A Doll’s House

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Plot Summary

A Doll’s House (first performed in 1879) is a drama that tells the story of the breakup of the marriage of a middle class couple who live in a town in Norway. The events in the play take place over three days around Christmas. Thorvald Helmer has received a promotion to become a bank manager, and both he and his wife Nora Helmer are anticipating the exciting prospect of having more plentiful resources. They have three children – two of school age and one baby. They have a nanny and a house maid. Thervold has an older Doctor friend – Dr Rank - who calls at the house regularly, and who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Nora has a former friend Mrs. Christine Lind who visits the house since she has heard about her husband’s promotion, and is seeking employment at the Bank. On hearing the lobby from both Nora and Mrs. Lind, Thervold agrees to offer her a position. Nora is also visited by Nils Krogstadt who works at the bank, but he fears that his position there is in jeopardy. He begs Nora to approach her husband to save his job, if not he will reveal that Nora, in former years when her husband was sick, took a loan from Krogstadt in the name of her father by forging her father’s signature on a promissory note. Thervold has in fact decided to dismiss Krogstadt and give his job to Mrs. Lind, and despite Nora’s strong protestations he sends a letter confirming his dismissal. In return Krogstadt writes a letter exposing Nora’s debt and forgery, and when this is revealed Thervold reacts angrily towards his wife’s duplicitous actions and especially their impact upon his own reputation. In the meantime it is revealed that Krogstadt and Mrs. Lind had once been in love, but now they reconcile, and she persuades Krogstadt to retract his threats of exposure. When Thervold realizes that the difficulties are resolved, he forgives Nora. However she is in no mood to reconcile. She has come to realize that she does not love Thervold since he revealed his selfishness when confronted by Nora’s actions that in fact were taken to protect Thervold’s ill health. It dawns on her that she has been treated in her marriage, not as an equal, but as a doll who lives in a doll’s house. She realizes she cannot be a good mother or a good wife until she steps out, and gets to know herself. Much to the consternation of Thervold, she leaves.
An Unequal Marriage

A Doll’s House has been played in many theatres across the world since it made its debut in 1879 in Norway. There is an excellent 1973 film version starring Claire Bloom and Anthony Hopkins. This play struck a chord because it unpacks some of the difficulties in a traditional view of marriage that saw the husband as the head of the household and the wife as always deferential and obedient to her husband, always beneath a veneer of sweet talk and polite manners. The Helmers have been married for eight years. They have a somewhat playful relationship but always in such a way that Nora must please Thervold. She depends on him for money entirely, and he is never happy when she is spending it. He is critical of her diet, in a somewhat light hearted manner, but one that suggests nevertheless that Nora should not be eating sweet foods. After a dance sequence at a party in which she shows her talent, Thervold whisks his wife away from the after party because he is jealous and wants his good looking wife only for himself. Thervold is a busy, ambitious man, very proud and conscious of his status in society, and his wife, children and household are made to fit in with his conception of what is important. Nora comes across in the early Acts of the play as somewhat childish, anxiety driven, and fearful. She had displayed independent behaviour of her husband when he was ill, and had financed a spa like holiday for him and the family in Italy, but she felt she crossed a boundary by her actions of taking a loan, doing so in secret, and in forging a signature. She is absolutely bent on not revealing the source of the funds to Thervold. She even considers the possibility of suicide rather than to be exposed and shamed because of these decisions.

Developments in the Catholic view of marriage

In its view on marriage, it is thought that the Catholic Church both reflected back and engaged with the cultures in which Christians have lived. The notion that marriage could be a mutual covenant between equals is a recent development, because since the dawn of civilization it been taken for granted that marriage was not an equal partnership. Even in the New Testament teaching of St Paul which compares the relationship of husband and wife to that of Christ and the Church, clearly this is not a relationship of equals (Ephesians 5:21-33). For hundreds of years the Church emphasised that the sole purpose of the sexual act was in the fruitfulness of the procreation of children. Only in the Second Vatican Council (1961-65) do we find a personalist approach taken to the relationship between husband and wife….viewed now not as a contract, but as a covenant, and the conjugal acts within marriage are viewed as enabling and fostering the unity/communion of the couple as well as the possibility of bringing children into the world. (Richard P McBrien, Catholicism 751). Mc Brien reminds us that sociologists assert that “this is the first age in which people marry and remain in marriage because they love each other”. (Ibid 792) There is emphasis in our era “on the mutual exchange
of love as constituting the sacrament of marriage.” (Ibid 792) and the need to take a broader view of the consummation of marriage than as a single act of physical union. (McBrien 793) Rather one looks to the good of the whole person and the quality of the personal relationship between spouses.

Amongst theologians there is considerable discussion regarding the meaning of mutuality in relationships. Recent Popes have used the concept of complementarity to ground the nature of the mutual equality that exists or ought to exist between men and women. But other Catholic thinkers speak to the difficulty of “complementarity” as a defining point since it can imply the acceptance of a power imbalance both in the institution of marriage, and in the institutional authority of the Church as it relates to men and women.

**Historical Perspective – the drive to freedom and equality**

*A Doll’s House* is an important play in highlighting the issues of an era that is all the time witnessing the struggle towards freedom across the range of human experience and striving. Developments in thought amongst the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers, and the dynamic actions of the French and American Revolutions focussed a call to liberty and equality. The implications of this call were played out in the emancipation of slaves in North American, the separation of Church and State in many countries, the breakdown of the class system in France, the birth of democratic voting systems in many parts of the world over a two hundred year period. Through their being engulfed in world wars and other wars, through the development of technology on a host of fronts, in the midst of ongoing ideological debate, the leaders of the world, at the end of the Second World War, responded to the crisis of the times in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, published at the United Nations Assembly in 1948. That Declaration states that men and women are equal. Yet we know from the way economies operate, the way politics works in most societies, the way that sport and entertainment is marketed, and the way that women suffer disproportionate domestic violence at the hands of men, that the Declaration represents an ideal towards which one strives rather than a reality in full flower. The Third Act of A Doll’s House emerging as it does in the late 19th century in northern Europe, witnesses to a woman who sees her situation clearly – that she is oppressed, that she needs to grow, that she needs to explore who she is, that she must embark on a journey of independence in order to become her true self and to become truly free. She removes the doll mask. She steps away from traditional securities. She becomes herself.
Being Obedient to Conscience

One can understand how her stance can be shocking to both women and men....that she walks out on her marriage, that she abandons her children. When you make a commitment, you stick to it. You hang in there with it. You don’t break it because of difficulties. Yet Nora is being obedient to her conscience....an echo of Martin Luther’s purported response to his actions in nailing the 95 Theses to the doors of the Church in Wittenburg in 1517. “Here I stand: I can do no other.” She is crystal clear. Clearly she loves her children, but she sees also that the nanny who is caring for them is in fact doing excellent work and is fully engaged in their development. She knows that an attempt to live as brother and sister with Thervold, as he suggests, will not work. She knows that millions of women the world over have given over their honour to accommodate to their husbands, but she sees that it would not be right for her to do so. In every city in North America, there are hostels for women who need to get away from their conjugal partners. These places of haven are a symptom of our human condition that as women and men we are still very much struggling to embrace the possibility of full freedom and equality in our conjugal relationships.

Catholic Responses to Marriage Breakdown

The Catholic Church teaches (canon 1013) that marriage is monogamous and indissoluble. (McBrien 794) Over the centuries the Church has struggled to accommodate to the situations that arise in real life because of its commitment to the words of Jesus that humans should not pull asunder what God has put together. (Mark 10:9; Matthew 19:6) The Church now emphasises more fully perhaps than in earlier centuries that marriage needs to be entered into freely....without coercion. No matter the promises made, there is no valid marriage relationship, if there no genuinely free consent. Thus we have seen the development of the annulment process within the Catholic Church which explores the roots of a marriage that has broken down so as to determine whether there was in fact a marriage in the first place, thus leaving the parties free to remarry. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches have permitted divorce, calling for the couples affected to great honesty and a spirit of repentance before embarking on a second marriage. The Catholic Church continues to actively engage with these issues during the pontificate of Pope Francis 1st as he continues to pursue the vision of a Church that would mirror as fully as possible the mercy that can only be found in heart of God.
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