

## “THE USE OF LANGUAGE AND FORM IN IBSEN’S *A DOLL’S HOUSE*: A FORMALIST PERSPECTIVE”

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### **Abstract:**

*Traditionally, literature has been viewed as a introspection of society. However, the formalist approach states that the nature of literature lies in its literariness. This paper purposes to investigate Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House by observing its internal elements in order to create and reinforce meaning. Rather than focusing on the external influences, the paper looks into the components of the text embracing dialogue, symbolism, motifs and dramatic form. With close reading the research highlights Ibsen’s workmanship and the way formal elements work together to create a unified and impressive drama. The research highlights formalist strategies in literary analysis and showcases Ibsen’s command of dramatic form and language.*

### **Keywords:**

Formalism, Literary devices, Dramatic structure, Internal analysis, literariness.

### **1. Introduction:**

Formalism is a way of examining Literature that began in Russia around 1910s. It determined on looking at the structure and form of the text. It underscored the importance of studying literature as an independent entity, apart from historical, biographical and social contexts. Formalists analyze that the language of the work should be studied in terms of its literary elements, that is intrinsic instead of extrinsic. Furthermore, it is grounded on examining a text, form and structure that encompasses language, style and devices rather than a debate on issues more distant to the text. It asserts that the purpose of literature is literariness.

A text according to Formalism is a entity on its own without the need of external influence. *Moscow Linguistic Circle* in 1914 lead by Roman Jakobson centered on the linguistic components of literature. He unveils the concept of poetic function of language. Additionally, *OPOYAZ* in 1916 lead by Victor Shklovsky concentrated on aesthetic aspects of literature, specifically interested in analyzing the literary devices.

Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is a skillfully written play that counts on its internal aspects, its structure, diction, and literary devices to communicate its underlying themes and implicit meanings. In place of focusing on historical or social influences, Formalism examines how the play structure, dialogue, and literary techniques collaborate to create its collective impact. Through a Formalist framework, the play’s unity, consistency, rationality as well as its use of symbolism, irony and contrasts are crucial in understanding the primary focus of themes like freedom and autonomy. Formalism mainly emphasizes on form relates to a style of inquiry that zooms almost entirely on attributes of the literary text itself. Victor Shklovsky has the view that literature’s objective is to effect the thinking of the reader. The way reader observe the world, interrupt his habitual way by spoiling it, therefore reader see the world in a new manner.

Formalist criticism, as an approach of literary analysis, highlights the autonomy of the text. According to formalist theorists such as Viktor Shklovsky and Cleanth Brooks, the strength of literature rests on its form, how the content is displayed rather than in the content alone. Concerning this, *A Doll's House* presents abundant resources for formalist inquiry. The use of foreshadowing, suspense, and intensification in dialogue all donate a perception of certainty and emotional harmony. The rigidity of the plot, with every event and line of dialogue all playing a part to unfold the dilemmas, reflects Ibsen's command on dramatic form.

Boris Eichenbaum, a scholar has the concept that literature should be examined with specific approach. It should be independent from ideological and political angles and literary text should be distinct from all other aspects of society. There should be the origination of independent science of literature in which only attention is on the form and structure of the content or text. A Formalist analysis uncovers that the structure is not simply a vehicle for delivering a message but the fundamental part of the play's meaning.

### Research Significance:

This study highlights the importance of understanding Henrik Ibsen's use of structure, language, and literary devices enriches the meaning and influence of *A Doll's House*. By pinpointing on formal aspects, the research presents a deeper recognition of Ibsen's craftsmanship and narrative technique. This angle not merely try to enhances the study of the play but also try to provide a broader understanding of how form molds content in dramatic literature.

### Research Questions:

- 1) What features are used in the play to generate meaning?
- 2) What main ideas are applied in the formalistic interpretation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*?

### Research Objectives:

- 1) To determine the features that are used in *A Doll's House* in order to generate meaning.
- 2) To investigate the main ideas that are applied in the formalistic interpretation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

## 2. Literature Review:

Formalism as an analytical approach draws attention on intrinsic elements of literature including structure, form, language, imagery, and symbolism without mentioning the author's perspective and historical context. This proposes a constructive lenses through which to examine Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Short, 1981). Oza in *Analytical Reading and Selected Inferences in the play A doll's House* offers a thematic and character based analysis of the play. The findings show Nora's transformation that reflects extensive societal discussion and underlines Ibsen's implementation of realism, symbolism, and subtle irony in juxtaposing dramatic tension (Oza, 2021). *Symbolic Realism in Ibsen's Doll's House: An Overview*, highlights everyday objects and situations that are infused with profound meaning. Through the figurative use of Christmas tree, the tarantella and the locked letterbox, the study depicts the explanation of nuanced emotional and societal struggles (Anglisticum, 2014).

Cleanth Brooks's milestone study of John Donne's *The Canonization* shows that paradox and metaphor are fundamental tools for poetic expression (Brook, 1947). Donne's handling of religious imagery to portray worldly love creates a structural and thematic unity that represents the central formalist belief in the inseparability of form and meaning. Similarly, in *A Doll's House* Ibsen engages dramatic irony, symbolic objects and rigidly structured acts in order to combine form and message.

The play's narrative structure characterized by its cohesion of time, place, and action illustrates the formalist focus on the interconnectedness of a text's components and aspects. Ibsen's precise attention to detail in crafting the dialogue, stage direction, and symbolic elements contributes to a cohesive and self-sufficient artistic experience as well as creative expression. The selected play under study reflects the formal specificity through its three act structure, which indicates Nora's development from submissiveness to self realization. The methodology often related with textualism and originalism continues beyond merely ascertaining the content of law, delving into the very structure and form of the work to accurate meaning (Nachbar, 2020).

Studying *A Doll's House* through a formalist point of view include a close reading of the text, concentrating on its literary devices, including symbolism, imagery and motifs. The symbolism of the Christmas tree, for instance primarily representing Nora's carefree, relaxed and decorative existence, progressively becomes shabby reflecting her deteriorating emotional state and the hidden weaknesses of her marriage. Additionally, the utilization of dramatic irony, where the audience is aware of Nora's secret loan while Torvalds remains ignorant, develops tension and highlights the concept of deception.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* is another work that include formal elements like symbolism and narrative structure in order to communicate meaning. (Levy, 1993) determines the forest, Faith's ribbons, and nighttime setting as internal characteristics that awaken moral ambiguity. Likewise, in *A Doll's House*, components like Nora's macaroons and the locked mailbox contribute to represent repression, secrecy, and disobedience, enhancing the play's thematic factors through structural and symbolic harmony.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* displays that the sound and structure craft a unified mood (Thompson, 1973) highlights the significance of repetition and abstain in constructing psychological tension. In Ibsen's play, the repetition of phrases such as "little lark" or "my little squirrel" and the consistent condescending tone of Torvald imitate Poe's method but enhancing Nora's symbolic entrapment adding a formal structure that displays her emotional condition. Chekhov's *The Lady with the Dog* offers another useful similarity. Its plot symmetry and motif of circular patterns examine the protagonist's internal change, similar to *A Doll's House* that uses repetitive language and mirroring actions (e.g, letters and secrets) to sketch Nora's awareness (Chekhov, 1899). *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath also proposes insight through its unbalanced matching of nursery rhyme rhythm coupled with disturbing imagery, revealing how rhyme and repetition can escalate tone and irony (Plath, 1965). These aspects are parallel to Ibsen's calculated use of formal balance and irony in depicting Nora's obedient tone in the opening scene versus her forceful language in the final act.

Formalistic examination of *A Doll's House* stretches beyond the recognition of textual elements, questioning into the complex relationship between form and meaning inside the play's structure. The formalist approach is not simply a descriptive exercise, but an insightful search that seeks to understand Ibsen's artistic expressions that add to the play's overall impact (Nachbar, 2020).

Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* mirrors Ibsen's method with the use of imagery and structure to follow the protagonist's moral and psychological maturation. The juxtaposition between light and darkness, symbols like hat and the crafted conclusion play role as a formal devices, as do the stage properties like props in *A Doll's House* especially Nora's final door slam, which has been ironically dissected as a symbolic punctuation mark concluding the plot's arc (Mansfield, 1922).

Formalist perspective of the selected play includes a detailed examination of the text, concentrating on its symbolism, imagery, and motifs. The Formalist angle avoids dependence on external factors like historical context or authorial intention and give spotlight to the

internal dynamics of the play (Azam, 2014). For instance, the recurring motifs of dolls and playthings echoes Nora's objectification (Akter et al., 2019). The title *A Doll's House* itself serves as a powerful symbol, capturing the artificial and controlling environment in which Nora Helmer exists.

Play's use of language, a Formalist approach evaluate the shades of Ibsen's prose, examining dialogues that exposes characters, develops the plot, and carries thematic concerns. The careful arrangement of scenes, the use of dramatic irony, and the gradual revelation of Nora's secrets all support the play's overall formal design. The play's formal elements collaborate by working together to create a powerful discussion on traditions, customs and individual identity (Azam, 2014).

Although *A Doll's House* has been extensively examined through feminist, psychological and social angles, limited attention has been given to its formalist aspects. Formalist analysis commonly used for poetry and short fiction, is rarely applied to Ibsen's dramatic work. This crafts a gap in understanding play's internal techniques add to its meaning. The active research aims to try to fill this gap by employing a targeted formalist approach.

### 3. Research Methodology:

This study supports a qualitative research approach, applying formalist literary criticism to examine Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. A detailed reading of the selected text acts as a primary method of analysis with no lean on historical, biographical or social contexts in agreement with formalist principals. The attention is on the internal elements of the text such as structure, language, symbolism, imagery and dramatic techniques that share its overall meaning and coherence. The play itself is the main source of data, supported by relevant scholarly literature on Formalism and Ibsen's work. The analysis explores the way literary devices shape character development and thematic expression with central idea. The goal of the explanatory research is to furnish a theoretically informed knowledge of particular textual instances. All the findings and data are interpreted thematically to present the form and technique of the play that increase its dramatic flair.

### 4. Key Concepts within Formalism:

#### 4.1 Defamiliarization:

Shklovsky illustrate the concept using Russian word "Ostranenie" which means 'Estrangement' or 'making strange'. It is a method of describing something in a strange manner that enables the reader to understand it in new ways. The aim of literature is to get the experience of things as they are perceived and not they are known. Greene in his *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that the part playing by Defamiliarization is to highlight the artists attention towards the literary devices and creation.

As In Leo Tolstoy's novella "*Kholstomer*", the story is portrayed from the point of view of horse. Tolstoy engage the readers to reconsider the human behaviors of how they try to own everything by considering them their own property like land and horses. Tolstoy describe all this from the perspective of horse so that human being challenge those assumptions that he take for granted.

#### 4.2 Literariness:

Literariness is the artistic tool that sets literature detached from everyday language by focusing on the structure and writing style of the text along with the use of metaphor, rhyme, rhythm and other stylistic devices. It concerns to the features that create a piece distinctively literary. According to Baldick (2008), literariness is depicted as the trait of a language which makes distinction in the literary language from the ordinary use of language in our practical



lives. We use ordinary language just for communication whereas artistic use of language is to grab the reader's interest towards its linguistic features.

#### 4.3 Foregrounding:

In literature, Foregrounding emphasize to draw attention towards something or to make something noticeable. Additionally, it gives spotlight to the certain text so that reader does not mix them and for this writers use many techniques like parallelism, alliteration and metaphor. Simpson (2004) states that It is oriented at drawing reader's attention to a certain section of a poem, short story, novel, drama or any other literary work. In literature, Foregrounding is examined as a form of textual pattering which sparked absolutely for literary aesthetic reasons in the form of divergence from norm. As Charles Dickens uses parallelism to highlight and foreground the book's theme in the opening lines of "*A Tale of Two Cities*" (1859) as:

"It was the best of time, it was the worst of time".

#### 4.4 Fabula and Syuzhet:

The story (Fabula) is the step-by-step progression of events taking place in a text. The plot (Syuzhet) is the sequence in which these events use to make up the narrative. This comparison is made only to highlight the construction of narrative and how a particular structure impacts meaning as well as interpretations.

Just like in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel "*Crime and Punishment*", Fabula is about Raskolnikov, the poor student who commits murder but later feel guilty and Syuzhet is that how this story is constructed. It means that Dostoevsky not only explain the events directly in a chronological order but when the story starts murder already had happened and Raskolnikov feel guilty. Through flashbacks and inner monologues, the novel create suspense and describe the psychological effects of crime on protagonist's mind..

### 5. Analysis:

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a well crafted play that depends on its internal components, its structure, diction, and literary devices deliver its deeper meanings. With a Formalist approach, the play's unity, coherence as well its use of symbolism, irony and contrasts are fundamental in understanding its central theme of freedom and autonomy. As opposed to focusing on historical and social contexts, Formalism examines how the play's structure, dialogue and literary techniques combine to shape its overall outcome.

#### 5.1 Structure:

The structure of *A Doll's House* follow three act format, which upholds unity and enhancement in the storyline. Each act performs a specific purpose in building dramatic tension and shifting the story forward The play maintains a clear beginning, middle and end assuring a cohesive narrative where all element serve a function and their role.. Act 1 unveils the setting, characters, and the central conflict which is Nora's secret loan. Act 2 heighten and intensifies this conflict, showing Nora's anxiety and hopelessness as

Krogstad threatens to reveal the truth. Finally, In Act 3 climax and resolution unfolds as Torvald's reaction to the letter sparks to Nora's realization and decision to leave. The structure and narrative symmetry mirrors Nora's transformation with a seemingly happy home and ultimately conclude in its downfall.

Nora who is the protagonist first appear to be a devoted partner who wants to impress her family and give them all the finest presents. But overtime, turns into a complete change woman shows the air of manipulation when she wants Torvald to save her. In contrast, Torvald presents himself as the clueless husband who simply offers money to the family and always appears to be satisfied when his family looks happy. Furthermore, he considers that a wife should do what they are told and that they really have no other identities and personas besides producing children and showing off like a trophy.

## 5.2 Diction:

Diction or the choice of language in the play has a pivotal role in character development and thematic exploration. Naturalistic and realistic dialogues created by Ibsen digs deeper into the issues, making the characters authentic and their interactions genuine. Ibsen mainly pay attention to the contrast in diction to highlight power dynamics, particularly between Nora and Torvald. Torvald's speech is often scornful filled with diminutive pet names like when he called her in Act 1:

“Is that my little lark twittering out there?”

“Is it my little squirrel bustling about?” (Ibsen, 1879)

This language goes through the theme of patriarchal control. The above mentioned lines revealing his dominance and arrogant view of Nora as a child like figure rather than an equal partner. Nora in the beginning speaks in a light, playful manner displaying her character as an obedient wife. When in Act 1 she actively go after Torvald's approval and responds to his condescending pet names by saying:

“Yes Torvald, I can't do anything without you to help me.”

Torvald replies her: “That is like a woman”

Nora said, “Yes Torvald, I know everything you say is right”. (Ibsen, 1879)

Same at another place she says:

“I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to.” (Ibsen, 1879)

However, as the plot thickens, her dialogues become more confident and straightforward, attaining the turning point in her final conversation with Torvald, when she says in Act 3,

“I have to stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself  
and everything about me.

That is why I cannot stay here with you any longer”. (Ibsen, 1879)

This transition in diction give signal about her change from a submissive wife to an empowered individual. The language used shifts depending on the characters. For instance, Torvald's language is self-centered and authoritative, emphasizing his role as the dominant figure in the household. Such as when he assert in Act 3,

“No man would sacrifices his honor for the one he loves”. (Ibsen, 1879)

In contrast, Krogstad's language reveal a desperate and emotional tone as he struggles to recover his reputation. When he says in Act 1:

“It never come into court; but from that day, every opening was barred to me.

So I turned my hand to the kind of business you know about.

I had to do something; and I don't think I was one of the worst.

But now I want to give up all that. My sons are growing up: for their sake,

I must try to regain what respectability I can.” (Ibsen, 1879)

Mrs. Linde's expressions in her speech are practical and straightforward, showing her freedom and realism. When she states in Act 1:

“Nora: How relieved you must feel--

Mrs. Linde: No, Nora. Just unspeakably empty. No one to live for any more.” (Ibsen, 1879)

## 5.3 Tone:

Ibsen's choice of tone and diction work with each other to focus on the play's themes of control, dishonesty and self-discovery. The tone of *A Doll's House* is closely tied with its language. In the opening the tone is light and domestic, almost mischievous as Nora and Torvald involve in seemingly playful taunting. However, as the conflict escalates, the tone becomes more fraught, desperate eventually serious and aggressive.

## 5.4 Literary Devices:

The play also utilizes various literary devices such as symbolism, irony, foreshadowing, metaphors, contrasts and parallelism.

**i. Symbolism:**

One of the most important literary devices is Symbolism, which Ibsen uses to represent deeper meanings behind seemingly ordinary objects and actions. The **title, *A Doll's House***, serves as the central symbol, describing the way Nora has been considered as a play thing rather than an independent person. Torvald's home resemble with a doll house where he overshadow every action of Nora's life, treating her as a frail, flimsy, and decorative figure rather than an individual adult. It is present within the text when Nora says to Torvald in Act 3:

"I have been your doll wife just as at home I was papa's doll child". (Ibsen, 1879)

Additional important symbol is the **Tarantella Dance**, which represents Nora's inner conflict and distress. She dances chaotically, not just to entertain, but to distract Torvald from finding the truth. In Act 2 she says to Dr. Rank:

"Now Dr. Rank, cheerup. You'll see tomorrow how nicely I can dance.

And you can pretend I'm doing it just for joy

and for you and for Torvald as well, of course". (Ibsen, 1879)

The **Christmas Tree** is another important symbol, it opens as a beautifully decorated centerpiece of the home, mirroring Nora's first impression of happiness and perfection. Meanwhile, as the play develops and Nora's world begins to unfold, the tree becomes exposed of its decorations, reflecting her declining emotional state. **The Locked Mailbox** symbolizes Torvald's power over Nora, as she is unable to access the letter that holds the key to her fate. The **Door Slam** at the end of the play serves as a strong auditory symbol of conclusion, marking Nora's exit from her previous life.

**ii. Dramatic Irony:**

Ibsen utilizes Dramatic Irony to connect the audience and create tension. Throughout the storyline, Torvald control Nora as a child like and incapable woman, unknowing that she has been secretly handling a major financial responsibility. One of the most impressive examples is the audience's familiarity of Nora's secret debt long before Torvald uncovers it. This irony draw attention towards the imbalance in their relationship, Nora has taken actual risks to save his life, yet he consider that she is helpless and dependent on him. This can be understand through the dialogue of Nora and Mrs. Linde in Act 1:

"Oh, sometimes I was so tired, so tired. But it was tremendous fun all the same, siting there working and earning money like that. Almost like being a man".

(Ibsen, 1879)

**iii. Foreshadowing:**

Ibsen make use of Foreshadowing to catch a glimpse of future events and construct suspense. In the opening scenes, Nora's nervous reaction when Torvald talks about morality and honesty indicates that she is concealing something important. Likewise, Dr. Rank's apparently casual statements about his declining health also foreshadow his death, which later synchronizes with Nora's awareness that her marriage is lifeless. Krogstad's increasing anxiety signals that he will refuses to quit, foreshadowing his decision to expose Nora.

Foreshadowing in *A Doll's House* can be seen when Torvald asserts he would protect Nora if she were ever in trouble. The audience is aware that when truth finally pick up on his cues, he prioritizes his own perception and reputation over his wife's well-being, opposing his earlier words. As in Act 2:

"Krogstad said: Does your husband love you so little then?

He knows what i can expose you to, and yet he venture.

Nora: how can you suppose that he has any knowledge of the sort?  
Krogstad: I didn't suppose so at all. It would not be the least like our dear Torvald Helmer to show so much courage." (Ibsen, 1879)

#### iv. Contrasts and Parallelism:

Ibsen employs it to spotlight the crucial concepts within the text. The contrast between Krogstad and Torvald is noteworthy, both are affiliated with reputation, but while Krogstad eventually saves himself and chooses honesty, Torvald remains captivated on appearances. In like manner, Mrs. Linde delves as a hinder to Nora, presenting what a woman can be when she is independent and non-reliant. Unlike Nora, who has been shielded from the harsh realities of life, Mrs. Linde has struggled hard to live on her own. These contrasts polishes the play's message about true strength and personal growth.

#### v. Metaphors:

Nora's condition in the household is often compare to that of a doll, strengthening the idea that she is simply an object of beauty and entertainment, not a person with independence. Moreover at several points in play Torvald repeatedly refers Nora using tiny pet names as "little squirrel" and "little skylark". These reflects how he interpret her as a fragile being, in need of his protection and guidance. This metaphor spreads to the larger themes of gender roles in marriage, where women are presumed to be obedient and dependent on their husbands.

#### vi. Theatrical Devices:

Stage directions and realistic Dialogues give strength to the narrative. They provide interpretation into the character's emotions. For example, Nora's nervous habits and avoidance of eye contact echoes her inner distress and emotional struggle. This attention to realistic detail draws the audience to connect with the characters on a deeper level.

Unlike traditional melodramas of Ibsen's time, *A Doll's House* does not count on overly dramatic dialogues or idealistic coincidences. Instead, the dialogues and interaction between characters feel natural, filled with disruption, hesitation, and subtext.

Through its well-organized framework, structure, carefully chosen diction, and effective use of literary devices, *A Doll's House* secure a strong sense of coherence and meaning. The dramatic machinery in *A Doll's House* serves as a masterpiece describing the careful arrangement of literary elements that can hold strongly within a work of literature.

#### 6. Conclusion:

A Formalist examining of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* discloses the depth and complexity of the play's artistic structure, independent of external social or historical contexts. The structure of three acts, the use of stage directions, and the strategic repetition of certain phrases and images all contribute to the emotional tension and dramatic advancement of the play. By examining the play's formal components such as, symbolism, dialogue and dramatic structure, it becomes evident that Ibsen artfully polished each aspect to serve a unified artistic purpose. Through close reading, it can be examined that form and content are deeply linked, making *A Doll's House* a powerful example of how meaning can immerse within the text itself. This perspective not only strengthen Ibsen's skill as a playwright but also illustrate the value of formalist analysis in uncovering the literary craftsmanship of dramatic works. Ultimately, this study assert that *A doll's House* can be appreciated as a self-contained work of art, where its form is essential to its everlasting significance and impact.

This study highlights the artistic value of *A Doll's House* by focusing on its internal elements. The research supports close reading and can guide future analysis of other literary works. It is helpful for the learners interested in literary form and theory.



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