**The Influence of a Father Figure in *A Doll’s House***

Throughout Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, the audience is tempted to focus on motherhood. The story follows Nora as she discards the roles imposed upon her by the society of the Victorian era, in which the play is set, that tell her that “before all else, [she is] a wife and a mother” (Ibsen 1016). However, during this era and in the play itself, women were ruled by their fathers and subject to their whims and the particulars of their personalities. The characters portrayed in the play are more influenced by the actions of their fathers than those of their mothers, as is shown through Nora’s relationship with morals and money, Dr. Rank’s experience with illness and excess, and the focus on the impact Krogstad’s actions will have on his children. Ibsen uses this play to communicate that each individual inherits their personality traits from their parents, and are thus doomed to repeat the faults of the past.

Throughout the play, Ibsen communicates to the audience the faults committed by Nora’s father and how they have impacted her adult life. Nora’s father’s immorality concerning the acquisition and expenditure of money is blamed for both Nora’s nature as a spendthrift and the fraud she committed that ended in the dissolution of her marriage to Helmer. Both Helmer and Mrs. Linde believe that Nora learned the carelessness with which she handles money from her father. Helmer claims that Nora’s ability to squander money is “deep in [her] blood”; that it is “hereditary” (Ibsen 971-972). Even Mrs. Linde, Nora’s dear friend, believes Nora has inherited her father’s wastefulness, as she claims Nora is skilled in making an attractive home, stating that she is “not her father’s daughter for nothing” (Ibsen 990). These characters use what they have learned of Nora’s past to explain away her behavior, preventing them from taking a deeper look into the motives for her actions. Helmer not only sees Nora’s father’s actions as the cause of her mismanagement of money, but rather, he treats any behavior he does not approve of as the result of her upbringing. Nora’s father is blamed for instilling the values in her personality that lead her to seek independence and abandon her family. Helmer exclaims that “all [Nora’s] father’s flimsy values have come out in [her]” and that she has “no religion, no morals, no sense of duty” (Ibsen 1013). Thus he writes off Nora’s actions, not only as wrong, but also as a repetition of her father’s faults. He insinuates that her actions, her bid for freedom from his own influence and that of her father, are not her own but are a reflection of someone else’s beliefs and personality. Even Nora recognizes the faults in her personality and she too acknowledges her father as the core of her problems. As is shown by Ibsen’s constant demonstration of Nora’s internal conflict through her nervous movements and fractured speeches, Nora fights to both identify and rebel against these foreign and external influences. In the final moments of clarity she has at the end of the play, Nora claims that she has been “wronged greatly” by her father, who ensured that “nothing’s become of [her]” because he constantly exposed her to his opinions and forced his views upon her (Ibsen 1015). The whole of Nora’s personality was based on the beliefs instilled in her from childhood that guided her throughout her entire life, for better or for worse. Nora could not become her own person while she was busy being the “doll child” her father wanted her to be; her final act of the play is to renounce her father’s influence, thus reclaiming her personality as her own.

While Nora’s personality is singled out as the result of her father’s actions, it is Dr. Rank’s physical condition that is said to be suffering for the behavior of his father. Rank may deplore his father’s actions, but he follows in his footsteps nonetheless, arranging his life around the influence of his father. Though they do not agree upon the particular fault of Rank’s father that caused his son’s illness, both Nora and Rank identify the father as the guilty party. Nora claims that Rank’s spinal injury is a result of the father being a “disgusting thing who kept mistresses and so on”, even going so far as to say that this is a medical fact shared to her by midwives and other such caretakers (Ibsen 990). Rank himself blames his father’s “gay army days” and he and Nora later agree that the indulgence of the father in truffles and foie gras, among other rich foods, was to blame (Ibsen 994). The nature of Rank’s father is blamed for his son’s illness; furthermore, the luxuries and joys of life are set at fault. Rank continuously distances himself from these comforts that are commonplace for those around him. Mrs. Linde immediately notices his dark humour when they first meet (Ibsen 990) and his good friend Helmer even goes so far as to say that he is a “cloudy background to [his] sunlit happiness” (Ibsen 1011). Rank recognizes from the effects of the actions of his father that “one never gets something for nothing in life” and he is aware that either he or those around him will suffer for the joys in which he partakes (Ibsen 1010). In a desperate attempt to mollify fate for past wrongdoings, he chooses to suffer his entire life, hiding away even his love for Nora, and thus he lets his father’s actions control him. Eventually Rank is so high-strung that his own demise is a relief, as it allows him to reveal his true nature, one suspiciously similar to that of his father, because there is no chance of his harming his loved ones anymore. When Rank recognized that he was nearing his death he “guzzled down” surprising amounts of wine, just as his father had once enjoyed port and champagne among his various other indulgences (Ibsen 1009). He seeks out his friend Helmer, not for a final farewell, but for a good cigar, “one of the dark Havanas” (Ibsen 1010). And Rank, too, tries his hand at love as he reveals his true feelings to Nora, making a final attempt to attain the companionship his father so craved. He cares more about the material pleasures life has to offer him than the lives of those he leaves behind. In his final moments, when he is given a last chance to be who he truly is or wants to be, Rank is just like his father.

Nora and Dr. Rank are two children suffering for the actions of their fathers; however, Krogstad is a father that is trying to do right by his children. Krogstad acknowledges the power he has as a father and attempts to ensure that the traits he passes to his sons are positive. Recognizing that it is the actions of the parents, and especially the father, that determine the outcome of a personality, Krogstad’s deceit and lies are said to be instilling poor values in his children, influencing them just as Nora’s father impacted her. Helmer describes the “atmosphere of lies” and the “germs of something degenerate” that plague the home in which Krogstad’s children are being raised (Ibsen 986). A vile personality is portrayed as a disease that is passed from parent to child, and Krogstad’s disposition is thought to be terminally ill. Worse still, Krogstad is thought to be purposefully breeding deception in his boys, “going home year in, year out, poisoning his own children with lies and pretense” (Ibsen 986). Thus Ibsen implies that, while some traits are passed along subconsciously, the most dangerous are those that are manufactured by men. Krogstad is aware of the threat he poses to his children and acts accordingly to absolve himself of his wrongdoings. As his boys age, Krogstad believes that, “for their sakes, [he]’ll have to win back as much respect as possible” (Ibsen 982). Once Krogstad realizes the impact his reputation would have on the futures of his sons, he orchestrates his actions around becoming free of the impression he had given his society. When Krogstad finds this future for himself with Mrs. Linde he is overjoyed, as he knows that he can now “win back a place in their eyes”, speaking perhaps those he had wronged, but more prominently of the children for whom he now has a mother with a stable income and a more pleasant and promising future (Ibsen 1006). He finds for himself a new way of being, and thus the legacy he leaves for his children to inherit is much brighter than he had once presumed. Ibsen uses Krogstad to demonstrate that the negative effects of a parent can be reversed, but that the reformation must begin with the source of the problem; with the father himself.

When the characters in A Doll’s House blame their families for their problems, it prevents them from acknowledging the power they have to control their own realities and their futures. The characters are unable to take responsibility for their actions until they free themselves from the influence of their parents, and especially their fathers. This is demonstrated most significantly when Nora identifies the effect of her father and leaves to find out who she really is without the influence of an external source. Thus Ibsen declares to his audience that, though they may be haunted by the ghosts of their past, inclined to behave according to the way they had been raised, his characters are by no means required to bend to the will of their fathers.

**Works Cited**

Ibsen, Henrik. "A Doll's House." *Literature: World Masterpieces.* 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ.: Prentice Hall, 1996. p. 969-1019. Print.