Welcome to the Dollhouse:

Hypersexuality as Social Commentary in “Baby Doll”

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Johanna Sinisalo's “Baby Doll” presents a future in which the dichotomy of fetishizing youth while forcing a projected sexual maturity builds a hyperconscious involvement of the reader that renders the story far less alien than the trope of science fiction might otherwise suggest. Building from the foundation of a foreign lexicon, “Baby Doll” makes the reader part of its world from the start, and it is not until Annette's tantrum at the end of the story that the reader is able to distance himself from the children enough to recognize fully the ramifications of demanding such hypersexuality of society's “baby dolls.”

From the outset, Sinisalo's story forces the reader to commit to the nature of its society. We are introduced to future pop sensation, “Stick That Dick,” of 2015 almost immediately, and shortly thereafter find narrator Annette watching something akin to pornography on the television as her mother unperturbed rattles off details of the upcoming week. Whether we are initially appalled by the unflinching explicitness or delighted by it, we have no choice by the first page but to accept it as the framework of that society; in doing so we exhibit the same morbid fascination surrounding sexuality that the characters do, priming us to empathize with Annette, and furthermore making us complicit in the demands of the society we would initially condemn.

Our involvement is partly developed thanks to the inclusion of an entirely new set of words. Describing age is a matter of “ten-yo,” “five-yo,” etc., and the adolescence of words like “palsy-walsy,” “jalookies,” and “mega” establishes them as a unique part of Sinisalo's world. They are distinctly schoolyard in nature, but given an air of feigned maturity due to the sexual charge of the subjects with which they are used in conjunction. The combination of the sexualized subject matter and its narration with

such distinctive words not only asks the reader to be a part of the world that has been established (since we have no other jargon or societal tendencies from which to choose), but also goes further in that it facilitates our association with the narrator. It is not long before we are on the narrator's side—we forget that Annette is eight years old.

Given then our integration into the world Sinisalo sets before us, we try to rationalize the remainder of the practices to which the society subscribes. Largely this seems to be the simultaneous split between fetishizing and skipping past childhood. Annette rips her stockings and exclaims “Oh, for fuck's sake!” but when her mother comes in the room and asks what she just said, Annette reiterates “Golly, I've wrecked my tights” (101-02), a strange self-censoring considering the openness with which the subjects of sex and objectification are handled between parents and children. Clearly, for all the promotion of expedited aging, there are certain standards of youthful innocence that are in some way upheld. Annette is allowed, encouraged even, to wear fishnet stockings and small skirts but she is apparently prohibited from letting her vocalizations reflect such adultness; while she personally has the vocabulary of someone much older, she is still conscious of the situations in which it is inappropriate to employ it, which is seemingly around her parents. This instance highlights a tension that permeates the entire story, that of a society in which youths must exude commercialized sexuality while still preserving somehow their value as a children.

Such tension is experienced really by the children themselves, a fact to which we are privy thanks to our external analysis of the anxieties that Annette's actions belay. She seems a particularly insecure breed, attributable arguably to the pressures of both society in general as well as the shadow of a commercially successful sister Lulu, but

she makes it clear that her anxieties are shared by a common population of youth her age. For example, at Ninotska's sleepover the girls watch one of her parents' pornographic movies, and Annette struggles in catering nonchalantly to the expectations of society:

> "She knows you're supposed to stay the distance with this stuff, and you're also supposed to pretend it doesn't bother you in the slightest, the way boys watch slasher movies...Even though the whole point of horror flicks is to upset you, and that's why they get made in the first place, you're still not allowed to be scared. And so they have to watch these grand slam hot pussies as if it didn't mean anything" (107).

Like Annette, the other girls are aware of what they must project in order to be a successful part of their surroundings, and yet if they anything like Annette, like we suspect they must be, there is a tangible unease that undermines the sincerity of this conformity. The unease stems from the fact that the only choice is to play to society's interpretation of sexual and personal aesthetics, but that interpretation is one nearly impossible to embody: that of the untainted but sexually loaded "baby doll."

Annette's sister Lulu is the (literal) poster child for this concept. For all her projected sexuality and her persistent pursuit by drooling boys, she is criticized by boyfriend Timppa when she tries to stop his physical advances after a month of dating. He asks indignantly, "Stop it? You're like a walking invitation, ass and jalookies on billboards all over town, and you have the balls to say *stop it*? When you lead a guy on like that, you've got to see it through" (116). The problems with a society that demands projected sexualization and condemns those who fail to "see it through" are manifold. And on the other hand, if boys don't want to "pull" a girl, they call her a slut ("Annette's a slut!" [105]). Add to what is already a complicated system of sexuality the additional

problem of how to preserve youth while trying to rush puberty, and the functional impossibility of this dollhouse society is cemented. Lulu's most recent billboard campaign is one that features underwear lines boasting names like “Sinful Black” and “Naughty Red,” but titled “Baby Doll.” While insofar as a modeling campaign is concerned, that ideal of fetishized and objectified innocence is attainable, it is not nearly so when put into practice. The result is Lulu thwarting Timppa's sexual persistence before she has even hit puberty, or Annette trying to feign post-pubescence: “She sits spread eagled before the mirror and with careful pencil strokes draws thin wavy lines between her legs” (106).

The effect of the difficulty of living up to society's requirements relative to sexuality and innocence on the characters is painfully clear, and since as readers we are given no choice but to participate in it, to take it as the only standard, we empathize with them (the difficulties that the characters face in living up to society's fetishized youth are matched by our difficulty as readers in accepting the fictional world Sinisalo has presented). As the story moves ahead, we find ourselves empathizing increasingly with Annette, so that when she catches the movie on television, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, the aesthetics of the film seem as equally magnetic to us as they do to Annette. As Annette tells Lulu, “Welcome to the dollhouse, Baby Doll” (119) before disconnecting the telephone, it gives the reader a sense of bitter satisfaction, since we too need someone to share in our forced acceptance of a society that is as fascinating as it is disturbing.

A juvenile empathy this is. Strangely involved considering how far away from our world the story's society seems at first. But what is, ostensibly, a radically different

society, actually bears enough similarities to induce such reactions on the reader's part. The ultimate success of the story is its careful decoration of a science fiction story into what passes initially only as a social commentary of the future. Sinisalo presents a world that initially is alien in its uncompromising sexualization of who we deem to be children, but that slowly and subtly proves its own familiarity to the reader as we find that our ability to empathize with the society and the characters is not such an arduous experience as would be expected were the fictional world very far removed from our own. It is in this ability to seem both alien and familiar that “Baby Doll” reflects the bipolarity of the fetishizing of hypersexual behavior while still demanding an innocence that the title of the story suggests. The reader however is not able to recognize objectively the problems inherent in the dollhouse society until the end of the story.

Having empathized so fully and unquestioning with Annette throughout the duration of the story, assuming of her the maturity that we possess as readers, and thus the righteousness of her experiences and her trustworthiness as a narrator, it isn’t until the end that we remember that she is eight years old.