 Asserting a Feminist Humanity: Nora’s Deliberate Performance and Ultimate Rejection of her Gender Role in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*

Many scholars have considered the importance of Henrik Ibsen’s female protagonist in *A Doll’s House* and have debated the nature and implications of her transformation in relation to feminism, gender roles, and humanity. The character of Nora Helmer poses questions about the role of the female in male-dominated societies, the impact of using sexist language and metaphors in everyday life, and the way in which oppressive patriarchal structures diminish the humanity of women. I argue that Nora executes a deliberate gender performance through her play-acting and participation in her husband Torvald’s belittling animal metaphors. By appearing to fulfill Torvald’s descriptions of stereotypical feminine helplessness and weakness, Nora seems to uphold his notion of a strict gender binary. However, in reality, Nora’s engagement with “masculine” concepts like business and finance upsets this binary and challenges the patriarchal structure of the society in which she lives. Nora is able to defy her gender role outright once her idealized vision of her marriage fails to materialize, and she realizes the danger of continuing to perform her restrictive female role. While some scholars argue that Nora’s metaphorical transformation is from a woman into a human, others believe she develops from a feminine woman into a masculine woman—or even a man entirely. I contend that her declaration of her humanness at the conclusion of the play functions as an inherently feminist triumph. Nora’s adoption of what are considered masculine traits by the patriarchy—but are in fact basic human rights—allows her to recognize her humanness and ultimately assert her worth as a woman.

Some of the most prominent aspects of the dynamic between Nora and Torvald are the
descriptions of wild creatures and animalistic metaphors that characterize the couple’s seemingly light-hearted banter. However, the affection in their interactions is guided by much more sinister underlying structures of power and control. Framing the nicknames as terms of endearment, Torvald frequently uses this animal imagery to belittle and dismiss his wife and establish a clear marital hierarchy where he is the powerful, authoritarian husband, and she is the submissive, acquiescent wife. In the opening scene of A Doll’s House, Torvald repeatedly refers to Nora as a “song lark,” “squirrel,” “spending-bird,” and “little songbird” (Ibsen 110-111) while he teases her about her careless spending habits, and Nora plays along with him and accepts the docile role he has placed her in. Torvald associates these small wild animals with frittering, squandering, and wasting, so by fulfilling his description of her, Nora reinforces stereotypes of female economic incompetence and ignorance. Her compliance in these roles conforms to Torvald’s notion of a strict gender binary where the financially dependent female must rely on the financially stable and independent male. In other scenes, Nora’s participation in these animalistic descriptions goes even further, as she not only responds to these names but actively uses them to refer to herself: “Your squirrel would run about and do tricks...” (Ibsen 146) and “Your skylark would chirrup in all the rooms...” (Ibsen 147). Torvald’s use of animal imagery also functions as a trope of naturalism, specifically the naturalistic notion of hereditary degeneration (Rossi 147). Torvald believes that Nora inherited her reckless spending from her father, stating “It’s in the blood. Oh yes it is, these things are hereditary, Nora” (Ibsen 113). By using metaphors of the animal kingdom—specifically wild, natural animals like squirrels and larks instead of domesticated pets—Torvald applies the deterministic and pessimistic philosophy of naturalism to his wife’s financial practices. He justifies her behavior as natural by likening her to creatures of natural wildlife, and he frames her incompetence with money as a hereditary flaw.
that she has no control over. Since Nora plays along with Torvald’s descriptions of her, she appears to uphold his idea that females are naturally helpless and weak.

Some scholars propose that Torvald’s language and use of animal imagery is part of the process of emasculation that occurs in patriarchal societies where females are raised to view the world through the male gaze. Referencing Torvald’s frequent use of animal nicknames, one scholar argues that “Nora is seen under the spell of emasculations right from the start of the play” (Hossain 6). He claims that because of her upbringing in a patriarchal society, Nora’s values and sense of self-worth are defined in male terms, which is demonstrated by her pride in her male role as a “savior” (Hossain 7) when she saved Torvald’s life by financing their Italy trip. This author positions Nora at the mercy of patriarchal forces—like Torvald’s animal descriptions of her—stating, “Nora is emasculated. She is, in fact, no one” (Hossain 7). Another scholar views Nora in a similar way, arguing that her fulfillment of her role as an inferior and submissive housewife is the product of the social conditions of the time (Kaur 4). This author sees Nora’s participation in her husband’s belittling animal descriptions of her as something she has no control over. “From a “little lark” who performs tricks for Torvald, she develops into an independently thinking woman who leaves her husband and children to find herself” (Kaur 5). Both these scholars posit Nora’s fulfillment of Torvald’s descriptions of her as a passive, unthinking act and argue that she does not develop into an individual with her own thoughts and motivations until the very end of the play. Although Nora does indeed fulfill Torvald’s belittling descriptions of her, I argue that her behavior is deliberate and tactful from the very start of the play. There are many instances when Nora secretly defies her gender role by transgressing the patriarchal boundaries set to confine females to an inferior position.
Judith Butler’s articulation of gender as a performance provides a framework to examine Nora’s actions and behaviors. Butler suggests that gendered acts and gestures “are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs…” (136). She argues that gender performance is a “strategy of survival within compulsory systems” (139) and is produced through a “stylized repetition of acts” (140). Applying this theory to Nora, her words and actions can be understood as conforming to societal expectations of her gender as a powerless, obedient, and domestic wife/mother/daughter. Through her repeated doll-like actions, Nora performs her gender role and appears to uphold nineteenth-century Norway’s definition of appropriate female behavior. By fulfilling her husband’s descriptions of her as a wild creature frittering away money, Nora plays the role of the economically incompetent and dependent wife. However, it is clear that Nora’s participation is a form of play-acting because she secretly defies her husband and the misogynistic society which he represents. As Mrs. Linde notes, “Well, of course, a wife can’t borrow without her husband’s consent” (Ibsen 121). Yet, when Torvald’s doctors declared that travelling south would cure his illness, Nora secretly and illegally borrowed money to finance their trip to Italy, and she has since been doing copying work to pay off the loan. In stark contrast to her society’s model of female decorum, Nora claims she is a “wife with a touch of business flair” (Ibsen 121), and she demonstrates her knowledge of finance, telling Mrs. Linde, “there’s something called quarterly interest, and something called instalments” (Ibsen 122). Nora’s economic rebellion is also evidenced by her secret purchase of the macaroons. When questioned by Torvald, she repeatedly denies his accusations and lies to him about buying the forbidden cookies. By doing so, she pretends to be obedient and dependent on him when in reality she defies him by exercising financial independence and spending money on things for
pleasure. In this way, Nora rejects Torvald’s naturalistic view of her spending habits as a consequence of hereditary degeneration. Her secret business transactions challenge Torvald’s view of economic incompetence as a natural component of the female gender. Butler’s gender theory argues against the idea of gender being a natural phenomenon, and Nora’s clear play-acting shows that she is performing a specific gender role created by society, not a natural gender order. Nora’s both casual engagement and quite serious involvement in the realm of business illustrate how her fulfillment of Torvald’s belittling animal descriptions of her is a deliberate act to conform to the societal role of the female gender.

My argument for Nora’s gender performance is further strengthened by her explicit awareness of the role she is playing. She purposefully behaves and acts in a manner that conforms to her expected gender role, and her clear understanding of this role is evident in her conversation with Mrs. Linde. After she discloses her secret of the loan to her childhood friend, Nora explains why she cannot tell Torvald that she saved his life: “And besides, just think how awkward and humiliating it would be for Torvald—with his manly self-esteem—to know he owed me something. It would upset the entire balance of our relationship…” (Ibsen 122). Nora clearly understands society’s expectations of gender roles—both for herself as a woman and for Torvald as a man—so her obedient and acquiescent behavior is aimed to not only fulfill her own role, but to preserve her husband’s as well. Her participation in Torvald’s animal metaphors is therefore a deliberate gender performance—a performance with the specific goal of controlling her husband. By playing the part of the helpless, powerless female, Nora appeals to Torvald’s masculine ego and his need to feel a sense of mastery and dominance in every situation. As a result, she is able to use her gender performance to try to manipulate Torvald. In some cases, Nora’s attempts at manipulation are unsuccessful, such as when she tries to prevent her husband
from firing Krogstad. Although she refers to herself as Torvald’s “little squirrel” and “skylark” (Ibsen 147-148), she is unable to stop him from mailing Krogstad’s notice. However, at other times Nora is successfully able to exploit Torvald’s masculinity, like when she pretends to forget how to dance the tarantella to stall him from finding Krogstad’s letter exposing her illegal loan and forgery. “But I can’t get anywhere without your help; I’ve completely forgotten it all” (Ibsen 161). Nora’s fulfillment of Torvald’s animal descriptions of her—“Here is your song-lark!” (Ibsen 164)—and the other aspects of her deliberate gender performance as a weak and docile female allow her to exercise control over her husband. In this way, Nora subverts Torvald’s use of animal imagery and disrupts the strict gender binary under which he—and the patriarchal society he represents—operates.

Although it is clear that Nora is aware of the role she is playing and purposefully performs it to manipulate and influence her husband, she is not completely untouched by the forces of misogyny present in her life. This is evident in the fundamentally patriarchal motivation driving her continued compliance with her gender role. Nora is striving to maintain an idealized vision of her and Torvald’s marriage—a vision shaped largely by her childhood. She was raised by her father, an overbearing man who forced all his opinions on her and called her his “doll-child” (Ibsen 182). Without a strong female role model to emulate, Nora grew up believing that she needed to charm and please powerful men in order to gain love and protection (Paris 42). Nora therefore performs her gender role of female docility and obedience to achieve what her misogynistic father and society have taught her to value—male approval. Nora’s idealization of her marriage to Torvald is based on grand notions of undying love and devotion. As she tells Dr. Rank, “You know how deeply, how indescribably Torvald loves me; he wouldn’t hesitate for a moment to give his life for my sake” (Ibsen 154). As one scholar observes, “Nora’s
relationship with her husband is based on a bargain she has made in her own mind… She does not mind being weak as long as his strength is at her service” (Paris 42-43). Her faith in Torvald’s love for her is so intense that she believes a “miracle” will happen, defined by one scholar as “an action in the real world that confirms beyond all doubt her belief that their marriage is based on the shared ideal of love, in particular, that Torvald loves her, as she loves him, above all else, even life itself” (Saari 52). For Nora, this action is Torvald saving her from her crime of forgery by taking responsibility for it and sacrificing his reputation. It is when this “wonderful thing” fails to materialize that Nora’s idealized vision of their relationship is shattered, and she finally breaks from the gender role she has performed for so long.

Torvald’s reaction to Krogstad’s first letter revealing Nora’s forgery exposes his core of pure egotism and selfishness—the complete opposite of his wife’s self-sacrificial love. When Nora explains her actions by saying, “I’ve loved you above all else in the world,” Torvald responds, “Don’t come here with your pathetic evasions” (Ibsen 177). Nora’s faith in her husband’s unconditional devotion to her is destroyed when he dismisses the ideal of love she believed they had shared. When Torvald then opens the second letter from Krogstad returning the incriminating bond, he is thrilled because his reputation—the thing he cares about most in the world—is saved. He scrambles to mollify and soothe Nora with his usual animal imagery: “...my terrified little songbird. Rest safe now; I have broad wings to cover you with… I will hold you here like a hunted dove that I’ve rescued unscathed out of the hawk’s claws…” (Ibsen 180-181). However, this time Nora does not fulfill Torvald’s descriptions of her weak and helpless femininity. Nora has realized that her motivation for performing her gender role was based on a false conception of idealized love which her husband never believed in, so she has no reason to continue play-acting. As one scholar notes, “If that which would make them equal in essence—
the mutuality of ideal love—doesn't inform the husband-wife relationship, then the form—male-dominated, hierarchical—in fact turns out to be the essence of the marriage” (Saari 53).

Recognizing this, Nora is finally able to break free from her gender performance. She acknowledges her participation in her gender role but also implicates Torvald—and by extension, her father and the rest of patriarchal society—in the creation of this role which she now realizes has been destructive to her well-being as an individual: “I’ve lived by doing tricks for you, Torvald. But that was how you wanted it… The two of you are to blame for the fact that nothing has come of me” (Ibsen 182). Nora decides to immediately leave Torvald, her children, and her home behind, discarding the roles of daughter, wife, and mother in order to develop her own humanity. She proclaims, “I believe I am first and foremost a human being” (Ibsen 184) and slams the door behind her, entering the world as an independent woman.

Many scholars who have studied Nora’s transformation have focused on the ramifications of her actions for the male-female gender binary. Some believe that Nora’s development is so extreme that she concludes the play as a “man” and has assumed a “male position” (Rekdal 150). This perspective draws on Nora’s involvement in business with Krogstad and her abandonment of her duties as a wife and mother to argue that she changes from a “female woman” into a sort of “male woman” (Rekdal 150). Other scholars recognize Nora’s assumption of masculine qualities but contend that she actually occupies a space between the two genders. “Nora, who refuses to limit herself to the feminine and private field of family but rather enters into the masculine and public world of money, betrays obvious androgynous features” (Rossi 146-147). Both these groups of scholars reference Nora’s own words regarding her involvement in the male realm, most notably the scene where she confides in Mrs. Linde about earning money and remarks, “It was almost as though I was a man” (Ibsen 123). However, other scholars interpret
Nora’s engagement with concepts of masculinity in a different way. They reject the idea of Nora as a masculine being and instead argue that her actions make her a stronger female. Comparing Nora’s assertive use of language to Torvald’s fumbling speech in the scene where she confronts him, one scholar states that “Nora emerges as a woman by being different than Helmer” (Rekdal 176). Yet, still other scholars assert that Nora’s transformation is actually from a female into a nongendered human being. One scholar claims that A Doll’s House depicts “the radical transformation of Nora from female to human being” (Saari 42). She insists that the male and female characters “demonstrate no essential difference in their spiritual make up” (42) and that Nora’s “actions, thoughts, and ideals are not gender specific” (47).

While these claims are compelling, I argue that Nora’s transformation is not as straightforward as some of these scholars portray it. Instead of changing genders, becoming both genders, or discarding gender completely, Nora ultimately asserts a feminist humanity. Nora exists in a patriarchal world, which is evident in both the misogynistic attitudes of the male characters in the play—like Torvald and Nora’s father—and the sexist rules that govern her society—like laws barring women from engaging in financial matters. Through her deliberate and manipulative performance of her gender role of weak and helpless femininity, Nora appears to uphold the male-female binary. However, she in fact defies this binary through her secretive business transactions. Because Nora is operating in a patriarchal world where the male gaze predominates, her adoption of so-called “masculine” traits is actually an adoption of basic human rights. Once her idealized vision of her marriage is shattered, Nora realizes the dangers of playing such a restricted gender role and breaks her performance, embracing her worth as an individual and human being. Thus, Nora’s assertion of her humanness is an inherently feminist assertion because it occurs in the context of a patriarchal society. Her female gender is
inextricably tied to her humanness since she exists in a world that constantly tries to strip women
of their humanity. At the conclusion of the play, Nora rejects her patriarchally-defined gender
roles outright and emerges as a feminist human being. The stage directions capture Nora’s
certainty and determination: “The sound of the street door being slammed is heard from below”
(Ibsen 188). Although her break with her gender performance is unequivocal, the details of the
new role Nora plans to undertake—and even whether she will assume a new role at all—are
much less certain. All she tells Torvald is that she plans to return to her hometown to begin her
new life. Yet, in this uncertainty lies endless possibility, potential, and hope for Nora’s future
growth as a woman and human.
Works Cited


