

# **"The Doll's House"**

**A short story by Katherine Mansfield**

**Theme, Symbolism, and Characterization**

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## **Themes**

"The Doll's House", by Katherine Mansfield, is a story that treats the topics of social difference, injustice, money as a tool of power or materialism, and the shallowness of human dynamics.

1- Social difference or class distinction that existed in the 1900s is reflected in the way that rich families teach their children to distance themselves from others according to their social position such as the Kelveys.

2- Injustice comes in the form of how the other girls view and treat the Kelveys just for being poor. The Kelveys are mocked and verbally abused because they are the daughters of a washerwoman and an unknown father, and even the teacher who is supposed to be fair, has a special voice for them.

3- Materialism: In the story, money is the powerful tool that defines happiness and popularity. The girls with money eat together at school enjoying special food and wear nice clothes while poor girls on the other hand eat jam sandwiches and wear ill-fitting torn clothes. This reveals that money has controlled human life as well.

4- The shallowness of human dynamics is reflected in the behavior of the girls at school. All of them became friends with Burnells for the sake of the doll's house. The two Kelveys compared to animals throughout the story simply because they are poor.

Katherine Mansfield herself believed that class distinctions are unjust and cruel. The idea dealt with in this story is a reminder from the author that people should be judged as individuals rather than family background.

Therefore, the topics in the story include money as it affects human dynamics and in the way that it differentiates one another.

### **Symbolism**

In the story, Kezia Burnell and her sister Lottie receive a beautiful dollhouse as a gift. Kezia is particularly impressed by the lamp that is put at the small dining room of the dollhouse. So impressed she is that she considers it to be the best thing because it looks so real.

However, the lamp takes a special role when we realize that it is the one thing that Kezia loves the most and talks about the most. Nobody within or outside her circle seem to listen to her...except Else! She takes every word that Kezia says at face value and dreams about that same lamp. This is symbolic: All people, rich or poor, have the same wants, dreams, wishes, and hopes. Sometimes, it takes for someone to merely get a glimpse at a dream to feel realized forever.

This is the reason why, when Else finally gets a very small chance to see the house, she forgets the fact that she was shooed out of the Burnell's home as if she were an animal. Instead, she focuses on one simple fact: She, too, had the chance to know what the lamp looked like. She had her opportunity to appreciate it. She, too, was able to be there. Hence, this is a direct hint at how society is unbalanced, and dissimilar. It shows how the

spoils of the rich cause the dreams of the poor, however, it is our dreams what make us all human just the same.

The doll house is symbolic of the upper class people in this society. All the walls are papered, there is carpet, but the dolls in the house, the people, are "stiff" -- they don't seem to belong to the house itself.

The doll house may be perfect, but what it represents a bad smell of painting. The smell is the only negative thing about the house. The smell represents the cruelty of society.

The best thing about the house is the little lamp, it represents the hope for the Kelvey's daughters and for all poor people. Kezia wanted to rebel against these social rules and share the light of the lamp - something that she has been attracted to since they first received the House - with others.

The lamp represents the only small piece of human kindness, the kindness that is only shown by Kezia in the story when she invites the Kelveys to see the house.

### **Characterization**

It is clear that out of the Burnell children, it is only Kezia who is a round character. The others are only interested in flaunting the Doll's House to gain standing amongst their friends and in mocking the Kelvey sisters. It is Kezia who shows she is a more rounded character, and the author gives us lots of information about how she is struck by the lamp:

The difference in Kezia's character from her sister focuses on the way that she has yet to learn of the sharp social divisions that divide her society from people that she should talk to and people that she shouldn't. If we examine the story, the major theme is that of social class and how it creates barriers that cannot be broken in society. Clearly, in this story, such barriers are drawn between the Kelveys and the rest of the children. However, what is

different about Kezia is that she does not act as if there is a line that divides them. This can be seen when she invites the Kelveys in to see the house.

When we consider the Kelvey sisters, at first they are presented as flat characters - easily distinguishable because of their way of walking and bearing themselves - Lil's silly smile and Else always hanging on to her sister. Yet, by the end of the story, we see that there is more especially to Else. Her comment about seeing the "little lamp" is highly significant, not least because the lamp is an important symbol in this story, but also because it shows that she is not the stupid, silent girl that everyone takes her for and she is able to think at a deeper level.