

# After Nora walks out, what then? By LU XUN

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(In a new translation by Wen-Chao Li)*

What I would like to talk about today is this: After Nora walks out, what then?

Ibsen is a Norwegian literary figure who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century. His works, with the exception of a dozen or so poems<sup>i</sup>, are all plays. There was a period when most of his plays dealt with social issues – these are known to the world as “realistic problem plays”. *Nora*<sup>ii</sup> is one of these “problem plays”.

*Nora* is also known as *Ein Puppenheim*, the Chinese translation for which is *Family of Puppets*. But the term “puppe” refers not only to puppets on strings – it also covers dolls that children play with; by way of metaphorical extension, the term also includes people who do whatever other people tell them to do. In the beginning, Nora was living contentedly in a so-called “happy family”; but she was eventually to wake up to the fact that she was a mere puppet manipulated by her husband, and her children were puppets manipulated by her. And so she walked out. We hear the slam of the door, and then the curtain falls. But I’m sure you’re already familiar with all of this, so I won’t go into the details.

What would it take for Nora not to leave? We might say that Ibsen himself has already provided us with an answer, which is the play *The Lady from the Sea* (*Die Frau vom Meer*), also translated as *Sea Madame* in China. This is about a woman who was already married, but had a lover before the marriage who lived across the sea. One day, the lover appeared out of nowhere and came looking for her, asking her to go away with him. She went and told her husband that she wanted to meet with this outsider. Towards the end of the play, the husband says to her: now you’re totally free. You’re free to choose [whether or not to leave], but you’ll have to bear the consequences yourself”. And that changed everything. She decided not to leave. Had Nora been given the same kind of freedom, then perhaps she would have chosen to stay put.

But Nora did leave after all. What next? Ibsen does not provide us with an answer – what’s more, he’s dead. But even if he weren’t dead, he wouldn’t have been responsible for giving us an answer anyway. This is because Ibsen is a writer of poetry

– he is not the kind of person who identifies social problems and figures out solutions on our behalf. He is like an oriole: the oriole sings because it wants to sing; it is not singing because it wants to amuse people, or because it wants people to benefit from it in some way or other. Ibsen is a man not very attuned to the ways of the world. It is said that, once, at a banquet in which some women got together to show their appreciation for his writing of *A Doll's House*, which gave people new insights into issues such as female self-consciousness and the emancipation of women, Ibsen announced, to everybody's surprise: "That isn't what I meant when I was writing the piece – I was simply composing poetry"<sup>iii</sup>.

So what happens after Nora leaves? Others have expressed their views. An Englishman once wrote a play about a "modern" woman who walked out on her family, but then had nowhere to go and ended up a degenerate in a brothel. And there was a Chinese chap – what shall I call him? – let's say, a writer from Shanghai – he said he had seen a version of *Nora* that was different from the present translation<sup>iv</sup>: Nora comes back in the end. It's a shame no one else has ever seen this version – unless Ibsen himself sent the manuscript to him. But if we were to work at it with some common sense, then Nora, really, is left with only two ways out: either go home, or go to the dogs. Because -- imagine if it were a little bird. While it's true that there's no freedom in a cage, once the bird leaves the cage, there are cats and hawks and other such [predators] outside. And, if it were a bird that's been caged for so long that its wings have become paralyzed – it no longer remembers how to fly – then, really, there's no way out for this bird. Well, there *is* another way out, which is to starve to death. But if it starves to death, then it would no longer be living, which would mean that it would no longer have any problems to deal with – so that's hardly a valid way out.

The most painful thing in life is to wake up from a dream and have nowhere to go. People who dream are in bliss. So unless you can see a way out for these dreamers, it is important not to wake them up. Look at Tang dynasty poet Li He. Now isn't he a man who's spent his entire life in the dregs? Yet on his deathbed he said to his mother: "Mamma, God built this mansion of white jade, and wants me to go and write a piece to celebrate the occasion". Now how can this be anything but a lie? How can it be anything but a dream? Yet here you have a young one facing an old one, one who's dying facing one who lives on; [thanks to these lies and dreams] the dying one is able to die happily, and the living one lives on, at peace with oneself. It is at times like this that lies and dreams serve a great purpose. For this reason, I believe that if there is no way out, then what we need is a dream.

But one should never, ever, dream of the future. Artsybashev<sup>v</sup> once used his novel to question those idealists who dreamt of building a golden world of opportunity, who encouraged others to suffer in the pursuit of this cause. He said: "You promise a golden world of opportunity to their sons and grandsons, but what have you left for they themselves to enjoy?" Well, there *is* something for them to enjoy, and that is their hopes for the future. But this is to be enjoyed at a price. In order to have these hopes, the senses are fine tuned to be so acute as to feel one's pain and suffering in all their intensity; the spirit is summoned to witness one's rotting corpse of a body. At times like this, dreams and lies become vital. So I believe that if there is no way out, then what we need is a dream – not a dream of the future, but a dream in the present.

But since Nora has already woken up from her dream, it is difficult for her to return to that dream state, and she is left with no choice but to leave. Yet once she leaves, at times it seems that her only options are return or ruin. Otherwise, what we need to ask is this: Has she brought anything with her, other than her emancipated mind? If all she has is a mauve woolen scarf like the kind you women in the audience are wearing now, then, be it a two-foot scarf or a three-foot scarf, however wide it is, it is totally useless. She needs to be rich – she needs to have possessions in her suitcase. To put it bluntly, she needs money.

Dreams are fine; otherwise money is essential.

Now “money” is a dirty word – men of taste will scoff at this, but I’ve always believed that when it comes to people’s views, not only can what people say today differ from what they said yesterday, what they say before a meal can also be very different from what they say after a meal. Those who admit that money buys food, yet call money filthy all the same – why, they should take a good look at their stomachs – I’ll bet they still have some fish and steak in there that they haven’t finished digesting yet. I say, starve them for a day, and then hear what they have to say.

So, looking after Nora’s interest, I say money (or economic resources, to put it in more elegant terms) is what concerns her the most. While money cannot buy freedom, freedom can be sold for money. We human beings have a great weakness, and that is that we are often hungry. In order to make up for this weakness -- if we do not want to turn into somebody else’s puppet, then, in the society of this day and age, economic leverage is a must. First of all, within the family, resources should be distributed evenly among men and women. Secondly, within society, men and women should have equal power. It’s a shame I don’t know how to get hold of this kind of power – all I know is that struggle is necessary – and the struggle for economic power may call for even more drastic measures than the struggle for political power.

Demanding economic privileges may sound like a very mundane thing to do, but it may prove to be a lot more tedious than demanding political power or demanding the ever so grand notion of female emancipation and other such things. The world is full of situations where little things are much more difficult to get done than big things. For instance, take a winter like the one we’re going through now. Suppose I only have this coat that I have on me right now, but I have to choose between either saving some poor fellow who’s about to freeze to death, or sitting under a Bodhi tree in meditation, praying for the salvation of all mankind<sup>vi</sup>. Now rescuing a single person may seem trivial compared to the salvation of all mankind, but if I were asked to pick, then without hesitation I’d go straight to the Bodhi tree and sit under it, because that way I wouldn’t have to take off the only coat I have and freeze myself to death. That is why although you may not encounter much resistance when talking about political rights in the home, once the subject changes to the equal distribution of wealth, then the very same people will turn into enemies right before your eyes -- then, of course, a big fight is in order.

Fights are not nice. Besides, we can’t go around telling everyone to become a fighter. That why it’s useful to have some kind of peaceful method – by this I mean the use of parental authority to free our children. In China, parents have absolute authority over their children. When you become parents, you can then use this authority to

distribute your wealth evenly among your offspring, granting every one of them the same economic privileges as their siblings without any squabbles. Some of them may want to use this money to study, others may want to set up business; some may want to enjoy themselves, some may want to use it to do things for society, some may simply spend it all – they can do whatever they like, as long as they hold themselves responsible for it. Now this may all seem pretty far-fetched, but as dreams go, it is a lot more realistic than the idealists' golden world of opportunity. Yet first we need to be able to remember, because forgetfulness is something that serves the self but is detrimental to future generations. Forgetfulness allows us humans to slowly distance ourselves from pain and suffering. But because we forget, we often make the same mistakes that people before us have made over and over again: a daughter-in-law is mistreated by her mother-in-law – but when this same daughter-in-law becomes a mother-in-law herself, she will mistreat *her* daughter-in-law in the same way; officials who detest students are often those same students who used to denounce officials; those who now oppress their children may have been rebels against their own families ten years ago. This probably has something to do with one's age and status, but forgetfulness is also an important factor. The solution would be to tell everyone to go buy a notebook, and write down their every thought and action, so that years later, when they have grown in years and status, they will have this record to go by. For example, when they feel annoyed that their kids want to go to the park, they can get their notebook out, and upon opening it will see an entry that says: "I want to go to Central Park". That will calm them down. The same goes for a lot of other things.

There is something in this world called "ruthlessness", the main ingredient for which is tenacity. After the Boxer's Rebellion, I heard in Tianjin there were these people called "greenheads"<sup>viii</sup> – bums that is – very stubborn, these people. To give an example, every time they carry your luggage for you, they want two dollars. You tell them it's only a *small* piece of luggage -- they say "gimme two dollars"; you tell them it's really not that far – they say "gimme two dollars"; you tell them you don't want them to carry your luggage for you anymore – they say "still gotta gimme two dollars". Now these "greenheads" are hardly the kind of people we want to model ourselves after, but then you've got to give them credit for their tenacity. When demanding economic privileges and somebody tells you this is old hat, you should reply "I want my economic privileges"; they'll say it's too degrading – you should reply "I want my economic privileges"; they'll say the economic system is about to change, by then you'll have nothing to worry about – you should still reply: "I want my economic privileges".

In fact, these days, if somebody like Nora were to leave home, she probably wouldn't have too much trouble surviving, because this is a special person we're talking about – many people will sympathize with her and help her sustain a living. But relying on other people's sympathy for a living already implies giving up one's own freedom. Now suppose there were a hundred Noras who left home, then there would be a lot less sympathy to go around; now suppose there were tens of thousands of Noras who left home – people would start to get annoyed. Far more reliable [than sympathy] would be to have some form of economic leverage in one's own hands.

Now if we manage to acquire economic freedom, does this mean that we are no longer puppets manipulated by others? Puppets we still are. The only difference is that we are less at the mercy of others, and have more people under our thumbs. Because, in

modern society, it's not just women who are at the mercy of men, men are at the mercy of other men, and women at the mercy of other women; there are also men who are at the mercy of women – this isn't something that will change overnight with a few women acquiring economic privileges. But then again we can't just sit there hungrily waiting for our ideal world to drop out of the sky; like a fish lying on a wagon trail desperate for a sprinkling of water<sup>viii</sup>, we need something to ease our gasping, and the quest for down-to-earth economic privileges does just that – it is something to keep us going while we ponder other alternatives.

Then again, so far we've been treating Nora as an ordinary person. Suppose she was special. Suppose she was the kind of person who would be willing to stick her neck out for others – that would make it a different story altogether. We have no right to encourage or entice people to make sacrifices; nor do we have the right to stop people from sacrificing themselves. Mind you, the world is full of people all too happy to make sacrifices, all too happy to suffer pain. There is a legend in Europe that when Jesus was on his way to the Crucifixion he rested under the eaves of a certain Ahasuerus<sup>ix</sup>, and because Ahasuerus turned him away he became accursed, doomed to find no rest until the Day of Judgement. From then on Ahasuerus was not allowed any rest, but had to go on wandering, and wanders on to this day. Wandering is painful, whereas rest is joyful. So why doesn't Ahasuerus take a rest? Well, there is the curse to blame, but one might also say that it is because wandering is more enjoyable than resting in one place – and so he goes on and on, wandering like mad.

But the choice of sacrifice is a personal one which has nothing to do with the kind of social commitment touted by revolutionaries. The masses (especially Chinese masses) are always suckers for a good show. When it's time for sacrifice, if the martyr is bold and daring, they applaud the tragedy; if the victim is timid and distraught, they see it as comedy. I know some guys who love to hang out in front of a Beijing mutton shop and watch the butcher skin sheep, their mouths gaping wide, as if enjoying the whole thing. *There's* human sacrifice for you – I don't think the sacrifice of a person would mean any more to these people than the slaughter of sheep. What's more, when the whole thing's over, they have but to walk a few steps, and what little joy there is will soon fade from memory.

In dealing with these masses, the only cure appears to be to deprive them of their entertainment; poignant sacrifices won't do – what we need to do is to fight on with vicious tenacity.

A pity it is that change does not come easily in China – this is a place where anything from moving a table to refitting a stove will almost always end in bloodshed – and the shedding of blood does not always guarantee that the table can be moved, that the stove can be refitted. It will take some hard lashing on the back with a giant whip [to bring about change] – China simply is not going to move of its own accord. I believe this lashing is going to come sooner or later (whether or not it's a good thing is another matter), but China is definitely going to be hit hard. As for where this blow will come from, how it's going to come, I really cannot say with any certainty.

And that concludes my talk.

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- i Lu Xun underestimated the number of Ibsen's poetic works, which runs to between seventy and eighty.
- ii Chinese name for *A Doll's House*.
- iii Most likely a reference to a speech Ibsen made at a banquet offered in his honor by the Norwegian Society for Women's Rights on May 26, 1898, during which he declared:

I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose . . . I must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for women's rights. I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights. And if you read my works carefully you will realize that. Of course it is incidentally desirable to solve the woman question [*sic*]; but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings" (Tornqvist, Egil: *Ibsen: A Doll's House*. Cambridge University Press. 1995, p. 6).

- iv "In 1880 the actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, about to play Nora in the German premiere, refused to perform the original ending on the grounds that she herself, as a mother, would never desert her children as Nora deserted hers. Ibsen, unwillingly, wrote an alternative ending (in which Helmer persuades Nora to 'think again of the little ones', and leads her to the children's door, where she collapses as the curtain falls). This subverts the entire point of the play, restores the status quo and destroys Nora's moral character – something Ibsen acknowledged by describing it as a 'barbaric outrage' on the play, and which the actress admitted by dropping the ending as soon as she could in favour of the original" (McLeish, Kenneth (tr): *A Doll's House*. London: Nick Hern Books. 1994, p. xii).

- v Mikhail Petrovich Artsybashev (1878-1927). In his best-known work *Sanin*, the main character (Sanin) scoffs at the idea of self sacrifice for the sake of ideals. Sanin's principle seems to be that between man and happiness there must be nothing; a man must freely and fearlessly give himself up to all the pleasures available to him. (*Sanin*, Chap. 9)

- vi Allusion to Sakyamuni, founder of Buddhism, who attained enlightenment while meditating under a Bodhi tree, praying for the salvation of all mankind.

- vii Not unlike squiggly merchants in the United States, except, rather than wiping windshields at intersections, they offer to carry luggage for people at railway stations.

- viii From *Zhuangzi*: "Zhuang Zhou was poor, and went to the Marquis Wen of Wei for food. The Marquis said, "Sure – when I collect my taxes [at the end of the year], I'll lend you three hundred gold pieces. How does that sound?" Zhuang Zhou was red with anger. He said, "On my way here yesterday, I heard some moaning in the middle of the road. I looked back, and there, lying smack in the track of my wheels was a carp. I said to him, 'Little carp, what are you doing here?' The carp replied, 'I am a subject of the Lord of the Waves on the Eastern Seas. Could you spare a cup of water to save my life?' I said, 'Sure. I shall travel south to the kingdoms of Wu and Yue, divert the waters of the River Shu, and use that water to give you a grand welcome. How does that sound?' The carp was red with anger: 'I've lost my natural habitat, man! I've got no way to live. All I need is a cup of water in order to survive – but you come and give me all this big talk. Well, you might as well go look for me in the market where they sell dried fish.'"

- ix Legend of Ahasuerus [Ahasaerus; Ahasverus] the Wandering Jew. A reference in John 18:20-22 to an officer who struck Jesus at his arraignment before Annas is sometimes cited as the basis for the legend. The medieval English chronicler Roger of Wendover describes in his *Flores Historiarum* how an archbishop from Greater Armenia, visiting England in 1228, reported that there was in Armenia a man formerly called Cartaphilus who claimed he had been Pontius Pilate's doorkeeper and had struck Jesus on his way to Calvary, urging him to go faster. Jesus replied, "I go, and you will wait till I return". The legend was revived in 1602 in a German pamphlet "Kurze Beschreibung und Erzählung von einem Juden mit namen Ahasverus" ["A Brief Description and Narration Regarding a Jew Named Ahasuerus"]. This version, in which the name Ahasuerus is first given to the wanderer, describes how in Hamburg in 1542, Paulus von Eitzen, a Lutheran bishop of Schleswig, met

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an aged Jew who claimed to have taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion. He received the reply "I stand and rest, but you will go on". (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* 12: 484)