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## A Feminist Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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### *Henrik Ibsen'in A Doll's House Eserinin Feminist Analizi*

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**Abstract:** This research paper attempts to give a feminist analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* based on the Anglo-American approach to feminist literary theory. It will first explain the feminist literary theory as a term as well as a practice and its function in literary criticism, followed by an explanation of the Anglo-American approach and some of its prominent writers. The paper will also explore how and to what degree (if at all) Henrik Ibsen, who is mostly famous for his realist dramas but has also been credited for his feminist characters and content, is involved with the women's cause by referring to some of his speeches, letters and acquaintances. It will then attempt a feminist analysis of the play based on the Anglo-American approach and Showalter's feminist critique, using quotes from and references to the three acts of the play as a justification to show how Henrik Ibsen challenged the stereotypical representation of women in literature with his female characters.

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen, Anglo-American feminism, feminist criticism, analysis of *A Doll's House*, the feminist critique.



## Introduction

*A Doll's House* is not only one of Henrik Ibsen's famous plays but also a great contribution to feminist literature even though the characters do not seem very outstanding at first sight. Ibsen never explicitly identified himself as a feminist but some of his speeches and acquaintances prove that he was concerned with the women's cause; this is also proven by his play's development and characters. Usually a lot of credit and attention is given to the protagonist, Nora, who is more or less the epitome of a modern woman when it comes to choice and behavior by the end of the third and final act. This study will not only focus on her but also the other characters, be it male or female, and how they have contributed to the play.

The paper will also analyze how Ibsen's female characters do not absolutely fit into any of the main stereotypical images of women in literature as the angel in the home or the madwoman in the attic. For that purpose, the study will make use of Anglo-American feminist criticism which is also concerned with the stereotypical and false representation of women in literature. Furthermore, it will explore how Ibsen challenged the public/private split of society and the common belief that a woman's activity in the male-dominated public sphere will result in her depravity. It will also discuss how Ibsen portrays the contrasting fate of couples whose marriage is either based on equality of both spouses or the dominance of the husband and suppression of the wife.

### 1. The Feminist Literary Theory and the Anglo-American Approach

#### 1.1. The Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist literary theory, as a term, gained currency during the mid-1980s; the term feminist literary criticism had previously been applied. Conventionally, criticism was used to refer to a practical approach to literary study, i.e. the close reading of texts; while theory referred to the interpretation, evaluation and examination of the philosophical and political underpinnings of the texts. Today, criticism and theory appear simultaneously in feminist anthologies and the feminist literary theory includes both, practical and theoretical, approaches to literature (Code 2000: 261). As mentioned by Code, the function of the feminist literary theory is



“analys[ing] the role that literary forms and practices, together with the discourses of literary criticism and theory, play in perpetuating or challenging hierarchies of gender, class, race and sexuality” (*ibid.*). Wallace states that “feminist literary theory, then, engages with the political and social goals of feminism, and it concentrates on literary culture and theory as a possible site of struggle and as a means of eventual change” (Wallace 2009: vii). Cuddon defines feminist criticism as:

A development and movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature which was well under way by the late 1960s and which has burgeoned steadily since. It is an attempt to describe and interpret (and reinterpret) women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature—especially the novel; and, to a lesser extent, poetry and drama (Cuddon 1998: 351).

Feminist criticism challenges the patriarchal attitudes in literature; the traditional male ideas about women and their nature. Thus, it questions prejudices and assumptions made by the dominant male writers and their tendency to put women in stock character roles (*ibid.*). According to Wallace, it was necessary for the would-be woman writer to kill “the angel in the house” (from Patmore's poem) which represents the embodiment of the late 19th century expectation of femininity; that is, the expectation that women “should be nice and sympathetic rather than forceful, outspoken, or intellectually vigorous” (Wallace 2009: 612). The aim of the feminist literary theory (and feminism in general) “must be to break down the public/private split and the binaries of masculinity/ femininity, mind/body, reason/ feeling” (Rice and Waugh 2001: 144).

Showalter identified three phases of modern women's literary development which are: the Feminine, the Feminist and the Female phase respectively. During the Feminine phase (1840-80), women writers largely imitated the dominant male writers and their assumptions about female nature; the distinguishing feature of this period is the introduction of the male pseudonym. In the Feminist phase (1880-1920), women used literature to present wronged womanhood, advocated for their rights and rejected male standards and expectations of femininity. In the Female phase (1920-present), women reject imitation as well as protest and instead deal with women's texts as an autonomous art (Rice and Waugh 2001: 153-4).



### 1.2. The Anglo-American Approach

Anglo-American feminist criticism is an approach to literature that, according to Wallace, “analyzes literary texts, the conditions of their production, reception, circulation, and their cultural effects from the perspective of gender difference” (Wallace 2009: 22). As the name suggests, this approach has been influenced by American and British feminism.

American feminist criticism was affected by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Friedan, who founded the National Organization of Women in 1966, expressed in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) “the fundamental grievance of middle-class American women, their entrapment within private, domestic life and their inability to pursue public careers” (Habib 2011: 254). *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) disillusioned many educated women with the “dominant image of the happy American suburban housewife and mother” (Guerin, et al. 2011: 255). Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) was concerned about the representation of women in literature and argued that “male writers distort women by associating them with (male) deviance” (*ibid.*). American feminist criticism’s main concern was restoring and including writings of female authors to the literary canon. Gilbert and Gubar also argue that men, whose voice has been dominant for far too long, define and create images of women as they please. According to them, the two main stereotypical images created by man are “the angel in the house” and “the mad woman in the attic”, both equally unrealistic. These images need to be examined and debunked for women to achieve literary autonomy (Bressler 1999: 177-8).

British feminist criticism has had a rather political orientation; Mitchell’s *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1966) examined Marxist categories of production and private property along with psychoanalytic theories of gender (Habib 2011: 255). According to Wallace (2009: 81), British feminism has been marked by two distinguishing features: first, it emerged through other radical political discourses (specifically Marxism) and second, it was preoccupied with documenting and analyzing the effects of culture and ideology on women. This type of feminism saw art, literature and life as inseparable; the way women were portrayed in literature has an influence on the treatment of women in real life. According



to British feminists, the patriarchal society does not exploit women only through literature but also socially and economically; the family structure causes women to be economically dependent on men. This type of feminist criticism does not only aim to critique society but also to change it (Bressler 1999: 178). Wallace states that Anglo-American feminism has gone through four phases:

From the early images-of-women criticism through a preoccupation with women's writing and its tradition to a phase of theorization induced by Continental poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought and fundamental to the presently dominant gender critique (Wallace 2009: 22).

Cornillon's *Images of Women in Fiction* focuses on the stereotypical characterization of women in writings of male and female writers and instead of those false images, critics asked for faithful representations of female characters. In search for more self-reliant women feminist critics such as Washington, Showalter and Moers, Gilbert and Gubar searched and researched literature by women that was still marginalized at the time (*ibid.*).

## 2. Henrik Ibsen as a Feminist

Whether Henrik Ibsen was a feminist or not may be an arguable question. Finney states that "the view supporting Ibsen as feminist can be seen to lie along a spectrum of attitudes with Ibsen as quasi-socialist at one end and Ibsen as humanist at the other" (Finney 1994: 89). Those supporting the former stance may refer to an amateur performance of *A Doll's House* which was performed by Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor; her husband, Edward Aveling; William Morris's daughter May and Bernard Shaw; all of whom were not only involved in the women's cause but they were or would also be notable figures in the British socialist movement. During the 19th century, feminism and socialism were closely connected. Finney argues that "the most prominent socialist thinkers of the day, male and female, saw that true sexual equality necessitates fundamental changes in the structure of society" (*ibid.*). Ibsen never overtly admitted being a feminist as proved by his speech held at the festival of the Norwegian Women's Right League in Christiania, May 26th, 1898:



I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. And if you read my books carefully, you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the problem of women's rights, along with the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity (Ibsen 1910: 65).

Perhaps Ibsen's concerns were neither political nor feminist but rather human. He might have believed that one does not necessarily need to be a feminist in order to defend women; one only needs to be human.

As mentioned by Templeton (1989: 28), Henrik Ibsen's most feminist play *A Doll's House* may not even be concerned about the women's cause but rather about humans and individualism in general. Nora, the protagonist, may not merely be a feminist heroine but rather a representation of Everyman.

But to say that Henrik Ibsen was not involved in the women's cause would be a mistake since there are many of his speeches and letters which prove that he was concerned about the so-called weaker sex<sup>1</sup>. In his speech to the working men of Trondhjem on June 14th, 1885, he mentions:

The reshaping of social conditions which is now under way out there in Europe is concerned chiefly with the future position of the workingman and of woman. That it is which I hope for and wait for; and it is that that I will work for (Ibsen 1910: 54).

Furthermore, Ibsen was considered one of the four central male voices for feminism in Norway along with Bjornstjerne Bjornston, Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland. They unanimously petitioned the Norwegian National Assembly and demanded that women should have the right to control their estates and this right should be made automatic (Lorentzen

<sup>1</sup> Women are generally considered the "weaker sex" due to the biological differences between men and women. For further detail, see Wallace (2009: 63-65).



2013: 56). When Ibsen made an attempt to explain why women instead of men should be consulted about the married women's property bill, he commented: "to consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection for the sheep" (Finney 1994: 90). The four critics showed a concern for the connection between love and economics, their petition stated:

She must know and feel that she enters the marriage with the same rights as her husband. Not only she, but her husband too, will benefit morally from this, and their lives together will, from the outset, assume the proper sense of dignity. Also love, if it exists, will be supported by the feeling of equality (Lorentzen 2013: 56).

Henrik Ibsen supported this petition a week earlier in a letter addressed to Bjornston. The letter concludes with the following statement:

If I could have my way back at home, then all the unprivileged should unite and form a strong, resolute, progressive party, whose program would be directed towards nothing but practical and productive reforms, towards a very wide extension of suffrage, the statutory improvement of the position of woman, the emancipation of national education from all kinds of medievalism, etc. (*ibid.*).

All these quotes by Henrik Ibsen prove his involvement and concern of the women's cause. The reason why he never labeled himself as a feminist or supporter of feminism may be due to "Ibsen's frequently voiced disinclination to belong to parties or societies of any kind" (Finney 1994: 90). Moreover, Ibsen seemed to be surrounded by feminists in his life as well as his work. Examples of those feminists were his wife Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen and her stepmother Magdalene Thoresen who was probably the first 'New Woman'<sup>2</sup> Ibsen met in his life. Magdalene Thoresen was a Danish writer and also translated French plays which were staged by Ibsen. Camilla Collett<sup>3</sup> must have also exerted influence on Ibsen's attitude towards women. In 1870 he had conversations with her about

<sup>2</sup> The New Woman was a term that emerged after the 1890s and was used to describe the modern feminist women who contradicted the late Victorian concept of the feminine (Pykett 1992: 137-9).

<sup>3</sup> Jacobine Camilla Collett (1813-1895) was a novelist as well as a feminist; "she wrote the first Norwegian novel dealing critically with the position of women" (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online n. d.).



marriage and the women's role in society. "Her realist novel *The District Governor's Daughters* (1854-5), which attacks the institution of marriage because of its neglect of women's feelings and its concomitant destruction of love, finds echoes in *Love's Comedy*" (Finney 1994: 90-1).

Nora, the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, may (additionally) represent Everyman but it is certain that she is a modern women who has taken a new role in marriage as attested in pastor M. J. Faerden's admonishment to his congregation in 1884 quoted by Finney (1994: 91) from Hanson (1982: 86-7):

Just as Nora appears in the final scene, free and unfettered by any bond, divine or human, without commitment or obligation to the man whom she has given her promise or to the children she has brought into this world — likewise we will find the wife in the modern marriage, from beginning to end... The emancipated woman has taken her place at the door, always ready to depart, with her suitcase in her hand. The suitcase - and not, as before, the ring of fidelity — will be the symbol of her role in marriage.

Nora was given a great freedom of choice by her creator; she is not chained to her family by the shackles of duty as wife and mother but is free to stay and bear it or leave. Ibsen's support of the feminist movement and ideology becomes evident not only through his characters and subject matter of his plays but also through his engagement in the women's cause whether he admitted it or not.

### 3. A Feminist Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

American feminist critic Showalter divided feminist criticism into two types: the feminist critique and gynocritics. The first deals with 'woman as reader' and the second with 'woman as writer'. The subjects of the feminist critique reflect those of the Anglo-American approach and include "the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male constructed literary history" (Rice and Waugh 2001: 146-7). Since gynocritics will not be applicable to this play (written by a man), this analysis will be an example of the feminist critique.

At first sight, *A Doll's House* features the stereotypical representation of women as irrational, naive and dependent on men; and the Victorian



dichotomy of the public and private spheres which “relegates women to the demesne of domesticity and deprives them of a political voice while requiring that men identify with a discourse of rationality which splits off and denies the importance of feeling” (Rice and Waugh 2001: 143). Torvald spends most of the time in his demesne: the public sphere. Even when he is at home he is usually working in his study. He seems to rarely spend time with his wife and children; at least there is no interaction between him and the children during the play. In fact, when the children return from a walk with their nurse, he remarks that “the place will only be bearable for a mother now” (Ibsen, *A Doll's House* Act 1: 23)<sup>4</sup>.

When Nora asks Torvald to come and look at what she has bought, his reply simply is: “Don't disturb me” (Act 1: 2) and only after a while (apparently after finishing his work) he comes out. This shows that his main job as the man is to make money. When Nora explains that she had expected Torvald to take the blame for her crime, he also makes clear that his reputation is more important than his love for her when he says that “no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves” (Act 3: 94). Torvald is portrayed as rational, imperious and to some degree even emotionally cold. He tells Nora to save money and forbids her from eating sweets in order not to ruin her teeth. He seems to see his wife, or women in general, as intellectually inferior as well. When he explains to her why he is not fond of borrowing and spending too much money, he uses himself as an example and asks her how she would repay the borrowed money to the people who lend it, if he had an accident and died. Nora does not seem to care and says that she would not bother about them since she would not know who they were. Torvald's reaction to that shortsighted answer is: “That is like a woman!” (Act 1: 3). He previously called her a “featherhead” (Act 1: 2) as well.

Contrary to that, his wife, Nora, is mostly confined to the private sphere; in the play, her contact with the outside world seems rare and is limited to shopping and visiting neighbors (she comes back from a shopping trip in the opening scene of Act 1 and in Act 3, she visits their

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<sup>4</sup> This book will be used for all the quotations from the play throughout the whole section. Since Ibsen's play is only divided into acts and does not give a further division into scenes and lines, only the act and page number(s) will be mentioned in the in-text citation.



neighbor's party with Torvald). Nora is portrayed as irrational, (at least superficially) submissive, naive and childish. She is even called a child by Mrs. Linde in Act 1(13) and Torvald calls her so several times during the play; he even mentions that she has "become both wife and child to him" (Act 3: 88). Nora is ignorant of the law and, as Torvald remarks, she does not "understand the conditions of the world in which [she] live[s]" (Act 3: 93); she justifies her criminal act of forgery by arguing that she was "spar[ing] her dying father anxiety and care" and "sav[ing] her husband's life" (Act1: 32).

It is worth mentioning that not all female characters in the play are given an immature and submissive personality; the world-wise Mrs. Christine Linde gives a stark contrast to the gullible, impetuous character of Nora. Christine is older than Nora and has a more "dejected and timid" (Act 1: 7) manner; Torvald even describes her as a "frightful bore" (Act 3: 77). "Life, and hard, bitter necessity have taught" (Act 3: 71) her to be prudent. She does not seem to approve of Nora's keeping secrets from her husband and prevents Krogstad from recalling his letter in Act 3. She says that "this unhappy secret must be enclosed; they must have a complete understanding between them, which is impossible with all this concealment and falsehood going on" (Act 3: 74). Another difference between her and Nora is Mrs. Linde's relationship with her true love, Krogstad. They are capable of honestly and openly talking to each other even after being separated for many years, while Nora and Torvald only have a serious conversation at the end of Act 3 after eight years of marriage. Furthermore, they seem to be equals; both are widowed and described by Christine as "two shipwrecked people" that "could join forces" (Act 3: 71).

According to Code (2000: 342), it is the "women's disproportionate confinement in the private sphere [that] correlates with women's subordinate status". Nora's absence from the public sphere makes her economically completely dependent on her husband and even the private sphere does not belong to her alone. As a man Torvald not only controls public affairs but also the private ones. He chides her for having spent too much money on the Christmas gifts and when he gives her two pounds he emphasizes that it has to suffice for the housekeeping at Christmas. He



governs the home, not Nora. But Nora is economically not only dependent on her husband alone; when Torvald was ill and they had to travel to Italy for him to recover, Nora was obliged to borrow the necessary amount of money from Krogstad. In order to pay him back, she had to secretly save some of the money Torvald gave her and she took on some usual jobs for women that involved needlework and embroidery or she started copying down papers. She seemed to have enjoyed being able to earn her own money, she tells Mrs. Linde that “it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man” (Act 1: 17).

Farrell argues that the division of society into public/private spheres gave husband and wife “distinct, but complementary, functions to perform” (Farrell 1996). It is also mentioned that the women did more than just take care of the house and the children; women functioned as moral and religious guides for their husbands as well. The public sphere was considered amoral and the only way through which the husbands could purify themselves from that evil place was through their wives who kept the home pure (*ibid.*).<sup>5</sup> Women who fail in keeping themselves and their family untainted are to blame when their offspring turns out bad. Torvald even remarks that “almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother” (Act 1: 36). Furthermore, after Torvald finds out about Nora’s crime, he threatens “to not allow [her] to bring up the children” for he does not dare to “trust them to [her]” (Act 3: 86). This division “put[s] women on a pedestal but also in a cage” (Guerin, *et al.* 2011: 255), or in this play’s case a doll’s house. Towards the end of the play Nora realizes that their “home has been nothing but a playroom”; she was only her husband’s “doll-wife” and previously had been her father’s “doll-child” (Act 3: 90). She had “merely existed to perform tricks” for her husband (*ibid.*).

As mentioned earlier, Gilbert and Gubar identified “the angel of the home” and “the mad women in the attic” as the main stereotypical images of women in literature (Bressler 1999: 177). They note that the “monster-

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<sup>5</sup> This construction of the separate spheres mainly developed in the middle class since lower class families needed two incomes and could not conform to this strict division (Farrell 1996).



woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy” and that “the monster may not only be concealed *behind* the angel, she may actually turn out to reside *within* [...] the angel” (Rice and Waugh 2001: 155-60). Oddly, the female characters of *A Doll's House* are betwixt and between those two images. Mrs. Linde had to work in the public sphere after her husband's death to support her family. She remarks that she “could not endure life without work” but after her mother had passed away and her two young brothers had grown up, she felt “quite alone in the world” and realized that there was “not the least pleasure in working for one's self” (Act 3: 72). She wants “to be a mother for someone” (*ibid.*); that is, despite her independence she longs for a family and the traditional role of “the angel of the home”. She is selfless and ready to put her own happiness aside for the sake of the ones she loves (characteristics that would suit an “angel”). This is proven by her marriage to a wealthy man only for the sake of being able to provide for her sick mother and two younger brothers; she did not marry him because she is a materialist. On the contrary, she cannot comprehend Nora's excitement about Torvald's promotion and believes that it “would be delightful to have what one needs” (Act 1: 9); apparently, she is not interested in “heaps and heaps of money” (*ibid.*).

Nora, on the other hand, is a different case and somewhat undergoes a transition from an imperfect angel to a monster or madwoman. She outwardly seems to be the cheerful, innocent “angel of the home” but even before the final act she proves that she is no angel. Evidence for that ranges from her little fib about not eating any macaroons to her keeping the secret of her forgery crime from her husband. The guilt that Krogstad makes her feel through his blackmailing almost drives her to insanity. This may be emphasized by the wild dance that she performs in Act 2 in order to keep Torvald away from the letter box. Her great desperation as well as her love for her husband is proven by her considering even suicide to save Torvald's reputation. It is the realization that Torvald does not reciprocate her strong feelings that causes a change in her. Torvald's “little squirrel” and “singing skylark”, as he has called her multiple times in the play, turns cold and quiet after seeing her husband's true nature. She begins questioning their life together, her life with her father and even



religion. The answers to her questions can only be found by her alone and that is when she decides to neglect her duties as a mother and wife in order to fulfill the duties she has to herself.

### Conclusion

At first glance, *A Doll's House* does not seem very feminist, but as the plot unfolds and moves towards its climax, the play challenges contemporary misconceptions about women and the protagonist Nora transforms from a doll, a possession, whose sole purpose is to entertain her husband, into an individual human being.

In his play, Ibsen did not put his female characters into the typical stock roles that associate women with supernatural creatures; be it angels or demons. He might have wanted to show that it is not necessary to portray women as supernatural; as angels, or demons. Women, no matter how good or bad, are neither one nor the other; they are human beings with virtues as well as faults. It is the realization that Nora is not a doll with the duties of a wife and mother "but before all else [...] a reasonable human being" (Act 3: 92) with duties to herself that causes her to leave her family and home.

Ibsen might have used Mrs. Linde's character to challenge the traditional public/private split of society. Contrary to the common belief, Mrs. Linde had not been deprived of her morality by having entered the male-dominated public sphere. Nora, on the other hand, has comparatively more shortcomings though she has been mostly confined to the private space which supposedly should keep her pure and untainted. She, nevertheless, does not refrain from keeping secrets from her husband and occasionally telling him fibs. Earning her own money and being independent has not harmed Mrs. Linde. She enjoys her work but also longs for the role of a loving mother and wife. She is supposed to show that a woman who enjoys her financial independence does not have to give up family life.

Last but not least, Ibsen used two different couples in his play to show how the fate of a marriage based on the equality of both spouses differentiates from one based on the dominance of the husband and the suppression of the wife. Krogstad and Christine enjoy a happy ending



after a fair share of hardships as two equals deciding to unite and form a family. On the other hand, Torvald and Nora's marriage, in which Nora had been underestimated and considered inferior by her husband, shatters into pieces after eight long years due to a lack of communication and understanding.

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**Öz:** Bu araştırma yazısı, Henrik Ibsen'in feminist edebiyat kuramına, Anglo-Amerikan yaklaşıma dayanan *A Doll's House* eserinin feminist bir analizini vermeye çalışmaktadır. O öncelikle feminist edebiyat kuramını pratik olduğu kadar teorik olarak ve Anglo-Amerikan yaklaşımın açıklaması ve onun bazı belirgin yazarları tarafından izlenen edebî eleştirelilikteki işlevini açıklayacaktır. Yazı yine onun bazı konuşmalarına, mektuplarına ve tanıdıklarına referansta bulunarak nasıl ve ne dereceye kadar kadınların neden olduğu şeylerle ilgili olduğunu araştıracaktır. Öyleyse yazı, oyunun üç perdesinden alıntılar yaparak ve onlara referansta bulunarak, Henrik Ibsen'in, kendi kadın karakterleriyle edebiyatta kadınların basmakalıp sunulmasına nasıl meydan okuduğunu göstermenin bir doğrulaması olarak Anglo-Amerikan yaklaşıma ve Showalter'ın feminist eleştirisine dayanan tiyatro oyununun feminist bir çözümlemesini yapacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Henrik Ibsen, Anglo-Amerikan feminizm, feminist kritisizm, *A Doll's House*'ın analizi, feminist eleştiri.

