

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: 5
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. 10
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 15
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. 20
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. 25

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?