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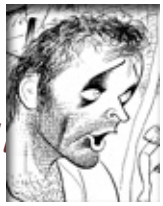

Number 12

Marriage, Adultery, and Desire: A Subversive Subtext in *Baby Doll*

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Upon its release in 1956, the film *Baby Doll* provoked virulent threats from protestors, bans from religious leaders, and flippancy from film critics who dismissed it as a lurid tale of a virgin child bride, her sexually frustrated husband, and her smarmy lover. Since then film historians have continued to revisit *Baby Doll* as significant to Hollywood's censorship struggle; yet the film itself has failed to find a respectable place in the canon of American cinema and as such has rarely been the subject of detailed critical analysis. A collaboration between writer Tennessee Williams and director Elia Kazan, the story portrays the nineteen-year-old married virgin Baby Doll Meighan (Carroll Baker) who must consummate her marriage the following day on her twentieth birthday, as long as her husband Archie Lee Meighan (Karl Malden) upholds his end of the bargain: to provide her with a comfortable life. The wrinkle in his plan arrives in the form of Sicilian Silva Vacarro (Eli Wallach), who has overtaken the local cotton-gin business. After Archie Lee spitefully burns down his rival's gin, Vacarro arrives at his house to seek revenge. There he meets Baby Doll, who becomes instrumental in his plan. What ensues is a complex mix of desire and desperation, with Baby Doll as both player and pawn. In this essay I examine the film's subtext illuminated through its unconventional depiction of gender roles, adultery, and female sexuality.

A Historic Controversy

Baby Doll became the first film to receive the seal of approval from Hollywood's self-regulatory Production Code Administration (PCA) while simultaneously (and contradictorily) earning a condemned rating from the Legion of Decency, a religious watchdog organization. At the time, the PCA and the Legion censored "lustful" content and required a form of "poetic justice" in a film's resolution.

¶3 The film received its most notorious attention when Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York mounted the pulpit of Saint Patrick's Cathedral on December 16, 1956, to denounce it. According to an article printed the following day in the *New York Times*, the Cardinal stated: "The revolting theme of this picture, *Baby Doll*, and the brazen advertising promoting it constitute a contemptuous defiance of the natural law, the observance of which has been the source of strength in our national life" ("Cardinal Scores"). Since he had never before used the pulpit to condemn a film, Spellman's unprecedented attack sparked a historic controversy. His depiction of *Baby Doll* as a "definitive corruptive moral influence" on audiences caused an ensuing backlash against his "employing a pulpit so powerful that the denunciation amounted to censorship" ("Roman Catholics").

¶4 What was it in particular about *Baby Doll* that inspired such outrage from Spellman and others? The Legion of Decency objected to the film's dwelling "without variation or relief upon carnal suggestiveness in action, dialogue and costuming" ("New Kazan Movie"). Yet this criticism matched that of other films banned that same year by the Legion of Decency, such as Brigitte Bardot's *And God Created Woman* and Marilyn Monroe's *The Seven-Year Itch*, neither of which inspired the same public wrath as *Baby Doll*. Furthermore, although Williams had become renowned for his "sex-haunted" works containing a "catalogue of perversities" including rape, incest, and nymphomania, none of them had earned censure by the Legion (Gardner 201). *Baby Doll*, on the

other hand, caused such a polemical debate over its supposed immorality that "Williams, his works, his reputation, were for a time front-page 'news,' which is not something that can often be said about playwrights in this period" (Palmer 31). Clearly, there existed something more agitating within *Baby Doll* than its sensuality. Upon closer examination, it seems the film's implicit challenge of the domesticated woman's role and its explicit portrayal of female sexual desire presented an antiestablishmentarian perspective, and it was this that provoked the greatest fury.

¶5 *Baby Doll* was released at an important juncture in American culture. Superficially, marriage and motherhood were considered "the only genuinely valued activities" for women, "every woman's sole destiny" (Breines 50, 55). On the other hand, the release of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1953 made it increasingly difficult to conceal the incongruity between accepted cultural norms and gender realities. This turbulence was "articulated as fears of sexual chaos and translated into rigid taboos against female 'promiscuity'" (Breines 55). The dichotomy led to the representation of women in films as either "sex objects or wives" (Breines 102), but never both: a sensual woman was seen a threat to the sanctity of the nuclear family. In Hollywood films, there was no indication that women could simultaneously be sensual, successful and respectable. Yet within these constraints a subtext emerged: "The didactic moralism of movie magazine stories and advice columns and movies themselves competed with the glamour and sexuality that held out the possibility, and likelihood, of a break with the family" (Breines 109). While most films "promoted women's domesticity and inequality," many films of the era "simultaneously reflected, unconsciously or otherwise, the malaise of domesticity and the untenably narrow boundaries of the female role" (French xxxi). Beliefs regarding marriage and motherhood became a contrivance to avoid "the sexual impasse in which the conditions for a more autonomous female sexuality were in place but were obscured by the double standard" (Breines 55). In retrospect, the small seeds of change were sown in those films of the 1950s that "provided fertile material for imagining feminine selves that diverged significantly from the model their mothers presented" (Breines 55). *Baby Doll*, as we will see, contributed significantly to this divergence.

¶6 The film opens as "the camera roots like an indifferent hog through a heap of white trash in the Deep South," leading to a scene of Baby Doll sleeping in her crib as her husband Archie Lee peers through a hole in the wall to watch her ("Cinema"). His voyeurism works as a fitting correlative for the audience's own lecherous gaze at Baby Doll—especially since it is this exact image of her that had been mounted on a block-long promotional billboard in Times Square, in New York City. In fact, the viewer's complicity in the gaze is so compelling that one reviewer wondered if the "sociological study has not degenerated into the prurient peep" ("Cinema").

¶7 In her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey identifies cinema with scopophilia, or "pleasure in looking," and classifies the audience's gaze as male and the "image" to be observed and fetishized as female: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey). In films that feature "the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists," the objectified woman eventually becomes controlled by her voyeur and "through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (Mulvey). Here, *Baby Doll* differs: Archie Lee as the gazer will never possess his

object of desire. As he attempts to cut a larger hole in the wall, she awakens from her thumb-sucking slumber. Upon noticing his action, she gets up and walks into the adjoining room to confront him. After his initial surprise, Archie Lee smiles at the object of his fantasy crossing the line into reality, but fantasy quickly fades as his "doll" morphs into a contemptuous child-woman who criticizes and threatens him. As John Timpane notes in his essay "Gaze and Resistance in the Plays of Tennessee Williams," all of Williams's characters, including women, "are seen with desire, but not with a desire to control. They are seen with desire because they cannot be controlled. Call it the difference between desiring what you can have and desiring what you can't" (Timpane). The film's depiction of the voyeur-husband who must peep on his own wife identifies the audience with the inadequate ogler and, as such, emasculates the gaze of the viewer as well. The subsequent disruption of Archie's impotent gaping by his female object sets a satiric tone for the film, mocks the audience's peeking into their lives, and portends the larger theme regarding women's roles addressed in the film.

"Not Exactly a Young Girl's Dream": A Satire of Gender Roles

It would not be difficult to enumerate the ways *Baby Doll* might be interpreted as upholding myths of woman, child, and virgin. Despite her arrogance, Baby Doll appears fatuous and naïve, fitting all the stereotypes of a female virgin: "inexperienced, helpless, childlike, and in need of protection, a holdover from the Victorian notion of woman as child" (Rowe 130). Yet Baby Doll's exaggerated character as a virgin child bride ultimately does more to challenge these stereotypes than support them. Indeed, the film challenges expectations on more than one front. In his essay "Civil Rights and the Black Presence in *Baby Doll*," Philip C. Kolin contends that the film "is a far more subtle and subversive film than critics emphasizing its sexual content ever recorded" (Kolin "Civil Rights" 3). He argues that although the film might be casually misconstrued as upholding racial stereotypes, a closer study shows that it undermines "the customs of the bigoted society" (Kolin "Civil Rights" 4). Similarly, in *Hollywood's Tennessee*, Robert Bray and Barton Palmer note that *Baby Doll*, through comedy, "strongly challenges conventional mores and sensibilities" (129).

¶9 Although *Baby Doll* might at first glance be dismissed as demonizing and demoralizing women, in fact it clearly satirizes traditional notions of a wife. Nineteen may seem young for a bride by current standards, but this was certainly not the case in 1956, when the median age for marriage in America was 20.2 (Oakley 291). At the time a young southern bride like Baby Doll was "far from fictitious," as actress Carroll Baker reflected in her autobiography (150). One sociologist summarized the limited options for white teenage girls of the era:

> In the 1950s, the single acceptable goal for women was to find fulfillment in the family as wives and mothers. The period was characterized by powerful cultural norms that exaggerated traditional femininity, sexual and domestic. Notions of femininity and masculinity were emphatically differentiated, women expected to be domestic and dependent on men, and men expected to be breadwinners. (Breines 33–34)

¶10 Through hyperbole, the film derides these prescribed gender roles. What better way to show the absurdity of domestic dependence than to portray a baby wife who sucks her thumb and sleeps in a crib? How better to expose the prostitution of the spousal relationship than to show a wife who must pleasure her husband in exchange for nice furniture? Through its characters, the film rejects both masculine and feminine stereotypes—Archie Lee is no breadwinner, and Baby Doll is most certainly not domestic. She neither cooks nor cleans, and she has no apparent respect for her husband, whom she treats with disgust. From the opening scenes of the film,

she calls him "not exactly a young girl's dream come true" and refuses to "cook for a fat old thing like you." Later in the film, she cringes as her husband forces a kiss upon her. She may be an uneducated virgin, but she is certainly not docile. Filmmaker François Truffaut described her as "clearheaded and without illusions to the point of cynicism," most unusual for a traditional powder-puff sex symbol of the 1950s (Truffaut 110); despite her diminutive name, she "shows herself to be no easily exploited and pathetic gamine" (Palmer and Bray 139). Her blatant contempt for her husband culminates in her refusal to satisfy him sexually, a radical protest tacitly suggesting that she values her own sexual interests over his.

¶11 Similarly, Archie Lee is a caricature of a 1950s husband, his machismo exposed as a pitiable attempt to control a woman. At one point he calls her a "cold woman," alluding to female frigidity, a common scapegoat for marital problems at the time. However, we soon witness that Baby Doll is anything but frigid, and we see that his words are a futile psychological ploy.

¶12 Archie Lee also attempts to diminish his wife by convincing her of her own ignorance. When, in seeking economic freedom, she threatens to get her own job, he dismissively asks, "What sort of work could you do?" His words epitomize a common tactic used to subjugate women:

> To justify the sexism that they consciously and unconsciously practiced, men resorted to the same tactic that had long been used by racists to perpetuate racial discrimination: the invention and dissemination of the big lie. . . . Like blacks, women were alleged to be mentally and physically inferior to the dominant group—less intelligent and talented, emotionally unstable, irresponsible, weak, and submissive. (Oakley 292)

Baby Doll's response to Archie Lee in this scene typifies how women had become complicit with the perception of their own inferiority. As her husband dismisses each of her job suggestions with quick comebacks ("You don't know math." "You can't even type."), she finally admits that she could be a hostess: "I could say hello." Such a deeply ingrained concept of female inadequacy would emerge as an impediment to widespread feminist action:

> As feminist leaders would discover in the 1960s, much to their dismay, a major obstacle to the destruction of sexism was the belief of many women that they were inferior and should be kept in their place—a testament to the effectiveness of the brainwashing of the male-dominated society. (Oakley 292)

Yet in *Baby Doll*, the assumption of female ignorance turns out to be man's downfall: Archie Lee so takes his wife's naïveté for granted that he reveals his own foolishness. After being cuckolded by her in public, Archie Lee turns to a man in the town and asks, "What would you do?" The man advises, "Get tougher." Archie's subsequent attempt to get tougher (by slapping a "disobedient" Baby Doll across the face) fails to whip her into line and rather prompts her final legal and sexual treachery against him.

¶13 The absurdity of gender imbalance resurfaces at the end of the film during the couple's final argument. Archie Lee threatens that there is a new government bureau looking to round up all the "UWs," or "useless women," and shoot them. Baby Doll smirks and responds, "How about men that's destructive? Ain't they got some plan to round up destructive men and shoot 'em? Men that blows things up, burns things down because they're too evil or too stupid to get along otherwise?" In this haughty retort, Baby Doll's sarcasm exposes what would become a key question for second-wave feminists: Why should women be held to some imagined standard, but not men? Although she may be unaware of the sociological context of her response, Baby Doll

instinctively articulates frustration with the irrationality of a double standard and, in doing so, points to the central target of the impending feminist movement.

¶14 The derision inherent in this portrayal of marriage appears to have been mostly lost on audiences and critics at the time of the film's release. Had it screened a decade later, it might have elicited a different reaction, but critics in 1956, restricted by the artistic and cultural norms of their time, mistook *Baby Doll*'s wit for mere crassness.

Confronting Taboo: Female Adultery

Gender double standards are further unraveled in the film's treatment of Baby Doll's infidelity. Kinsey's 1953 *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* shocked Americans by estimating that 50 percent of women had engaged in premarital sex and that 26 percent committed adultery by age forty (Oakley 304). The report toppled widespread views on sexuality and helped to "demystify sex, to liberalize American attitudes about it, and to have it looked upon as a commonplace human activity rather than some secret, dirty, prohibited perversion" (Oakley 305). Specifically, the Kinsey report provoked a "revelation that women were much more promiscuous than people had thought" and were "engaging in sexual practices that previous generations—and the American sexual code of the fifties—had deemed unnatural, abhorrent, immoral, and even illegal" (Oakley 304).

¶16 Still, a wife's infidelity remained particularly taboo and, as such, was handled relatively consistently in films:

> There is definitely a double standard. While there is a great deal of tolerance for the straying husband depicted in these films, there is almost none for the straying woman. When a woman betrays a man sexually, it is a matter of cosmic significance, but when a man does it, it may be a casual fling. When a woman strays in marriage, it is seen as justifiable only if her husband is a cad or a killer. Even then, it is best for her to wait until the bounder has been dealt with by society or by fate. It is also justifiable if her straying has been motivated by True Love, but if that is the case, she can expect sympathy only from moviegoers, not from the plot of the film itself. She will have to pay. (Basinger 354)

Baby Doll broke with this convention: despite Archie Lee and Baby Doll's having "a false marriage, falsely made" and "bound to collapse" (Kazan 191), the fact that Baby Doll escaped unpunished was anomalous.

¶17 In the final act of the film, Archie Lee returns to find Baby Doll in her slip, alone in the house with Vacarro, who has spent the day with her. The lovers proceed to flaunt their relationship—feeding each other, sharing private jokes—until the enraged husband runs off to get his gun. As Archie Lee hollers maniacally while firing futile shots, Baby Doll summons the police and then runs to hide with Vacarro in a tree. When the police arrive, Vacarro emerges to show them a signed note from Baby Doll stating that Archie Lee had burned down Vacarro's cotton gin. As the police restrain Archie Lee, he pleads not for himself but for them to keep the lovers apart: "But don't you leave my Baby Doll here with him. Don't you leave him here with her . . . you're a married man, you understand how I feel. . . . Just for tonight, don't leave him on the place." At the film's end, Archie Lee watches from the officer's vehicle as Vacarro rushes off the property, promising to return the next day with more cotton. After both men have left, Baby Doll remains with her Aunt Rose at the house, with nothing to do but "wait for tomorrow and see if we're remembered or forgotten." Notably, this ambiguity was absent from Williams's screenplay, "which ends with Baby Doll falling into Vacarro's arms like a piece of ripe fruit"

(Palmer 31), and from Williams's later adaptation into the play *Tiger Tail*, which concludes with the lovers unambiguously united.

¶18 In early feedback on the story, PCA Chief Joseph Breen expressed concern that the film's ending provided "very little relief of normal, healthy decency and sanity" (Brook 352–53); remember that the PCA required "poetic justice" in the resolution of films. The PCA initially emphasized that this "theme of 'justified adultery' could not be allowed" (Palmer and Bray 143). However, Kazan successfully convinced them that such an affair never took place, and the PCA ultimately agreed that the affair was "absent" from the picture. Such a claim seems absurd when viewing the characters' interactions and Kazan's careful cutaways, so that "the only sense in which the 'sex affair' could be said to be absent from the picture is that it is not directly dramatized" (Palmer and Bray 144). Viewers themselves, of course, never questioned the obvious theme of adultery.

¶19 Archie Lee's plea in the film's end—begging the police to prevent the adultery—mirrors the desperation of the era's censuring agencies to conclude the film according to cultural norms: the wandering wife shouldn't end up with her lover. The parallel between the audience and Archie Lee comes full circle: they begin as co-voyeurs and end as co-moralists desperate for restitution. When Baby Doll leaps to stop Vacarro from running off, he brushes her aside, causing Archie Lee to smile. Yet that smile fades quickly as he asks, "What happens tomorrow?" One of the officers responds, "The town marshal has no control over tomorrow." Like the town marshal, the PCA has no control over what happens tomorrow—whether Baby Doll is jilted or earns her licentious twist on "happily ever after."

¶20 Regardless of whether one imagines Vacarro's return or not, *Baby Doll*'s "bad wife" motif presents a compelling aberration from mainstream cinematic representations. Since she is neither reformed nor punished in the end, the film fails to uphold the sanctity of marriage or woman's domestic place. This conscious decision on the part of both writer and director to liberate Baby Doll from her husband at the end of the film seems salient. As Barton Palmer notes in his essay "*Baby Doll*: The Success of Scandal," the conclusion could easily have been changed to conform to the moral confines of the time:

> Interestingly, *Baby Doll* could well have been melodramatized in such fashion, with Archie Lee transformed into a less ambiguously evil and oppressive husband from whom Baby Doll decisively breaks with the help of a more obviously virtuous Vacarro. The adultery, and the lust that motivates it, would then be provided with what the PCA promoted as "compensating moral value." . . . The sense that a poor innocent had been rescued from her lascivious and conscienceless oppressor would be stronger than their ostensibly illicit behavior. (Palmer 36)

Instead, *Baby Doll* challenges its audience with characters who are neither purely good nor blatantly evil. Author and director "were deliberately flouting the time-honored concept of providing compensating moral value to balance the material that was questionable in code terms" (Palmer and Bray 142). Such ambiguity muddies the morality of the story: without knowing who is good or evil, there is no way for the audience to identify if or how "good" wins in the end.

¶21 Baby Doll exemplifies the paradoxical nature of Williams's female characters:

> The centrality of women in Williams' plays and his deep sensitivity to their plight has led to a widespread consensus that he was an early feminist who may have identified with women because of his own status as an outsider. On the other hand, perhaps there's a hint of misogyny in Williams' fascination with doomed women facing impossible circumstances. (DiSchiavi 18)

As a tragicomic character, Baby Doll elicits both empathy and revulsion. Symbolically she represents the iconic trapped wife of the 1950s with the power to both liberate herself and castrate her oppressor as she embarks on an unknown future. Though Baby Doll is not rewarded for her affair, the gravity typical of contemporary depictions of female adultery is completely absent from the film. Archie Lee is held accountable for his arson, but Baby Doll is not held accountable for her infidelity. Although she still believes her future lies in the hands of a man (her lover rather than her husband), she nonetheless has extricated herself from the despised Archie Lee, inherited a newfound independence, and awakened her sexuality—quite a sum of accomplishments for a philandering wife in a 1950s film.

"Orgiastic" and Aroused: Female Sexual Desire

Since *Baby Doll* was called the "dirtiest" film ever "legally exhibited" ("Cinema"), one would expect it to contain more than a few scenes of light petting—scenes that no longer "raise the most timid eyebrow," as Kazan himself later remarked (Williams and Mead 209). The film did not push the boundaries of explicit sex, even for the time, which was why it ultimately received approval from the PCA. Rather, there was something more subversive about its portrayal of sexuality.

¶23 Palmer states, "It is the unconventionality (rather than the illicitness or explicitness) of the sexual themes in *Baby Doll* that insured the film a sensational reception" (Palmer 31). He observes that Baby Doll's sexual awakening flourishes in the absence of "love": "Innocent of his ulterior motives at first, Baby Doll discovers in the attentions of Vacarro genuine sexual feelings for the first time, but Williams does not show her 'falling in love' in any conventional sense" (Palmer 30). This lack of "love" not only makes moral restitution in the film's conclusion impossible but, perhaps more significantly, also presents female sexual desire as independent of love. Examining the scenes of *Baby Doll* that inspired the most outrage, it seems significant that they all display an unusual depiction of female sexual arousal.

¶24 The first widely contested scene shows Vacarro beside Baby Doll on an outdoor swing. After trying to scare Baby Doll into confessing Archie Lee's crime, Vacarro attempts a different tack: seduction. He sits beside her on the swing, rocking and touching her. As he runs his hand across her body, it "slides suggestively downward and out of frame" as Baby Doll becomes physically aroused to the point of intoxication; the PCA described her response as "orgiastic" (Brook 354–55). Smiling with her eyes closed and gripping the pole of the swing, she unconvincingly pleads, "Don't touch me. Please don't touch me. I don't like to be touched." When he asks, "Why do you giggle then?" she responds, "Because you make me feel kind of hysterical, Mr. Vacarro." Caressing her neck, he has a stranglehold on her and challenges her to face her desire:

> BABY DOLL: Mr. Vacarro, you certainly are getting familiar.
>
> VACARRO: Don't you have any fun-loving spirit about you?
>
> BABY DOLL: Well, this isn't fun.
>
> VACARRO: Why do you giggle then?
>
> BABY DOLL: Because I'm ticklish.

There is no doubt that the titillation she purposefully or innocently labels "ticklish" is in fact sexual arousal. According to the PCA, this "distastefully lustful" scene makes "deliberate use of adultery as a weapon" (Brook 354). She becomes so impassioned that it frightens her. After shaking off what she calls feeling "weak" and

"buzzy and fuzzy," she rushes off to find salvation from Archie Lee, although ultimately he cannot save her from herself or the power of her desire.

¶25 Also significantly protested was a scene in which Vacarro tickles Baby Doll with his foot as she giggles and writhes on the floor. The citizens of Aurora, Illinois, succeeded in obtaining an injunction against the film's exhibition based on this scene, which they called "scandalous, indecent, immoral, lewd, and obscene." They stated that the scene portrayed a "young wife" lying on the floor as her "lover places his foot on her stomach, moving it about in circular motions" while she "displays an arousal of her sexual passion" (De Grazia and Newman, 243–44). Note that the citizens of Aurora opposed what they called "an arousal of her sexual passion," although in the scene Baby Doll simply laughs gleefully, like a child being tickled. Their linking the "circular motions" of his foot with her "arousal" implies that they found this scene symbolic of a vaginal or clitoral stimulation. Ultimately, what offended audiences was not merely the portrayal of an affair but the depiction of a woman's sexual arousal.

¶26 Importantly, Baby Doll plays an active role in her own seduction. She leads Vacarro on a cat-and-mouse chase that ends in the unstable attic of the old house, a symbol of her own constructed sexual boundaries collapsing. In this precarious place Vacarro succeeds in forcing her to sign an affidavit implicating her husband in the destruction of the gin. Having obtained what he came for, Vacarro pauses for a moment, offers Baby Doll the white flag of a handkerchief, and then turns to leave. It is at this point that she must act quickly and vocalize her own desire. With Vacarro no longer blocking her exit, she quickly escapes the attic and chases him down the stairs:

> BABY DOLL: I want to uh . . . I want to uh . . .Was that all you wanted? Me to confess that Archie Lee burnt down your gin?
>
> VACARRO: What else did you imagine, Mrs. Meighan?
>
> BABY DOLL: Well . . .
>
> VACARRO: Mrs. Meighan, I . . . You're a child, Mrs. Meighan. That's why we played the game of hide-and-seek—it's a game for children.
>
> BABY DOLL: You don't have to go all the way to your place for a nap. You could take a nap here.

Vacarro accepts Baby Doll's coy invitation to take a nap in her crib, adding, "Come up and sing me to sleep," as he walks up the stairs. Before following him she mutters to herself, "My daddy would turn in his grave." No sexual act is witnessed, although the fade-out leaves much to be imagined.

¶27 When the PCA took issue with this scene, Kazan argued that it was "physically impossible for any sexual activity to take place in such a limited area" (Walsh 274), yet the subsequent depiction of the couple, especially Baby Doll, overtly suggests that a considerable change has taken place. In early notes on the film, Kazan articulated his initial idea of Baby Doll's character arc. He imagined Baby Doll as a woman "almost defeated . . . [having] lost her appetite for life and fun and sex" (qtd. in Schickel 331) who ultimately discovers ecstasy and happiness with Vacarro. Kazan wrote in his notes: "A bad initial motive brings on a miracle of living. Suddenly two starved people meet . . . and their last bit of sex play is sheer, wild, released exuberance, completely free and healthy . . . In fact, the most revolutionary, satisfying thing that has ever happened to them" (qtd. in Schickel 331). Although much of this was absent in the final version of the film, it indicates how Kazan linked sexual satisfaction and personal freedom. After their "nap," Vacarro finds Baby Doll "different, grown up

suddenly," and Baby Doll declares feeling "cool and rested for the first time in my life" (*Baby Doll* 1956); the "mature viewer can hardly fail to notice the change or to connect it with a sexual awakening" (Brook 354). Even her costuming suggests the transformation—from "baby doll" pajamas and girlish dresses in the beginning to a slip during her seduction and finally to a darker skirt and sweater at the conclusion. Not surprisingly, the PCA "feared that reference to Baby Doll's 'growing up' at the end of the story might be taken as an indication of her newfound sexual fulfillment" (Brook 354).

¶28 Baby Doll's discontentment with her life and her marriage unleashes a desire that leads to her sexual awakening and emancipation from the confines of marriage: "Baby Doll is initiated into the erotic, but not in the self-serving and exploitative fashion Archie Lee had anticipated. There is more to life, Baby Doll learns from Vacarro than the furniture needed to make her ramshackle house more livable. She thus becomes a woman of more varied and unpredictable possibilities" (Palmer and Bray 139). By stepping out of her wifely role, Baby Doll achieves more than sexual freedom and satisfaction—she dismantles the prescribed role of a typical female protagonist. Of course, what she will do with her newfound freedom is unclear, left to the viewer to imagine.

¶29 Significantly, *Baby Doll* also epitomizes the transition within Williams's earlier works from "Southern women who are sexually detached—if not repressed—and clearly dominated and made victims by the men in their lives" to his female characters after 1950, who "are passionate, complicated, self-assured, prepossessed, and sexually vital" (D'Alessandro). Baby Doll herself illustrates this metamorphosis toward a feminist perspective: from repression to passion, from dissatisfaction to fulfillment, and from entrapment to liberation.

¶30 In a decade of films that "were all about sex, but without sex" (Haskell 235), *Baby Doll* fits the mold perfectly: a film in which "sex is the only focus" (Truffaut 110) but even the director can convince himself that nothing happens. *Baby Doll*, like other films of its era, exposed the changing nature of femininity in the 1950s, in which "the traditional woman is often torn between her desire for a conventional, secure lifestyle and her longing for an unconventional, adventurous, largely unchartered course of action" (French xxiii–xxiv). As a homosexual male in a closeted world, Williams believed that he too was "excluded by the patriarchy," which he came to reject "in favor of what might be seen as a more androgynous political and moral order" (Adler). So there can be little doubt that in *Baby Doll*'s presentation of the rigidity of marriage, the inconsequence of a wife's adultery, and the urgency of female sexuality, he aimed to satirize the inegalitarian aspects of the existing patriarchal society.

¶31 These themes anticipate the problems and questions later identified in the second-wave feminist movement. As Betty Friedan would ask in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*:

> What if those who choose the path of "feminine adjustment"—evading this terror by marrying at eighteen, losing themselves in having babies and the details of housekeeping—are simply refusing to grow up, to face the question of their own identity? (76)

By rejecting the traditional role of wife and mother, Baby Doll "grows up" and propels herself into unknown territory. Furthermore, Baby Doll's sexual awakening foreshadows the emphasis of second-wave feminists on "intimacy and personal fulfillment, their critique of the family, and their conviction that sexual liberation was central to equality" (Breines 199). Unconsciously influenced by society's shifting attitudes, Williams and Kazan created a revolutionary portrayal of changing womanhood. Perhaps Kazan spoke the truth when he said, "I made *Baby Doll* as I saw it. . . . I wasn't trying to be moral or immoral, only truthful" ("New Kazan Movie").

The film reflected the turmoil of its time, which is why it resonated so strongly in 1956 and why it still resonates today. As Truffaut said, "Whether it is a work of genius or mere talent, whether decadent or generous, profound or brilliant, *Baby Doll* is fascinating" (Truffaut 113).

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