

# Research Essay of *Lullabies for Little Criminals* by Heather O'Neill

(by Ariel Lekas)

In the novel *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, Heather O'Neill deals with the uncomfortable subject of a young girl's loss of innocence and her introduction to the adult world, in which sex is at the forefront. Through her own narration and thoughts, Baby's feelings and reactions regarding the act and its implications are revealed. Although society likes to ignore this disturbing topic, there are several other literary works in which pre-adolescent characters discover their sexuality by forming relationships with older predators or by prostitution. In this novel, the protagonist Baby does both, and her attitude towards sex and sexuality can be both compared and contrasted to those of Augusten Burroughs in *Running With Scissors*, Iris in "Taxi Driver," and Violet in "Pretty Baby."

In the expositions of *Running With Scissors* and *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, the main characters have not yet experienced sex for themselves. However, both Baby and Augusten, aged eleven and twelve respectively, have been indirectly exposed to many sexual images. In the Red Light District of Montreal, whores working street corners and newspaper advertisements for strippers displaying pictures of them "with their wrists in handcuffs and their breasts falling all over the place" (O'Neill 6) are commonplace to Baby. The attitude with which she regards the prostitutes goes further than nonchalance; some of Baby's comments even suggest admiration and jealousy. She exclaims: "They made me feel bad when I was little because they always had beautiful high-heeled boots, while I had to wear ugly galoshes" (O'Neill 6). This reverence for glamorous older women is shared by Augusten, who shares his mother Deirdre's passion for dressing up in fancy women's clothing and shoes and performing in front of an audience. Despite her love for reading her poems to adoring fans, in reality Deirdre's only true supporter is her son. This failure as a writer is only one of the many reasons that bring Augusten and his mother into contact with the Finch family. Augusten's relationships and time spent with the Finches proves to be the foundation for his sexual acceptance and exploration. Upon one of his visits to the Finch household, Dr. Finch discusses his "Masturbatorium" with Augusten and Deirdre. As the name suggests, the "Masturbatorium" is a room where the doctor pleases himself in between seeing patients. At the age of twelve, Augusten describes being able to "picture the *Penthouse* magazines, columns of them, next to the sofa. The thought of fat Dr. Finch ditching a patient to go jerk off in the back room while looking at pictures of airbrushed vaginas - or worse, Golda Meier - was disturbing." (Burroughs 34-35). Thoughts and knowledge of what might go on behind closed doors when much older men are "relieving their stress" are not common in twelve-year-old children. Having both been exposed to such blatant sexual displays at young ages is very likely a directly related to the origins of Baby and Augusten's views that sex is inevitably a part of life and is not a big deal despite your age.

Being so young at the time of their first sexual experiences, the main characters of the two novels are unsure of how to deal with the emotional side of sex. Although both Baby and Augusten later develop emotional relationships with the older men that take advantage of them, initially they feel detached and unclean. After his first sexual encounter with Neil, when

Augusten gets home he states "I can still smell Neil; it's like his smell is trapped between my upper lip and my nose. I think I want to wash my face, take a shower." (Burroughs 123). Similarly, when Baby arrives back at the apartment after the first time Alphonse has sex with her, she says "I peeled off my clothes and walked to the bathroom naked. I felt as if my insides were cold. I turned on the hot water and stuck my hand under it, waiting to feel warm-blooded again. I looked in the cabinet mirror and told myself that it didn't matter. So I believed my reflection, since there was no one else telling me what to do." (O'Neill 210). Lacking in these descriptions is any sort of sentiment attached to the act of sex; Augusten is very matter-of-fact and Baby does not mention the act, only her feelings of emptiness and self-loathing. When reviewing *Running With Scissors*, Miriam Marty Clark describes Augusten's sexual relationship with Neil as "[p]ainful, violent, humiliating..." (Clark 301). The same description can be used to describe all of Baby's sexual relationships. The dirtiness and disconnectedness that she feels is even further deepened after the first time Baby is paid to have sex. Afterwards, she describes her numbness. She explains, "every time I'd had sex before, it had been kind of painful. That time I didn't feel a thing. It was hard to believe he was even inside me when he was there." This complete physical detachment from the act of sex is also shared with Baby by the young girl Iris in the film "Taxi Driver."

Like Baby, Iris is a twelve-year-old prostitute, working for a pimp who supposedly loves her. When the main character Travis pays Iris' pimp for fifteen minutes alone with her, she handles the situation much like the business transaction that it is. Even though Travis only wants to save her from a life of prostitution, Iris continues to insist on taking her clothes off and "making it." She tells him that he has only fifteen minutes, and that "[they] better make it or [her pimp] will get mad" ("Taxi Driver"). This scene displays the disconnectedness she feels from turning tricks, much like Baby. Other negative effects are also caused by the distorted views that these young girls have on relationships. Hirschman and Stern, in examining the effects of child prostitution, say that "[o]ccurring as it does during the young person's early years of identity formation, it can prevent the individual from ever achieving a sense of wholeness and self-worth. And it can serve to distort the individual's ability to construct intimate-as opposed to merely sexual-relationships with others" (Hirschman and Stern 579). This is proven true when applied to Baby and Iris. Removed though they may be from the strange older men who pay them for their services, both young girls develop strong attachments to their respective pimps despite the horrible way they are treated. A conversation between Iris and Sport reveals her feelings for him. She complains that he "never spends any time with [her] anymore, and he refers to her as "his woman" and tells her that "[he]'d be lost without her." ("Taxi Driver"). This intimate relationship between a young girl and a much older man is paralleled in *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. Baby comes to depend on Alphonse for shelter, clothing, and heroin. Although she is viewed by others as his girlfriend, her relationship with him attempts to fill the void where a mother-daughter relationship should be. She says: "When Alphonse came into my life, it strangely felt a little bit like he was a mother figure. Every good pimp is a mother." (O'Neill 186). This statement refers to the stability and security that Alphonse somewhat provides for Baby in the absence of a real mother in her life. Iris, on the other hand, actually does have a mother who loves and misses her. In this way she differs from Baby. However, despite the fact that Jules is not by any standards a good father or role model for Baby, he loves her very much just as Iris' do. At the end of the film, a letter from Iris' parents is read aloud expressing their gratitude to Travis. A segment of the letter reads: "There is no way we can repay you for returning our Iris to us. We thought we had

lost her, but now our lives are full again... we have taken steps to see that she has never cause to run away again... In conclusion, [we] would like to thank you from the bottom of our hearts." ("Taxi Driver"). Her parents obviously care deeply about her and are taking measure to ensure that her life will end up on the right track. Jules also makes an attempt to straighten Baby's life out by returning to Val de Loups so she can live with Jules' cousin. The values of growing up in a stable family environment versus the detrimental effects of growing up in an unwholesome environment that is not suitable for children are also conveyed in the film "Pretty Baby."

Similar to Baby and Augusten, Violet in "Pretty Baby" is also exposed to sexual images at a very young age. Being raised in a whorehouse, with prostitutes and johns having blatant and casual sexual encounters at all hours of the day, Violet is no stranger to sex and has no illusions as to what her future will be. When getting her fortune read at the beginning of the film, she is told that "[She] will have so many men [she] won't know what to do with them." ("Pretty Baby"). The servant telling her this is not referring to men as true lovers, but rather as men willing to pay for her services. Violet is not phased at all by this; she is simply waiting for the day when she herself will become a prostitute. Baby, also, is aware of the fact that she will be expected to sell her body. She says, "I knew Alphonse was a pimp and that sooner or later I was going to have to turn a trick. For some reason it seemed as natural as growing wisdom teeth. I didn't even question why I was going to have to." (O'Neill 215). These attitudes are not healthy or normal for preadolescent girls, but nonetheless both Violet and Baby view prostitution as a commonplace part of life. Another likeness between the two is how they are rescued from the world of the sex trade with the hopes of leading a relatively normal life. After a tearful reunion with her mother, Violet's new stepfather explains: "I want to send Violet to school and she has to be raised right... Mrs. Fuller has overcome her past, and she wants the same for Violet." ("Pretty Baby"). Then, with hardly any hesitation, Violet leaves her old life behind to return to being a child in the care of her family. Similarly, after Alphonse dies of an overdose, Baby does not even pause before walking out of the hotel and heading towards the shelter where Jules was staying. Dealing with the obvious emotional and mental trauma that comes with the death of someone close to you is not easy, and as Baby is walking she says "All I knew now was that I kept walking and walking toward the Mission... I felt that if I stopped, even for a second, I would completely collapse and throw up on my shoes" (O'Neill 311). This sense of direction and motivation that Baby is contrasted greatly by Violet, who does not make the decision for herself but rather just goes along with whatever the adults in her life tell her to do. These events show just how mature and independent Baby is compared to Violet. However, when Baby finally reunites with Jules again at the end of the novel, she does agree with his suggestion that they move away to the small town outside Montreal where her mother and Jules are from to clean up her life.

Striking similarities can be found between these three young characters who all experience sex in their preadolescent years. Many of their attitudes and reactions are very much alike. However, they differ in the fact that all come from different social situations and environments. Though disturbing, the reality is that these encounters can happen in real life and not just in novels and therefore our society must find ways to become informed and deal with this problem.

## Works Cited

- Clark, Miriam Marty. "Reading Students Reading in the Postcanonical Age." Pedagogy 5.2 (Spring2005 2005): 297-303. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 9 Mar. 2009.
- Hatch, Robert. "Films." Nation 226.15 (22 Apr. 1978): 484-485. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 10 Mar. 2009.
- Hirschman, Elizabeth C., and Barbara B. Stern.. "Women As Commodities: Prostitution as Depicted in The Blue Angel, Pretty Baby, and Pretty Woman." Advances in Consumer Research 21.1 (Jan. 1994): 576-581. Business Source Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 10 Mar. 2009.
- "Lullabies for Little Criminals." Publishers Weekly 253.31 (07 Aug. 2006): 34-34. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 9 Mar. 2009.
- Pretty Baby. Dir. Louis Malle. Perf. Brooke Shields, Keith Carradine, Susan Sarandon. Paramount Pictures. 1978.
- "Running With Scissors (Book)." Kirkus Reviews 70.10 (15 May 2002): 714. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 9 Mar. 2009.
- "Running With Scissors; Cutting wit." The Times (London, England) (Feb 22, 2003): 16. Academic OneFile. Gale. Grant MacEwan College. 9 Mar. 2009.
- Simon, John. "Coming of Age in Sodom." National Review 30.23 (09 June 1978): 727. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 10 Mar. 2009.
- Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Robert De Niro, Jodie Foster, Albert Brooks, Harvey Keitel, Leonard Harris, Peter Boyle, Cybill Shepherd. Columbia Pictures. 1976.
- Zaleski, Jeff, et al. "Running With Scissors (Book)." Publishers Weekly 249.22 (03 June 2002): 77. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 9 Mar. 2009.