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# A Geometry of Edges: Beginning and End in *A Doll's House* and *In the Red and Brown Water*

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## Abstract

This paper examines two seminal works of theater, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Tarell Alvin McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water*, in the context of their "edges" — that is, their beginnings and ends. I undertake close readings of each play, paying particularly close attention to Ibsen's image of the door and to McCraney's inclusion of a prologue and epilogue. My paper argues that Ibsen's edges are characterized by a certain *linearity*, and McCraney's by a certain *circularity*. In other words, Ibsen's ending renders impossible any return to the beginning, whereas McCraney's practically necessitates such a return, suggesting an infinite temporal loop. Despite the plays' evident historical and thematic differences, their intricately constructed edges reveal that Ibsen and McCraney both conceive of their works as "geometrical" worlds: worlds in which plot points like a vector from beginning to end or curls around itself to form dense knots of language. These plays — one linear and one circular — are rendered fundamentally incompatible by these clashing geometries.

**Keywords:** Ibsen, McCraney, edges, beginning, end, linear, circular, geometry

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A door opened; a door closed. A sound of humming, a sharp exhale. So begin — and end — Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Tarell Alvin McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water*, two plays whose endings echo their beginnings. Despite this structural similarity, Ibsen and McCraney's "edges" function differently. Ibsen's edges allow readers to gauge what has changed since the beginning of the play, to measure some distance travelled by the characters. McCraney's edges, however, render the question of distance moot, for they obscure any sense of change over time. The structural frameworks developed by Ibsen and McCraney raise layered questions about change and stasis, movement and stillness, and — aptly — beginning and end. Yet while Ibsen's edges establish a linear trajectory that makes any return to the beginning impossible, McCraney's create abstract loops of time that confuse the very distinction between beginning and end.

*A Doll's House* comprises multiple beginnings and endings. Indeed, although the theatrical structure of the work appears to match the physical architecture of the set, the beginning and end of the action — defined by Nora's entrance and exit — do not square with the beginning and end of the play — defined by the rising and falling of the curtain. The play opens in an empty room that Ibsen describes as "pleasant ..., tastefully but not expensively furnished" (Ibsen 1); only after the audience has taken in these decorative choices does Nora appear. Even Nora's entrance may be separated into the ringing of "the front door-bell" (Ibsen 1) and the subsequent opening of the door. In short, this opening sequence fragments the play's introduction into at least three discrete parts: the exposure of the set, the sound of the approaching character, and the appearance of the character. The ending of the work operates similarly, though not identically; Nora "goes out through the hall door" (Ibsen 86), after which Helmer speaks the final words of the play, which are followed by "the heavy sound of a door being slammed" (Ibsen 86). In this case, the set is not empty, for Helmer remains visible. More importantly, there is no clear distinction between the slamming of the door — the play's final action — and the end of the play. This synchronization of distinct elements of the ending represents a shift from the opening of the work. The beginning of *A Doll's House* in fact depicts many beginnings in sequence, suggesting that a play's edges are in some way multiple, separable, peelable. But in combining two elements distinguished at the beginning, the ending establishes an equivalence between the door and the work of theater itself. That is, whereas the beginning implies that the play exists beyond the opening and shutting of the door, the ending insinuates that the door *is* the work, that the door shuts when the work ends and the work ends when the door shuts. By the end of the play, then, the motion of the set has become indistinguishable from the motion of the plot.

The play's title reinforces this connection by hinting that the work is not only *A Doll's House*, but also a doll's house. In other words, Ibsen's choice of title blurs the line between what the work *is about* and what the work *is*. Indeed, theater presents an audience with actors — or "dolls" — who live false lives in a pretend real space — or a doll house. Thus, theater itself becomes a sort of doll house, an artifice. Insofar as the doll's house represents in and of itself the work of theater — an idea implied by the title — the play's beginning, like its end, becomes inseparable from the physical structure of the set. Most works of theater begin with a clearly visible set. But Ibsen's immediate emphasis on the details of the room — "A whatnot with china and other small objects d'art; a small bookcase with books in handsome bindings" (Ibsen 1) — makes clear that the first moments of the opening act depend on the set as a physical

framework. Perhaps, then, even the beginning of *A Doll's House* hints at this bond between the physical and the theatrical. Ibsen further strengthens the bond between set and theater by twice stripping Nora of any connection to the work's existence. The play begins before Nora's entrance, and thus the play exists without Nora. The ending functions identically, since Nora leaves the stage before the play ends, but Helmer remains on stage. Helmer's continued presence could suggest that Helmer is somehow inextricably linked to this doll house, and thus that for Helmer there exists no possibility of life outside of the theater. However, it could also serve to further emphasize Nora's separation from the life of the work by literalizing her escape from the "script" of a doll's house, from the kinds of conventional roles demanded of dolls in "play."

Despite the subtle contrasts between beginning and end explored above, Ibsen's door creates a neat physical framework by which the ending operates in parallel with the beginning. The door itself performs two basic actions: opening and closing. The shutting of a door represents the perfect reversal of the opening of a door. In a sense, then, the door allows Ibsen to concretize the beginning and ending of his work: opening and beginning, after all, are synonyms, as are closing and ending. However, it would be overly simplistic to suggest that the door opens at the beginning of *A Doll's House* and shuts at the end. A door closes after it is opened, opens before it is closed. Thus, the door's motion at the beginning is identical to its motion at the end: it swings open, then swings shut. The key difference is that at the beginning Nora walks through the frame in one direction, while at the end she exits in the opposite direction. In any case, Ibsen's structural framework relies on physical, tangible elements: the door, the set, the bodies of the characters.

The trajectory of Ibsen's play is linear: the door's opening and closing at the end does not erase its opening and closing at the beginning, nor does Nora's exit at the end somehow cancel her entrance at the beginning. A play's ending must return to its beginning — or allow for such a return — for circularity to be possible. A circular's play's ending cannot reflect developments that are unaddressed at its beginning, since this imbalance creates a gap between beginning and end that cannot be bridged. By this metric, *A Doll's House's* edges are clearly not circular: at the end, the public is left looking at Helmer as he "covers his face with his hands" (Ibsen 86), so it is impossible to pretend that the set has returned to its original state and that nothing has happened in the interim. It is also worth noting that the shutting of a door and the *slamming* of a door differ slightly, at least in the force with which the door is pushed. In a sense, then, the ending of *A Doll's House* breaks with the structure of the beginning by allowing Nora's built-up emotions to influence her interaction with the door. This change exemplifies the play's linearity: the final shutting of the door is not identical to the initial opening of the door because the play's end cannot be separated from the tensions developed since the beginning. If the plot of *A Doll's House* were truly circular, leaving us exactly where we began, Nora would shut the door without slamming it at the end, for her exit — and the ending more generally — would exist independently of the strong emotions explored in the previous exchange.

McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water* includes no such interruption of the circular flow from beginning to end, from end to beginning. The very inclusion of a prologue and epilogue creates a distinction between these framing devices and the core of the play that allows for an almost atemporal beginning and end. Indeed, while the epilogue addresses Oya's

loss of an ear, the prologue does, too: Aunt Elegua explains that they “say she ain’t even scream” (McCraney 12) and Mama Moja describes Oya “holding her head” (McCraney 13). These references are sufficiently vague not to disclose the final action before the epilogue, but it becomes clear in retrospect that they allude to this event. If one assumes the prologue and epilogue to be parts of the play — a reasonable assumption, since actors perform these sections just as they do others — the mentions of Oya’s ear complicate the chronology of the work. The suggestion is that the prologue and the epilogue exist in some sort of liminal, timeless space, independent of the rest of the play and of its linearity. In fact, the beginning and end of *In the Red and Brown Water* come together to form a circular structure. Even McCraney’s italicized stage directions establish that in some way the end *is* the beginning. In the prologue, McCraney writes that “The cast is standing in a line downstage. / The men all begin to hum, a sweet sad hum, / Thick like the early morning mist” (McCraney 11). In the epilogue, McCraney simply states that “The men hum that sweet sad hum” (McCraney 126). The word “that” no doubt refers to the same “sweet sad hum” explained in detail in the prologue. McCraney’s reference to the prologue insinuates that the epilogue loops back to it. One might assume that the epilogue represents a continuation of the prologue, so that the play progresses in logical, sequential — indeed, linear — fashion from beginning to end. But other evidence suggests that the relationship between prologue and epilogue is less straightforward. For instance, the prologue begins with the line “I don’t know all...” followed by an assertion that “Nobody does” (McCraney 12), while the epilogue begins with the line “I don’t know about all that...” followed by the assertion that “No one does” (McCraney 126). In many ways, then, the epilogue is the prologue and the prologue is the epilogue, for the two address the same ideas in the same order — and even use much of the same language.

Of course, the prologue and the epilogue are not identical in their effect on the audience. The prologue is nebulous and oddly premonitory — conveying, perhaps, some sense of preordination or tragic inevitability about the coming events — while the epilogue reads as a reaction to a traumatic event that has just occurred. But this change reflects the audience’s projection of the play’s events onto the vague words of the characters in the epilogue. Phrases like the aforementioned “say she ain’t even scream” clearly refer to Oya’s self-mutilation; however, these words are not specific enough to independently communicate that a girl has cut off her ear. Rather, their meaning and power change as a function of what the audience knows. Thus, the ending of *In the Red and Brown Water* is perhaps best expressed by a clichéd paradox: Everything changes and nothing changes. Examined independently of the play’s action, the prologue and epilogue are almost interchangeable. Yet by bringing the audience back to the play’s beginning, the epilogue forces a conscious recognition of the extent to which things — characters, relationships, beliefs — have changed. Thus, these sections’ very timelessness and separation lend the plot its force. McCraney does not wish to write a static play; in fact, he underscores the emotional transformation of his characters. In his notes, McCraney writes that Oya “begins the play a girl and ends it a woman” and that Elegba “begins the play a boy and ends it a man” (McCraney 9). However, the prologue and epilogue contain no indication of Oya’s girlhood or womanhood except for the phrase “beautiful girl,” used in both sections. In a sense, then, the very lack of transformation that characterizes the prologue and epilogue highlights the transformation of the play’s characters.

Though they reinforce the play's emotional punch, McCraney's edges also meet, the ending bringing the audience back to the work's beginning to form a structure that is quite literally circular. The prologue begins with Oya's "sharp breath out" and exclamation: "Ah!" (McCraney 12); the epilogue ends with Oya's "sharp breath" and exclamation: "Ah!" (McCraney 129). Furthermore, McCraney's very first instruction, perhaps predictably, is that "the lights come up" (McCraney 11); his last instruction is the word "blackout" (McCraney 129). In other words, the play begins with a change from dark to light, an exhale, and an exclamation, and ends with an exhale, an exclamation, and a change from light to dark. This chiasmic structure almost seems to set the play up to start again: it is not inconceivable that Oya would shout "Ah!," followed by a dimming and raising of the lights, and another shout of "Ah!," only for the prologue to begin once more. The epilogue repeats the words and actions of the prologue, but the crucial first spoken word of the play is left for the end of the prologue. Thus, the beginning-end connection might be described as doubly circular; the epilogue comes back to the beginning on the "macro" level with its repetition of the prologue's broad structure, but it also comes back to the beginning on the "micro" level by returning the audience to the protagonist's first utterance.

Since the prologue and epilogue are squarely set apart from the rest of the play, there is no lingering reminder of what has changed — at least on stage, though the play's events may well linger in viewers' minds — and thus nothing to force this circular path into a linear trajectory. Of course, the ending of McCraney's play *does* turn on the knowledge that Oya has cut off her ear. But the play's opening also alludes to this event before anyone knows what Oya has done — or will do — to herself. Unlike Ibsen's use of the physical set to help audiences understand the distinction between beginning and end, McCraney's circular structure is abstract and distinctly unphysical, for it relies not on some object or piece of furniture, but rather on the repetition of sound, the adjustment of lights, and the creation of a temporal loop that spins from beginning to end and back to beginning. Even the title implies a fluidity, a lack of solidity. *In the Red and Brown Water's* title, like its edges, suggests a nebulous work, a coil of theatrical wire: the play begins with humming and ends with humming; it begins with darkness and ends with darkness; it begins with breath and ends with breath.

This essay has thus far addressed how Ibsen and McCraney's works return at their ends to some element employed at their beginnings, either to emphasize a change in a character or to complicate any sense of linear progress. Both works use their edges to emphasize some repeated action: just as the door opens and closes at the beginning and end of Ibsen's play, Oya exhales at the beginning and end of McCraney's work. These acts are doubly similar. First, both involve some contradictory combination of repetition and reversal. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's emphasis on the opening of the door at the beginning and the shutting of the door at the end implies a reversal, while the fact that the door in fact opens and closes both times suggests a repetition. In *In the Red and Brown Water*, the placement of Oya's breath at the beginning of the prologue and at the end of the epilogue implies a mirroring or flipping of the theatrical structure, whereas the identical description of Oya's breath itself demands a repetition. Second, both acts entail a manipulation of air. Moving a door pushes the air behind the door, and the *slamming* of a door described by Ibsen at the end of *A Doll's House*, in addition to the violent "thunk" of wood against frame, might produce a powerful whooshing of displaced air. Similarly, Oya's exhalation pushes out air. More importantly, both of these "air" devices link

beginning and end; both the door's motion and the action of breathing enclose their respective plays in a symmetric structure.

Despite these structural similarities between the two works, the linearity of *A Doll's House* stands in stark contrast to the distinct circularity of *In the Red and Brown Water*. After all, a beginning and end only form a "circle" if the end can somehow return to the beginning, and such a return is only possible in a work like *In the Red and Brown Water* in which the conclusion exists independent of any action since the play's first page. Conversely, a beginning and end only form a "line" if the end turns on developments that take place after the start of the play, as in *A Doll's House*. These two plays, then, differ in some fundamental geometric sense, a difference reinforced by the distinction between the physicality of Ibsen's structural framework and the abstractness of McCraney's prologue and epilogue. Indeed, if Ibsen's play is itself a doll's house, a sort of box, then it is incompatible with a circle: fluid, cornerless, infinite.

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