

A comparison of two female heroes: Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone*

The character of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Antigone of Sophocles' *Antigone*, two women that chose to rebel against society in order to achieve something that they believe strongly in. The different cultures that embrace these two plays, allow for many parallels between the values of both men and women. These two protagonists are definitely similar in some ways, due to the fact that in both situations there is an obvious repression of women and that these women are both striving for something that is against the law. However, there are several key differences between the characters of Nora and Antigone. These differences, although not guarding them from reaching their ultimate goals, do manage to give us a clear distinction between the two protagonists..

Antigone, based in ancient Greece, repeatedly demonstrates examples of the oppression of women. From the first scene, when Antigone is talking to Ismene about her plan to bury Oedipus, the repression of females is evident. Ismene is clearly terrified of defying Creon's laws, which would put ultimate disgrace upon their lives. Ismene emphasizes this point by stating that "[They] are women and such are not made to fight with men." (Sophocles, 193) By this statement, Ismene shows us that the society has forced the inferiority of women so strongly, that even they believe that their sex is helpless against the 'superior', male sex. Antigone however, steps over this barrier and puts her brother's burial in front of not only the law, but also the values of their society. The view of women in the times of Ancient Greece was more extreme than that of the late 19th century, the time when Ibsen's, *A Doll's House* takes place. In *A Doll's House*, the oppression of women is a little more passive; the people of this time referred to the subject with a certain degree of subtlety. Instead of openly stating that women are inferior, as Creon does in Sophocles' play, Torvald uses certain euphemisms to portray these values. For example, when Torvald and Nora are discussing Nora's spendings, Torvald says, "My little song-bird must never do that again. A song-bird must have a clean beak

to chirp with – no false notes.”(Ibsen, 26) Torvald’s view of Nora is like a doll, except one that also cleans the house and takes care of his kids. This notion of a ‘perfect housewife’ is one that is constantly reoccurring in Ibsen’s novel.

The audience does not feel the oppression of women as much in *A Doll’s House* as they do in *Antigone*. This is because of the large difference in the time periods of the two plays. Also, Torvald seems to approach Nora in a very passionate way, one that masks the strong feeling of superiority that men felt. Even though the view of women in *Antigone* might seem more radical, especially when Creon throws out comments such as: “No woman while I live shall govern me.”(Sophocles, 214) or “You woman’s slave!”(Sophocles, 224), the euphemisms that Torvald uses are actually just as repressive, if not more so. His significantly older age does not is not that much of a factor in his relationship with Nora, the fact that she is a woman, who is also willing to play this role, is what creates the seemingly parent-child-like relationship between the two. Torvald's somewhat ‘loving’ comments represent where women were placed in the society; they were looked at as ‘little housewives’. In fact, this notion of a ‘perfect little housewife’, or a delicate young woman who takes care of the house, is still somewhat present in today’s society.

Another difference between the two women is the path which they take in order to make their statement against the laws of the state. Antigone has a strong sense of rebellion from the beginning of the play, whereas Nora expresses some thoughts against the Society, yet she only realizes her repression at the end of the story. Antigone states her rebellious position and questions the state throughout the whole play, not hiding any of her thoughts. Nora on the other hand, is slightly more delicate with the approach. She tries until the last moment to hide the fact that she has forged her husband’s signature. She seems to have some kind of doubts about her social status but does not react, as Antigone did, until the end of the play before she leaves the house. When talking to Mrs. Linde, Nora gets upset after she is told that she hasn’t accomplished anything important in her life. “My dear! Small household cares and that sort of thing! - You are a child, Nora.”(Ibsen, 11) The fact that Nora is disturbed by the thought of being ‘useless’, shows that she has some sort of will to raise her status in the society. When Mrs. Linde tells her that everything she has done so far are just ‘small household cares’, Nora wants

to be recognized as something more than that. Antigone on the other hand, is not protesting on the behalf of herself. Her reason is the respect for her dead brother, not her own respect for herself. We, as the audience, can see that Antigone is actually sad to leave all of her life behind and die at such an early age:

Unwept, unwedded, unloved I go

On this last journey of all.

Eye of the blessed sun –

I shall miss you soon.

(Sophocles, 230)

However, Antigone believes that a respectful burial of her brother is more important than any achievement that she could have reached. In some way Nora also risks her life by forging her Husband's signature, in love for her husband. However, she does not want to tell this to Torvald because she is afraid that "it would upset [their] mutual relations altogether; [their] beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is now." (Ibsen, 13) Here, Nora displays the fact that her role is somewhat fake; she agrees to play the role of the innocent housewife, mostly because it is something that Torvald feeds off. When Nora tells Torvald about the forgery he first scolds her for being irresponsible but later calms down and confesses that "There is something so indescribably sweet and satisfying, to a man, in the knowledge that he has forgiven his wife – forgiven her freely..." (Ibsen, 64) At this point, Nora changes her position in the conversation; she begins to question the law. The fact that she says this to Torvald shows a great change in her personality, almost a striving for freedom. This striving is something that Antigone experiences quite early in the novel, carrying it all the way through to the end. The stubbornness of Antigone almost makes her seem manly, and the audience sees her as being more of a tragic hero than Nora, who does not dare disagree with Torvald until the end of the play. It is at the end of both plays however, when the two characters switch personalities. Nora becomes a strong, stubborn woman whereas Antigone, while keeping her belief that what she is doing is right, resorts to mourning for what she will miss. Nora

walks out of the house, saying “Oh Torvald, I don’t believe anymore in wonderful things happening.”(68) We can see that Nora has realized some things about the society that she is living in. Her constant hope that something good will happen turns out to be nothing more than a dream. Antigone on the other hand, is in despair before being taken away:

So taken, so am I led away:

A virgin still, no nuptial song, no marriage-bed,

No children to my name.

An outcast stripped of sympathy.

(Sophocles, 232)

These lines are very tragic; Antigone is being killed and she is naming all of the experiences she has not had, and yet she doesn’t regret what she has done, and still keeps her faith. This definitely is a trait of a tragic hero; however, this dignity is also her flaw and is what causes her death.

There are definitely some similarities between Nora and Antigone. However, these similarities mostly have to do with the fact that both women are in a society where women are oppressed. The differences in their personalities are very evident, and create a fine line between the two. While Nora is more of a submissive character, at times mocking the society, “What do I care about this tiresome Society?” (Ibsen, 15), Antigone is not the typical quiet housewife. Antigone has a stronger character, one of a true hero. Perhaps it is Antigone’s social status that somehow plays in to her being such a powerful character. Being of a royal family, it is understandable that Antigone wants proper respect for her brother no matter how much of an enemy he is to the state. Nora is also somewhat victorious; just like Antigone, she also loses certain aspects of her life, her children and house and husband. However, Nora learns that her main duties are “Duties to myself.”(Ibsen, 65)