Realism Movement in Drama

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What is Realism?

“Refers generally to any artistic or literary portrayal of life in a faithful, accurate manner, unclouded by false ideals, literary conventions, or misplaced aesthetic glorification and beautification of the world. It is a theory or tendency in writing to depict events in human life in a matter-of-fact, straightforward manner. It is an attempt to reflect life "as it actually is"”

-Carson- Newman College
Realistic Paintings
Background

- Movement began in **mid-late 1800’s** as an experiment to make drama more appetizing to society
- Political events and social reforms led to different thoughts
- Sudden rejection of Romantic idealism:
  - Revolutions and wars in Europe portrayed the need for social, economic and political reform
  - Technological advances
  - Pragmatism
  - Common man demanded recognition
  - Working/middle class demanded more rights
Contributors to Realism

- **Auguste Comte**: Developed Positivism theory, encouraged one to inspect nature through precise observation.
- **Charles Darwin**: “Origin of Species”, made many people believe that science could provide the answers in life.
- **Karl Marx**: Argued against urbanization and in favor of equal distribution of wealth, founder of Communism.
Beginnings of Realism

- The beliefs of Comte, Darwin and Marx lead to an overall change in social and independent thoughts.
- Society began to question religious, political and economic beliefs.
- Science and deep observations were paramount in European societies.
- Scientific methodology can apply to human problem solving.
Writers of Realism

● Alexandre Dumas fils
  ○ Contemporary life and social problems
    (*Camille*)

● Emile Augier
  ○ Contemporary conditions

● Anton Chekhov
  ○ Known for psychological reality, social complications, illusion of the lack of a plot
    (*The Lady w/ the Dog, Three Sisters*)
What makes something a realistic work?

In realistic work, such as A Doll’s House, readers tend to view important techniques the make plays and novels realistic.

- Characters are believable and engaging.
- The characters live, relatable or not, lives within the story.
- An accurate reflection of the human condition and contemporary life with no stereotyping.
- Reflection is made also by culture and social class.
- Details of individuals’ problems and challenges.
Naturalism (Not to be confused with Realism)

- More scientifically and cynically based
- Based on concrete observations of human beings
- Human behavior controlled by instinct
- Man is subject to a natural object
- Sought only to study the drama of the play, and other elements without interpretation
Theatrical (drama) realism

- Movement began in mid-late 19th century in Europe (Norway)
- Playwright, Henrik Ibsen, is credited for introducing realism in drama
- Ibsen known as the “Father of Realism”
- Aimed at bringing a greater fidelity of real life to the stage
- Attacked society's values & dealt with unconventional subjects
Realistic Setting in Plays

- Recreate a specific location
- Painted backdrop and wings-flats were placed parallel to mask offstage space
- Some furniture and freestanding objects were added on stage
- Some interior designs for plays featured a room with three walls, a ceiling, and decor.
Characters and Dialogue

● “I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life” (Act 3). The reality is that Nora made changes in her life to please other men, which she realized was a waste when Torvald refused to sacrifice his reputation for Nora.

● “From this moment happiness is not the question; all that concerns us is to save the remains, the fragments, the appearance” (Act 3). Torvald states this after he learns of Nora’s forgery. This is an aspect of realism because of the internal conflict she has, along with the external conflict she has with Torvald.
Gender Roles: The Role of Women

- The women were seen as only caretakers of the house and children, as well as the supporters of the husband's each decision.
- Women were restricted and bound to the societal norms of the time.
- If women had free time it was to be put into with maintaining the household and not socializing.
- Education was limited towards women, also they were strictly prohibited from politics completely.

Example in A Doll’s House: "How painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything!" (ACT 1)
Gender Roles: The Role of Men

- Men are seen as the moral of the household, though at times not the brightest.
- The main provider of the family; their status in their workplace and social life had had hefty importance.
- Expected to live a public life no matter the job.
- Socializing with other like-minded men in public places like clubs, meetings, or even bars.

Example in A Doll's house: “Nora dear, I can forgive you this panic, even though basically you’re insulting me… Whatever comes. you’ll see: when it really counts, I have strength and courage enough as a man to take on the whole weight myself.”(Act II)
Realism Seen in A Doll’s House

- **MRS. LINDE:** "You must not forget that I had a helpless mother and two little brothers. We couldn't wait for you, Nils; your prospects seemed hopeless then." (Act 3)
  - This exemplifies the problems Mrs. Linde had and how she needed to do what’s best for her.

- Torvald: “Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me." (ACT 1)
  - Torvald is a pragmatist when it comes to money and finance, compared to Nora.

- **MRS. LINDE:** "I want to be a mother to someone, and your [Krogstad's] children need a mother." (ACT 3)
  - In order to appeal to Krogstad, Mrs. Linde has to offer him something beneficial to his children, because he cares greatly for his kids.
Thematic References including Realism

- “My life is so dreadfully empty and I feel so forsaken. There is not the least pleasure in working for one's self. Nils, give me someone and something to work for” (2221 Act 3) This displays realism because of how, in real life, people have problems.

- “My poor innocent spine has to suffer for my father’s youthful amusement” (Act 2). Even something as simple as an illness demonstrates life’s issues.

- [From below, the sound of a door slamming shut] (2233 Act 3) The play ends with a failed relationship, as opposed to past stories that supported the idea that life is like a fairy tale. It is not.
Public Reaction to A Doll's House

- Play was an attack on the middle class
- The new middle class values included hard work, sexual morality, education, thrift and a prudent marriage.
- Image was everything, Nora showed this
- Ms. Linde didn't represent the ideal Victorian woman, she was poor, widowed, no children, but she knew the right and wrongs
- Ibsen attacked the male audience with the portrayal of Torvald as only caring about family image.
Realistic Drama in Today’s Society

● Realism is everywhere. Realism is real life.
● Realism became more popular since “A Doll’s House”, and was the main style of most of media, books, film, and TV.
● People preferred realistic stories because of the relatable aspects of the lives of the characters and the reader/viewer.
What was easy/hard to understand

**Easy**

- The connection between the play and real life of how women are controlled.
- The role of feminism and how it applied to the last action of the play (when Nora leaves).

**Hard**

- The idea that, in real life, most women are controlled and they let it happen. How come Nora took action if realism shows that it only happens in a rare case?
- The fact that science led to the realistic movement in theatrical drama.
Summary Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrlsTzcq5O8
Question 1

Henrik Ibsen was known to be the father of theatrical realism. His realistic influence can be seen in a majority of his plays. What are some realistic elements that are seen in *A Doll’s House*?
The setting of the play takes place in the living quarters of the Helmers. The rooms are brought on stage to give the play a more realistic feeling. “This action takes place in the Helmer’s residence… A comfortable room…” (2186)

The characters talk in a straightforward manner and tell it how it is. For example, “Good. Well now it’s all over. I’m putting the keys here” (2233). Ibsen does not complicate the drama.

The gender roles of men and women portray the common Norwegian man and woman at the time. “Sometimes one has a tiny little bit of influence, I should hope. Because one is a woman, it does not necessarily follow that…” (2199).
Question 2

- Considering A Doll’s House is a play with realism, how does Ibsen build the suspense in the play? What literary techniques make the play realistic and build the suspense? What is the suspense? Provide textual support.
Suspense is seen with the fact that Nora’s crime was foreshadowed and hinted from the beginning. Readers were on the edge of their seats with if or when Torvald would open Krogstad’s letter and see his wife’s dirty deeds. Also when Torvald did find out about Nora’s crime, readers were curious to find out how he would react.

Quote:”Are you forgetting that I’ll be in control then over your final reputation? (ACT II) These words from Krogstad serves as suspense as to whether or not he will reveal Nora’s secret and Torvald’s reaction will be.
Question 3

- Knowing that the story is considered one of Ibsen’s most realist plays, how could “A Doll’s House” be considered anti-realist? What parts of the story oppose reality?
While at the time, feminism was widely practiced, that time is mostly over and it is hard to relate gender differences to today’s modern society. Gender equality, and the fact that men are not as controlling anymore, contrast Nora and Torvald’s situation. Reality shows gender equality (for the most part).

The characters of the story have a lot of drama in their lives, dealing with love, betrayal, feminism, and crime. Most people in reality don’t deal with these things. Therefore, the story is exaggerated and the character’s situations are really unlikely in real life.
Question 4

- Why do you think the realist movement was so revolutionary? How come realism and the focus on people’s lives became so popular?
Realistic literature offered a new type of literature, one in which the public and society could relate to.

Ibsen encouraged writers to discover new and unique ways of writings; they did not have to follow the common ways of writings.

The movement of language and diction was significant because the way the characters would talk would be more realistic and easier to understand. (Instead of a character saying “thou art”, he/she would “you are”)

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