

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Doll's House

by

### Rumer Godden

### Book Information

Rumer Godden, The Doll's House  
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Book Level: 4.5  
Interest Level: MG

The activities, sorrows, and joys of a family of dolls living in an old doll house are related from the dolls' perspective.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books

**Topics:** Emotions, Happiness; Emotions, Sadness; Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Toys; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

### Main Characters

Apple a small, plush boy doll who is Tottie's brother and the Plantaganets' youngest child  
Charlotte Dane one of the young sisters, who plays with the Plantaganets  
Darner the Plantaganets' family dog  
Emily Dane the other sister, who plays with the Plantaganets  
Great-Great Aunt Laura the Dane girls' aunt, who once owned Tottie, Marchpane, and the doll house  
Marchpane an arrogant and cruel porcelain doll who once lived with Tottie in the doll house  
Mr. Plantaganet the head of the Plantaganet household  
Mrs. Innisfree the lady who organizes a charity doll exhibition and helps the Dane sisters restore their doll house furniture  
Mrs. Plantaganet (Birdie) a gentle celluloid doll who is rather flighty and absent-minded  
Tottie Plantaganet a small wooden Dutch doll who is the main character of the story  
walking doll an arrogant doll at the doll exhibition

### Vocabulary

**antique** an object of special value because of its age  
**celluloid** a highly flammable plastic  
**cracker** a paper noise-maker often used in parties  
**embroidery** decorative needlework  
**kid** a kind of white leather made from goatskin  
**parasol** an umbrella used as protection from the sun  
**sampler** a piece of fabric embroidered with various stitches

### Synopsis

Tottie Plantaganet is a little wooden Dutch doll who lives with two little girls named Emily and Charlotte Dane. Tottie is one hundred years old, and she used to belong to the girls' Great-Grandmother and Great-Great-Aunt Laura. Now she has been given her own little family. There is Mr. Plantaganet, a doll with a porcelain head; Mrs. Plantaganet, or Birdie, who is his celluloid doll wife; their son (and Tottie's brother) Apple, who is a plush doll; and finally, their little dog Darner. At first the Plantaganets live in a shoe-box house, but they long for a real home.

Homes are very expensive, and it seems unlikely that the Dane family can afford to buy one for the Plantaganets. Tottie remembers her life with the Dane girls' ancestors. She explains to her family how she lived in a grand doll house many years ago. It had carpet and wallpaper and pretty furniture. The Plantaganets desperately want to live in a house like that, so Tottie tells them to wish for it.

Soon, the Great-Great-Aunt of Emily and Charlotte dies, and her relations discover a doll house in the old lady's attic. They decide it should be given to any little girls in the family rather than sold. Emily and Charlotte are thrilled when their parents agree to let them have the house. The Plantaganets are excited as well, for they are growing tired of living in a shoe box.

Meanwhile, a beautifully dressed porcelain doll named Marchpane has been sent to the cleaners. Many years ago, Marchpane and Tottie lived together. Marchpane is extremely arrogant and

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self-centered. She has few thoughts in her head except for thoughts of herself. Tottie thinks about Marchpane as the author prepares the reader for the doll to enter Tottie's life again.

Much of the Plantaganets' and little girls' excitement turns to dismay when they receive the house and see what a terrible state it is in. The interior is dusty, moldy, and full of cobwebs. Some of the pretty furniture is ruined. The girls remember some beautiful doll furniture from a shop, but they do not have enough money to buy it. They decide they must find a way to earn money. Soon, Mrs. Innisfree visits and asks if they would like to show Tottie in an exhibit for charity. She promises to pay them. Needing the money for the furniture, the girls agree to loan Mrs. Innisfree the doll. Tottie, however, is terribly confused and thinks she is being sold. Before the exhibit, though, the girls return the money to Mrs. Innisfree so it can be used for charity. Mrs. Innisfree agrees to help the girls restore the furniture that came with the house.

Before the exhibit begins, Tottie encounters many of the other dolls who will be shown. Two of them are the French walking doll and Marchpane, who are both conceited. Marchpane does her best to make Tottie feel inferior. Later, the Queen tries to buy Tottie, but learns that Tottie is not for sale because she belongs to two little girls who love her. After the show, the jealous Marchpane vows to reclaim what she believes to be her house.

Tottie returns to her family and her new home with the beautifully re-upholstered furniture. Soon, though, a package arrives in the mail. It is Marchpane. Emily falls in love with Marchpane from the start, but Charlotte is leery. Before long, Marchpane, with Emily's help, has displaced the entire Plantaganet family. Now they are all Marchpane's servants. Tottie and her family desperately wish that Emily will learn the truth about Marchpane. Soon, Marchpane becomes increasingly malevolent, reveling in the misery she is causing. She is responsible for little Apple getting too close to a lamp's flames. Birdie rescues her son, but dies in her attempt. Marchpane just smiles.

Emily then realizes the truth about Marchpane, and the girls decide to donate the doll to a museum where she can be admired. The Plantaganets continue living in their house, comforted by Birdie's memory.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Tottie often tells the Plantaganets that they "must go on wishing." How is wishing important in this novel?

*The dolls wish when they need things or face difficult situations. Wishes also represent hope and faith for the Plantaganets. They wish for a doll house so they do not have to live in a shoe box any longer. Tottie wishes for specific Christmas presents, and they are received. They wish for Marchpane to leave their home, and she finally does.*

### Literary Analysis

One theme in this novel is that one must look beyond the exterior to find beauty. How is this theme shown?

*One example is shown through Tottie. She is a small wooden doll whom Marchpane thinks has no value and is completely inferior to her porcelain materials. The Queen, however, sees the beauty in Tottie and wishes to buy her, not Marchpane. Another example is shown when Mrs. Innisfree helps Charlotte and Emily to see the beauty in the doll house's original furniture. By sanding and polishing, it reveals the wood's beauty underneath. A final example is shown through Birdie. She is considered rather brainless, yet she reveals the true value of her character when she gives her life to save Apple.*

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#### Inferential Comprehension

What is arrogance? Can you find phrases or actions in the story which show Marchpane's arrogance?

*Arrogance is being overly proud or feeling superior to others. One example of Marchpane's arrogance is revealed in chapter four: "Marchpane liked being looked at and admired more and more, though she thought of course it was only her due, and that the people were very lucky to have a chance to see such an elegant and beautiful doll as Marchpane." Another example is illustrated when Tottie declares that Apple is their little boy. Marchpane replies, "Wait and see, you little splinter!" (chapter nineteen)*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why is bird imagery appropriate in describing Mrs. Plantaganet?

*She is described as being "flighty." She tends to flutter about from one thing to another. She is cheerful and small. She enjoys humming and music. She also tends to be rather simple-minded.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The dolls' house is described in detail in this book. The furniture, wall coverings, carpets, and window treatments are all discussed. Have students create their own doll houses on poster board. Look to the book for clues and descriptions and try to make the rooms resemble the rooms in the story. Students can look through home, gardening, and decorating magazines. They can even consult sales flyers from furniture stores to find the perfect furniture. Have students cut out pictures and design every room, displaying their results on the poster board. They could even design a garden if time permits.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Many of the dolls in this book come from foreign countries. Tottie is Dutch and the walking doll is French. The walking doll uses a number of French words and expressions in the book. Some examples are: "Je les deteste" ("I hate them!"), "Pardonnez-moi" ("excuse me"), and "Non. Non. Je m'en doute" (No. No. I doubt it.). Have students find and list

several other French words and expressions. Then, with the help of French dictionaries or language books, have them translate the phrases. If any of the students speak French, let them instruct the class on basic words and greetings in French, as well as proper pronunciation. The students can practice speaking several simple French phrases. Or, perhaps a French teacher could visit and give the class a basic French lesson.

**Recognizing Details** Embroidery and cross-stitching are discussed in detail in this book. Specific stitches and techniques are mentioned, as well as finished wall hangings called samplers. This would be a good opportunity to show students some cross-stitch samplers. Ask students if they have any examples of needlework at home they could bring in to show the class. Somebody who knows how to cross-stitch may be brought in to give a demonstration to the class. Demonstrate basic stitches as well as petit-point.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** In *The Doll's House*, all the dolls are given personalities, feelings, and thoughts. Ask students to think of other stories or movies in which inanimate objects come alive and show feelings and thoughts. The movie *Toy Story* is a good example of such personification. Do the students like stories with personified characters? In a written assignment, have them describe their favorites and explain why they are favorites.