



A Textual and Contextual Reading of Selected Dialogic Text:

A Doll's House

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Abstract

Drama texts or dialogic texts can be interpreted and analysed from textual or thematic perspectives. We can use linguistic methodologies to explain the diverse and complex nature of drama texts. Literary and stylistic dimensions have a significant role in interpreting text organisation and meaning using linguistic factors which can reveal the purpose of dialogic texts. A play is actually a type of narration. That is what the playwright means to say through the play. This paper aims to examine the textual and contextual aspects of dialogic texts in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). A drama text is a play in which a conversation is carried out by the interlocutors about a topic. A theme or topic may or may not be directly inferred by the characters' conversation. The systemic functional approach of Halliday, from the textual and contextual perspective, will be applied to the dialogues extracted from *A Doll's House*. Those dialogues are also to be analysed as mansplaining, a neologism which refers to how a man shows that he knows and understands more than a female does.

Keywords: dialogic texts, thematic interpretations, mansplaining, *A Doll's House*

Introduction

The present study aims to examine the textual and contextual aspects of dialogic texts in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The systemic functional approach of Halliday, mainly from the textual and contextual perspective, will be applied to the dialogues extracted from *A Doll's House*. Those dialogues will also be analysed in terms of mansplaining. We will briefly talk about Halliday's systemic functional approach before we deal with analysis of the selected dialogic texts. Language has various functions which serve in human communications and interactions. These functions can be stated as expressive, social-interactive, informative and directive. (Gramley & Patzold, 2004, p.152)

The expressive function deals with revealing emotions as joy, anger and frustration. The social-interactive, informative and directive are about containing expressions of the spoken and written actual texts. If the interaction contains some business, it is called informative. If the addresser and addressee talk about their plans and give instructions to each other then it be-

comes directive. Dialogic conversations include much more interactive communicative language binding the social ties between addresser and addressee. (Biber, 1988, p.114) The study tries to interpret the basic principles of communication, semantics, mansplaining and their reflection in language use (dialogic texts). They help language users understand and use language in context of dialogic communications.

Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014) is thought to have given rise to the term 'mansplaining'. The term is defined by *Oxford Dictionary* as "to explain something to a woman in a way that shows he thinks he knows and understands more than she does". Solnit writes "women . . . being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property, now or ever." (2014, p. 21)

The interactions undertaken by women and men "with gendered domains (those sets of linguistic routines or contexts which appear to be gendered) and gendered stereotypes of what it is assumed that women and men can do". (Mills & Mullany, 2011, p.50) However, this paper does not aim to focus on mansplaining from a gender relations and feminism perspective or scope. It does not also deal with gendered identity. Mansplaining serves here for showing associations between men and women in particular contexts. The contexts and situations reveal man talks much and woman talks little. It is simply about how man and woman are acting in different contexts and situations. We have chosen the dialogues exchanged between Nora and her husband, Helmer, and Nora and Krogstad. In other words, one female, two males.

Methodology: Halliday's Systemic Functional Approach

Drama texts or dialogic texts can be interpreted and analysed textually and thematically. Linguistic methodologies are used to explain the diverse and complex nature of drama texts. Literary and stylistics dimensions have a significant role in text organisation and interpretation of texts using the linguistic factors. According to this principle, we can come up with a more categorical viewpoint using linguistic dimensions which interact to complement each other to produce the common truth. Dascal (2003) puts it as:

These dimensions do tolerate each other not because they are (un)able to dominate the others, but because they acknowledge the value and specific contribution of each other in allowing language to function effectively. (p.460)

Here, we adopt an eclectic approach to our study as truth cannot be comprehended and encompassed by any one theory, approach or point of view.

Halliday regards language as "a social semiotic that is as vital part of social life, enabling people to exchange meanings and thereby functioning in society." (1994, p. 39) To his systemic functional approach, the relationship between grammar and context and the relationship between language and its cultural context are indispensable elements. To Halliday, "grammatical system and vocabulary must be developed within a particular culture to give room for humans to achieve their social purpose." (1994, p.40) This approach aims to establish a relationship between language in context and context of culture. Halliday categorizes three lines of meaning as: theme, subject, and actor. They are as following:

- (i) The theme functions in the structure of the clause as a message. A clause has meaning as a message, a quantum of information; the theme is the point of departure for the message. It is the element the speaker selects for 'grounding' what he is going on to say.
- (ii) The subject functions in the structure of the clause as an exchange. A clause has meaning as an exchange, a transaction between speaker and listener; the subject is the warranty of the exchange. It is the element the speaker makes responsible for the validity of what he is saying.

- (iii) The actor functions in the structure of the clause as representation. A clause has meaning as a representation of some process in ongoing human experience; the actor is the active participant in that process. It is the element the speaker portrays as the one that does the deed. (1994, p.82)

According to Halliday's model, while register describes the situational context, the semantic plane describes the systems of linguistic choices directly realized by grammatical structures. (1994, p.83) The lexicon and grammar achieve meaningful choices made on the semantic plane. The theme, actor and subject will be dealt with as mansplaining in the contextual plane of the language.

Preliminary Critical Notes on *A Doll's House* (1879)

A Doll's House is a social realist play in three acts by Henrik Ibsen. It is called a domestic tragedy as well by some drama critics. It deals with an ordinary family – Torvald Helmer, a bank lawyer, his wife Nora, and their three children in 19th century Norway. While Torvald regards himself as the sole breadwinner and moral member of the family, his wife, Nora, as a beautiful and irresponsible woman whose job it is to make her husband and children happy and comfortable. Some unwanted and hard-minded outsiders come and intrude into this family. One of them, Krogstad, threatens to reveal the forgery and fraud committed by Nora without the knowledge of her husband to obtain a loan to save her husband's life. Nora fakes her father's signature to get the loan from the bank but she has no idea about the seriousness of her action and she has no idea about the law and outside world, either.

With the loan, she intends to cover her husband's travel costs to the south, Italy. On doctor's advice, Torvald should travel south to recover from his illness. When Nora's act of fraud is uncovered, her husband goes mad and reacts with utmost rage and accuses her of putting his social reputation in jeopardy. He calls her an irresponsible, stupid thing and daughter of her father. Nora is totally disillusioned about her husband; she sees his true colours. At the end of the play, Nora proclaims her independence from her husband and children, and leaves them behind by slamming the door of the house. (McFarlane, 1989, p. 243)

Analysis: *A Doll's House* as a Dialogic Text

Text types should be mentioned before we deal with the analysis of the play. Hatim and Mason define text type as "a conceptual framework which enables us to classify texts in terms of communicative intentions serving an overall rhetorical purpose" (1990, p.140), so drama is a text written in dialogue form to be staged or performed. Drama text is actually a play in which a conversation is carried out by characters about a topic. Theme or topic may not directly be inferred by the characters' conversation. But we, as readers or audience, will find out the message or theme of the play during the different events in the play and through various references used by the characters.

We can state that each conversation between characters is directly or indirectly related to the main theme of the play. In terms of subjective point of view, the play is actually a type of narration. That is what the playwright means to say through the play. It is known that the narrative text consists of a series of events with a subject connecting many different parts with a thematic unity. As a rule, the events in a typical play are given in a chronological order. A drama text, as a narration text, includes dramatic excitement with a pivotal turning point. It may also contain the initial and final solution in which the context of situation is reflected.

To Fairclough (2001), interpretation is "the indirect relationship between text and social structures saying that this relationship is mediated first of all by the discourse which the text is part

of, because the values of textual features only become real, socially operative if they are embedded in social interaction.” (p.117) What we infer from this is that texts can be produced and interpreted against certain assumptions and values of the social context.

We intend to demonstrate how the different contextual, semantic, and mansplaining features work in dialogic texts. *A Doll's House* will be analysed and interpreted from the perspective of the goals mentioned above.

Consider the following together:

HELMER. And what's in this parcel? (1)

NORA [shrinking]. No, Torvald! You mustn't see that all tonight! (2)

HELMER. I don't want to be disturbed. 'Bought', did you say? All that? Has my little spendthrift been out squandering money again? (3) (McFarlane & Arup (trans.), 1981, Act One, p.3)

In the first exchange above, the dialogues are between husband, Helmer and wife, Nora. In dialogue (1), Helmer explicitly wants to see what the parcel contains as he suspects that his wife, Nora, may have bought unnecessary things and he believes that they must be cautious with money. He believes that Nora is a spendthrift. In (2) what we see is that Nora seems to be hiding something from Helmer. She uses the modality “mustn't” which shows the manner of the action and it refers to the same topic. In (3) Helmer talks to Nora as he would to a child and accuses her of being ‘spendthrift’. The dialogues interacted by the characters reveal the rheme/theme feature in the situation and text. From the mansplaining perspective, Helmer has upper hand over all financial matters and he is determined to keep Nora in her place by showing he knows and understands everything better than Nora.

Consider the following dialogue between Helmer and Nora again:

HELMER. There, there! My little singing bird mustn't go drooping her wings, eh? Has it got the sulks, that little squirrel of mine? Nora, what did you think I've got here?

NORA [*quickly turning round*]. Very well, money! (Act One, p.3)

Nora actually protests against Helmer's attitude but she does it by using carefully selected words and phrases. For example, she uses ‘very well’ which is actually a protest. As Nora is just a housewife, she cannot have any authority over her husband. During the nineteenth century women did not have any right to property and money. Helmer's calling his wife ‘little squirrel’, and ‘little spendthrift’ is another example which reflects not only Helmer's behavioural or socio-context of the situation but also the view of society towards women in the 19th century. Ibsen beautifully puts it in the play. “My little singing bird mustn't go drooping her wings...” demonstrating that Nora has no authority over her husband and she is disappointed by her husband. She is regarded as a singing pet bird by Helmer.

Let us have a look at the following dialogues exchanged between Nora and Helmer:

HELMER. Nora, Nora! Just like a woman! Seriously though, Nora you know what I think about these things. No debts! Never borrow! There's always something inhibited, something unpleasant, about a home built on credit and borrowed money. We two have managed to stick it out so far, and that's the way we'll go on for the little time that remains.

NORA. Very well, just as you say, Torvald.

HELMER. Yes, but supposing something like that did happen... what then?

NORA. If anything as awful as that did happen, I wouldn't care if I owed anybody anything or not.

HELMER. Yes, but what about people I'd borrowed from? (Act One, p.3)

The context is money or family finance again. Helmer thinks that Nora does not know anything about money matters, so he warns her to be careful with it. As in the case of finance, Nora does not know much about it, but he only knows about money. His exclamations 'No debts! Never borrow' demonstrate his strong belief that she has no idea about family income and money matters. Again mansplaining is explicitly exhibited by him. Concerning what others will think of them is not taken seriously by Nora but Helmer. She seems to only care for her family. He merely thinks about what society will think of him, not Nora, if he cannot pay back the borrowed sum. As part of socio-cultural context, his behaviour reflects his mansplaining. Social context does not matter to her while it totally matters to him.

HELMER. Nora! Here we go again, you and your frivolous ideas! Suppose I went and borrowed a thousand crowns today and you went and spent it all over Christmas, then on New Year's Eve a slate fell and hit me on the head and there I was... (Act One, p. 2)

Here again, he accuses her of being spendthrift and having frivolous ideas about money borrowing by reminding Nora that without his financial support she could not live. Helmer is unwilling to borrow any money from anyone. What is inferred from his utterance is that, from a mansplaining perspective, he should weigh in all advantages and disadvantages if he borrowed money. His belief is that he has to think about their future as well. Financial matters seem to be of great concern for only Helmer. Actually, the socio-context makes him to care for money matters in order not to tarnish his manly image.

In the following dialogue, the conversation takes place between Helmer and Nora. They talk about Krogstad. Consider the following dialogue together:

NORA. ... Tell me, was it really something terribly wrong this man Krogstad did? (Act One, p.32)

She asks him this question to find out what wrong Krogstad did, so she retorts to 'yes/no' question. The subject and theme is Krogstad. She wants to find out why Helmer does not think anything good about him.

HELMER. Forgery. Have you any idea what that means? (Act One, p.32)

He answers it by stating what Krogstad did. From a mansplaining view, only he knows what forgery is not her. Again the theme is Krogstad.

NORA. Perhaps circumstances left him no choice? (Act One, p.32)

She avoids directly blaming Krogstad as she cites 'circumstances' as a possible cause for it. If she talked about it from mansplaining perspective, she would not be citing 'circumstances' at all. Actually, she indirectly wants him to see it from a different perspective rather than putting a direct blame on him. While Helmer freely utters what he thinks about Krogstad, Nora is very careful with her choice of words not to confront him directly.

HELMER. Maybe. Or perhaps, like so many others, he just didn't think. I am not so heartless that I would necessarily want to condemn a man for a single mistake like that. (Act One, p. 32)

Helmer seems to be determined not to change his mind about Krogstad though he says ‘I am not so heartless’. He might be consciously or unconsciously under the social pressure. Krogstad is again theme and subject of the exchange.

NORA. Oh no, Torvald, of course not! (Act One, p.32)

She objects to him but she fails to change his mind. Her objection is minor one as she is just a woman.

HELMER. Many a man might be able to redeem himself if he honestly confessed his guilt and took his punishment. (Act One, p.32)

He thinks that Krogstad is just guilty and wants him to confess his guilt frankly and compensate for it by a possible punishment.

NORA. Punishment? (Act One, p.32)

She is absolutely puzzled. Her exclamation ‘punishment’ is a query for what kind of punishment there would be.

HELMER. But that wasn’t the way Krogstad chose. He dodged what was due to him by a cunning trick. And that’s what has been the cause of his corruption. (Act One, p. 33)

His answer clarifies the situation. Krogstad is again the subject and theme of the conversation. The dialogues have just shown us that whatever the topic or theme of the conversation is the initiative is taken by the mansplaining character, Helmer. Nora is regarded as the one who knows, understands and comprehends almost nothing.

HELMER. My dear Nora, as a lawyer I know what I’m talking about. Practically all juvenile delinquents come from homes where the mother is dishonest. (Act Two, p.33)

He addresses Nora patronisingly as ‘my dear’ but he does not really mean it. He just thinks that she should open her eyes to the things which she is unfamiliar with. He uses his greater knowledge to impose his will on Nora. He also uses ‘practically’. It shows that he exactly knows the situation well. He delineates the social context and situation.

NORA. Why mothers particularly? (Act One, p.33)

By using ‘wh’ question, she tries to figure out the reason why Helmer puts the blame on mothers rather than fathers as he directly blames mother for their children’s wrong doing.

HELMER. It’s generally traceable to the mothers, but of course fathers can have the same influence. Every lawyer knows that only too well. And yet there’s Krogstad been poisoning his own children for years with lies and deceit. That’s the reason I call him morally depraved. That’s why my sweet little Nora must promise me not to try putting in any more good words for him. Shake hands on it. Well? What’s this? Give me your hand. There now! That’s settled. I assure you I would have found it impossible to work with him. I quite literally feel physically sick in the presence of such people. (Act One, p.33)

Here ‘woman’ is the main topic. ‘Why’ actually refers to the reason why Krogstad is just an immoral man. ‘Impossible’ is used to attract Nora’s attention to Krogstad’s immorality. As a mansplaining figure, Helmer knows almost everything and directs her how to think and act. The dialogues are mainly descriptive, directive and argumentative.

Now consider the following dialogues between Krogstad and Nora:

KROGSTAD. I'll tell. I want get on my feet again, Mrs. Helmer; I want to get to the top. And your husband is going to help me. For the last eighteen months I've gone straight; all that time it's been hard going; I was content to work my way up, step by step. Now I'm being kicked out, and I won't stand for being taken back again as an act of charity. I'm going to get to the top. I tell you. I'm going to back into that Bank-with a better job. Your husband is going to create a new vacancy, just for me... (Act Two, p.54)

Here, Krogstad tries to blackmail Nora in order to get a higher position at the bank where Helmer works. He is greedy and wants to be at the top. His greediness is a proof that he is a male and has authority over Nora; whereas he has no power or authority over Helmer who is also a male like him. What we see is that males clash to claim their position in society; however, the clash is not fought one to one. Krogstad manipulates Nora to meet his demands rather than facing Helmer. Again, as tradition during that time, Nora, as a female, is regarded as a tool for males. She is just a thing for him. Krogstad believes that he was fired unfairly from his work at the bank and he is, somehow, looking for a kind of revenge. He has the idea that as a man he deserves a better position as it was expected at that time by the society. Given Krogstad's utterances, what we see is that mansplaining is in action again. It is Krogstad who is in a position of power in comparison to Nora; he knows much better than Nora does.

NORA. He'll never do that! (Act Two, p.54)

She knows her husband well, so she thinks that Helmer will never ever do anything for Krogstad. It shows that she has no power over her husband to influence him to do anything she wants.

KROGSTAD. He will do it. I know him. He'll do it without so much as a whimper. And once I'm in there with him, you'll see what's what. In less than a year I'll be his right-hand man. It'll be Nils Krogstad, not Torvald Helmer, who'll be running that bank. (Act Two, p. 54)

Krogstad seems to be pretty sure that Helmer will do what he wants provided that Nora persuades her husband. He thinks that it is a small thing for Helmer to do that but the problem is that Krogstad thinks that she can exert her influence on her husband but in reality she has no convincing power over her husband. His greediness is fed on by society. Krogstad seems to eliminate anyone or anything on his way to power. Here, the theme is business or in other words it is getting a job.

NORA. You'll never live to see that day! (Act Two, p. 54)

She claims that he will never have such a chance as she knows Helmer's character and one thing is certain her current status does not let her exert any power over her husband. Although Nora claims "you'll never live to see that day", it is an ineffective threat and has no influence on Krogstad.

KROGSTAD. You can't frighten me! A precious pampered little thing like... (Act Two, p. 54)

Krogstad regards Nora's remarks as a threat and he belittles her by calling her "a precious pampered little thing". To him, Nora is just a thing or tool for use. He perpetuates the patriarchy inherited by the male dominant society.

NORA. I'll show you! I'll show you! (Act Two, p. 54)

She seems not to bow to him, though she does not have any power over him and her husband. It is a sort of threat posed by her but it hardly has an impact on him.

KROGSTAD. Under the ice, maybe? Down in the cold, black water? Then being washed up in the spring, bloated, hairless, unrecognizable... (Act Two, p.54)

Nora's threat has no influence and impact on Krogstad; he, in turn, threatens her. It is a strong proof that he is aware that she is an easy prey.

NORA. You can't frighten me. (Act Two, p.54)

She says that he cannot frighten her; however, he thinks, knows and understands more than her.

KROGSTAD. You can't frighten me, either. People don't that sort of thing, Mrs. Helmer. There wouldn't be any point to it, anyway, I'd still have him right in my pocket. (Act Two, p.54)

He seems to be determined to have what he wants and he strongly believes that he will get Helmer to do what he wants as Nora has already been a prey to him. He thinks that Helmer will listen to his wife. Krogstad's utterances are proof of male dominant society in which women are unvoiced.

NORA. Afterwards? When I'm no longer... (Act Two, p.54)

She tries to figure out what Krogstad can do if she cannot persuade her husband to give him a job at the bank. Still, she does not bow to his threats; she has no means to stop him from threatening her.

KROGSTAD. Aren't you forgetting that your reputation would then be entirely in my hands? [*Nora stands looking at him, speechless.*] Well, I've warned you. Don't do anything silly. When Helmer gets my letter, I expect to hear from him. And don't forget: it's him who is forcing me off the straight and narrow again, your own husband! That's something I'll never forgive him for. Goodbye, Mrs. Helmer. (Act Two, p.54)

As a representative of male dominated society, Krogstad explicitly warns Nora not to do any silly things and give the letter to Helmer. Unless the demand is met, he threatens to tarnish their family reputation. He puts the blame on Helmer for this matter. Krogstad's explicit threats could be regarded as part of the social representation of his role in society.

NORA. He's going. He hasn't left the letter. No, no, that would be impossible! [*Opens the door further and further.*] What's he doing? He's stopped outside. He's not going down the stairs. Has he changed his mind? Is he... ? There it is Torvald, Torvald! It's hopeless now! (Act Two, p.55)

Nora is taken aback. She is deadly afraid that Helmer will find out what transpired and happened to meet Krogstad at door steps. If she were a male, Krogstad would not dare threaten her at all and would not be scared of her husband as well. Again Nora's role, as a mother and wife, makes her a powerless and ineffective being.

In Act Three, Nora realizes that she has been with a stranger for years. When she wants to leave home, Helmer goes mad.

HELMER. This is outrageous! You are betraying your most sacred duty. (Act Three, p.82)

Here, Helmer's remark clearly demonstrates mansplaining. Even he finds the right to remind Nora of her most sacred duty. He is the epitome of the 19th century patriarchal society.

NORA. And what do you consider to be my most sacred duty? (Act Three, p.82).

She questions her mansplaining husband about her most sacred duty. It is actually a strong protest against this mansplaining figure. She regards it as if it were last straw.

HELMER. Does it make me to tell you that? Isn't it your duty to your husband and your children? (Act Three, p.82)

Here, Helmer still insists in his being right. He is blind to what Nora says and wants. As tradition, he regards her just as caretaker of him and children no more than that.

NORA. I have another duty equally sacred.

HELMER. You have not. What duty might *that* be?

NORA. My duty to myself. (Act Three, p.82)

Nora has just realized that she has other duties to do as well as being a mother and wife. To Helmer, she is like a doll in a play house. She is trapped and not fully alive at all. As she is not a grown up woman with voice and dignity, she cannot decide on her own. It is high time she dismantle the patriarchy and its obsolete values by recognizing her duty to herself. Now, she comes up as an 'everyman' to be fully human rather than being a mere plaything of Helmer.

NORA. That I don't believe any more. I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are-or at least I'm going to try to be. I know most people agree with you, Torvald, and that's also what it says in books. But I'm not content any more with what people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear. (Act Three, p.82)

She turns up being a rebel against all established institutions and values. She rejects and protests all prescribed roles dictated by the society and its institutions on women. Here actually, 'the books' refer to religion and its teaching and dictations to women. Nora leaves her domestic sphere behind and gets ready to go on a journey of self-discovery. She finally cries out her long-held captive feelings as she sees herself as a war hostage.

Conclusion

The analysed dialogues have demonstrated that one interlocutor tries to convince the other to make him/her accept his/her own point of view. Each interlocutor justifies their opinion by using such devices as evidence, references, and relevant information to support their points. According to the analysed dialogues, each speaker tries to manage the situation to reach his/her goal and intention. The argumentative text has the persuasive strategy to make the addressee change their minds about a specific topic. The interlocutors interacting with each other share the knowledge of the context of the situation. Therefore, the type of text reflects the context of the situation.

The addressees try to ask and submit their views in the form of interrogative forms. The evaluative expressions are given by the interlocutors through the use of different verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and cohesive devices. The play, as a narrative text, consists of many events and conversation exchanged by different characters related to the theme of the play. The events in the play demonstrate the intention and message of the playwright. The language of the play is exhibited in the context of situation through dialogues or the structure of the conversation. The

knowledge aspect in the play reveals the playwright's knowledge of the socio-cultural values and beliefs of the status of the woman in the 19th century.

The use of modalities in the dialogues shows the social situation and context. The dialogues have been analysed from the textual and contextual perspectives. The context reveals how the interlocutors deal with the topic and what they do to demonstrate the intentional context of their action to realize their goals. Those mansplaining interlocutors are on the wheel to direct and orient their goals. One can read *A Doll's House* as a strong call for women's equality with men and enormous challenge to mansplaining.

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