# Bossing the Boss: Repression and Rebellion in the Works of Ibsen and Pinter

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This article posits that the underdogs or the repressed in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965) revolt against their superiors, thus asserting, in an epic manner, themselves on their bosses or tormentors. These landmark plays of Ibsen, a world leading and iconic dramatist, and of Pinter, the 2005 winner of Noble Prize in literature, present gnawingly repressed and avidly rebellious young ladies who defy societal and familiar rules as they battle to extricate themselves from the bossy dispositions of men who hold their liberty and dignity hostage. From the onset, Ibsen's Torvald, Krogstad, and Nora's father bully and menace Nora while Pinter's Max and his sons bully and strive to coerce Ruth into a sex object. Notwithstanding the odds on their path, these ladies challenge, champion, and change the crushing conventions that have been a thorn in the flesh of generations of women.

One acknowledges the validity and well-informed opinions of critics such as Joan Templeton, who holds that in *A Doll's House:*

> Patriarchy's socialization of women into creatures is the major accusation in Nora's account to Torvald of how first her father, and then he, used her for their amusement…how she had no right to think for herself, only the duty to accept their opinions. Excluded from meaning anything, Nora has never been subject, only object. (142)

*A Doll's House* opens with Nora laughing and humming, as she is pre-occupied with the Christmas tree (Ibsen 1), but the melodious atmosphere is permeated by Torvald's authoritative, repressive voice, "Is that my little lark twittering out there?" (Ibsen 1), and as an abused person, indeed, Nora timidly responds, "Yes, it is" (Ibsen 1). To exert his overwhelming authority on Nora, Torvald contemptuously calls Nora a *little skylark, twittering, little squirrel, little featherbrain, little songbird, little prodigal, little Nora, little one, little bird, little sweet-tooth, little obstinate, little scatterbrain, little woman, little miss stubborn, helpless little creature, my capricious little girl, lovely little thing, my little bride, my frightened little songbird* and *a poor frightened helpless little darling* (Ibsen, Act one)**.** The diminutive, insolent term, "little," is used on Nora at least twenty times in the first act of the play in a marriage wherein the relationship is vertical and not horizontal. That is, a relationship in which Nora is the object and Torvald is the subject, or say, a union that has Torvald at the peak of power and Nora at the bottom in a world where men are perceived as saviors for women. In what seems to be sarcasm, Emma Goldman states,

> Nora is the beloved, adored wife of Torvald Helmer. He is an admirable man, rigidly honest, of high moral ideals, and passionately devoted to his wife and children. In short, a good man and an enviable husband. Almost every mother would be proud of such a match for her daughter, and the latter would consider herself fortunate to become the wife of such a man. (1)

To accentuate his own false sense of supremacy, Torvald depicts Nora as a mediocre, lavish, obstinate, frightened, and secretive ill-mannered woman who must be rescued from her own ignorance and flaws. Torvald sporadically placates the term "little" with "darling" and "sweet," clichés which cannot be misconstrued for love. After all, when Torvald refers to Nora as a "lovely little thing" the word "thing" subverts "lovely" in the phrase, thus stripping Nora of human dignity.

Viewing Nora as a puppet wife, Torvald controls her thoughts and movements. By insisting on re-teaching Nora how to dance tarantella, Torvald reveals his dominance and haughty attitude:

TORVALD. Not so violently, Nora!
NORA. This is the way.
TORVALD. [Stops playing] No, no – that is not a bit right.
RANK. Let me play for her.
TORVALD. [getting up]. Yes, do. I can correct her better then.
NORA. [as she dances]. Such is fun, Christine!
TORVALD. Stop, Rank; this is sheer madness. Stop, I tell you! [Rank stops playing, and Nora suddenly stands still]. (Ibsen 48-49)

Additionally, Torvald's bossy character is in display after the dance when he commands Nora to have sex with him, "Am I not your husband?" (Ibsen 58). He infers that Nora's responsibility as a wife is to please him when he wants or on command. Moreover, he treats Nora as a child and his personal treasure, property.

Torvald is hesitant in giving Nora money because he fears she will squander it on cookies. Noticing that Nora is being treated as a kid and being deprived of her dignity, Dr. Rank, a family friend, whispers to Torvald to allow Nora to express herself: "You mustn't contradict her," but Torvald takes Nora in his arms and says: "The child shall have her way" (Ibsen 49). Besides treating Nora as a child, he also considers her his property. He calls her his "dearest treasure" that is "all my very own" (Ibsen 57). The duty he designs for Nora is to please him, play with children, and do needlework, yet he strives to still find fault in the way these duties are handled. For example, he calls the knitting of Nora's friend, Mrs. Linde, "ungraceful" and insists on teaching both Nora and Mrs. Linde how to embroider in a way that resonates with what he calls the Chinese effect: "Yes, it's far more becoming. Let me show you. You hold the embroidery thus in your left hand and use the needle with the right – like this – with a long easy sweep. Do you see?" (Ibsen 56). This persistent bossy dispositions force Nora to tiptoe in her own house each time Torvald is around: "[She] goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens" (Ibsen 1). Nora loses her liberty and happiness in a home she calls her own, as Torvald berates and intimidates her at every turn.

Torvald demonstrates his insidiousness and hostility towards Nora when she borrows money from Krogstad to heal him without his consent. He quickly reduces Nora to a wretched woman, liar, hypocrite, criminal, woman of no religion, no morality, no sense of duty, a shiftless woman, and forbids her from bringing up her own biological children after learning she borrowed money without his knowledge and approval: "I shall not allow you to bring up the children….I shan't dare trust you with them… from now on, there'll be no question of happiness, but only of saving the ruin of it, the fragments the mere facades…" (Ibsen 62-63). To this effect, Ian Johnston says:

> Torvald has no sympathetic understanding of people…, he treats Mrs. Linde very casually. She is an unimportant person, irrelevant to Torvald's sense of himself. Hence, she is hardly worth noticing. And Torvald's relationship with Dr. Rank does not include any complex and understanding sympathy for what that man is going through. (2000 lecture)

Contrary to Torvald's conduct, Nora respects him prior to being compelled to fight frantically to boss him. The strong love she has for her husband is amplified in her selflessness and eagerness in saving his life. She disregards all social, legal, and moral implications by forging her father's name on a note and using it to borrow money to save Torvald's life. When Krogstad, from whom the money is borrowed, threatens Nora: "Your husband is going to kick me downstairs again into the mud and you will keep me company in that mud" (Ibsen 23), Nora does not fear for herself but for her beloved husband.

Nora's kindness drives her to work tenaciously to pay the money she borrowed with a forged check to save an ungrateful, bossy husband:

> Whenever Torvald has given me money for new dresses and such things I spent more than half of it; I have always bought the simplest and cheapest things…. But it was often very hard on me, Christine-because it is delightful to be really well dressed, isn't it? .... Well, then I have found other ways of earning money. Last winter I was lucky enough to get a lot of copying to do, so I locked myself up and sat writing every evening until quite late at night. Many a time I was desperately tired, but all the same it was a tremendous pleasure…. (Ibsen 13)

Nora knows, according to James McFarlane, that "She has committed a crime and she is proud of it; because she did it for the love of her husband and to save his life. But the husband, with his conventional views of honour, stands on the side of the law and looks at the affair with male eyes" (McFarlane 437).

Nora is fed-up with Torvald and the later senses Nora's growing self-determination and potential rebellion, and he tells Linde, "She [Nora] is terribly self-willed, this sweet little person. What are we to do with her? You will hardly believe that I had almost to bring her away [from that dance] by force" (Ibsen 55). Torvald senses danger, but is drunk with power, imperiousness and fails to know that "experience in all ages has proved that everyman who possesses power is inclined to abuse it; he goes on exercising it until he comes up against the limits" (Montesquieu 253). The following dialogue shows Nora's rebellion and challenge to Torvald's authority:

> TORVALD. [Walking about the room]. What a horrible awakening! All these eight years-she who was my joy and pride-a hypocrite, a liar-worse, worse-a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all! For shame! For shame! [Nora is silent and looks steadily at him. He stops in front of her.] …. All your father wants is principle-be silent!-all your father want of principles has come out of you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty.
>
> NORA. When I am out of the way you will be free.
> TORVALD. No fine speeches, please. Your father always had plenty of those ready too….You will still remain in my house, that is a matter of course. But I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not trust them to you.
>
> NORA. Sit down. It will take some time. I have much to talk over with you.
> TORVALD. [sits down at the opposite end of the table] You alarm me, Nora! – and I don't understand you.
>
> NORA. No, that is just it. You don't understand me, and I have never understood you either -before tonight. No, you mustn't interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say. Torvald, this is a settling of accounts.
>
> TORVALD. What do you say?
> NORA. I must stand quite alone if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for that reason that I cannot remain with you any longer.
>
> TORVALD. Nora, Nora!
> NORA. I am going away from here now, at once. I am sure Christine will take me in for the night. (Ibsen 62-67)

Nora's use of imperative sentences such as "sit down," "you mustn't interrupt me," and "you must simply listen to what I say" is an affront to Torvald's position in his own turf, home and his invincibility. Nora exercises what Max Weber calls "domination by virtue of authority, i.e., power to command and duty to obey" (30). Nora commands Torvald to "sit down" and "simply listen" and he does just that.

Torvald shifts from ordering Nora to be being ordered by her. He confesses: "You alarm me, Nora!" while obeying the command and his previous words to Nora, "I have brought wings to shelter you under…. I will protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claws" (Ibsen 65) are vacuous. With his crumbling supremacy, he is rapidly becoming a doll (plaything) in his own dollhouse, and besides obeying her orders, he further promises to "believe" what she says (Ibsen 72), and will "gladly work night and day" for her (Ibsen 70). What a turn of events! In a self-assured manner, Nora tells the baffled Torvald, "I have fought a hard fight these three days" (Ibsen 64), as she claims the position of a boss and insists, "I believe before all else I am a reasonable human being just as you are" (Ibsen 68). To escape from bondage and assume the commanding rule, Nora withdraws anything that stands for her authority from Torvald, including a wedding ring, and

> When Nora leaves Torvald, who sits with his face buried in his hands; when the dull thud of the great door below is heard, we are profoundly shaken by the domestic tragedy we have seen enacted. We feel too crushed to applaud. Having had the misfortune to be born of the male sex, we slink away in shame, vowing to mend our ways. (Weigand 26)

Torvald's position crashes and burns and he covers his face to hide from the wife he has abused and from the world that gives a false sense of ultimate supremacy. Such false sense of everlasting supremacy is also seen in Pinter's *The Homecoming*, which delineates Ruth's painful journey through domination to the acquisition of authority in a world of sex maniacs and bellicose men.

Pinter's Ruth suddenly finds herself in the midst of brutal men, who attempt to boss her, but she maps her way from the periphery to the center in the play and bosses her male bosses. Ruth, who is erroneously perceived as feeble, arms herself with sexual tricks and with wisdom as a former butcher (Max), a boxer (Joey), a murderer (Lenny), a war veteran (Sam), and a professor of philosophy (Teddy) surround her. Although Ruth ends of breaking all hegemonic barriers that have ensnared, dominated, and battered her female predecessors, she arrives at the scene in which all odds were against her. Prior to her arrival at the scene, Jessie, the late wife of Max, has been submerged in the bossy dispositions of males around her, including her husband, Max who describes her as follows: "mind you, she [Jessie] wasn't such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn't such a bad bitch. I gave her the best bleeding years of my life, anyway" (Pinter 9). Like Ibsen's Nora, Pinter's Jessie was bossed and psychologically bruised by her own husband. The arrival of Ruth symbolizes the return of Jessie to challenge and boss the men who made her life miserable. Like the late Jessie, Ruth has three sons, yet is perceived as a kid by the male who each claim to be her boss. Ruth is, nevertheless, different in her unwavering resolve to reverse the status quo, even if it means using sex as a bait.

As soon as Ruth sets foot on Max's home, a lieu of repression, she elects to wrestle a butcher, a boxer, and a murderer. Teddy, Ruth's husband, with whom she visits her in-laws in London, loses his authority to his usually obedient wife. Ruth repudiates nearly everything Teddy asks her to do as soon as they step into the home of her in-laws. Ruth uses the word "no" more than eight times that night, as Teddy tries, to no avail, to convince her to go to bed and not to go for a walk alone late at night (Pinter 20-23). Unfortunately, this defiance happens when

> Teddy has, in many ways, returned to show off, to boost of his successes in work and marriage, and display his superiority. He has risen above his working-class background; he is a "professor of philosophy", possessor (in his mind) of a trophy wife, and like his father, has three boys. He has euphemistically come home to rub his family's face in his success. Teddy is rationalizing his capacity to dominate his family. (Krasner 478-497)

Challenging her husband by going for a walk late at night and without the company or protection of a male is her first victory before she confronts Lenny, a woman beater and a murderer.

Lenny's complaint about some little and gnawing disturbance foreshadows Ruth's imminent dominance: "It's just that something keeps waking me up. Some kind of a thick" (Pinter 25), a thing that is considered "common place" (Pinter 28). Metaphorically, Ruth is this "common place" "something" that troubles the almighty Lenny and would soon lead the males who wield power at whim. Lenny's fears rapidly become reality as Ruth challenges his authority by correcting him the very first time they meet:

LENNY: Good evening.
RUTH: Good morning, I think.
LENNY: You're right there. (Pinter 31)

Sensing the crumbling of his long-held authority, Lenny attempts to assert his masculinity, authority, and brutality by boasting to Ruth how he murdered a woman:

> I clumped her one…on my mind…to kill her…as killings go, it would have been a simple matter…this lady…just sliding the wall, following the blow I 'd given her…why go to all the bother…getting rid of the corpse…so I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that. (Pinter 31)

Referring to a different woman, he also tells Ruth, "I just gave her a short-arm jab to the belly and jumped on a bus outside" for not giving " [me] a helping hand" (Pinter 33). As soon as Lenny finishes narrating how he has been abusive to women, Ruth continues to challenge him and to take charge:

LENNY: Excuse me, shall I take this ashtray out of your way?
RUTH: It's not in my way.
LENNY: It seems to be in the way of your glass…and now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass.
Ruth: I haven't quite finished.
LENNY: You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.
RUTH: No, I haven't.
LENNY: Quite sufficient, in my own opinion.
RUTH: Not in mine, Leonard. (Pinter 34)

Ruth warns Lenny, "if you take the glass… I'll take you" (Pinter 34), and indeed, takes control of Lenny and others in the play.

After her victory over this murderer (Lenny), Ruth sexually teases Joey, a boxer, for two hours. Ruth holds male characters hostage, and even reduces them to animals: Although Max, the oldest person in the family seems embarrassed by Ruth's sexual passion and its impact on the family, he, too, is crushed by Ruth's sex weapon. He asks,"Where's the whore [Ruth]? Still in Bed? She'll make us all animals" (Pinter 68), but ends up on his knees, moaning and sobbing as he earnestly begs Ruth for a scrap of her love, "I'm not an old man…. Do you hear me? …kiss me" (Pinter 82).

Max, a brutal man who insists, "I worked as a butcher all my life, using the chopper and the slab…." (Pinter 47) is helpless in the face of Ruth whom he has just called, a "smelly scrubber", "stinking pox-ridden slut", "filthy scrubber" and "disease" (Pinter 41-42**).** Ruth is daring enough to wrestle a butcher and determined enough to not be cowed into submission by the aggressive Max. Indeed, the frequency of the use of words such as "knock,"" "tuck," "hit," "jab," and "box" in this play, suggests the violent behavior of characters, a behavior that Ruth easily overcomes. Ruth shows a mastery of knowledge by making other characters inferior in philosophical discourse. Ruth quickly challenges her husband's knowledge on philosophy, suggesting that besides using sex as a bait to capture those who menace her, she is intellectually equipped enough to win in an intellectual exchange:

> Look at me. I …move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear…underwear…which moves with me…it…captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg…moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict…your observation to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant… than the words which come through them. You must bear that…possibility…in mind. (Pinter 52-53)

Embarrassed by his wife's logical argument and his own intellectual inaptitude on a subject he claims to be an expert on, Teddy quickly switches the discussion: "I was born quit near here" (Pinter 51-53). The astuteness of Ruth in this response throws all characters off, and compels Teddy to seek her help in teaching his philosophy classes: "You can help me with my lectures when we get back. I'd love that, I'd be so grateful for it, really" (Pinter 55). To Rosca Alina Elena, in "Mimicking Subjection to *the Name- of- the -Father* in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*,"

> Rather than attacking or contesting patriarchy, Ruth chooses to dismantle this myth in a more intelligent and secure way. She confirms men's manufactured, illusory dominance, opposing no resistance to the stereotypical role they build for her, only to bring to the fore women's operational independence and agency. Feminity comes to occupy the medium of solid action and factual operation, while men remain caught in a fictional web of ineffectual passivity, waiting for their desires to be confirmed and satisfied by women. (92-99)

To demonstrate that she can survive on her own, Ruth refuses to return to the U.S. with her husband to meet their children, thus turning her back to the role of motherhood traditionally assigned to women. Like Ibsen's Nora, she must leave behind her children in search of her own identity and values and must prove to men that her role extends beyond the status quo. Ruth ascertains that she has a final say on the contract her in-laws attempt to put in place for her, thus repositioning herself as a seat of authority in the play.

The foregoing discussion and evidence depict Ibsen's Nora and Pinter's Ruth as reincarnated, but empowered repressed women in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Pinter's *The Homecoming* respectively.

The repression they experience from men in their lives and around them propel them to fight against their superiors, thus asserting themselves as full-blown human beings who can wield power and take authority over their persecutors. Nora and Ruth tear down the yoke of bondage to assume positions of bosses and to demonstrate that claims of the superiority of men are a social construct that give men a false sense of supremacy in every and all domains. By defying societal and familiar rules that hold their liberty and dignity hostage, Nora and Ruth, who are ambassadors of all women, show that the repressed can disentangle themselves from their situations and that being a boss is not a birthright for men, and so, they challenge, champion, and change the male hegemonic landscape that from time immemorial has besieged women.

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