

# *A DOLL'S HOUSE: A VICTORIAN OR A PRESENT-DAY TOY?*<sup>1 2</sup>

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**Abstract:** Henrik Ibsen's path-breaking play *A Doll's House* (1879) has been adapted in many occasions. The filmic version made by David Thacker in 1992 has been one of the most recent and relevant adaptations. The main purpose of this article is in the first place, to show how this film reflects Victorian society as regards women's situation and family life from a historical perspective. Secondly, I will define and apply the concepts of the private and public spheres to the text from the perspective of materialist feminism. Finally, my intention is to examine how far the events depicted in the film still have significance today and how a text like *A Doll's House* can be re-examined from new post-feminist perspectives in order to address contemporary social issues such as women's situation.

**Key Words:** Film adaptation, the woman question, private and public spheres, nature vs. culture, materialist feminism, post-feminism.

## *Casa de Muñecas: ¿Juguete victoriano o actual?*

**Resumen:** La obra de teatro de Henrik Ibsen *La Casa de las Muñecas* (1879) ha sido adaptada en numerosas ocasiones. Una de las versiones filmicas más recientes e interesantes es la de David Tacker en 1992. El principal objetivo de este artículo es, en primer lugar, mostrar desde una perspectiva histórica cómo esta película reproduce la sociedad Victoriana en cuanto a la situación de las mujeres y la vida familiar de la época. En segundo lugar, definiré y aplicaré al texto los conceptos de las esferas pública y privada desde perspectivas del feminismo materialista. Y finalmente, mi intención es analizar hasta qué punto los acontecimientos reflejados en esta película siguen teniendo vigencia actualmente y observar la manera en la que un texto como *La Casa de las Muñecas* puede ser adaptado y enfocado desde las nuevas perspectivas post-feministas para tratar temas sociales como la situación de la mujer en el mundo contemporáneo.

**Palabras Clave:** Adaptación filmica, el debate sobre la mujer, las esferas pública y privada, naturaleza vs. cultura, feminismo materialista y post-feminismo.

*A Doll's House* is the play written by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). It was first staged in Copenhagen in 1879 and it arrived in Britain ten years later leaving no one indifferent. Nevertheless, the text that will be the object of analysis in this paper is not the original play but David Thacker's 1992 filmic adaptation which has

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maintained the original source to a great extent. Traditionally, the original literary sources have been prioritized over the resulting films on the basis that adaptations are not faithful representations of the original text. However, the choice of this film as an object of analysis is justified by critics such as Imelda Whelehan who argues that: “the study of literary adaptations on film and TV is becoming more common” (1999: 3). Her arguments are against the view that films use different narrative techniques that make impossible a literal translation of a narrative or dramatic text into a visual medium. Besides, when we approach an adaptation we must bear in mind that its intention and meaning depend totally on the moment when it is produced. Furthermore, when a play is “translated” into a film the adaptation seems more justified, as cinema appears to be the most convincing and dramatic genre in its representation of reality. Therefore, it is made clear that this film can be studied in itself as an artistic and social manifestation.

*A Doll's House* shows the change in the marriage of Nora and Torvald Helmer, from the typical Victorian “happy” family headed by a male breadwinner to the new woman that Nora turns out to be when she leaves her family in search of her identity. There are other sub-plots like Nora’s relationship between Christine, an old friend who has no family and needs a job, and her connection with Krogstad, the man who had lent the young housewife the money to save her husband and who now threatens to reveal the secret. In the end, Krogstad repents. He now has the joyful prospect of marrying Christine, an old lover whom he had been unable to marry due to his precarious economic situation at that time.

The main purpose of this article is in the first place, to show how this film reflects Victorian society as regards women’s situation and family life. This will be done from a historical perspective by providing the most important historical data portrayed in *A Doll's House*. Secondly, I will try and define the concepts of the private and public spheres and support my arguments with the materialist feminist theories which will be applied to the filmic text. Finally, my intention is to examine how far the events depicted in the film still have significance today, more concretely in the 90s when the film was released, and how a text that originally belongs to another time can be adapted to address contemporary feminist issues in order to make the audience reflect on our past and present days.

Let us begin with a brief account of the socio-historical context in which the action of the film develops. As Dorothy Thompson explains, the life of women had got worse during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: working-class women were paid less than men; middle class women had no real occupations, unmarried girls who did not belong to a rich family had little chance of earning a living and the upper-class women had been turned into decorative objects (1969: 194). Long before, thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her work *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 had started to complain about society’s discriminatory treatment of women and their lack of legal rights.

Nevertheless, women had to wait until the 1830s to see the issue of votes of women rise and until the 1860s to see “a tiny women’s suffrage movement founded in five of the major cities of Britain” (Atkinson, 1988: 10). The women’s cause was supported by the philosopher John Stuart Mill, MP for Westminster, who “first raised the issue in Parliament when he demanded that women be given the vote in the 1867 Reform Act” (Thompson, 1969: 10), which was opposed by the Prime Minister Gladstone. Moreover, during those years changes started to take place in favour of women’s situation: in the 1870s and 1880s

upper-class women could study degrees at Cambridge, London and Oxford Universities although it was considered “unwomanly” (1969: 199); the Education Act of 1870 made primary education compulsory for both boys and girls and some acts were passed to improve married women’s condition.<sup>4</sup>

Then, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) emerged to demand the right to vote for women in a peaceful and moderate way. It was officially formed in 1897, just the year when *A Doll's House* was first staged, with Mrs. Millicent Garrett as its President but, as the vote for women kept being postponed, more radical movements appeared such as the radical women workers in the 1890s and finally, the famous suffragette movement. The suffragettes was the name coined by the *Daily Mail* in 1906 to refer to the members of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded in 1903, and whose members were more radical and prepared to break the law to achieve their purposes.<sup>5</sup> Finally, it was the joint action of both the WSPU and the NUWSS that saw women attain the vote in 1918, if they were over thirty, or householders, occupiers of property with a minimum rent, or graduates or qualified people, and the final achievement of the vote for all women over 21 in 1928. (Atkinson, 1988)

Bearing all this in mind, it is easier to understand the impact of Ibsen’s play at the time and its historical meaning for contemporary viewers of the film version. The year the play was first staged in Britain was precisely the moment when society was divided between those who were afraid of the irruption of women into the public sphere and those who advocated women’s essential right to vote and their fundamental role in society.<sup>6</sup> More and more voices were vindicating the same opportunities for men and women and denouncing the state of marriage as similar to the situation of slavery and feudalism. Then, I will illustrate how this social context is exposed in the film.

The film’s first scene depicts a traditional Christmas Day in a Victorian upper-middle class family in Great Britain: a beautiful wife and mother of three children who comes in from doing her Christmas shopping, and her husband gently rebuking her for having spent so much. From the very beginning we perceive the unequal relationship between husband and wife. For example, he addresses Nora as “squirrel”, “little songbird” or “little woman”. For her part Nora acts as if she were a little child that needs his approval and who uses her beauty to get what she wants from him (money). This introductory scene exemplifies the typical family structure that reigned in Britain during those Victorian years. As Trevor May explains:

The roles of husband and wife, as indeed of children and servants, were strictly delineated, and all were assured of their place in a hierarchical structure. The undisputed head was the husband. [...] Wives were subordinated (legally as well as socially) to their husbands, as were children to their parents. In the idealised version all were happy

<sup>4</sup> Such as the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 and the Married Women Act of 1886 (1969: 201).

<sup>5</sup> This movement was international since The International Women’s Suffrage Alliance had been founded in 1902 (Atkinson 1988: 9).

<sup>6</sup> As had already been demonstrated in the Crimean War (1853-1856) when women began to serve their country as nurses. In 1891, 53.057 nurses were listed (Thompson 1969: 200).

in their allotted place, but in reality the home could subject its members to insufferable pressures. (1987: 204)

May's description corresponds to the situation portrayed at the beginning of the film. And yet, we soon realise that everything is not as it seems because Nora hides an important secret.

The arrival of Christine brings with it a clash of two different worlds and conceptions of womanhood. Having lost her husband, Christine found herself forced to work outside the home. Throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the only jobs that were considered appropriate for a middle-class woman were those of governess, nurse, secretarial jobs and female clerks (Peterson 1989: 132). This was precisely Christine's case, since she was forced to work as a clerk in a company for some years. Christine is therefore presented as *apparently* the opposite to Nora who has been "denied the opportunity of undertaking paid employment" and because of that finds herself "pushed back more and more into an ornamental role" (Dennis and Skilton 1987: 259), that is, with no role in society or in the home either, since the house was run by servants and the children cared for by maids.

I said *apparently* because the audience soon comes to know that this is not actually the case. Nora reveals to her friend that, some years back, she borrowed an important quantity of money from Krogstad to save her husband's life. She explains to Christine that, in order to repay her debt, she has been saving money from the cash that Torvald gives her for household keeping and that she has been secretly working as a transcriber. In consequence, she reveals herself to be an active woman who is able to "feel like a man". Besides, she is also capable of making the most of the scarce benefits that women had at that time. For example, she secretly administered her husband's money for the maintenance of the house to repay her debt without him noticing. In this sense, she makes the most of her small responsibility with the household money to do as she pleases. In acting in this way, she epitomises Michelle Rosaldo's theory about women's ability to exert power in societies in subtler ways (in Eisenstein 1984: 21). Ironically, however, all Nora's actions are motivated by her desire to serve her husband and save his life. She is very conscious of the role imposed on her by society as made patent in her refusal to let Torvald know the truth. As she tells her friend, "besides, how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything! It would upset our mutual relations altogether; our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is now".

All these things considered, it can be deduced from the beginning of the film that the interaction between the characters is mediated by the economic relationships underlying the social structure. An analysis of this kind supports a materialist conception of the social order according to which the economic base determines everything in culture and society. As the materialist feminist critic Gayle Rubin exposes, the construction of the sex/gender systems must be considered in relation to other social systems such as economics, politics and state organisation (Landry and MacLean 1993: 165). This is precisely what *A Doll's House* sets out by presenting the clear division of roles and spheres existing between husband and wife and showing at the same time the factors that have created that division: economy, Victorian morality and social values. The next step is to define these two demarcated spheres in the Victorian era: the private sphere for women and the public one for men.

Materialist feminism, as a branch of feminism that appeared in the 1970s during the second-wave feminist movement, followed Engels's conviction that the first division of labour to take place was the split in occupations between men and women. One of the main goals of some of its representatives like Juliet Mitchell or Michelle Barrett was to establish the history of gender ideology in relation to capitalist social relations. That is to say, if ideology is considered to be linked to material relations then, gender ideology is logically grounded in the economic relations between men and women. It also follows that the main site of struggle will be in the patriarchal institution par excellence: the family. As Barrett asserts:

“[...] we can note that the meaning of gender in capitalism today is tied to a household structure and division of labour that occupy a particular place in the relations of production, and that, therefore, this ideology does, concretely and historically, have some material basis”. (quoted in Landry and MacLean 1993: 31)

Shulamith Firestone also contributed to this materialist conception of gender relations by pointing out that the main reason for the division of labour between sexes was based on the “natural reproductive” difference between them (Eisenstein 1984: 17). In other words, the biological difference between man and woman has created the so called “public/domestic dichotomy” that was so deeply-rooted in Victorian society. Mitchell words: “women had historically inhabited two worlds, and had been subject to oppression in both: the world of production, that is, the labor market; and the world of reproduction, that is, the family” (1984: 18) help explain why both spheres have proved to be oppressive for women. Let us begin by examining the characteristics or roles ascribed to each of these spheres and then this theory will be applied to the film.

As Helen Eisenstein explains: “men had become associated with what was public through the workplace, politics, religion, intellectual and cultural life” (1984: 20). Thus Torvald is represented as the business man who moves up socially by becoming the manager of a bank. He also embodies the law and the imposition of social values; as he tells Nora: “you don't understand the society you are living in”. Likewise, in the final scene, Torvald bases his argument that his wife's “place is in the home” on religious ideals. With respect to “intellectual and cultural life”, the tarantella dance scene clearly depicts the husband as the master or teacher and Nora, as his pupil. Finally, “the exercise of power and authority”, as can clearly be observed in Nora's terror at her husband discovering her secret letter. Another instance of this patriarchal authority in the private sphere is exemplified in Torvald's (and Doctor Rank's) erotic pleasure watching the Tarantella scene (a metaphor of the sexual act) where he is the master of his wife in sexual terms. Man's “public” honour must also be preserved under any circumstance, as Torvald informs his wife: “No man would sacrifice his honour for the woman he loves”, which is characteristic of the male sphere.

On the other hand, Eisenstein describes the private as associated to: “the home, children, domestic life and sexuality or its repression” (1984: 20). We only see Nora within the walls of their house. She is reminded by Torvald that “First and foremost, you are a wife and a mother” and, with respect to “domestic life”, she is the one in charge of the household, preparing the party and making Torvald's and her children life comfortable.

These obligations extend to being/acting as her husband's sexual doll, that is, ever-ready to comply with his sexual advances, as Torvald expects of her when they return from the ball. At this point, it is clear that he is the sexually active partner, trying to make love with Nora despite her refusal.

This view of women corresponded to the stereotype known as the "Angel in the House" whose original source is the poem written in 1854 by the English Mr. Coventry Patmore in which he advocated a "life-companion in the shape of virtuous life" as the ideal wife that husbands need (Dennis and Skilton 1987: 141). This poem and the stereotype built out of it claims for an idea of marriage based on companionship and "the sweet picture of tranquil home" (1987: 147) in which the woman is expected to preserve the peace of the home as a shelter for her husband against the tensions of his public life. Evidently, Nora is perfectly conscious of this as made evident in the conversation with Christine when she says that her "lovely house" would be destroyed if Torvald ever learnt that the money that saved his life came from her trespassing into the public sphere; as she states, "it would hurt his masculine pride".

This shelter, this house in which the wife is supposed to be the angel turns out to be oppressive and unbearable for Nora, a doll's house as she repeats constantly in the last scene of her departure: "Our home has never been more than a doll's house, I've been your doll wife just as I was a doll child for papa at home and the children have been my dolls...". Nora has by now realised how unfair her situation, and that of women in general, is having being brought up first by her father ("papa") and then passed on to Torvald. She denounces that he and her father have played with her as if she were an unanimated being, in "Papa's hands and then in yours" and she refuses to be brought up by him anymore.<sup>7</sup> Her words make clear how, in Victorian society, women were considered the property of their fathers and later of their husbands. A look at some of the laws existing at the time corroborates this for it was stipulated in the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 that a married woman was allowed to keep only £200 of her income. By the same stroke of hand, until 1884, a married woman was considered a possession ("chattel") of her husband. (Atkinson 1988: 6).

It is in this final epiphany that Nora openly reacts against this oppressive role of women, for she is now conscious of the dichotomy between the public and the private and she cannot accept it. Just as many posterior feminist thinkers and writers would contend for decades, she is beginning to wonder why women have been subjected to this one sphere in such an oppressive way.

Nora was a very controversial character when the play was first staged as she embodied the feminist values that from that moment onwards would become more and more widespread. Some decades after Ibsen's play reached Britain, Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf focused on some of the points that the film adaptation dramatises. In her work, *Three Guineas* (1938), she observes the ongoing clear division of spheres. In her own words:

The world as it is at present is divided into two services; one of the public and the other the private, in one world the sons of educated men work as civil servants, judges, soldiers and are paid for that work; in the other world, the daughters of educated men work as

<sup>7</sup> "You are not the man to bring me up. I have to bring myself up. I have to be on my own".

wives, mothers, daughters –but are they not paid for that work? Is the work of a mother, of a wife, of a daughter, worth nothing to the nation in solid cash? (2001: 152)

Thus, forty years later, the problems for women shown in the film still existed in British society. Woolf also pointed out how the situation of economic dependence suffered by Nora continued much the same: “It seems that the person to whom the salary is actually paid is the person who has the actual right to decide how that salary shall be spent” (2002: 155). This is exactly what happens throughout the whole film in the main characters’ marriage until Nora decides to leave.

Nora’s words about thousands of women having sacrificed their honour for the men they love or her releasing Torvald of all obligations to her, so as to secure complete freedom, call to mind Woolf’s contention that it is very unfair for women not to be paid for domestic labour and that a woman’s freedom can only be real if she is economically independent. The freedom Nora needs is evidently the freedom to think of her self and in order to do so she will need this economical independence with which a job can provide her. In this respect, the freedom she has in mind is very different from the concept her middle-class female contemporaries had, since for them freedom was achieved through marriage and maintenance by a man (Peterson 1989: 120). Thus, this film shows a step towards the female realisation of the necessity of moving out of the domestic sphere to gain their “freedom”.

After having analysed the main aspects and features of this dichotomy in society, it can be asserted in Eisenstein’s words, that “because the domestic sphere was associated to the female, it was inevitable that women became associated to a lower order of social/cultural organization” (1984: 24). This argument had already been forwarded by Sherry Ortner in her famous article, entitled “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” (1974), where she tries to give an explanation for the existence of this public/ private dichotomy, which in her view exists in all societies, based on biological grounds. In her essentialist view of the situation, Ortner argued that the subordination of women was something present in all cultures and hence that there must be a common cause in all societies for this downgrading of women. After analysing the biological, cultural, symbolic and socio-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in the highest forms of culture, she concluded that:

Woman’s physiology, more involved more of the time with “species of life”; woman’s association with the structurally subordinate domestic context, charged with the crucial function of transforming animal-like infants into cultured beings; “woman’s psyche”, appropriately moulded to mothering functions by her own socialization and tending toward greater personalism and less mediated modes of relating — all these factors make woman appear to be rooted more directly and deeply in nature. (1974: 84)

Thus, although women participate actively in the “culturalisation” of their children, their reproductive potential is what binds them to an inferior position in society. With this in mind, it appears that the Helmer family unit epitomises the key issue theorised by Ortner, namely the fact that: “since women are associated with the domestic context, they are identified with this lower order of social/cultural organization” (1974: 79). The family, and hence woman (Nora), is identified with nature and placed in opposition to culture.

Lacking this natural basis, men considered themselves to be the natural owners of cultural action and thought.

In this respect, Nora's key assertion: "First and foremost I am a human being", shows her anxieties which can be related to Ortner's famous question: "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", especially if Nora is seen as wilfully detaching herself from the roles and duties imposed on her by her condition as a woman. The film shows the incompatibility between the spheres because Nora is not able to think of a profession within the institution of marriage<sup>8</sup>. Trevor May's words depict this situation as follows: "Women can never stand on the same ground as men, since the latter may have professions and marriage, while marriage or professions must be the alternative for women.[...] Nature has placed them at disadvantage in any struggle" (1987: 158). Nora feels the necessity of leaving her family to begin to think and act as an independent being. When Nora tells Torvald that she does not understand the society in which she lives she is demonstrating Ortner's ideas that women's attachment to the family-private realm is a cultural construct; on the contrary, it is a condition arbitrarily imposed on them.

The question at hand is therefore, what interpretation of Nora's final decision could be forwarded in terms of these feminist and materialist theories? In this respect, what stands out in the final scene is the fact that Nora's decision has been motivated by her desire to be happy (since she has "never been really happy"), to develop her own identity instead of "performing" tricks for Torvald. In order to be free and discover her own nature as a human being in a society that she does not understand she has to break up her marriage. Her disillusion is on the one hand, personal as regards her husband's reaction. She expected him to blame himself for the irregularity in Krogstad's contract but this "most wonderful thing" does not happen. On the other hand, her disillusion extends to the whole of society where women are reduced to non-entities. The only "wonderful thing" that "happens" in the end is when she gains the courage to begin a new life outside patriarchal seclusion.

The film therefore uses a personal situation to illustrate the socio-political circumstances of Victorian women. Thus, it appears to support the slogan: "the personal IS political" launched by second-wave feminists in the 70s through its turning a personal dilemma into something public<sup>9</sup>. In doing so, it blurs the boundaries between the private and the public spheres by demonstrating that it is in the family that the main struggle between man and woman takes place.

From this perspective, *A Doll's House* can be said to anticipate many of the twentieth-century feminist ideas about this aspect of the family and how the distribution of power

<sup>8</sup> The other female character Christine gets a job while she has no family of her own but when she and Krogstad decide to start a relationship we do not know what will happen to her professional situation. Christine makes the reverse journey from work and toil to the joy of partnership and maintenance. So the point is that, be it the case of Christine or Nora, the combination of work and family is shown to be incompatible for a woman.

<sup>9</sup> It can be said that it is following the famous Women's Liberation Movement slogan "the personal is political". This famous sentence was first uttered by Clara Zetkin during the Russian Revolution of the first and second decade of the twentieth century. It then became the slogan for the second-wave feminist movement, based on arguments such as the following one: "'the personal is political', most current feminists are convinced of the multiple interconnection between women's status, roles within families, and their inequality and segregation in the workplace and the political realm, and between their socialization in gendered families and the psychological aspects of their oppression". (Lindemann 1997: 17)



in society emerges from the nuclear family. As Susan Moller points out: “The family has long been regarded by feminists as an important location where sexual equality must be won” (1997: 13). Some radical feminists even advocated that women should break with the institution of family and all its implications as the only possible remedy to their situation of subordination. For instance, Betty Friedan rejected the biological determinism that put women aside in society, and in her work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) she revealed the anxiety felt by many women confined to the duties of wives and mothers in their houses. Another example could be Shulamith Firestone, who also attacked the institution of motherhood and the family by saying that “the power difference between men and women, then, was embodied in the biological family” (1984: 16), concluding that their liberation would only be accomplished by “the abolition of women’s physical and psychological responsibility for the reproduction of the species” (1984: 17). This is what Nora does; she puts into practice the theories formulated by these feminists, even though her character clearly predates their writings.

To round off these points concerning the family, an essential aspect of the traditional family is how much it was affected by hypocrisy and the importance that was given to the maintenance of appearances (Lindemann 1997: 121). Torvald is a clear example of this Victorian morality that, in many cases, has continued until the present day. When Torvald learns the truth, he decides to separate Nora from the family, although he allows her — for appearances’ sake — to remain in the house. It is then that Nora rebels against the proposal of a fake set-up by stating that she does not care about what people say. In this respect, *A Doll's House* can be said to contribute to set the private sphere of the family as the field of battle between the sexes.

As a final point, I would like to reflect on the meanings this film has in recent days, more exactly in 1992 when David Thacker’s film adaptation of Ibsen’s work was released. In 1992 the Conservative Party was still in power in Great Britain but the Prime Minister was now John Major after Margaret Thatcher’s three runs as Premier (1979 to 1990). During those years, the New Right policies had changed the shape of the country, especially as regards its economic situation. Although Margaret Thatcher was a woman, she supported a return to past Victorian values and the importance of the family unit, which, as she stated in a Conservative party conference, was the natural place for women. In 1992, Conservatives still thought of the family as the basic block of society and were apprehensive about the “breakdown of the family” (Lindemann 1997: 55) that was taking place with increasing rates of divorces and fast changes in the models of families existing in society. As a consequence, many feminist achievements as regards the progressive breaking of the public/private dichotomy suffered from a backlash during Conservative rule.

By the 90s, British women had already massively entered the labour market. They had, likewise, achieved almost the same rights as men. They could, to some extent, make their personal life compatible with their jobs and they were more independent. Simultaneously, however, violence against women continued, occupational sex segregation persisted, women still didn’t enjoy the same wages as men for the same jobs and many attacks were suffered on previously obtained rights like abortion. And yet, as Ann Brooks contends, the media and the government promoted the idea that feminism was over (1997: 2-5). Against this background, it seems that the purpose of a film like *A Doll's House* is to call attention to

the forgotten feminist struggles of the past. In other words, an attempt to remind society that many of the inequalities and unfair situations portrayed in the film were not merely a thing of the past but still exist in Britain at that time.

In fact, it is not a coincidence that, in the first years of the 90s, a group of feminist critics like Susan Faludi who, in her notable book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), rejected those media-constructed contemporary feminist ideals based on the New Right belief in individualism, capitalism and the economic market. The new post-feminism was accused by these critics of promoting a “backlash” against feminist achievements of the past by presenting successful women as incapable of adapting to family life. However, in the view of critics like Faludi or Ann Brooks, second-wave feminist ideals should not be rejected but redefined and adapted to the new circumstances.

This line of thought is the one promoted by Thacker in *A Doll's House*, since the woman depicted does not choose to stay at home and favour traditional family stability. On the contrary, once Nora realises that the system she is living in is oppressive, she breaks away from it. However, this dramatic finale can also illustrate the contradictory status of women in society in the 90s since, in the end, Nora cannot make compatible her desires of becoming an independent person with her expected role “within” the institution of the family.

It is my contention that this dramatisation of the “either/or” position of women reflects the still unclear situation of women in society in the 90s. In this sense, it appears that the purpose of this 1992 film was to make the audience—and especially women—aware of the fact that all the gendered improvements in society heralded by Conservative institutions were rather dubious. In other words, the film takes a subject of the past to say that this matter is not as past as we have been made to believe. David Thacker shows that the personal is still political and women do not have to abandon the battle for their rights against the patriarchal system. Besides, we cannot forget that the topic of the family itself has appeared in the political agenda for many years and it will continue to be relevant in the future as different feminist critics like Naomi Zack have considered: “the political nature of families in oppressive societies is an important political topic” (1997: 48).

Taking all these things into account, some interesting conclusions emanate from this analysis of this film. First of all, *A Doll's House* has proved to be an illustration of how the public and private sphere dichotomy works hand in hand with economic processes. As such Torvald is characterised as, not only a hard-working banker but also as the head of his family household. Likewise, thanks to second-wave feminist theories, such as Ortner, Eisenstein or Firestone among others cited, the family is shown to be the nucleus of arbitrarily attributed gender roles and inequalities.

Moreover, this text reflects those anxieties regarding the “woman question” that rocked late Victorian society as a consequence of the suffragettes’ campaigns. And at the same time, the film can be seen as subtly underlining the abandonment of many feminist ideals of the 70s and its subsequent negative consequences on contemporary women’s lives. On this reading, we can observe how a text that originally belongs to another time can be adapted and re-presented to address contemporary issues in order to make the audience reflect on our past and see how some problems we believed were overcome, are still deeply rooted in society.

On a different plane, by exemplifying how a female character like Nora achieves her own independence and definition as an autonomous human being, Thacker, touches his cap not only to the struggles of a historical few but also to the feminist theories of different times that advocated that women should break out of patriarchal moulds to allow their own independent selves to flourish. In this respect, Thacker's film re-captures the topic of women's lower position in society, cast aside as a non-issue in New Right ideology and politics, to revive past feminist theories and ideals as a means of vindicating that something is still wrong as regards the day to day inequalities lived by contemporary British women.

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