Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

4710 English Undergraduate Research: Children's Literature

English Department

4-1-2012

Into the Doll's House: Understanding Presumed Female Housekeeping in Children's Literature

Jacqueline F. Rammer
Marquette University

A research paper completed for English 4710. This is an advanced undergraduate course focused on the study of a particular genre and its ability to articulate meaning in historical, social, and/or literary contexts. This paper is part of the Children's Literature genre series.

Jacqueline F. Rammer
English 4710-101
Dr. Wadsworth
Spring 2012

Into the Doll's House:

Understanding Presumed Female Housekeeping in Children's Literature

It should come as no surprise that a children's book from 1866 entitled *Edith and Milly's Housekeeping* undoubtedly includes pre-twentieth century themes that upper-class young women must diligently study and practice to be "good" housekeepers. Although the book, part of the "Aunt Louisa's London Toy Books" collection written anonymously by Laura Valentine, a general editor for Frederick Warne & Company Publishing, may seem to be merely about two girls enjoying an extravagant doll's house, it also has a stronger meaning ("Aunt Louisa's" 1). The book reflects common nineteenth-century lessons for young girls in regards to housekeeping, morals, maturity, and class consciousness. It is arguable that the reason for the book's failure to remain popular over centuries is that the notion of the doll's house has been transformed in westernized countries from a tool to help young girls learn how to keep a house into a play toy with which girls are encouraged to use their strong imaginations and not restrict themselves to traditional notions of gender roles, including housekeeping.

Edith and Milly's Housekeeping is the seventh book of a collection by "Aunt Louisa," with other notable titles including *The Life of a Doll*, *Good Children*, *The Faithful Friend*, and *Ten Little Niggers*, the titles themselves making it overtly clear that the majority of books would appeal to white female and some male children at the time, with the sociopolitical aspects of the 1860s deeply affecting the ability for children of all races to have non-racist texts, and for any texts to actually appeal to non-white children (Valentine 24). In regards to gender, *Edith and Milly's Housekeeping* was certainly marketed toward young girls, with an attractive cover

boasting bubble-gum pink accents and a bold focus on both “Aunt Louisa” and “Housekeeping,” something which even in the twenty-first century is undoubtedly feminine. The front cover also details the pricing, which for a normal copy was one shilling, but for two shillings a person could buy a copy “mounted with linen” (Valentine 1). Although the concept of one shilling may seem trivial in today’s society, not everyone could spare the money to buy a book for their children at the time, much like today’s issues with poverty and literacy. Therefore, only wealthy upper-class children could be guaranteed the financial ability to purchase the book.

If the cover’s colors and details are not enough to determine the book’s audience as decidedly female, the contents themselves are also obviously meant for young girls, probably around the ages of six to ten. The first chapter introduces us to the main character, Milly Ord, a seven-year-old who, on her birthday, is excited to spend the day with her friend, Edith. The two girls are quite mature in their language and communication with each other, as when Edith greets Milly she says, “Many happy returns of the day, Milly,” certainly reflecting the English sensibilities of upper-class children at the time (Valentine 1). The entire plot of the very short story is that Milly has just received a doll’s house for her birthday, one “as high as Milly herself,” a reflection of Milly’s parents’ grand socioeconomic status (Valentine 1). Girls, and many boys, of all economic classes and backgrounds, could appreciate the exorbitant nature of the doll’s house, detailed in five of the six illustrations. In an attempt to grasp the reader with direct address, Valentine writes, “If you look at the picture you will see the Doll’s House, and can judge if it was pretty. That is Edith in the green dress; she is older than Milly, but I think she loves play just as much” (1). The author clearly meant for the doll’s house to represent playtime at its best, although in retrospect such notions of play are directly correlated to gender roles, which becomes more overtly clear in later pages.

In “The Drawing Room,” Milly refers to her dolls as “all my own family,” a sentiment that many girls from all time periods feel and have felt toward their dolls (Valentine 2). Milly is aware of the many occurrences that her dolls happen upon in their new home and is quick to explain them to Edith as readers look upon an illustration of the girls peering into a doll’s house full of busy dolls. The following chapter, “The Dining Room,” begins to detail notions of “housekeeping,” extending from play into something more substantial and real. While viewing the extremely realistic and richly complete dining room, Milly reveals:

> Mamma told me a long time ago that I was to have the Doll’s house soon, so I got everything ready. I made the flowers out of silver paper, and Mamma gave me some of her old wreaths for the leaves; they were too large, of course, but I cut them smaller. The pictures on the walls I painted. Oh! it took a long time and a great deal of trouble to get everything ready for my Doll’s House. (Valentine 2)

Many girls of today spend their time making small accessories for their dollhouses and enjoy such little crafts and bits of enjoyment. However, Milly seems to be expressing her work on the doll’s house as if it is a chore. Milly reflects upon this “great deal of trouble” with a sense of pride but also with the sense that it is much more than play and is practice for actual housekeeping which Milly will undoubtedly be expected to do in the future.

Practice for the future is precisely what Milly’s mother desires for her with her play, and Milly “should learn how to furnish [her] own house by-and by,” a didactic lesson carried on throughout the story which alerts young readers that their doll’s house is really a model for their future home as wives and mothers. By painting pictures, creating miniature wreaths, and making sure the dolls in the drawing room are satisfied, Milly is certainly preparing to be a housekeeper for a family of her own. Even small comments about her doll, such as “The other lady in a

bonnet is talking to Louisa; I think she is my ugliest doll, because she has a cross face," reflect the gossip and "chit-chat" which a nineteenth-century housewife would be characterized as having (Valentine 1). The desire to become an older woman is reflected in Edith's statement about the doll's house bedroom when she says, "If I had such a pretty bedroom as this to sleep in, I should feel quite like a grownup lady" (Valentine 4). Many young girls consistently desire to be older and to have much more sophistication, so it comes as no surprise that Edith has such feelings. However, one wonders when such joys of childhood became unacceptable to children themselves and when young girls first began feeling the need to be older. Such comments from young Edith reflect the uncomfortable nature of female childhood, and the constant desire to grow older and more mature. "I always like to see my servants neatly dressed," Milly says "with a little housewifely air," showing that such imitation of actual housewives, most likely the girls' mothers, is the prime aim and motive behind playing with the doll's house, although a sense of enjoyment gained from playing with dolls and "making home" is certainly part of the picture (Valentine 4).

Besides just learning how to become an accomplished housekeeper, the girls in the story also learn important life lessons which apply to females and males, blacks and whites, the poor and the rich. As Milly states, "Preparing for a Doll's House teaches one not to waste anything—all kinds of scraps become useful for it," detailing the notion that play can indeed be educational in nature, with such lessons not remaining strictly about housekeeping (Valentine 5). However, just as such lessons seem to solidify the idea that the girls' dollhouse really could teach lessons with a sense of universality, Milly seems to echo lessons that her mother has told her, by saying things such as "Mrs. Gray makes her [daughter] put away her clothes neatly, for she says there is nothing more unladylike than an untidy bedroom" (Valentine 5). There is nothing wrong with

teaching children that it is a good thing to try to always be neat and tidy, but in the context of the story, such lessons become more dangerous to issues of social equality. Mrs. Gray is most likely representative of Milly's mother, and Milly is most likely putting the words of her mother into Mrs. Gray's mouth. The lesson is that, to be a lady, one must have a tidy room. Such lessons restrict the female identity to one of a housekeeper, nothing more and nothing less. One is only a lady if one is neat. Although there is some depth to Milly's imagination when it comes to her doll's house, her play home mostly stands for a facsimile of reality, with the main goal of her play being to reinforce lessons on how to be a proper female.

If Milly's aim is to be a "proper" nineteenth-century female, then she is already succeeding by the time readers are led to the doll's house kitchen. More than any other room, the kitchen "quite delighted Edith," and she gazed excitedly at all of the miniature pots and pans (Valentine 5). In an ultimate depiction of class consciousness, Edith says "Milly, I think you have dressed the cook in the same green merino that my dress is made of!" (Valentine 5). Of course, Milly laughs gaily and explains that her mother used to have a dress made out of it but she was given a scrap of it to use for the cook doll (Valentine 5). All the while, readers are painfully aware that Edith's dress material is on the lower-class cooking doll, a fact that leads one to realize the class differences between Edith and Milly. Whereas the doll's fabric is merely considered a scrap from Milly's mother, that is the exact fabric that Edith is wearing for her friend's special birthday. Treating such notions of class with a giggle and a smile is the only way that Milly knows how to react, and chances are such acts will carry on into adulthood. Once again, Milly has another piece of housekeeping knowledge when she says, "…it is a little troublesome to keep them all clean, but a lady must look after her kitchen and see that it is nice, or the house will not be comfortable" (Valentine 5). Milly seems to have a great deal of upset

and stress in regards to managing her doll's house and is extremely particular about every detail of it, something that is uncharacteristic for the majority of twenty-first century girls and their dollhouses who enjoy *playing* with them rather than *troubling* over them.

After finishing the preparations to make the doll's house ready for night, the girls sit around their own fireplace and speak to Milly's mother, who most likely troubles over the many details of her own extravagant home. The book concludes with Milly's mother explaining to Edith that "…I am desired by your Mamma (whom I have just seen) to tell you, that if you continue a good girl, *your* Christmas gift will also be a Doll's House" (Valentine 6). Perhaps the doll's house that Edith receives will not be as extravagant as Milly's or as full of so many characters, but it is clear that the notion of the upper-class society which Milly and Edith belong to or at least frequent is that gifts for children are not meant to be so much surprises as they are incentives for good behavior. Milly herself was quite aware of her doll's house well before her birthday so that she would have "everything ready" when it came (Valentine 2). This leads to the concept that doll's houses were not so much about pure and simple childish enjoyment of the toy but for working towards a preparation into adulthood and becoming "good" housekeepers. Such a philosophy may seem foreign to many children in the twenty-first century, who would be confused if they were told well ahead of time about their gifts.

It must be stressed that, to Milly and Edith, such a doll's house was indeed a wonderful gift, and their behavior merely reflects the culture of the time. Girls would indeed "play house" with their dolls in the only way that they would know—the gendered way in which they lived. As Seth Lerer notes in his book *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*, "...the idea of girlhood as a special category of identity is something that emerges in the mid-Victorian period (the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 1785 for the first appearance of

'girlhood,' and the word does not appear again until 1831)" (232). Clearly, notions of a girl's childhood were just coming into view at the time of the publication of *Edith and Milly's Housekeeping*, providing an understanding as to why the girls act so mature and serious about their adulthood. Strong expectations of females to know how to cook, clean, and manage a home while also still having a sense of ingenuity when it comes to issues of decorating and hosting dinner parties were all a part of the culture in 1860s England. To put it into perspective, just as females were expected to know how to do such things and to practice them at such a young age, males were not supposed to have any part of these activities except financing them. Today's twenty-first-century world is quite different in most cultures of the westernized world. After Suffragettes, the age of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, and gender equality movements, a book like *Edith and Milly's Housekeeping* just does not seem to fit. While the story of exploring an extravagant, over-the-top dollhouse remains something that many children would still enjoy, the lessons of practicality, housekeeping tips, and gender-based expectations do not apply.

Today's dollhouses may seem to be more focused on the concept of play than is the one which "Aunt Louisa" portrays because of the societal changes which have occurred between 1866 and 2012. Concepts of the home and family, not to mention housekeeping, have altered fascinatingly. Today's dollhouses may not have any females in them at all, with two men keeping home, or housekeeping may be portrayed as a more equal partnership between males and females. Dollhouses may be viewed differently from Milly's because of women's rights and the concept that a woman's entire life will not be defined by her life inside of the home but by educational and career opportunities nonexistent in the times of Edith and Milly. Of course, while some dollhouses throughout the United States still boast gendered depictions such as Barbie's ultimate "dream home," others have changed a great deal. Although the plastic dolls

and the plastic homes may reflect traditional gendered notions, it is the children themselves who either keep those notions or explore newer concepts. The concepts which are explored in a doll's house today are indeed more playful because such ideas, while still important to the future lives of children, are not the only factors of their lives. If Edith and Milly were also studying seriously in school and preparing themselves for an independent life not solely dependent on their housekeeping skills, chances are they could have had more of a relaxing time with the doll's house.

If children of the twenty-first century were to read *Edith and Milly's Housekeeping*, which is now long out of print and in many ways forgotten, they would certainly be in awe of the wonderful illustrations of the magnificent dollhouse. Perhaps some would find the lessons on housekeeping cute and fun, but they would most likely not be able to understand the utter seriousness that Milly has toward her doll's house. The doll's house is not just a toy for Milly, but a tool with which to grow as a girl into a future wife and mother. Edith will also receive a doll's house if she is a good girl. Incentives were often given to children who behave; yet culture and society determine what is in store for the children who receive the incentives, as well as just what those incentives entail in regards to the independence and equality of children.

Works Cited

"Aunt Louisa's London Toy Book." Internet Archive. Open Library, 2008. Web. 17 February 2012. http://openlibrary.org/books/OL20838544M/Aunt_Louisa's_London_gift_book.

Lerer, Seth. Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Valentine, Laura. Aunt Louisa's Edith and Milly's Housekeeping. London: Frederick Warne & Company, 1880. University of Florida George A. Smathers Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature in the Department of Special Collections and Area Studies. Web. 9 February 2012.http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00023896/00001.