

The Doll's House by Catherine Mansfield

General Questions

Q1. What is the plot structure of The Doll's House?

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—Isabel, Lottie, and Kezia—are excited about their new doll’s house, and they 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.

Q2. Analyze the major characters in the story.

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.

Q.3 Comment on the major themes in this story.

1. 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 fourteenth paragraph. 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.

2. 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.

Q4/ How is the story narrated?

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." Frequently, third-person narrators will limit themselves to conveying the thoughts and impressions of just one character, viewing the action of the story from a single perspective. In this story, however, 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, however. 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.

Q5/ What does "the lamp" symbolize?

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.