Barbie Doll Study Guide

Barbie Doll by Marge Piercy

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Introduction

"Barbie Doll" appears in Piercy's 1973 collection, *To Be of Use.* By using the iconic image of the Barbie doll as a kind of straw "man," Piercy implicitly criticizes the ways in which women are socialized into stereotypical feminine behavior. Written as a fairy-tale of sorts, "Barbie Doll" suggests that the enormous social pressures on women to conform to particular ways of looking and behaving are ultimately destructive. Her ironic tone barely conceals a simmering rage at prescribed gender roles that eat away at women's self-confidence and wreak havoc on their self-image. Piercy suggests that corporate America, embodied by Barbie's maker, Mattel Toys, participates in our patriarchal system by perpetuating gender stereotypes. The Barbie doll, one of the best-selling "toys" of all time, has become an icon of U.S. culture for the way it idealizes the female body. For more than 40 years parents have been buying the doll, along with Barbie's companion, Ken, for their daughters, who attempt to emulate Barbie's appearance and the values that that appearance embodies. Indeed, in some segments of society, the term "Barbie Doll" itself has become a term of derision, signifying an attractive, but vapid, blonde who will do what she is told. Piercy skewers this image, implying that it is inherently destructive. Piercy's poem has been reprinted a number of times. Its accessibility and clearly defined□yet not simplistic□stance toward its subject make it one of her more popular pieces.

Author Biography

A feminist activist as well as a poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright, Piercy melds the personal and the political in her writing. She writes frequently about women's issues, particularly the ways in which women have been made to feel inferior, both about their minds and their bodies. Born to working-class parents Robert Douglas and Bert Bedoyna (Bunnin) Piercy in Detroit, Michigan in 1936, Piercy began writing - both poetry and fiction - when she was fifteen. Her early literary influences include Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and the Romantic poets Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, but Piercy learned about storytelling through listening to the women in her family, especially her mother, her Aunt Ruth, and her maternal grandmother, Hannah, who gave Piercy her Hebrew name, Marah. Piercy received a full fellowship to the University of Michigan, where she co-edited the literary magazine her senior year and also won a prestigious Hopwood Award for her poetry. After receiving her bachelor's degree, she entered Northwestern University, from which she graduated with an M.A. in 1962.

Piercy's grandfather was a union organizer who was murdered while organizing bakery workers. Piercy too has fashioned an overtly political life for herself. An active member of Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, she helped organize protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and for civil rights for all Americans. Her involvement in the women's movement, however, has come to define her writing. By infusing her poetry, fiction, and essays with autobiographical elements, Piercy gives her writing an urgency and edge frequently lacking in so much contemporary poetry. Her description of the girl child in "Barbie Doll" is a not-so-thinly-veiled reference to herself. Piercy, however, did not sacrifice herself to patriarchy's image of what an "ideal" woman should be; rather, she made herself into a crusader for women's rights. The majority of her novels, most of which contain autobiographical material, address some aspect of recuperating women's identity from the snares of a society that does not have women's interests at heart. The author of numerous novels, poetry collections, essays, and plays, Piercy writes full time and occasionally teaches workshops. Her writing has appeared in more than 150 anthologies and has been translated into more than a dozen languages. She lives with her third husband, writer and publisher Ira Wood, and five cats in Wellfleet on Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

Poem Text

This girlchild was: born as usual

and presented dolls that did pee-pee

and miniature GE stoves and irons

and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.

Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:

You have a great big nose and fat legs.

She was healthy, tested intelligent,

possessed strong arms and back,

abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.

She went to and fro apologizing.

Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.

She was advised to play coy,

exhorted to come on hearty?

exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.

Her good nature wore out

like a fan belt.

So she cut off her nose and her legs

and offered them up.

In the casket displayed on satin she lay

with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,

a turned-up putty nose,

dressed in a pink and white nightie.

Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.

Consummation at last.

To every woman a happy ending.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

The title of this poem refers to Mattel's Barbie Doll, a popular toy for young girls. The original Barbie - tall, shapely, with blonde hair and blue eyes - debuted in 1959 at the American Toy Fair in New York City. Mattel has manufactured a variety of "Barbies" since then - everything from Action Adventure Barbie, to "Mod" Barbie, to Francie, an African-American "Barbie." The poem begins in a fairy-tale vein, the archaic term "girl-child" being used to underscore the mythic quality of the story. The dolls, stove, iron and lipstick are all traditional playthings for young girls, but they are also markers of an identity in the making, the things that young girls grow to identify with their own social roles. The doll presents an idealized image of the body, and stove and irons tell them what kind of work is expected of them as adults. Lipstick, perhaps the most sexualized cosmetic for women, signals to young girls that they will be valued for their physical appearance.

Lines 5-9:

The "magic of puberty" introduces the theme of growth. It is a magical time because the body changes rapidly. Girls begin to menstruate and their bodies change. Piercy uses the term ironically here, as she is also referring to the pain that comes with puberty. Adolescents become more aware of one another as sexual and social beings and are frequently cruel towards one another. The "girlchild" is told she has "a great big nose and fat legs" even though she is smart, healthy and strong. The latter descriptors, however, are seen as being positive only for males, not females. Being good with one's hands (manual dexterity) is a conventional male trait. Similarly, while having an "abundant sexual drive" for boys might be seen as "sowing oats" or being a "real" man, for girls it is often considered aggressive or the mark of a "whore."

Lines 10-14:

The girl was made to feel guilty for who she was, for her intelligence and abilities, and also for not being slim and "beautiful." She apologized to everyone for not being the person they wanted her to be, but all they could see was her body and how it did not match their idea of what a woman should look like. They tried to help her be more of an idealized woman by suggesting how to compensate for her unfeminine qualities. It is important to understand that for Piercy the "girlchild" is "every girl," not some poetic character with no relation to the real world. Children are socialized through family, culture, and education from the day they are born. Piercy is symbolically examining the process of how children come to inhabit their gendered identities and the destructive consequences of those processes for women.

Lines 15-18:

Fan belts wear out because of overuse. Fan belts are also commodities - things - like Barbie dolls themselves and, Piercy suggests, like women. This simile is interesting because it uses an image we associate with cars, and cars are a symbol of masculinity in American culture. Her "good nature," that part of her that sought to accommodate others, has been so exploited that she can no longer continue. She "offers up" (a gesture of sacrifice) her nose and legs, the symbols of her oppression, but to whom we do not know: presumably patriarchal power itself.

Lines 19-25:

These lines are laden with irony. The very person that the girlchild could never be is the person "appearing" in her casket, after a makeover by the undertaker. "A turned-up putty nose" and "a pink and white nightie" are features of Barbie-doll-like beauty and femininity. It is ironic that the very people ("everyone") who could not appreciate the girl-child for who she was in life, now admire the person she is *made* to be in death. In Piercy's fable, it is society (not the girl) that achieves consummation, for it has made the girlchild into what it wanted. "Consummation" is a term used to describe completion or fulfillment. The last line of the poem echoes the happy ending of fairy-tales. In this case, of course, Piercy is saying that because of women's subservient position in society, it is often difficult for their lives to have happy endings.

Themes

Obedience

"Barbie Doll" symbolically describes the inherently destructive nature of patriarchy. A system of social organization in which male prerogative is the ruling principle, patriarchy demands women's obedience to men. Historically, this obedience has been externally manifest through law; for example, until the twentieth century women had been denied voting privileges in the United States. But patriarchy also exhibits its power through the shaping of mind and serf-image. A "good" woman is one who conforms to patriarchal expectations: she is feminine, domestic, pretty, and accommodating. When you are not these things, as the girlchild in Piercy's poem is not, you will be punished. Society will shun you, you will be judged a freak, and your own strengths (e.g., the girlchild's physical strength and intelligence) will appear to you as shortcomings because you will not be recognized for them. Piercy' s poem presents a girl of many talents who is worn down by an image of herself created by others which she could not, literally, live up to. In an act of "self sacrifice, she cut off her nose and legs, those parts of her which did not conform to how a "beautiful" woman should look. This act of mutilation echoes the mutilation other women endure in tyrannically patriarchal societies. In parts of lower equatorial Africa, for example, young girls are forced to have "clitorectomies," procedures which medically remove the clitoris. This deprives the woman of sexual pleasure, and is a constant reminder that her only value is as a child-bearing machine for the man who will own her. In the West, eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia are consequences women suffer in attempting to conform to the ideal of the Barbie body. In "Barbie Doll" the girlchild fulfills the patriarchal prescription for obedience by destroying herself. She perpetuates patriarchal power in death by being transformed into someone she could not be in life.

Sex Roles

"Barbie Doll" speaks to the destructive influences of rigid sex roles in modern society, and how women, especially, have been socialized into making their bodies and behavior conform to those roles. We see this socialization at work when the "girlchild" is "presented dolls that did pee-pee / and miniature GE stoves and irons / and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy." Taught from early childhood that a woman should be pretty, intellectually passive, and domestic, the girlchild is apologetic for being none of these. Society, however, offers her compensatory strategies: she is urged to "play coy, / exhorted to come on hearty, / exercise, diet, smile, and wheedle." This was too much for the girlchild and, as a result of her inability to please those who want her to be someone else, she grows to loathe herself and finally destroys herself in an act of sacrifice, "cut[ting] off her nose and her legs / and offering] them up." The irony of the last lines of the poem, when the undertaker constructs a woman the girlchild could never be, suggests that societal expectations for sex roles transcend death itself and that, fight as they may against such repressive stereotyping, women will always lose. The moral of

Piercy's parable is in the reader's response. The lesson is contained in the audience's outrage at the ways in which women have been (and continue to be) forced to conform to an ideal of femininity□often in ways antithetical to who they are as human beings. Piercy would have her readers take their rage at the poem's last line as a spur to action.

Style

A narrative poem written in free verse [verse having irregular meter, or rhythm that is not metrical], "Barbie Doll" can be read as a parable of what often happens to women in a patriarchal society. Parables are short narratives with a moral. Well-known parables are found in religious texts such as the Bible. The moral of Piercy's poem also functions as a warning: it urges readers to be aware of the ways in which society shapes our (gendered) identities and urges women not to compare themselves to idealized notions of feminine beauty or behavior.

Piercy's diction is occasionally archaic. That is, she uses words and grammatical constructions which we would not use today, for example "girlchild," "that did pee-pee", etc. By weaving these archaisms into a story told in contemporary language, the speaker achieves an effect of timeless-ness, suggesting that the instance of modern women modeling themselves after Barbie dolls is only the latest in the history of women's oppression.

Piercy employs irony to drive her point home. Irony, which comes from the Greek word "eiron," refers to the way in which a speaker "hides" or in some way understates what she really means. The end of Piercy's poem is ironic because the only thing that is consummated is the "girlchild's" death. When the speaker wishes "every woman a happy ending," she is actually expressing disgust at what has happened to the girlchild and what regularly happens to women who have been socialized to make men's desires their own.

Historical Context

In her essay, "Through the Cracks: Growing Up in the Fifties," originally published in *Partisan Review* and later reprinted in *Part-Colored Blocks for a Quilt,* Marge Piercy describes the social pressures exerted on women to conform in mid-twentieth century America, claiming that those who did not were labeled "sick." Piercy writes, "If you wanted something you couldn't have easily or that other people did not want or wouldn't admit to wanting, if you were angry, if you were different, strange, psychic, emotional, intellectual, political, double-jointed: you were sick, sick, sick." Commenting on the demands to physically conform, she notes that women's clothes were meant to accentuate breasts and hips while simultaneously "squashing" any parts of the body, such as the stomach, which might stick out. Piercy's mother bought her a girdle when she was twelve years old, telling her that she "was now a woman." Images of restraint are common in Piercy's writing about her childhood and adolescence, as is her anger at the pain such restraint caused. "Women must accustom themselves to a constant state of minor pain, binding themselves in a parody of the real body to be constantly 'attractive' .... We didn't have bodies then, we had shapes. We were the poor stuff from which this equipment carved the feminine." Piercy's anger at the ways in which ideas of beauty destroyed women's serf-confidence and enslaved them to male desire is evident in the cynical and bitter irony of "Barbie Doll," which symbolically tells the story of a woman who could not resist, or accommodate, society's demands. Of late 1950s America, Piercy says that "Even the notion of acceptable beauty was exceedingly limited and marred a whole generation of women who grew up knowing it (training in serf-hatred) and a whole generation of men who felt they were entitled to it, and any actual woman not resembling the few idols was very second best: or Everyman has the right to the exclusive possession of Marilyn Monroe."

In 1959 when Piercy was twenty-three years old, Mattel created and sold the first Barbie doll. Named after Barbara, the daughter of the founders of Mattel Toys (Ruth and Elliot Handler), Barbie was the first doll with an adult body to appear in America. She was a doll of idealized proportions but with no genitals or nipples. This allowed the doll to be feminine and sexual but non-offensive at the same time. The Handlers claimed they got the idea while watching their growing daughter begin to imitate adult conversation and behavior. They wanted to give their daughter (and potential consumers) a doll that would represent the teenager she and other children would become. Special attention was given to Barbie's outfits, which were designed to appeal simultaneously to a young girl's idea of teenage independence and fun and a parent's idea of wholesomeness. The original Barbie had a tennis dress, a bathing suit, a ballerina outfit, a wedding dress, and a football game outfit, encompassing all of the (gendered) roles of a conventional suburban, middle-class American life. By playing with Barbie, young girls learned what was expected of them. They were given the illusion of freedom, of inventing themselves through the many Barbie costumes. As the country changed in the 1960s, however, so did Barbie. Her facial features were softened, along with her skin tone, and she was given a new hairstyle□a bubblecut□to reflect the changing times. In the 1970s Barbie changed yet again. Now Barbie's bright blue eyes looked directly ahead, signaling an

assertive, confident woman who makes her own decisions. The sexual revolution and women's liberation helped to create a new image of what girls could be. Barbie has continued to "evolve" along with society. Mattel has put out a number of different Barbies to reflect those changes. Their stable of dolls has included Betsy Ross Barbie (to commemorate the bicentennial) Twist and Turn Barbie, Color Magic Barbie, Action Adventure Barbie, Francie (an African-American Barbie), and a host of other Barbies meant to reflect the changing values of American society and the opportunities available to women.

Critical Overview

Perhaps the real mark of "Barbie Doll's" reception has been the numerous times it has been reprinted and anthologized. Appearing in 1973, at the crest of feminism's second wave, "Barbie Doll" embodied the rage many women felt at being sexually objectified and treated as second-class citizens. The poem remains popular in large part because it continues to represent women's experience.

Most of the criticism and reviews of Piercy's poetry have underscored its politically committed nature. Leapfrog Press has built a website (http://www.capecod.net/~tmpiercy/over.htm) excerpting reviews of Piercy's poetry. Erica Jong calls Piercy "one of the most important writers of our time who has redefined the meaning of the female consciousness in literature and in so doing has begun to redefine the meaning of literature." Writing in the *Washington Post* on Piercy's *Selected Poems,* poet and critic Carolyn Kizer says "Marge Piercy is my idea of the very model of a modern major feminist. There is a deal of sheer, toe-curling pleasure to be gained from reading this robust, protean and hilarious woman's selected poems ... her earthiness, her wonderful physicalness." "Barbie Doll" has also been reprinted in a number of classroom anthologies, and teacher Robert Perrin has written an essay on using the poem to acquaint his students with gender issues.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Chris Semansky's most recent collection of poems, Blindsided, *has been published by 26 Books of Portland, Oregon and nominated for an Oregon Book Award. In the following essay, Semansky examines Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" as a symbolic story about women's socialization in a patriarchal world.*

Marge Piercy's poem, "Barbie Doll," is a mythic rendering of the destructive ways in which women have been socialized into thinking of their bodies and behavior in relation to a patriarchal ideal. This ideal, represented by Mattel's popular Barbie doll, is a thin yet curvy body, with symmetrical, perfect facial features. The girlchild in Piercy's "Barbie Doll" sacrifices her own gifts to fulfill the social dictates of patriarchy, a system of social organization based on male privilege. The doll is symbolic of the ways that women themselves have been "plasticized," turned into creatures who have been riven of their humanity.

After the Barbie doll came out in 1959 many women literally attempted to emulate her look. This was virtually impossible, since Barbie's body measures the human equivalent of 39-18-33. However, one woman, Cindy Jackson, founder of the Cosmetic Surgery Network, has dedicated her life to trying to achieve a "Barbie look," putting herself through more than twenty operations. It is not only Barbie's body that young girls aspire to but Barbie's life as well. The original Barbie came with a tennis outfit and bathing suit, as well as a wedding dress. She embodied the ideals and values of a middle-class suburban housewife who spent her days at the country club and her afternoons cooking dinner for her husband. To become a Barbie doll is for many girls and young women a dream. For Marge Piercy it is a nightmare. Her poem is a frontal assault on the socialization (for Piercy, "Barbie-ization") of young girls.

The process of constructing an identity based on gender and the consequences of this construction for women are popular subjects in the sociology of gender. The *Dictionary of Sociology* lists four primary features: 1) women are ascribed specific feminine personalities and a "gender identity" through socialization; 2) women are often secluded from public activities in industrial societies by their relegation to the private domain of the home; 3) women are allocated to inferior and typically degrading productive activities; 4) women are subjected to stereotypical ideologies which define women as weak and emotionally dependent on men.

Socialization is the process through which human beings learn how to be in the world. They internalize rules - some spoken, some unspoken - and these rules come to form a part of the image we develop about ourselves. "Barbie Doll" addresses the various stages of socialization: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The girlchild is presented with toys - presumably by her family - which help to set expectations for what her interests and behavior should be. Dolls, stoves, irons, and lipstick are all conventional things that little girls, especially in the West, are given to clue them in to societal expectations. This is not an intentional or necessarily coercive process but one which adults themselves have gone through and have come to believe is "natural." That

is, they believe that little girls will enjoy pretending to be a home-maker or a Barbie doll because these are desires with which little girls are born.

The domestic realm has long been a space relegated to women. It is expected that they cook, clean, bear children, and take care of their men, who work and provide for the family. The public realm, the realm of politics, business, war, and large-scale decision-making, belongs to men. Academia, until recently, has also been a male province, as women were not valued for their intelligence. If women taught at all, it was elementary school where teaching was considered closer to baby-sitting, something in which women were considered well-versed. That the girlchild, when she reached adolescence, "tested intelligent" suggests that she was doomed, for such a quality is not valued by a society which considers "smarts" to be the mark of a strong male. Intelligent women present a threat to male power. Similarly, a woman who is good with her hands ("manual dexterity") or who has "abundant sexual drive" is considered to be unfeminine, as these qualities are also normally associated with maleness and masculinity.

Because she did not conform to social expectations, Piercy's girlchild did not "consummate" the process of socialization. Because she could not "play coy, /... come on hearty, / exercise, diet, smile and wheedle," the girlchild suffered intense emotional conflict, which eventually resulted in her taking her own life. The poem is not clear as to the girlchild's emotional state when she "cut off her nose and legs." We can read the statement that "Her good nature wore out / like a fan belt" to mean that she became angry and killed herself in disgust, or we can read the lines to mean that she was exhausted with constantly trying to be something that she was not. She did not, however, make it to adulthood, which means she failed to pass on the expectations that she herself could not meet. The only way that society could ensure that future generations would grow into the gender roles that the girlchild did not would be if the girlchild were not around to be a negative role model. When she did "offer" herself up, the undertaker, symbolically representing the destructive power of patriarchal desire, was ready to transform her, to have her conform to the gendered role she could not inhabit during her life.

Piercy's poem symbolizes what happens to young women in real life. In her essay "klaus barbie, and other dolls I'd like to see" from the anthology *Adios, Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity,* Susan Jane Gilman writes that "We urban, Jewish, Black, Asian and Latina girls ... realize that if you didn't look like Barbie, you didn't fit in. You were less beautiful, less valuable, less worthy. If you didn't look like Barbie, companies would discontinue you. You simply couldn't compete." Piercy herself, an urban Jewish woman and a burgeoning intellectual, did not fit in. Before she became politically active in the 1960s Piercy was a part of the Barbie-ized culture of 1950s America. It was not just men who controlled women, though. Male desire permeated society. Piercy writes that "Women policed each other in the fifties with a special frenzy, being totally convinced nothing but death and madness lay outside the nuclear family and the baby-doll-mommy roles. How could we have believed that when we saw the toll of death and madness inside the roles?" These roles began to expand in the 1960s as more opportunities developed for women. Rising female employment offered women economic possibilities, and the sexual revolution gave them "permission" to seek sexual

satisfaction outside the bounds of marriage. Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 blockbuster book, *Sex and the Single Girl,* described the "new woman" as a sexy, financially independent, upwardly mobile professional who made her own decisions, and Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* argued strongly for equal rights for women. In 1964 Congress passed Title VII, which banned gender discrimination in employment and helped create the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a federal agency which addresses issues of gender equality and discrimination in the workplace. Piercy herself embodied America's cultural changes, as she divorced her first husband partly because he did not take her writing seriously and held conventional notions of how a wife should behave.

As a result of the changes in American society, gender roles for women have expanded greatly since the 1950s. These changes have been tracked by the Barbie doll, which literally has had scores of incarnations, including Francie the African-American Barbie, and "Punk" Barbie, a 1980s doll. More recently Mattel has announced plans to give Barbie a makeover. She will have a "less graduated profile," in response to children's interest in more realism in their toys.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Alice Van Wart is a writer and teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Toronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature.

In her essay "Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence," Elaine Showalter says women writers in the 1970s were experiencing the beginning of an exciting new phase where they "seemed at last able to express anger and passion, to confront their own raging emotions...." Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" is a highly polished and ironic poem that perfectly demonstrates Showalter's thesis. In "Barbie Doll," Piercy scathingly condemns contemporary expectations placed on women concerning their appearance. The view she expresses in the poem is a feminist one, consistent with the political views she expresses in her numerous poetry collections, novels, and essays, particularly those views that condemn society's attitudes towards women.

"Barbie Doll" tells the story of a girl who grows up to find out she does not look quite as she should. Because she wants the approval of others she attempts to compensate for her imperfections in other areas. She soon grows tired of her efforts and in desperation chops off the offending parts of her body, taking her life as she does. In the hands of the undertaker, however, she finally achieves what she could not in life: perfection and hence approval.

The apt title given to the poem points to the central and controlling device of irony and the symbolic associations between the doll and the women in the poem. The Barbie Doll, more than being a favorite with adolescent girls, is a cultural icon of femininity that carries with it complex associations of ideal beauty and desirability. Piercy wishes to expose the destructiveness behind such ideals by showing the extent to which many women will go to achieve them.

Told through the third person point of view in four stanzas of free verse, the poem delineates the far-reaching consequences of a women's concern with her appearance as measured by an external ideal. The use of the third person point of view reinforces the increasing sense of alienation and serf-loathing the woman in the poem experiences towards herself because she does not conform to this ideal. In the first stanza, Piercy shows the early indoctrination of young girls into feminine stereotypes. The second stanza conveys society's concern with women's appearance, in general, while the third stanza shows the extent to which women will go to conform to an ideal. The fourth stanza provides a concluding ironic twist showing how the woman in the poem achieves in death what she could not in life.

In the first line of the first stanza the poet introduces the subject of her poem as the "girlchild." Distinguishing her only by gender serves to objectify her, and the fact that she is "born as usual" suggests there is nothing out of the ordinary about the birth of this girl. The enjambment between lines one and two, however, clarifies that "as usual" also means she is greeted into the world as girls usually are with presents of "dolls that did

pee-pee / and miniature GE stove and irons / and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy". The images of "dolls," "stoves," "irons," serve to show the early indoctrination of girls into the woman's world of motherhood and domesticity, while the image of "wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy" begins her introduction into the guileful art of femininity.

In the fourth line the poem's focus shifts from childhood to "the magic of puberty." The use of the word "magic" to describe this period of the girl's life suggests the powerful and extraordinary nature of the emotional and hormonal changes that transform her from a girl into a young woman capable of bearing children. However, the magic of puberty is destroyed for her when a classmate tells her she has "a great big nose and fat legs."

In the second stanza the young woman has become so preoccupied with her imperfections that she is unable to see her positive qualities. Although she is "healthy, tested intelligent / possessed strong arms and a back" and even possesses "abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity," she is so conditioned to be over-concerned with her appearance that these positive qualities fail to have any value. Because she only sees her imperfections and believes she has no value because of them, she goes "to and fro apologizing." So obsessed is she with her imperfections that she begins to believe that what "everyone saw" when they looked at her was "a fat nose on thick legs."

By collapsing the images of "a great big nose and fat legs" into the comic image of "a fat nose on thick legs," Piercy uses synecdoche [a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole, or the whole stands for the part], to draw attention both to her use of irony and to the sad fact that the young woman can only see herself in the terms of some artificial ideal.

In the third stanza the woman is "advised to play coy / exhorted to come on hearty / exercise, diet, smile and wheedle." She is pressured into trying to mold herself into what she is not and to compensate for her shortcomings. The verbs "advised" and "exhorted" suggest the insistence placed on the woman to please others, particularly men, while the advice to "play coy" and to "come on hearty" point to the artificial means women are encouraged to use to make themselves desirable.

As an artifice of desire that measures itself against an impossible ideal, the female body requires endless maintenance to shape it for public acceptance and idealization, and this woman fails to shape herself into the image of what is desirable. Eventually she tires of her efforts and breaks down. As the poet puts it, her " 'good nature' wore out / like a fan belt."

The poet's use of simile [a figure of speech comparing two unlike things, often introduced by "like" or "as"] shows the extent to which the woman has accepted society's objectification of her body. Like the fan belt in a car that wears out and is discarded, the woman wears herself out in her attempts to perfect herself. Her body becomes an alien thing.

Because of its imperfections it has no value, "so she cut off her nose and her legs / and offered them up." Since she is the sum of her imperfect parts, "a fat nose on thick legs," by offering them up she is in fact sacrificing her life. The image of the woman cutting off parts of her body points to a growing popularity among women of using cosmetic surgery to perfect their appearances. More generally, it also suggests the history of abuse that women have inflicted on themselves in the name of beauty.

In the final stanza the woman lies in a casket made up for public display. Her face has been "painted on" by the undertaker's "cosmetics" and her "putty" nose has been "turned up." She lies on "satin" dressed "in a pink and white nightie." Everyone who comes to see her says, "Doesn't she look pretty?" Ironically, she achieves "consummation at last." "Consummation" in this context means literally to complete through perfection. The woman achieves in life what she could not in death.

The last two lines of the poem move beyond ironic expression and are rich in implication and scathing in intent. Piercy satirizes the traditional ending to many conventional fairy tales that conclude with the female protagonist living happily ever after with the consummation of marriage. Piercy subverts the traditional implication of sexual consummation to consummation in death. By sacrificing herself the woman finally receives the approval she had always wanted from others. The last line moves from the specific woman to women in general as Piercy concludes her poem: "to every woman a happy ending." The irony is clear. The woman lying in her casket is made up to look just like a Barbie doll; even her nose has been turned up. The woman, however, no longer bears any resemblance to the person she was. She is made-up and false, and, just like a Barbie doll, lifeless and perfect.

In "Barbie Doll," Piercy has found the perfect vehicle to express her anger and to criticize both women and the society they live in. By equating the woman in the poem with the image of the Barbie Doll and by using irony as a controlling device within the poem, the poet shows both the insidious way in which women are objectified as well as their own cooperative part in the process.

Source: Alice Van Wart, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

Marge Piercy has her own website: http://www.capecod.net/~tmpiercy/index.html

A compilation of essays about the Barbie doll's cultural significance can be found at this website: http://www.dolliedish.corn/barbie/onbarbie.html

For another point of view on how Barbie has been marketed, examine Mattel's own website for Barbie: http://www.barbie.com/

In 1976 Watershed Tapes released a cassette of Piercy reading her poems, *At the Core.*

Topics for Further Study

What was Barbie's first date with Ken like? Write a short story about this from a 1960s Barbie's point of view, then do the same for a 1970s Barbie and a 1990s Barbie. What do your stories tell you about how you think of these decades?

Make a list of all the toys you can remember playing with as a child. Write an essay on how these toys contribute to a child's sense of him-or herself as a boy or a girl.

Interview an equal number of men and women, asking them what they consider to be their own most appealing attributes, and what they consider to be the most appealing attributes in a mate. Write an essay describing what similarities and differences you find and what this tells you about how we see ourselves in terms of our gender identity and how others see us.

Write a poem called "G.I. Joe" about a "boy-child's" socialization.

Compare and Contrast

1959: Mattel Toys introduces the first Barbie Doll.

1966: Francie, Barbie's "mod" cousin, is introduced in a polka-dotted top and gingham bikini bottom.

1967: African-American Francie "Barbie" is introduced.

1976: Barbie is given a place in "America's Time Capsule" at the nation's bicentennial celebration.

1971: Discarding any submissive undertones, Barbie's eyes, once adverted in a side-glance, now look straight ahead.

1975: During the Winter Olympics, Barbie is marketed abroad as the athlete of the year, appearing as a swimmer, skier, and skater, with a gold medal draped around her neck.

1982: "Punk" Barbie is released.

1985: "Day to Night" Barbie, Mattel's version of the yuppie lifestyle, is released. She has everything from modern office equipment (a tiny calculator) to an evening gown designed for the night out on the town.

1986: "Astronaut" Barbie is released. **1988:** "Dr. Barbie" is released.

1990: Mattel sponsors the "Barbie Summit" in New York City. Thirty-nine children from around the world meet and discuss world hunger, environmental degradation, and war and peace.

1995: "Karaoke" Barbie is released.

1993: Barbie sales reach $1 billion in 1993. She and related products account for 34 percent of Mattel's overall sales.

1997: Mattel announces plans to give Barbie a more realistic figure and tone down the makeup. The new Barbie will reportedly have a wider waist, slimmer hips and a smaller bustline, and will be phased in gradually.

What Do I Read Next?

Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession, by Sarah Strohmeyer and Geoff Hansen (photographer), treats the Barbie doll as a contemporary American woman and spoofs her. She assumes roles including Safe-Sex Barbie. Barbie Antoinette, Anita Hill Barbie, Marie Curie Barbie, and in honor of her upcoming 40th anniversary, Hot Flash Barbie, who comes complete with tiny estrogen supplements.

Published in 1997 by Orchises Press, Denise Duhamel's collection of poems, *Kinky,* treats Barbie as a "real" character, asking and answering questions such as: What if Barbie were in therapy? What if she were a religious fanatic? Do you know why Barbie and Ken don't dress in underwear?

Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole's *Mondo Barbie* collects poems and stories about this American icon, many of which are from Barbie's own point of view.

Early Grrrl: The Early Poems of Marge Piercy, was published in 1999 by Leapfrog Press and contains many of the poems that helped launch Piercy's career as both feminist-activist and writer.

Adios, Barbie, edited by Ophira Edut, collects first-person accounts of young women reflecting on the relationship between body image and race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Further Study

Lord, M.G., *Forever Barbie,* William Morrow and Co.: New

York, 1994.

Lord's examination of Barbie's historical impact on U.S. culture and consumer society is the most complete published thus far. Lord provides a detailed examination of Barbie's "roots" and traces her changes through the latter half of the twentieth century.

McDonough, Yona Zeldis, ed., *The Barbie Chronicles,* New

York: Touchstone Books, 1999.

This anthology collects essays and poems about the plastic icon at the 40th anniversary of her creation. The best essays in this collection discuss Barbie as seen through the lenses of sexuality, gender, and race.

Piercy, Marge, *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982.

This collection of interviews, essays, and reviews provides a first-hand account of Piercy's involvement with the women's movement and her views on her own, as well as others', poetry.

Varaste, Christopher, *Face of the American Dream: Barbie Doll 1959-1971,* Grantsville, MD: Hobby House Press, 1999. This book is a fresh look at the early Barbie dolls as "time capsules of the past" that mirror popular culture. The fashion trends, make-up and hairstyles of the 60s are embodied in photographs of vintage Barbie dolls. Actual advertisements for beauty products are shown to document the fashionable trends of the period. The author points out the revolutionizing influences on the fashions and selects dolls that perfectly embody the various styles, giving us a first hand look at the changing American Dream.

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BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535