The Doll's House

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield was born Kathleen Beauchamp in New Zealand to a prominent English family in New Zealand. Much of her childhood was spent in the small, country village of Karori, where she was educated in a village school alongside the children of housekeepers, milkmen, and other lower-class children, just like the Burnell sisters in "The Doll's House." At fourteen, she was sent to England to continue her education, studying at Queen's Collage, Harley Street. On returning to New Zealand in 1906, she found life in a small colonial town stifling and unpleasant. She longed to escape the narrowness of her privileged upbringing and return to London, what she considered the center of intellectual and artistic life. She left New Zealand for good in 1908 to make a name for herself as a writer. Once in London, she fell in with a group of other artists and bohemians and began submitting manuscripts to editors. Mansfield was met with early success, publishing stories in journals such as *The New Age*, *Rhythm*, and *The Blue Review*, while also managing to publish her first collection of short stories *In a German Pension* in 1911. It was only at the death of her younger brother during the war in 1915 that she turned to New Zealand as a source of inspiration for her writing. She used her childhood memories as fodder for many of her most famous stories, including "Prelude" and "The Garden Party." In 1917, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent the final years of her life traveling in search of healthier climates and writing prolifically, a desperate attempt to put down all that she had to express before she would eventually succumb to disease. She was most prolific in these final years, writing more than forty stories and several more unfinished works before her early death at the age of 34. Her husband, editor and critic John Middleton Murry, published many of her stories posthumously in "The Dove's Nest" (1923) and "Something Childish" (1924). Mansfield's work helpef developed the form of the short story in English literature she is still hailed as a master of precise feeling and psychological depth in her writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While no one in Europe was utterly untouched by the scourge of the First World War, Katherine Mansfield was personally affected when her dear younger brother, Leslie Heron Beauchamp, was killed in 1915 just weeks after arriving at the front. Mansfield had met with her brother in London before he shipped out and they talked for hours of their happiest years together as children. Upon news of Leslie's death, Mansfield longed to return to a childhood that was ignorant of the awful events that shook Europe and the world. She felt she owed it to her brother to use her writing to recreate the New Zealand of her childhood. She wrote, "I have a duty to perform to the lovely time when we were both alive. I want to write about it and he [her brother] wanted me to." Mansfield's "The Doll's House" is directly autobiographical in many ways, taking place in a village town just like the one the Beauchamp family moved to when Katherine was just a girl.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Doll's House" continues the story of the Burnell family, which Mansfield began to chronicle in "Prelude," her longest story that recalls her own childhood memories in the New Zealand countryside, and continues in "At the Bay." Her story "The Garden Party" explores similar themes of class division in a New Zealand village, particularly the coarseness of the wealthy towards the lower classes. Mansfield's luxurious descriptions of the doll's house towards the beginning of the story were likely influenced by her teenage admiration for Irish poet, playwright, and novelist Oscar Wilde. That Mansfield seems to care so deeply about the lower classes likely stems from her ardent love of Anton Chekov, who wrote many stories about Russian peasants. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a definitive modernist masterpiece, often includes dialogue that is not attributed to any one character in particular yet adds to the general noise of the episode being depicted, much in the same way that Mansfield uses dialogue in "The Doll's House." The episodic and somewhat haphazard narration is another modernist feature Mansfield shares with other writers of her time, namely her friend and rival, Virginia Woolf, whose novels, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *The Voyage Out* employ similarly episodic structures.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Doll's House"
- **When Written:** 1922
- **When Published:** 1922 (first published in *The Nation and Athenaeum* on February 4, 1922, later appearing in the 1923 collection *The Dove's Nest)*
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, modernism
- **Setting:** A small, countryside village
- **Climax:** In a moment of cruelty and excitement, Lena Logan screams, "Yah, yer father's in prison!" at the Kelvey sisters in the schoolyard.
- **Antagonist:** Aunt Beryl, Class Prejudice

- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Friendship and Rivalry with Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield were friends and rivals for many years. After Mansfield's death, Woolf wrote in her diary, "I was jealous of her writing—the only writing I have ever been jealous of." Though Woolf is still the more prominent in English letters, she was, when she first met Mansfield, quite intimidated by the young New Zealander who had already made something of a name for herself in England. When the two first met, Mansfield had written and published a number of short stories, whereas Woolf had only published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. In 1918 Virginia and her husband, Leonard published Mansfield's longest story, "Prelude," the first commission for their new Hogarth Press.

Love of Music. Katherine Mansfield was an accomplished cellist. According to her husband, Mansfield even spent time playing with traveling opera troupes when she needed money upon her return to London in 1909 and worked as an entertainer at private parties.

PLOT SUMMARY

A **doll's house** arrives at the Burnell home as a gift. The dollhouse smells so strongly of paint that Aunt Beryl thinks it could make someone sick. Isabel, Lottie, and Kezia, the Burnell's three daughters, do not mind the smell, however, and couldn't be more delighted by the house. Kezia, the youngest sister, notices a small **lamp**, which she thinks it the best part of it.

The next morning, the Burnells are excited to boast to the other girls at school. Isabel, the oldest, forbids her sisters from saying anything before she's had a chance to describe the doll's house to the others. She also reminds Lottie and Kezia that she is allowed to choose which two girls will visit first to see the house.

At playtime, all the little girls gather around to hear Isabel's talk about the house except for Lil and Else Kelvey—the daughters of the village washerwoman and the poorest girls at school. Everyone in the village gossips about the Kelveys, saying that their father is in prison, and many children, the Burnells included, aren't allowed to talk to them. As such, the Kelveys can only eavesdrop as Isabel proudly describes the doll's house. Kezia reminds her sister to mention the lamp, though no one else seems to care about it. Isabel chooses Emmie Cole and Lena Logan as the first two girls to come see the house.

Kezia asks her mother if she can invite the Kelveys to see the doll's house, but Mrs. Burnell refuses and tells Kezia she knows why. More days pass, and by now everyone has seen the house except the Kelveys. At school the other girls cruelly taunt the sisters, who react only with silence. Later that afternoon, Kezia is at home swinging on the **big white gates** of her family's courtyard. When she spots the Kelveys walking down the road, she decides to swing the gates open and invite them inside. Lil shakes her head and reminds Kezia that they aren't supposed to talk to one another. Kezia assures Lil that it doesn't matter. Lil still doesn't want to go, but Else, standing behind her, tugs on her dress and looks at her pleadingly.

Kezia leads the Kelveys inside. While she is showing the Kelveys the doll's house, Aunt Beryl spots them and shouts furiously at Kezia. She shoos the Kelveys away and slams the doll's house shut.

It is revealed that earlier that afternoon Aunt Beryl had received a letter from Willie Brent. In the note, Willie had threatened to come knock on the door if Aunt Beryl didn't meet him that night in Pullman's Bush. Aunt Beryl is terrified by the idea of Willie coming to the door. After yelling at the girls, however, she feels better, and hums as she walks back into the house.

The Kelveys, meanwhile, run off and sit by the side of the road. Else inches closer to her sister and smiles. She speaks for the first time in the story, saying, "I seen the lamp."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kezia Burnell – The youngest Burnell sister, Kezia is more independent and thoughtful than both Isabel and Lottie. Her favorite part of the **doll's house** is its small **lamp**, which she believes fits inside of it perfectly. When Isabel is telling the other girls at school about the house, Kezia reminds her not to forget the lamp, though no one else seems to care about it. Though everyone else ignores or mocks Lil and Else Kelvey, Kezia wants to invite them to see the house. Her mother, Mrs. Burnell, has forbidden her from doing so. Nevertheless, when Kezia sees the Kelveys passing by one afternoon while she is swinging on **the white gates** of her family's home, she decides to invite them inside. She ignores the rules of class that the adults in her life have tried to impress upon her, instead offering kindness and friendship to the Kelveys.

Isabel Burnell – The older sister of Lottie and Kezia, Isabel is bossy and wants to be the first to brag about the **doll's house** to the other girls at school. Isabel cares about what others think of her and is careful to seem mysterious and important before she shares the news of the house with the other girls. As the oldest Burnell sister, Isabel gets to choose which of the girls can come see the house, and revels in being the center of attention as the others try to prove their loyalty and friendship in order to be invited.

Lil Kelvey – The older sister of Else and the daughter of the

village's "spry washerwoman," Lil is often mocked by the other girls at school. She is "a stout, plain child, with big freckles," and wears a dress made from pieces of material her mother collected while cleaning homes—including a green tablecloth that used to belong to the Burnells and red sleeves from the Logan's old curtains. She also wears a hat that used to belong to the postmistress, which is far too big and looks ridiculous on her. She does not join in when the other girls chat and play at school, choosing instead to stay off to the side with her sister. Lil rarely speaks, instead responding to the other girls' taunts with a "silly, shamefaced smile." When Kezia invites Lil and Else into the courtyard to see the **doll's house**, Lil at first refuses out of a sense of shame and fear, knowing that it would be out of line for her and her sister to enter the Burnell's home.

Else Kelvey – The younger sister of Lil, Else is a shy, quiet, and mysterious child. She wears a long white dress that is too big for her and a pair of old boys' boots. A "tiny wishbone of a child," she has cropped hair and "enormous solemn eyes." She rarely speaks, not even to her sister. Instead, when she wants to communicate, she tugs on the hem of Lil's dress, which she is almost always holding onto. Else is a good listener, noting when Isabel describes the **doll's house** to the other girls that Kezia loved the little **lamp**. Though Lil resists when Kezia invites them into the courtyard, Else encourages her sister to go inside to see the doll's house. She notices the lamp when she finally sees the house, emphasizing her similarity to the wealthier Kezia.

Aunt Beryl – The aunt of Isabel, Lottie, and Kezia Burnell, Aunt Beryl is the sister of Mrs. Burnell and lives with the family in their country home. This implies that she is unmarried and needs to depend on the family financially. Aunt Beryl criticizes the **doll's house** when it first arrives, thinking that it smells so strongly of paint that it could make someone ill. Later, she catches Kezia showing the dollhouse to Lil and Else Kelvey and scolds them cruelly, shooing the Kelveys away and slamming the doll's house closed. She is in some kind of relationship with Willie Brent, which she wants to keep a secret.

Lena Logan – A friend of Isabel's and one of the first two girls invited to see the **doll's house**. When the girls are gossiping one day at school, Lena has the idea to embarrass the Kelveys by going up to them and asking Lil if she will be a servant one day. When she does this, Lil and Else do not respond but rather stare back at her silently. Lena decides to kick it up a notch, and screams, "Yah, yer father's in prison!" at them, parroting the gossip she has heard adults in the village spread about the Kelveys' father.

Emmie Cole – Another friend of Isabel's who is invited with Lena Logan to see the **doll's house** first. She starts the cruel whisper about Lil Kelvey at lunch one day, whispering to Isabel, "Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up." This leads to Lena approaching the Kelveys and hissing, "Yah, yer father's in prison!" to insult them.

Lottie Burnell – The middle Burnell daughter and sister to Isabel and Kezia. When Isabel instructs Lottie and Kezia to let her tell the other girls about the **doll's house** first, she does not resist, but understands, along with Kezia, "the powers that went with being the eldest." Lottie follows what her older sister does. When guests come to visit at the end of the story, for example, Lottie goes to change into a fresh pinafore with Isabel, though Kezia does not.

Willie Brent – Willie Brent writes a letter to Aunt Beryl threatening to come to her front door if she doesn't meet him in Pullman's Bush later that night. He is likely a past or current lover of Aunt Beryl, and probably of a lower class. His threat to come to the front door would embarrass Aunt Beryl, who likely does not want anyone to know she is in any way associated with Willie.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jessie May – Another girl who goes to the village school with the Burnells and the Kelveys. She dares Lena Logan to approach the Kelveys and ask Lil if she will be a servant when she grows up.

Pat – Pat is the Burnell family handyman. He brings the **doll's house** into the courtyard and picks up the Burnell girls from school.

Mrs. Burnell – Mother of Isabel, Lottie, and Kezia. When Kezia asks her if she can invite Lil and Else Kelvey to see the **doll's house**, she tells her no, and does not explain why except to say, "Run away, Kezia; you know quite well why not."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

INSIDERS, OUTSIDERS, AND CLASS

Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House* is primarily a tale about how class shapes life in small village. The story revolves around the daughters of two families, the wealthy Burnells and the lower-class Kelveys. As rich insiders, the Burnells do not associate with poor outsiders like the Kelveys. As such, when the young Burnell sisters receive a **doll's house**, all the little girls at their school are invited to see it except for the Kelvey sisters, who know better than to expect an invitation. The narrator continually emphasizes barriers both physical and metaphorical between who is "in" and who is "out" to highlight and critique such harsh classism. Mansfield ultimately suggests that class boundaries

need not be as rigid as they are and can even be overcome with empathy and kindness.

The characters in *The Doll's House* are clearly divided into two groups: the popular, wealthier insiders who are free to associate with one another, and the poor outsiders who are shunned by the rest of society. The Burnells and their friends are definitely "in": they wear the right clothes, eat the right sandwiches at lunch, and have the right parents. The richest girls in school, the Burnell sisters are at the center of its social life. Since they "set the fashion in all matters of behaviour," the other girls copy what they do. And because the Burnells are told by their parents not to speak with the Kelveys, all the other little girls avoid them too. Even the school's teacher follows the Burnells' lead, using a "special voice"—implied to be condescending or patronizing—to address Lil Kelvey when she brings her "common-looking flowers."

The impoverished Kelvey sisters, meanwhile, are clearly "out." They dress in odd scraps and hand-me-downs from the homes of the other girls. Lil wears a dress made from an old green tablecloth from the Burnell house with "red plush sleeves" from the Logans' curtains." Her younger sister, Else, wears a dress that is too big for her and a pair of boys' boots. While the other girls sit together at lunchtime with "thick mutton sandwiches and big slabs of johnny cake spread with butter," the Kelveys sit apart and eat plain jam sandwiches wrapped in newspaper. Mansfield highlights these class indicators both to demonstrate the triviality of such differences and also to show how they nevertheless make the Kelvey sisters outsiders among their peers.

The story also grammatically separates the Burnells from the Kelveys by referring to the latter using more colloquial, intimate language. Nearly every time Mansfield describes Else, for example, she uses the pronoun "our": "her little sister, our Else, wore a long white dress," she writes, and also, "Where Lil went our Else followed." This encourages the reader to empathize with the sisters and to feel some kind of claim to Else, in particular, as one of their own. Meanwhile, "them" or "their" are often used to describe the Burnells and the other girls, effectively distancing them from the reader. Through language, then, Mansfield simultaneously points out class differences and asks the reader to see past them.

The story further unravels class-based prejudice through Kezia, the youngest Burnell sister who opens the big **white gates** of her family's home to allow the Kelveys inside to see the doll's house. The gates are a symbol of the Burnell's class superiority, physically separating them from poor outsiders. By opening them, Kezia demonstrates how a strict boundary can be easily broken with a simple act of kindness.

Kezia's opening of the gates is made all the more powerful by the fact that even acceptable girls are only allowed to enter the courtyard in pairs to see the doll's house, and not "to come traipsing through the house." Kezia is the only Burnell to reject such classist thinking. She enjoys swinging on her family's gates, physically teetering between the inside and the outside of her home—between what she wants to do and what she has been told to do. By showing empathy for the lower class Kelveys, Kezia overcomes the harshness of her peers and society.

Notably, when the Kelveys eventually do see the doll's house, their experience of it proves no different than that of the other little girls. They gaze on it with the same wonder, and little Else even notices the small **lamp** that Kezia, too, admires. The story up to this point has depicted how class differences have serious consequences about who gets to experience beauty and friendship, and who does not. Through these final moments, however, Mansfield argues that class distinctions are ultimately petty, unfair, and meaningless.

INNOCENCE AND CRUELTY

While *The Doll's House* mostly focuses on the interactions between young girls with one another, it is not simply a story about how children behave. These girls are, in many ways, simply representations of the society in which they are being raised, and their behavior reflects what their parents and elders have taught them. Tellingly, the older characters prove more rigid in their upholding of society's rules. In contrast, the youngest characters are the only ones willing to disregard harsh dictates of social etiquette. Mansfield suggests, then, that class-consciousness and prejudice are not innate but rather passed down from one generation to the next.

When the popular girls do their worst to mock the Kelveys, they are often simply imitating parents who gossip about the lower-class family. For example, at lunch one day the popular Emmie Cole whispers to Isabel Burnell and looks sideways at the Kelveys in a way directly copied from her mother. Emmie whispers, "Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up" before "swallow[ing] in a very meaning way and nod[ing] to Isabel as she'd seen her mother do on those occasions." Of course, the negative influence of prejudiced parents is most evident in the fact that the Burnells are forbidden from speaking to the Kelveys. This suggests that the hatred the popular girls express toward the Kelveys is not a mark of inherent cruelty, but rather a posturing toward the cold, judgmental adulthood surrounding them.

The Kelveys similarly have inherited a learned sense of submission and shamefulness from their own mother, the "spry washerwoman" of the village. As a washerwoman, the Kelveys' mother likely needs to do her job as inconspicuously a possible, careful not to disturb the families living in the homes she cleans. The Kelvey girls are similarly quiet, and do not try to join in when the other girls are talking. Later, when the Burnell sisters' Aunt Beryl catches the Kelveys in the courtyard and shoos them away, they scamper off, "burning with shame, shrinking together, Lil huddling along like her mother."

Mansfield further highlights how quickly such lessons in classism and prejudice can be absorbed, and, it follows, how easily the accepting nature of innocence can be corrupted. The older girls have already fully conformed to the rules set by society. As the eldest Burnell sister, Isabel gets to choose which of the local girls will be allowed to view the **doll's house** first. The Kelveys know they do not stand a chance at being chosen by Isabel, who rigidly refuses to speak to them. Likewise, Lil, as the elder Kelvey sister, does not wish to shake the status quo. Lil never interrupts the other girls or talks to them out of place, instead offering only her "silly, shamefaced smile" when they scoff at her and Else. When Kezia offers to let the Kelvey sisters see the doll's house, it is Lil who refuses, knowing it is a breach of social etiquette. "Lil turned red and shook her head quickly," Mansfield writes, continuing, "Lil gasped, then she said, 'Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us.'"

The younger girls, however, display less class-consciousness as well as more consideration and kindness. Kezia, the youngest Burnell, does not yet have a fully-formed sense of what is acceptable behavior according to her elders. She wants to invite the Kelveys to see the doll's house but is discouraged by her mother, Mrs. Burnell, and told that she ought to know better. Similarly, the young Else Kelvey does not hesitate when Kezia invites her and her sister to see the doll's house. She wants to take Kezia up on the offer and urges her older sister to do the same by tugging at Lil's skirt and looking at her with "big, imploring eyes."

Kezia is not only less aware of class prejudice, but also proves more sympathetic than her sisters. From the beginning of the story, her love of the small, seemingly insignificant **lamp** in the doll's house indicates her sensitive nature. When Isabel is relating the details of the house to the other girls at school, Kezia has to remind her to mention the lamp, but the others don't pay any attention to this detail. After the Kelveys see the doll's house, however, the narrator reveals that at least one of the little girls was listening when Kezia gushed about the lamp: Else. In the only line she speaks, and the final line of dialogue in the story, Else smiles and says, "I seen the little lamp," clearly caring about it as much as Kezia did.

That both of the youngest characters take care to notice the small lamp connects them in their innocence and thoughtfulness. The lamp, like the rest of the doll's house, however, is not real. Though it may be a symbol of hope, it is one that cannot actually be lit. Mansfield might be suggesting, then, that it is only a matter of time before even Kezia and Else conform to the strict and cruel class distinctions by which the village abides.

PROVINCIALISM AND PRETENSE

Based on Mansfield's own childhood experiences of moving from the New Zealand town of Wellington to the rural village of Karori, *The Doll's House* is a critique of small-town vanity. Beyond emphasizing the arbitrary nature of class division, the story also mocks the narrow-minded provincialism of the Burnells—the most distinguished family in a tiny village, outside a small town, on a far-off island in the British Empire. *The Doll's House* ultimately points to the desire to appear fashionable and sophisticated—and the pretense and conformity that desire engenders—as the root of much prejudice and cruelty.

This is represented most clearly in the descriptions of the **doll's house** itself, which mirrors the Burnell's country home and social position in their village. The Burnell sisters gain much prestige when they are given the house. All the other little girls cannot stop talking about it and are dying to see it. The doll's house itself, however, isn't actually all that impressive. It is "a dark, oily, spinach green" and has "a tiny porch, too, painted yellow, with big lumps of congealed paint hanging along the edge." While the house does have some extravagant features, it also smells, according to Aunt Beryl, so strongly of paint that it could make someone sick. It is put in the courtyard, "propped up on two wooden boxes beside the feed-room"—not exactly demanding a place of honor in the family's home. It might be the most wonderful doll's house in the small village, but, Mansfield implies, to the rest of the world it is an average toy at best.

Similarly, the Burnells may be the richest family around, yet they are ultimately just big fish in a relatively small pond. That the Burnells are not as fashionable and rich as they might like to believe is indicated by the fact that the Burnell sisters must attend school with all the other children in the village, "not at all the kind of place their parents would have chosen." The narrator describes how "the Judge's little girls, the doctor's daughters, the storekeeper's children, the milkman's, were forced to mix together" at school, even if the Burnells would rather their daughters have a more elite education.

These other children, in turn, try to seem as much like the Burnells as possible by emphasizing the otherness of the Kelveys. Indeed, the popular girls appear closest and most alike when they are being cruel to Else and Lil. When one of these girls, Lena Logan, insults the Kelveys by screaming "Yah, yer father's in prison!" at them, the others are so united by this act of meanness that they lose any sense of individuality: "the little girls rushed away in a body, deeply, deeply excited, wild with joy," Mansfield writes. The need to feel superior engenders an unthinking mob mentality at odds with genuine sophistication. The girls are, in fact, simply conforming to a backwards, decidedly unfashionable mode of thinking.

Mansfield is strongest in her critique of vanity at the end of the story, when Aunt Beryl cruelly shoos the Kelveys away from the doll's house, treating them "as if they were chickens." Aunt Beryl yells at them with a voice that is "cold and proud," yet this action is, in part, to relieve her own stress and anxiety about her relations with a lower-class man called Willie Brent. The

narrator does not say much about Willie Brent, or what, in particular, his relation to Aunt Beryl is, though it is likely that he is her lover. Willie writes Aunt Beryl a note that she finds "terrifying," threatening to come knock on the door if she doesn't meet him in Pullman's Bush later that night. That Aunt Beryl finds this notion terrifying suggests her shame in being associated with Willie. She takes out her anger on the Kelveys, which makes "her heart [feel] lighter. The ghastly pressure was gone." Like the little girls of the town, Aunt Beryl uses her prejudice against the Kelveys to make herself feel better. Through her vain hypocrisy, Mansfield argues that those allegedly more sophisticated or worldly citizens are no better than the lower-classes they define themselves against. On the contrary, the desire to prove one's social clout is a mark of small-minded vanity.

TALKING VS. SILENCE

Much of the communication in *The Doll's House* is nonverbal. The Kelvey sisters, in particular, barely speak in the story, instead communicating mostly through gestures and glances. It's clear, however, that though Lil and Else rarely talk, they easily understand each other. In contrast, the Burnells and their friends are almost constantly yapping, gossiping, or boasting about the **doll's house**. Unlike the Kelveys, their chatter often proves shallow and frivolous. By exploring these very different methods of communication, Mansfield seems to suggest that silence can often reveal more truth than speech.

Mansfield explores communication and silence throughout the story by associating talking with casting judgment or spreading untruthful gossip, while linking silence with a sense of caring and attention. With Isabel Burnell at the helm, the popular girls are always chatting and gossiping with one another. Isabel tries to be in control of what is said, forbidding her younger sisters from telling the details of the doll's house to any of the girls since she ought to be the first one to brag: "'I'm to tell,' said Isabel, 'because I'm the eldest. And you two can join in after. But I'm to tell first.'" Her sisters Lottie and Kezia do not chafe at this rule, but comply, understanding that Isabel has the right to speak before them.

Speaking not only has arbitrary rules, but also the potential for dangerous consequences. That the village does not know much about the Kelvey family allows cruel speculation about them to spread. Though no one knows where the Kelveys' father is, they suspect he is in prison. When taunting the Kelveys, Lena Logan shouts, "Yah, yer father's in prison!" as if it's true, and the other girls are practically beside themselves with excitement that Lena has shouted what everyone's been thinking. The narrator never confirms or denies whether the Kelveys' father is in prison, but it doesn't make a difference to the villagers—that the gossip has spread is enough evidence for the Kelveys to be shunned and despised. This points to the often destructive and deceptive power of language.

While most of the village is gossiping throughout *The Doll's House*, the Kelvey sisters almost never talk, not even to each another. Instead, they have a system of communication that does not need words: Else follows Lil around and communicates by holding onto the edge of her older sister's dress and tugging at it when she wants something. From the tug alone, Lil knows what Else means. Their communication, though silent and nonverbal, is more accurate than the jabbering of the rest of the village; "The Kelveys never failed to understand each other," Mansfield writes.

The Kelveys are not just listening to one another, but to the other girls as well. When all of the girls gather to hear what Isabel is saying about the doll's house, the Kelveys stay away, knowing that they are not supposed to talk with the others. "Many of the children, including the Burnells, were not allowed to even speak to them," Mansfield notes. Though Else and her sister do not gather around Isabel's court in the schoolyard, they listen from the sidelines—so well, in fact, that little Else remembers to look for the small **lamp** Kezia has mentioned when she finally sees the doll's house. "I seen the little lamp," Else says to her sister in the only moment she talks in the story. Mansfield seems to suggest that listening and caring for one another is a more effective and true means of communication than constant talk or gossip, which only results in untruths and harsh judgments.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE LAMP

Most broadly, the miniature oil lamp in the **doll's house** symbolizes the ideas of connection and inclusivity. The best feature of the house according to Kezia, the youngest Burnell sister fixates on the lamp when she first sees it and prizes it because it seems to fit so perfectly in the house. This makes it especially pertinent in a story that is very much about "fitting in"—the Burnell sisters are popular and beloved by all the other little girls in the town while the Kelveys, Lil and Else, are despised and mocked. The lamp lacks the extravagance of the rest of the house and is a small, almost mundane feature, yet Kezia cares about it even as everyone else seems to ignore it. In the same way, she cares about including the Kelvey sisters when everyone else would rather not bother. Light is also often a symbol of hope, and the lamp thus further represents the hope that Kezia can overcome the strict class divides that rule the village. Kezia does eventually invite the Kelveys to see the dollhouse, though they are quickly scolded and shooed off by Aunt Beryl. In the end, Else smiles

her rare smile because she, too, has seen, and appreciated, the perfect little lamp. Kezia and Else each share their love of the lamp despite their obvious class differences, and Mansfield seems to suggest that friendship and empathy can overcome class prejudice.

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 draw 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.

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 fat 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 clout it brings them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Stories* published in 1956.

The Doll's House Quotes

For, really, the smell of paint coming from that doll's house…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.

Related Characters: Lottie Burnell, Kezia Burnell, Isabel Burnell , Aunt Beryl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

The first description of the doll's house does not make it seem particularly nice or valuable. In addition to its strong odor, the house has garish coloring, clunky exterior features, and lumps of paint caked on the porch. While Aunt Beryl focuses all of these imperfections, thinking it smells enough to make someone sick, the Burnell sisters are more innocently absorbed in the novelty and excitement the doll's house brings to their lives. Later, the other girls in the village will all jockey for position in hopes of being invited next to see the doll's house, clumps of paint and all. Mansfield seems to suggest the provinciality of this country village and the vanity of the Burnell family by emphasizing both the imperfections of the doll's house and everyone's utter obsession with it.

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 hatstand 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…

"O-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.

Related Characters: Else Kelvey, Lil Kelvey, Kezia Burnell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314-315

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator slips into second person, speaking directly to the reader while describing the intricacies of the house's interior. The inside of the doll's house is much finer than its somewhat rough exterior. Mansfield seems to be suggesting that appearances can be deceiving, which, in turn, can be read as a critique of the class-based prejudices evident throughout the village. The villagers ostracize the Kelveys, for example, in part because of their hand-me-down clothing. Lil and Else's appearance may be strange and garish, but Mansfield asks the reader to look past it to see that they are little girls all the same.

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 moved when you shook it.

The father and mother dolls…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 at Kezia, to say, "I live here."

Related Characters: Else Kelvey, Kezia Burnell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

When the Burnell sisters see inside the doll's house for the first time, Kezia fixates on a small oil lamp. Despite all the finer details of the house—like its plush red carpets and golden picture frames—Kezia adores the functional yet modest lamp most of all. Kezia's interest in the lamp underscores her innocence and speaks to her youthful ability to see beauty in small, seemingly insignificant things. Kezia also does not fancy the lamp arbitrarily, but because it seems to fit so well in the house. While the mother and father dolls seem a little too large for their surroundings, the lamp is sized perfectly. This notion of fitting in—of who belongs and who doesn't—will reappear throughout the story.

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…

Related Characters: Isabel Burnell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 315-316

Explanation and Analysis

That the Burnell sisters can only invite two girls at a time to see the doll's house reflects the snobbery and prejudice of the Burnell household. The girls from school may be invited to come over, but they are not invited to stay long and play. Instead, they can only enter the courtyard—not even the house itself—to get a brief glance at the toy. Through this, Mansfield seems to suggest the rather rude ways the Burnells try to distinguish themselves from the others in the town, and further underscores the family's vanity. Only invited guests are allowed inside the home, and the boundaries separating insiders from outsiders are intentional and strictly enforced.

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 hung pine trees...the only two who stayed outside the ring were the two who were always outside, the Kelveys. They knew better than to come anywhere near the Burnells.

Related Characters: Else Kelvey, Lil Kelvey, Isabel Burnell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

Upon her arrival at school, the popular Isabel had told the other girls that she had something to share with them (that is, news of the doll's house) at playtime. When playtime rolls around, Isabel is surrounded by girls eagerly awaiting the new gossip. The Kelveys do not even think about entering the circle with the other girls, however, because they know they are not welcome. The Kelveys are outsiders specifically because they are much poorer than the others; despite being children, the girls at school already behave according to the strict class rules that their parents, and society at large, have set for them. Though they dare not join in the group, the Kelveys still listen, suggesting that though they cannot mingle with the others, they long to know what their peers chat and giggle about.

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 storekeeper's children, the milkman's, were forced to mix together.

Related Characters: Else Kelvey, Lil Kelvey, Kezia Burnell, Lottie Burnell, Isabel Burnell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

Though the Burnells are the wealthiest family in their country village, Mansfield suggests that they are, themselves, in a rather precarious social position. They cannot send their daughters to a fancy school in town, as they live too far out in the country. Instead, they must settle for sending their daughters to school with children from lower classes and who have working class parents. Such diversity is not considered a benefit to the Burnell sisters' education, but rather a consequence they must endure. For all of their vanity, Mansfield suggests that the Burnells are ultimately provincial, narrow minded, and not nearly as fashionable as they would like to believe.

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...the Kelveys were shunned by everybody.

Related Characters: Lottie Burnell, Kezia Burnell, Isabel Burnell , Else Kelvey, Lil Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after listing all the lower and working class children the Burnell sisters are forced to "mix" with, the narrator notes that the villagers arbitrarily draw a line at the Kelveys. As the poorest of all, Lil and Else Kelvey become easy targets for the other villagers. The insecurities and class tensions that plague the village are channeled into resentment and exclusion of the Kelveys as obvious outsiders to protect everyone else's place as insiders. Throughout the story the other girls are cruel to the Kelveys largely in an effort to reaffirm their own social status. By distancing themselves from the Kelveys, they girls to become closer to the higher class Burnells.

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 gaolbird. Very nice company for other people's children!

Related Characters: Else Kelvey, Lil Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316-317

Explanation and Analysis

Upon further explaining the Kelveys' background, the narrator seems to slip into the consciousness of the village as a whole. The tone reflects what the other villagers have agreed to believe about the Kelveys and how they parrot gossip about the poor family. The Kelveys are conspicuously poor, wearing hand me down clothes made of fabrics that their mother gets from the homes she cleans, and the absence of the family's father only adds to their shame. Rather than feel sympathy for the hardworking mother or her two young daughters, the people of the town only worry about the influence the Kelveys might have on their own daughters. Here, Mansfield introduces the idea that gossip can be dangerous and hurtful. Though Lil and Else's father is missing, the narrator never clarifies whether or not he is actually in prison. That no one knows where he is leaves the town to assume the worst, and this speculation leaves little room for compassion.

> 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.

Related Characters: Else Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

Upon describing Else, the narrator emphasizes how, though Else's clothing marks her poverty, it is not inherently linked to her character. Mansfield continues to suggest that looks are deceptive, and to care only about the Kelveys' outward appearance denies them their full, complex humanity. Else's eyes, rather than her clothes, hint at her depth of feeling. When, at the end of the story, Else wants to go into the courtyard to see the doll's house—something Lil thinks it is a bad idea—it is her imploring eyes that manage to convince her sister to agree. The fact that Else rarely smiles or speaks also makes her joy and affirmation that she has seen the lamp all the more powerful at the end of the story.

> 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.

Related Characters: Lil Kelvey, Else Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues to describe the way the Kelveys interact with each other, and in doing so underscores the strength of their bond. While the rest of the town gossips about the Kelveys, Lil and Else themselves rarely speak at all. This does not mean they do not communicate, however. Despite their communication being subtler—a system of tugs, gestures, and glances—they never misunderstand each another. This contrasts with the cruel, false gossip that is readily spread around the village. Mansfield seems to suggest that such incessant talk does not inherently constitute meaningful communication. Instead, attention and care are what establish genuine understanding between people.

> 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.

Related Characters: Isabel Burnell , Emmie Cole (speaker), Lil Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

After all the girls at school have seen the doll's house, and there is little more to say about it at lunch, they start picking on the Kelveys. This may be more out of boredom than anything else, yet further underscores the girls' desire to align themselves with the Burnells by ostracizing the

Kelveys. Mansfield also subtly suggests that the girls are not naturally inclined to be cruel to the Kelveys; Emmie's gestures are not natural, but affectations and habits she has picked up by watching her mother gossip. Class prejudice and cruelty are not innate, then, but rather are learned behaviors.

> "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, shamefaced 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.

Related Characters: Lena Logan (speaker), Lil Kelvey, Else Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

When Lena, one of the more popular girls at school, tries to insult the Kelveys at lunch, things don't go as planned. She had expected to get a rise out of Lil, but Lil only smiles in response. Lil's silence is more of an insult to Lena than Lena's insult is to Lil. The other girls start to laugh, and Lena, desperate to save face, reaches for the easiest thing she can think to say that will put her back into a position of power. Rather than let the Kelveys make a fool of her, she reminds the Kelveys that they are outsiders by hissing that their father is in prison, simply parroting the gossip she has heard from the adults of the town. Lena says what everyone else already believes, but to say it to the Kelveys face is especially cruel. That this action wins Lena back the approval of her friends again emphasizes how the girls ostracize the Kelveys to assert their own position in the school's social hierarchy.

> Isabel and Lottie, who liked visitors, went upstairs to change their pinafores. But Kezia thieved out 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 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.

Related Characters: Lil Kelvey, Else Kelvey, Kezia Burnell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

When the Burnell sisters get home from school and learn that the family has visitors, Lottie and Isabel go inside to change into more presentable clothing. Kezia, as the youngest, does not seem to care much whether or not she sees the visitors, or how she looks to them. This reflects her independence and lack of concern with social propriety. That she sneaks out back also foreshadows the defiance she will show a few moments later, when, despite what everyone else has told her to do, she invites the Kelveys in to see the doll's house anyway. The gates Kezia swings on symbolize her family's sense of superiority, as they try to separate themselves from the other, less aristocratic people of the village. By swinging on the gates, Kezia teeters between her parents' world, filled with strict rules and class prejudice, and the world outside, where she can make her own decisions. When Kezia ultimately swings the gate open, she breaks down the class barriers between herself and Lil and Else—if only for a moment.

> 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.

Related Characters: Lil Kelvey, Else Kelvey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Kezia, as the youngest in her family, is the only one still innocent and independent enough to disregard society's strict class rules, the young Else also lacks a fully-formed sense of class-consciousness. Though her older sister Lil clearly does not want to enter the Burnell's courtyard when Kezia invites them inside, knowing that to do so would be a breach of social order, Else desperately wants to go and communicates that to her sister by repeatedly tugging her skirt and looking at her with imploring eyes. This again underscores the sisters' bond and ease of communication with each other. Else's innocence, much like Kezia's, further reflects that prejudice and cruelty are learned, rather than innate, behaviors.

"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.

Related Characters: Lil Kelvey, Else Kelvey, Aunt Beryl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

Though Kezia and Else were innocent enough to want to play together with the doll's house, Aunt Beryl, who is much older and set in the ways of society, reacts strongly when she sees her Kezia with the lower-class Kelvey girls. Her violent reaction reflects just how prejudiced one can become over time when constantly steeped in the same classist views of society. When Lil and Else scamper off through the white gates, they leave the Burnell home and return to their status as outsiders, just where Aunt Beryl wants them. Lil notably runs off in a way that resembles her mother. This suggests that, while children like Isabel inherit class prejudice and cruelty, the Kelveys have inherited their shame.

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.

Related Characters: Else Kelvey, Lil Kelvey, Kezia Burnell, Willie Brent, Aunt Beryl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

After Aunt Beryl scolds Kezia and shoos the Kelveys away, the narrator reveals that her outburst was not merely provoked by the Kelveys having been inside the courtyard, but also by having received a letter earlier that afternoon from Willie Brent. Though Willie's identity is not made explicitly clear, it is implied that he and Aunt Beryl are in some kind of secret relationship.

His threat to come to the front door if Aunt Beryl does not meet him would expose this relationship. Aunt Beryl finds it terrifying that he would do such a thing, suggesting that she would be ashamed of anyone finding out about her and Willie. He is likely from a lower class than she is. As such, this passage reveals the vanity and hypocrisy of Aunt Beryl—who has just scolded her niece for showing kindness to the Kelveys, even as she herself engages in a relationship with another outsider.

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.

Related Characters: Else Kelvey (speaker), Lil Kelvey, Kezia Burnell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

In the only line she speaks, and the final line of dialogue in

the story, Else declares that she saw the little lamp that Kezia, too, loves. While all of the other girls had dismissed or seemed to ignore the lamp, Else has noticed this seemingly mundane item, just like Kezia did. That each girl notices the lamp suggests that they are not that different despite their obvious class differences. It also further underscores their shared innocence. As the youngest characters in the story, neither has succumbed to the prejudices that surround them, and are instead able to appreciate the small beauties and joys of the world.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE

A **doll's house** arrives at the Burnell's home, sent from town by a family friend as a thank you for her recent visit. The family's handyman, Pat, carries the doll's house into the courtyard, and places it next to the feed-room to let it air out. It smells strongly of paint, so much so that Aunt Beryl thinks it could make someone sick.

The fact that the doll's house has been sent from town emphasizes that the Burnells live out in the country. The Burnells might be the wealthiest family in their village, but they are not living among more fashionable society. That the house is left it in the courtyard next to the feed-room—hardly a place of honor—suggests it is not terribly valuable.

The "sacking" covering the **doll's house** is taken off to reveal the exterior of the house. It is painted a "dark, oily, spinach green," with two chimneys and a door that looks "like a little slab of toffee." There are also four real windows and a front porch, "painted yellow, with big lumps of congealed paint hanging along the edge." The newness of the house is so exciting that no one else seems to mind the smell.

Mansfield's initial descriptions of the house do not make it seem very attractive, but the Burnell sisters think it is wonderful nevertheless. While Aunt Beryl finds the smell of paint sickening, the younger, more innocent girls are too thrilled by the novelty of the house to care. Their fascination with the relatively modest toy reflects the provinciality of the setting.

The hook on the side of the doll's house is stuck, so Pat pries it open with his penknife. When the front of the house swings open, all of the rooms are on display at once. When knocking on the door of a real house, one can only peer in and see the front hallway, but the doll's house opens entirely—allowing one to see everything, "the way God opens houses at the dead of night."

The narrator emphasizes the human impulse to peer inside of things. In this way, Mansfield begins to compare the doll's house with the Burnell's family home, which is not opened to outsiders, but closed off by big white gates. Furthermore, after Isabel Burnell later brags about the doll's house, all of the little girls at school long to see inside of it—a reflection of their longing to be invited into the Burnells' home and to catch a glimpse of their privileged lifestyle.

The Burnell girls have never seen anything so wonderful before and take in all of the details of the house—from the pictures painted on the walls, to the red carpet, plush pillows, beds with actual bedspreads, and kitchen fit with a small stove. Kezia, the youngest, notices a small **lamp** in particular, which sits on the dining room table and is filled with a liquid that looks like oil. She thinks the lamp is the best part of the house because it fits so perfectly, whereas the father and mother dolls look a little too big for the house and do not seem to belong inside it.

Kezia notices a small lamp and prizes it above all the other features of the house because it seems to fit so well. This suggests her innocence as the youngest Burnell sister, and her willingness to see the value in small, seemingly insignificant things. This also reflects the importance that "fitting in" will have in the story. It will soon be revealed that the poor Kelveys, with their mismatched clothing and simple lunches, do not fit in with the other girls, yet Kezia wants to invite them to see the doll's house anyway.

The next morning, the Burnell sisters rush to school, excited to tell everyone about the **doll's house**. Isabel warns her sisters Lottie and Kezia that she, as the oldest, ought to be first to tell the other girls about the doll's house and that they cannot say anything until she does so. She also insists that she choose the first girls who are to come and see the house.

Isabel's bossiness in forbidding her sisters to brag about the doll's house suggests certain rules about communication in the village. Just as Isabel must speak first because she is the oldest, many of the little girls in the town are not allowed to speak to the Kelveys because they are considered too common.

The Burnell sisters are allowed to invite girls from school two at a time into their family's courtyard to see the **doll's house.** These visiting girls are not invited to stay for tea or to go play in the house, but simply to enter the courtyard and see the house.

The Burnell sisters have learned from their parents which girls are acceptable to be friends with which are not. What's more, there are boundaries regarding where even their friends can go within the house. Just as Isabel makes herself more mysterious by waiting until playtime to tell the others about the doll's house, the Burnell family makes itself more powerful by limiting which parts of their home visitors can view.

The Burnells don't make it to school in time to brag about the **doll's house** before the bell rings, and instead Isabel tries to make herself seem mysterious and whispers that she has something to tell the other girls at playtime. When playtime comes around, all of the girls at the school gather around to hear what Isabel has to share. All, that is, except for the Kelvey sisters, Lil and Else. As the poorest girls at the school, they are always excluded, and know they must stay on the outskirts of the circle.

Isabel demonstrates how powerful it can be to stay tight-lipped about a secret. She builds suspense by suggesting that she has something to tell everyone, and at playtime all the girls surround her, desperate to hear what it is. The Kelveys are first marked as outsiders when they do not join the circle surrounding Isabel.

The Burnell family would not send their daughters to the school if it weren't the only school around for miles. It is only a village school, and the family laments that all kinds of children must mix together—"the Judge's little girls, the doctor's daughters, the storekeeper's children and the milkman's." The Kelveys, in particular, are the family everyone tries to avoid. Lil and Else's mother is a washerwoman, and their father is out of the picture, leaving everyone to speculate that he is in prison. Many of the children at school are not allowed to talk to them, and the schoolteacher even uses a "special voice" to address Lil when she brings her "common-looking" flowers.

Though the Burnell's would rather not send their daughters to a school with lower-class children, they have no choice, as they live in a small village. They might feel superior to the others, but they, too, must deal with the inconveniences of country life. Though not everyone in the village is as wealthy as the Burnells, the Kelveys are the scapegoats—everyone shuns them in particular because of gossip that their father is in prison.

Lil and Else dress in unattractive clothing that makes their poverty all the more noticeable. Lil wears a dress made from hand-me-down scraps that her mother collects from the homes she cleans; her skirt is made from the Burnells' old tablecloth and her sleeves from the Logan family's curtains. Meanwhile, Else wears a white dress that is much too big for her and a pair of old boy's boots. To top it off, Lil's hat used to belong to the postmistress and looks ridiculous on a little girl.

The Kelveys are conspicuously poor and their clothing marks them as outsiders among their peers at school. That Lil's clothing is made of materials from the homes of the other girls only makes her humiliation worse.

Else is particularly strange, never smiling and rarely speaking. She has short hair, a tiny frame, and big, expressive eyes like "a little white owl." She walks around behind Lil, holding on to the hem of her sister's skirt, tugging it when she wants something. Though they rarely speak, the Kelveys always understand each another.

Mansfield seems to be particularly interested in Else, giving her a detailed description. That she and Lil do not speak much mark them as unique from their peers who constantly gossip. Mansfield seems to suggest that though the Kelveys rarely talk, their communication is truer than frivolous chatter, as they always understand one another.

The Kelveys sit apart and listen in as the other girl's chat at school. Sometimes a girl will turn and sneer at them, but Lil only smiles back. Isabel, meanwhile, spills all the juicy details of the **doll's house**, and Kezia has to remind her to mention the **lamp**. No one pays the lamp any attention, however, too excited to find out who Isabel will choose to see the house first. She picks Lena Logan and Emmie Cole.

While everyone seems to ignore the lamp, the end of the story reveals that Else, at least, was listening to Kezia. Though the Kelveys are ostracized and forced to sit apart, they still listen to the other girls' gossip and long to see the doll's house like everyone else. They are not so different after all.

Over the next few days, the **doll's house** is all anyone can talk about, and the girls at school kiss up to Isabel in hopes of being invited to see it. At lunch, the girls sit together and eat "thick mutton sandwiches and big slabs of johnny cake spread with butter" while the Lil and Else sit apart eating plain jam sandwiches "out of a newspaper soaked with large red blobs."

Just as their clothing marked the Kelveys as outsiders, their humble sandwiches further indicate their poverty.

In a flashback, Kezia asks her mother if she may invite the Kelvey's to see the **doll's house** but Mrs. Burnell refuses. When asked why, she brushes Kezia off and tells her that Kezia knows exactly why the Kelveys are not to come.

Despite Mrs. Burnell's assertion, Kezia is too young to fully understand the classist rules of society and sees no reason why the Kelveys cannot come. This suggests the innocence of children in comparison to adults.

A few days pass, and now every girl at school except the Kelveys has seen the **doll's house**. Bored of talking about the house, the girls begin gossiping about the Kelveys instead. Emmie Cole starts it, whispering to Isabel that Lil will grow up to be a washerwoman just like her mother. As she talks, she moves her head in a way she has seen her mother do, imitating the sort of gossip that the adults spread regularly. Suddenly, Lena Logan gets an idea. She suggests going up to the Kelveys and asking them if they'll grow up to be servants. Jessie May eggs Lena on, and Lena tells the other girls to watch her as she runs over, giggling, to where the Kelvey sisters sit.

The girls have learned their cruelty from their parents, as Emmie turns her head in a way that she has watched her mother do when her mother gossips. Mansfield suggests that classism is not inherent, then, but learned. The girls build momentum, each trying to outdo the other in their insults to the Kelveys. They are performing for one another, trying to get the most laughs by being the most cruel and outrageous.

When approached by Lena, Lil and Else stop eating and hide their sandwiches. Lena asks Lil, "Is it true you're going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?" When Lil does not respond except with a shamefaced smile, the other girls snicker, and Lena, upset that her first insult didn't work, hisses, "Yah, yer father's in prison!" and runs off.

That Lil and Else stop eating and hide their food marks their shame and deference towards the other girls. Just as the others learn their cruelty and perform it like a play, Mansfield begins to reveal how the Kelveys have a learned sense of shame.

When the other girls hear Lena's insult, they are so excited by the cruelty of it that they run off hopping, screaming, and playing like a wild mob. They begin playing with a jump rope with more excitement than ever before.

The cruelty of Lena's remark is so exciting to the girls that they skip and dance as a wild mob. They have lost all sense of individuality. Acting alone, it's likely none of the girls would have insulted the Kelveys so harshly, but in a group they have the boldness to be particularly mean.

That afternoon, Pat picks the Burnell girls up from school and drives them home to greet visitors who have arrived at the house. Isabel and Lottie go to change into fresh pinafores, but Kezia sneaks out to the courtyard to swing on its big **white gates**.

Kezia is uninterested in getting ready for the guests and would rather play on her own. This again marks her innocence and independence. She swings on the white gates, physically moving in and out of her family's property, seeming to dance on the edge of belonging and being an outsider.

While swinging, Kezia notices two small dots along the road in the distance. As they get closer, she realizes it's Lil and Else. She jumps off the **white gates** and considers running off, but changes her mind, jumping back on the gate and swinging it open to greet the Kelveys.

Kezia almost runs away, but instead decides to follow her gut and invite the Kelveys to see the doll's house, even though she knows she is not supposed to. She does this mostly because no one else is around to judge her or influence her. Mansfield suggests not only that classism can be overcome, but that the youngest, more innocent children are the ones likely to break the status quo and have compassion for outsiders.

Kezia says hello and asks the Kelveys if they want to come inside and see the **doll's house.** Lil and Else are stunned, and Lil quickly shakes her head no. When Kezia asks why not, she gasps and tells Kezia that her mother told their mother that they weren't supposed to talk to Kezia. Kezia brushes it off, saying that it doesn't matter and that no one is looking. When Lil again refuses to enter the courtyard, she feels a little tug on her dress. When she turns, she sees Else looking at her imploringly. Else twitches Lil's skirt again, indicating that she wants to see the house.

Else wants to take Kezia up on her offer to let them see the doll's house, even when Lil refuses because she knows she is not supposed to. Again, the younger, more innocent characters are willing to break the classist rules society has set.

Else and Lil follow Kezia inside, and Kezia opens the **doll's house** for them. When Kezia begins to give them a tour of the small house, Aunt Beryl suddenly yells at Kezia from the back door for letting the Kelveys inside. Aunt Beryl comes into the courtyard and furiously shoos the Kelveys away and slams the dollhouse shut. The Kelveys slip through the **white gates** and run down the road.

Though for a moment the Kelveys were welcomed inside, social order is quickly and harshly reinforced by Aunt Beryl. When the Kelveys slip through the white gates, they pass back into their role as outsiders. By slamming the doll's house and closing it, Aunt Beryl also symbolically puts an end to the kindness Kezia had been showing the Kelveys.

Aunt Beryl, it is revealed, had had a terrible afternoon due to a letter she received from Willie Brent. In the letter, Willie threatened to come to the front door if she didn't meet him in Pullman's Bush later that night. She feels better now that she has scolded Kezia and scared off Lil and Else.

Though Mansfield does not reveal who, exactly, Willie Brent is, it is obvious that Aunt Beryl would be mortified if anyone knew she was in any way associated with him. It is likely that he is her lover, and her embarrassment of him further indicates that he is too poor or common for her. By mentioning Willie Brent, Mansfield exposes Aunt Beryl's hypocrisy in scolding Kezia when she, too, has had relations with someone who is an outsider.

Meanwhile, Lil and Else run off, stopping to rest by a "big red drain-pipe" on the roadside. They sit silently and look over the fields to the Logan's cows. Else nudges closer to her sister and smiles. She speaks for the first time in the story, saying, "I seen the little **lamp**."

Mansfield suggests that despite their class differences, Kezia and Else are not all that different after all. They each notice the small lamp—it connects the two girls and reveals the ultimate triviality of classism. The Kelveys took as much pleasure in seeing the doll's house as any of the other girls in the village, though only Kezia, merely a child, was willing to share it with them.

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