A Doll's House and Feminism

1792: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women in England*
1848: Revolutions in Europe
1859: Darwin's *Origin of Species*
1869: Susan B. Anthony begins suffrage movement; John Stuart Mill's essay "The Subjection of Women" (UK) influences Norwegian feminist movement
1879: Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (*ET DUKKEHJEM*)
1888: First beauty contest in Spa, Belgium
1920: Women permitted to vote in USA

The "Woman Question" ca. 1879:
- Are women human like men?
- Should women be given rights of citizenship (right to hold property and money, right to vote, ability to be educated in all fields)?
- Fear: if women are given their freedom, will they give up their so-called sacred rights of mothers and wives?

Quotes from Ibsen:
1) "Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda .... I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is."
Ibsen to the Norwegian League for Women's Rights in Christiania, 26 May 1898, in *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (New York, 1964), 337.
2) Speech to working men of Trondheim in 1885: "The transformation of social conditions which is now being undertaken in the rest of Europe is very largely concerned with the future status of the workers and of women. That is what I am hoping and waiting for, that is what I shall work for, all I can."
3) In his notes to *A Doll's House*: "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view."
4) Ibsen on modern tragedy: "There are two kinds of spiritual law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and another, altogether different, in woman. They do not understand each other; but in practical life the woman is judged by man's law, as though she were not a woman but a man. The wife in the play ends by having no idea of what is right or wrong; natural feeling on the one hand and belief in authority on the other have altogether bewildered her. A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." From C. Innes, *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*. NY: Routledge, 2000, p. 70.

Adapted from information found at: http://chss.montclair.edu/~nielsenw/ibsen.html

The New Woman

The *New Woman* was the term used at the end of the nineteenth century to describe women who were pushing against the limits which society imposed on women. Today she might be called a liberated woman or feminist. Gail Finney gives a concise description of her:

> The New Woman typically values self-fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; is more open about her sexuality than the 'Old Woman'; is well-educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and, accordingly, prefers comfortable clothes (sometimes male attire) to traditional female garb.

Ibsen supported greater freedom for women and expressed his belief in his plays...Ibsen's contemporaries associated him with the New Woman and women's rights. In 1898, the Norwegian Women's Rights League gave a banquet to honor him for his support of women's rights. How identified he was with this issue is suggested by Max Beerbohm's exaggerated, if witty statement, "The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain."

Adapted from information found at: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/newwoman.html

"Blaming Nora"

A Doll's House explores the nature of women within society and its rules, but as Ibsen insisted, it is not a play about the rights of women. Nora's story is part of a searching exploration of the female at the turn of the century...At the time of the play, Freud was asking "What do women want?" and finding no answer. "The ideal wife is one who does everything that her ideal husband likes and nothing else," wrote George Bernard Shaw, in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, in a chapter entitled "The Womanly Woman": "Now to treat a person as a means to an end is to deny that person's right to live."

Toril Moi, in her searching and splendid book, *Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, takes us back to Hegel, whose description of human society had one set of ethical imperatives for males, as social beings, and another for women, whose ethical imperatives are seen entirely inside the small structure of the home, where they are wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and not really individuals. What this produced, as Moi explains, was a set of constructed "ideals" of love, fidelity, self-sacrifice and so on, that constricted and deformed many human lives and selves.

Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in Amalfi in 1879. The previous winter in Rome he had proposed that women be allowed to be present at the annual general meeting of the Scandinavian Club, and that they should be made eligible to become librarians there. "Is there anyone in this gathering who dares assert that our ladies are inferior to us in culture or intelligence or knowledge or artistic culture?" The motion about the librarianship was carried. The other was lost by one vote. Ibsen was furious. He left the club, and returned to make a furious speech in which he inveighed against the women who had intrigued against him on this question. "They had thrown his gift into the mud. What kind of women are these? They are worse--worse that the dregs, worse than scum." In 1898 he addressed the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights in Christiania. There he delivered a kind of manifesto:

> "I have never written a poem or a play to further a social purpose. I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than most people seem inclined to believe. I thank you for your good wishes, but I must decline the honour of being said to have worked for the Women's Rights Movement. I am not even very sure what Women's Rights really are."

Ibsen was interested in human beings, simply and dramatically...Toril Moi says that Ibsen is the greatest dramatist after Shakespeare, and one reason for his greatness is that he is interested in human beings even more than he is interested in social constructs or systems of belief...He explores both nature and nurture.

There is a true story, in which Ibsen himself was involved, behind *A Doll's House*. It is the story of Laura Kieler, who had written a novel in the 1860s, *Brand's Daughters*, and got to know the Ibsens--Ibsen called her his "skylark". In 1878 she sent the manuscript of another novel, hoping Ibsen would recommend it. He thought it was very bad and said so. She needed money because she had borrowed--as Nora does in the play--to take her tubercular husband to Italy to "save his life". On receiving Ibsen's letter she forged a cheque, was discovered, and treated like a criminal by her husband, who committed her to a lunatic asylum, taking her back only grudgingly.

In Rome, in 1878, Ibsen wrote "Notes for a Modern Tragedy", which describes the moral frame of *A Doll's House*. He writes, among other things: "The wife in the play ends up by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction"; "A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint"; "A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race." Laura Kieler, it should be said, was very distressed by *A Doll's House*, as her situation was widely known.

A. S. Bayatt: "Blaming Nora" published in *The Guardian* (2 May 2009)
http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/may/02/ibsen-a-dolls-house