

A Doll's House: Catharsis and Social Evolution

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Abstract

Literature like life is dynamic and multi-dimensional. When one finds the expressions of life in literary works, it shapes their personality and fosters a better understanding of human emotions and life on the whole. A story or drama speaking of the life of a significant number of beings or all, with its tribulations and complexities, establishes a sense of relatability in the spectators' mind, contributing to its popularity as they release their pain and see things from a new perspective through it.

The term Catharsis initially used as a medical metaphor by the great Greek philosopher Aristotle in his book *Poetics* is also interpreted as a process of purgation the spectators of tragedies went through. Other than the classical tragedies, catharsis can also be traced in the modern tragedies, which realistically portray the life of a common individual, unsettled and discontent. A modern tragedy like '*A Doll's House*' by *Henrik Ibsen* depicts the complexities of the lives of Victorian women and speaks volumes about their individuality. This paper aims to study the dimensions of catharsis in the play mentioned, the effect of the actions taken by the female protagonist on the spectator/reader, especially women of the nineteenth century and the present time. The end of the play is also looked at critically to understand the contribution of literature in encouraging the society towards development, significant realizations, and release of fear.

Keywords: Catharsis, Modern Tragedy, Doll's House, Individuality, Ibsen

Objectives

- Study catharsis and trace it in the modern tragedies
- Analyze the cathartic effect of literature
- Analyze the role of literature in social evolution

Methodology

A theoretical analysis of the term Catharsis and the play A Doll's House is done to find the relatable elements in the play with its relevance in Victorian society and at present for social evolution.

Introduction

Catharsis, originally used as a metaphor by the great Greek Philosopher Aristotle in his book *Poetics* while defining tragedy, means purgation of emotions, specifically fear and pity aroused by witnessing a tragic stage play which leads to pleasure. Due to the absence of any definition given, various interpretations have surfaced. In the etymological sense, Catharsis is a medical term that means "purgation" and evacuation of harmful elements or a cause of pain from the body.

Another interpretation is derived from the religious context of cleansing "purification" of the soul and "*sublimating the emotions in order to prepare for or to achieve a state of exaltation.*" (Schaper, 1968) Catharsis is also interpreted as the purging of the soul through one's self-realization. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a German Philosopher, dramatist, and critic interprets Catharsis as an experience where these emotions find a proper balance and helps the spectator of the tragedy learn to balance these emotions when they face it in reality as well. (Lucas 23, 1928)

Donald William Lucas mentions it as "intellectual clarification" in an authoritative edition of the *Poetics* titled *Poetics- Introduction, Commentary and Appendixes by D.W. Lucas*, which gained recognition in the twentieth century. In the neo-classical era, the emotions of pity and fear brought the purgation of other feelings including anger and pride. (Hasan 2009)

Aristotle defined Tragedy as-

"Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (Aristotle and Butcher, *Poetics- Part VI*)

The term tragedy and as a genre of drama originated from the ancient Greek civilization, later as defined by Aristotle is a play in which the protagonist is usually a person of noble lineage with outstanding qualities who falls to disaster through the combination of Fate, Chance and his/her Hamartia, a tragic flaw in character. Catharsis is the emotional cleansing or purgation of the protagonist as well as the spectators at the end of the play. The protagonist, at the end of the play, experiences catharsis through his self-realization about the doom that has befallen them. The emotions that have been sublimating in the course of the play now purge out resulting in the

cleansing and intellectual clarification of the protagonist and he becomes whole again. The aim of tragedy according to Aristotle as mentioned is to purge the audience of emotions of pity and fear and they leave feeling cleansed, with a better understanding of the ways of God and men. The quotient of mimesis (imitation) of the real affairs, language and actions of the spectators in the work helps in sublimating these emotions and then releasing them because they find an expression of their lives and themselves into it.

“For pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.”
(Aristotle and Butcher, Poetics, Part XIII)

Shakespearean tragedies follow this quotient of relatability which is well noted by Dr. Samuel Johnson when he remarks- *“Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature.”* *“His persons (Shakespeare’s characters) act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated and the whole system of life is continued in motion.”* (Johnson)

Unlike the classical tragedies which revolve around individuals of a usually of royal lineage or related, with a unified plot with a one-time span, the modern tragedy deals with the tribulations of a common man, leading an ordinary life; their ambitions, problems, aspirations, therefore more realistic and easier to relate to. It can also have a sub or multiple plots. The elements of tragic flaw- Hamartia remain intact. Other than the functions of fate & chances which aren’t necessarily there always and tragic flaws, the social conventions and prejudices are also held responsible for the downfall.

Henrik Ibsen

Described as “a profound poetic dramatist- the best since Shakespeare” by Richard Hornby, Henrik Ibsen was one of the pioneers of modern theatre, who was widely acclaimed as the “Father of Realism” and the most distinguished and foremost playwright of the nineteenth century. Born on 20 March 1828 in the port town of Skien, Norway, into an affluent Merchant family, he left school at the age of fifteen and joined as an apothecary’s apprentice when he began writing plays most of which were unsuccessful in the early stages of his career as a playwright. At the Detnorske Theater (Bergen) – regarded as the first pure Norwegian theatre, he produced more than 145 plays as a writer, producer, and director and later joined the Christiania Theatre in 1858. Married but dissatisfied with life he lived into a self-exile for the next 27 years and then returned as a notable and controversial playwright.

The influence of his own life and the people around him can be traced in his plays. His father’s financial ruins influenced the characters he created which often mirror the issues of financial difficulties and moral conflicts. The theme and portrayals of suffering women echo his mother

Marichen Altenburg and her powerlessness. Ibsen's treatment of realism in his works stands him out in the genre of social tragedy in the modern age.

It was the reception of *A Doll's House* with which he achieved success and international acclaim as it caused an uproar. He also explored the "drama of ideas" and gradually became the center of dramatic controversy as he received scathing comments on his plays including *A Doll's House*, *The Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and others where he attacked the marital roles and relationships, individuality, venereal disease, tearing down the existing ideologies and denouncing the society's morals and stereotypes. Ibsen, not a feminist himself as he said, stood for the liberty and individuality of a being. Died on 23 May 1906, he is said to be the most frequently performed dramatist after Shakespeare.

A Doll's House

Written, published, and first performed in 1879, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen is a realist modern prose drama set in Norway. Central towards the nineteenth-century marriage norms for women Ibsen attacks the Victorian social codes in the 1870s which posed numerous limitations on the freedom of married women who weren't allowed to deal with financial transactions and were treated not as an individual. The play created a sensation when it was staged for its bold and unconventional theme. The plot of the play revolves around Nora Helmer, the protagonist into a conventional role of a nineteenth-century woman married to Torvald Helmer, a lawyer soon to be promoted to Bank Manager, sharing a happy marital relationship and had borne three children. As the play develops Nora's secret job, her involvement in a financial transaction with Krogstad, the antagonist Nora borrowed money from and the mistake of forgery are revealed leading to Nora's emotional turmoil and shatters her disillusionment about her marriage. These significant developments in the plot of the play establish it as a modern tragedy and with these developments the emotions of fear, guilt, and anxiety of Nora sublimates leading to catharsis in the end, finally, walking out of her home.

The play has a happy beginning where we are introduced to a carefree, bubbly, spendthrift Nora involved in preparing for Christmas. She is well settled with her family but is ignorant of the ill-treatment by her husband Torvald. She also appears a strong-headed and independent woman when we witness the conversation between Nora and her friend Mrs. Linde about Nora's attempts to save Torvald's life and earn livelihood secretly. Tension develops on the part of Nora when Krogstad threatens to expose her act of forgery that would bring shame to her husband. Though she believes that- "*I (she) did it for love!*" (Ibsen and Archer, 53), but questions herself again and gets pale with terror when she contemplates the effect of the revelation of her crime of forgery when she remarks- "*Corrupt my children! - Poison my Home! It's not true! It can never, never be true.*" (Ibsen and Archer, 57)

Her anxiety elevates as she anticipates her husband's attempt to protect her fearing that he would ignore his reputation which she as a devoted wife doesn't want. It so heightens that she decides to commit suicide and counts the hours she has to live- *"Seven hours till midnight. Then twenty-four hours till the next midnight. Then the tarantella will be over. Twenty four and seven? Thirty-one hours to live"* (Ibsen and Archer, 82). The conflict between love and law complicates her mental turmoil and as she endures all the pain there comes the moment of catharsis – her purgation, self-realization, and development.

It is in Act three when the letter from Krogstad arrives, revealing Nora's secret transactions, her disillusionment about her marriage, and her husband's love shatters completely. Torvald's reaction upon reading the letter was nothing like Nora anticipated- rather than protecting her he blames her for destroying his *"whole happiness"* and is scared of Krogstad's attempt to ruin his reputation. It is here where Nora, the protagonist reaches Catharsis, the moment of self-realization, and has evolved her personality from deeply dedicated in love to dependent individual, now aware of self-importance and dignity which she had ignored throughout. Every dialogue between them reminds her of the ways she has been objectified which certainly leads to a complete breakdown followed by an evolved personality, rising above. The series of dialogues towards the end reflects Nora's purgation through her suffering.

"While I was at home with father, he used to tell me all his opinions and I held the same opinions. If I had others I said nothing about them, because he wouldn't have liked it. He used to call me his doll-child and played with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house-" (Ibsen and Archer, 101)

She continues as her suffering flows out, *"Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child."* (Ibsen and Archer, 101) Nora, the woman of the nineteenth-century Victorian society, dependent on her husband in all ways, decides to choose between her will and society. The intellectual clarification gets visible when she remarks, - *"I have never felt so much clearness and certainty as to-night"* (Ibsen and Archer, 104) therefore deciding to not stay there. The decision to leave is tragic for she knows nowhere to go but that she needs to find and build her own identity as an independent individual who deserves to be treated like a human, not a 'doll' or pet – *"I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are- or at least that I should try to become one."* (Ibsen and Archer, 103)

The tragic end of Nora leaving is her attempt towards development through her purgation from fear, pain, and a reality check.

Catharsis and Social Evolution

As in a modern tragedy, it is not only the tragic flaw of the character but social codes as well which lead to the breakdown of the character. Here Nora's tragic flaw is her naivety which leads her towards the tragic end of her happy married life. Her belief in the love in her marriage, the absurd treatment by him which she keeps defending throughout, to others and herself realistically represents many if not all households of the Victorian society, and therefore the moment of self-realization of Nora is the same for the women in the audience as well because they could easily relate to the treatment towards her as it was to them. It can be elucidated from the fact that once married, all the rights of the women of the nineteenth century were given over to her spouse wherein her right to consent was also abrogated. This male domination and established notion of the inability of women are realistically portrayed by Ibsen through the character of Torvald Helmer. He behaves exactly as men were supposed and taught to when in a dialogue he mentions to Nora that "*I will be both will and conscience to you.*" (Ibsen and Archer, 99) which discards her ability to think and do right.

The life of a woman then was caged in domestic chores and which haven't changed yet. Like Nora most women are brought up with the belief of being second to the man, to be protected by their father and then-husband which moves the female audience when Nora reiterates her belief in Torvald's love and his responsibilities towards her as she mentions "*You shall not save me! You shall not take my guilt upon yourself!*" (Ibsen and Archer, 96) Later the mention of all the sacrifices done by women "*millions of women have done so*", while men seem to not bend establishes a oneness in the thoughts of the protagonist and the audience which eventually pushes the audience to empathize with her, that makes them fear the reaction of Torvald on the unveiling of the truth and on Nora's decision to leave. Nora's calling towards herself beyond her roles of a wife and mother makes the spectator ponder and delve deeper in their thoughts about their own lives which provides a learning experience, opportunity, and strength for women to stand for themselves.

Conclusion

The issues of Ibsen's days still possess relevance and compelling power. The play's end acted as a trumpet call for all the women to look at their lives and take lead. The purgation which the audience goes through has led to the evolution of an individual but that of the society too. It is believed that the social life within the cities began to change quickly ever since the publication of this play, a definite reason for all the critical commentary that the play and the playwright received. The play does not specifically teach to leave everything and start afresh but creates an understanding in women to not let such ideologies build and function in their families. Nora leaves for perhaps a better future but saves and informs the spectator or reader about the red signs they need to observe and stop before it gets difficult to endure. UNESCO's Memory of the World mentions Nora as a symbol for fighting for the liberation of women and equality (Rustin).

It also establishes the importance of being on the same page in a marital relationship between a man and woman, sharing responsibilities and respect. In the present time as well women often compromise on their individuality and decide to go with the flow demarcated by the society, therefore the awareness this play projects, and the significant change in the assessment of actions and use of name-calling from the standpoint of all the sexes becomes relevant in the present itself. Moreover, *A Doll's House* subverts the basis of the stereotypes about the ability and intellect of women, for the society and for women themselves to stop hiding behind excuses and think of themselves as rational, independent, and important as men.

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