# "Barbie Doll" and "G.I. Joe": Exploring Issues of Gender

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I have been hard pressed as a teacher to contextualize gender issues. As a male, I must seem rather like an apologist—the '90s version of the '60s white liberal fighting for equal rights for blacks. Though my maleness or whiteness does not negate my sensitivity to these issues, I fear that I may seem to be overreaching, trying too hard to do and say what's right. In contrast, my female colleagues who address gender issues may seem self-serving, too eager to stress their own self-enfranchisement. ■ So what can we do? How can we create opportunities for our students to discover for themselves the implicit power of gender, without, at the same time, seeming to deliver ideology? Part of the answer lies where it often does for those of us who teach English: It lies in literature, in the discovery of a selection that provides an *entrée* for students into new and often unexplored topics. Part of the answer, however, must lie in pedagogy, in offering students directed opportunities to discover meanings, not *a* meaning. It is a complex, multidimensional challenge, and I began the process without much genuine success.

But then I discovered Marge Piercy's poem "Barbie Doll." It is a widely anthologized, surprisingly accessible poem of twenty-five lines, one that can be treated in two illuminating class periods. The poem provides great opportunities for exploring issues of gender.

First, I have students examine the language of the poem, circling and linking words that help to create dominant impressions. The poem's language is rich, ironic, and powerful. The opening stanza describes the first, formative decade of a "girl-child." Students note that she is "presented with dolls that did pee-pee" (2), recognizing the ceremonial formality of *presented,* juxtaposed with the euphemistic word *pee-pee,* though they may not use academic language to express these ideas. They note that she receives "miniature GE stoves and irons," as well as "wee lipsticks" (3–4), and extend the discussion by describing other stereotypical "girl toys." These developing, dominant images—made evident through diminutive language—can be stressed by providing substitutions for key words ("dolls that *wet,*" "*small* stoves and irons," or "*little* lipsticks") and then asking students how the alternative words change the meaning of the poem.

The second stanza provides contrast that students usually notice. The girl in her early teenage years is described in robust terms: "She was healthy, tested intelligent, / possessed strong arms and back" (7–8). These positive descriptions, especially "strong arms and back," counter many of the limiting descriptions of girls, providing part of the countermovement of this poem. However, those aggressively positive characteristics are balanced by a grim yet simple line: "She went to and fro apologizing" (10). Students do not miss the sadly rhythmic emphasis that "to and fro" provides, nor do they miss or misunderstand the depressing cycle that is described in these words. And, once again, students can freely share their experiences and observations.

**"Barbie Doll" by Marge Piercy**

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.



The third stanza—moving into an unidentified period of adolescence and, perhaps, young adulthood—is replete with loaded language. The girlchild, now referred to simply as *She,* is "advised to play coy, / exhorted to come on hearty, / exercise, diet, smile and wheedle" (12–14). Here, some students may need to use a dictionary, but the force of the words *coy, exhorted, hearty,* and *wheedle* will make the page-flipping worth the effort as they consider how these words create a powerful vision of the way people exert their influence on impressionable young women, as well as undermine young women who, at heart, want to resist the influences of the dominant culture.

In the last four lines of the third stanza, students learn that the girl's "good nature wore out / like a fan belt" (15–16). The stark, mechanical image sets up a gruesome action in the last two lines of the stanza: the girl ceremonially "cut[s] off her nose and legs / and [offers] them up" (17–18). The closing stanza presents an artificially serene view of the girl —prepared by the undertaker with makeup, reconstructed nose, and a "pink and white nightie" (22). This powerfully, horrifically, stereotypically presented image is made even more disturbing by this observation: "Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said" (23).

By examining the language throughout the poem, students may discover the insensitivity—and ultimate cruelty—of a society that encourages patterned behaviors, that fails to recognize the innate values people possess, that creates artificial demands, and that perpetuates unhealthy expectations.

Yes, a text-based discussion of "Barbie Doll" may yield some fascinating and illuminating results: Students may question social norms; students may challenge societal and personal expectations for girls; students may comment on the personal tragedies—albeit not as violent as the one presented in the poem—that result from trying to please others. The discussions, if they are anything like those that have taken place in my classes, will be both lively and insightful. But there is more.

A second day's session can be equally eye-opening for students—and perhaps for us, too—if we turn the poem inside out with a question like this: "So, what would this poem be like and what would it say about our society if it were called 'G.I. Joe'?"

Class discussions of "G.I. Joe" can parallel those of "Barbie Doll." What toys are foisted upon boys during early childhood, with what sorts of social, personal, and psychological implications? What kind of comment from a classmate can undermine a boy's self-concept? What adolescent qualities that seem positive in a neutral context are the bane of a young boy's existence? What would he feel obliged to apologize for or dismiss? What implicit advice does "everyone" give young men? What behaviors are they encouraged to engage in? What would make a boy's good nature wear out, and what contrasting image would replace the fan belt? What ceremonial image of a young man would the undertaker create? And, of course, we can ask students to consider the counter-implications of constructing a

poem called "Ken," as opposed to, say, constructing a poem called "G.I. Joe."

Prodding students to explore "Barbie Doll" for central images and ideas to use in creating a parallel poem makes them read and think carefully. They become responsible for understanding the subtleties of poetic construction—the linked language, the developing images, the stanza structure, the thematic concerns. They also become responsible for applying the principles of the poem, for extending the ideas, and, perhaps most importantly, for creating new meanings.

What would this poem be like if it were called "G.I. Joe"?

To ask literature to enhance gender awareness is asking a great deal, but we cannot overlook the power of reading, discussion, and discovery. However, as we engage students in these discoveries, we must be sensitive to the contexts in which we teach and in which students learn, for if we only ask that students read pieces and then parrot principles of gender neutrality—if we do not ask them to make multidimensional discoveries—then we will not empower them to move beyond their sometimes limited and often limiting perspectives.

In short, we must search for works of literature—like "Barbie Doll"—that enable students to find meanings for themselves; we must devise classroom activities—like creating "G.I. Joe"—that allow students to extend, elaborate, and create meanings for themselves. For we cannot, it seems to me, *teach* gender awareness. We can, however, help students *learn* about the power that gender has in our lives.

**Work Cited**

Piercy, Marge. "Barbie Doll." *Circles on the Water.* New York: Knopf, 1982.

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## *EJ* 75 YEARS AGO

### Poets' Progress

" . . . Within our limited space we cannot be too discursive, and the (younger woman) poets we have chosen will give a certain unity to our consideration because, unlike some of the more "objective" of their sisters, they unite in presenting a picture of the spiritual situation in America today of the young, sensitive, self-conscious woman—of such a woman in a civilization which has theoretically made room for her as a person but practically has not quite caught up to her—which does not understand her, and is often aghast at her actions, and often, too, callous to her sufferings."

Llewellyn Jones. "The Younger Woman Poets." *EJ* 13:5 (1924): 301–310