An Interview with Ibsen: How the Alternate Ending Alters Ibsen’s Message

Statement of Intent

At the time when it was written, Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House* deemed by much of the general public to be scandalously unconventional in its liberalism. This was primarily due to the play’s ending, in which the protagonist, Nora, leaves her husband and three small children in order to seek self-realization. Although condemned for having created a feminist home-wrecker, Ibsen remained steadfast in his choice of endings. However, when faced with the threat of a German adaptation of the play with an alternate ending, Ibsen was forced to write another ending in order to placate an outraged audience, and to prevent the alternate ending from being written by anyone else. Ibsen described this ending as a “barbaric act of violence” (Ibsen, 1880) towards the play, and urged theatres to use the original ending, as the alternate distorted the entire message of the play. This piece is an interview with Ibsen discussing the play, with particular focus on the alternate ending. I will discuss the possibility of the alternate ending being “a stronger indictment of male society” (Reinert, 2005), as some critics have asserted, and how, in Ibsen’s opinion, the alternate ending alters the significance and message of the play. In doing so I will be able to assess the importance of the original ending to the play and indeed discuss Ibsen’s final choice of ending and its efficacy in conveying his message.

Many regard *A Doll’s House* to be a tragedy; indeed Ibsen himself argued that the play is a “modern tragedy” (Ibsen, 1878), the first of its kind. Traditionally, there are several elements that an Aristotelian tragedy must include. These are that the hero must be of noble birth or of a high position in society, but must have hamartia (a tragic flaw). This leads to peripetia (a reversal of fortune) which causes the hero to experience an anagnorisis (a realization that their downfall was brought about by their tragic flaw) and finally a catharsis.
(the audience sympathizes and feels pity for the hero). *A Doll’s House* for the most part adheres to these criteria for a tragedy: Although Nora is not nobility her family lives comfortably and, perhaps more importantly, is extremely well respected in society. Nora’s tragic flaw is lack of regard for the female moral code to which she is bound by society. She also lacks forethought and understanding of the fact that while society holds separate moral codes for men and women, the law judges women by masculine law. When Nora comes to realize that her husband values conventionality and respectability more than he does Nora, she experiences a moral upheaval, resulting in Nora having no real idea what is truly right or wrong. She does not know whether to trust her own morality or her belief in the authority that has guided her entire life. It is here that the “modern tragedy” deviates from the Aristotelian model, for while there is moral conflict it is the tragic hero that rises triumphant. While the arguably tragic ending is brought about by Nora’s actions, the audience does not pity her, as she looks with hope towards the future.

While *A Doll’s House* fits the model of an Aristotelian tragedy, it does not have the same purpose as the Aristotelian play, which is to warn against the tragic flaw. While the audience is able to acknowledge that Nora is a highly flawed individual, it is society that is culpable in the “modern tragedy”. Through Nora’s moral confusion and subsequent upheaval of her life, the audience is made to see that it is society which possesses a tragic flaw which is that there exists an ethical double standard for women. Ibsen also hints to the audience that left unchecked this flaw will lead to a similar moral confusion throughout society. As such, Ibsen believed strongly that his original ending was imperative to the play, as it completes Ibsen’s modern tragedy. In the interview Ibsen argues firmly that the alternate ending is a crime against the play, for although it is indeed a tragic ending, the alternate ending serves as an admission of Nora’s guilt and a vindication of society’s attitude towards women.
While Ibsen believed that the alternate ending completely bypassed his intended message to the audience, since his death there have been those critics who believe that the alternate ending is in fact a more effective medium for the message Ibsen is trying to convey. This assertion is based on the premise that Nora still faces an intense moral dilemma, thus the contrast between Nora’s personal morals and those ascribed to her by society is still presented to the audience. However the fact that Nora is convinced to stay by Torvald, a symbol of the oppressive male society, who shows Nora her children demonstrates the fact that Nora’s belief in male authority and traditional womanly duty towards her children have been so deeply ingrained into her psyche that she is unable to escape, when she knows she will be unhappy. This ending could ending could be interpreted as a condemnation of a society that indoctrinates women so thoroughly that they are rendered almost completely unable to make decisions.
An Interview with Ibsen

Interviewer: You developed the term Modern Tragedy in order to describe *A Doll’s House*. What are the tragic elements of a Modern Tragedy and how is it different from the traditional Aristotelian tragedy?

Ibsen: While the modern tragedy retains many elements of the Aristotelian tragedy, the driving force of the modern tragedy is a social problem with the tragic hero as a medium for the exposure of the problem. As such the conflict in the plot generally is prompted by a clash between the hero and this social issue, as is the case with *A Doll’s House*: the dutiful wife and mother Nora comes up against the denigration of women in society through her husband. An Aristotelian tragedy focuses primarily on the folly of the tragic flaw of the hero.

Interviewer: What is the message that you attempt to convey to the audience through Nora’s moral confusion and the upheaval of her life at the end of the play?

Ibsen: Nora’s moral dilemma is due to the fact that she is torn between two dichotomous moralities: her own morality, which tells her that forging a signature is ethical if it is to save her dying husband, and society’s and her husband’s conventional morality which dictates that every facet of a woman’s life must be known to her husband. While many critics have interpreted the play as being feminist, I myself am not. That being said I am a humanist, and believe in the right of every person to know his or herself, a right that is denied women in this male dominated society. In leaving her family Nora demonstrates the fact that without knowing herself she cannot be sure of any aspect her life: not her husband nor her children.

Interviewer: Is this message changed with the implementation of the alternate ending in which Nora stays out of duty to her family?
Ibsen: The alternate ending that I wrote in order to satisfy those who found my play offensive is a barbaric act of violence against the play. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that it is imperative that each person be granted the freedom to know themselves without being shackled to a predetermined way of life. When Nora leaves her family she leaves not as a crippled tragic hero brought down by her flaws but as a woman looking towards the future. The alternate ending which depicts Nora as unable to part from her children and racked with guilt about having almost left them motherless leaves the audience filled with pity for Nora and secure in the knowledge that she is in the wrong and that she deserves the pain she is experiencing.

Interviewer: How do you react to critics who say that the alternate ending is in fact a stronger indictment of male society than the original?

Ibsen: The assertion that the alternate ending could be interpreted as a criticism of society is feasible, but not particularly convincing. The audience is still presented with a moral dilemma and the fact that she cannot mentally escape her sense of duty towards her children is indicative of the indoctrination of women, which may indicate that it is a criticism of society. However the converse is immediately evident to the audience, which is true to the Aristotelian model: the tragic heroine suffers for her tragic flaw.
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