

Comparative Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Kate Chopin's *the Story of an Hour*: Portrayal, Female Agency, and Rationale Versus Emotion

Ade Bunga Putri

Universitas Indonesia

Depok

(ade.bunga11@ui.ac.id)

Abstract: In the middle of the ongoing trials and tribulations of the patriarchal society, the first wave of the feminism movement started to rise in the 1850s. The first-wave feminism rose to fight for statutory reformation in women's political power. Written around the time of the first-wave feminism, the drama *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen (1879) and the short story *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin (1894) have the same theme of women's captivity in a patriarchal household and their attempts to liberate themselves from the oppression. This study aims to analyze *A Doll's House* and *The Story of an Hour* to observe how the authors developed the theme of patriarchal households in the first-wave feminism era. The study was conducted using the close reading method in a comparative approach. The study concludes that the two works differ in (1) the portrayal of the patriarchal households; (2) the agency of the main characters to escape from the oppressive household; and (3) the focus on rationale versus emotion in the character's decision-making process. The findings of this study will provide insights into how authors can utilize different approaches in writing about patriarchal household oppression and female agency.

Keywords: female agency; feminism; oppression; patriarchal household.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the middle of the ongoing trials and tribulations of the patriarchal society, the first wave of the feminism movement started to rise in the 1850s. Norma Basch, writer of the journal article *Invisible Women: The Legal Fiction of Marital Unity in Nineteenth-Century America*, stated that the legal and economic situation in the nineteenth century "maintained the meticulous definition of gender roles" and "mandated the complete dependence of wives on husbands" (1979: 349). The first-wave feminism rose to fight for statutory reformation in women's political power.

Plenty of literary works was produced as a response to this societal condition. Among the most notable ones is Henrik Ibsen's drama *A Doll's House* (1879) and Kate Chopin's short story *The Story of an Hour* (1894) which have the same theme of women's captivity in a patriarchal household and their attempts to liberate themselves from the oppression. Nora, the heroine of *A Doll's House*, seems happy to live in the seemingly ideal 19th household while his husband, Torvald Helmer, is patronizing her and making her existence become like a doll. But as the plot

progresses, her character is developed into a woman who is rebellious and dares to take charge and change her situation. When her husband reacts angrily upon finding out about her forgery, she starts to realize that throughout her marriage, she has been putting on a show and she cannot be anything other than filling the role that her husband and the patriarchal society expect her to be. Similarly, Louis Mallard, the heroine of *The Story of an Hour*, is a lady who gets liberation upon hearing the news of her husband's death. At the end of the story, when it was revealed that her husband, Brentley Mallard, is still alive, she dies due to a heart attack from seeing her husband.

Both literary works aroused controversies by the 1800s European and American social standards. *A Doll's House* raised controversy due to the ending where Nora, the female main character, decides to leave the house and abandon her children. The portrayal of the lack of opportunities and resources for women's self-fulfillment also causes disagreements among critics at that time. On the other hand, *The Story of an Hour* was controversial due to the female main character feeling liberated upon hearing the news of her husband's death, and at the end of the story, she died of a heart attack because she found out that her husband was still alive.

Despite having the same theme and same societal background, these literary works use different ways to explore the theme. This study aims to examine the different strategies utilized by both authors to explore the patriarchal household condition of that era. The study was conducted using the close reading method in a comparative approach. The study compared on how the two works differ in (1) the portrayal of the patriarchal households; (2) the agency of the main characters to escape from the oppressive household; and (3) the focus on rationale versus emotion in the character's decision-making process. The findings of this study will provide insights into how authors can utilize different strategies and approaches in writing about patriarchal household oppression and female agency.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The previous studies on Henrik Ibsen's drama *A Doll's House* and Kate Chopin's short story *The Story of an Hour* analyze each work separately and individually. In the article *Ibsen's Doll House*, Paul Rosefeldt (2003) suggests that the root cause of all conflicts in *A Doll's House* emerges from the father figures that Rosefeldt considers "pollutants". For instance, Torvald Helmer is an irresponsible father who has very little thing to do with his children. Torvald is a father of "lies and disguise, polluting his children" (Rosefeldt, 2003). The same goes for Nora: according to Rosefeldt, Nora's financial carelessness and forgery are due to her inheriting her father's traits.

In the article *Emotions in the Story of an Hour*, Selina Jamil (2009) analyzes how Kate Chopin explores emotions in the short story. Jamil notes that Chopin refuses to follow the tradition of assigning "supremacy to the faculty of reason", and instead, she assigns supremacy to "the faculty of emotion".

In the article *Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"*, Lawrence I. Berkove (2000) suggests that this story is an irony in that the story does not build Louise Mallard as a heroine, but as "an immature egoist" and "a victim of her self-assertion".

There is no previous study that analyzes Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* in a comparative manner. By looking at prior studies, and how there is no study specifically comparing these two, the findings of this study will provide insights into how authors can utilize different approaches in writing about patriarchal household oppression and female agency.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was a comparative analysis of the drama *A Doll's House* and the short story *The Story of an Hour* using the close reading method. As a methodology, according to Jockers in Smith, close reading depends on “concentrated reading on the text”. The analysis was done by comparing how the two works differ in (1) the portrayal of the patriarchal households, (2) the agency of the female main characters in escaping the patriarchy, and (3) the decision-making process of the main characters. The plot, word choice, and characterization were literary devices used to analyze.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Portrayal of Patriarchal Household in the Nineteenth Century

The first-wave feminism did not emerge without cause. Before the nineteenth century, most household heads—which were the husbands—had the authority over the familial means of production. In the nineteenth century, England imposed coverture, a common law that stated that a married woman held the status of *feme covert*, and her husband became the custodian and ruler of her property. Before being a sovereign nation, the US also adopted the coverture law. All a woman's assets became her husband's property after marriage. Even until the mid-twentieth century, women were not given the right to own a bank account or get a loan without their husbands' permission and autographs.

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen is relatively more illustrative in describing the patriarchal gender roles and repression in the main character's household compared to the short story *The Story of an Hour*. Ibsen provided textual evidence about the household situation. It was clear from the drama that Nora's husband (Torvald) takes the dominant role and controls all the decisions in the household. Torvald patronizes Nora by calling her with objectifying nicknames such as “squirrel”, “my little skylark”, and “songbird”, and Nora is willing to play along with this, which denotes her passivity and her lack of decision-making competency. Torvald even calls her “his dearest property” in one line. Although Ibsen incorporated some metaphors, the drama provided textual evidence that gave context to the metaphor. One of the examples was the extended metaphor of a “doll's house” in Act 3. This metaphor illustrated Nora's captivity in the household which was the recurring theme throughout the drama.

It was clear that Torvald held complete control over household finance. Whenever Nora wants to go shopping, she asks Torvald to give her money, and she has to tell him the purpose of the money. Combined with Nora's financial carelessness and her gullibility about the power dynamic between her and Torvald, the patriarchal oppression exists; she just does not realize it yet, especially in Act 1 and Act 2.

On the contrary, the short story *The Story of an Hour* was not as illustrative as *A Doll's House* in describing the main character's household situation. Kate Chopin did not provide any details about their marriage, nor about the past. This might be due to the short story only telling about the one-hour span after Louise heard about her husband's death, so there was not much room to explore the background. Although there was a reference in the story that said that the lines of Louise Mallard's face “bespoke repression and even a certain strength”, it was not mentioned what caused the “repression” (Berkove, 2000: 153). In consequence, Chopin gave room for the reader to fill in the knowledge gap and form their interpretation. Some hints might lead to certain assumptions about the “repression”, but it still allows more interpretations, such as in the following quote:

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (Chopin, emphasis mine)

As it can be seen in the quotation above, Louise aspired to “live for herself” after her husband’s death. This could be implied that before her husband’s death, she could not “live for herself”; however, the text was not stated what made her incapable to live for herself. Does it mean her husband took the dominant role in the marriage and did not allow her to make any decisions like Torvald in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*? Or was it not her husband, but the society that did not allow her to live for herself? The next line talks about “imposing” a private will upon another human, but does it mean her husband has done it?

Female Agency

Female agency refers to females’ capacity and power to determine and achieve their own choice in life, where this capacity was previously repressed. Female agency was acknowledged to consist of *intrinsic agency*, or belief in herself and realization of her rights; and *instrumental agency*, or ability to make decisions and utilize obtained resources (Qutteina, Al-Khelafi, & Yount, 2019: 2). According to Naila Kabeer, the agency can be defined as the “ability to define an individual’s goals and act on them” (as cited in Donald, Annan, & Goldstein, 2020).

According to Donald et al. (2020), the agency is closely related to “autonomy” and “bargaining power”. In the psychology literature, autonomy is someone’s ability in taking measures to achieve their values and goals. On the other hand, in the economics literature, bargaining power refers to the ability to exert power over someone else and bargain each spouse’s weight in household responsibilities. Autonomy is individual, while bargaining power is relational. Thus, the agency is the combination of the individuals’ internal ambition and their ability to influence someone else on their preferences.

Donald et al. (2020) also suggested a conceptual framework for individuals to capture agency, which consists of three keys:

1. Individuals need to define goals that align with their values.

This refers to the intrinsic motivation to do self-reflection and to set well-defined goals. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), intrinsic motivations can be analyzed whether they are self-regulated, imposed by fear from others, or dependent on internalized social norms.

2. Individuals need to have a sense of urgency and control.

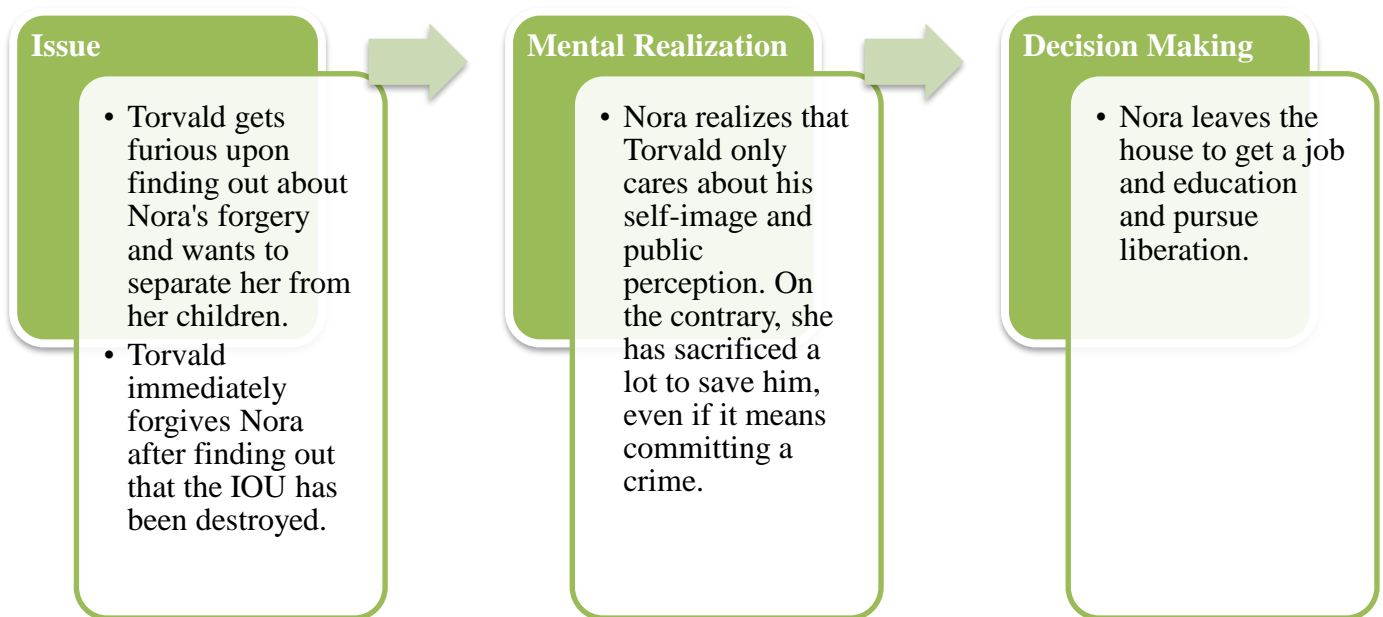
Having a sense of control and belief in self is important in an agency. Once individuals have defined their goals, they need to believe that they can achieve them. In psychology, this aspect has been explored in the concept of *self-efficacy* and *locus of control*. Self-efficacy is defined as individuals’ belief in their capacity to produce effects (Bandura, 1994). Locus of control is the degree to which individuals believe that an event’s outcome is under their control instead of caused by external factors (Rotter, 1966).

3. Individuals need to achieve their goals.

After the individuals have defined their goals, the last thing to do is to act on them. While the first two aspects are regulated internally, the last aspect is relational and influenced by gendered power relations.

In terms of agency, both Nora from *A Doll's House* and Louise Mallard from *The Story of an Hour* wanted to liberate themselves from their patriarchal households, but Nora has more agency and takes an active role to escape the marriage. When Torvald, her husband finds out a letter about her loan and forgery crime, he gets mad at her and does not want to let Nora be around the children. He also says that he is ashamed of being her husband because her crime will damage his reputation in society. Only after receiving the second letter—which states that the IOU paper has been destroyed and Nora is safe from her crime—did Torvald forgive Nora. This brings Nora to the realization that her husband cares more about his reputation in society, even after she has sacrificed herself to save him. This does not stop only as a **mental realization**, because she explains to Torvald that he has been treating her as someone with less power than him and that they “never have any serious conversation” which led to her **deciding** to leave the house to get a job and an education. All in all, Nora’s agency can be illustrated in the diagram below:

Figure 1 Visualization of Nora’s agency process in *A Doll's House*



In contrast, Louise Mallard from *The Story of an Hour* gets her freedom by chance due to her husband’s death. It cannot be said whether Louise has tried to escape from the marriage or not, because Chopin did not provide any context about her past. But it can be inferred that she did not, because based on the following quote of the story, Louise has only realized freedom as an abstract emotion that she can barely recognize, as seen in the excerpt below:

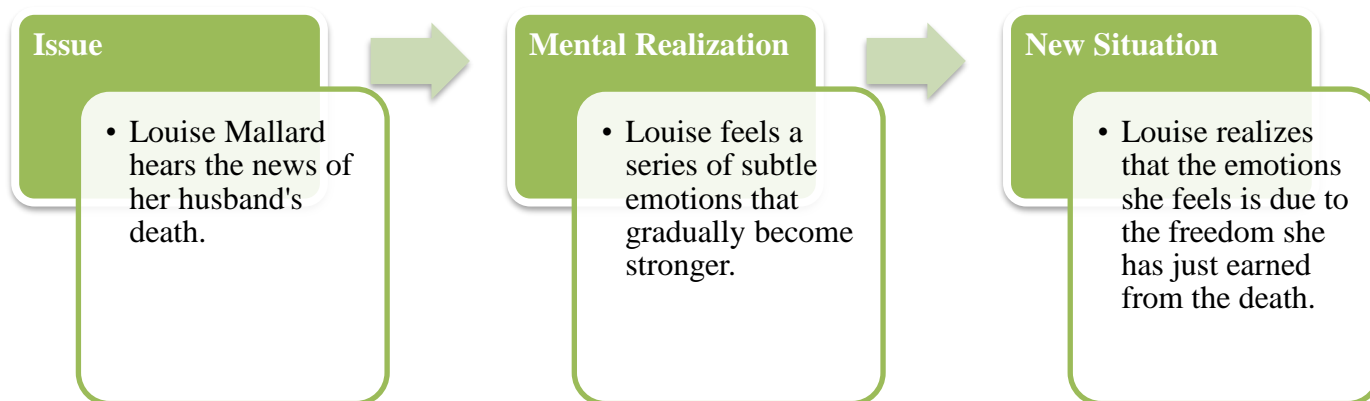
*Something was coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. **What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.***

*Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was **beginning to recognize this thing** that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. (Chopin, emphasis*

mine)

Louise’s agency process can be illustrated in the diagram below. Notice how the diagram differs from Nora’s. What is formed after the mental realization is not decision-making, but a new situation is created. Also, her mental realization is in the form of abstract emotions while Nora’s mental realization is a conclusion that she draws from an issue. This will be explained further in the next section.

Figure 2 Visualization of Louise Mallard’s agency process in *The Story of an Hour*



Decision Making: Rationale versus Emotion

Since decision-making is a major element in the female agency, it is important to know the aspects that influence decision-making. Popular beliefs tend to perceive rationale and emotion to antagonize one another in decision-making. Emotion is often considered something that overrules rationality in making judgments. However, Luo & Yu (2015) suggested that emotion and rationale can cooperate to affect decision making because according to Darwin’s evolutionary viewpoint, emotions are adaptive and can guide individuals to make sound judgments in uncertainty.

According to Barrett (2012), emotions are “socially constructed” and “biologically evident”. When any physical changes happen, they can be turned into emotions when there is a social conceptual knowledge that forms the perception of said physical change. Emotions are also situational. For instance, if an individual’s blood pressure is increased, and the person has just heard a piece of upsetting news, that physical state can be translated into feeling offended.

Rationale, on the other hand, is derived from the process of drawing a conclusion from a set of information. As a part of decision-making, the rationale can be described as the capacity to weigh the pros and cons of a decision and choose the most beneficial one. In other circumstances, it can also refer to the mental process of understanding the facts of an event and pondering the consequences.

From the explanation above, it can be seen how Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour* contrast in exploring the realm of reasoning versus emotion. *A Doll’s House* explores the reasoning of Nora. Throughout the drama, Nora develops from someone who is childlike, passive, and fiscally irresponsible to recognizing that her marriage has ceased her to be a “doll”, and if she continues the marriage, their children will also be “doll children”. The

realization does not come as a *Deus ex Machina*, because Ibsen shows how Nora pieces together Torvald’s behaviors and concludes that she needs to leave the house.

Nora’s mental process follows the pattern of problem-issue-solution causality. First, she identifies the root problem. Then, she realizes that some issues arise from the root problem. After that, she comes up with a solution. Her mental process throughout the drama can be dissected in the diagram and the table below:

Figure 3 Visualization of Nora’s mental process in *A Doll’s House*



Table 1 Visualization of Nora’s mental process in *A Doll’s House*

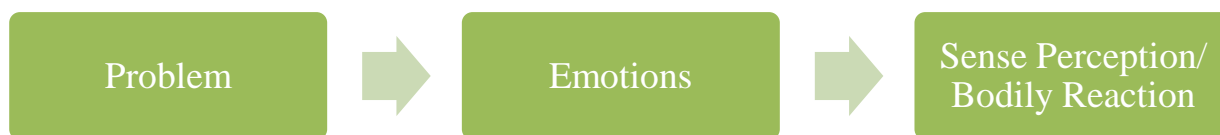
Problem	Issue	Solution
Nora needs money to pay for Torvald’s medication and travel to Italy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Married women at that time were forbidden by law to do financial activities without their husband’s signature, consequently, Nora cannot get a loan. ○ Nora does not want to let her husband know that she is having financial difficulties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nora illegally borrows money from Krogstad and forges her dead dad’s signature. ○ Nora tells her husband that her father lends her the money.
Krogstad finds out about Nora’s forgery and has just recently been fired by Torvald from his job.	Krogstad threatens Nora that he will let Torvald know about her forgery unless Nora wants to persuade Torvald to give his job back.	Nora tries to convince her husband to give her his job back.
Krogstad becomes outraged due to Nora’s failure in convincing her husband and he decides to let Torvald know about Nora’s forgery.	Krogstad puts a letter in Torvald’s mailbox which exposes Nora’s forgery and illegal loan.	Nora distracts Torvald from opening the mailbox by discussing the upcoming dance party and asking him to help with the preparation.
Torvald reads the first letter from Krogstad which exposes Nora’s forgery and illegal loan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Torvald gets furious upon reading it and tells Nora that he will not allow her to see her children anymore. ○ After that, Torvald realizes that there is a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Torvald’s reaction and behavior change make Nora realize that her husband does not love her and has been demeaning her. ○ Nora decides to leave the

	<p>second letter that says that Krogstad has destroyed the IOU. Nora is safe. Torvald takes back his words and forgives Nora.</p>	<p>house and abandon her children to be a liberated woman.</p>
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On the contrary, *The Story of an Hour* explores the emotion of Louise Mallard. At the start of the story, Louise’s sister, Josephine, reveals the news about Louise’s husband’s death “in broken sentences; veiled hints”, and “great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible” so that the news will not hurt her. When Louise realizes that she has been freed from her marriage, the realization comes in the form of emotion that is “too subtle and elusive to name”. At the end of the story, when it is revealed that her husband is not actually dead and he suddenly returns home, Louise suffers great pain to the point that she dies from the shock. As Selina Jamil stated in Emotions in The Story of an Hour, the “joy” that kills Louise is the joy that she refuses to surrender, as the patriarchy would require her to do at her husband’s return (2009: 220).

Another striking difference between this short story and the drama in *The Story of an Hour* is the implication of Louise’s emotions. Not only do Louise’s emotions affect her decision-making, but they also impact her sense perceptions and bodily reactions. After hearing about her husband’s death, when her grief is gone, she goes to her room and feels “a physical exhaustion”. On the more extreme spectrum, when she finds out that her husband is still alive, her shock and disappointment manifest in her heart attack. Louise’s mental process can be illustrated as seen in the diagram below:

Figure 4 Visualization of Louise Mallard’s mental process in *The Story of an Hour*



CONCLUSION

Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Kate Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour* share the same theme of women’s confinement in a patriarchal household. However, the authors used different strategies in writing about patriarchal household oppression, female agency, and the heroine’s decision-making. *A Doll’s House* was more illustrative in describing oppression in a patriarchal household by providing textual evidence. *A Doll’s House* was focused on Nora’s agency in liberating herself, and it was shown by the process of her agency which follows the pattern of issue-metal realization-decision making. Nora’s decision-making process relies on the rationale, and Ibsen shows Nora’s mental process throughout the plot. When Nora’s mental process was dissected, it showed that it follows the pattern of problem-issue-solution. On the other hand, *The Story of an Hour* portrays the patriarchal household in an ambiguous way which leaves out some details that allow multiple interpretations. In contrast to *A Doll’s House*, Louise Mallard gets her freedom by chance, so the concept of female agency is not prominent in the story. Louise’s decision-making is also dominated by her emotion rather than rationale. Louise’s mental process follows the pattern of problem-emotions-sense perception/bodily reaction.

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