 1965, p. 230). Nora meticulously rejects every contributor to the
patriarchal system, including motherhood, duty, sacrifice which is preached by the cultural authority of books.

[Torvald] Helmer: Oh, it’s outrageous. That you could betray your most sacred duties in this way.
Nora: What do you count as my most sacred duties?
Helmer: And I have to tell you! Are they not the duties to your husband and children?
Nora: I have other duties, equally sacred.
Helmer: No you don’t. What ‘duties’ might you have in mind?
Nora: Duties to myself.
Helmer: Before all else, you’re a wife and a mother.
Nora: I don’t believe in that anymore. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, just as much as you, - or, at least, that I’ll try to become one (Ibsen, 1965, p. 228)

Nora’s self-awakening and determination for her own emancipation is what transforms her into the most famous transgressive female in all of Ibsen’s works. Despite her husband and her late father’s conditioning, Nora figures out the truth, a truth that has been burdening inside her since the play’s beginning but finally breaks to the surface through Torvald’s betrayal. Upon the discovery that she was unwittingly a servant to the patriarchal system, she constructs an escape route for herself, much to her husband and the majority of nineteenth-century society’s indignation.
CHAPTER 4: IBSEN’S OTHER HERIONES

*Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler* were each written over a decade after *A Doll’s House* during the 1880s. Hedda and Rebecca each have unfamiliar Norwegian names, symbolising an air of ‘otherness’ which separates them from convention. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 106).

Hedda, the daughter of famous General Gabler, was used to being raised under a masculine influence and has little time for ‘womanly things. Rebecca West is a single orphan who is ambitiously Radical and a free thinker, all qualities a woman is required to suppress in a man’s world. While both women long to escape their predestined female roles and the subordination from their male counterparts, they act on their desires through actions that orientate around men. In all three of Ibsen’s plays, the women’s self-realisation of their manipulated position in society is largely dependent on the attitudes of the men nearest to them. Torvald’s insensitive betrayal in the forgery scandal triggers Nora’s decision for emancipation. The men in Hedda’s life corner her like a trapped animal, and Rosmer practically forces Rebecca’s sacrifice. However, unlike Nora Helmer, both Hedda and Rebecca are still too much victims of their patriarchal thinking to move from transgressive to feminism, thus ultimately failing to escape their entrapment without taking their own lives.

The conventional norms of nineteenth century women are thwarted by Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, who contradicts the qualities expected of the domesticated housewife. In contrast to Nora Helmer, the cunning Hedda is fully aware of her inferior position as a woman from the beginning of the play. This awareness is the cause of her growing frustration- knowing her womanhood forces her to be physically and socially dependent on her husband, Tesman. Rather than longing for emancipation or a change in the patriarchal construct, Hedda wants to steal the superior role assigned to Tesman by birth right. According to Ibsen, ‘Hedda really wants to live the whole life of a man.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 122). While still known as Hedda Gabler, rather than Hedda Tesman, Ibsen claimed that as a personality ‘she is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than as her husband’s wife.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 100). In fact, Hedda is more masculine than Tesman as she was raised by a general and he was brought up by two maiden aunts. With her gullible husband, her strong nature overpowers the room and she can almost pretend that she is ‘one of the boys’. In the face of what she viewed as an empty existence, she attempts to live vicariously through her husband.
to gain insight into a world that according to her Tesman, ‘she isn’t supposed to know anything about’. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 100. She glories in playing the battle of wits with both Brack and Lövborg- as long as she can maintain the upper hand. The moment either of hint their sexual attraction to her, to remind her physically that she is a woman – she panics and desperately reaches for her favourite objects for comfort- her pistols. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 122). Her father’s pistols as a phallic symbol, supply Hedda with the masculine facade she uses to defend herself against the male invasion.

Despite Hedda’s determination to deny her womanhood, she can never actually be a man. Not only does her body betray her but also her mind. As Janet Gorton states, ‘[Hedda] has internalised the repressions of society, and her exaggerated fear of scandal renders her incapable of defying public opinion.’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 122). When she discovers Brack knows she was an accomplice in Lövborg’s suicide, she panics:

Hedda: [Without replying.] And supposing the pistol was not stolen, and the owner is discovered? What then?
Brack: Well, Hedda—then comes the scandal!
Hedda: The scandal!
Brack: Yes, the scandal—of which you are so mortally afraid. (Ibsen, 1990, p. 70).

Unlike Nora Helmer, who ‘cannot consider’ society’s opinion on her journey to find her real identity, Hedda is deathly afraid of destroying her carefully constructed image. It seems that for all her blatant disregard of Victorian values and restrictions, she is a victim of her patriarchal circumstances and surroundings.

Ibsen’s highlights Hedda’s differences from the stereotypical domestic woman through the use of the antithesis between Hedda, a potential mother in spite of herself, and Julianne Tesman, a maternal figure who idealises motherhood without having any biological children herself. In the first scene of the play, Hedda’s role was predetermined: the ‘expectations’ that Mrs Tesman speaks of indicated the part that Hedda was meant to play, a role which Hedda fought against every chance she could. (Barrows, 2009). By the final scene, Hedda, who is overcome by her lack of hope in society appears (to the gullible Tesman) to have finally succumbed to the role of the devoted wife and mother. He does not notice that she is utterly miserable by the thought of his child inside her. Her disgust of
motherhood, coupled with her ‘beautiful act of liberation’ in destroying Lövborg’s manuscript being viewed an act of devotion by her husband, causes her to clench her fists in suppressed rage and claim quietly, ‘Oh, I’ll die of this- I’ll die of all this’ (Ibsen, Gosse, & Archer, 2009, p. 132). The reality encloses on Hedda, and her continual use of denial no longer works.

While Nora Helmer expels her feelings through her tarantella dance, Hedda represses hers inside her own mind, the built up frustration and despair leads to her tragic decision in the final scene. Hedda deludes herself and her journey down to earth is the most important part of the play as it triggers her final decision. Once alone with Brack, Hedda further explains her admiration for the free and courageous Lövborg. Brack’s next words forever destroy her hope for liberation, ‘Mrs Hedda- but I’m afraid I have to disburden you from this illusion.’ He reveals that Lövborg is already dead, and he accidentally shot himself in "lower part" of the stomach, while still looking for his manuscript. To make matters worse, he was in a prostitute’s bedroom at the time. This is the second time in Act IV where Hedda is disgusted by the society in which she if forced to live. Throughout the play, due to the irrational expectations of her as a woman, Hedda is forced to live in a false reality. Repelled by the world around her, she constructs situations in which she has the power and will not be subdued by the desires of men. Lövborg’s ludicrous and undignified death shatters her illusions once and for all, proving her lack of control, even in the settings of her own making. (Barrows, 2009). ‘What is it’, she states in revulsion, ‘this curse- that everything I touch turns ridiculous and vile?’ (Ibsen, Gosse, & Archer, 2009, p. 133).

According to Norwegian scholar Robin Young, in the Preface to his study of the dramatist, ‘Ibsen did not write or think as a Freudian’. (Hand, 2005). Published in 1890, Freud’s work in psychoanalysis occurred at a later date. Despite having no knowledge of psychoanalysis, Ibsen does a remarkable job of developing the female psyche and the repressive mechanisms of their society. Hedda is an extremely intelligent woman forced to live a rather limited existence. Her inability to act on her wishes and desires causes her to manipulate the people around her in order to gain control. When she realises her failure in making Lövborg’s death an act of ‘liberation’, her illusions of control are shattered, and she is repulsed.
Hedda’s loss of control is further emphasised when Judge Brack realises it was she who provided Lövborg with the pistol. ‘So I’m in your power,’ she states to the Judge. Hedda is horrified by the thought of being owned by another man and expresses her defiance at the thought of not being ‘free’. “One usually manages to adjust to the inevitable,” says Brack, in a mocking reply. (Ibsen, Gosse, & Archer, 2009, p. 133). Brack’s quote is incredibly important as his opinion represents the views of patriarchal society. By society demands, Hedda can either succumb to scandal or accept her role as the passive woman. Judge Brack sees this role as her only option. Unaware of Hedda’s blight, Tesman replaces Lövborg in the manuscript and Hedda can see her position has been filled by Mrs Elvsted. Hedda sees that no matter what decision she makes, she can be easily replaced by the numerous women in the play who comply to the patriarchal construct, believing it to be natural. ‘Is there nothing the two of you need from me now,’ Hedda asks her her husband. Tesman dismisses her, ignorant to her question of double-meaning. She is the invisible, hidden behind his aspirations.

The future is dim for Hedda. Faced with her husband’s obliviousness and Brack’s sexual bribery, she cannot bare the patriarchal world no longer: ‘It quiets, then a pistol goes off.’ (Ibsen, Gosse, & Archer, 2009, p. 134). Hedda shoots herself in the head. ‘But good God!’ Brack exclaims, “People don’t do such things!” But Hedda is not a conformist and by killing herself in this way, she seems to be stating, ‘I do’. Brack’s last line relates to his earlier statement on adjusting to the inevitable conditions of society. In killing herself, Hedda chose an option outside of the conditions of the social construct, one that the likes of Judge Brack could never conceive. By killing herself, she escapes the society that promotes gender discrimination, sexual oppression and motherhood. While Hedda proves herself to be a transgressive woman, she sadly loses herself in the process.

Unlike Hedda Gabler, Rebecca West does not let the fear of scandal affect her decision making; as she says to Rosmer, ‘Oh, why must we worry about what others think? We know, you and I, that we have no reason to feel guilty’ (Ibsen, 2007, p. 33). Rebecca rejects the role as wife and mother by continuing to live as a single woman beneath one roof with Rosmer following the death of his late wife, Beeta. Ibsen’s Rebecca West was hailed by feminists. The character was reportedly inspired by Ibsen’s mother; Gina Krog claimed to have heard ‘the gospel of the future’ expressed in Rosmersholm: ‘Ibsen’s belief in women, in the women of his country, has never been expressed so proudly as here’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 96).
Similar to Hedda, Rebecca lacks the maternal instinct typically associated with the traditional nineteenth-century women. She muses to her housekeeper that Rosmer seems better off as childless as he does not have the capacity to ‘put up with a lot of crying children’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 96). While disinterested in motherhood, she has no issue using her female biology to trick Rosmer’s late wife that she was pregnant by Rosmer. She uses the assumed feminine traits such as seductiveness and attractiveness to manipulate others in her struggle for emancipation. As Kroll says, ‘Who is there you couldn’t bewitch if you tried’ while accusing her of using his infatuation with her to gain entry into Rosmersholm, and by extension Rosmer’s life. children’ (McFarlane, 1994, p. 96). Rosmer, who is unaware that he is, in fact, subservient to Rebecca, as she lives vicariously through him to exercise her political agenda and love for free-thought. It is unfortunate, that for all her ambitions and ideas, she cannot take credit and must let Rosmer be the front ‘man’ for her operations.

While Ibsen’s portrayal of Rebecca is transgressive, she is still very much entrapped within a male ideology. At the beginning of the play, Rosmer’s brother-in-law Kroll commends her for remaining with Rosmer after his wife’s death: ‘You know there is something rather splendid about that- a woman giving up the best years of her life, sacrificing them for the sake of others,’ Rebecca replies: ‘Oh, what else would I have to live for?’ (Ibsen, 2007, p. 6). Despite her motivations, Rebecca’s life is oriented around the man in her life. Her visions of reforming society are focused on Rosmer, the object of her affection, rather than herself. When Rosmer asks her towards the end of the play how she thinks things will be for her now, she replies ‘that is not important’ (Ibsen, 2007, p. 80). Gail Finney believes Kroll’s comment that what Rebecca calls her emancipation is only an abstraction may have some truth; given by her confession that when she reached twenty-five, she began subtracting a year from her age admitting that she believed she was ‘getting to old’ to be unmarried. (McFarlane, 1994, p. 96). Although Rebecca rebels against tradition, she feels guilty for not following patriarchal conditions. She likes the idea of emancipation but is not quite able to let go of society’s perception of the female role.

By the end of the play, Rosmer finally grasps just how much control he has lost to this woman. She manipulated his life to suit her wants and agenda, much like she manipulated Beate into taking own life. He is disgusted by his failure to acknowledge the ‘difference’ in Rebecca, in comparison to others of her sex. The disparity in her is considered a mistake by
men in patriarchal society. Rosmer wide and eccentric demands for Rebecca to kill herself for his sake is a madman’s attempt to retain ‘something like an identity, something like a voice’ (Moi, 2006, p. 225). By the end of the play, Rosmer for a moment registers the sheer madness of his behaviour. For him to reclaim his superior position as a man, he needs Rebecca to prove her devotion to him by killing herself the way his previous wife did: ‘All this- it’s insanity,’ he exclaims. (Moi, 2006, p. 225). With Rosmer’s line, Ibsen captures the irrationality of patriarchy and the desperate measures a man will go to for validation. Rebecca calmly agrees to Rosmer’s demands: ‘What I have sinned, it is fit I must expiate’ (Reynolds, 2008). According to Elizabeth Hardwick, the real reason ‘Rebecca agrees to kill herself in the millstream it is not expiation but a furious disappointment in Rosmer and disgust with herself’ (Moi, 2006, p. 225). Despite her true motivations, Rebecca gives in to Rosmer’s demands, demonstrating that while she is a transgressive character, she remains a victim to ‘Rosmersholm view of life’- a life embedded in patriarchal tradition to which she makes her last sacrifice. (Reynolds, 2008).

Through Hedda Gabler and Rebecca West, Ibsen explores the psychological effects that result from the rejection of cultural convention. While Hedda and Rebecca share some similarities to Nora Helmer, Ibsen portray them with much more dark complexity and their situation as inferior creatures in society is much less comfortably explained than the somewhat unrealistic feminist route portrayed through Nora ten years earlier. Later in Ibsen’s career, the playwright became increasingly pessimistic in regards to society and went from telling the truth about the patriarchal construction, to exploring the destruction of that truth.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The roots of discrimination against women have long been embedded in Western culture and society for thousands of years. Ibsen challenged the false patriarchal image of women and represented the reality through the portrayal of his female characters. Using his plays as a political platform, Ibsen exposed the truth about the defects of Victorian patriarchal society. Nora Helmer, Hedda Gabler and Rebecca West each broke the social, economic and feminine position assigned to them. Ibsen revolutionises the female character, removing the shadow thrown on her and providing her with the active role, rather than the stereotypical passive. Ibsen’s literary works reflected issues such as the male/female hierarchy and the rational perception of the roles of men and women in the nineteenth century. The plays caused people to question tradition and whether it originates from nature or a prejudiced masculine construction.

Ibsen’s Hedda and Rebecca shattered the patriarchal illusion of their ‘natural’ inferiority but also demonstrated the psychological instability, that is inflicted on these women by patriarchy which ultimately leads to their downfall. In A Doll’s House, Nora achieves emancipation but not without sacrificing her children and all that she knows; good and bad. While Ibsen plays portray bleak outcomes for these characters, the women’s transgression and ideological awakenings, introduces a possible new and reformed structure of society, where the male and female are capable of equal roles. From a humanist point of view, Ibsen envisioned a future of an improved system where women would not feel emotionally crippled by their oppressive patriarchal destinies and could advance naturally, socially and politically, thus improving human civilisation as a whole.
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