

The Doll's House (1922) by Catherine Mansfield

Author Biography

Mansfield was born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp on October 14, 1888, in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. Her father, Harold Beauchamp, was a clerk for an importing firm though he worked his way up over the coming years from one position to the next. He became a partner in the business in 1889, a director of the Bank of New Zealand in 1898, and the chairman of the bank in 1907. Her mother, Annie Burnell Dyer Beauchamp, was constantly ill, having been weakened by rheumatic fever when she was in her teens. She stayed at home and watched over Katherine and her five siblings, of whom only three survived childhoods. In 1893, the family moved to Karori, a suburb of Wellington. Their house there, called “Chesney World,” was the model for the house in which “The Doll’s House” takes place. The family moved back to Wellington in 1898, to a large, spacious house with rolling gardens. Katherine attended Wellington Girls’ High School in 1898– 1899. It was during this time that her first stories were published in the High School Reporter. In 1900 she attended Miss Swainson’s private school, where she founded a small magazine. She attended Queen’s College in London from 1903 to 1906, studying cello at first but being drawn into writing. She traveled throughout Europe while at Queen’s and returned to New Zealand after graduation. During this period, she had several affairs with other girls she met at school. Back in her native country, she began publishing under her pen name, Katherine Mansfield. She became pregnant by Garnet Trowell, who was the son of her former cello teacher. In 1909 she married George Bowden, a singing teacher she had known for three weeks, but left him the day after the wedding to travel with a light-opera company. She soon had a miscarriage. In 1910 she returned to London and lived briefly with Bowden before meeting John Middleton Murry, with whom she fell in love and whom she eventually married in 1918, when her divorce from Bowden became final. While in London, she and Murry edited the magazines *Rhythm* and its successor, *Blue Review*, which published her works. She also wrote reviews for *Athenaeum*, an old, established literary magazine that Murry edited. She met and socialized with many

important writers of the time, including D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, and Virginia Woolf, who became a close friend. Having contracted tuberculosis in 1917, she traveled the world seeking treatments, ending up at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Avon near Fontainebleau, outside Paris, where she died of a hemorrhage on January 9, 1923.

THE DOLLS' HOUSE (1922): (Text)

When dear old Mrs. Hay went back to town after staying with the Burnells she sent the children a doll's house. It was so big that the carter and Pat carried it into the courtyard, and there it stayed, propped up on two wooden boxes beside the feed-room door. No harm could come of it; it was summer. And perhaps the smell of paint would have gone off by the time it had to be taken in. For, really, the smell of paint coming from that doll's house ("Sweet of old Mrs. Hay, of course; most sweet and generous!") -- but the smell of paint was quite enough to make any one seriously ill, in Aunt Beryl's opinion. Even before the sacking was taken off. And when it was. . .

There stood the doll's house, a dark, oily, spinach green, picked out with bright yellow. Its two solid little chimneys, glued on to the roof, were painted red and white, and the door, gleaming with yellow varnish, was like a little slab of toffee. Four windows, real windows, were divided into panes by a broad streak of green. There was actually a tiny porch, too, painted yellow, with big lumps of congealed paint hanging along the edge.

But perfect, perfect little house! Who could possibly mind the smell? It was part of the joy, part of the newness.

" Open it quickly, some one!"

The hook at the side was stuck fast. Pat pried it open with his pen- knife, and the whole house-front swung back, and -- there you were, gazing at one and the same moment into the drawing-room and dining-room, the kitchen and two bedrooms. That is the way for a house to open! Why don't all houses open like that? How much more exciting than peering through the slit of a door into a mean little hall with a hat-stand and two umbrellas! That is -- isn't it? -- what you long to know about a house when you put your hand on the knocker. Perhaps it is the way

God opens houses at dead of night when He is taking a quiet turn with an angel . .
. .

"Oh-oh!" The Burnell children sounded as though they were in despair. It was too marvelous; it was too much for them. They had never seen anything like it in their lives. All the rooms were papered. There were pictures on the walls, painted on the paper, with gold frames complete. Red carpet covered all the floors except the kitchen; red plush chairs in the drawing-room, green in the dining-room; tables, beds with real bedclothes, a cradle, a stove, a dresser with tiny plates and one big jug. But what Kezia liked more than anything, what she liked frightfully, was the lamp. It stood in the middle of the dining-room table, an exquisite little amber lamp with a white globe. It was even filled all ready for lighting, though, of course, you couldn't light it. But there was something inside that looked like oil, and that moved when you shook it.

The father and mother dolls, who sprawled very stiff as though they had fainted in the drawing-room, and their two little children asleep upstairs, were really too big for the doll's house. They didn't look as though they belonged. But the lamp was perfect. It seemed to smile to Kezia, to say, "I live here." The lamp was real.

The Burnell children could hardly walk to school fast enough the next morning. They burned to tell everybody, to describe, to -- well -- to boast about their doll's house before the school-bell rang.

" I'm to tell," said Isabel, "because I'm the eldest. And you two can join in after. But I'm to tell first".

There was nothing to answer. Isabel was bossy, but she was always right, and Lottie and Kezia knew too well the powers that went with being eldest. They brushed through the thick buttercups at the road edge and said nothing.

" And I'm to choose who's to come and see it first. Mother said I might".

For it had been arranged that while the doll's house stood in the courtyard they might ask the girls at school, two at a time, to come and look. Not to stay to tea, of course, or to come traipsing through the house. But just to stand quietly in the courtyard while Isabel pointed out the beauties, and Lottie and Kezia looked please. . . .

But hurry as they might, by the time they had reached the tarred palings of the boys' playground the bell had begun to jangle. They only just had time to whip off

their hats and fall into line before the roll was called. Never mind. Isabel tried to make up for it by looking very important and mysterious and by whispering behind her hand to the girls near her, "Got something to tell you at playtime".

Playtime came and Isabel was surrounded. The girls of her class nearly fought to put their arms round her, to walk away with her, to beam flatteringly, to be her special friend. She held quite a court under the huge pine trees at the side of the playground. Nudging, giggling together, the little girls pressed up close. And the only two who stayed outside the ring were the two who were always outside, the little Kelveys. They knew better than to come anywhere near the Burnells.

For the fact was, the school the Burnell children went to was not at all the kind of place their parents would have chosen if there had been any choice. But there was none. It was the only school for miles. And the consequence was all the children in the neighborhood, the judge's little girls, the doctor's daughters, the store-keeper's children, the milkman's, were forced to mix together. Not to speak of there being an equal number of rude, rough little boys as well. But the line had to be drawn somewhere. It was drawn at the Kelveys. Many of the children, including the Burnells, were not allowed even to speak to them. They walked past the Kelveys with their heads in the air, and as they set the fashion in all matters of behavior, the Kelveys were shunned by everybody. Even the teacher had a special voice for them, and a special smile for the other children when Lil Kelvey came up to her desk with a bunch of dreadfully common looking flowers .

They were the daughters of a spry, hardworking little washerwoman, who went about from house to house by the day. This was awful enough. But where was Mr. Kelvey? Nobody knew for certain. But everybody said he was in prison. So they were the daughters of a washerwoman and a goal bird. Very nice company for other people's children! And they looked it. Why Mrs. Kelvey made them so conspicuous was hard to understand. The truth was they were dressed in "bits" given to her by the people for whom she worked. Lil, for instance, who was a stout, plain child, with big freckles, came to school in a dress made from a green art-serge table-cloth of the Burnells', with red plush sleeves from the Logans' curtains. Her hat, perched on top of her high forehead, was a grown-up woman's hat, once the property of Miss Lecky, the postmistress. It was turned up at the back and trimmed with a large scarlet quill. What a little guy she looked! It was impossible not to laugh. And her little sister, our Else, wore a long white dress, rather like a nightgown, and a pair of little boy's boots. But whatever our Else wore she would have looked strange. She was a tiny wishbone of a child, with cropped hair and

enormous solemn eyes -- a little white owl. Nobody had ever seen her smile; she scarcely ever spoke. She went through life holding on to Lil, with a piece of Lil's skirt screwed up in her hand. Where Lil went our Else followed. In the playground, on the road going to and from school, there was Lil marching in front and our Else holding on behind. Only when she wanted anything, or when she was out of breath, our Else gave Lil a tug, a twitch, and Lil stopped and turned round. The Kelveys never failed to understand each other.

Now they hovered at the edge; you couldn't stop them listening. When the little girls turned round and sneered, Lil, as usual, gave her silly, shamefaced smile, but our Else only looked .And Isabel's voice, so very proud, went on telling. The carpet made a great sensation, but so did the beds with real bedclothes, and the stove with an oven door.

When she finished Kezia broke in. "You've forgotten the lamp, Isabel ".

"Oh, yes," said Isabel, "and there's a teeny little lamp, all made of yellow glass, with a white globe that stands on the dining-room table. You couldn't tell it from a real one".

" The lamp's best of all," cried Kezia. She thought Isabel wasn't making half enough of the little lamp. But nobody paid any attention. Isabel was choosing the two who were to come back with them that afternoon and see it. She chose Emmie Cole and Lena Logan. But when the others knew they were all to have a chance, they couldn't be nice enough to Isabel. One by one they put their arms round Isabel's waist and walked her off. They had something to whisper to her, a secret. "Isabel's my friend".

Only the little Kelveys moved away forgotten; there was nothing more for them to hear. Days passed, and as more children saw the doll's house, the fame of it spread. It became the one subject, the rage. The one question was, "Have you seen Burnells' doll's house?" "Oh, ain't it lovely!" "Haven't you seen it? Oh, I say "!

Even the dinner hour was given up to talking about it. The little girls sat under the pines eating their thick mutton sandwiches and big slabs of johnny cake spread with butter. While always, as near as they could get, sat the Kelveys, our Else holding on to Lil, listening too, while they chewed their jam sandwiches out of a newspaper soaked with large red blobs.

" Mother," said Kezia, "can't I ask the Kelveys just once"?

" Certainly not, Kezia".

" But why not"?

"Run away, Kezia; you know quite well why not".

At last everybody had seen it except them. On that day the subject rather flagged. It was the dinner hour. The children stood together under the pine trees, and suddenly, as they looked at the Kelveys eating out of their paper, always by themselves, always listening, they wanted to be horrid to them. Emmie Cole started the whisper.

Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up".

"O-oh, how awful!" said Isabel Burnell, and she made eyes at Emmie.

Emmie swallowed in a very meaning way and nodded to Isabel as she'd seen her mother do on those occasions.

" It's true--it's true--it's true," she said.

Then Lena Logan's little eyes snapped. "Shall I ask her?" she whispered.

" Bet you don't," said Jessie May.

" Pooh, I'm not frightened," said Lena. Suddenly she gave a little squeal and danced in front of the other girls. "Watch! Watch me! Watch me now!" said Lena. And sliding, gliding, dragging one foot, giggling behind her hand, Lena went over to the Kelveys.

Lil looked up from her dinner. She wrapped the rest quickly away. Our Else stopped chewing. What was coming now?

" Is it true you're going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?" shrilled Lena.

Dead silence. But instead of answering, Lil only gave her silly, shame-faced smile. She didn't seem to mind the question at all. What a sell for Lena! The girls began to titter . Lena couldn't stand that. She put her hands on her hips; she shot forward. "Yah, yer father's in prison!" she hissed, spitefully. This was such a marvelous thing to have said that the little girls rushed away in a body, deeply, deeply excited, wild with joy. Someone found a long rope, and they began skipping. And never did they skip so high, run in and out so fast, or do such daring things as on that morning.

In the afternoon Pat called for the Burnell children with the buggy and they drove home. There were visitors. Isabel and Lottie, who liked visitors, went upstairs to change their pinafores. But Kezia thieved out at the back. Nobody was about; she began to swing on the big white gates of the courtyard. Presently, looking along the road, she saw two little dots. They grew bigger, they were coming towards her. Now she could see that one was in front and one close behind. Now she could see that they were the Kelveys. Kezia stopped swinging. She slipped off the gate as if she was going to run away. Then she hesitated. The Kelveys came nearer, and beside them walked their shadows, very long, stretching right across the road with their heads in the buttercups. Kezia clambered back on the gate; she had made up her mind; she swung out.

"Hullo," she said to the passing Kelveys.

They were so astounded that they stopped. Lil gave her silly smile. Our Else stared.

" You can come and see our doll's house if you want to," said Kezia, and she dragged one toe on the ground. But at that Lil turned red and shook her head quickly."

" Why not?" asked Kezia.

Lil gasped, then she said, "Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us".

" Oh, well," said Kezia. She didn't know what to reply. "It doesn't matter. You can come and see our doll's house all the same. Come on. Nobody's looking".

But Lil shook her head still harder.

" Don't you want to?" asked Kezia.

Suddenly there was a twitch, a tug at Lil's skirt. She turned round. Our Else was looking at her with big, imploring eyes; she was frowning; she wanted to go. For a moment Lil looked at our Else very doubtfully. But then our Else twitched her skirt again. She started forward. Kezia led the way. Like two little stray cats they followed across the courtyard to where the doll's house stood .

"There it is," said Kezia .

There was a pause. Lil breathed loudly, almost snorted; our Else was still as a stone .

"I'll open it for you," said Kezia kindly. She undid the hook and they looked inside.

"There's the drawing-room and the dining-room, and that's the"--Kezia!"

Oh, what a start they gave!

"Kezia"!

It was Aunt Beryl's voice. They turned round. At the back door stood Aunt Beryl, staring as if she couldn't believe what she saw.

"How dare you ask the little Kelveys into the courtyard?" said her cold, furious voice. You know as well as I do, you're not allowed to talk to them. Run away, children, run away at once. And don't come back again," said Aunt Beryl. And she stepped into the yard and shooed them out as if they were chickens."

" Off you go immediately!" she called, cold and proud.

They did not need telling twice. Burning with shame, shrinking together, Lil huddling along like her mother, our Else dazed, somehow they crossed the big courtyard and squeezed through the white gate.

" Wicked, disobedient little girl!" said Aunt Beryl bitterly to Kezia, and she slammed the doll's house to. The afternoon had been awful. A letter had come from Willie Brent, a terrifying, threatening letter, saying if she did not meet him that evening in Pulman's Bush, he'd come to the front door and ask the reason why! But now that she had frightened those little rats of Kelveys and given Kezia a good scolding, her heart felt lighter. That ghastly pressure was gone. She went back to the house humming.

When the Kelveys were well out of sight of Burnells', they sat down to rest on a big red drain-pipe by the side of the road. Lil's cheeks were still burning; she took off the hat with the quill and held it on her knee. Dreamily they looked over the hay paddocks, past the creek, to the group of wattles where Logan's cows stood waiting to be milked. What were their thoughts?

Presently our Else nudged up close to her sister. But now she had forgotten the cross lady. She put out a finger and stroked her sister's quill; she smiled her rare smile.

" I seen the little lamp," she said, softly.

Then both were silent once more.

THE END

1. The Plot Structure

Introduction

“The Doll’s House” begins when an elaborate doll’s house is delivered to the home of the Burnell family. It is a gift from Mrs. Hay. The doll’s house is massive, so big that the delivery man needs the help of the Burnells’ handyman to carry it into the yard. It is left in the yard because it is newly painted. The doll’s house is amazing to all who see it because it accurately reproduces a real house in miniature. Kezia and the other children are enchanted with the details of the doll’s house. The three Burnell girls—Isabel, Lottie, and Kezia—are excited about their new doll’s house.

Complications

The three Burnell girls want to bring friends from school home to see it. Their mother, however, is concerned that having too many girls come through the house might create too much trouble, so she puts limitations on the visitors; only two guests can come over at a time, and they are not allowed into the house. Isabel is able to gather the girls around her and describe the house to them. All of the girls gather and are impressed. Outside of the group, off to the side, stand the Kelvey sisters. Lil and Else Kelvey come from a poor family. As the Burnell girls stand at the center of attention, choosing which girls to invite to their home to see the doll’s house, the Kelvey sisters are not even considered. Over the course of weeks, all of the girls from school except the Kelvey girls go to view the doll’s house. Kezia asks her mother if she may invite the Kelveys to see it, but her mother adamantly refuses. She will not say why she will not let them come to the house, but she

assumes that Kezia understands the social rules that prohibit such a visit. At school, the other children become aware of the Kelveys' social situation when they see them excluded from viewing the doll's house. At first, they talk rudely about the Kelvey sisters among themselves. To show off to the other girls, Lena Logan walks over to Lil Kelvey and asks if she plans to be a servant when she grows up, which makes the other girls laugh maliciously. Their laughing makes Lena turn even meaner, and she shouts out pointedly that the Kelveys' father is in prison.

Climax

Pat, the handyman, picks up the girls in the buggy, and when they arrive home, they find that there are visitors. The older two girls run upstairs to change into their good clothes, but Kezia goes out into the yard by herself, feeling estranged from her family. When she sees the Kelvey sisters walking along the road, she climbs up on the gate and calls out to them, inviting them into the yard to take a look at the doll's house. Lil Kelvey knows that Kezia's mother has forbidden them from entering the yard, and so she is hesitant to enter, but Kezia tells her that no one will see them. Else tugs on Lil's skirt to show that she would like to see it very much.

Resolution

The three girls stand before the doll's house. Kezia opens it and just as she starts to show the Kelveys the inside, her Aunt Beryl, notices them from inside the house and calls out angrily, telling the Kelvey girls to leave their yard and never come back, chasing them away. She yells at Kezia and slams the doll's house shut. The Kelvey sisters walk away from the Burnell house. Lil is humiliated by the things that Aunt Beryl has called her.

Conclusion

After the two girls sit quietly for a brief while, Else, who has not spoken up to this point in the story, tells her sister, smiling with pride, that she did, in fact manage to catch a view of the little lamp, that was the object of Kezia's attention.

2. Character Analysis

Aunt Beryl

Aunt Beryl is a self-centered woman who imagines herself to be sensitive, even though she is callous about the feelings of others. When the doll's house is delivered to the Burnell home, it is Aunt Beryl who insists that it should be kept outside because she finds the fumes of its recent paint job so powerful that they make her feel sick. At the end of the story, she is in a terrible mood because a man named Willie Brent, with whom it would shame Aunt Beryl to be associated, has written to say he wants to meet with her. Brent's letter has threatened to confront Aunt Beryl publicly at her house if she does not comply, angering her. Her mood picks up when she sees the Kelvey children in the back yard. She races out into the yard and tells them to leave, and she yells at her niece Kezia, who invited them to look at the doll's house. She is proud of her rage.

Isabel Burnell

As the oldest of the Burnell daughters, Isabel is a reflection of the kind of social hierarchy that rules the society in which they live. Her age gives her privileges over her sisters. When their mother limits the number of schoolmates the girls can bring home to see the doll's house, Isabel is allowed to choose which friends to invite first. Because the other girls at school are interested in seeing the doll's house, they compete to be her friend. Their competition makes Isabel snobbish. When she hears the other children mocking the Kelvey girls, she goes along with the mockery, and this makes Lena Logan approach the Kelveys with outright cruelty, which delights Isabel and her friends.

Kezia Burnell

Kezia is the youngest of the Burnell sisters, and the one who is most inclined toward empathy and fanciful imagination. It is Kezia who finds the little lamp in the doll's house fascinating. She thinks that it makes the doll's house look as if it is lived in, even though the dolls who come with the house do not seem as if they belong. While her older sister Isabel tells the other girls at school about the doll's house, Kezia tries to interject her thoughts about the lamp, but she is ignored, unable to take any of the attention away from Isabel. Later, after all of the other girls from

the school have come to view the doll's house, Kezia approaches her mother and asks if she can invite the Kelvey sisters, but her mother is adamant that they cannot be invited to the house, telling Kezia that she should know why it would be wrong. Kezia does not appear to agree with her mother's position, however. On the afternoon that the Kelvey sisters are mocked at school by Lena Logan and the rest of the girls, Kezia wanders away from the rest of the family, into the back yard. Seeing the Kelvey sisters, she invites them into the yard, through the gate, in direct defiance of her mother's command. She even overcomes their hesitation by telling them that no one will see them. Bringing them to the doll's house, Kezia crouches down and is about to share the things about it that she finds wonderful, but her aunt comes, chases the Kelveys away, and chastises Kezia.

Lottie Burnell

Lottie is the middle Burnell sister, younger than Isabel and older than Kezia. She lives in Isabel's shadow, forced to wait before inviting friends home to look at the doll's house until Isabel is finished inviting all of her friends over.

Mrs. Burnell

The mother of Isabel, Lottie, and Kezia is a very class-conscious woman. She is the one who makes the rule forbidding her daughters from bringing home more than two girls at a time and refusing to let any of the girls come into the house. Lil Kelvey knows that she is not allowed to come to the Burnell house because Mrs. Burnell talked to her mother, setting down this rule. When Kezia directly asks if she can have the Kelvey girls over to look at the doll's house, Mrs. Burnell is adamant in her refusal, assuming that her daughter understands why she would be so horrified at such a prospect.

Else Kelvey

Else is the younger Kelvey sister. She is tiny and slim, the opposite of her sister, with large eyes that are described as looking like an owl's. She follows her older sister, Lil, everywhere she goes, holding onto the hem of Lil's skirt so that she does not become lost. Else does not speak aloud, but instead she tugs on Lil's skirt, and whatever is on her mind is simply understood. Else does not react when the other girls tease the Kelveys. She seems to have no opinions until Kezia invites the sisters

into the Burnell yard to look at the doll's house; then, she is insistent about going in to look at it, even after Lil points out that Mrs. Burnell told their mother to keep Lil and Else away. At Else's insistence, Lil leads her in, but they only manage to get a quick glimpse of the inside of the doll's house before they are chased from the yard by Aunt Beryl. Having been chastised by a stranger, the two sisters sit dejected until Else speaks for the first time in the story, telling her sister that she saw the tiny lamp. Although she is quiet, she does pay attention, having heard Kezia talk about the little lamp while all of the other children paid no attention. Her declaration about seeing the lamp shows some small measure of triumph, even though Aunt Beryl has done her best to belittle Else and her sister.

Lil Kelvey

Lil is the elder of the two Kelvey sisters, the one who is aware of the burden of being low on the social hierarchy. She is large and plain looking, and her mother dresses her conspicuously, with a dress cut from material the Burnells gave her mother and a woman's hat that once belonged to the postmistress. Her little sister, Else, follows her everywhere, holding onto her skirt. The two sisters are shunned by the other children at the school, but they have a special bond, so that Lil understands Else's needs and wants even when nothing is said aloud. Lil is good natured about accepting the teasing of her classmates. When Lena Logan asks if she plans to be a servant when she grows up, Lil only smiles, though she is ashamed. When Kezia invites Lil and her sister into the Burnell yard, Lil is conflicted. She is curious about the doll's house, but she knows that Mrs. Burnell has forbidden them from entering the yard. She goes in because her little sister urges her to do so, and almost immediately, Aunt Beryl runs from the house, chasing them away, talking to them cruelly. Later, when they are out of sight of the Burnell home, Lil sits quietly, blushing with humiliation. Her sister talks to her and is answered with silence.

3. Themes in the story.

A. Class Conflict

The town that is depicted in "The Doll's House" is clearly one with a range of different social classes, as Mansfield explains in the paragraph that describes the school. This explains why people of different classes are attending the same school.

For examples of the different economic levels represented here, she mentions judges and doctors, storekeepers and milkmen. Readers know that the Burnell family is very wealthy from the start because their guest, Mrs. Hay, is obviously affluent enough to send an extravagant gift like this massive doll's house, while Aunt Beryl is so comfortable in her position that she takes a condescending attitude toward "sweet old Mrs. Hay" and finds fault with the handcrafted toy. When the Burnell daughters want to bring their schoolmates home to see the doll's house, Mrs. Burnell sets down rules that show her belief that the children at the school are of a lower class than her children. She will not allow them to come to tea or even to enter the house. At the bottom of this scale is the Kelvey family. Mrs. Kelvey does laundry for other families, which was about the lowest-paying and least prestigious position there was at the turn of the twentieth century. Mr. Kelvey's whereabouts are unknown. He could be gone for some good reason, but the neighbors assume the worst and tell each other that he is in jail, which would be a powerful mark of shame for the Kelvey family. The poor, lower-class Kelveys are not only looked down on by the Burnells, they are actively shunned. Mrs. Burnell explicitly tells her children that the Kelvey girls are not to be included with the children who are invited to see the doll's house. Later, when all of the other girls have seen it, Kezia asks again, to see if her mother has changed her mind, but Mrs. Burnell responds as if the question is ridiculous. Later, when Aunt Beryl chases the Kelvey girls out of the yard, her bad mood lightens, indicating that being rude to lower-class people is actually pleasurable to those who hold higher social status.

B. Conformity

One of the most powerful phenomena explored in this story is the way that people, especially children, find themselves swept by social trends into behaving terribly. The story starts with an act of kindness, when Mrs. Hay sends a gift to the Burnell children that she thinks they will enjoy. They are not allowed to enjoy the doll's house indoors because their Aunt Beryl thinks that it reeks of paint, which is a sign that she finds it to be cheap or inferior. The girls decide that they would like to show the house to their friends, but their mother puts a restriction on how many friends may visit the Burnell house at once. Because the invitations are limited, they become valuable, and the girls at the school begin competing for the affection of Isabel Burnell, who, finding herself the center of attention, encourages their competition.

4. Type of Narrator: Omniscient Narrator

“The Doll’s House” is told from a third-person point of view. The narrator is not a character within the story, one who would speak of herself or himself as “I” or “me,” but is instead an outside observer, reporting on all of the characters as “he” or “she.” In this story, the narrative perspective changes often. Readers are told what Aunt Beryl, the Burnell sisters, and the Kelvey sisters are thinking. Sometimes the narration does not go into the characters’ minds, however, instead conveying what they think by offering precise, detailed descriptions of their actions. The narrator’s omniscient point of view is not entirely consistent. Else Kelvey is consistently referred to as “our Else.” This nearly brings the narrator into the story, creating a character who has a relationship to Else and the other characters. Aside from this one linguistic twist, there are no other clues of the narrator’s personality. The use of the word “our” is alone in establishing the narrator as a character, while the rest of the narration is from the omniscient point of view. In “The Doll’s House,” the omniscient narrator describes the private wishes of several characters, including those of the Burnell children. The Burnell children could hardly walk to school fast enough the next morning. They burned to tell everybody, to describe, to— well—to boast about their doll’s house before the school bell rang. Unlike stories written from the first-person point of view, stories with an omniscient point of view offer a wider, and perhaps more reliable, perspective. Writers often use such a point of view when they wish to examine broad social issues.

5. Symbols

A. The lamp

Mansfield uses the lamp in the doll’s house as a symbol. It clearly means something to Kezia Burnell. Though that meaning is not directly explained, readers can tell from Kezia’s association of the lamp with a smile and the phrase “I live here” that the lamp’s significance has something to do with an unfulfilled need to belong. Like most symbols in literature, its precise meaning is open to interpretation, so that different readers will understand it differently. At the end of the story, the importance that Kezia places on the lamp is shared by Else Kelvey. Else is proud that, in spite of being treated badly by the Burnells’ Aunt Beryl, she has managed to sneak a look at the lamp. The story does not say what the lamp means to Else or even hint at whether its meaning is

the same for her as it is for Kezia, but Else does share Kezia's enthusiasm for it, so it clearly means something to her.

B. The White Gates

The Burnell courtyard has big white gates that separate the street from their private property. The gates are a symbol of the Burnell's class superiority, physically separating them from poor outsiders. The Burnells gladly let certain visitors like Lena Logan and Emmie Cole enter the courtyard to see the doll's house. Others, like the Kelveys, are meant to stay outside. When Kezia swings on the gate at the end of the story, she seems to teeter between her family's ideas of who is acceptable and her own. Kezia wants to invite the Kelveys to see the doll's house but is forbidden from doing so by her mother. When Kezia swings the gate out to greet the passing Kelveys, she physically crosses the line that society has drawn between her and the lower class Kelveys. Kezia demonstrates how a strict boundary can be easily broken with a simple act of kindness. After Aunt Beryl catches Kezia and the Kelveys together in the courtyard, she shoos them away and the Kelveys pass back through the gates, again re-establishing the social order the gates represent.

C. The Doll's House

The doll's house itself is a symbol of the Burnell family's societal position. When it is brought into the Burnell courtyard, it becomes, literally, a house within a house, a mirror of the Burnell's home. The narrator describes it as having a strong smell, so strong that it needs to spend time outside to air out before they bring it inside. Additionally, the house is painted a "dark, oily, spinach green" has "two solid little chimneys," "yellow varnish," and "a tiny porch...with big lumps of congealed paint hanging along the edge." These phrases barely make the dollhouse seem beautiful, and the fact that the house is nice enough but not exquisite is a reflection of Mansfield's opinion of the Burnells' position in society. A foil for her own family growing up, the Burnells might have a large country home, but they are not living in a fancy house in town. Mansfield suggests the provincialism of the Burnells through the details of the house, criticizing, too, the pride they feel in the dollhouse and the social cloud it brings them.

Questions

- 1. Classify the characters in this story into dynamic vs. static and round vs. flat.**
- 2. Is there any irony in the story? Explain.**
- 3. What aspects of figurative language are to be found in the text?**
- 4. Explain the value of setting variation in the story?**