

The miniature social values reflected in barbie: a critical reading of marge pier...



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Barbie doll as a popular icon in American culture has been carried with a long history. However, it is also a controversial toy that often critic by its unrealistic body image and the women stereotype imposed on her. Marge Piercy's poem presents the theme about women's loss of self-esteem and the coercion of external forces through the Barbie dolls. This paper aims to take a textual analysis of the subject matters and images the author's view from a critical perspective. Irony and satiric tone are also used to reinforce the prevailing trend of twisted social and cultural values throughout the poem.

Starts with an unfamiliar word "girlchild", the author emphasizes the infant's biological gender, which seems to degrade one's gender identity. The girl was born with nothing especially and received a typical toy, thus leaving she a conventional role and foreseeable prospect of a female character. For example, the doll was carried with "miniature stoves" and "iron", symbolizes her domestic role—a household worked in the kitchen. Besides, the word "miniature" and "wee lipsticks" indicate the "normal" image in the adult forces world in miniature. With a potentially patriarchal value, the adult forces women to stay inside, at home or within the restricted space. Then the girl came to puberty, the tone here became sharp and ironic with the word "magic". She was mocked as "a great big nose" and "fat legs" by her classmates. During the puberty, the girl has possessed intelligence and judgement, but most concepts and ideas are derived from the adult. Thus teenagers start to care more about their appearance. Sadly their notion of beauty has been twisted by the conventional values.

In the second stanza, the girl grown up mentally and physically, while prejudice or biased views of beauty have changed her thought and influenced her values. The young woman felt a sense of guilt and said apologies about her imperfect appearance. Here we find the poet's criticism that people tend to prioritize women's superficial outlook rather than their intrinsic characteristics. This preconception has ironically forced the young woman to apologize for " her own mistake". Although both stanzas two and three begin with the subject " she", the girl characters have been divided into two kinds in her life. In the stanza three, the girl was advised to act as the one in keeping with social value, and became the one who she's not. Eventually her good nature was " worn out like a fan belt". The simile here presents an image of a machine with gear, because the girl's good nature doesn't work or fit to the machine (social expectation). Time after time it was broken apart at all. As critical as the tone goes, the poet moves the poem to a climax: the girl cut off her legs and offered herself up, in order to meet the social conventions. Her good nature depleted, her physical function damaged and she became the victim of the social oppression. It sounds absurd and shocking when the girl mutilated herself. However, this kind of tragedy actually happens in today's society as well, for instance, people tend to go through plastic or cosmetic surgery to make themselves look better. In fact, what the poet tries to address to is the issue of social values and its impact on the shaping of the youth's behavior.

In the last stanza, the " physical mutilated" girl lied in the casket with her " putty nose", beautiful make-up and elaborated dressed in " pink and white nightie". She looked pretty in others' eyes. It draws reader's attention that

the “ nightie” here has some sexual metaphors, which implies that the girl was offended even after she was dead. Furthermore, the “ casket” could be understood as a pun: a coffin to bury the girl’s dead body, or a small case for jewels and other valuables. On one hand, the girl was naturally dead and laid in the casket, the “ stain” was like a winding sheet to cover her body. On the other hand, she was given a second life with a pretty appearance that meets the social expectation, and she was on display in the casket like a treasure with a satin. At the end, Piercy ironically and sadly creates a fairytale “ happy ending”: the girl is in such a doll-like creature, pretty but lifeless. The author presents that the happy ending is not just for the girl character but for all women as well, as if all women doomed to experience it: willing to become a beauty even at the cost of death.

The poem reads like a gothic tale full of sarcasm in a depressing tone. Piercy shares her sharp but sad feeling towards the social pressures on the women with the reader. In the poem we see how the society and family play a dominant role in shaping behavior. Women’s conventional role, appearance and the ignorance of their intrinsic qualities all have impacted on their growth. Although the narrative in Piercy’s poem reads a bit exaggerated, the similar situation actually continues to happen but in different ways. Thus, Piercy’s poem revokes the readers to re-examine women’s right in the society which is dominated by the patriarchy, and also driven by the profit.