

# **The Miniaturist Study Guide**

## **The Miniaturist by Jessie Burton**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Burton, Jessie. *The Miniaturist*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2015. First Paperback Edition.

*The Miniaturist* is narrated by a third-person narrator who has insight only into Nella's thoughts and feelings. The novel begins with a Prologue that takes place at the end of the novel's timeline. In the prologue, unnamed characters are attending a funeral.

In Part One, 18-year-old Nella Oortman arrives in Amsterdam. She has been wed to Johannes Brandt in her hometown of Assendelft, and has come to live with him as his wife. Johannes is a wealthy merchant and member of the Dutch East India Company, and Nella is overwhelmed by the splendor of his house. Upon arrival, Nella is greeted by Marin Brandt, Johannes's sister, and Cornelia and Otto, the home's servants. Marin shows Nella to her room and has Nella's pet parakeet, Peebo, sent to live in the kitchen. Marin, while not overtly hostile to Nella, has a cold and aloof attitude that makes Nella feel unwelcome in her new home. When Nella finally sees Johannes, at breakfast, he is not particularly forthcoming. Instead, he spends most of the conversation bickering with Marin about finances. Eventually, though, Johannes presents Nella with her wedding gift: a lavishly ornamented cabinet that contains an exact replica of the house.

One evening, Nella goes into Marin's room and finds a large collection of artifacts from around the world, as well as love notes from an unidentified sender. Marin gives Nella a book called Smit's List and through the directory of merchants, Nella is able to locate a miniaturist who can craft items for her cabinet and brings a letter with her requests to the miniaturist's workshop on the Kalverstraat, a business street. Also in this area is a bakery, where Cornelia's old friend Hanna works. When Nella receives her first delivery from the miniaturist, it contains a cryptic message, as well as items that Nella did not request, but that are identical to items in the house, signalling there is something strange about the miniaturist.

Nella attends a party with Johannes, and meets Frans and Agnes Meerman, old friends and current business associates of the Brandts. Johannes is currently working with them in order to sell a bulk of sugar that Agnes inherited. Upon returning home from the party, Nella attempts to consummate her marriage, and Johannes angrily rejects her. Despite this, Nella continues her pursuit of being the perfect wife. One day, she decides to visit him at his office, where she finds him conducting an affair with Jack Philips.

In Part Two, Marin tells Nella that she has known about Johannes's homosexuality for a long time, and that it is part of who he is. Nella slowly comes to accept this, though she is saddened she will not be a traditional wife. One day, Peebo escapes through an open window. In a private conversation with Nella, Cornelia reveals that Frans is likely the source of the love notes in Marin's room, as he has been in love with her for a long time. Many years ago, Cornelia says, Frans asked Johannes for Marin's hand in marriage, and Johannes denied him, creating the tension that exists between the families.



The miniaturist sends Nella a set of dolls representing the Brandt household, the Meerman household, and Jack. With her newfound knowledge of Johannes, Nella asserts her freedom and her role as the mistress of the household over Marin. Johannes heads to Venice, where he plans to try and sell the Meerman's sugar once and for all. One evening, Nella spies on Marin and finds her taking a bath, eating candied walnuts, and eventually crying while reading a love note.

During the time Johannes is in Venice, it is evident that the Amsterdam economy is starting to worsen. Nella sees Agnes at church, and Agnes says that Johannes has not taken any of her sugar with him on his trip. When Nella returns home, Jack is there and violently demands to know where Johannes is. Jack kills one of Johannes's dogs, Rezeki. Otto and Jack begin to physically fight, and the fight ends when Otto stabs Jack in the shoulder. The wound is not severe, though, and Jack is able to escape.

In Part Three, the group must deal with the aftermath of Jack's visit. When Nella goes to confront the miniaturist at her shop, another merchant informs Nella that the miniaturist's residence has been vacant for some time. When Johannes returns from Venice, he greets Nella warmly. When Marin confronts him about how much sugar he sold while abroad, an explosive fight ensues that ends with Marin angrily telling Johannes of Rezeki's death.

Soon, the sugar becomes more important than ever. Nella notices that the sugar loaf held by her Agnes miniature has blackened. Otto flees, concerned Jack may report their fight to the authorities. Frans arrives at the house to inform Nella and Marin that he has witnessed Johannes with another man, and will be reporting what he saw to the burgomasters. Despite these heightening stakes, Nella and Johannes continue to grow closer and reckon that though their marriage may not be romantic, it can still be fulfilling in the form of friendship.

Johannes is forced to flee, though, due to Frans's accusations. The St. George Militia comes to the house in search of him. Though Nella attempts to deter their search, a messenger arrives announcing his capture. Soon after, Nella discovers that Marin is pregnant with an unwanted child. In subsequent chapters, Marin reveals to Nella that she always frowned upon the idea of becoming a wife and mother, as she longed to preserve her individual freedom. This signals a shift in Nella's own thinking about separating what it means to be a woman and a wife.

In Part Four, Nella balances Marin's pregnancy with Johannes's legal predicament. She works with the bakers Hanna and Arnoud to sell some of the sugar. Despite Johannes's doubts, Nella hopes the profits will be enough to buy off Johannes's conviction. However, as Johannes's trial begins, it becomes clear that there is an overwhelming bias against him, and that Frans is working with Jack to testify against Johannes. One day, Marin gives birth to a baby girl and names her Thea. Marin is insistent that they do not call a midwife, and so Nella and Cornelia assist with the birth, though they have no experience.



Despite Johannes's convincing testaments, the court eventually rules against him and he is sentenced to death. Meanwhile, Nella finally enters the miniaturist's workshop to find it has been abandoned. There, she meets Lucas Windelbreke, a clockmaker and the miniaturist's father. Nella realizes how important the miniaturist has become to her over the past months, and how she has allowed Nella to become self-actualized. When Nella returns home, Cornelia informs her that Marin has died. Upon closer inspection of the child, they realize Thea is actually Otto's daughter, not Frans's as they previously thought.

Nella destroys her cabinet and uses its remnants as firewood. Nella discusses the terms of Marin's burial with pastor Pellicorne. Though he is initially hesitant to bury her in the church because of her affiliation with Johannes, Nella eventually convinces him. After a final meeting with Johannes at the Stadhuis prison, he is executed by drowning the next morning. When the execution is over, Nella sees Otto in the crowd.

In Part Five, Nella brings Otto back to the house, where he meets his daughter. Otto says he knew about Marin's pregnancy and returned in order to meet the newborn child. Though everyone is still reeling from Marin's recent death and Johannes's execution, the novel ends on a hopeful note. Nella looks out upon Amsterdam and feels a sense of control and purpose for her future.



# The Old Church, Amsterdam, Tuesday, January 14th, 1687, Part One: Mid-October 1686, The Hengracht canal, Amsterdam: "Outside In," "Cloak"

## Summary

The *Miniaturist* is a novel told in third-person present tense. It begins with a prologue "The Old Church, Amsterdam, Tuesday, January 14th, 1687." In the prologue, someone has died and a funeral is being held. Though the deceased "had no friends" (1), many have come to the church solely to observe. An unnamed "she" watches the burial from a hidden spot, and keeps her gaze fixed on an unnamed "girl." Once the funeral is over, the woman emerges from her hiding spot and places a "miniature house small enough to sit in the palm" (3) atop the burial site.

The novel then begins "Part One: Mid-October 1686, The Hengracht canal, Amsterdam" (5). This is several months before the prologue. The first chapter of Part One "Outside In," begins with 18-year-old Petronella "Nella" Elisabeth Oortman knocking on the door of her new husband's house. Nella reflects on the brief marriage ceremony she and her husband, Johannes Brandt, had a month earlier. Nella looks away for a moment, and when she returns her gaze to the door. It is opened slightly. Nella enters, removes her shoes, and is greeted by Marin Brandt, Johannes's sister. Marin seems 10 years older than Nella, and her appearance suggests an ascetic sensibility. Marin introduces Nella to Otto and Cornelia, the house servants. Otto is African, and Nella has never seen someone with dark skin before. Cornelia's personality seems sarcastic and unfriendly. She takes Nella's pet parakeet, Peebo, to live in the kitchen while Marin shows Nella to her new room. Nella is overwhelmed "by the sumptuousness of her new room" (12) with its heavy velvet and embroidery on every surface. Marin notes that she has chosen all of the paintings in the new room, which are still lifes of game birds, rabbits, and food. At the end of the chapter, Marin comments on the stench of Nella's lily perfume and leaves.

In "Cloak," it is now early in the morning and Nella has not yet slept. She thinks about the course of events leading to her marriage: her father was a beer maker who died two years ago and left the family in debt. Soon after, Nella's mother began preparing her for marriage. After seeing Nella play the lute, Johannes extended an offer of marriage to Nella. At the time, the plan had not seemed real, but now she is overwhelmed.

Nella's thoughts are interrupted by the sound of someone entering the house. She believes it to be Johannes, and goes downstairs to greet him, only to find Marin is already there. Nella observes a brief conversation between the two before Johannes retreats to his study. Nella watches as Marin picks up Johannes's cloak and inhales it



deeply. When Marin goes to her room, Nella knocks on the door of Johannes's study and they have a brief exchange. Johannes seems mentally preoccupied. Nella checks on Peebo before returning to her room and pondering what her future as a wife will hold.

## Analysis

The prologue is brief, mysterious, and mentions no names of the characters one will meet later in the novel. As it is set after the events of the first chapter, it sets a tone of dread. Someone, though the reader does not know, will die just a few months after the novel commences in Part One.

The prologue also establishes the deep link between Amsterdam, the Dutch East India Company (also known as the "VOC"), and the image of ships, the ocean and sailing. The church where the funeral is held compares "the church's painted roof" to "the tipped-up hull of a magnificent ship" (1). Later in the prologue, the unnamed woman thinks of the saying "Hard grind got us the glory, the saying goes--but sloth will slide us back into the sea. And these days, the rising waters feel so near" (3). These metaphor shows just how sacred the maritime economy is to the Dutch people.

In "Outside In," there is not yet a sense of gloom surrounding Amsterdam and its ties to the ocean. Nella observes clouds the "colors of saffron and apricot" which "echo the spoils of the glorious republic" (8). The colonialist trading power of the Dutch is mighty and praised. The fact that Nella has never seen an African man also indicates that the empire is in its early days, and that knowledge of the slave trade is not yet common information.

"Outside In" introduces the symbol of Peebo, Nella's parakeet. Peebo is a symbol of Nella's sole remaining link to childhood that follows her into her new role and life in Amsterdam. His confinement to the working kitchen parallels Nella's feelings of confinement, and the way she is shut out from knowing about those around her.

Another symbol introduced in "Outside In" are the paintings in Nella's room. The paintings, showing game animals and still lifes, showing trends in the arts of the time, but also represent a smothering stillness that seems to permeate Nella's new home. Everything is overstuffed and highly-embellished to a sickly degree.

In "Cloak" the reader learns more about the circumstances that lead to Nella's marriage: her father, two years deceased, left the family with debt that Nella's marriage to the wealthy Johannes will help mitigate. Nella reflects on the way her mother groomed her for marriage and planted the thought in Nella's mind that being a wife is the most she can aspire to. Nella feels something inherently wrong with this idea, but does not wish to upset her mother. However, there is evidence that suggests Nella still believes in some of the more naive ideals about marriage, such as that love is essential to a marriage.

At the end of the chapter, the author hints that the house itself is its own entity. "The house still seems awake despite the unforgiving hour" (22) Nella observes. Nella can





hear sounds, movement, and bits of conversation going on throughout the night, indicating that the house is full of secrets.

## Discussion Question 1

Does Nella seem genuinely excited about being a wife? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How would you describe Marin and Johannes's relationship based off of their first interaction in the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

What are Nella's concerns about Peebo?

## Vocabulary

misericord, burgomasters, nave, vellum, menagerie, grandee, pattens, tallow, ewer, nebulous



# "New Alphabet," "Trompe L'Oeil," "The Gift"

## Summary

In "New Alphabet," Cornelia wakes Nella, who does not realize she has fallen asleep. Cornelia helps Nella dress in a new ensemble purchased by Johannes. Though Nella's mother sent Johannes the measurements, the dress is far too big.

Nella arrives at breakfast, where Johannes and Marin are already eating. Otto is helping Johannes with some business documents. Johannes and Marin talk to each other, but do not acknowledge Nella. They openly discuss business, about which Marin has a strict and religiously-observant attitude. The conversation becomes tense as topics turn to sugar and slavery. Nella thinks "souls and purses [...] these who are obsessed with souls and purses" (28). Eventually, both Johannes and Marin leave the room. Nella hears Marin pressing Johannes for details on his whereabouts and encourages him to be responsible to his new wife. Johannes ignores her and goes out. Nella then observes Marin in "a pose of misery" (31).

In "Trompe L'Oeil," Nella looks to visit Peebo, only to find him in the "best kitchen" (32), which is a room filled with decorative china and a large mural on the ceiling. Otto is in the best kitchen too, polishing silverware. They discuss Johannes's business and wealth. Their conversation is cut off when Marin enters the room and demands that Nella leave him to his work.

The following chapter, "The Gift," Nella spends the following nights in anticipation of Johannes visiting her bed and consummating the marriage. He does not, and she hardly sees him. One day, Nella is about to play one of Johannes's lutes he has displayed in the best kitchen, but Marin appears and says they are for decoration only.

Several days later, Nella approaches Marin while she is working with Johannes's business ledger. She asks Marin "will it always be like this?" (38) in reference to Johannes's constant absence. Marin is vague in her response, and simply says Johannes must work and Nella must be a wife. When Nella points out Marin never married, Marin says, "No, [...] but I've always had everything I wanted" (39).

The next day, Johannes arrives home with a large cabinet "measuring nearly half Johannes's height" (41) as a wedding gift for Nella. It is exquisitely crafted with the finest materials. Johannes opens the curtains to reveal it contains an exact replica of every single room in the house. Marin is disgusted with the gift, and Nella is confused by it and feels it is a gift for a child. At the end of the chapter, Nella enters Marin's room.



## Analysis

The chapter “New Alphabet” introduces the symbol of Nella’s too-large dress. Though the dress was supposed to be fashioned to Nella’s exact measurements, it arrives much larger. This symbolizes the intimidation and smallness that Nella is feeling: she is dwarfed by the wealth and excess around her, as well as by the heady business dealings happening between Johannes and Marin.

Marin’s materially conservative approach is expanded upon in “New Alphabet.” Though Johannes is clearly very wealthy, Marin organizes simple meals of bread and fish. She calls the meal a “gesture of humility” (25). Meanwhile Johannes seems to find this approach amusing and in contradiction with his own more lavish tastes. Nella observes this dichotomy when she thinks, “souls and purses [...] these who are obsessed with souls and purses” (28). Essentially, Marin and Johannes are obsessed with religion and money--two things that seem in direct opposition to one another.

In “Trompe L’Oeil,” the reader sees Nella and Otto interact for the first time. Nella observes him closely and thinks “everything about him is so fresh, so unfamiliar” (33). He has a quiet, level-headed personality, and seems very aware of Johannes’s business dealings.

The extended metaphor of the sea continues in “Trompe L’Oeil,” as Otto uses the sea to describe the future of Johannes’s business: “Things will spill over,” he says, and then they will be forced to “sink or swim” (34). In “The Gift,” this metaphor is applied once again, and a distinctly Christian element incorporated. Ships in paintings are described as having “crucifix-like masts rising into the sky” (36) and the Bible tapestries on the wall feature “clever Noah and his sturdy ark” (37).

In both “Trompe L’Oeil,” and “The Gift,” Marin appears at random when Nella believes herself to be totally alone. “Are you following me?” (37) Nella asks her. Marin makes no reply, increasing her suspiciousness.

The evident tension between Johannes and Marin increases in “The Gift” when Johannes presents Nella with the cabinet replica of the house. Marin is displeased by the gift, and considers it too lavish and too expensive to be appropriate.

The cabinet itself is a key symbol introduced in “The Gift.” From its first appearance, there is already a sense of fear and dread surrounding the object. Johannes notes that the oak and elm used to construct it are also the woods “used for coffins” (42). Nella instantly recognizes the cabinet as “a monument to her powerlessness, her arrested womanhood” (45).

## Discussion Question 1

How do you think Marin feels about Nella? What leads you to believe this?



## Discussion Question 2

What are your initial impressions of the relationship between Marin and Johannes?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think Marin means when she tells Nella that though she never married, she always had "everything" she "ever wanted" (39)?

## Vocabulary

impudent, privation, mastication, lexicon, apogee, brazier



# "Trespases," "Smit's List," "On The Kalverstraat"

## Summary

In "Trespases," Nella enters Marin's room to find it is bursting with curiosities including feathers, skulls, and books. It smells strongly of spices, and the walls are covered with maps. Nella looks through Marin's books and finds a love note written in a handwriting that is not Marin's. It says "I love you. I love you. From back to front, I love you" (48). Suddenly, Marin appears and grabs Nella tightly. She demands to know whether Nella has looked into her books, which Nella denies. After being cast out of Marin's room, Nella takes Peebo's cage up to her room so she can keep him safe.

The next chapter, "Smit's List," begins with Peebo flying freely around Nella's room. Marin brings Nella a book called "Smit's List," which details all of the merchants in Amsterdam. She also shows Nella how to make purchases using promissory notes. Inside the book, Nella finds the name and address of a Miniaturist. She writes a letter, requesting the creation of a lute, a betrothal cup, and a box of marzipan. Then, she goes to the kitchen to find food. There, Cornelia and Otto are working and Cornelia makes a comment about the bruise Marin left on Nella's arm. She then explains to Nella that Marin wears "secret furs" (56) under her black clothes. When Nella says she is going into town, Cornelia offers to come with her.

In "On The Kalverstraat," Nella and Cornelia head into the market. Cornelia explains Otto's past: he is an orphan who was put on a Portuguese slave ship. Johannes bought him from the West India Company. Cornelia tries to explain why, though he is a "Dutch gentleman" (60) many do not see him that way. The two stop at a bakery where Cornelia's friend Hanna works. While Nella looks around the shop, she overhears Cornelia and Hanna whispering, and notices "a packet pass between the women" (62).

After they leave the bakery, they head to the address of the Miniaturist. The building is decorated with a plaque showing a gold sun and the phrase "Everything Man Sees he Takes for a Toy" (63). No one appears to be in the workshop, however, so Nella leaves her note for the miniaturist under the door. When Nella leaves the miniaturist, she cannot find Cornelia, but notices a woman with gold hair blatantly staring at her. She tries to follow the woman, but loses sight of her. Instead, she finds Cornelia in an alley in front of the orphanage where she was raised.

Back at the house, the cabinet has been placed in Nella's room. Nella's lily perfume bottle has been knocked over by the delivery men and has filled the room with its sickly smell.



## Analysis

Marin's room shows both the power and global reach of Johannes, while also revealing an irony in Marin's character. Nella observes "this room is not from Amsterdam, though it shows an Amsterdammer's drive for acquisition. This is the republic's reach, in four small walls" (47). Marin's collection is a testament to the expanding power of the VOC and the colonization that is taking place on their behalf. At the same time, Marin's treasures are ironic in the sense that Marin herself has never been on a voyage, nor has she seen the world the same way Johannes has. Instead, she simply receives and catalogues these treasures.

The mystery around Marin and her philosophies grows in "Smit's List" when Cornelia reveals that Marin wears "secret furs" of "sable and velvet, under every dress" (56). This directly contradicts Marin's supposed belief in piety and humility, as it is an indulgence in luxury. This hints that Marin wants those around her to view her in a certain way, but that she is hiding secrets within.

In this section, Nella slowly learns some of the secrets of those around her. She visits Marin's room and finds she possibly has a secret lover, or at least is in possession of love notes. She also finds out the history of both Otto and Cornelia. Nevertheless, Nella does not seem any closer to building trust and relationships with those around her.

When Nella is out at the market, she sees a woman staring at her with "calm, transfixing curiosity" (64). The woman disappears almost as soon as she came, but Nella cannot help but feel there is something significant about this woman, and thoughts of her continue after Nella has returned home.

The cabinet, as described at the end of "On The Kalverstraat," is "watchful" (66)--a description that expands upon its eerie, almost sentient presence.

## Discussion Question 1

How do you interpret Marin's trinket-filled room in juxtaposition to her conservative personality?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Nella bring Peebo to live in her room?

## Discussion Question 3

How do you interpret the quote "Everything Man Sees he Takes for a Toy" (63), which hangs above the miniaturist's workshop?

## Vocabulary

loamy, salacious, profligacy, promissory, draconian, haberdashers, winched



# "Delivery," "Barge," "Marriage Parties"

## Summary

In "Delivery," three days have passed and Nella is home alone, save for Otto in the garden. Someone knocks on the door, and Nella answers to find a tall, strapping man with a delivery for her. Suddenly, Johannes appears behind Nella at the door and demands to know who is calling. The delivery man introduces himself as Jack Philips, from Bermondsey. When Jack is dismissed, Johannes wants to know what Nella had delivered. He is pleased to learn it is items from the miniaturist, but shows no more interest before returning to his study.

Back in her room, Nella opens the package to find a paper that proclaims "Every woman is the architect of her own fortune" (70). Inside the paper are the items she ordered: the lute, marriage chalice, and marzipan are stunning and finely crafted. Additionally, the miniaturist has sent a set of chairs, a cradle, and a pair of dogs. The chairs are replicas of the ones in the sitting room, and the dogs are exact likenesses of Rhezi and Dhana, Johannes's hunting dogs. Nella is filled with paranoia that someone knew these things about her private life. She writes a letter to the miniaturist, saying she will no longer be requiring his services.

In "Barge," Johannes invites Nella to attend a feast thrown by the Silversmiths' Guild. During their barge ride to the party, Nella realizes it is the first time they have been alone together. They have a casual conversation about business, and about Johannes's dealings with Frans and Agnes Meerman.

In "Marriage Parties," they arrive at the feast. The party is extremely lavish, with an excess of food and alcohol. Johannes begins talking excessively and excitedly about his love of food and Nella cannot tell if he is being sincere or posturing. Johannes goes off to converse, and Agnes Meerman appears and introduces herself to Nella. Agnes has a sly and haughty personality and Nella feels Agnes is mocking her. Agnes's husband, Frans appears and joins the conversation. He is much more reserved than his wife. Johannes then joins the conversation, and briefly discusses his dealings with trading the Meerman's large amount of sugar abroad. Frans quickly exits the conversation and it seems he and Johannes are uncomfortable dealing with each other.

## Analysis

The items Nella has ordered from the miniaturist, as well as the items she did not order yet still received, are filled with symbolism. The marzipan symbolizes Nella's desire to return to the sweetness of her childhood. The lute symbolizes Nella's romanticization of her first meeting with Johannes, and all of the promise that moment held. The marriage chalice is "a memento of something that never actually occurred" (71). The cradle, Nella





feels, is intended to criticize the fact that she and Johannes have yet to consummate their marriage.

Most of Nella's thoughts about Johannes revolve around how to be a proper wife. She is keen to consummate the marriage and is hyper-aware of Johannes each time he is around. She thinks about how she wants to fall in love with him and create an idyllic marriage. She thinks "love has to come, otherwise I cannot live" (85).

The chapter "Marriage Parties" is heavy with the theme of excess. The description of the party is so lavish it is "dizzying" (82). Each individual food item is described in great, almost grotesque, detail. There is rarely a balance in the food described in this novel thus far. It is either too bland and pious, such as the food Marin eats, or the rotting excess of the food described in paintings or at this particular party. These contrasts create an emphasis on the lack of stability and normalcy in Nella's new life and in emphasizing that strangeness, contribute to the overall tone of uneasiness.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Nella and Johannes's reactions to the delivery man, Jack Philips.

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Johannes truly loves food as much as he professes in "Marriage Parties" or was there another reason for his discussion?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the chapter "Marriage Parties" was given that title?

## Vocabulary

creel, sedate, venal, jabots, proffering, doughty, marjoram, timbre, trestle



# "Study," "Steps," "Boom And Bloom"

## Summary

Johannes and Nella are on their way back home in "Study." Nella inquires about Johannes's wealth, and he describes to her that his money is untouchable and changeable like "moisture" (94). Just as Nella is about to tell Johannes of the miniaturist and their strange creations, she sees he is asleep. Back at the house, Nella is jealous of Johannes's unwavering affection for his dogs, and attempts to make hints that they should be together intimately. Johannes is oblivious and retreats to his study. Nella waits outside the door, and when she feels something brush against her skirt, she is scared and bangs on his door. When Johannes lets her in, Nella is surprised by the warmth and coziness of the study. She becomes very forward in her physical advances towards Johannes. They kiss, and Nella puts her hand down the front of Johannes's pants. She does not find what she expects, but "more of a curled worm" (99). Johannes becomes angry and demands Nella leave the room. She retreats to her bedroom and turns the paintings in her room to face the wall.

The next morning, in "Steps," Cornelia is in Nella's room fixing the paintings. When she leaves the room, she gives Nella a package that has come from the miniaturist. Inside, there is a piece of paper that says "I fight to emerge" (102), as well as an assortment of miniature household items. In addition, there is a "tiny golden key" that is "useless but ornate" (103).

Nella wants to go visit the miniaturist, but Marin brings everyone (except Johannes) to church. On their walk to the chapel, Nella notices the way that people look at Otto with expressions ranging from curiosity to disgust. One man, his face full of smallpox scars, lashes out at Otto and Cornelia defends him, calling the man "Hole-Face" (105). Nella notices the way people watch Marin for her beauty, too.

In "Boom And Bloom" the group is at church watching a man named Pellicorne preach. Nella quickly realizes that the mysterious blonde woman who stared at her on the Kalverstraat is in attendance. When Nella looks away, the woman disappears. The group runs into the Meermans and Marin invites the couple to dinner.

## Analysis

After the party, Nella is struck by Johannes's power and influence. The narrator says "it is not a man she has married, but a world" (94). This is reflected in the fact that, since her marriage, Nella has hardly spent any time with Johannes. Instead, she has spent her time around the people and things he surrounds himself with.

Nella's new role as a wife takes a turn in "Study" when she willingly offers herself to Johannes. She is aggressive, forceful even, when she attempts to seduce her husband. However, Nella does not wish to have sex with Johannes based out of romantic feelings



or even physical attraction to her husband, neither of which she has expressed thus far in the novel. Rather, Nella's desire to consummate the marriage stems from a belief that this is what a real "wife" does, and that having sex will lead to the romantic feelings she desires. Nella is determined to break the cycle of monotony and mystery that has plagued her since arriving in Amsterdam, even if it means being overly bold. She is, however, rejected by Johannes when she reaches for his penis, though it is unclear why he resists.

Nella turning the paintings in her room after being rebuffed by Johannes signals a turning point in her character. Though she initially wanted to hide the grotesque paintings upon arrival, she chose not to in an attempt to assimilate into her new surroundings. Now, she turns them as an act of resistance against the house and people she feels trapped among. The next morning, when Cornelia turns the paintings over, it symbolizes how Nella's efforts at breaking free of the cycles of her new life may be futile.

The larger theme of water is extended to Marin in this chapter when Nella observes, "Marin is like the figurehead on the bow of a ship, leaving waves of turning faces in her wake" (106). This implicates Marin in the representations of power, economy, and religion that water has been used to describe thus far in the novel. Indeed in this particular moment Nella is witnessing the awe that passersby react with upon seeing Marin, and this shows an innate force in her that draws others to her.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Johannes rejects Nella's romantic advances?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think the paintings Marin has placed in Nella's room represent?

## Discussion Question 3

Who do you think is the woman with the golden hair?

## Vocabulary

mewls, psalter, ostentatious, pinioned, diffidence, winnowing



# "The Wife," "Exchanges," "The Deserted Girl"

## Summary

In "The Wife," Cornelia is preparing for that night's dinner, which the Meermans will be attending. Nella asks her what was in the packet Hanna gave her at the bakery. Cornelia explains it was the last of her best sugar. Nella goes into town to visit the miniaturist. No one answers the door, though a face appears in the window. Nella is certain it is the woman who was watching her on the street and in church. The man Cornelia dubbed "Hole-Face" appears and explains to Nella that the woman never answers to callers. Nella presses him for information, but he knows little, save for that she has been living there for "three or four months" (119).

Back at the house, everyone is preparing for the Meermans's arrival. All are nervous as Johannes has not yet returned home and their arrival is less than an hour away. Eventually, they arrive before Johannes. The group makes small talk, and Nella is forced to explain the cabinet she received from Johannes as a wedding gift. Agnes explains to Nella that her husband Frans used to be very close to Johannes, and that they have known each other since they were 22. Finally, Johannes returns home.

In "Exchanges," the group dines together. After the rich meal, Agnes produces a sugar loaf and everyone tries a bite, including Marin, who typically abstains from sweets. The conversation becomes strained and awkward, so Marin requests that Nella play the lute. Nella performs and genuinely enjoys herself. The Meermans leave not long after her performance, and everyone can hear Agnes complaining loudly about the gathering, commenting on both Nella's cabinet and Marin eating the sugar.

The next day, in "The Deserted Girl," Nella wakes up, dresses herself, and decides to visit Johannes at work. When she explains her plan to Cornelia, Cornelia attempts to discourage Nella from her visit. Nella lashes out at her and chooses to go anyway. Nella heads into town and finds the VOC office where he works. She knocks on his door, and when no one answers, she enters. Inside, she finds Jack Philips, the delivery man from the miniaturist, performing oral sex on Johannes. Nella is so shocked that she almost faints. Johannes and Jack see her and Johannes is horrified. Cornelia, who has followed Nella to the VOC, drags her back to the house.

## Analysis

This section reveals that sugar is a coveted commodity in Amsterdam and that Johannes's dealings with the Meermans and their sugar is no small matter. Nella is expecting Cornelia to reveal some larger secret when she asks what was in the packet



exchanged between Hanna and herself. Instead, it is the last of her sugar. This heightens the stakes of the exchange between the Brandts and the Meermans.

The level of detail with which Nella observes Agnes ties into her desire to be a proper wife. She views Agnes and Frans as an ideal couple and thus idealizes the role Agnes plays. Though not overtly, Nella picks up on Agnes's words and choices and replicates them in her own small way. It is why, in the previous section, she asks Johannes about Otto's origins. It is also why, in this section, Nella chooses to visit Johannes at the VOC. It is unclear whether Agnes is actively attempting to influence Nella in order to manipulate her, or if Nella is simply acting on Agnes's comments out of a subconscious desire to be a wife like her.

Nella's wifely desires continue in "The Deserted Girl." Nella has completely genuine intentions when she decides to visit Johannes at the VOC. In addition to being inspired by Agnes, who mentions at dinner that she occasionally drops in on Frans at work, Nella feels that this is a wifely task that will bring her and her husband closer together. Before she heads out, there is foreshadowing that Nella should stay away from Johannes's office. Cornelia rather openly protests Nella's venture, and aggressively insists she come along in a manner that suggests she is panicked at the thought of Nella learning the truth of Johannes's sexuality. However, Nella rebuffs Cornelia, not understanding her concern, and heads out, only to find--to her great surprise--her husband with another man.

Nella continually sees the woman with golden hair, whom she has come to assume is the miniaturist. Nella is consumed by the idea of this woman, and adamant on speaking to her. However, the woman remains completely elusive--appearing only at random times, and conveniently disappearing before Nella can speak with her.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Agnes is so jealous of Nella's cabinet?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Nella enjoy playing the lute at the dinner?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the revelation of Johannes's homosexuality explain previous events in the novel?

## Vocabulary

carapace, strumpet



## Part Two: November 1686: "Inside Out," "Decisions," "Tales"

### Summary

"Part Two: November 1686" begins with "Inside Out." In this chapter, Nella wakes up to find Marin sitting on the edge of her bed. It has been seven days since Nella saw Johannes with Jack Philips. Nella has spent every day since in her room, with Marin coming to visit her each morning. On this morning, Nella admits to Marin what she has seen and claims Johannes is "a sodomite" (145). Marin's reaction is unsurprised and Nella realizes, with anger, that Marin has known of her brother's sexuality the whole time. Nella accuses Marin of being a conspirator in her unhappiness. Marin, distressed, says that Nella should be grateful for her situation. Nella realizes that Marin is worried Nella will tell the burgomasters of Johannes's homosexuality. Still, Nella is devastated she will never be a "proper woman" (149), and accuses Marin of the same. Marin warns Nella against making hasty decisions, and tells her that the punishment for homosexuality is drowning.

In "Decisions," Nella takes Peebo in his cage into the hallway. She hears Marin and Johannes talking downstairs: Marin is attempting to convince Johannes to stay away from Jack. Their conversation reveals the affair is long-standing. Finally, Nella cannot bear to hear anymore, brings Peebo downstairs, then lets him out of his cage into the hallway. Nella thinks she will never have a child, and is sad at the prospect of her future. Yet, she is now even more determined to learn about the miniaturist and "discover the truth behind the work" (155).

In "Tales," Nella and Cornelia talk in the kitchen. Nella asks her about the love note she found in Cornelia's room and asks if Frans Meerman wrote it. Cornelia is hesitant at first, but eventually tells Nella the history of that relationship. Frans and Johannes worked together when they were young, and Frans knew Marin from when she was a girl. Eventually, he asked Johannes for Marin's hand in marriage, and Johannes refused. By the time Marin found out about Frans's intentions, he had married her friend Agnes. Now, Frans sends Marin a gift every year. After the conversation, Nella returns upstairs looking for Peebo. She cannot find him, but finds a hall window left wide open.

### Analysis

Nella is stricken by the sight of Johannes and Jack Philips, and feels it is the death knell of her potential happiness as a wife in Amsterdam. The concept of being a wife was the central focus of Nella's life and future, now she feels "It is as if her entire life has come at once, and she is wading through a sea of suppositions with no way of bailing" (143). This metaphor, which also makes use of the overarching theme of and allusions to water in the novel, demonstrates Nella's state of being overwhelmed and exhausted.



Just how important Nella's self-concept of "wife" was is revealed when she accuses Marin of ruining her chances of being a "proper woman" (149). According to Nella, a "proper woman marries--she has children" (149). She views Marin as not being a "proper woman," thus showing how not only Nella's self-concept revolves around marriage and children, but also her concept of being a woman in general. Part of the reason Nella has been viewing Marin as so "other" is due to her status as an individual, and not part of a family unit.

Despite her independence, Marin still sees herself as a proper woman, and seems aware of the often painful and supportive roles women are often forced to take, no matter their status as a mother or wife. She says, "We can do nothing, Petronella--we women. All we can do if we're lucky is stitch up the mistakes that other people make" (148). There is a solemn sense to this sentiment, as though Marin feels burdened by taking care of someone else, most likely Johannes. This would explain her prudence and solemnity in contrast to his excess. She displays this trait in herself almost immediately when she asks Nella to refrain from speaking of Johannes's homosexuality to any kind of legal authority. "Words are water in this city, Nella," she says. "One drop of rumor could drown us" (148). She is looking out for Johannes's best interest.

Homosexuality, now an established piece of Johannes's character, becomes tied to the theme of water when Marin informs Nella that homosexuality is a crime, the punishment for which is drowning. Drowning has been alluded to previously in the novel, in terms of wealth and the shifting of the nebulous economy. All of these elements are tied to directly to Johannes and the world of trade he inhibits.

Throughout the novel, Peebo has gradually been gaining more freedoms. He started off in the working kitchen, and gradually increased his living conditions until he was flying free in Nella's room. Now, in this section, Nella releases him to roam free in the house. He enjoys the exhilarating moment, but ultimately escapes from the house very quickly. This journey makes Peebo a symbol for Nella's gradual transition through Part One. With time and investigation, Nella has been learning the secrets of the house and its population. Learning of Johannes's affair momentarily liberated her, and made her capable of fully claiming her independence within the household. Peebo escaping signals that there are limits to the knowledge and freedom Nella might hope to have. It potentially foreshadows a situation in which Nella knows too much and becomes too entwined in the world of Amsterdam.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Peebo's escape represent for Nella?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might Johannes have married Nella, even though he is not heterosexual?



## Discussion Question 3

What evidence of Marin and Frans's relationship has there been in the novel thus far?

## Vocabulary

sodomite





# "Eight Dolls," "Written In Water," "The Boy On The Ice"

## Summary

In "Eight Dolls," Johannes sends Nella flowers in condolence for her loss of Peebo. She puts some of the flowers in her hair and debates whether or not she is truly happy that Johannes will never love her as man and wife. Cornelia brings Nella a new package from the miniaturist, which Nella opens to find contains dolls in the likenesses of herself, Marin, Johannes, Cornelia, Otto, Frans and Agnes Meerman, and Jack Philips. There is also a small version of Peebo. The note in the hand of Nella's likeness says "Things Can Change" (167). Nella looks out her window and sees the woman with golden hair crossing the bridge. When she calls out to her, the woman disappears in the crowd.

The following chapter, "Written In Water," begins with Nella heading to the miniaturist, miniature Peebo in her pocket. She stops to eavesdrop on a conversation between Marin and Johannes: Marin is attempting to convince Johannes to go to Venice to sell the Meerman's sugar. Nella barges in on the conversation and Johannes must admit to her he is soon leaving for Venice. Later, he boards the VOC barge, he and Nella exchange goodbyes. Johannes seems genuinely emotional saying goodbye to Nella. Down the canal, the group spots Jack watching Johannes's departure.

That night, Nella intends to go to the miniaturist, but is distracted by the scent of lavender and steam coming from Marin's room. Nella peers through the keyhole to see Marin is taking a bath. She is surprised by Marin's womanly figure and secret indulgence in candied walnuts. When Marin finishes the bath, she asks herself "What have you done?" (176), shreds a love note, and weeps.

In "The Boy On The Ice," winter is growing colder, causing dead bodies and old furniture to rise up in the canal. Nella notices that Marin seems distracted. Nella goes shopping for Christmas presents with Cornelia. At the bakery, they learned that gingerbread men and dolls have been banned by the Catholic church for idolatry.

One day, when Johannes has been away for three weeks, Nella enters her room to find Marin rummaging through the cabinet. Marin is disgusted when she finds the doll resembling Jack, which she proceeds to throw out the window, where it lands on the frozen canal. The next morning, Nella wakes to find that the doll has been taken from the canal and set against the doorpost.

## Analysis

The dolls the miniaturist sends Nella represent the manipulation and control that dominates the relationships between the individuals the dolls represent. Each of the individuals has some sort of influence or leverage on another. At the same time, the



dolls, combined with the note saying “Things Can Change” (167) represent a shift in Nella’s powerlessness. With these dolls in Nella’s hands, she symbolically realizes a degree of her own influence and power.

Part of Nella’s newfound power emerges in her deepening relationship with Johannes. Johannes, in the face of pressure from Marin and the Meermans’, seems to be taking solace in Nella, where he previously ignored her. He sends Nella flowers upon finding out about Peebo’s escape: a genuinely romantic gesture. When he departs for Venice, he and Nella share a tender, private moment. Nella eases into her new role as a companion for Johannes, and even wonders what kind of life they could have together. This is a level-headed departure from her earlier revelation about his sexuality. Here, she seems to be almost accepting of homosexuality--something she was taught was evil since birth.

In “Written In Water,” Nella witnesses Marin’s private moment taking a bath and indulging in candied walnuts. This is shocking to Nella, as Marin very explicitly refuses sweets and lives a very non-indulgent lifestyle, counter to the fashion of Amsterdam. Even her body seems indulgent in its ampleness and womanliness, which is a reality hidden by the neat black clothing Marin wears. Her emotional outburst concerning the love letter is yet another antithesis to her public persona. Here, the duplicity of Marin’s character becomes clearer. Her public displays of conservatism are underwritten by these private displays of indulgence.

In “The Boy On The Ice,” the freezing of the canal causes debris and dead bodies to rise up to the water’s surface. This serves as a metaphor for the coming winter: soon, the Brandt’s will no longer be able to hide whatever secrets they are harboring. Tying in with this is the doll of Jack and its subsequent retrieval from the canal. Jack’s affair with Johannes is one of the Brandt’s deepest secrets. Even though Marin throws the doll of Jack out the window, he is returned unharmed. This is a metaphor for the way Jack haunts the Brandt’s, and also the difficulty they will face in keeping him silent about his affair with Johannes.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do you think the miniaturist included each of the specific dolls in their gift to Nella?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How has Nella’s relationship with Johannes changed from the beginning of the novel?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How do you think the doll of Jack Philips was retrieved from the canal?

## Vocabulary

N/A



# "The Rebel," "The Fox Is Feverish," "Cracks"

## Summary

In "The Rebel," Nella retrieves the doll from outside. At breakfast, Marin praises the burgomaster's decision to ban dolls. At breakfast, Nella complains about the cold, and Otto notes that the "wood supplies have thinned" (183). After breakfast, Nella goes to the kitchen with Otto and Cornelia and they discuss the upcoming holidays. Cornelia says that on Epiphany, Johannes allows Otto and Cornelia to dress in "lords" (184) clothes and feast with them. Marin comes downstairs with a letter from Nella's mother, asking Nella and Johannes to come home for the holidays. Nella sees that Marin actually wants her to stay, and so Nella denies her mother's letter.

The next chapter, "The Fox Is Feverish," begins with Nella writing to the miniaturist. In her letter, she acknowledges the miniaturist's awareness that Peebo has flown away. She also condemns her "delivery boy" (187) Jack for the damage he has caused her. Nella requests a verkspeel board game, and insists that they meet someday. After signing her letter, Nella looks out the window and sees Otto hurrying across the square. Without putting on her coat, Nella follows him. Otto enters the church, and Nella sits in the back, watching him pray furiously. Nella is interrupted by Agnes Meerman, who looks "thinner" (191) than usual. When Nella informs her that Johannes is travelling, Agnes is angry. She says that none of the sugar has been taken from the warehouse, meaning Johannes has not actually gone to Venice to sell it. Nella escapes Agnes's fury, but comes home to find the front door agape, and an angry Jack standing in the foyer.

In "Cracks," Jack demands to know where Johannes is. When Nella says he is in Venice, Jack asserts that he is there for pleasure, not business. Marin appears. Jack produces a knife and slices through a painting. Jack hurls insults at Marin, who remains unfazed, even in the presence of the knife. Suddenly, Jack kisses Marin on the mouth. Mid-kiss, Otto storms in and demands that Jack leave. They tussle, and in the course of the fight, Jack accidentally stabs Rezeki. They continue to fight, and Jack gets stabbed in the collarbone with the knife. Jack flees after removing the knife from himself.

## Analysis

The section begins with Nella recognizing the duplicity evident in Marin's character. She thinks, "Marin lives in two worlds. Is her deathless, public propriety really a fear of God or a fear of herself? What lies beating in that carefully protected heart?" (183). Earlier in the novel, Marin appeared quite black and white to Nella: someone who was strict, silent, and organized. As the novel progresses, Nella is recognizing the ways in which Marin is a complicated human being, undefined by how she chooses to present herself.



This complexity evident in Marin reveals itself further when Nella realizes that Marin wishes her to stay for Christmas. Though Marin is unwilling to say this explicitly, the fact that Nella can sense it is enough and hints at the emerging relationship between the two women. This relationship has quietly evolved throughout the text, though it has maintained the surface layer of the initial tension between the two. While Nella was doing her best to create a deep relationship with Johannes, she has been all the while growing closer to Marin.

This section continues to subtly hint at the ways that Amsterdam's wealth is merely a show, and the reality is that the economy is floundering. When Nella complains about the cold, Otto notes that the wood supplies have thinned, indicating that the Brandt family's current financial situation is causing them to make setbacks on particular luxury items. However, the section indicates it is not just the Brandt's who are facing difficulties, but other wealthy members of society. When Nella sees Agnes at the church, she cannot help but notice how Agnes's face has thinned severely. Agnes, who earlier in the novel luxuriated in decadence and all things fashionable, now appearing thin shows how others are also living beyond their means in order to maintain fashionable appearances. Her thinness also shows how imperative it is that Johannes sell the Meerman's sugar. They are clearly facing financial difficulty, and will be more desperate than ever for Johannes to deliver their portion of the profit.

The sugar, though, it seems Johannes is not eager to sell. Agnes informs Nella that none of her sugar has been touched, meaning Johannes has not brought any with him to Venice. Jack points out that Venice has a reputation for being a place of homosexual indulgence. Though Johannes's intentions are not truly known at this point, signs indicate he used his trip to Venice as an opportunity to escape from the pressures of the Meermans, Marin, and Jack. His genuine sorrow at leaving Nella behind indicate that perhaps she was the only person he was not eager to leave behind, and thus caused him to recognize the potential benefits of his new marriage.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Nella chooses to stay with Marin for Christmas?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might Otto have fled to the church to pray?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Jack is so angry about Johannes's trip to Venice?

## Vocabulary

privations, effigies, salubrious, mesmeric



## Part Three: December 1686: "Stains," "Sweet Weapons," "The Empty Space"

### Summary

"Part Three, December 1686" begins with the chapter "Stains," in which the members of the household reckon with the aftermath of Jack's visit. Nella puts Rezeki's body in an empty grain sack. She wonders whether the reappearance of Jack's doll was an omen. Indeed, Nella thinks Jack's appearance was an omen itself of worse things to come. Cornelia is rattled by the dog's death, and Otto fears that Jack will have him reported to the burgomasters.

After they have finished the cleaning, Nella returns to her room, where she finds a packet from the miniaturist. Inside, there is the verkeerspel board she ordered, and a note that says "Nella: the turnip cannot thrive in the tulip's patch of soil" (207). Nella realizes she never actually delivered her letter to the miniaturist, and meditates on the note. Then, Nella goes to her cabinet and examines her dolls. She sticks the doll of Jack with one of the miniature fish knives. Examining Rezeki's miniature, she notices a small red cross on the dog's head. She is unsure whether or not it has been there the whole time and she has just failed to notice it. Nella writes a new letter to the miniaturist, asking her for guidance. The next morning, as Nella is preparing to go out to deliver the letter, she hears sounds coming from the cellar, where Rezeki's body has been stored. Inside, she finds Marin cleaning blood from rags. Marin demands her to get out.

In "Sweet Weapons" Nella arrives on the Kalverstraat. Outside the miniaturist's workshop, she calls for the woman. Behind her, the wool merchant comes out of his shop and tells Nella to stop yelling. Nella apologizes, but asks if he knows the whereabouts of the miniaturist. The wool merchant says her residence has been empty for "over a week" (213) but that a package was left for her. Inside the package is an assortment of miniature desserts and a note that says "Don't let sweet weapons stray" (215).

The next chapter, "The Empty Space," with Cornelia greeting Nella at the door with news that Johannes has returned from Venice. Cornelia tells Nella she should be responsible for telling Johannes of Rezeki's death, which she dreads doing. Nella goes to Johannes in his study, and she is surprised to see how genuinely happy how Johannes is to see her. He embraces her warmly, and Nella feels she cannot bring herself to tell him of Rezeki's death. Instead, she tells him of her encounter with Agnes at the church. Otto comes into the room to make a fire. Marin sneaks in and asks Johannes how much sugar he sold in Venice, to which he replies business was slow. Their jabs at each other turn into a larger fight about the nature of their relationship. Marin accuses Johannes of restricting her life and her happiness, to which Johannes says everyone should be grateful to him. Johannes says Marin forced him to marry Nella, despite his wishes. Marin says they have much less money than he is willing to



admit. Finally, Marin explodes and announces that Jack has killed Rezeki. Johannes is devastated and Nella comforts him.

## Analysis

Though Jack's rampage at the Brandt house was a horrible enough occasion in itself, the language around it also seems to indicate it is but an omen of even worse things to come. The narrator notes, "So near to Christmas, the killing of a master's beloved dog feels like the opening act of some macabre carnival" (204).

Nella's latest package from the miniaturist contains a confusing message with references to both turnips and tulips: "Turnips and tulips are entirely different phenomena of nature--one practical and simple in its structure, the other decorative and engineered by man" (207). Nella interprets this message to mean she is either one or the other of these plants.

Marin has been consistently critical of Johannes throughout the novel, but their large fight in this section hints at what the larger source of their resentment might be. "We're nothing more than prisoners of your desire" (219) Marin accuses. This indicates she feels the members of the household simply exist to please Johannes. Marin also acknowledges the dwindling status of the Brandt's wealth, as has been hinted at in previous chapters.

In this section, the relationship between Nella and Johannes reveals how it is deepening. After being away in Venice, Johannes appears genuinely pleased to see Nella. Nella does not expect this, but enjoys his kindness. This makes it all the more difficult for her to tell him the news of Rezeki's death, showing that she cares for his feelings and is taking on a more nurturing, wifely role without even realizing it. In the fight that occurs at the end of "The Empty Space," Nella and Marin's roles seemingly reverse in terms of the one who is defending and caring for Johannes's emotions. Marin lashes out at him while Nella consoles him. This section marks a turning moment in the theme of "wifedom" as well as in the relationships of these two women with Johannes. When Marin explodes and tells Johannes that Rezeki has been killed, she is also disregarding Johannes's feelings, and making a statement that she is no longer the caretaker of his emotional well being, leaving Nella up to the task.

In this section, the miniaturist seems to have developed from simply being a reflection of Nella's life into a prophecy of her life. Nella cannot make a determination of whether the mark on Rezeki's miniature has been there the whole time, indicating there may be supernatural forces at work.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think the mark on Rezeki's miniature was there from the start, or could it have somehow appeared suddenly?





## Discussion Question 2

How do you interpret the miniaturist's note reading "Don't let sweet weapons stray" (215)?

## Discussion Question 3

What details from Marin and Johannes's past are revealed during the course of their fight?

## Vocabulary

presage, maiolica, scourge



# "The Witness," "Souls And Purses"

## Summary

In "The Witness," the house passes two days in silence. Cornelia organizes charity boxes for the orphanage, and the cakes and pies are smaller and fewer. Johannes goes out on both nights, though no one knows where and does not want to ask. Nella examines her figure of Agnes, and notices that the tip of the miniature sugar loaf she holds has blackened. In a panic, Nella accidentally snaps the doll's hand off. Nella debates how the spores came to be. Just as the mark on the Rezeki figure's head, she is unsure if they were a detail she previously missed, or an entirely new development. Nella looks through Smit's List and reexamines the miniaturist's listing. She notices it mentions a clockmaker that the miniaturist apprenticed with, and writes a letter to him, begging for information on his former apprentice.

Someone knocks on her door, and Nella is surprised to see it is Johannes. Nella confronts him about him going to see Jack the past few nights. They reckon with the state of their marriage: Johannes admits Nella is bolder and more powerful than he expected. She gives him the miniature of Rezeki and he is deeply touched.

The next morning, Nella is awoken by Cornelia much earlier than usual. Cornelia says that Otto has disappeared.

In "Souls And Purses," Johannes heads out to search for Otto. After he leaves, Nella, Marin, and Cornelia converse in the salon. Nella notices Marin's particularly thick clothing and labored movements. She is eating candied walnuts in plain view of Nella and Cornelia. Nella confronts Marin about knowing something of Otto's disappearance. Marin admits that she "suggested" (233) to Otto that he leave for his own safety, in case Jack chooses to report him to the burgomasters.

Days pass, and Johannes continues to search for Otto. Meanwhile, Nella becomes concerned about the state of the sugar. On the day she goes to ask Marin about the sugar, Marin is eating candied walnuts in the open. Before she can propose the question of the sugar to Marin, Marin gets sick.

One day, a knock comes on the door and Nella answers to find it is Frans. Frans is searching for Johannes with questions about the sugar. He went to the warehouse to see if any had been sold and saw Johannes lied about his trip to Venice. Then, after coming from the warehouse, he witness Johannes with another man. Frans says he is going to take this information to the burgomasters.

## Analysis

The subtle hints of the Brandt's decreasing wealth appear in "The Witness" when it is noted that there are fewer cakes and pies being sent to charity that year. These hints



are both indicative of the Brandt's financial situation, as well as the shrinking economy of Amsterdam as a whole. In conjunction with this, Nella notices that the tip of the sugar loaf held by her doll of Agnes has blackened. As with the mark on Rezeki's head, Nella cannot determine whether these details are new or simply things she had not previously noticed. Nevertheless, they incite a sense of urgency and paranoia in Nella. Suddenly, Nella realizes the vital nature of Johannes selling the Meerman's sugar, something that others around her do not seem to deem as imperative to their survival.

Later in the same chapter, Nella and Johannes discuss the reality of their marriage. Nella is no longer willing to hide from the truth of her husband's sexual orientation, and he acknowledges that Nella was likely expecting a very different type of life for herself. Though the conversation essentially terminates any hope Nella may have had for establishing herself as a traditional wife figure, it does open a new kind of door for her: one of independence and equality within a platonic relationship.

In "Souls And Purses," Marin's pregnancy is foreshadowed by her labored movements, thick clothing, and open consumption of sweets. Though Nella presumes the difficulty moving is due to the thick clothes she is wearing to keep warm, but it will soon become evident that Marin's pregnancy is so overwhelming at this point that she is struggling to keep it hidden. This is more evident in the clue of her eating candied walnuts openly--something that the Marin of earlier chapters would have frowned upon. Though Nella makes note of this, she does not have the time to question Marin, as her mind is too consumed with the sale of sugar.

The sale of the Meerman's sugar becomes even more imperative when Frans reveals that he has witnessed Johannes's homosexuality. This raises the stakes of the sugar sale from being simply monetary to one that literally has consequences for Johannes's life.

## Discussion Question 1

Compare Johannes's and Marin's reaction to the miniatures.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Otto runs away?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Frans told Nella and Marin that he witnessed Johannes with another man?

## Vocabulary

susurrations



# "Escape," "Horseshoe," "Hidden Bodies," "No Anchor"

## Summary

In "Escape," the women come to a consensus that Frans will have Johannes arrested, and that Johannes needs to flee the city. That night, while examining her cabinet, she hears Johannes enter the house. Nella rushes to greet him, and alerts him to the fact that he must leave as soon as possible. She thanks him for all he has done, but tries to hurry him away. Johannes, who seems tired, laments the laws that have prevented him from loving another man. Johannes gives Nella a list of people who may be interested in purchasing his sugar. That night, Nella is the only one to see him off. They wish each other well, and Nella thinks she will never see Johannes again.

In "Horseshoe," Nella wakes from where she has spent the night in Johannes's study to the sound of Cornelia calling for her. Cornelia says that the St. George Militia has arrived at the door. Marin says Nella should be the one to answer the door. Indeed, it is the militia searching for Johannes. Nella tells them Johannes is traveling, but they do not believe her and wish to search the house. One of the militia members says Jack reported Johannes's sodomy, meaning Jack conspired with the Meermans. Nella searches for a vulnerable-looking man in the militia and attempts to win sympathy, but fails. A messenger boy arrives, saying that Johannes has been caught on his ship. Then men, satisfied with Johannes's capture, leave. Marin seems to accept her brother's fate, while Nella worries over how they will help him out of his current predicament.

In "Hidden Bodies," Nella is contemplating her cabinet when she smells something strange coming from Marin's room. Nella lets herself in, and finds her many objects and curiosities are broken and littering the floor. Marin herself is in bed, holding a cup filled with a pungent green mixture. Nella rushes to her side and takes the cup from her hand. She realizes all of the suspicious clues surrounding Marin point to the fact that she is pregnant, and the green mixture she was about to drink would have killed the baby and possibly her. Nella confronts her and says she can no longer keep this a secret from Cornelia. Marin has been using pig's blood and Rezeki's blood to give Cornelia the appearance of her menstrual cycle. She also admits that Frans is the father and that she is seven months along.

In "No Anchor," Nella has just told Cornelia about Marin's pregnancy. Cornelia, an orphan, is thrilled at the prospect of the child, but Nella does not know what Marin will choose to do. Cornelia looks at Nella's cabinet and notices the doll of Marin. She picks it up, and notices something under the doll's dress. They lift up the dress to find a walnut forming a pregnant stomach. Cornelia is disgusted and thinks Nella is spreading the family's secrets. Nella tries to explain that the miniaturist is "a prophetess" (265). They argue over the miniaturist, before eventually coming to an agreement that for the sake of Marin, they must keep the details of the miniaturist between them.



## Analysis

This section deepens the relationship between Johannes and Nella. Something about this newfound friendship makes Nella sad, though. She views it as “camaraderie come too late” (244). Without realizing it, Nella takes on the wifely role of defending and caring for Johannes when all others have seemingly abandoned him. Even in his absence, Nella does her best to honor him by sleeping in his study, and defending him against the accusations of the Militia. Perhaps it is fitting for the pattern of Nella’s relationship that it finally comes together only under unfortunate circumstances.

The St. George Militia helps Nella understand the very real danger Johannes is in. The narrator explains that sodomy, “after greed and flood,” “is the worst word in the city’s lexicon” (250). As noted throughout the novel, the concept of “flooding” represents not only the city’s reliance on the canal system, but also acts as a metaphor for the regulation of Amsterdam’s wealth. To equate sodomy with something as vital to the city as its finances foreshadows that this is a crime that will be judged swiftly and harshly. This list of words is also ironic in the sense that greed and flooding/water are integral to the current state of Amsterdam, which is built on a culture of excess. In that vein, sodomy should also be a normal part of Amsterdam’s culture, and yet here it is treated as an immense grievance.

The revelation of Marin’s pregnancy explains many of her behaviors throughout the novel thus far. In addition to providing an explanation for her labored movements and sudden fondness of sugar, Marin’s pregnancy also explains her distracted and unfocused attitude that is unlike her usual sharpness. Clearly, though, the pregnancy is unwanted or else Marin would not attempt to terminate it with a homemade remedy. Nella is excited about the possibility of a child and seemingly encouraged by the news. Yet Marin is not, and continues to assert that there are many things Nella does not understand, or is not permitted to know. “The knot’s tied too tight for you” (253) she explains. Nevertheless, the scene in “Hidden Bodies,” in which Marin’s pregnancy is discovered shows a genuinely tender moment between Nella and Marin. Their relationship is one that has shifted drastically over the course of the novel, and continues to shift. Though Marin clearly desires to remain emotionally closed off to Nella, here is a tangible sense of affection between the two, and in this scene in particular, Marin is relying on Nella.

Though the miniaturist has been a source of anxiety for Nella, her interaction with Cornelia in “No Anchor,” reveals Nella’s subconscious feelings that the miniaturist is actually a benevolent figure. Cornelia is revolted by Nella’s collection, and Nella immediately jumps at the opportunity to express the ways in which the miniaturist is vital to her existence. At the same time, Nella’s insistence that the miniaturist’s activities remain a secret between her and Cornelia indicates that Nella is aware of how surreal and grotesque the miniatures may appear to others.



## Discussion Question 1

What clues have there been in the novel leading up to the revelation of Marin's pregnancy?

## Discussion Question 2

Make a prediction about what will happen now that Johannes has been arrested.

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think the miniaturist should be described as a "prophetess"?

## Vocabulary

pliancy



## Part Four: January 1687: "Spores," "Stadhuis," "Verkeerspel"

### Summary

In "Spores," it is the first day of the new year. Nella is planning on going to Johannes's warehouse disguised as a maid. Nella is shocked by the vastness of the warehouse, and by the incredible amount of sugar contained within. Nella realizes how imperative it is that this sugar sells. Though Johannes has given Nella a list of potential buyers, Nella realizes an even better client: the bakers Hannah and Arnoud.

In "Stadhuis," Nella visits Johannes in the Stadhuis prison. She is hopeful and full of ideas during the visit, believing that she will be able to solve the family's financial and legal woes. Johannes, however, seems exhausted from life and physically abused. Despite Nella's resolution, Johannes does not believe that any amount of money or persuasion could change his circumstances.

In "Verkeerspel," Nella returns home to find Marin has ordered a cradle identical to the one the miniaturist sent to her, a fact even Cornelia acknowledges. Marin appears and Nella expresses concern the neighbors may have seen the cradle. Marin says she believes Nella wants "to take my child" (287) for herself. Frustrated, Nella accuses Marin of spending money they do not have. Marin slaps Nella, and Nella accuses Marin of being unlovable. The bickering continues over whether or not they will hire a midwife, which Marin does not want to do.

Later in the day, Nella is wandering around the house. Cornelia is readying Marin's room with a sense of excitement and wonder. In the back of the house, Marin is setting up a game of verkeerspel. Nella enters the room, and the tension from earlier in the day seems to have dissipated. Marin is relaxed and planning for the birth. Nella thinks that Marin does not truly understand the pain ahead. They sit and begin playing verkeerspel. Nella brings up the issue of Johannes's sugar, and Johannes himself. Marin does not want to discuss Johannes, as she feels there is nothing to be done. Nella presses Marin to barter with Frans and use her unborn child as leverage. She confesses that Cornelia told her the story of Johannes stopping the union between Marin and Frans. Marin considers this, but says the reality was very different: Johannes did refuse Frans's proposal, but because Marin asked him to do so. "I never wanted to marry him" (292) she tells Nella. Marin continues, saying that she never wanted to marry because she felt she was the "head" of the "household already" (293). Johannes's travel and business allowed her to manage the home as a man would.





## Analysis

In “Verkeerspel,” Nella and Marin’s roles seem to reverse. In earlier chapters, Marin accuses Nella of spending on the cabinet and miniatures, and uses any opportunity to berate Johannes for living beyond realistic means. In this chapter, Marin orders an expensive cradle and Nella immediately questions how Marin plans to pay for such an item. In addition to caring for Johannes and attempting to solve his newfound legal problems, Nella is now acting as the head of the home’s internal financial affairs, as well. This shows a stark change from the beginning of the novel, when Nella felt completely overwhelmed by her new home, and felt that its many secrets were far from her reach. Now, Nella is shaping the future of the home as much as Marin was. This turn of character adds a new facet to the theme of Control. Though Nella has gradually been assuming power over the last few sections, she seems unaware of her newfound ability to influence. Indeed, she does so without realizing it and still seems to view herself as a helpless victim of her circumstances.

The cradle, in addition to providing an example of Nella’s new role, shows the unspoken attachment Marin is developing for her unborn child. Now that Marin has resolved to give birth to the child, she is more seriously considering its future and finding herself acting unordinarily sentimental.

This newfound sentimentality allows Marin to open up to Nella about her past and the circumstances that lead her to become the woman she is today. In perhaps the biggest revelation on the theme of Wifedom, Marin reveals that she never became a wife as a means of retaining control over her own future. After experiencing the freedom of being the master of a home while Johannes was away, “I couldn’t tolerate being a wife” (293) Marin confesses. This account of Marin’s history completely shifts Nella’s perceptions about womanhood and life as a wife. Nella considers the fact that she was raised to believe that being a wife was the only future a woman could aspire to, and the only means of achieving anything. Yet, from Marin’s perspective, being a wife limits a woman’s potential and restricts her role. Nella suddenly finds herself caught between wanting to care for and protect Johannes, and recognizing that her marriage to a homosexual man may now allow her certain mental freedoms she would not have been afforded otherwise.

### Discussion Question 1

Whose perception of womanhood do you agree with: Marin’s or Nella’s and why?

### Discussion Question 2

Why is Cornelia so excited about Marin’s unborn child?



## Discussion Question 3

How might Marin's life have been different if she married Frans?

## Vocabulary

marquetry, hermetic, ineffably, expiated, foxed, entente



# "The Hopeful Loaf," "Wild Beasts Must Be Tamed By Men," "The Actor"

## Summary

In "The Hopeful Loaf," Nella waits outside Johannes's warehouse for a meeting with the bakers Hanna and Arnoud. While waiting, she considers her conversation with Marin about the role of a wife, and her own preconceived notions of what it means to be a woman. The bakers arrive and are surprised to find Nella representing the sugar sale. Nella leads them to the sugar, and negotiates with them to buy a portion of the loaves. In the end, they buy a sample of the loaves and say they will buy more if they are able to sell them in a timely manner. With the 1500 guilders of profit, Nella plans to deliver 1,000 guilders to the Meermans as both repayment and potentially a stopper to their accusation of Johannes. The other 500 will be used to bribe Jack. Upon returning home, Nella finds Cornelia in shock over a note that has been delivered. Nella hopes it is from the miniaturist, but it is not.

The next chapter "Wild Beasts Must Be Tamed By Men" begins with a vivid description of the Stadhuis, the large, stark, and plainly decorated courthouse where Johannes's trial will take place. Nella and Cornelia arrive for the first day of Johannes's trial, over which a man named Pieter Slabbaert will preside. Nella sees Hanna and Arnoud and Agnes and Frans in the crowd, as well. Agnes appears even more wild, thin, and unkempt than the last time Nella saw her. Nella notices her toying with something. Johannes enters the trial chamber, and his difficulty walking indicates he has been tortured on the rack. Hanna comes to sit with Nella and Cornelia, and informs Nella that the sugar sales are going well.

The trial commences, and Judge Slabbaert begins his opening statements, which list the accusation against Johannes as raping, beating, and then bribing Jack. Johannes fights back at the judge's attempts to corner him about his marriage and work. Though the day was meant to be a reading of the charges, Judge Slabbaert calls the plaintiff to testify.

In "The Actor" Jack enters the courtroom to testify against Johannes. Though his wound has surely healed by now, as Nella notes, he wears a "bloodied bandage" (311) for dramatic effect. Jack brings "the charges of a sodomitic attack, assault and bribery" (312). The judge has Jack recount the attack, and is clearly sympathetic to Jack's perspective. Jack has difficulty recounting the event, and seems slightly remorseful that he is lying. At the sight of Johannes, he becomes weak and the judge agrees to adjourn for the day. As the spectators leave the courthouse, Nella rushes to catch up with the Meermans. Nella notices something has fallen where Agnes was sitting. She picks it up to find it is a doll of herself. Nella examines it to see if the doll shows any signs of pregnancy, but after finding none she acknowledges "Now is not your time" (316).



## Analysis

The opening of “The Hopeful Loaf” shows just how deep set Nella’s convictions about womanhood and wifedom are. Though she was deeply affected by Marin’s tale of youth and her choice to remain unmarried as a form of self-preservation, Nella struggles to apply this same logic to her own life. Her deep thinking on the topic shows just how foreign the concept of a single woman is to her, and how she is battling her own preconceived notions, particularly in light of the fact that her own husband is now in custody.

Nella once viewed marriage as “the only possible form of influence a woman may have” (294), but thanks to Marin, Nella now recognizes a woman as an independent concept that does not necessarily have to be attached to a husband to have autonomy. As it pertains to her marriage, Nella realizes her current life has allowed “a choice and the molding of one’s own fate” (294) in the sense that Johannes’s absence has created the closest thing to a bachelorette life possible and because of that Nella is afforded choices that many married women are not allowed.

Indeed this concept is put into practice immediately after Nella considers it when she does business with Hanna and Arnoud at Johannes’s warehouse. In an attempt to save her husband’s life, Nella has developed skills and an attitude similar to Marin, which she recognizes. After selling the sugar, Nella realizes that “performance is all,” and that in order to succeed, “she will tuck her real self away as Marin does” (300). This serves as recognition that female freedom also comes with a price: the subversion of one’s true self in the public eye for the sake of private expression.

The symbol of the Stadhuis is introduced in this chapter. The Stadhuis is the central courthouse of Amsterdam and represents the fact that, despite Amsterdam’s private penchant for excess, the hand of the law is unwavering. The building itself is described as featuring “no gold, no velvet, no sense of indulgence, just four walls of brilliant white, the furniture dark and plain” (302). The contrast of colors in this description invokes the black and white nature of justice in the Amsterdam legal system, and foreshadows the court’s inability to recognize nuance as it pertains to Johannes.

Nella’s discovery of Anges’s doll reveals that Agnes has been in contact with the miniaturist as well. The “level-gaze” (316) of Agnes’s doll, as opposed to the “surprised” looking one Nella received, shows how Nella’s perception of herself differs from how others see her: she has more power in the eyes of others than she recognizes. Furthermore, Nella’s examination of the doll for signs of pregnancy reveals her now-hidden but still very real desire to have a child and live out a traditional wifely existence. At the end of the chapter, though, Nella must confront the fact that she is not meant to have a child at this time.

## Discussion Question 1

Make a prediction about the outcome of Johannes’s trial.



## Discussion Question 2

What do you think Nella means when she thinks, “performance is all” (300)?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Nella is so interested in Hanna?

## Vocabulary

eaves, abating, surfeit, preponderance, tremulous, consternation



# "The Guilders And The Doll," "Arrival," "The Tale-Teller"

## Summary

In "The Guilders And The Doll" Nella ponders Agnes's doll. She recalls Agnes's jealousy over hearing about Nella's wedding gift. Leaving the courthouse, Nella is confronted by spectators as "the wife" (318). Frans approaches her and Nella pleads with him to spare Johannes. She brings up his relationship with Marin and attempts to use it as leverage. She then offers a portion of the sugar profits to Frans. Frans is more shocked by the doll Nella has pulled out of her pocket in addition to the money. He recognizes it from Agnes's cabinet, and is disgusted by it. He says "a cannonball would do less damage to my marriage than those cursed miniatures" (320). He then informs Nella that he ordered the miniaturist to be arrested. Nella curses him and leaves.

In "Arrival," Nella heads to the Kalverstraat but is stopped by Cornelia, who begs Nella to come home and tend to Marin. When they arrive home, Marin's heart is beating rapidly, and she says she is in unbearable pain. Nella believes it is time for the birth, and begs Marin to hire a midwife, which Marin adamantly refuses. In Nella's room, Marin lays on the bed and as the night wears on, she is in increasing pain. Finally, Nella says they have to look under Marin's skirt to make sure the pain is not anything abnormal. Nella looks and finds the child's head emerging from Marin. She orders Marin to push, though there is a lot of blood and tearing flesh. Finally, after a final push, the baby arrives. It is a girl, who Marin promptly names Thea. At the end of the chapter, Nella realizes that there is no version of Marin's room in her cabinet.

In "The Tale-Teller," Nella and Cornelia attempt to sleep. When Nella wakes, it is now eight o'clock in the morning. Nella realizes she is an hour late for the second day of the trial. Nella feels something is not right with Marin, but feels she must go to the trial. Nella demands Cornelia hire a midwife before leaving. Arriving at the Stadhuis, Nella sees that Agnes is not with Frans. She asks a woman where Agnes is, and the woman tells her that Agnes gave her testimony at the start of the day and that she was "trembling" (333). Meanwhile, Frans is currently on the stand. Frans relays the night he supposedly witnessed Johannes assaulting Jack. He admits, though, that Johannes was always a trusty businessman. After finishing with the questions, Frans begins to cry. Johannes asks why he is crying if he is telling the truth. Johannes then launches into a lecture about all he has contributed to the city. After he tells Frans and Jack they have his forgiveness, the judge orders Johannes out of the courtroom so that his fate may be decided. After deliberation, the judges decide Johannes is guilty and will be put to death. Nella hears a voice from the top of the viewing gallery, and turns just in time to see the miniaturist leaving the courtroom.



## Analysis

Nella's continued ferocity in the fight for Johannes's life shows that, in addition to caring for him as her husband, Nella is eager to flex her intellect and independence. It is becoming increasingly evident that Johannes's case is one-sided and the chances of his rescue are slim. Even Marin sees Nella's attempts at rescue as foolish. This shows that Nella's fight for his life is a challenge that represents much more to Nella. In the course of working for his freedom, Nella has developed her autonomy enough to conduct business dealings, walk the streets alone, negotiate with the militia, and recognize her own independence as a woman outside of her marriage. Working for Johannes's freedom is a way of Nella challenging herself and wrestling with her self-concept.

As the trial continues, Johannes's freedom grows even more unreachable, as Frans has clearly plotted an airtight route to a conviction. In calculatedly stating that Johannes remained a good businessman throughout their interactions, Frans is cutting off any possible rebuttal that his accusations are based in revenge over the sugar.

Frans's loathing of the miniaturist and her creations is indicative of their power over others, and not only Nella. Thus far in the novel, we have seen Marin and Cornelia both react to the miniatures with an inherent sense of disgust and horror. Now, Frans expresses that the miniatures have consumed his wife completely and that he has ordered the shop closed. Nella and Johannes are the only two who have seen the miniatures and embraced them as a means of comfort. Nella's realizations about the miniatures indicate that, despite their strangeness, they have allowed her a certain degree of autonomy over her world. The same could be said for Johannes, who is searching for his own form of control in a world that does not accept him for who he is.

The scene in which Marin gives birth portrays her in her most emotional and raw state. It is physically impossible for Marin to retain any kind of composure or persona during the birth, and she is forced to be completely vulnerable. In a sense, Marin sheds her duplicity and must devote herself entirely to the act of birth and the future of motherhood. The birth is violent, and Marin describes her body as falling apart. Even Nella senses that something about the birth has not gone correctly. These sentiments foreshadow Marin's death, which will be revealed in coming chapters.

## Discussion Question 1

What might happen to Nella's future if Johannes goes free? What if he is convicted?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Frans's desire to convict Johannes is based entirely in business? If not, what else might have inspired his accusations?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think many characters have an instinctively repulsed reaction to the miniatures?

## Vocabulary

razed, ululate, morass, ministration, denigrating, rapacious





# "Daughters," "A Closing Door"

## Summary

In "Daughters," Nella is both shocked and relieved to have seen the miniaturist, as it means she has not been arrested at Frans said. Nella rushes to the Kalverstraat in search of the miniaturist. She finds the workshop is vacant, and that the sign of the sun that once hung over the door has been removed. All that remains of the sign is "for a Toy" (342). The door hangs open, and Nella goes inside. She finds the house has been completely vacated, save for a worktable on the second floor that contains "a world" (343). Nella finds furniture and figures representing many Amsterdammers. She also finds a version of her home that fits in "the center of her fist" (344). Also on the table is a stack of letters with requests and grievances from women all across the city, including herself. In the margins of her letters are annotations that indicate the miniaturist spied on Nella and gathered all information possible about her life.

Suddenly, Nella hears someone entering the house. She attempts to hide, but the man finds her and calls out to her by name. Nella emerges from her hiding place to find an old man. He says she is not Petronella, and that he is Lucas Windelbreke--the clockmaker who the miniaturist trained with. He explains that the miniaturist was also named Petronella, and was his daughter. When Nella explains that she wrote to him, Lucas says he received many letters asking for an explanation of the miniaturist's actions. He explains that she was a prodigious student who was not content to limit herself to clockmaking. Instead, she worked towards something called "the fleeting forever" (348). Over the course of the conversation, Nella realizes the miniaturist helped her reclaim "self-dominion" (349).

Nella returns home both inspired and perplexed by the history of the miniaturist. She realizes how many women across Amsterdam have been both helped and mystified by the miniaturist. Upon returning home, Cornelia greets Nella saying "We did it wrong" (350).

In "A Closing Door," Nella is confronted with the fact that Marin has died, though it is unclear how and why. A woman enters the room and introduces herself as Lysbeth Timmers, a wet nurse. Observing Thea more closely for the first time, Nella realizes the baby has skin "the color of a candied walnut" (353) and that her father is Otto. Nella negotiates with Lysbeth for her daily salary and the promise of keeping any sensitive information away from the authorities. Later on, Nella and Cornelia talk and plan for the child's future. Nella agonizes over how the child will grow up as a mixed-race person in racist Amsterdam. She also considers the relationship between Otto and Marin--something she never suspected. She then finds the doll of Otto tucked under Marin's pillow.



## Analysis

Nella's investigation of the miniaturist's abandoned workshop leads to a realization that the miniaturist has helped Nella reach and accept her autonomy. Nella finds letters from many other women in Amsterdam, indicating that the miniaturist served a similar role for women across the city. All of them, trapped in the limiting roles of womanhood, are searching for some sort of escape from their realities, or seeking answers to issues in their lives. This investigation gives Nella some clarity into the miniaturist's methods: it appears that she was able to make such accurate miniatures after in-depth spying on those with whom she worked, including Nella. In the margins of one of her letters, Nella finds an annotation that reads, "A constant searcher, a tulip planted in my soil who won't have space to grow" (345). This connects to an earlier package from the miniaturist in which she says, "Nella: the turnip cannot thrive in the tulip's patch of soil" (207). This confirms that the Nella is the "tulip" in question, but leaves the concept of the "turnip" open to interpretation. It does, however, expand on the concept that Nella is a woman confined by her role and requires more freedoms than her situation presently allows.

Nella's revelations about the role of the miniaturist climaxes during her conversation with Lucas Windelbreke. Lucas holds the position that his daughter meddles in the lives of others and strikes fear into the heart of her clients. In response, Nella says "I thought she was stealing my life, but in truth she opened its compartments and let me look inside" (345). For Nella, the miniaturist allowed her to reclaim "self-dominion" (349).

Marin and Otto's relationship is a surprising reveal, as it was suggested nowhere in the text up until this point. Marin has remained protective of Otto throughout the novel, but there has not been any explicit indication that their relationship was anything other than professional. At the same time, Marin never confirmed that the child actually belonged to Frans, as Nella thought. This relationship changes Nella's perspective on her work to free Johannes. She has previously suggested to Marin that the newborn child could be used as leverage against Frans, and subsequently thought Marin was simply being stubborn in her refusal. Only now is Nella able to see the true complexity of the situation.

## Discussion Question 1

Were there any clues in the novel that may have indicated a relationship between Marin and Otto?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways did the miniaturist help Nella since her arrival in Amsterdam?



## Discussion Question 3

What do you think caused Marin's death? Do you think it could have been prevented?

## Vocabulary

wreathe, rheumy, trepidation



# "Empty Rooms," "The Canker In The Orchard," "Degrees Of Being Alive," "Millstone"

## Summary

The next morning, in "Empty Rooms," Lysbeth helps Nella and Cornelia prepare Marin's body for burial. Nella chooses to bury Marin with the map of Africa kept in her room. The rest of Marin's curiosities will be preserved, as they will someday belong to Thea. After they finish the preparations, Nella is alone and considers her cabinet. At first, she thought it was an insult. Then, it became her solace. Nella retrieves a hammer from Otto's tool cabinet, and smashes the cabinet into pieces. She destroys the miniatures as well, including the dolls except for Otto, Marin, and Johannes.

That evening, in "The Canker In The Orchard," Cornelia goes to visit Johannes in prison. Nella goes to see Pastor Pellicorne about Marin's burial. She lies and says that Marin died from an ongoing illness. Pellicorne says that, despite Marin's piety, she cannot be buried in the church, as she is "tainted by association" (369) for being related to Johannes. Nella uses 200 guilders to convince Pellicorne to give Marin a corner burial plot in the church. He accepts all too easily, and Nella is repulsed by this. Marin tells Pellicorne that Marin's gravestone will read "Things can change" (372).

"Degrees Of Being Alive" begins that Saturday morning. Nella visits the bakery, where Hanna and Arnoud agree to buy more sugar. After her meeting, she goes to visit Johannes. Nella finds him looking tired and tattered. He has accepted his fate and the accusations against him. Nella is torn about whether or not to tell him of Thea and Marin's death, but ultimately decides to let Johannes go to the grave knowing none of this news.

In "Millstone," crowds gather to watch Johannes scheduled execution on Sunday. He is executed by being thrown from a dock with a weight around his neck. Nella feels dizzy and sickened by the circumstances. When the execution officially begins, Nella looks away and only listens. She only opens her eyes after hearing the sound of the weight splashing in the water. When the crowd begins to leave, Nella feels someone watching her. She looks around and sees, standing in the crowd, Otto.

## Analysis

Marin's death is portrayed as violent, sudden, and unintentional, indicating that it could have been prevented. The narrator notes of Marin's body, "Marin does not look peaceful. She looks as if she didn't want to die. There was still so much to do" (363). It is as though the circumstances surrounding Marin's life--her single status, her



pregnancy out of wedlock with a man of color--forced her into a situation where she did not feel she could hire a midwife. This is a commentary on the way that independent women's lives are quite literally at risk, both socially and physically, depending on the choices they make.

When Nella destroys her cabinet, it is a rejection of her dependence upon anyone but herself. She feels she has grown past the place where she requires solace or escape. She has seen too much and experienced real life in a way that no longer necessitates the escapist fantasy or controlled autonomy of the cabinet. With Marin gone and Johannes's death sentence impending, Nella is officially the head of the household, and no longer needs a false household to govern. This maturation comes with a price, however, as signified in the final line of the chapter "Empty Rooms." After smashing the cabinet, Nella sits on the floor and cries, "With no one to hold, she holds herself" (365). This is symbolic of the cost of Nella's autonomy: she is alone in a way she has never experienced before, and that authority comes with a degree of pain.

Nella powers onward, though, with an even more powerful attitude of independence, as indicated in her conversation with pastor Pellicorne in "The Canker In The Orchard." Pellicorne says that it is a shame Marin never married, as she would have made a good wife. In response to this, Nella thinks, "For some of us, Nella thinks, it's a waste to be married" (369). This thought shows she has fully allied herself with Marin's philosophy of independence.

The annotation Nella requests for Marin's gravestone, "Things can change," is a reference to an earlier letter from the miniaturist found in the chapter "Eight Dolls." Nella requesting this quote shows an intention to carry on Marin's legacy, and to shape a future that both of them would have been proud of.

The final night Nella and Johannes spend together acts as a surrogate for their wedding night, only now with a very different outcome. After sitting together and sharing a charged yet peaceful time in Johannes's prison cell, the narrator notes, "In the future she will refer to it as her first wedding night, a communion where no words were needed" (381). In earlier chapters, Nella was consumed with the idea of consummating the marriage and feeling as though they were a proper, traditional couple. Now, with Johannes's life about to meet its end, Nella acknowledges that his departure will mean a new level of freedom for herself and that she will be able to fulfill a new dream of independence.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Nella felt compelled to destroy her cabinet?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Nella chose the phrase "things can change" for Marin's gravestone?



## Discussion Question 3

What different emotions is Nella feeling regarding Johannes's execution? Why might she be sad? Why might she be happy?

## Vocabulary

assiduously, apiary, brackish, dun



# Part Five, The same evening, Sunday, January 12th, 1687: “Nova Hollandia”

## Summary

Part Five, The same evening, Sunday, January 12th, 1687, begins with the chapter “Nova Hollandia.” The chapter picks up where Part Four left off, with Nella recognizing Otto in the crowd. Nella begs him to come home, and Otto is in shock about Johannes’s execution. He tells Nella that he fled to London because he thought it would protect the family.

Back at the house, they find Lysbeth burning the remnants of the cabinet. Otto embraces baby Thea and says that he knew about Marin’s pregnancy. Nella tells him that Marin died giving birth and they both struggle to maintain composure. Nella promises to herself that when Thea grows older, she will tell her everything about Marin.

Cornelia enters the room and is shocked to see Otto. They embrace and Nella leaves them alone to get reacquainted. Nella goes to the front door and stares out at the canal. She considers what will become of the members of the household and feels hopeful. In the final line of the novel, Nella returns inside.

## Analysis

Otto admits that he knew about Marin’s pregnancy and returned to Amsterdam in order to see the child. He reveals that, in their conversations about the pregnancy, Marin remained firm about the child’s future, saying that its “life must be what he makes of it” (389). Though Nella and Cornelia are concerned about Thea’s future as someone of a mixed-race background, Marin seemingly maintained confidence that her child would be able to conquer any challenge.

In the final scene of the novel, Nella is depicted as the head of the household. While Otto, Cornelia, Thea, and Lysbeth sit inside, Nella stands at the front door and looks out over Amsterdam. She arrived through the same doorway mere months ago, and now she stands in that same doorway facing the opposite direction. Despite the numerous setbacks that recently occurred, Nella feels hopeful due to Otto’s return and the excitement surrounding newborn Thea. She thinks, “We make a hopeful tapestry; no one to weave it but ourselves” (392). The novel ends on a note of hope and unlimited possibilities for the future, with Nella now at the helm of her own ship.

## Discussion Question 1

Make a prediction about what might happen after the final scene of the novel.



## Discussion Question 2

Compare the scene of Nella's arrival with the final scene of the novel.

## Discussion Question 3

Revisit the prologue and try to determine which unnamed characters are being portrayed.

## Vocabulary

valerian, sallies





# Characters

## Petronella “Nella” Elisabeth Oortman

Nella is a young woman from Assendelft, a pastoral area of the Netherlands. Soon after her 18th birthday, Nella is married to Johannes Brandt and sent to live with him in Amsterdam. She is an idealistic young woman, who has concrete ideas of what she wants her future to look like: a romantic marriage full of love and children and a traditional role as a wife.

As the novel progresses, Nella must reevaluate her idea of what it means to be both a wife and a woman, as her expectations of these things are completely altered by the nontraditional Brandt family. She gradually realizes her power as an individual and develops a sense of purpose that extends beyond servitude to her husband.

## Marin Brandt

Marin Brandt, in her early 30s, is Johannes’s sister. She is a strict and terse woman who values piety and conservatism over the luxury of her brother and his business. While Marin is not overtly unkind to Nella, she is unwelcoming.

Over the course of the novel, Marin’s personality is revealed to be more complex in that her private self is actually much less conservative, and indulges in things such as fur-lined dresses and candied walnuts. Her public persona is a performance.

At the end of the novel, Marin dies after giving birth to Thea, of whom Otto is the father.

## Johannes Brandt

39-year-old Johannes is Nella’s husband and Marin’s older brother. He is a wealthy merchant affiliated with the Dutch East India Company, also known as the VOC. He has traveled extensively in the past to both Asia and Africa, and continues to travel for business throughout the novel.

Johannes’s personality is gentle and calm. Though he has difficulty participating in his new relationship with Nella, he eventually comes to appreciate Nella’s similarly sympathetic personality. His affair with Jack Philips reveals he is a homosexual, which is considered a crime punishable by death.



## Cornelia

Cornelia, who is in her early twenties, is the maid of the Brandt household. Initially, she treats Nella with a haughty and bold attitude. Certainly, she behaves more casually with the members of the household than a traditional maid would.

Cornelia was raised in an orphanage before being taken in by the Brandt's, making her especially sensitive to the needs of children and feelings of abandonment. This also gives her a strong sense of loyalty to the Brandt's.

## Otto

Otto is a member of the Brandt household staff. He was originally born in Dahomey, an African kingdom, and was purchased by Johannes after being taken aboard a slave ship. People of African descent are very uncommon in the Netherlands, and so Otto is treated with both blatant hatred and disrespectful curiosity. Nevertheless, Otto constantly behaves with an air of calm composure. After his fight with Jack Philips, Otto leaves Amsterdam for London. At the end of the novel, Otto returns after Marin has given birth to their daughter, Thea, and Johannes has been put to death.

## Frans Meerman

Frans is an Amsterdam businessman. At the start of the novel, he is working with Johannes to sell a large quantity of sugar, which his wife Agnes inherited. As a young man, Frans was friends with Johannes and a member of the VOC. Many years ago, he requested Marin's hand in marriage and was denied.

## Agnes Meerman

Agnes is married to Frans. She is a fashionable woman who enjoys Amsterdam's lavish society. At the same time, she is also deeply pious and fervently attends church services. Before marrying Frans, Agnes was a close friend of Marin. Though they remain friends for the sake of business, their relationship is strained.

## The Miniaturist/Petronella

Though she is elusive at first, Nella becomes certain that the miniaturist is a woman with bright golden hair who is repeatedly spotted around Amsterdam. Petronella was originally trained by her father, a clockmaker, before starting her own workshop.

## **Jack Philips**

Jack is an English actor who also works as a delivery man for the miniaturist. He is revealed to have been engaging in an ongoing affair with Johannes before eventually partnering with Frans in order to blackmail Johannes.

## **Hanna**

Hanna is a baker in Amsterdam's business district. She is close friends with Cornelia, as they were raised in an orphanage together. Hanna clearly has a strong mind for business and helps Nella sell the Meerman's sugar.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Peebo

Peebo, Nella's pet parakeet, represents Nella's childhood and the gradual loss of innocence that occurs after she comes to Amsterdam. At first, Peebo is kept in the working kitchen, but gradually gains more freedoms to fly around the house. Eventually, he escapes through an open window. This transformation directly parallels Nella's discovery of the secrets of the Brandt household, and her discovery of Johannes's homosexuality directly coincides with Peebo's escape.

## Nella's Dress

Nella's ill-fitting dress symbolizes the overwhelming feelings and sense of discomfort upon first arriving in Amsterdam. Though the dresses were supposedly made to Nella's measurements, they are far too large and in addition to making Nella feel awkward and uncomfortable, represent just how out of her element Nella is in her new urban surroundings.

## The Cabinet

The cabinet is a symbol of Nella's individual growth as a woman outside of her marriage. As a wedding gift from Johannes, the cabinet symbolizes how, as half of a non-traditional marriage, Nella is afforded growth and introspection on her life that she would not have been allowed had she ended up in the traditional role of wife that she, initially, so desperately craved.

## Marzipan Miniature

One of the first items Nella requests from the miniaturist is a piece of marzipan, which symbolizes both the sweetness and innocence of the childhood she left behind, as well as the pivotal role that sugar will come to play in her future. Nella is struck by Marin's attitude prohibiting sweets, causing Nella to reflect on when her mother made marzipan for her as a child. When Nella tastes the miniature, it tastes of real sugar; something that will come to be essential to Nella's livelihood as she is in charge of selling the Meerman's sugar.

## Cradle Miniature

The miniature cradle represents both Nella's inability to have a child with Johannes and Marin's eventual pregnancy. Though Nella does not request a cradle from the miniaturist, she is sent one anyway and she feels that it is a mockery of the fact she and



Johannes have not consummated their marriage. Later, Marin orders a cradle for unborn Thea and it resembles the miniature exactly, shifting the meaning of the cradle to be not a mockery of Nella's unrealized conception, but a prediction that there will be a child in the Brandt house.

## Wedding Chalice Miniature

Nella requests a miniature wedding chalice from the miniaturist as a symbol to commemorate the married life she aspired to: one consisting of traditional husband and wife roles. For Nella, the miniature chalice is a symbol of hope that she and Johannes may still live out the ideal of a bride and groom.

## Lily Perfume

The lily perfume, a gift from Nella's mother, symbolizes the affectation Nella initially adopts with the hope of wooing Johannes. Her amorous efforts, including the perfume, border on grotesque and stifling. When Nella breaks the perfume bottle and the scent permanently permeates her room, this symbolizes the failure of her efforts and the constant sense of embarrassment she feels being married to someone who will never "love" her.

## Candied Walnuts

Marin's secret indulgence in candied walnuts represents the side of her personality she keeps completely hidden: the side that is not constantly policing her own behavior, and the behavior of others, but allows for the enjoyment of life's small pleasures.

## Dolls

The dolls Nella receives from the miniaturist represent the theme of puppetry and manipulation that dominates the relationships of the Brandts, the Meermans, and their associates. Secrets, business dealings, and hearsay all contribute to the relationships between these characters, as though they were dolls being controlled by each other.

## The Stadhuis

The Stadhuis, the central courthouse of Amsterdam, represents how justice is viewed as black and white. Though the rest of the city enjoys a lavish lifestyle and does not observe religious piety strictly, the court is unwilling to observe these gray areas and nuances that populate the city's people, a fact that will eventually contribute to Johannes's demise.



# Settings

## Nella's Room

Nella's room in the Brandt house is overly-large and lavishly decorated. It is filled with an excess of embroidery, and after Nella spills her perfume, the entire room smells intensely of lilies. All of Nella's senses are overwhelmed by this room, adding to her initial feelings of displacement in Amsterdam. At the end of the novel, though, Nella's room becomes the sight of Thea's birth and Marin's death, changing the purpose of the room from one of ornament and display to one imbued with literal life and death.

## Marin's Room

Marin's room, though small, is bursting with decor that reveals her curious mind. Her shelves boast an extensive collection of trinkets, maps, and trophies gathered from Johannes's voyages around the world. This represents Marin's desire for the same autonomy afforded to her brother by his gender, which is ultimately relegated to confinement and private study.

## Johannes's Study

Johannes's study is where Johannes spends the majority of his time when home. Inside, Nella is surprised to find that the study is very cozy and simple, without the clutter and memorabilia of Marin's room. Similar to Johannes himself, Nella initially thinks the study mysterious and secretive only to find that its contents are actually quite warm and welcoming.

## The Stadhuis

The Stadhuis is Amsterdam's central courthouse, and the sight of Johannes's trial. Unlike the rest of Amsterdam, with its flair for excess, the Stadhuis is decorated simply, with black and white furniture. The structure of the courtroom is organized like a theater, with spectators watching from a gallery above the courtroom floor, emphasizing the performative nature of Johannes's trial.

## Assendelft

Assendelft, Nella's hometown, is portrayed as a quiet, idyllic, pastoral town. While Nella idealizes her childhood home in her mind, Marin and others seem to view it as a place where there is little to do in comparison to Amsterdam.



## The Miniaturist's Workshop

The miniaturist's workshop is on a street of businesses called the Kalverstraat. Before the miniaturist closes her workshop, a sun symbol hangs over the door. Nella visits the shop many times, attempting to make contact with the miniaturist, only to find the door locked and the house seemingly uninhabited. After the miniaturist vacates her shop, Nella is able to enter and finds everything cleared out, save for a work table filled with hundreds of miniatures.



# Themes and Motifs

## Wifedom

Nella's journey of self-discovery in the novel largely focuses on how her definition of what a fulfilled woman is grows from the sole social expectation of "a wife" to idea that a woman can be independent of a husband and happy being completely self-sufficient.

At the beginning of the novel, Nella has just gotten married and moved from her countryside home to live with her new husband in Amsterdam. Nella clearly has very specific ideas about what she expected her life as a wife to look like: a relationship marked by sex, companionship, conversation, and eventually, love. Even when it is almost immediately evident that Nella's new relationship will not feature any of these elements, she remains persistent in her desire. At the end of Part One, Nella's dreams are permanently shattered when she discovers her husband, Johannes, receiving oral sex from another man. This is particularly crushing after, just a few nights earlier, he aggressively rebuffed her sexual advances. Nella is devastated after this discovery, and feels that her entire life and self-concept have been shattered. Being a wife was her sole goal, and it has been suddenly taken from her.

This discovery, though, leads to Nella adopting a new attitude of independence. She becomes more assertive to others, and grows to accept Johannes's sexuality. Slowly, Nella realizes the nuances of being a wife, and starts to separate the concept of being a wife from the concept of being a woman. This new attitude actually works to bring Nella and Johannes closer together, and they start to develop a gray area that is not romantic, but still tender and friendly. When Johannes is captured by the St. George Militia, Nella works tirelessly to free him without the aid of others. As Nella exerts her independence to help Johannes, it becomes clear that she is aiding him both as someone who loves him and is legally bound to him, but also as someone who is proving something to herself.

Nella's concept of wifedom shifts completely when Marin tells Nella the truth about her own past: that she never married as a means of remaining independent and having power. After working to help Johannes--a task that involved doing business, holding meetings, and managing finances--Nella realizes that she, too, desires this same kind of power in her life, and is willing to sacrifice her marriage for the sake of independence. When Johannes is put to death, Nella is emotionally devastated, and yet she also acknowledges a newfound sense of freedom within herself. By the end of the novel, Nella is no longer concerned with the concept of being a wife, as it is no longer intrinsic to her understanding of herself. Rather, this concept has evolved completely into not an understanding of what it was to be a wife, but what it is to be a woman.





## Excess

The city of Amsterdam during the time period in which the novel is set is marked by a kind of grotesque excess, which creates a mood of intensity and revulsion in the reader. The art and the food, most specifically, are repeatedly explained in a manner that is so lavish it is intended to disgust.

When Nella first arrives in Amsterdam, her room is decorated with highly-realistic paintings depicting close-up flowers, dead game animals, and detailed fruit. These paintings create an oppressive and sickly air in the room--a feeling which is soon added to by the scent of Nella's spilled lily perfume. When Nella turns the paintings to face the wall so she is no longer disturbed by them, she wakes up the next morning to find Cornelia flipping the paintings. This gesture is symbolic of the fact that Nella is now trapped in these circumstances and will be forced to confront them head-on, as opposed to turning away from her problems.

The chapter "Wedding Parties" is charged with a heady air. When Johannes and Nella attend the feast at the silversmith's guild, the party is so over-the-top as to be grotesque. Much of the chapter is spent describing the overabundance of food and the intoxication of the party's guests. Nella feels uncomfortable and overwhelmed by the party, but everyone else seems to feel this is a normal, and even wonderful, gathering.

It seems that no one in Amsterdam is immune to the lure of wealth and comfort. Even Marin, whose entire life seems to exist around the idea of moderation, is revealed to wear sable furs beneath her unadorned black dresses. Nella later discovers that candied walnuts are Marin's secret indulgence, even though she publicly rejects sweets.

This excess is made even more ironic by the fact that the city of Amsterdam, in conversation, supposedly values God and religion above all else. Pastor Pellicorne, the preacher at the church the Brandt's attend, is fiery and strict in his teachings. He praises humility and restraint while those who attend his church leave to return to lives of excess. Even Pellicorne himself, who accepts a financial bribe from Nella in Part Four, is not immune to the power of money and feeling of power that excess brings.

## Water

In the novel, water is a metaphor used repeatedly to tie together ideas about Amsterdam, its wealth, and its religion. Water itself is an incredibly powerful substance: the ocean is vast, unknown, and one of the mightiest forces on Earth. Similarly, the Dutch East India Company sails these powerful seas in order to expand their empire. Water is the primary tool used for the expansion of the Dutch economy and the Dutch perception of the world. Anyone who can master it is effectively one of the most powerful people.

The fact that religious metaphors in the novel so often include a water or seafaring element is a testament to the reverence the Dutch people have for their expanding



colonial empire and trading network. Their perception of the Dutch East India Company and men like Johannes is almost deified--a reaction we see in Agnes's admiration of Johannes and his work.

Yet, while water is also powerful, it is mercurial. It can change shape, or evaporate completely. The tide can turn against a ship and cause the destruction of someone who once thought the forces of nature were in their favor. There is often talk of things "spilling over" (34) or flooding in the novel. While these are, on the surface, references to Amsterdam's canal system, they are used as allusions to the concept of Amsterdam's economy and society bursting from the immense pressure and demand that is being placed on it.

The references to water are most powerfully realized in the chapter "Millstone," in which Johannes is executed. The punishment for homosexuality is drowning, which is done by placing a millstone around the convict's neck and throwing them into the water. In this scene, Nella closes her eyes and hears only the deadly splash of the water. This scene is almost crucifixion-esque, as though Johannes is returning to the water to pay for the sins and ignorances of the people of Amsterdam.

## Love

Outside of Nella's role as a wife, the theme of love is marked by the varied and complex types of love-relationships portrayed in the novel. Beginning with Nella's own relationship to Johannes, the novel displays the many forms love can take that are not always in line with traditional concepts.

Though Nella and Johannes have a rocky and confusing start to their relationship--which loses all hope of romanticism or eroticism when Nella discovers his homosexuality--they end their relationship on positive and supportive terms. They realize they can care for and support each other platonically, and Nella regrets that in the short span of their relationship they realized this fact too late.

Johannes's homosexuality portrays another kind of love. He and Jack Philips are hinted to have been romantic partners for some time. However, the relationship is so easily damaged and twisted because of the way society at large views homosexuality. Because the risks are so high, Jack is quickly willing to forsake it in favor of legal security. This creates a commentary on the perils of condemning homosexuality.

Otto and Marin's relationship is perhaps the most pure romantic love depicted in the novel. And yet this relationship is kept even more of a secret than Johannes's relationship with Jack for several reasons: due to Otto's class status, and more largely to his race. Their love notes reveal tender, caring, poetic interactions that would be considered normal, but they inspire sorrow in Marin, whom Nella sees cry upon re-reading them.

The reader comes into the novel focused on the traditional concept of man and wife, as this is what Nella's primary focus is. However, the course of the novel unfolds a wealth



of alternatives to this traditional scheme, with a handful of different romantic and platonic relationships rooted in love. Perhaps intentionally, the most traditional homogenous relationship depicted--Agnes and Frans Meerman--is the least love-filled and explicitly joyous.

## Duplicity

In this novel, each of the main characters seemingly has two distinct sides to their personality, suggesting that people must be known intimately if one wants a more accurate understanding of them. One is a public face they wear, and display in their interactions with other characters, and the other is a secret personality that harbors secrets and is only exposed in private moments.

For Nella, her character publicly displays an image of meekness and girlishness. At the start of the novel, she is very clearly overwhelmed by her new surroundings and companions. Yet her internal side is one of strength and resilience; one who is not quick to give up on a goal. By the end of the novel, this inner strength eventually finds an outlet in working to sell Johannes's sugar and free him from prison through business dealings. Though unsuccessful in the latter part of the mission, Nella's internal strength now takes precedence over her timidity.

Marin is a character whose duplicity is often acknowledged by Nella in thought. Marin has a very cool and detached personality, and does not openly become too involved in emotional dealings with any other character. And yet Nella's private observations of Marin reveal a more emotionally raw and intellectually curious woman than her public persona lets on.

Johannes, too, is marked by duplicity. His public self is magnanimous, confident, and bold. Both at the dinner he and Nella attend in "Wedding Parties" and during his speeches in his trial in Part Four, Johannes appears open and strong. Yet he is a much more private and gentle man than this persona lets on. In his conversations with Nella he often laments how difficult it is to maintain this public face, and expresses a sense that Amsterdam is an oppressive city that forces people to hide their true selves.

The miniaturist's note "I fight to emerge" (102) touches on this theme, as it alludes to the fact that many of the character's hidden personalities and secrets are struggling to remain hidden, and many of the true selves in this novel will be revealed over the course of events.



# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is narrated by a third person limited narrator, who has insight into what Nella is specifically thinking, as well as to the sentiments of the city of Amsterdam as a whole. This is a unique combination in that Nella's specific sentiments about what is going on around her are often juxtaposed with the less naive sentiments of Amsterdam's culture. For example, after Nella finds out about Johannes's homosexuality, she is confused and upset. Though she has been raised to believe homosexuality is a sin, she rather quickly comes to accept it and understand it is part of Johannes's soul. However, the narrator continues to clue the reader into just how much of a very real danger homosexuality is in the eyes of Amsterdam's law. In the chapter "Horseshoe," the narrator notes that "sodomy" is "after greed and flood [...] the worst word in the city's lexicon" (250). This gives the reader insight into the stakes surrounding the characters, though Nella is not given this same information.

## Language and Meaning

The novel occasionally makes use of Dutch words and phrases. Many of these words, such as "guilder," the currency used in the novel, as specific to this era of Dutch history. Other words often used include "herenbrood," a type of bread, "pattens," a type of shoe, and "verkeerspel," a board game. The VOC is an abbreviation for Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or the Dutch East India Company.

In addition to these colloquialisms, the dialogue is very important to the novel, as the conversations between the characters often dictate the course of events. Amsterdam is a city ruled by gossip and hearsay, and so the content of discussions are paramount. The conversations in the novel are not often long, drawn-out discussions, but actions and interactions punctuated by a series of impactful statements.

## Structure

The novel is structured into six sections. The first section is a prologue; the events of that actually take place after the end of the novel. Part One through Part Four each encompass a single month beginning in October 1686 and ending in January 1687. Part Five, which encompasses a single day, is an extension of the same day on which Part Four ends.

The chapters often flow from one day to another, with only an occasional day passing by undocumented. This emphasizes just how much Nella's life is changing at such a rapid pace. By the end of the novel, everything has changed from the time of Nella's arrival in Amsterdam, though just over three months has actually passed.



## Quotes

Souls and purses [...] these two are obsessed with souls and purses.

-- Nella (New Alphabet paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Nella has this thought upon first witnessing Johannes interacting with Marin. She observes that finances and spirituality are at the core of the majority of their conversations.

Everything man sees he takes for a toy.

-- Narrator (On The Kalverstraat paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This phrase is on a sign hung above the miniaturist's workshop. It is a saying that mocks the way mankind is so quick to feel superior over the world. In this case, the miniaturist is proclaiming the profundity of her work: while others may see a toy, it is something that should not be trivialized.

Every woman is the architect of her own fortune.

-- The Miniaturist/Petronella (Delivery paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The miniaturist sends this phrase to Nella with her first package. Nella is initially confused by the phrase, as she feels it is only men who are capable of shaping a life. Later in the novel, Nella will come to fulfill the quote when she takes her life into her own hands and shapes a future she desires.

It is not a man she has married, but a world.

-- Narrator (Study paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Nella considers this concept after witnessing Johannes out at a party. In addition to navigating her private relationship with her husband, Nella must also adapt to his excessive, socialite lifestyle--one very different from her own.

In suffering do we find our truest selves.

-- Marin (The Rebel paragraph 7)

**Importance:** This statement is made as an offhand comment when Nella is complaining about the cold in the house. However, on a larger level it depicts Marin's outlook on life. Marin's life is one in which she has more autonomy than other women, but that autonomy has come at the price of isolation, secrecy, and her eventual death. Yet, this suffering has allowed Marin to live a life that is true.

I fight to emerge.

-- The Miniaturist/Petronella (Steps paragraph 9)

**Importance:** This appears on a note from the miniaturist, and is part of the miniaturist's extended metaphor comparing Nella to a tulip. Here, the miniaturist is describing Nella's



struggle to shake off her notions of being a proper wife and become the independent woman she is fated to be.

We can do nothing, Petronella--we women. All we can do if we're lucky is stitch up the mistakes that other people make.

-- Marin (Inside Out paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Marin expresses this statement of hopelessness to Nella with regards to Johannes. Though Marin has largely been able to live life on her own terms, she has been held back from things such as travel and doing business publicly. Thus, she has been left with a bitter feeling in regards to the power of a woman in society.

Things can change.

-- The Miniaturist/Petronella (Eight Dolls paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The miniaturist sends this note to Nella with one of her packages. Later in the novel, Nella will tell pastor Pellicorne to put this phrase on Marin's gravestone. The phrase is both a testament to the fleeting nature of life, and also to the way in which one can rise above their circumstances and become the "architect of their own fortune" as the miniaturist formerly noted, and Marin taught Nella by example.

Marin lives in two worlds. Is her deathless, public propriety really a fear of God or a fear of herself? What lies beating in that carefully protected heart?

-- Nella (The Rebel paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Nella thinks this after she witnesses Marin's private bath, during which she eats candied walnuts and sheds tears over a love letter. Nella understands that there is a hidden, softer side to Marin and wonders how and why it remains so buried in view of others.

The knot's tied too tight for you.

-- Marin (Horseshoe paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Marin says this to Nella after Nella tries to convince her that the unborn child can be used as leverage against Frans, who is bringing Johannes to trial for sodomy. Nella explains everything she believes to be true about Marin and Frans's past. Rather than telling Nella the truth, Marin expresses with this statement that things are far more complicated than Nella is ready to understand.

She will tuck her real self away as Marin does.

-- Narrator (The Hopeful Loaf paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Nella makes this pact with herself after successfully selling some of Johannes's sugar to Hanna and Arnoud. She realizes how much of business is based in performance, and that in order to succeed, one must sublimate a real part of themselves and put on a different mask.



I thought she was stealing my life, but in truth she opened its compartments and let me look inside.

-- Nella (Daughters paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Nella expresses this thought to the miniaturist's father, Lucas, when he expresses sorrow that so many women have given themselves over to the miniaturist. In this moment of clarity, Nella reckons with the fact that, though the miniaturist certainly provided Nella with bouts of confusion and suspicion, she ultimately permitted a form of control Nella would not have had otherwise.

In the future she will refer to it as her first wedding night, a communion where no words were needed.

-- Narrator (Millstone paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The narrator provides this description during Nella's final private meeting with Johannes at the Stadhuis prison. They sit in silence, simply feeling the sensation of each others' presence, with the heavy knowledge that his execution will occur the next morning. For Nella, who did not have a "traditional" wedding night with Johannes, this evening represents a very different way in which her life is set to change.

We make a hopeful tapestry; no one to weave it but ourselves.

-- Nella (Nova Hollandia paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Nella thinks this in the final scene of the novel. Though Johannes and Marin have died, Nella is left to run the household of Otto, Cornelia, Lysbeth, and baby Thea. With these friends at her side, Nella is confident that the future will be pieced together in an unorthodox fashion, like a "tapestry," but that it will be a future filled with hope.