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## GENDER STUDIES

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### **FEMINIST PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN “NEW DRAMA” (“A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen)**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “new drama” was actively developing in Europe. It pushed the progress of drama and theatre in many countries. And now we know famous writers of that time: Henrik Ibsen, Knut Hamsun, August Strindberg, Gerhart Hauptmann, Anton Chekhov, Maurice Maeterlinck, Bernard Shaw and others. But how was “new drama” different from “old drama”? Which new ideas and tendencies were introduced into literature and theatre?

#### **Modernity becomes a matter of acute interest in “new drama”**

First of all, “new drama” aimed to describe and comprehend modern life and personality. It was all about daily life, working conditions, real circumstances, relationships between people. Modernity becomes a matter of acute interest in “new drama”. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century dramatists also studied modernity from a scientific perspective. They gathered different facts, analyzed and classified them, and then integrated these data into their plays.

#### **Metaphors, Symbols, Allegories of Modern Life**

Although “new drama” largely focused on modernity, writers didn’t stay absolutely true to life. Their plays are a kind of metaphors for life. To this end, different symbols, allegories, subtext, artistic details were of great importance.

“Old drama” would portray an event or an occurrence, while “new drama” focused on psychological collisions.

While “old drama” focused on certain events or incidents, “new drama” portrayed a unique individual with his or her thoughts, feelings, dreams and ambitions.

### **Individual as a Symptom of the Epoch**

The new generation of writers was highly interested in the individual’s psychology, which reflected the whole atmosphere of that time. Accordingly, the functions of a dramatic hero were transformed. He or she used to be a social type, belonging to a certain social group and reflecting its beliefs, customs, behaviors. But now the individual became a spiritual symptom of the epoch, its emotional portrait.

### **Psychological Plot as a Reflection of the Atmosphere**

The 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century dramatists were most interested in the person’s spiritual world, rather than in specific events. They viewed psychology as a mirror for moral, social and philosophic problems of the time.

“Old theatre” told the viewers about individual tragedy, and “new theatre” emphasized the tragedy of existence.

If “old theatre” was concerned with individual tragedy, “new theatre” talked about the general tragedy of humanity. These tragic elements intensify, because every European felt the instability and insecurity of life.

### **Collision of Ideas, Views, Positions**

“New drama” was defined by ideological discussions and spiritual conflicts. The plot was driven not by the outer intrigue or the characters’ actions, but by psychological collisions, ideas, moral values and beliefs. The dramatists presented a wide range of ideas, which could be interpreted differently.

In the “old theatre” characters were usually divided into main and secondary, positive and negative ones. “New drama” rejects this division. All the characters are important, they aren’t flat, and every one of them helps us understand the main idea of the play. There is no absolute truth in “new drama”, every character has got a viewpoint of his own.

### **Viewer (Reader) to Take Part in Dramatic Action**

In “new drama”, the relationship between the reader and the text was transformed. Readers or viewers used to be plain on-lookers, but now they found themselves in the middle of action, they contemplated together with the characters.

While “old drama” was marked by struggle and robust action, “new drama” was more about contemplations, debates, seeking the truth. Characters speak, argue, and discuss different problems.

### **Combining Realism, Naturalism and Modernism**

Furthermore, “new drama” brought innovations into European dramatic style. Writers aimed to disclose important ideological and moral problems, so they relied on realism and naturalism, but also turned to modernist tendencies, which began to form in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “New drama” turned to symbolism, neoromanticism, impressionism, expressionism, surrealism and the like.

With theatre undergoing a drastic transformation, the borders between literary genres become vague and obscure. Some plays by Henrik Ibsen are both drama and tragedy, and Chekhov’s works combine comedy and tragedy. At the same time, Bernard Shaw develops the “Drama of Ideas”, in which the clash of ideologies reveals acute social problems.

So, “new drama” marked the time of changes in 20<sup>th</sup> century art. It focused on difficult collisions and doubts of

that epoch. But, of course, writers couldn't ignore the first wave of feminism going on. So gender issues became a point of discussion in literature.

### **Henrik Ibsen as Pioneer of “New Drama” in Norway**

Henrik Ibsen is a major figure of Norwegian and European “new drama”. He was the first one to voice important feminist problems. And he was followed by a whole generation of writers who expressed their views on this subject.

In his play “A Doll’s House” (1879) Ibsen discussed the problem of power in society, and the problem of female independence. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Norway, women had no say in family problems, financial, legal, and professional issues. And this problem was widely discussed. Ibsen was aware of the contemporary debates about equality for women. And Nora is a product of those debates, because she challenged the audience to think about feminism.

The play is set in a house which belongs to Torvald Helmer, a successful lawyer. He’s married to Nora who loves him and the kids, and makes their home warm, cozy, filled with joy. We first meet the characters on Christmas Eve: everyone is getting ready for the holiday, kids are laughing, it smells like pine tree and almond cookies. The furniture is not very expensive, but long-lasting, there are some books and engravings here and there... It seems like the Helmer household is prosperous and happy. But it turns out to be only superficial.

Suddenly, “people from the past” arrive into the house, like Christine Linne – Nora’s old friend. She has had a difficult few years, ever since her husband died leaving her with no money or children. Nora promises to talk to Torvald about finding her a job. There’s also Nils Krogstad, who works at Torvald’s bank. But instead of asking for help, he blackmails Nora.

As the plot progresses, Nora's secret comes to light. It turns out she is afraid of Krogstad because he knows something ugly. A few years ago Nora forged her father's signature to borrow money from Krogstad, so they could travel to Italy to improve Torvald's health. Krogstad knew Nora had broken the law, and although she paid her debts in due time, he decided to blackmail her to get a job.

Nora didn't tell her husband about what she did. Deep down, she is proud, although she's aware of the legal outcomes. Her secret is her joy and her pride, because it testifies her love. And although Nora did think she might have to tell Torvald everything, she wanted to do it as late as possible, maybe in a few years or decades. But Krogstad came in and crushed Nora's plans. His despair sped up the events and made life in the Helmer household unpredictable.

### **Real Life and Human Drama in "a doll's house"**

Ibsen shows how real life interferes with peaceful and righteous existence of a Norwegian family. Nils Krogstad threatens Nora: he says he will let her secret out unless she helps him to get a job in the bank. He is doing a bad thing, but only because he has to take care of his children, whose mother died too early. Besides, he believes this new job will give him a chance to earn money honestly. So blackmail is presented ambiguously. But Nora cannot help Krogstad because of her husband's refusal.

The climax of the play is Krogstad's letter to Torvald Helmer, in which he reveals the truth about Nora. But the main thing isn't Nora's misdemeanor; it's the characters' essence, their true motives and real relationships.

Nora cherished her husband's love and was sure that he would take her fault in a critical situation, but suddenly she saw a totally different person. After reading Krogstad's letter, Torvald was only worried about his own reputation – what the people were going to say. He was scared that his

family might be known as scandalous. So he only took interest in how he could save the family's image and keep Nora away from the kids. Nora who adored Torvald just stopped existing for him as a woman and as a human being. So the prosperity of Helmer household was only a facade to cover up the alienation and loneliness.

Nora was mistaken about Torvald. But she didn't quite know her friend Christine as well. Nora took pity on the poor and lonely woman, but Christine who was able to stop Krogstad from sending the letter, didn't do that. What is it: a wish to restore justice or female envy? The author doesn't answer this question, inviting the audience to think for themselves.

As the plot progresses, we see the characters and their opinions of each other evolve. Krogstad changes too. Rude and cruel at first, he turns out different. Although his behavior was immoral, he only did that for the sake of his children, who had to survive without their mother. Meeting Christine Linne and hoping to start a happy family with her made him change. He became noble and self-conscious, and though he did send the letter, later he visited Torvald to say he won't threaten him anymore. So the threat of public condemnation was over for the Helmers.

Upon getting new information, Torvald changes again. He's on cloud nine that he isn't under threat anymore. But Nora is different now... She cannot be a doll anymore. She saw her husband's essence in a critical situation, and now she's unsure who she loved and who she took a risk for.

The play ends with this family falling apart. Nora breaks up with Torvald and leaves her home. The finale is vague and open-ended, just like no life situation can be resolved once and for all.

With the secret revealed, the characters' family, social and psychological roles are shifted. Let's see, which roles Nora used to play before she was found out and after that.

<b>Nora Before</b>	<b>Nora After</b>
A doll and a child (a bird, a squirrel) for Torvald (he wants to steer her upbringing and development, to be proud of her because she embodies his perspective on family life).	Having realized she's a human being, she takes a firm stand and defends it.
Intimidated by Krogstad's blackmail.	A confident woman won't let herself depend on anybody.
A mother who takes care of her kids.	A mother restrained from her children. A mother walking out on her children and her home.
A wife who loves her husband dearly, so she's ready to break the law.	A useless sacrifice (her misdemeanor was in vain, because her husband didn't appreciate her, he only cared for himself).
A woman with no social rights or possibilities to choose her own way.	A woman with no rights yet, but choosing her own path. She doesn't want to play pretend in a doll's house anymore.
A good friend (for Christine Linne).	A betrayed friend (Linne could've stopped Krogstad's letter, but she didn't).
Perfect (for Dr Rank).	Imperfect (with Dr Rank dead, there's nobody to love and respect Nora).
Conclusion. Nora used to be everybody but herself. Living for others, she sacrificed her own life and interests.	Conclusion. Nora enrolls on a complicated road of searching for her essence and her destiny. She has no idea where she is going to go, but she knows that her former values from a doll's house are unacceptable. She wants the truth and the right to make her own decisions.

In the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, “new drama” created versatile images of women in modern times: in family, society, art. The writers showed us how women depended on established rules and morals, and yet strived to change the social order. Women in “new drama” become a lot more powerful: they ruin social, family and psychological stereotypes. They don’t conform, they pick their own ways and stay true to themselves.

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