



The Images of Clothes in Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE

Quan Wang

To cite this article: Quan Wang (2015) The Images of Clothes in Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE, The Explicator, 73:4, 239-242, DOI: [10.1080/00144940.2015.1084980](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2015.1084980)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2015.1084980>



Published online: 25 Nov 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 741



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

QUAN WANG

Beihang University

The Images of Clothes in Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE

Keywords: clothes, Darwinism, Henrik Ibsen

Critics have commented on various symbols in “A Doll’s House,” such as the Christmas tree, the tarantella, the house and its doors (Johnston 321–24), the hide-and-seek game (Drake 32–33), and even the portraits of fathers (Rosefeldt 84). However, the images of clothes have been neglected. In fact, Henrik Ibsen has a penchant for the visual effects of costumes, and his job as a stage director in Bergen Theatre was “to organize the scenic arrangements, including the costumes and scenery, of each play” (qtd. in Marker and Marker 2). An investigation into the orchestration of apparel will deepen our understanding of the characters and reveal the Darwinian theme in the drama.

First, Helmer is associated with a masquerade costume.¹ During the Christmas dance, he wears a black cloak with a removable mask (Ibsen, “Doll’s House” 98). He corrects Nora’s dancing with repeated “instructions,” controls her performance within “the proprieties of art,” presents his well-trained wife at the party, and receives “a tumultuous hand” (98). When Helmer flings his masquerade “on a chair,” it exposes his “pounding blood” for sexual intercourse with Nora (101). Then, Krogstad’s letters doff his cloak of a social paragon and reveal his animalistic self-preservation: “I’m saved. Nora, I’m saved!” in sharp contrast with the early draft: “You are saved, Nora. You are saved!” Once secure, coward Helmer dons the masquerade of a protective husband: “I’ll keep you like a hunted dove I’ve rescued out of a hawk’s claws” (107). Helmer’s mask is also embodied in his dealings with Krogstad. After years of struggle, Helmer is promoted to bank manager and becomes “the fittest one” with “full authority” in his financial kingdom (58), the pillar of society. By discharging a “moral invalid,” the manager

establishes his profile as a man of principle who “literally feel[s] physically revolted” before Krogstad (70). However, beneath the respectable facade lurks his egotistical motivation: Krogstad’s childhood “crony” relationship embarrasses Helmer’s authority, a feeling he describes as “excruciating” (78). So Helmer arbitrarily dismisses Krogstad and “make[s] an opening” for his wife’s friend.

As the victim of Helmer’s discharge, Krogstad holds Nora’s forgery in his pocket, indirectly “in control over” her husband. Even after Nora’s suicide, Krogstad would “still have him [Helmer] in my pocket” (Ibsen, “Doll’s House” 88). “To have somebody in one’s pocket” means to “have influence or power over somebody” in a surreptitious way, “especially by threatening him” (*Oxford Dictionary* 1525). This is an accurate description of Krogstad’s dealings. Because of his misdeed, “every door was closed” and his current job is his only chance of survival, “as if it were life itself” (Ibsen, “Doll’s House” 63–64). When this opportunity is threatened, Krogstad resorts to any possible means to struggle for existence, regardless of morality, and concretizes the Darwinian survival.

Blackmailed by Krogstad, Nora avails herself of “stockings” to seduce Rank into rescuing her. Nora, keenly aware of her “ravishing appeal,” dreams of inheriting a fortune from an old man who loves her. Plunged into desperation, she acts out her sexual fantasy and asks dying Rank for “a great proof of friendship” (Ibsen, “Doll’s House” 83). She barter her sexual appeal for the “exceptionally big favor” and allows Rank to admire her “flesh-colored silk stockings.” Moral principles are put aside, and natural impulses are exploited for survival. “Shame on you (*Hits him lightly on the ear with the stockings*)” (Ibsen, “Doll’s House” 82). The play is “about the *willful* selling of one’s self to gain some advantage” (Otten 515). When Rank fails, Nora turns to Kristine for help.

Kristine is sewing the “tattered” garment of interpersonal relationships. “The masquerade clothes” are “tattered” in a mess (Ibsen, “Doll’s House” 72), but Kristine will “fix that up” (74). Metaphorically, Kristine is “trimming” the strained relationship between Nora and Krogstad to buttress female friendship while also “mending” her broken love with Krogstad. However, the facade of altruism covers her “knitting” of a web to trap victims. First, Kristine intervenes with Krogstad’s withdrawal of the letter and deliberately smashes Nora’s “joy and pride” (64). Then, Kristine manipulates Krogstad’s affections. The purpose of her arrival in the city is to “get a job” at the bank because of Helmer’s promotion: “I’m here to look for work” (57). However, she deceives Krogstad into believing her love for him. “Mrs.

Linde: Why do you think I came into town? / Krogstad: Did you really have some thought of me?" (96). A scrutiny of the context exposes her motivation. Krogstad's unchecked behavior could cause two results. If Helmer surrenders, Kristine's newly acquired job will be returned back to Krogstad; if Helmer insists, his reputation will be wrecked, and her job will be lost. Thus, Krogstad's aggression must be stopped. How can Kristine dissuade Krogstad, a man whom she would desert "the moment a better catch comes by"? "Anyone who's sold herself for somebody else once isn't going to do it again" (97). Kristine is right in her assertion, but this time "she's sold herself" *not* "for somebody" but for herself, that is, she is prostituting herself for a desirable job. For Kristine, work is tantamount to everything in her life and "it's been my best and my only joy" (96). When her "best and only joy" is menaced, she is willing to do anything to secure it. Therefore, the nature of love as expressed in the motto of "to live for somebody" is garbled into "to work for somebody," which distinctively accentuates the priority of job and, if in conflict, love must be sacrificed for job. When pressed by Krogstad as to whether she would step aside from the job for his sake, Kristine responds curtly: "No" (95). Kristine betrays her friend, exploits her lover, knits a chameleon-like camouflage, and survives well.

Rank, the only one who escapes Kristine's web, wears an imaginary hat. "They say there's a hat—black, huge—have you never heard of the hat that makes you invisible?" (Ibsen, "Doll's House" 103). Hat, with its proximity to the head, is a metonym for human intelligence. Rank exercises critical faculty and makes ethical evaluations of society: "It's the healthy these days that are out in the cold" (58). The jungle law of society finds its fuller expression in the first draft of Rank. "The stronger tree deprives the weaker of elements necessary for its growth, and turns them to its own advantage" (Ibsen, "Commentary" 301). Rank's sense of right and wrong keeps him detached from society. However, his moral existence turns out to be a misfit in "the survival of the fittest": He will die soon. Ibsen's juxtaposition of the triumph of calculating Kristine with the death of ethical Rank compels us to ponder over Darwinian ideas in this problem play.

Ibsen is influenced by Darwinism, as was popular among European intellectuals in the later nineteenth century. J. P. Jacobsen, the Danish translator of Darwin, held frequent discussions with Ibsen over evolutionary theory. Asbjørn Aarseth concludes that "Ibsen had read at least part of the first chapter of the Danish translation of *On the Origin of Species*" (7). Darwin, a scientist, presents an objective law of nature; Ibsen, a poet, dramatizes its effect upon human beings with his artistic weaving of clothes images.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to the insightful comments from the consulting editor and executive editor. This article is supported by the National Project for Research and Teaching of Foreign Languages (No. 2014BJ0009A) and the 2015–2016 U.S.–China Fulbright Visiting Research Scholar Program (No. 68150127).

Note

¹Helmer's costume in the play is described as an "evening dress, with a black domino open over it" ("A Doll's House" 98). According to *Oxford Dictionary*, *domino* can mean "a loose cloak, worn with a mask for the upper part of the face at masquerades." Helmer's clothing thus implies his disguised personality. Of course, *domino* is also the name of the well-known game and is frequently employed to characterize chain-reaction events. Correspondingly, Ibsen's usage serves three functions in the play: a mask of his character's personality, an indicator of tricks and calculations, and a structure for activating catalysts. However, only the foremost meaning of *domino* is directly linked to the topic of "the images of clothes" as discussed in the essay. Because the reader's likely association of *domino* with the board game and/or chain-reaction events would result in digression from the theme of clothes, the essay replaces *domino* with synonymous words such as *cloak*, *masquerade*, and *mask*.

Works Cited

- Aarseth, Asbjørn. "Ibsen and Darwin." *Modern Drama* 48.1 (2005): 1–10. Print.
- Drake, David B. "Ibsen's A DOLL HOUSE." *Explicator* 53.1 (1994): 32–33. Print.
- Ibsen, Henrik. "A Doll's House" in *Four Major Plays*. Trans. Rolf Fjelde. Vol. 1. New York: New American Library, 1965. Print.
- . "A Doll's House: Commentary." Appendix 2 to *The Oxford Ibsen*. Vol. 5. Trans. James Walter McFarlane. London: Oxford UP, 1961. Print.
- Johnston, Brian. "Three Stages of 'A Doll House.'" *Comparative Drama* 25.4 (1991): 311–28. Print.
- Marker, Frederick J., and Lise-Lone Marker. *Ibsen's Lively Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.
- Otten, Terry. "How Old Is Dr. Rank?" *Modern Drama* 41.4 (1998): 509–22. Print.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's English–Chinese Dictionary*. Ed. A. S. Horby. 7th Ed. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2009. Print.
- Rosefeldt, Paul. "Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE." *Explicator* 61.2 (2003): 84–85. Print.