

English A1 Language and Literature (HL)

Written task 2 – Critical essay

Prescribed question: How and why a social group is presented in a particular way?

Session: May 2013

Number of words in task: 927

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Outline

Prescribed question: How and why a social group is presented in a particular way?

Title of the text for analysis: *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, 1879.

The part of the course to which the task refers: part 3: Literature – texts and contexts.

My critical response will:

- examine how women are presented in *A Doll's House* through Nora's characterisation as economically dependent on men and how this affects the language used in the play
- examine how the economically restrictive environment in 1870s Norway, affects how women are portrayed in the play as secretive and manipulative
- explain how the context in which the play is set restricts women's identity to their social roles as mothers and wives and not as individuals

Written task 2 – Critical response

Prescribed question: How and why a social group is presented in a particular way?

Presentation of women as a social group in Ibsen’s play, A Doll’s House.

In Henrik Ibsen’s play, *A Doll’s House*, set in male-dominated late 19th century Norway, women are portrayed as possessions. Ibsen portrays women as economically, emotionally and intellectually restricted through characters such as Nora, Mrs Linde, the maid, Helen, and the Nurse. As a naturalistic play, women’s identity is limited to their social roles as mothers and wives, and less as individuals. The portrayal of women in the play is mainly conveyed through Nora’s characterisation and her relationship with her husband, Helmer.

The nature of the restrictive environment for women is shown through Nora’s characterisation and Helmer’s use of language towards her. Nora’s characterisation in the opening scene reveals that women in 1870s Norway depended greatly on their husbands for financial support. Nora is portrayed as a middle-class wife, as she tips the porter a pound while she only had to pay a shilling. Evidently, this shows that her understanding of the value of money is limited due to her reliance on her husband, Helmer, for financial support. Nora’s dependence on Helmer to give her money leads to Helmer treating her like a pet and a doll. This is shown through Helmer’s tone and language towards Nora: “[his] most treasured possession?” (87). Nora is constantly referred to as Helmer’s “squanderbird”, due to her careless use of money on items that make her happy, but that are of lesser importance and without purpose; such as macaroons, dresses, sweets and toys for the children. This treatment towards Nora is reflected through the patronising tone used by Helmer when addressing Nora: “The

squanderbird's a pretty little creature, but she gets through an awful lot of money. It's incredible what an expensive pet she is for a man to keep." (26). Comparing Nora to a pet, highlights Helmer's dominance in the marriage, which reflects the male-dominated society. This portrays women as part of man's property.

Furthermore, through Nora's characterisation, women in *A Doll's House* are portrayed as secretive and manipulative. Being secretive is a reflection of the context in which the play is set. Since Nora does not have a source of income of her own and depends on her husband for financial support, she secretly borrows money, an action on which the dramatic tension of the play is based. Nora's secretive nature is also a reflection of Helmer's domineering attitude. Through the stage directions, we learn that even in her house she has to hide and tiptoe, reducing her relationship with her husband to that of a father and child. This is shown through the symbolism of the macaroons: "She takes from her pocket a bag containing macaroons and eats a couple. Then tiptoes across and listens at her husband's door" (1). In addition to women being portrayed as part of a man's possession due to their lack of financial independence, they are also depicted as manipulative. This is shown through Nora's change in behaviour as Helmer enters a scene. Nora uses her moodiness to persuade Helmer to do whatever she wants: "I performed tricks for you, and you gave me food and drink. But that was how you wanted it" (98). This ability to manipulate her husband highlights the theme of reality and appearances. When it suits her purposes, Nora will play the role of a 'doll-wife' to get what she wants from her husband. Therefore, since women do not have their own source of income, through Nora's characterisation, they are portrayed as manipulative and secretive.

In a male-dominated society, women's identity is restricted to their social roles as mothers and wives. This idea is conveyed in the final scene of the play where Nora walks out of her marriage with Helmer, in order to assert her independence. Throughout the play, Nora is seen as a childlike mother, who plays with her children. She is not teaching them as she relies on Helmer for her intellectual well-being, but she is rather playing with them as a child. Helmer states: "My child shall have her way" (78), as his paternalistic tone towards her reflects the relationship between a father and a child. The change in Nora's characterisation is shown through the symbolism of her taking off the fancy dress after the dance. Clothes are a symbol of identity, and as Nora takes off her fancy dress, she is figuratively taking off her naturalistic identity as a mother and a wife. When Helmer tells Nora that she has a sacred duty towards her husband and her children, she asserts her independence by saying that she also has another duty: "My duty towards myself" (100). Ultimately, this shows Nora's shift in identity. She has transformed from a naturalistic wife, to being an independent individual. It is because of the duty to herself that the stage directions: "*The street door is slammed shut downstairs*" (104), becomes important as Nora walks out of her marriage to assert her independence.

In conclusion, due to the nature of the male-dominated late 19th century Norway, women's identities were restricted to being mothers and wives. Women could not express their own true identity due to social conventions. Women were merely regarded as possessions and trophies by their husbands. In the patriarchal society of late 19th century Norway, because of their dependence on men for economic support, women such as Nora are characterised as being secretive and manipulative and as shown when Nora behaves like a 'doll-wife' to get more money

out of Helmer. Ibsen however challenges this social restriction in the final scene when Nora walks out of the marriage in an effort to gain control of her life.

(927 words)

Bibliography

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Trans. Michael Meyer. London: Methuen London, 1997. Print