



Delineating Two Exclusive Views on Power of Choosing & Modal Dynamics of Double Performances

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Abstract

This article endeavors to make use of the theories presented by French semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, in order to demonstrate the main structural exchanges inherent within some of the critical choices and acute performances at the heart of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In this study, the syntagmatic exchange structures and the paradigmatic structures of gift and test which are at work within the narrative line of the play are discussed and exteriorized so that there can be a better apprehension and appreciation for the internal path of signification concerning the relation of the main couple actants (Note 1) in this discourse. It will be seen how the power to choose of the protagonists of exchange or loci of exchange structures might be exercised or overlooked and how one may devalorise and negate an offer of exchange based on the way it is modally interpreted. This study will contemplate on the manner in which one's voluntary renunciation of rights may metamorphose into a manipulative and deceptive dispossession of that right, when actants get involved in parallel programmes which are complementary and at the same time contradictory to one another. Thus, through adopting such a perspective towards the choices made and the dilemmas faced by the main actants of Ibsen's discourse, one gets the chance to have a more tangible canvas on which to draw Nora and Torvald's change of hearts and malfunctioning transactions.

Keywords: Exchange Structure, Double Performance, Power of Choosing, Dilemma, Free Choice, Veridictory Modality, Overmodality, Valence, Attribution, Renunciation, Dispossession, Appropriation.

1. Complexity of Narrative Programme of Syntagmatic Type

This article will address the central structures which fuel the discordant liaisons existing between the main couple actants in Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. Through a thorough inquiry on the subtle choices present in their exchanges and the evaluation of those propositions, a more profound understanding of the flow of signification in terms of actantial decisions can be grasped.

In order to get a better understanding of what is meant by a narrative programme of syntagmatic type, it is only convenient to distinguish briefly between the two notions of paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis. The paradigmatic axis is the one which is usually called the "axis of selection, where the units keep a relation of the type 'or ...or', and have a relation of exclusion between themselves, based on which an element is retained at the expense of all the other possible elements" (Courtés, 1991, p. 45). (Note 2) However the syntagmatic axis is the one referred to as the "axis of combination, where the units are linked together based on the relation of the type 'and ...and', this axis is founded on the principle of co presence" (p. 45).



Syntagmatic structure can be presented as the major complex form in the story and it combines two different but mutual narrative programmes that are referred to as the “exchange structure[s] (*structures d'échanges*)” (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 114). The syntactic schema of such a structure is formulated by Courtés (1991) as:

$$F1 \{ S1 \rightarrow (S2 \cap O1) \} \leftrightarrow F2 \{ S2 \rightarrow (S1 \cap O2) \}$$

Or

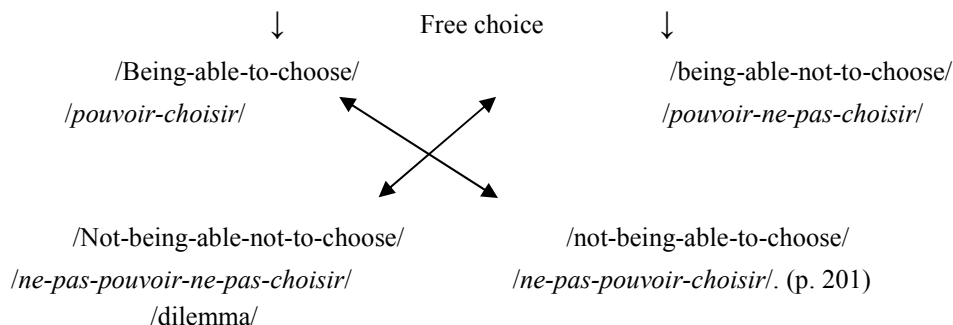
$$F1 \{ S1 \rightarrow (S2 \cup O1) \} \leftrightarrow F2 \{ S2 \rightarrow (S1 \cup O2) \}. \text{ (p. 45)}$$

The first exchange structure is of “conjunctive type” (p. 45), while the second one is of “disjunctive type, which is not concerned with 'giving', but with 'removing'” (p. 45). Based on these formulae, it is seen that the two subjects change their roles respectively, in that “each of the two actors will be subject of doing in one of these PNs (Narrative Programmes) and the subject of state in the other one” (p. 45). Also, the symbol \leftrightarrow implies that “the two PNs constitutive of the exchange are linked by a relation of reciprocal presupposition” (p. 45).

What keeps the balance of these “double performances” (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 114) as one of the conceivable ways of communication and transformation of the objects of value is the equivalence of the value of the objects involved in them, that is why “the two objects (O1 and O2) should be judged by the protagonists of the exchange to be equivalent, [and] if one of the objects has more value than the other, then there will be a plus-value” (Courtés, 1991, p. 45). This equivalence of the values of such objects would be evaluated by the “veridictory modalities” (p. 45). (Note 3) These modalities are established in the play between “being and seeming” (p. 45). It could be stated that an exchange is valid, and is endowed with an “egalitarian character” (Greimas, 1976b, p. 197) only if there is a “shared belief by the partners in the 'valence' of the objects” (Bertrand, 2000, p. 210), in that they have equivalent values.

Greimas (1977) offers the canonical form of the exchange structure as “an utterance with three actants, the addresser, the addressee, and the object of communication” (p. 34). Thus based on this definition, he comes up with the following form: “TU (Translative Utterance) = F: $\text{transfer} (A1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow A2)$ ” (p. 34). In this transfer of value, the actants are not to be perceived as “operators” (34), since they perform no action, but as “loci where the object-values may be situated, places to which they may be brought and from which they may be removed” (p. 34), and this process is performed simultaneously, since “the conjunction of S1 with the object which it receives from the other subject S2, is simultaneously associated with the disjunction of the other subject S2 from the object which it attributes” (Bertrand, 2000, p. 209).

Moreover, whenever there is an exchange, each one of the partners can obtain the chance of accepting or refusing it, and this possibility of accepting or refusing the exchange converts itself into the “possibility of choosing, the choice in front of which the subject finds itself, in the case of any proposition of exchange” (Greimas, 1976b, p. 200). Therefore, the subject can decide and this decision is “an exercise of /being-able-to-do/ (*/pouvoir-faire/*), placed on the cognitive dimension” (p. 200) which possesses a modal structure. (Note 4) This modality in this particular case of the structure of exchanged is “reduced to /being-able-to-accept/ (*/pouvoir-accepter/*), and /being-able-to-refuse/ (*/pouvoir-refuser/*)” (p. 200). Sometimes the subject is faced with a “dilemma” (p. 200), and that is when the obligation of choosing is imposed on it. Greimas (1976b) presents the significant “power of choosing (*faculté de choisir*)” (p. 201), which is at the disposal of the subjects. He also explains about the distinction between the choice and the dilemma, which are both placed at a “hierarchically superior level, characterized by the hyperotactic 'overmodalities (*surmodalités*)' of free choice and dilemma” (p. 201). While the first overmodality of free choice (*choix libre*) is defined as the “/being-able-to-choose/ or /being-able-not-to-choose/” (p. 201), the second overmodality of dilemma is defined as “/not-being-able-not-to-choose/ or the obligation to choose” (p. 201). These modal categories of “the cognitive /being-able-to-do/ can be indicated on the semiotic square” (p. 201), as follow:





Based on this square, the situations in the discourse where “the liberty of choosing is transformed into an obligation of choosing, and the exchange structure into a dilemma” (p. 200) are better comprehended.

Sometimes, the preceding “interpretive doing (*faire interprétative*)” (Greimas, 1976b, p. 208), which is usually undertaken by one of the two subjects engaged in the exchange, is “accompanied by a modal dynamic which is recognized as:

Interpretive doing (<i>faire interprétative</i>)		Decisional doing (<i>faire décisionnel</i>)
Devalorization of the offer	~	negation of /not-being-able-not-to-do/” (p. 208).

1.1 Love as the Transferred Object of Communication in Nora and Torvald's Structural Exchange

The most central exchange structure in the discourse of *A Doll's House* is the marriage of Nora and Torvald.

$$F1 \{ \text{Nora} \rightarrow (\text{Torvald} \cap \text{Love}) \} \leftrightarrow F2 \{ \text{Torvald} \rightarrow (\text{Nora} \cap \text{Love}) \}$$

Theirs is an exchange of the conjunctive type, since the addressee and the addressor are involved in an utterance of transfer, where the transferred object of communication is the love that each brings into this exchange. However, this double performance of theirs, or in other words, the exchange structure existing in their relationship cannot be acknowledged as a valid one. Although a mutual and reciprocal presupposition exists simultaneously between the two programmes at each side of the equation, Nora and Torvald's marriage structure can be viewed as a shaky one, in that it lacks the equivalence which should necessarily exist between the two values of the objects involved in it, to keep it balanced. There is no valence between their two loves, which do not share equivalent values on the cognitive plane.

On the surface it may seem that Torvald loves Nora as much as she loves him, or at times even more. This is apparent in the way he cares about her, like when he tells her that she should not "tire [her] blessed eyes and [her] delicate little fingers" (Ibsen, 1954, p. 29) doing the preparations with her hands for Christmas. So, how come that their marriage hits the tough shaky rocks? The answer lies in the fact that a plus-value is associated with the love that Nora shares, as opposed to the contribution on the part of her husband which is an almost fake one, though he may not be aware of it himself. This claim can be well proven by the veridictory modalities which should be put in place to judge the egalitarian character of any exchange. This characteristic is that which is missing in the particular case of this couple, and this is what takes Nora a long time to understand and then to accept.

The estimation of the equivalence of the shared objects by the veridictory modalities can be done as follows: Nora as a wife loves her husband truly and purely. She even would not allow herself to "think of doing what [he] disapproves of" (p. 29) and in hard times, despite every obstacle in her way, when "the doctors came to [her] privately and told [her] his life was in danger- that nothing could save him but a winter in the South" (p. 38) she did what every dedicated wife would do in such times. It was she who "saved Torvald's life ... and found [borrowed] twelve hundred dollars" (p. 37) for his trip to Italy, without letting him know that, considering "his loathing of debt, and ... how painful and humiliating it would be for him, with his manly self-respect to know that he owed anything to [her]" (p. 39). Nothing but a pure love would be explanatory of what she did for her husband and the whole family. She had to put up with "a lot of anxiety, [since] it had been no joke to meet [her] engagements punctually" (p. 39) and also because of her obligation to pay the "quarterly interests" (p. 39) to Krogstad from whom she had borrowed the money, she had to save money and only buy the "simplest and cheapest things" (p. 39), but she was happy all the while, knowing that she has done all this for the sake of one she is in love with.

Thus, Nora loves Torvald and does not hesitate to let him know that. As a contracting part in the exchange, she combines the modalities of /being/ and /seeming/ which posit her and her love at the hyperotactic position of the overmodality of truth, and yet Torvald and his love do not occupy the same or even an equal position on the veridictory square. His love is literally nothing more than a lie or an illusion. His contribution to their marriage exchange is only a bringing together of an appearance /seeming/ of loving, while deep down in reality, he solely loves her in a selfish manner only for his own sake which, for a fact, he endears so much. This is evident in his words when after understanding about her forgery in borrowing the money which saved his life, Torvald blames her and after having called her a "wretched woman" (Ibsen, 1954, p. 96) he tells Nora that:

Helmer: You have destroyed my whole happiness. You have ruined my future. Oh, it is frightful to think of! I am in the power of a scoundrel; he can do whatever he pleases with me, demand whatever he chooses; he can domineer over me as much as he likes, and I must submit. And all



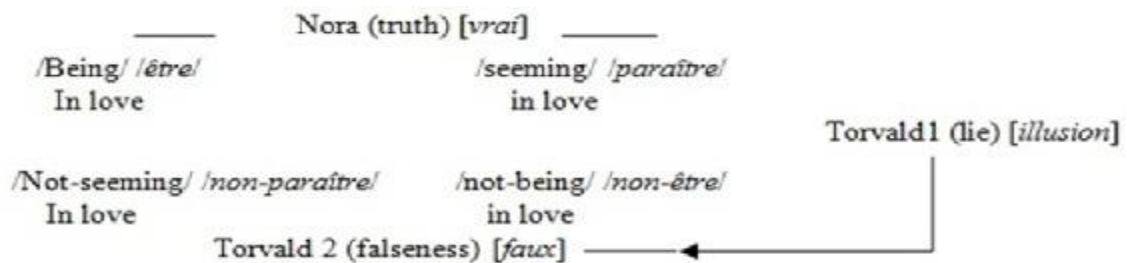
this disaster and ruin is brought upon me by an unprincipled woman. (My italics. p. 96-97)

He even would not be willing to share some of the pain she has been through and his only fears revolve around the possibility of others thinking that he has also been in one way or the other involved in this forgery, done by his wife for his sake. Torvald continues his upbraiding telling her that:

Helmer: He [Krogstad] can publish the story all the same; I might even be suspected of collusion. People will think I was at the bottom of it all, and for all this I have you to thank ... Do you understand now what you have done to me? (My italics. p. 97)

Instead of being grateful, he shows her his true color, which could not be possibly any further from the state of love, and if there is anyone with whom he is truly in love that person would not be anybody but himself. Torvald represents a contradictory state of being in love.

Thus, eventually Torvald breaks this illusion of being a caring husband, for Nora. When this illusion vanishes, she sees him and his love in a new light to which they belonged all the way from the very beginning of the narrative. She sees the falseness of his love:



Thus, if love is their object of transfer, then: TU= F: transfer (Nora → Love → Helmer), but the transfer cannot be performed perfectly, since one party is getting less than she shares, and that is the reason why their marriage cannot function properly.

In the beginning of the discourse, Nora's exercise of her power of choosing (*faculté de choisir*) as an individual has been wholly compromised by the stereotypical platforms on which she had been placed as a wife in the bond of marriage, and then as a woman on the bigger scale, as if implying that the choice is always made for her not by her. Initially she is a mother fulfilling her role as a mother and a wife acting as one, and yet possessing a free choice requires being an individual which she lacked at this point. So, Nora started out the discourse being in the state of /not-being-able-to-choose/ or */ne-pas-pouvoir-choisir/*.

The overmodality of 'free choice' comes around only after Nora finds herself entangled in Krogstad's dilemma of her forgery, and when she can see through the illusions by which she had been fed for so long, and gets the reality of his husband's love as being false. All this, puts her in an inner dilemma of her own in that she no longer is able to surrender her power of choosing to others. She has to decide if she wants to accept the predetermined fate written for her by those domineering forces in her entourage or to refuse it and make use of this power to make something of her life. This is when her modal status changes towards a /being-able-to-choose/, and with this she obtains a free choice. According to the modal categories at her disposal at this point of the narrative, now that she got hold of the free choice, three options were open to her. She could exercise her /being-able-to-choose/ modality and either accept her present status as a dominated wife and well-considered woman, or she could refuse these and take a different path, or she could equally exercise her /being-able-not-to-choose/ modality and remain neutral to the whole issue, which though not very different from the previous modal state of hers in terms of its effects on her life, connoted a completely different status in which this time she would consciously decide to turn her rights over to those willing to grab it. Although the free-choice overmodality ideally would open up these three options, the third option would not be available to Nora anymore, because her situation is slightly more complicated than that. As was said before, she is a woman faced with a dilemma which places on her an obligation to choose and links her with the modality of /not-being-able-not-to-choose/. Simultaneously, she has entered into this phase of her progress, where she *must* choose, either to continue being a fool in her marriage, accepting his false love or else to reject it, and get out of this false exchange of theirs all together. This becomes an obligation she would have to fulfill, and her modality would now accommodate as well a */ne-pas-pouvoir-ne-pas-choisir/* or /not-being-able-not-to-choose/.



This is the part in the narrative when the suspense is heightened, since because of Nora's freedom to choose between the two alternatives, the outcome of her decision is not predictable. So, at the end of the story, Nora finally exercises her power to choose between leaving and staying in the exchange of theirs called marriage. She is weighed down by an obligation to go through an interpretive doing before the story ends.

Her interpretive doing, along with her estimation of his love, leads her to devalorize Torvald's offers, not only for the present contractual exchange of their marriage which she refuses, in telling him that she can be "no wife for [him]" (Ibsen, 1954, p. 105), but also for any future ones, that regard him unless if "the miracle of miracles" (p. 107) happens. Thus, she announces that "[she] [is] going at once. ... It is of no use [he] forbidding [her] anything now. She shall take with [her] what belongs to [her]. From [him] [she] will accept nothing, either now or afterwards" (p. 102). This time, it is the female who gains the upper hand and gives the verdict in saying that she "no longer believes in miracles" (p. 107).

Thus, Nora comes a long way from /not-being-able-to-do/ to /not-being-able-not-to-do/ and in her decisional doing or her (*faire decisionnel*) she negates and overcomes the dilemma, while changing her state utterances, as the following equation would manifest:

F: S1 (Nora) → [S1 ∪ O1 (/not-being-able-to-do/) → S1 ∩ O2 (/not-being-able-not-to-do/)]

/ne-pas-pouvoir-faire/

/ne-pas-pouvoir-ne-pas-faire/

/devoir-faire/

She disjoins herself from her initial passive position. She gets to choose, and in this way grants herself the capacity not to bend to what others expect of her.

2. Complexities of Narrative Programmes of Paradigmatic Type

Continuing the previous discussion on the initial and final conditions in the trajectory of the main actants of the narrative, and the loci of the exchange structures, it is as well possible to look at their situations with two other paradigmatic structures that are complementary to each other. In semiotics, usually with every conjunction, there comes a disjunction and conversely (Courtés, 1991, p. 53); based on this theory, the two "correlated" (p. 53) structures of gift (*don*), and test (*epreuve*), are introduced.

When there is a talk about the gift structure, it means "not only an attribution, but also and at the same time, a renunciation" (p. 53), in that the disjunction of the first subject from the object in question is simultaneous with the conjunction of the second subject with that same object. So it is evident that two PNs "in relation of reciprocal presupposition" (p. 53) exist inside such a structure. It is also helpful to note that, while these two structures are classified as holding paradigmatic relations between themselves, the relation between the constituent PNs, in each one of these two structures is syntagmatic.

What Greimas also means by the structure of test is defined as a structure consisting of two narrative programmes of dispossession and that of appropriation. Unlike the previous structure, in this one the first subject makes his own conjunction with the object possible, while bringing about the second subject's privation from it.

The schemas presented by Courtés (1991) for the paradigmatic structures that Greimas talks about in his semiotics, look like the following formulae; where the first one concerns the gift structure, while the second one concerns the structure of test:

F {S1 → (S2 ∩ O)} = PN of Attribution (*PN d'attribution*)

F {S1 → (S1 ∪ O)} = PN of Renunciation (*PN de renunciation*)

F {S1 → (S2 ∪ O)} = PN of Dispossession (*PN de dépossession*)

F {S1 → (S1 ∩ O)} = PN of Appropriation (*PN d'appropriation*). (p. 53)

These two separated structures are concluded in the utterance: "EN (utterance) = F gift (*don*) / appropriation" (Greimas, 1976b, p. 161). This way of putting it also shows the fact that these two structures are deemed to be complementary in the discourse.

When it is said that the two PNs in each structure are correlated it means that "they are the two indissociable faces of the same process" (Courtés, 1991, p. 53). The first "conjunctive" (p. 53) programme in the gift structure is considered "positive" (p. 53), while the second one in the test structure is considered to be negative in that in most

of the cases S1 forcibly deprives S2 from what it had previously possessed only to bring about its own conjunction with that object of value. Also according to the above formula, the PN of attribution is “transitive, since the subject of doing, donor, and the subject of state, beneficiary, form two distinct actors” (Bertrand, 2000, p. 209), while the PN of appropriation is “reflexive, since the subjects of doing and state are played by the same actor” (p. 209). In terms of the disjunctive narrative programmes also it is seen that there is a “reflexive privation” (p. 209) in the case of the renunciation and there is a “transitive” (p. 209) one for dispossession.

2.1 Correlated Structures of Gift and Test in *A Doll's House*:

These two structures are stimulated from the very beginning of Ibsen's story, though unlike the paradigmatic structure attributed to them by Greimas, in *A Doll's House*, they are present in a syntagmatic manner occurring in a parallel fashion. The first one is apparent in Nora's renunciation of her valued liberty of choice, alongside with her other liberties, and attribution of them all to her husband, who makes use of this reflexive privation as a gift, and abuses her through degrading her status as a human being, reducing her to an inanimate doll, and dominating her in all areas. Torvald objectifies Nora and looks at her like a possession or a property that he owns, something which is apparent in his telling her that he wants to “look at [his] dearest treasure, at all the loveliness that is mine, mine only, wholly and entirely mine” (Ibsen, 1954, p. 90). Moreover, he calls her by animal names such as “squirrel” (p. 26) and in this scenario she has no option but to waive her rights and resign to his verdicts through affirming them the whole time saying “Oh, yes Torvald” (p. 26).

The motivation behind this transitive attribution of hers has come from her initially being in the delusion that he really loves her and is willing to “risk body and soul, and everything, everything for [her] dear sake” (Ibsen, 1954, p. 95), not knowing that he has a hidden agenda of his which grows more and more on her, one that is developing side by side with her gift. Her credulous belief in his “broad wings to shield [her]” (p. 99) had put her reflexive renunciation into motion.

Basically, the same truth about Nora and Torvald's relationship can be looked at from two different perspectives in the story; hers which sees her sacrifices as tokens of her love for a husband who in turn loves her back, and his which is founded on the firm belief that “no man sacrifices his honour, even for the ones he loves” (p. 105). He deprives her of her choices, steals her sense of individuation through a transitive privation which imposes certain delusional perspectives on him, like seeing his wife as a “doll-wife” (p. 101), and appropriates all the power exclusively to himself like when he says that they “cannot afford to squander money” (p. 26) and that is the final word. These two structures will be shown as follows:

$F \{Nora \rightarrow (Torvald \cap Liberty)\} = \text{PN of attribution}$

$F \{Nora \rightarrow (Nora \cup Liberty)\} = \text{PN of renunciation}$

$F \{Torvald \rightarrow (Nora \cup Individuality/freedom)\} = \text{PN of dispossession}$

$F \{Torvald \rightarrow (Torvald \cap Individuality/freedom)\} = \text{PN of appropriation}$

As is seen above, accompanying the previous process, one witnesses the structure of test performed by Torvald as the other face of the same coin, with which Nora also plays. In fact, without her truly knowing it, he steals her individuality which is then defined in stereotypical frames of being a wife and a woman.

However, when Torvald's hidden agenda (the fakeness of his love and the selfishness of it) is revealed to Nora and she understands that “[he] was not the man [she] had imagined” (Ibsen, 1954, p. 104), he no longer is able to continue with his test structure, and Nora herself no longer goes on being the naive giver she used to be. She takes on her own explicit structure of test without expecting any gift in return from anyone, not Torvald, or her community which would both look at her askance. Her final decision to take off the doll dress “he had made for [her]” (p. 60) and to take her life into her own hands can be summarized in the following structure of test that she eventually performs:

$F \{Nora \rightarrow (Torvald \cup Choice)\} = \text{PN of dispossession}$

$F \{Nora \rightarrow (Nora \cap Choice)\} = \text{PN of appropriation}$

This time it is Nora who decides that they should “come to a final settlement ... and get to the bottom of things” (p. 100). She makes a decision to “think things out for [herself] and try to get clear about them” (p. 103). Besides, now that she has got possession of her life and individuality, she figures out that she has got “duties towards [herself]” (p. 103). Thus, her present structure of test enables her to get a subjective entity beyond that which had been defined for (her) exteriorly.



One of the main reasons why Nora manages to take back her already renounced freedom (of choice), is that while “the subject through the operation of disjunction on the plane of realization, separates itself from its object of value, [it] keeps it on the plane of actualization” (Greimas, 1976b, p. 127). Thus, Nora's renounced rights have always already been virtually present and that is why they could be taken back to actuality so that they are realized.

Therefore, these structures help one grasp a broader view on the varied conditions in Nora and Torvald's situation. They facilitate the sketching and outlining of her initial disjunction from her liberty, and her succeeding conjunction with her right of choosing the right path for her life. They also depict Torvald's central change of status as the story goes forward.

3. Conclusion

This paper portrayed the main procedures by which Nora and Torvald as the protagonists of exchange or the loci of exchange structure went through double performances and presented a modal structure by means of which the valence of the shared objects involved in their syntagmatic contractual structures could be estimated. This study equally sketched the process by which the power of choosing of the actants was exercised and it attempted to give an account of how this process can be interpreted. In the end, the paradigmatic structures of gift and test which defined the relations of the main couple actants in this discourse were examined so that there could be a better admiration and appraisal of the internal path of signification undertaken by the major figures in Ibsen's play.

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Notes

Note 1. Actants are defined as being the permanent, invariant roles, which are given preeminence at the deep structure of the narrative (Boussiac, 1998, p. 5).

Note 2. All translations from French are my own, unless stated otherwise.

Note 3. The "modal predicate, being of being or /l'être de l'être/ is susceptible of being treated like a modal category and be projected on the semiotic square" (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 419).

Note 4. Wanting (Vouloir), Having-to (Devoir), Being-able-to (Pouvoir), and Knowing (Savoir), are the modal values, which could equally modalize a being (être) or a doing (faire) (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 230-231). Usually the oblique lines signal the presence of a modal value.