



# “The Sacred Duty”—Oscar Wild’s “Lady Windermere’s Fan”, a Response to “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen: A Comparative Study

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## Abstract

This article primarily investigates on “the sacred duty” depicted in “A Doll’s House” (1879) (1889-the English translation) by Henrik Ibsen and “Lady Windermere’s Fan” (1892) by Oscar Wilde, which was staged almost simultaneously in London. Nora’s leaving from her doll’s house stressing her duty to herself and desire to be herself created a huge controversy in traditional Victorian society. A Doll’s house sheds lights on the anomalous position of women in the male-dominant society and due to the intense public discussion about the play, there came up Ibsenist and anti-Ibsenist movement. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, being an unconventional literary figure in the late Victorian period, seems to have provided a bold response to “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen through his well-made play, Lady Windermere’s Fan in which the protagonist, Lady Windermere left home on a rash decision and made her mind to return when she was reminded of her sacred duty towards her child. The paper concludes showcasing that Nora’s decision to leave her doll’s house looks fair enough in the circumstances around her whereas Lady Windermere returning to her family to perform her “sacred duty” must also be praised as she was misled by a baseless misconception.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics, Literature

## Keywords

Henrik Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Sacred Duty, Anomalous Position, Victorian

## 1. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen (1824-1889) holds a very special position in the world of theatre as one of the most influential dramatists of all time. He being a pioneer of realistic theatre introduced and popularized realistic theatre; thereby known as the father of realistic theatre in the global context. Most of his plays that include A Doll's House (1879), Ghosts (1882), Hedda Gabler (1891), The Master Builder (1892) and An Enemy of the People (1882) [1] [2] [3] have been translated into many languages and produced more often than not. Ibsen is famous for the "problem plays" where social problems are often juxtapositioned in the context of the traditional thinking patterns of the pre-modern eras against modern social perspectives. He created a platform for a debate; A Doll's House is arguably the best example for the fact as Nora's departure from her doll's house leaving children in husband's custody exercised the minds of the people all over. A Doll's House which questions the anomalous position of women in the male-dominant society is generally regarded as his masterpiece that created huge controversy over the role of wife and mother. The monster image of the main character, Nora of the play, created such a widespread public discussion that led to the polarization into Ibsenist' and anti-Ibsenist' conviction that dominated cultural scene not only in Europe but in the whole world [1]. In this scenario, a section of a society (the anti Ibsenists) was highly critical of Nora's move and labeled her as "a heartless monster". They insisted on the importance of family as an essential social unit and domestic harmony through which children's personality is developed. Ibsenists, on the other hand, argued that individual's liberation and freedom should be there before everything else and insisted that duty to oneself before "the sacred duty". Though Ibsen commented that his main concern of the play was humanity before everything, feminists of the third wave often quoted the play as a ground-breaking literary piece where a male seriously stood for women's rights.

Predominantly male-dominant society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century could not whatsoever tolerate Nora's departure from the doll's house to be "herself" highlighting "my duty to myself". "A Doll's House" was first staged in all three Scandinavian capital cities in the course of 1879-80 and despite the furious controversy it created the most intense public discussion in the region with widespread mouth-to-mouth publicity that led to a situation where on many social invitations, it was mentioned; you are requested not to mention Ibsen's Doll's House [1] [2] [4]. The play was later rehearsed and prepared to be staged in Germany but at the last moment, the eminent actress playing the role of Nora refused to act the role of "monster" unless the ending was altered; Ibsen subsequently had no option but to substitute a more conciliatory ending. It, however, took ten years for the play to be staged in London (1889), Victorian England,

and the cultural centre of the world then. As expected, the polarization of the Ibsenist and Anti-Ibsenist movement marked an indelible place in English literature creating the most intense public debate whether Nora is right or wrong in her decision making.

A Doll's House consists of five main characters having Nora as the central figure of the play. Torvald Helmer, the husband of Nora is a possessive person who treats Nora like doll and acts more as a father figure than a husband. He always calls Nora in pet names such as "my little squirrel", "my little songbird", "my little featherbrain", "sweet little thing" etc. The arrival of Mrs. Linde, Nora's classmate after many years made Nora to confess her ever kept secret, the borrowing money. Mrs. Linde, on contrary, believes in sacred duty; what she says to Krogstad, her former lover in patching up their relationship is a proper example "I need someone to be a mother to and your children need a mother, you and I need each other (Act iii). Krogstad is the creditor of the play yet nice and understanding person, a contradiction to well known creditor, Shylock in the Merchant of Venice by Shakespeare for he well reads the traumatic condition of Nora in the crisis. Dr. Rank, though a doctor by profession becomes an incurable patient in the course of the play, and a frequent visitor to the Helmer's place and a secret admirer of Nora. In the Lady Windermere's fan, only three main characters could be found creating an assumption of love triangle, Lord Windemere, Lady Windemere, husband and wife and Mrs. Earlene who is actually the mother of Lady Windemere who appears in the town after twenty years of mysterious period.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), one of the finest dramatists of the late Victorian era is mostly famous for Farce, a humorous play in which characters involve in unlikely situations, or a play of that kind which aims at entertaining the audience through situations that are exaggerated to the point of absurd, extravagant and so unlikely and improbable in real life. Oscar Wilde's most famous play, The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is known to be one of the best examples of Farce [4] [5] [6] [7].

Lady Windermere's Fan (1892) however, is more a realistic play than a farce. And clearly reaching out for the concept of total theatre in which colour and design the spatial relations of actors within the playing space, music, and movement contribute to shaping the thematic life of the drama. The play is a "light" play as usually of Wilde's and not as serious as Ibsen's plays, yet it is undoubtedly witty and carries a worth-noticing social message underneath, and Wilde exposes Victorian upper-middle class in his plays with the ulterior motive of putting things right. His humour is more a double-edged sword than mere physical laughter; for instance, what Mr. Dumby, a minor character says in the play "In this world, there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants and the other is getting it. The last is much much worse: the last is a real tragedy!" (Act iii) is a solid example of the fine blend of wit and the harsh reality of life [7] [8].

Lady Windemere's Fan is founded upon love, marriage, and motherhood, out of the which the latter is highlighted most embedding a serious social message that a wife, and specially a mother should not make rash decisions that one may regret later in life. The play as usual of Wilde's plays exposes the spoilt upper-middle class of Victorian England and its shabby behaviour and shallowness. The overall message, however, is a serious matter, one should be extremely serious with family affairs and decision making, what is done cannot be undone.

## 2. Discussion

Motherhood is usually defined as "a sacred duty" entrusted upon women, and is a part and parcel of the civilization of human beings in nature to secure and protect the progeny unlike most of the animals in the universe. Though man in most cases supports woman in rearing children, it is supposed to be a main responsibility or "most sacred duty". (Act iii, A Doll's House) [1] of women irrespective of socio-cultural, political, and geographical differences.

Nora, the protagonist of A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen at the end of the play leaves her doll's house stressing "My duty to myself" (Act iii) which cheated so much of controversy in the predominantly male dominant society and Nora was unfortunately pushed into a situation by her husband, Trovald Helmer, where she could no longer stay in the place as she explains "I couldn't spend the night in a strange man's place" (ACT iii). Nora has been very responsible, dutiful, and loving wife as well as mother; when her husband was seriously ill, it was Nora who cured him borrowing a large amount of money from Krogstad, a bank officer turned creditor. "All right I thought but your Life must be saved somehow" (Act i) [1].

It was a real struggle for Nora to pay the money back primarily because she was a good wife and a loving mother. "I couldn't save much out of the house-keeping money because Trovald has to live property and I couldn't have the children looking shabby, I didn't feel I could touch the money that I had for my little darlings" (Act iii) [1].

Nora reaches epiphany towards the end of the play when she realizes that the miracle would not happen and her life has been nothing but "doll-child" turned "doll-wife" here; "I've been your doll-wife here just as at home I was papa's doll-child" (Act iii) Ibsen further reinforces matter through the juxtaposition of Nora's first arrival to the stage and confession in the end; (Nora comes into room humming happily) (Act i) and also says to Mrs. Linde, her classmate "... But you know I've been so happy these last eight years" (Act i). Nevertheless, at the moment of epiphany she confesses "I thought I had but really I've never been happy" (Act iii) [1] [5].

Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, is a revolutionary figure in English Literature and known for his unconventional lifestyle. He was accused and imprisoned for gay relationships, yet a good father, he wrote "Happy Prince and Other Stories", a very popular short story collection in English literature for his own children

[9]. It is a noteworthy fact that rather an unorthodox person in behaviour is stressing on the traditional “sacred duty” of women as it should be an important part of civilization; nevertheless, in *Lady Windemere’s Fan*, Oscar Wilde sheds light on the importance of performing the “sacred duty” as a mother.

Mrs. Erlynne, the intruder to Wildemere family which is finely bonded in love, once left her only child as a young wife and mother that is exactly what Nora does in Ibsen’s “*A Doll House*”. However, Mrs. Erlynne seems to blackmail Lord Windmere claiming she is nobody but his loving wife’s mother. Lady Widemere who believes, as she was told, that her mother died when she was a baby, and suspects that Lord Windemere her husband is having an extramarital relationships with Mrs. Erlynne. Her suspicion is further proven due to Lord Windemere’s persistence in inviting Mrs. Erlynne to Lady Winermere’s birthday party. When Mrs. Erlynne arrives at the party Lady Windermire vacates her home believing her husband would follow her and plead her to be back at home. This is crucial moments in the play where Mrs. Erlynne encounters Lady Widemere who is in fact her daughter. Mrs. Erlynne speaking out of her first-hand experiences, pleads Lady Windemere not to leave her husband and specially her only child. She is very well aware of the bitter circumstances that follow, however, Lady Windemere at first is extremely reluctant to listen to her contemplating that Mrs. Erlynne’s ulterior motive is to take her husband away from her; Lady Windermre accuses Mrs. Erlynne “a degradation to know, a vile woman, a woman who comes between husband and wife” (Act iii), and she further insults her “you talk as you had a heart, woman like you have no hearts. Heart is not in you. You are bought and sold” (Act iii) [7] [10].

Mrs. Erlynne, however, is not shaken by these insults yet, persistent in avoiding Lady Windemere making the same mistake once she committed and subsequently paying for it. She explains the predicament of a woman who makes the mistake through her firsthand experience “You don’t know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised mocked, abandoned, sneered, to be outcast to find the door shut against one, ...” (Act iii) [7] [11]. What she highlights most are the social stigma and rejection by society on a young mother who abandons her “sacred duty” and the way she ends up as a social outcast.

Yet, Nora in *A Doll’s House*, stresses a “sacred duty” that comes above all; she insists on the fact that her life is nothing but “a doll child” and “doll wife” and that funny life has denied her to be herself. Throughout her life, she has been what her father wanted her to be and what her husband wanted her to be. Therefore, at least now, she must be herself before it is too late to be. There she insists “I must try to educate myself” “I must stand on my own feet if I am to get to know myself and the world outside” (Act III). When Helmer opposes her and tries to persuade her highlighting her naïve nature “Oh, you blind inexperienced creature”. Nora accepts yet, is determined “I must try to get some experience Trovald. That is why I am leaving” (Act III) [1].

Lady Widemere, on the other hand, in *Lady Widemere’s Fan* has already left

her home believing that her husband would follow her and pester her to be back at home. Mrs. Erlynne in this case is determined to reunite husband and wife as she herself is the responsible factor for the dispute. Above all, she is quite aware of the tragedy of single life though she is not a single parent; she knows the tragic consequences of a divorcee.

“... a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don’t know what it is. One pays for one’s sin and then one pays again and all one’s life one pays. You must never know that, As for me, if suffering be an expiation, then at this moment I have expiated all my faults, whatever they have been; for tonight you have made in one who had it not, made it and broken it. But let that pass. I may have wrecked my own life, but I will not let you wreck yours” (Act iii) [7].

On contrary, Helmer in “A Doll’s House” failed miserably in persuading Nora to perform “sacred duty”, Nora is extremely adamant of being herself, fair enough as she was never allowed in the prevailing male dominant society.

“Helmer: But this is disgraceful. Is this the way you neglect your most sacred duties?

Nora: What do you consider is my most sacred duty?

Helmer: Do I have to tell you that? Isn’t it your duty to your husband and children?

Nora: I have another duty just as sacred.

Helmer: You can’t have. What do you mean?

Nora: My duty to myself” (Act iii) [1].

Nora prioritizes her duty to herself as another duty just as sacred compared to her duty towards children and husband, and finally leaves from “the doll’s house” insisting “I couldn’t spend the night in a strange man’s house” (Act iii) despite the pleadings of Helmer to be his “little squirrel, songbird, scatterbrain, featherbrain” (Act i) again. Nora realizes the true nature as well as the actual personality of her husband at the climax of the play when he accuses her as “liar, hypocrite and a criminal”, and subsequent to that Nora makes up her mind “I don’t believe in miracles anymore” (Act iii) [1].

Monster image of Nora is supposed to be created due to the assumption that she leaves her children in the most heartless, merciless and cruelest manner, a mother would never imagine doing. Yet Nora does not dump her children on the roads; she left them in safe hands that looked after her, fed her, and above all, loved as her own mother would do. That is none other than Anna Maria the nurse and the Cameo character<sup>1</sup> of the play [4]. Nora provides the assurance “I am sure they are in better hands than mine” (Act 3). Therefore, it is undoubtedly not fair to label Nora “a heartless monster” as her sincere expectation was not to be a revolutionary figure but “to be herself”, which was denied throughout her

<sup>1</sup>A small but noticeable role in a film, play or fiction though the presence is brief, the impact created by the character, in most cases, is huge.

life.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan* stresses on the traditionally expected "sacred duty" of a woman. In response to "A Doll's House" what is highlighted in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is not to leave home under any circumstances, whether it is sweet or troublesome. The most noteworthy factor here is that Mrs. Evlynne speaks out of her firsthand experiences, the experiences she herself underwent in life. She does her best not to let her daughter, Lady Windermere, to make the same mistake she committed once and has been repenting throughout.

She stresses "I may have wrecked my own life, but I would not let you wreck yours ... No ! Go back, Lady Windermere, to the husband who loves you, whom you love. You have a child Lady Windermere ... God gave you that child" (Act III) [7].

"Back to your house, Lady Windermere your husband loves you. He has never swerved for a moment from the love he bears you. But even if he had a thousand loves. You must stay with your child. If he was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your child. If he abandoned you, your place is with your child".

Mrs. Erlynne eventually succeeded ... (Lady Windermere holding out her hands to her helplessly, as a child might do, says pleadingly) "Take me home. Take me home" (Act 3) [9].

Though Nora never had a second thought Lady Windermere changed her mind, in other words, Mrs. Evlynne succeeded in her mission though Helmer failed miserably. Yet, these two are totally different scenarios which cannot be matched in the equal grounds as Nora had her reasons to leave her "doll's house" while Lady Windermere had hers to reverse her decision.

### 3. Conclusions

Henrick Ibsen (1824-1889) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) are contemporary dramatists whose works translated and produced in multiple languages at different places. In both the plays, "A Doll's House" and "Lady Widemere's Fan", young wives and mothers leave respective homes being disappointed and heartbroken by their husbands' "strange" behavior. Nora in "A Doll's House" emphasizes her urgency to deviate from "the doll - child" turned "doll - wife" role and demands some space to be herself in the predominantly male-dominant society in which female conduct is judged in the male point of view. Lady Widemere in "Lady Widemere's Fan" on the other hand, is misled by baseless suspicion that her husband carries an affair, and makes a rash decision to leave her home and the only child. Mrs. Erlynne, her mother though Lady Widemere would never be aware of the fact, in the course of the day appears as an eye-opener, subsequently succeeds in her endeavor of reuniting the Widemere family. While Nora has her own reasons to leave the Doll's House, and she pos-

sesses all the privileges “to be herself” in the circumstances depicted in “A Doll’s House” by Henrick Ibsen, Lady Widemere is also absolutely correct in decision making to come back home as she was misled by a false, baseless assumption. The time difference of the staging of the two plays in London is just three years, “A Doll’s House” (the first English translation) in 1889 and Lady Widemere’s Fan in 1892; therefore, with regard to “the sacred duty” of a woman, the role of a mother in Lady Widemere’s fan could possibly be a reaction to “A Doll’s House” in which the mother ultimately prioritizes “duty to herself” over “sacred duty”.

The sacred duty, the duty towards children and husband is a frequently found major theme in literary works. Therefore, such a major theme can’t be critically viewed only through two literary pieces, and must be analyzed in a broader perspective. However, this main limitation may not underestimate the main concern of the text that is to seek the illusive truth and harsh reality from the facts elaborated in the texts.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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