**Speculative Worksheet [Example]**

**[This is just an example of how someone might complete this assignment. Though you can draw ideas and inspiration from it, don’t follow it too closely.]**

Information

Your “why” question:

Why do people find baby dolls disturbing?

Why you find this question interesting or useful:

I find this question interesting because dolls are often portrayed as creepy in stories, but people don’t seem to think about why the dolls “work” in this way.

A shallow assumption that some might have about your question, and how you might question that assumption:

One assumption that people have is that dolls can be made creepy in the same way that anything can be made creepy. But I wonder if dolls have something particular about them that makes people inclined to see them as creepy.

1. First Answer.

I’m a father, so as my children have grown up I’ve been around plenty of baby dolls. Let me start by describing a doll to the reader who lives a relatively doll-less life. One doll that lives in my home has a uniquely strange face. His or her mouth is open in such a way that its small number of teeth, while mostly concealed, still show, and protrude forward slightly. This arrangement makes its smile seem contorted and uncomfortable, as if the child is patiently suffering. Its cheeks, clinching the smile, are muscular and tense. The wide, staring eyes suggest both laughter and desperation. Overall the doll’s face is a disturbing mixture of amusement and pain.

As I continue observing the face I become even more disturbed by it, because a question comes to mind. Shouldn’t a doll look 100% sane and beautiful? Unlike parents, doll makers get to choose what their “child” looks like. So why would anyone choose these strange doll faces that I see all around my house?

Perhaps I am being naive. I get out my sketchpad. I pretend I am a doll designer. I try out ideas for a face. This is tough...

The main problem is that the doll’s face is fixed, and so any choice I make is *the* choice, frozen in place forever. Should I go for a “real” look, or something more abstract and cartoonish? Should I give the doll an expression or a blank stare? If an expression, which expression should I use? And should I draw my definition of beauty from what I think, or should I imagine what a child would think is beautiful (or cute or sweet or whatever)? Do the parents or gift-givers (those actually *buying* the doll) have a say?

Regardless of the choice, the face, once fixed, becomes creepy. I now have learned, through painful experience, that one reason that dolls are disturbing is because the designers must work through a confusing set of possibilities toward one fixed choice. And a fixed face is creepy. I’m no longer surprised that a doll maker, fighting against a guaranteed creepiness, might end up creating a frightful face halfway between delight and agony.

2. Second Answer.

Another reason dolls are disturbing is because there’s a power in taking something particularly innocent and making it sinister. Imagine, for instance, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” with a creepy minor note underneath. But why is making a particularly innocent thing sinister so powerful?

Well, let’s explore that power by connecting the two words, “innocent” and “sinister.”

innocent: not responsible, not experienced, not harmful

sinister: planning or causing harm

The two seem to be opposite, but in what ways are they opposite? They are opposed on the subject of causing harm. And when a particularly innocent thing is made sinister, it emphasizes “harm” in two ways: not only has the innocent thing been harmed in being made sinister, but the once-innocent thing is now also an agent of harm (planning or causing harm to others). These two emphases are jointly displayed. As with the creepy version of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” the corrupted doll retains its “innocent side” as it adopts its “corrupted side.” Thus the corrupted doll is a dynamic definition of corruption, showing, at one glance, the start and finish of the corruption process.

As I compare the definitions I also notice that innocence is a fragile thing. Once something has lost its innocence, that innocence seems difficult to get back. The thing has been polluted. If “innocent” means “not experienced,” then once something is made sinister it seems difficult or impossible to erase that experience. Redemption is still possible, but the original state of innocence can never be recovered.

These are two complementary reasons that the “sinister-ized innocence” of a doll is powerful. On one hand, the corrupted doll can’t let go of its innocence, but on the other, it can’t let go of its corruption. It retains these opposites in a tense definition between them. Story-makers recognize this power of “sinister-ized innocence” and use it in their stories.

3. Third Answer.

Perhaps the baby-doll-disturbance is created not so much from the *failure* of the doll makers so much as their *success*. In other words, dolls in the last century or so look too realistic, too much like real babies. And though that realism is telling my brain that a baby doll is actually a baby, the effect is not complete: I can still sense that it is not a baby. These two messages, that the doll is a living baby and that the doll is “dead,” hit me simultaneously, and disturb me.

We use metaphors to think about and explain certain subjects. For instance, I might say that developing feelings of love is like “falling.” I might say that being insulted feels like “a slap in the face.” And in helping me describe and think, metaphors are useful. But the philosopher Thomas Aquinas warned that a metaphor should be established at a good-enough “distance” from its subject. A doll is a metaphor for a living baby, but if the metaphor and the subject blend too much together (because of an overly realistic doll), we might not think as metaphorically anymore. We might start thinking of the two as the same thing.

The first dolls were made of coarse material like sticks, resembling an actual baby only “metaphorically.” Modern dolls, being more realistic, start to “become the baby.” But because the doll only *almost* becomes the baby, the confused metaphor evokes the idea of a baby that is in some ways alive and in some ways dead. This evocation is only possible for someone experienced enough in the idea of the dead baby—an ignorant child is immune to some degree—but as we grow up and gain experience, we are more and more likely to experience the confused metaphor as a baby that is both living and dead.

So we aren’t disturbed by some particular facial feature of the doll, but what we bring *to* the doll: the understanding that a baby can be alive, and it can also be dead. The failed doll metaphor causes me think this double-truth, at least subconsciously.

Because of the overly successful (and, thus, failed) metaphor, any potential ugliness in the doll is exaggerated. I am made oversensitive and thus I am inclined to see the doll as creepy and disturbing.

4. Overall Main Idea.

The baby doll, with its modern realistic features but fixed face, is too real, but not real enough. The development toward the realistic (life) can’t overcome the fixedness (death). But what if, as technology develops, someone was able to make a doll ultrarealistic and unfixed (realistically moving, warm, even breathing)? Such a doll would still be creepy because its realism presses against my understanding that it is not alive. The “life” part of the doll would not easily overcome the “death” part.

But, if a doll could be realistically animated and yet remain disturbing, why did I say that the fixed expression of dolls is what expresses its “death” side? Well, even today a few dolls are animated, but those animations are “deathly” in their repetitive, robotic motions. And even an ultrarealistic doll with ultrarealistic animation would likely give hints of being robotically dead. A fixed face is merely one possible manifestation of this death. In fact, an ultrarealistic doll would enhance the creepiness because it would intensify the life-and-death contrast, just as today’s dolls do in relation to more primitive dolls of hundreds of years ago. So an ultrarealistic doll would only make the creepiness worse, because the failure of the metaphor would be even more pronounced.

In the end, I can’t blame the doll. The source of the doll’s creepiness is me. Whether the doll is fixed, robotically animated, or ultra-realistically animated—whether I sense the life-and-death contrast or am informed of it—I bring to the doll the knowledge that a baby can be either alive or dead, and the doll then expresses that idea back to me. The failed metaphor of the doll is like a mirror allowing me to see my corrupted, sinister-ized perception of the world. My own loss of innocence disturbs me.

I, as an adult—who has lost innocence, who has become more familiar with death—can see in a doll this life-and-death contrast. When I see or imagine a child naively playing with this horrible idea, I am disturbed. I know that as the child becomes less innocent she will become acquainted with the horrible idea too.