Barbie Doll

Marge Piercy
American poet, novelist, and activist Marge Piercy (b. 1936) grew up in Michigan in a working-class family during the Depression. She graduated from Northwestern University with an MA and went on to write seventeen volumes of poetry and fifteen novels, including *Sex Wars: A Novel of the Turbulent Post-Civil War Period* (2005); *City of Darkness, City of Light* (1996); and *The Longings of Women* (1994). She is known for her highly personal free verse and her themes of feminism and social protest. “Barbie Doll” both comments and reflects on the popular icon – and children’s toy – of the same name.

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.

1. Identify several stereotypes that Marge Piercy draws on in this poem. Why is *girlchild*—one word—an appropriate term? Explain.
2. What images and colors does Piercy use to depict the girlchild?
3. Who is the speaker in the poem? *How do you know?*
4. How does the way the girl is encouraged to behave run counter to her natural inclinations? Explain.
5. How does the speaker entwine other commentaries into the poem? *Why? Are these voices in the mind of the girlchild real or imagined? Explain.*
6. What is the speaker’s tone in the poem? What specific lines and images lead you to your understanding of tone?