Analysis Of Protagonists From A Dollhouse And Tartuffe

Posted on July 27, 2022

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/analysis-of-protagonists-from-a-dollhouse-and-tartuffe/

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Molière's *Tartuffe* belong to different centuries and dramatic traditions, yet both examine households governed by mistaken ideas of authority. Nora Helmer and Orgon occupy very different positions within those households. Nora is a wife whose intelligence and sacrifice are concealed beneath the role of a cheerful dependent, while Orgon is the male head of a wealthy family whose power allows his obsession with Tartuffe to endanger everyone around him. Both characters live through forms of self-deception and eventually confront evidence that destroys an idealized view of their world. Their moral situations, however, are not equivalent. Nora's secrecy develops within legal and marital inequality, whereas Orgon's blindness becomes destructive because he possesses enough authority to impose it on others. Comparing the two protagonists therefore reveals how performance, patriarchy, money, and moral certainty shape personal awakening, family conflict, and the difference between being constrained by a social role and using a social role to control other people.

Performance, Identity, and the Illusion of Order

Both plays present family life as a kind of stage. Nora performs the role Torvald expects: playful, attractive, financially careless, affectionate, and dependent. His pet names such as "little skylark" and "squirrel" sound tender but position her as something decorative and childlike rather than as an equal adult. Nora sometimes uses this role strategically to obtain money or influence, proving that apparent submission can contain intelligence and calculation, yet strategy inside unequal power is not the same as freedom. Orgon constructs an equally artificial identity for himself. He wants to see himself as a man of unusual religious seriousness who has risen above ordinary attachments, and Tartuffe sustains that image through exaggerated humility, piety, and moral discipline. In both households, performance becomes a substitute for reality: Nora's marriage appears harmonious because she performs obedience, while Tartuffe appears holy because Orgon interprets theatrical devotion as spiritual truth.

The difference lies in how each protagonist responds when performance begins to collapse. Nora gradually recognizes the gap between the role she has learned to play and the self she has never been allowed to develop fully. Orgon, by contrast, protects his illusion until direct evidence makes it impossible to sustain. Ibsen's realism exposes the emotional cost of living inside a role, while Molière's comedy exposes the absurdity of mistaking performance for character. Both dramatists

make the audience more perceptive than the central authority figure. We see Nora's competence before Torvald recognizes it, and we see Tartuffe's fraud before Orgon accepts it. This dramatic structure invites viewers to examine how social identities become believable not simply because they are true but because other people are invested in maintaining them.

Money, Secrecy, and Unequal Authority

Money is central to both plots because financial control determines who can act openly and who must depend on someone else. Nora secretly borrowed money to finance travel that helped restore Torvald's health. Because her legal and marital independence was restricted, she forged her dying father's signature as security. The forgery is legally wrong, yet its moral meaning cannot be separated from the circumstances that produced it. Nora takes financial responsibility while publicly being treated as incapable of serious economic judgment. She works privately to repay the debt, revealing discipline and competence that the marriage does not formally acknowledge. Torvald believes himself to be the rational provider, but the secret loan shows that Nora has already carried the household's most consequential financial burden. The gap between appearance and reality is therefore built into the economic structure of the marriage as much as into its emotional language.

In *Tartuffe*, property functions differently because Orgon possesses rather than lacks formal authority. He can promise Mariane to Tartuffe, disinherit Damis, transfer property, and entrust politically dangerous documents to an outsider because the household is organized around his will. His private mistake becomes a collective crisis precisely because he can convert belief into action without needing the consent of the people affected. This contrast is essential. Nora conceals information because direct equality is unavailable to her; Orgon ignores information because he has enough power to dismiss the people who challenge him. Both characters deceive, but the institutional consequences of their deception differ. One operates within constrained agency, while the other turns personal certainty into family law.

Gender, Marriage, and Moral Judgment

Nora's crisis exposes the gendered foundation of her marriage. Torvald sees himself as provider, teacher, and protector, yet the secret loan reveals that Nora has already performed a major act of protection for him. She risked legal consequences and years of private labor to save his health while he continued to interpret her as financially irresponsible. Her dream of the "wonderful thing" is the belief that if the truth emerges, Torvald will sacrifice himself for her in return. His actual response destroys that fantasy because he first worries about reputation and condemns Nora as unfit to raise the children. The failure of reciprocal courage forces her to reinterpret the entire marriage. What she had understood as affection now appears inseparable from paternalism, and what seemed like protection becomes evidence that Torvald has never regarded her as an equal moral adult (Ibsen; Templeton).

Orgon's patriarchal authority appears through his treatment of Mariane, Elmire, and Damis. He attempts to force Mariane into marriage with Tartuffe despite her love for Valère, dismisses Elmire's judgment, and punishes Damis for reporting what he has witnessed. Molière repeatedly allows women and servants to perceive reality more accurately than the man who formally governs the household. Elmire understands Tartuffe's desire and devises the test that finally exposes him, while Dorine uses wit to protect Mariane and challenge Orgon's irrational plans. The difference from Nora is revealing. Molière's women often possess practical clarity from the beginning but lack formal authority; Ibsen traces the slower development of a woman who has internalized the role assigned to her and must learn to distrust the very structure that has defined her identity.

Revelation, Religion, and the Collapse of Borrowed Certainty

The two plays use different methods of revelation. Orgon must witness Tartuffe's hypocrisy directly. Elmire hides him under a table and invites Tartuffe to speak freely, turning direct observation into the cure for a blindness that testimony could not overcome. Even then, Orgon delays acting, which shows how strongly he is invested in the belief he must abandon. His recognition concerns another person: Tartuffe is not what Orgon believed him to be. Nora's revelation is inward. She already knows what she has done and understands many of Torvald's habits, but his response to Krogstad's letter reveals what those habits mean. She is forced to reinterpret not only Torvald but herself, recognizing that she has moved from her father's "doll-child" to her husband's "doll-wife." Orgon discovers a false man; Nora discovers the falseness of a social identity she has been living inside.

Religion and morality also operate differently in the two plays. *Tartuffe* does not condemn sincere faith; Cléante repeatedly distinguishes genuine devotion from theatrical extremism and warns Orgon against replacing one extreme with another. Orgon's error is the surrender of moral judgment to someone whose performance confirms his desire for certainty. *A Doll's House* approaches morality through law, duty, marriage, and selfhood rather than religious satire. Nora eventually decides that inherited rules cannot be accepted merely because father, husband, church, or society repeats them. Both plays therefore challenge borrowed certainty. Orgon accepts Tartuffe's moral language instead of evaluating conduct, while Nora has accepted a social script that defines her duties without granting her equal authority. In each case, genuine judgment begins when inherited certainty collides with lived experience.

Restoration versus Transformation

The endings reveal the deepest difference between the protagonists. *Tartuffe* concludes through comic restoration when a royal officer reveals that the king has recognized Tartuffe's criminal history, prevents the family's ruin, and restores legal order. Orgon remains head of the household, presumably chastened by experience. The structure survives because the immediate corruption is

removed. *A Doll's House* refuses such restoration. Nora leaves Torvald and the children because she believes she must educate herself and determine whether she can become an equal person. No external authority guarantees the outcome, and the closing door leaves the future unresolved. Orgon's recognition corrects a mistaken judgment within the existing order; Nora's recognition challenges the order itself. He learns that Tartuffe is false, whereas she learns that the identity expected of her is incomplete and that continuing unchanged would require returning to the same form of self-deception.

Conclusion

Nora and Orgon are linked by self-deception, family conflict, idealized identities, and eventual recognition, but their positions within patriarchal households are profoundly different. Nora's secrecy arises from an effort to save her husband within a system that restricts her legal and financial agency. Orgon's blindness becomes dangerous because his authority allows him to ignore the judgments of people who depend on him. Both characters mistake social performance for truth: Nora trusts the performance of protective marriage, while Orgon trusts the performance of religious devotion. Their endings reveal the difference between exposing one fraud and questioning an entire social role. Orgon is restored after Tartuffe is unmasked; Nora leaves because Torvald's response shows that the marriage itself has prevented genuine equality. Together, the plays demonstrate that moral awakening requires not only discovering who has lied but also examining the systems of authority, money, gender, and inherited belief that made the deception persuasive.

Works Cited

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. 1879.

Molière. *Tartuffe*. 1669.

Templeton, Joan. *Ibsen's Women*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.