

# Small objects: a literary analysis of lullabies for little criminals

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Small Objects: A Literary Analysis of “ Lullabies for Little Criminals” In “ Lullabies for Little Criminals,” there are many small objects that are relevant to Baby’s life. Objects can have remarkably profound effects on a person’s life, whether they are of sentimental value or another form of personal meaning, they have an impact on us. An object can mean many things to different people. An abandoned doll in a trash bin could be seen as old and ugly to an average person, but to the person who originally owned the doll; it could have been particularly special.

In the novel, Heather O’Neil illustrates the effects of such objects on Baby and their symbolic meaning. In “ Lullabies for Little Criminals,” there are three objects that represent Baby’s growth and change throughout the novel: the ragdoll, the knee- high socks, and the toy mice. When introducing her new friend Lauren to her room, Baby reflects on her rag doll, “ It was a doll that my mother had bought for me when she was pregnant . . . The doll also made me feel sweet inside, too, because it made me feel that at some point, even before I existed, I had been loved” (O’Neill 97-98).

This illustrates Baby’s longing for a loving mother figure, which is a reasonable expectation from a 12 year old girl. Loving care is a critical need of any child. Baby does not have that feeling of being loved; therefore, she finds comfort in the fact that she was once loved. The doll is also representative of her current state of mind. Such as her wishes to be normal: have normal friends, normal parents, normalfamily; a normal life. When Jules destroys Baby’s rag doll out of anger, it is symbolic of a lostchildhood.

Her last reminder of the love her mother had for her had been torn away. Baby says, “ Now I was nothing, a real nobody (O’Neill 119). The destruction of her doll meant that her sense of belonging, that she was once part of a family, was now gone. She seems as if she is being pulled into adolescence without having any real sense of true childhood. When the character Alphonse begins to take an interest in Baby, his first attempt to make Baby take an interest in him is to give her a gift. The gift is a pair of dainty knee-high socks.

Baby wants nice things, and these socks were, according to baby, “ the first pretty things I’d ever owned” (O’Neill 155). This gift is exhilarating for her. It is an acknowledgment from someone who believed she was attractive, especially coming from Alphonse. According the others in the neighborhood, it was known that Alphonse only looked out for good looking women, so if he took notice of someone, it meant something (O’Neill 148). It is particularly clear to the reader that Alphonse likely has ulterior motives, but to baby Alphonse is simply someone who likes her.

The socks remind Baby that she is pretty, and she is proud of the fact that an older man found her attractive. In turn, this causes baby to trust Alphonse and fall for his manipulation, leading towards what could be a life of prostitution. The socks are symbolic of Baby being forced into adulthood. Baby is still young and naive; she has no way of understanding what Alphonse is attempting to do. Therefore, the socks may also represent Baby’s vulnerability and lack of ability to judge character.

At this point in the novel, Baby has not had a proper childhood or even learned any of what it means to be a teenage person, and now she is already being pushed into adulthood. After Alphonse dies in the hotel room, Baby does not know what to do. She is lost without an adult. She realizes, “ Even though I was making all the money, it seemed that since he was the adult, he was the only one who could get us a place to stay and food to eat” (O’Neill 309). It is clear that Baby is still mentally and physically a child, but has taken on the role of an adult.

Since there is no longer an adult in her life, she is immediately overwhelmed. She does not think seeing Jules is a good idea (O’Neill 311), however, for some reason she is compelled to go to the shelter in which he is residing in. It seems that Baby’s situation may be hopeless. Baby’s arrival to the Mission seems to be the crucial turning point in the novel. She is presented with a family of toy mice, which baby believes to be “ by far, the best gift I’d ever gotten” (O’Neill 317). An innocent and beautiful gift, which is exactly what Baby needs, something she has not had in an exceptionally long time.

The mice are given along with the knowledge that she will be living Jules’s cousin from now on. The mice represent the possibilities of positive change in Baby’s life. They are symbolic of hope; the possibility that she will find what she needs. In “ Lullabies for Little Criminals,” the use of objects to create symbolic meaning is abundantly evident and illustrates the roles Baby assumes as the novel progresses. She does not experience growing up in the same way most children do. She seems to go from child, to adolescent teen, to adult, in approximately a year.

The roles she assumes show her growth in a manner that is unnatural to the reader, and the use of symbolism to show how this process is forced onto her is profound. The symbolism of the toy mice representing change shows Baby's final step towards becoming a "normal" person. The author's use of this immediately after the seemingly darkest point in the novel serves to create an emotional uplift for the reader; ultimately allowing the reader to realize that the character is going to be alright. The narrator states, "Then Janine stepped over to me and squeezed me hard.

I could feel my heart beating when she hugged me against her, but now it felt fine . . . Her big blue eyes looked just like Jules's, and I guess mine too. Her green winter jacket smelled like rain" (O'Neill 330). The final paragraph of the novel shows that Baby will likely get exactly what she wanted: Love, a caring person, family, belonging, and most importantly, the opportunity to find herself. Work Cited O'Neill, Heather. *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. 1st ed. Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print