Rumer Godden's 'The Dolls' House' – An Anatomy of a Masterpiece,

With an Endnote from Francesca Lia Block

"Tinkle. Tinkle. Tinkle," said the musical box.
Marchpane smiled.

It might not be thought that a book where one of the major characters is burned to death, and another glories in her demise, would be a children's book, yet Rumer Godden's *The Dolls' House*[1] is just such a book and is apparently suitable for children between the ages of 7 & 11, as the by-line for the most recent edition listed on Amazon has it, suggesting, one might think, subject matter that is all innocence, sweetness, and light, an expectation not particularly dispelled by Godden's first sentence, 'This is a novel written about dolls in a dolls' house'. But this is Rumer Godden, and anyone who knows her dolls' stories, of which there are several, and of which a couple, including this one, are masterpieces, will know that they are never filled with innocence, sweetness and light. (Oh, and just in case you're wondering, the other masterpiece is *The Story of Holly and Ivy*.) The dolls in Godden's doll stories have a number of things in common. In the first place they can only be brought to life by being incorporated into the make-believe play of children. But once brought to life they can think, they can talk, they can discuss things with each other, and, most importantly, they have emotions, often very intense emotions; but they can never 'do', all they can do is wish; and they are dependent upon the children who are playing with them, hearing, or perhaps feeling would be a better term, their wishes, and acting accordingly. And crucially for Godden it doesn't end there, because what happens in the children's lives then affects what happens in the lives of the dolls and, contrariwise, what happens to the dolls offers an insight into what is happening with the children.

And before I go any further and taking one step back as it were, it is pertinent to speculate at this point about the target audience for these stories. How do these stories 'work' for 7–11 yr olds, what is their appeal? Well, not having a 7–11 yr old handy, I will have to speculate: One of the genre requirements of children's literature is that the child characters in it have to have autonomy, the sorts of autonomy that children don't necessarily have in real life. In real life children cannot choose their parents, their siblings, where they live and under what circumstances and in what sorts of homes. They have to eat what they are given, wear the clothes they are given, go to bed when they are told, never mind that in the more public arena they have to go to school and generally comport themselves in the ways that the adult society that surrounds them requires them to. But if a children's author wanted to write only about how children are controlled by the adults around them it wouldn't make for a particularly jolly read, and no child would touch it. Godden's doll stories present us with one solution, and that is to cast the children in them in the adult role and the dolls in them in the child role. We have thus a double perspective which works, I would suggest, as a distancing device, one which allows Godden to focus on the dolls and to thus invoke our sympathy with them in what is effectively an account of a struggle for power between them and their human child 'parents', the saving grace

[1] The case of the wandering apostrophe! My Puffin copy even disagrees with itself, the cover suggesting that there is only one doll involved – 'The Doll's House'; with the inside title page suspecting that there are more than one – 'The Dolls' House'. It's known as the 'You say tomato' syndrome.

being that the dolls can actually win the war if they can only wish hard enough and manage to persuade the children to do what they, the dolls, want them to do; and at one remove it is thus by analogy an account of the war between children and adults in the real world. In the real world too children have to resort to wishing and hoping, and relying on their parents to pick up the cues and do what they, the children, want them to do. And while I recognise that I have vastly over-generalised the case so far as real families in the real world are concerned, the fact remains that when the chips are down it is the adults who have the say.

Starting Point:- When I first read *The Doll's House* (I never read it as a child) I was absolutely knocked sideways by what is, I would venture to suggest, the most chilling line in the whole of children's literature. It consists of two little innocuous words – 'Marchpane smiled', and the sentence preceding it, '"Tinkle. Tinkle. Tinkle" went the musical box,' is innocent enough too in all conscience, offering us a reason, perhaps, why Marchpane might be smiling. As to why those two lines, each given a paragraph to itself, are so powerful and so devastating?: the answer is to do with structure, context, and Godden's use of language, and in this little essay I hope to offer an analysis of how she does it. (Cautionary note. I hope it will be obvious that when I refer to 'the reader' in the following, I am referring solely to myself. Other readers may well disagree with some of my readings – I trust that they will for otherwise how will we ever learn?)

Literary Criticism:- Literary criticism and textual exegesis is nearly always concerned with content, and that content is then examined in terms of whatever the current fashion in isms happens to be at the time: Lacanian-ism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, Marxism, Freudianism, feminism, intermodernism, to name but a few. But nobody, to the best of my knowledge, asks what is, I guess, a technical question: how does she do it? Perhaps it is the question that is only asked by a practitioner – how do I go about writing a children's book? One answer is to look at what Rumer Godden does and learn from her. Plotting is crucial – everything else feeds into that, and in order to appreciate Godden's skill with the plotting it is necessary to start at the end, specifically the climax, the point at which all the story strands come together.

Synopsis:- So, a brief synopsis. Two children, Emily and Charlotte, inherit a little Victorian wooden doll, Tottie, who is seven years old in doll years, and who is the nearest it comes to being the protagonist – Godden calls her the chief person in the novel. In the course of the first couple of pages or so Tottie acquires parents: Mr. & Mrs. Plantagenet, the latter being a little celluloid doll also known as Birdie. She also acquires a three year old baby brother called Apple, and Darner, a dog. A major plot strand concerns the acquisition of the dolls' house itself in which crucially, so far as the plot is concerned, there is a place for a little birthday cake candle. For a while everything is fine. The dolls play happy families, helped of course by Emily and Charlotte who are playing together happily too. But lurking in the background is Marchpane who, along with Tottie herself, had lived in the Dolls' house years ago when it was still new, and at a fairly late stage Marchpane enters the doll family household, declares that it is her house and relegates the other dolls to the status of servants. In this she is assisted by Emily and opposed by Charlotte, but as Emily is the oldest, Emily wins. The story climaxes with a fire in which Apple looks as if he is going to get burned by the candle, and Birdie, in order to save him, plunges into the flame and is herself burned to a cinder. Marchpane smiles. The girls, now of the same mind,

decide they don't like Marchpane very much after all, and she is sent off to a museum to be looked at but never played with, which pleases her mightily.

Proposal:- What I propose to do is to examine the text from a number of perspectives, some of which will be familiar enough: character, theme, use of language etc, but others of which tend to get neglected, the importance of structure in particular; and my underlying question is always how does Godden weave all these strands together to make the story 'work' and how does she give it its emotional power? And my proposition is that answer lies in her articulation of structure and in her use of language, for therein lies her genius. But before I get to that I just want to take a look at what I am calling metanarrative elements in the text.

Meta-narrative:- It is no accident that in her biography of Godden[2], Anne Chisholm refers to her as a storyteller, and indeed that is what she is. This is particularly evident in her asides to the reader, which effectively count as what I am calling meta-narrative – a diegetic level that sits outside the actual story itself, in this case allowing the author to address the reader directly. (I am oversimplifying a tangle of theory here and am taking a more conventional approach, assuming that the anonymous third person narrator in the book is the voice of the author herself. And while I'm in this parenthesis, we are often told that children can't cope with this sort of diegetic complexity. Well they can!) The first example of this direct address occurs with the very first couple of sentences that I have already partially quoted: 'This is a novel written about dolls in a dolls' house. The chief person in it is Tottie Plantaganet, a small Dutch doll.' And within a couple of short paragraphs the author has referred to herself in the first person and the reader has entered the text as 'you'. So, when Tottie acquires parents: 'Of course Tottie knew, just as you and I know, that Mr. and Mrs. Plantaganet were not her real father and mother.' Examples of such direct address abound throughout the text, even extending to direct advice / instruction to her readers, telling them / us for instance, that if we don't know what the word 'unique' means, we must 'go and look it up in the dictionary'. And on a couple of occasions she takes it further still, using the opportunities that printing options offer. When describing the clothes that Emily makes for the dolls for example, Godden provides little illustrations of quilling and scalloping: ('this is quilling §§§§§'); and when Tottie is sent to an exhibition of dolls through the ages, organised to raise money for the Blind Children's Fund, she can only read her label upside down, so it is printed upside down, and you have to turn the book upside down to read it. Finally a couple of further examples related to that same said exhibition: Tottie has heard a conversation between the girls and Mrs. Innisfree, the lady who is organising it, a conversation in which there is talk of a fee being paid to the girls for lending her to the exhibition, but Tottie gets it into her head that she is actually going to be sold. Packed away in her box she does not hear a later conversation between the two girls in which they discover that they are actually rather unhappy about taking a fee, the exhibition is after all supposed to be using the money raised to help blind children not to help *them* to buy nice furniture for their dolls' house, so they change their mind. But, as I say, Tottie doesn't know this, and in a parenthesis Godden tells her readers: 'You must keep remembering that,' and a couple of pages later when Tottie is still distressed: 'If you look back to page 51 of this book you will see why.'

[2] Rumer Godden: A Storyteller's Life. By Anne Chisholm. Pan Books (1998)

In these last two examples, of course, Godden has drawn attention to the very structuring of the novel itself.[3]

Characterisation:- Character is, amongst other things, a major structuring device in any story. At the most basic level we read a story to find out what the characters are going to do. Characters can be simple: James Bond; or complex: Elizabeth Bennet. In children's literature we have for example the simpler characterisation of Enid Blyton's George, or the more complex characterisation of Nina Bawden's Carrie. With simple characterisations we are simply concerned with what the characters do, but with more complex characterisations we are interested both in how characters change and develop *and* in what they do, the two are very closely interlinked. In *The Doll's House* these two types of characterisation sit side by side. The dolls fall into the former category, they can't change – they have to live with the personalities they are given, but Emily and Charlotte are more complex beings and the relationship between them does develop and change in the course of the story.

So, starting with the dolls, the first thing we learn is that Tottie is made of good hard wood, and she herself has an awareness of the living tree from which she was carved, an awareness that gives her the strength and determination that is to stand her in good stead throughout the novel. On top of which, the fact that she has been around for such a long time means that she has a hundred times more experience tucked under her belt than the other dolls. All of which makes her the strongest of the dolls, none of the other dolls have her strength of character. Of her parents, Mr. Plantagenet has had a chequered history. He was originally a highlander with a kilt, and with bagpipes painfully glued to his hand. He had been bought for some children who did not care for him, and who tore off the bagpipes, scribbled a moustache onto him, allowed him to be chewed by their dog, and then flung him into a cold dark toy cupboard. Emily and Charlotte acquire him when they visit them and find him under a table. They repair him, clean the dust and glue off him and dress him up, but he is easily made afraid, afraid of being hurt and abused again. Birdie, as noted earlier, is a little celluloid doll. She has come out of a party cracker and there is something in her head that rattles, as a result of which she is indeed 'not quite right in the head', and she gets very easily muddled and confused; but the girls think there is something brave about her so they decide to keep her. She had been covered in feathers and, for all that the girls wash them off, there is 'still something of the cracker and the feather about her'. They decide she is somewhere between 20 and 30 yrs old in doll years, but in human years she is only as old as the previous children's party; she is clearly ephemeral, and, as we have seen, it is she who gets burnt up at the end of the story. As for Tottie's baby brother, Apple, who is also, it is important to remember, Birdie's youngest child and as such has a special place in her heart, we learn nothing about his back story, only that he is made of plush (a sort of velvet Wikipedia informs me), and that everyone thinks he is 'a little love of a doll.' He is, however very naughty, never staying where he is put – when Emily puts him on a chair for instance 'he had deliberately fallen off because he wanted to practice standing on his head.' This too has important plot

[3] And if we want to take it even further, she has drawn our attention to the fact that the novel is a totally artificial construct contained within a physical object that is the very book that we are holding in our hands and that, since we are able to manipulate the book, we are thus able to manipulate the story. It's an extraordinary thing to do, though not unique, not in adult literature, running all the way from Sterne to Italo Calvino; nor in children's literature: 'If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture.' It's postmodernism by definition, but I promised not to get bogged down in 'isms' which is the reason why this observation has ended up as a footnote.

implications, since it is this character trait that leads him to be inadvertently implicated in Birdie's death. And Darner? He is made from a darning needle and you had to be careful when handling him, and crucially he is given to barking 'Prr-ickkk!' whenever he senses danger. As for Marchpane, when she does appear she turns out to be consumed with self-regard and conceit, only wanting the be admired, refusing to be brought to life by being played with. And the girls themselves?: as we shall see, Charlotte is more interested in the domestic, while Emily is more interested in the aesthetics of the house and its inhabitants, and at a deeper level Charlotte is perhaps more empathetic with the dolls themselves, with their feelings for each other and with their wishes and desires about what they want to happen in their lives. But as already noted, Emily is the eldest and tends to take charge, and Charlotte is generally happy to follow her lead. But it is a flexible relationship, with Charlotte coming up with suggestions too, and basically they get on very well together, until Marchpane arrives.

Themes:- In the course of reading the novel, a number of themes emerge. The first that presents itself concerns the relationship between the past and the present, and the impact of the former upon the latter. Tottie, Marchpane, and the dolls' house itself all come from the past, indeed have shared that past with each other, and each of them in their several ways have a very strong impact on what happens in the story. The past also brings with it Victorian assumptions about class, very different from those prevailing at the time that the book was written, the 'present' of the story. From another perspective again, it is possible to see the novel as an account of the disruptive effect of the invasion of a settled and ordered social situation, specifically in this case the family, by the arrival of a powerful outsider with different priorities and value systems. Particularly important is the relationship between the dolls and the girls: how can the dolls get the children to do what they, the dolls, want them to do? Sometimes they manage this, but sometimes they don't, and if they don't, the relationship becomes a struggle for power and control. And finally, somewhere deep in the heart of the book, is a debate about the very existential nature of the dolls themselves. Are they precious antiques displayed in glass cases in museums to be gazed at and admired but never touched because they might get spoilt, or are they personages who are brought to life by the children who incorporate them into their imaginative play? I shall be exploring these themes in the course of my analysis of two main narrative strands, that of the dolls' house itself, and that of Marchpane, though others are important, those of Tottie and Birdie particularly. In that analysis I shall be looking at the ways in which Godden weaves the cues and clues, some obvious, some less so, into the text, all of which are given added strength by her poetic sense of the power of carefully chosen words which, when placed in the appropriate context, prove to have a strength of implication and connotation which goes well beyond their ostensible meaning. And it doesn't end there, for she also has the poet's *ear*, knowing that the very sound of the words, the very melody of a turn of phrase can add emotional weight to those meanings and connotations, and just as importantly can also contribute to the forward momentum of the unfolding story

The Dolls' House:- At the beginning of the story there is no dolls' house, and the need for it is first brought to our attention in the beautifully placed final line of the first chapter (the first of many such final lines) when we are told that Darner liked staying at home: 'That was the trouble. There was no home.' The word 'home' gives us depth of meaning, and the turn of phrase and its placement at the end of the chapter gives us our first cue. So over the page to Chapter 2 (and page turns are always important) and we discover that Mr. Plantagenet too wants

a home, that he hates their current accommodation in a couple of cold shoe boxes, they don't feel safe, he wants the security of a proper home, a proper dolls' house, and imagines how good it could feel when, at the end of the day, the children would shut the front and they would be quite private in their own home, and Tottie, remembering, concurs – she had forgotten how good it had felt. And shutting the front?: a seemingly minor detail of description that passes us by on our first reading, but which Godden will pick up later to good effect. There are other problems with the shoe boxes too, they get damp and sodden when the dolls hang their washing out to dry, and in a seamless segue – one of many – the point of view moves from that of the dolls to that of the children, in this case Charlotte's, she has sensed the dolls' distress: ' "You can't play with them properly," wailed Charlotte.' A proper dolls' house is needed. But dolls' houses are expensive so we, the readers, have to bide our time. In the meantime Tottie whets the dolls' appetite, and ours too, describing the dolls' house she lived in a hundred years ago, in the course of which description, be it noted, she mentions a birdcage which sets Birdie (no accident her name) off imagining it singing 'delicate clockwork musical-box music', another cue – a real musical box will have an important role in the build up to the climax. Tottie also tells them about the light with a place for a real birthday cake candle in it which you could light, causing Birdie, in a moment of unusual clarity, to warn Apple to be careful of it, and Tottie in her turn to warn Birdie herself to be afraid of it, that she wold burn up in an instant it she got too near it – as clear a plot cue as one could wish for. (Also to be noted at this point is that Birdie's moments of clarity always concern Apple, her youngest child.) At this stage in our reading, of course, we take these descriptive details as being merely descriptive details, but with hindsight we know that they are important plot cues too. Godden / Tottie has made the dolls' house sound very desirable and so we must guess that it is the dolls' house that is going to feature in the ongoing story, a suspicion reinforced by one of Godden's trademark uses of a repeated phrase, an insistent melodic fragment that drives the narrative forward, in this case as the other dolls severally ask, '*What was it like? What was it like? What was it like?*'[4] And we are also now into another of the major themes of the novel – the intrusion of the past into the present. And, as I say, by now we the readers are wondering, and indeed suspecting, because that is the way these narratives work, that the dolls' house that Tottie is describing will be the dolls' house of the story.

Turn the page to the next chapter, and so it proves to be. It had belonged to the children's great-great-Aunt and had subsequently been languishing in an attic: the past has now most decidedly arrived in the present and is going to determine what is going to happen over the course of the story. Its arrival is presaged by a letter and a family discussion about whether they should keep it or sell it, with the children's father suggesting they sell it. So, in another of Godden's reinforcing repetitions. the children beg their mother: '*Can we have it?*' and the dolls beg along with them: "*Can we?*", and the '*can we ?*' is reiterated a couple more times with readers left to decide for themselves who is actually saying it, girls or dolls. In the meantime Godden surreptitiously keeps the Apple narrative strand going, slipping in the odd sentence while the reader's attention is directed elsewhere: Charlotte has put him down too close to the fire and he is slowly sliding into it. It is Tottie who finally notices, crying 'Apple! Apple! Take care!' and this time it is the children's father who hears her plea and rescues him in the nick of time.

[4] My italics – and I shall, throughout, be putting all such examples into italics to emphasise my argument.

When the dolls' house itself finally arrives it is covered with dust, rust, grime, and mould. It is, in short, in need of serious refurbishment – it has after all languished in a dusty attic for the best part of a hundred years – and in Chapter 5 Godden describes the process, a description which is couched in the form of a dialogue between the dolls' wishes and the girls' actions. Thus, initially, the dolls are very distressed, (with the exception of Birdie who is quite bewitched by the birdcage with a little bird in it). Tottie keeps them going. '*Wish*', she tells them, repeating the word over and over again throughout the chapter, urging them on when they complain – '*Don't bleat. Wish . . . . Wish* that Emily and Charlotte can put our house in order and make it good again'. And the girls sense the dolls' wishes. The first thing they do is take everything out to clean it and again the dolls are anxious, but Tottie again keeps them going: '*Wait and see. Wait and see.*', which is not only an instruction to the dolls, it is also an instruction to the reader. We too have to wait and see what is going to happen – all of which serves also to build our speculation about what *is* going to happen. And so it goes on, with the girls even responding to specific 'requests' from the dolls – that the front steps should be cleaned, that Apple should get a cot, etc. In the process, however, if we pay close attention, we discover that Charlotte is more interested in the ordinary, in the domestic. It is she who does most of the cleaning and scrubbing, causing Emily to reflect that she must like the doll's house very much. Emily herself is more interested in making the dolls' house as beautiful as possible. There must be beautiful clothes for the dolls, which she makes; there must be real lace for the curtains, beautiful antique furniture, etc. And therein lies our next cue, for they have seen some beautiful dolls house furniture in an antique shop, but it is expensive – they must raise some money. 'But *how*?' Charlotte wants to know; '*How*?' the dolls want to know; and '*How*?' the reader wants to know. '"Somehow," said Emily,'– another three word last line given a paragraph to itself, which means, of course, as we should know by now, that that seemingly innocent word, 'somehow,' carries a weight of consequence far beyond its ostensible meaning. So we turn the page to the next chapter in which we meet Mrs. Innisfree and the girls discover that they can make money by loaning Tottie out to her for her exhibition, which is to lead in its turn to Tottie's distress when she thinks she is going to be sold, all of which is contained in that single 'Somehow'. The description of the exhibition itself fills a substantial chapter, and it is a chapter in which all of the major themes of the novel are rehearsed. It is also to provide a context for Tottie to encounter Marchpane for the second time in her life – which is perhaps my cue for returning to the beginning and looking at Marchpane's trajectory through the novel up to this point too.

Marchpane:- We first learn about Marchpane in Chapter 2 when Tottie is describing the dolls' house to the other dolls, and they ask her if there was anyone else who lived in it with her. Yes there was, she was called Marchpane, and Tottie, who was an even earlier occupant, remembers her arrival. The others ask about her name. Tottie explains that it was a type of almond icing, very sweet and sticky, 'You very quickly have enough of it.', an explanation that indeed says more than it appears to say, followed up one of Godden's devastating choices of words when they ask her in a thrice repeated question what she was like… 'She was *valuable*'(my emphasis) – another word that carries a huge weight of meaning. Everything is within it – Marchpane's personality, her self-regard, her history, the fact that she is a genuine antique, the fact that she will need to be cleaned up, her debut in the exhibition, the class distinction between her and the other dolls, indeed her very existential identity as a valuable antique, to be protected above all from any children who might want to incorporate her into their play and hence mess her up, and

the word even includes Emily's preference for her over the other dolls when she finally arrives, all of which will determine the role she has in the story. One might even say that the whole novel is summed up in that one word. We conclude with another of Godden's powerful reiterations, starting with Tottie's line about how good it felt to be shut up safe and sound at the end of the day. '"I had forgotten how good that can be" but the line is no sooner out than its threatening echo comes back at the reader, 'She had forgotten Marchpane as well.' It's just so beautifully placed at the end of the chapter. And thus, of course, does Godden ensure that we have *not* forgotten Marchpane. And like the tolling of some discordant warning bell, the phrase, in another of Godden's asides to the reader, gets repeated at the end of the following chapter: 'As I told you, they had forgotten Marchpane'. Well the dolls may have forgotten Marchpane, but we are not allowed to, since, when we turn the page to the *next* chapter again, we find another powerful little sentence which in the very act of telling us of her absence ensures her presence in our minds: 'When the dolls' house arrived, Marchpane was not in it.' Despite her absence, the chapter is then devoted to telling the reader that she has been sent to the cleaners, which Godden tells us was very bad for her because the very fact that great care is being spent on cleaning her simply fuels her self-conceit; and in an opening paragraph the warning bell tolls no less than ten times as Marchpane thinks about herself in the third person, reflecting upon how wonderful *Marchpane* was, how valuable *Marchpane* was, how well made *Marchpane* was etc., her conceit reaching its zenith when she is finally put on display and reflects condescendingly upon how fortunate her viewers will be to have the chance to admire 'such an elegant and beauteous doll as *Marchpane*'– a tolling bell indeed. Marchpane has however been cleaned with petrol which means that for ever afterwards she smelled rather nasty, and Godden, in her authorial persona, interjects to tell us that the smell was quite appropriate, 'because she was nasty'. That was Chapter 4, but the reader has to wait until Chapter 8 to hear more, a mini-chapter of just 6 lines informing us that Marchpane too has been sent to the above mentioned exhibition. And *we* know that she is bound to meet Tottie there, but the effect of Godden's giving us that piece of information in a little chapter to itself increases our expectations, whets our appetite even more, much more than if she had just let the information emerge in the course of describing the exhibition itself.

The Exhibition:- There follows a sequence of chapters which crosscut back and forth between the exhibition and the dolls' house back in the nursery. The first Exhibition chapter, Chapter 9, constitutes the emotional heart of the book. You might even call it the chapter of Tottie's despair. It's a substantial chapter in which many of the major themes of the novel are rehearsed. There are all sorts of dolls in the exhibition, many of them of them antique – so we are immediately into a dialogue between the past and the present, and the impact of the former upon the latter. Tottie finds herself between a finely dressed French doll and a wax doll, and facing her is Marchpane herself, and it is not long before the issue of class come up. The French doll sneers at Tottie because she is only made of wood, the dispensable and certainly lower class domestic wood of clothes pegs and broom-handles, which Tottie does not deny, but points out that flagpoles and ships masts and violins are also made of wood. Marchpane, again emphasising the class distinction, tells the French doll that such dolls were sold in the cheaper shops, four for a penny, and when Tottie reminds Marchpane that they have met before, Marchpane, yet again emphasising the class difference between them, only observes contemptuously that she couldn't be expected to remember her. We move on to what is the central debate of the chapter: Marchpane and the French doll are both of the same mind – they

most decidedly do not want to be brought to life by being played with by children, the French doll declaring that they are horrible little creatures and that she detests them: 'Je les déteste' in untranslated French and, along with Marchpane, hoping that, if any children visit the exhibition, they will not be allowed to touch. Tottie, by contrast, finds an ally in a wax doll who has been packed away in storage for many years but who yearns to be played with, initially casting children in a parental role: 'It is children who give us life,' and she takes it even further in her desperation: 'I want children!' she cries. It is an extraordinarily intense cry, from one perspective that of a child wanting a parent, and from another, that of a parent wanting a child, and basically the sentence incorporates both meanings. No wonder it is so intense. Thematically we are into what I have called the existential nature of doll-dom – the wax doll making that clear when she observes that Marchpane and the French doll don't even deserve the name of doll. And underlying the whole debate is the nature of the relationship between dolls and children. Which leads me back to Tottie's story line, and her dreadful despair because she believes that she has been sold by Charlotte and Emily. It is only when the Queen visits and, to Marchpane's extreme chagrin, not only notices Tottie, but also remembers playing with such a doll when she was a child, and actually wonders if Tottie is for sale and is told no, that she's the very dear possession of two little girls – it is only then that Tottie herself discovers that she is not for sale after all, and so great is her joy that she topples over in sheer relief. And look how Godden does it. *We* know what Tottie doesn't know – and if we have forgotten, Godden reminds us in one of those metanarrative interjections mentioned above – and our concern as readers is not whether she is going to be sold, it is about when she will find out that she's *not* going to be sold. Thus does Godden build our empathy with the character, with the result that her overwhelming relief when she does find out becomes our overwhelming relief on her behalf. As I say: the emotional heart of the book. And a final note: the chapter is followed by a brief coda in the form of another of Godden's one page chapters, ostensibly celebrating Tottie's relief, but ending with another warning bell – 'But Marchpane was bitterly jealous.'

In the final exhibition chapter, Chapter 12, we return to the debate about what it means to be a doll. The exhibition itself is in the process of being cleared up and the dolls are thinking about what is going to happen to them next, with the wax doll in particular not wanting to go back to being shut away in her box, and in a chiming six times repeated '*tell us*', the other dolls plead with Tottie to tell them about the dolls' house she used to live in, and in which she is going to live again. So she does tell them about it, and about her family too, which is the cue for Marchpane to state her claim to the dolls' house – it was hers in the past so it is still hers in the present. Tottie and her family have quite simply stolen it; and with a thrice repeated '*Wait and see*' Marchpane promises that she will return to substantiate her claim. And of course she is using exactly the same words that Tottie had used earlier in the novel as she chivvied the other dolls to think positively about the changes that Charlotte and Emily would bring to the dolls' house as they cleaned it up and restored it. The melody may be the same but the contextual harmony is very different: in Tottie's case bold and promising, in Marchpane's, dark and threatening.

The Parcels:- In the interim, in Chapter 11, the dolls have moved into the dolls' house, each in their own particular niche: Darner in his kennel, feather brained Birdie in her pink bedroom with her feather broom, Mr Plantagenet in the sitting room reading the newspapers and feeling like the master of the house, but thinking it would be nice to have an office to go to, and Apple

discovering that he loves tumbling down the stairs and hoping that Charlotte will put him back so that he can do it again. The candle is there and the girls light it when it gets dark, and at the end of the day 'they shut the front and left the Plantaganets safe inside' thus, almost to the letter, bringing to fruition Mr. Plantagenet's earlier dream that precisely that would happen.

In Chapter 13 Tottie returns to the nursery and the girls are talking about Christmas and, in another of those unmarked segues, Tottie (or is it Charlotte) imagines what the dolls would like as presents: perhaps a parasol for Birdie, a marble for Apple, a tiddlywinks plate for Darner? And in Chapter 14 they duly turn up. The dolls and the humans are in harmony again. But then two parcels arrive. The first contains a toy post office, and attentive readers will have remembered Mr. Plantagenet's wish for an office to go to. And the second? Well of course we the readers will guess that Marchpane will be in it, not least because Godden has been giving us clues and cues throughout the book, but also because we, even the youngest of us, know that that is how such narratives work. Never mind the fact that there is Darner at the end of the chapter barking his warning bark at it, 'Prick! Prick!' So we turn the page and read gleefully on to see if we are right, not least because we realise that Godden has got all her players in place and that we are thus heading for the climax. But Godden paces it, thus allowing all the themes of the novel to emerge, and weaving them into a rich counterpoint of theme, characterisation and event.

So it is Christmas morning and we find the dolls playing happily in the newly arrived post office: Birdie, be it noted, finding particular pleasure in the tinkling telephone which sets her off again dreaming about musical boxes, and Mr. Plantaganet feeling particularly proud of himself because he is the postmaster, and now truly master in his own house. Modern readers cannot but be aware of the gender stereotyping going on here, but Godden was writing this in the 1940's and, as we know from L. P. Hartley, they did things differently then[5]. The girls decide that because it is Christmas, the dolls should go home early, so back they go, returning to their allotted places in their 'happy little house' as Charlotte has it, and they chime in, 'our happy little house', 'our happy little house', 'our happy little house', from Birdie, Apple, and Mr. Plantaganet respectively, but not, be it noted, from Tottie herself, because this time Charlotte has *not* shut the front and left the Plantaganets nice and safe inside, and the fact that the front has not been shut allows Godden to build the tension by having Tottie watch fearfully as the girls unwrap the second parcel, and there's Marchpane. Emily loves her from the start, exclaiming over her clothes with their buttons and lace edgings, her real hair, her eyes that, in contrast with the eyes of the others, open and shut, and Marchpane complacently echoes her every exclamation, 'My clothes', 'the lace edgings', 'it is real hair', 'Mine open and shut'. Emily promptly declares that she goes with the dolls' house. Charlotte looks rather at the happily settled Plantaganets, and echoing the description from earlier in the book, comments only that Marchpane does not smell very nice.

Godden has now got all her players in place for the final confrontation. By this stage Tottie and Marchpane are well established as the opposing protagonists, and in the process have come to encompass the major themes of the novel. Both are from the past, but they bring very different sets of values with them. Tottie wants to engage with the present, Marchpane does not. Marchpane wants to re-establish the old distinctions of class, Tottie is 'ordinary' – Charlotte's word for her and her family. Godden does not define 'ordinary' particularly, but in the

[5] It's a misquote, but you get the drift.

Marchpane house of 100 years ago the family would have been the servants, in the modern world they are independent, no longer at anybody's beck and call. From Marchpane's perspective the servants have taken over the household and, assisted by Emily, she will battle to change them back into servants. As I have already noted, Tottie holds the family together, gives it its strength to determine its own future, and she will battle on their behalf to the bitter end. In terms of the dolls' relationship with the girls, Emily is on Marchpane's side, and Charlotte is on Tottie's and the family's side. The girls are no longer in harmony with each other, and that bodes ill for the dolls. And at the deeper level that I have identified, that of the very existential nature of doll-dom itself, Tottie wants to be brought to life by being incorporated into the children's play, Marchpane wants to be shut away in a glass case to be preserved, gazed at and admired, but never touched. One is life, the other a sort of living death.

A Musical Structure, a Digression:- The more I read the book the more I found myself thinking of it in musical terms: the turns of phrase, the uses of repetition, the very words themselves behaving like melodic motifs: thus I ended up likening Godden's repeated cues earlier in the book about Marchpane's eventual appearance to some sort of tolling discordant bell of warning, or I ended up thinking in terms of bold and promising harmonies vs dark and threatening ones, or talking of the girls' actions harmonising with the dolls' wishes. And when we get to the end, which is where I've got to now, all the themes, elements of characterisation, phrasings, uses of language, etc. from earlier in the novel are brought together in a counterpoint of increasing tension that can only be resolved by the burning of Birdie. And so to the next five chapters, which will take us to the climax.

The Next Five Chapters:- chapters 16 thru 20, but since this is only (only! you've got to be kidding!) a children's book, they tend to be shorter and very much to the point, a fact that also serves to keep the pace moving very effectively. But they are also and always chapters that need to be read at two levels: on the surface we have the narrative of the dolls, what they are thinking, wanting and doing, but always underneath are the, often unstated, particular and distinct roles of the two girls in determining the direction that this narrative takes. So, taking them chapter by chapter:-

Ch.16: Marchpane is brought into the house: the invader has arrived. Tottie (Charlotte) must fight her, and Godden makes much play of the fact that Tottie is made of good strong wood, returning to the fact on a number of occasions throughout the chapter by having her remind herself – and the reader – that good trees don't fall down in storms, that the bowsprits and masts of ships and rifle stocks are made of wood, and in the last sentence of the chapter having her reflect that nothing can be stronger than good plain wood. In opposition is Marchpane (Emily), seeking to restore the old divisions of class, declaring that the house is hers, that Mr. Plantaganet shall be the butler, that she shall have the best bedroom, currently Birdie's; and, echoing the French doll from earlier in the book, sneering at Tottie for being cheap and shoddy – hence Tottie's defences just outlined. Of Birdie we see little, though we do overhear her rustling away dusting paper chains in her bedroom. And the girls? Emily has brought Marchpane into the house. Emily takes her through to see Mr. Plantagenet, but when Mr. Plantagenet wants Totty to come in from the kitchen it is Charlotte who brings her through. The chapter concludes with another discussion about that nature of doll-dom with Marchpane declaring that she is not interested in the little girls who play with them. Mr. Plantaganet is appalled and, as did the wax

doll in the exhibition, tells her to her face that she is not a doll, she is a '*thing*' (Godden's emphasis)

Ch.17: The focus moves to the girls. Despite Charlotte's protests Emily responds to Marchpane's demands to have the best bedroom, cleans out all the paper chains etc., puts Birdie and Mr. Plantagenet to sleep in a cotton reel box in the attic, and having got them there, loses all interest in them, leaving Charlotte to make it nice for them. Birdie gets easily confused, and despite the warnings of the other dolls, keeps finding herself back in her old bedroom arguing with Marchpane about whose bedroom it is. The account works so well at character level that the reader forgets to ask who does the moving, and indeed we are not told, but must presume that it is Charlotte. Mr. Plantagenet meanwhile has come to hate Marchpane. Tottie tells him to wish that things would change for the better, but he knows that, though Charlotte may be on their side, Emily isn't, and it is Emily who does things. But, give it time, Tottie is certain that Emily will eventually discover that Marchpane is not a doll but a thing: ' "Certain," said Tottie in her most wooden voice.', and we are back to wood again.

Ch.18: But as Mr. Plantagenet has observed, Emily *is* on Marchpane's side, and despite Charlotte's heartfelt objections, decides that Plantaganets shall be the servants in the house. Mr. Plantagenet even loses his post office. Emily and Charlotte argue more and more bitterly and more and more intensely.

Ch.19: Marchpane (Emily) has had her own way. She has Birdie's bedroom. She has Birdie's bed and Birdie's bath. She uses Birdie's china, she even has Birdie's birdcage. And by the end of the chapter she has Birdie's child. So, down to details. Apple is not happy staying in the kitchen with the other dolls so, aided by Emily, as becomes clearer as the chapter unfolds, he takes to visiting Marchpane and ends up singing for her. The other dolls become worried but Apple is wilful, as indeed is Emily. Birdie, nothing daunted, in another of her moments of clarity when she is worried about Apple, and aided, we must presume, by Charlotte, goes into the sitting room and brings him back. She even goes so far as to accuse Marchpane of letting Apple do dangerous things. Marchpane smiles – the first of a number of such smiles that we hear about as the story builds to its climax – and tells Birdie that she will let him do dangerous things if she wants to. (You can almost hear Emily's voice saying it.) When Tottie tries to oppose Marchpane, telling her that Apple is *their* little boy, Marchpane responds with another threatening twice repeated *wait & see*. We do not have to wait and see for very long because within a sentence Emily decides that Apple shall be Marchpane's little boy. Charlotte, distressed beyond measure, argues back, but Emily holds all the cards. She is the eldest and as such the final decision is hers. Darner may bark his warning bark, which he does, but in the last sentence of the chapter: 'Marchpane only smiled her heavy China smile' – a second smile.

Ch. 20: Birdie, however, can never remember that Apple is now Marchpane's little boy, and aided, again we must presume, by Charlotte, keeps going into the sitting room to try to get him back. Then, the final catalyst: a musical box is brought into the children's lives, and Emily puts it into the sitting room for Marchpane and Apple to enjoy. The tinkling gets into Birdie's head, and she is also drawn to it. So, to return to my musical analogy, there follows what, as I have already suggested, I can only think of as a counterpoint of motifs with the musical box tinkling away – the word 'tinkle' in its various permutations occurring no less than 19 times, escalating in

intensity as it is repeated over and over again. Darner meanwhile, is barking furiously as he tries to warn everybody, the girls included, of what is about to happen, and his barking also increases in intensity, culminating in a long drawn out 'Prrrrrickkckckckck!', and a final P-R-I-C-K as Apple starts to catch fire, and the whole thing is punctuated at crucial points by Marchpane's cold china smile. All of which has been driven by the destructive force of Charlotte and Emily's increasing disharmony. And so to the climax. There is a smell of singeing, Darner barks, the musical box tinkles, Birdie bursts in and finds Apple leaning over the lit candle, Marchpane watches, smiling her china smile, the rest of the family hear Darner barking and realise that there is something wrong, Marchpane continues smiling, The perspective changes as Charlotte senses that something untoward is happening in the dolls' house, Emily is not interested, Charlotte smells the singeing, Darner barks yet more loudly, then, all in one movement, Apple starts to burn, the girls fling open the front, Tottie and Mr. Plantagenet tumble into the sitting room, the musical box tinkles in Birdie's head but, in her final moment of clarity, she registers that Apple is burning and, by flinging herself between Apple and the lamp and as a result burning right up herself, effectively sacrifices her own life in order to save that of her child. And there we are:

'"Tinkle. Tinkle. Tinkle," said the musical box.
Marchpane smiled.'

Is it the most chilling couple of sentences in the whole of children's literature? I think it is. And it's all so beautifully prepared and executed by Godden. It's powerful stuff.

Aftermath:- The girls try to blame each other about who put the dolls where, and to Emily's discomfiture it is Charlotte who suggests that Birdie gave her life for Apple. Both are agreed, however, that the only one who didn't move was Marchpane. And neither of them had liked the way she just sat there smiling while Birdie burned to death. So they decide to donate her to a museum, which they do, and there she resides in a glass case, safe from being played with ever again.

Footnote:- And a final little footnote, intriguing enough to be worth rescuing from the usual homes for footnotes at the bottoms of pages. Rumer Godden's older sister, Jon, was also a novelist and, in her biography of Godden, Anne Chisholm quotes a note that Rumer wrote to Jon in which she compares them to the Brontë sisters, with Jon as Emily and herself as Charlotte. Emily and Charlotte – make of that what you will!

Endnote from Francesca Lia Block

As might be guessed from the title, Francesca Lia Block's *House of Dolls*[6] provides us with an interesting little endnote to *The Dolls' House*. Published in 2010, it's a sort of echo text to the Godden, a homage if you will to the earlier book. Ostensibly very different, the similarities begin to emerge as you read it. As in the earlier book, the dolls cannot make things happen, they can only wish, and hope that the child playing with them will hear their wishes, and as in the earlier book, if the child is not happy then the dolls' lives will very probably be unhappy too. In this particular case Madison Blackberry, the child in question, is most decidedly unhappy. Her mother has no time to play with her or read to her. Rather she spends her time getting dressed up in her finery and swanning off to galas and fundraisers. And if there *is* any attention being paid to the children, it is her baby brother, Dallas George, who seems to get all of it. As for her father, he comes and goes, and is away most of the time, travelling the world, seemingly answerable to no-one, least of all to Madison Blackberry. Madison herself longs for a new dress but none seems to be forthcoming. So she is bored and sits and sulks.

And the dolls? They are not the nuclear family of *The Doll's House*. Instead there are two girl dolls, Wildflower and Rockstar, and their respective boyfriends, Guy and B. Friend, and a fairy doll, Miss Selene who, we gather reading between the lines – and the book requires a lot of reading between the lines – longs for a baby. Guy is a military doll, dressed in army fatigues, and B. Friend is a teddy bear. So far so dissimilar, but then the similarities start to appear:- here too the dolls' house turns out to be old, it had belonged to Madison's grandmother, and Wildflower came with it, so she too was old, and 'valuable', Block puts it in quotes, so we do indeed know where we are. Wildflower, it turns out, is the celluloid doll, but she is as far from Birdie in personality as it is possible to be. Indeed she is the strongest of the dolls, the Tottie of the household if you will, bringing her experience of the world to bear upon their present plight, and it is she who will do the wishing at the end of the book.

The story: It is clear that Madison Blackberry feels seriously rejected by all in the household, and she takes it out on the dolls. The girl dolls' dresses get torn and they end up without any clothes at all; and in a blink and you miss it detail, Madison overhears something on the television as a result of which she decides to send Guy off to war – a dusty box in a cupboard – and declares B. Friend MIA – in reality he has had his arm pulled off by Dallas George whereupon it is chewed up by the dog, and the rest of him is losing his stuffing as he now lies ignored in Dallas George's toy box. Their joint fates remind us of Mr. Plantagenet's chequered history for he, if you recall, had been abused by the two children who owned him, chewed by their dog, and had ended up in a dusty toy cupboard too.

Things only begin to get better when Madison's grandmother comes to visit and sees the devastation to the dolls' house that she had loved as a child, and had found a great comfort when *her* mother had been killed in the war. (By this time it will not have escaped the attentive reader's notice that war is the underlying theme of the whole book.) And Grandmother begins to repair the damage, starting by making new dresses for the dolls. Wildflower, understanding what the root of the problem is, wishes as hard as she can, not for something directly for the dolls

[6] On the paper jacket Barbara McClintock is credited only as the illustrator, but I presume that she is responsible for the whole design of the book, and her line drawings are such an integral part of the text that she really needs to be credited as co-author, not just as illustrator.

themselves, but that Grandmother would also make a new dress for Madison Blackberry, knowing that that will improve their lot too. And Grandmother does indeed make a new dress for Madison Blackberry, She then sits down with Madison and tells her all about how she had enjoyed the dolls' house when she was a child, and Madison, now comforted, retrieves Guy and B. Friend, and even finds a baby for Miss Selene. The war is over for the dolls. Then Madison's father returns home and declares that the war is over in the real world too, and Madison's mother stops gadding about and instead sits on the bed with her and reads a book to her that she had enjoyed as a child, and the book was called . . . *The Dolls' House*.

I rest my case.