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A POETIC CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL BEAUTY STANDARDS AND GENDER ROLES IN MARGE PIERCY'S *BARBIE DOLL*

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Abstract: This study explores how cultural narratives in poetry reveal and critique societal beauty standards and fixated gender roles. This poem is analyzed using qualitative content analysis, through the lens of myth and symbol theory, psychoanalytic feminism, and gender role theory to uncover deeper meanings behind symbolic representations and internalized expectations in the poem. The figure of the Barbie doll serves as a cultural myth, promoting an idealized femininity that reinforces traditional norms. These ideals, internalized through early socialization and unconscious pressure, shape women's identities, leading to emotional conflict and self-alienation. Gender roles theory further explains how behaviors, responsibilities, and values are assigned based on socially constructed expectations, often limiting individual potential. The poem demonstrates how these societal forces prioritize appearance over ability, suppressing authenticity and self-worth. Through its critique, the poem remains a powerful commentary on how enduring myths and roles continue to influence women's lives in contemporary society.

Keywords: appearance, *Barbie Doll*, beauty standard, gender roles, stereotype

INTRODUCTION

The portrayals of women in society are ascribed to oppression, discrimination, and non-equal things. Throughout history, one consistent example that is still relevant over the years is societal beauty standards and gender roles. Scholars have noted that from an early age, women are often exposed to narratives that implicitly encourage them to conform to idealized beauty standards, such as those represented by princesses or Barbie dolls (Sayekti and Fitria 2022, 158). The fixated standards broadly influence women's lives, shaping their self-perception and dictating their behavior. Women will do anything, including change themselves, and aim to compete with beauty standards, as these standards often prioritize physical appearance over individual qualities and achievements.

Societal beauty standards flow through media portrayals and are projected into dominant markets, such as fashion and make-up, to attract women. Therefore, beauty standards are also evolving from time to time and often create a pervasive feeling of inadequacy and pressure to meet the standards for women. It has been argued that the emergence of societal beauty standards has led women to perceive imperfections in their skin, appearance, bodies, and behavior, reflecting the pervasive influence of these ideals (Khoo 2019, 249). Even though it seems unattainable ideas, society keeps placing societal expectations on women to meet those standards. For instance, beauty industries now offer "supporting" ways for women to be attractive, such as diets, botox, plastic surgery, and even cosmetics.

It has been suggested that Western ideals of beauty promote the notion that women should be slender, physically attractive, and possess a degree of sex appeal in order to attract the opposite sex (Emeksiz 2021, 54). While still struggling with ideas of beauty standards, women still have to intersect with fixated gender roles, which define and restrict women's identities and opportunities. Since a young age, women have already socialized to meet specific expectations regarding their appearance and behavior, rein-

forcing traditional gender norms that prioritize their looks over their abilities and accomplishments. These roles dictate that women should embody certain physical ideals and exhibit behaviors deemed appropriate for their gender, such as nurturing, passivity, and sly behaviors that will later be useful to obey their husbands. Such expectations not only limit women's potential but also lead to identity and self-esteem loss, as society thinks that women are only an "accessory" for their husbands and not capable of doing anything by themselves.

Before discussing further, it is necessary to understand the object that will be examined in this study. Marge Piercy's poem *Barbie Doll* captures the devastating impact of these societal pressures. Telling a story about a young girl's lifetime, Piercy vividly illustrates how the relentless pursuit of societal approval can strip away a woman's sense of self. It serves as a powerful critique of beauty standards and gender roles that confine and diminish women's lives, revealing the irony of valuing appearance over substance. Piercy's *Barbie Doll* explores the constraints imposed on women by patriarchal structures and systemic oppression, ultimately silencing the female voice within the poem (Nirwinastu 2021, 455).

The poem serves as a poignant critique of the rigid social beauty standards and oppressive gender roles imposed on women in patriarchal societies. Through vivid imagery and compelling narrative, the poem captures the destructive impact of these societal expectations on the protagonist, a young girl whose life becomes defined and ultimately consumed by the relentless pressure to conform. Drawing attention to the interplay between societal ideals and personal identity, *Barbie Doll* offers a scathing commentary on how cultural narratives about beauty and gender suppress individuality and perpetuate inequality. Moreover, the poem shows that gender is not an innate quality but a socially constructed identity reinforced through repetitive societal practices. In *Barbie Doll*, these constructions manifest as unattainable ideals of femininity, driving the protagonist to reject her body and identity.

Through the feminist lens, *Barbie Doll* by Marge Piercy, which was published in 1969, reflects the feminist spirit of the century. Second-wave feminists contended that acknowledging the biological differences between sexes does not justify prescribing specific behaviors or roles based solely on whether one is born male or female (Power 2020, 30). As women were challenging traditional roles and fighting against the systemic structures that dictated their lives and worth, Piercy highlighted *Barbie Doll*, capturing the feminist critique of how women are molded to fit narrow and oppressive beauty standards from a young age. By analyzing the poem through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, this study highlights how Piercy's work deconstructs patriarchal control mechanisms, exposing the psychological and cultural forces perpetuating damaging stereotypes and restrictive roles for women.

In contemporary discourse, the intersection of gender roles and beauty standards remains a pressing issue, reflecting the enduring influence of societal expectations on individual identity and self-worth. Despite progress in challenging traditional norms, beauty standards continue to disproportionately target women, defining their value by their physical appearance and adherence to idealized femininity. Social media, advertising, and popular culture amplify these standards, creating environments where unattainable images of beauty dominate and perpetuate unrealistic expectations. This perpetuation not only reinforces gender roles but also intensifies the pressure on women to conform, often at the expense of their mental and emotional well-being. Social media is a two-edged sword that makes women dissatisfied due to media depiction of beauty ideals (Termisi and Herwan 2021).

Gender roles further complicate this dynamic by prescribing specific behaviors, aspirations, and appearances for men and women, thereby limiting individual expression. For women, these roles often align closely with beauty standards, promoting passivity, compliance, and self-objectification as desirable traits of domestic work. Women are always connected to the domestic sphere, linking to the roles of

homemakers, mothers, and caregivers (Ummah et al. 2024). Meanwhile, men face pressures to embody strength, dominance, and emotional restraint, highlighting how these societal constructs confine both genders. In modern discourse, feminist scholars, activists, and media critics increasingly challenge these norms, advocating for more inclusive, diverse, and equitable representations of beauty and gender.

In recent years, societal beauty standards and fixed gender roles have continued to place significant pressure on individuals, making exploring these themes in Marge Piercy's poem *Barbie Doll* both relevant and necessary. Despite progress in gender equality, media and social platforms still promote narrow definitions of beauty and femininity, reinforcing unrealistic expectations for women. These ongoing challenges highlight the importance of revisiting Piercy's work to understand better and critique the cultural norms that continue to shape how women are expected to look and behave. The poem captures the emotional and psychological toll such expectations can have, especially from a young age. By analyzing *Barbie Doll*, this study aims to emphasize the poem's lasting relevance and inspire critical reflection on how societal ideals continue to define female identity today.

This research explores the representation of women's values and societal pressures in Marge Piercy's poem *Barbie Doll*. To support this research, several previous studies that focus on themes of gender roles, beauty standards, and patriarchal oppression have been reviewed. These studies show a growing interest in how literary works reflect women's experiences and social expectations. However, many focus on limited aspects such as appearance or surface-level stereotypes without deeply analyzing how societal norms shape women's identities and values. For example, society may explore how patriarchal structures silence and shape women's identities through institutions such as education and media (Nirwinastu 2021). Social media intensifies the dissemination of beauty ideals, as it more often contributes to appearance comparisons, self-objectification, and body dissatisfaction, especially among women (Mwangi and Buvar 2024; Fardouly et al. 2018).

Broader societal perspectives on this issue are also discussed by Sajid et al. (2021) and Rizkia et al. (2024), who note that women across cultures are pressured to meet narrow beauty standards in order to be accepted or valued and that these expectations have real consequences for their social standing. Similarly, Padmanugraha (2015) emphasized that women are often measured against unrealistic beauty ideals, akin to the image of a Barbie doll, and argued that actual value lies not in appearance but in intellect and character. While these standards for women are mainly rooted in traditional gender roles, (Goedderz and Calanchini 2023) explain that the influence of traditional gender roles affects how women are less represented in society, as they are considered the second sex, who only belong to the domestic sphere. Such expectations shape interpersonal dynamics and significantly influence how women are valued in society.

Previous studies have extensively examined gender roles, beauty standards, and patriarchal oppression, revealing how societal institutions and media contribute to the shaping of women's identities (Nirwinastu 2021; Mwangi and Buvar 2024). Scholars have noted how social media fuels self-objectification and appearance comparisons (Fardouly et al. 2018), while global studies confirm that women are pressured to conform to narrow ideals to gain acceptance and value (Sajid et al. 2021; Rizkia et al. 2024). Others, like Padmanugraha (2015), draw direct parallels between beauty standards and the symbolic figure of the Barbie doll. Furthermore, Goedderz and Calanchini (2023) highlight how traditional gender roles limit women's public representation. However, many of these works focus on surface-level stereotypes or sociological data rather than close literary analysis. This study fills that gap by offering a poetic and feminist critique of how *Barbie Doll* reflects and resists oppressive social norms.

This study explores how the standardization of beauty contributes to the marginalization of women, leading to decreased self-confidence and constant self-

comparison. The modern conceptualization of female beauty is increasingly distorted, amplified by technological advancement and the pervasive influence of media. While previous studies have addressed these themes, few have specifically examined how Marge Piercy's poem *Barbie Doll* critiques these societal pressures. Notably, no prior research has closely analyzed how the poem reflects and challenges dominant beauty standards and gender roles, both in the context of the time it was written and in relation to contemporary issues. The present study employs a psychoanalytic feminist approach to examine how *Barbie Doll* reveals the internal and external conflicts experienced by women under societal expectations in order to fill the gap from previous studies. The central question guiding this study is: How does *Barbie Doll* expose the psychological and societal impact of beauty standards and gender roles, and in what ways do these themes remain relevant today?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marge Piercy's *Barbie doll* has been recognized as a critique of the unrealistic beauty standards and rigid gender roles imposed by society. The poem was written in 1991, during the height of second-wave feminism. The poem resonates with themes that challenge patriarchal norms, particularly how women are forced to prioritize physical appearance over personality and capability. The poem can expose these societal expectations' devastating psychological and emotional tolls. The critical discussions of *Barbie Doll* often center on its symbolic representation of beauty standards as unattainable and damaging. It serves as a metaphor for the homogenized ideal of femininity that women are pressured to follow. Piercy's poem critiques this reduction and highlights how societal expectations infiltrate and shape women's self-perception

Myth and Symbol

In his seminal work *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith (1950) asserts that myths and symbols are central to constructing American identity and ideology. Myths are not just made-up stories but long-standing tales that grow over time to show what a group of people believes and values as a community (Smith 1990, 6). Smith's theory views myths as narrative frameworks that express and reinforce societal ideals, while symbols function as cultural shorthand for complex values. This theoretical lens is handy in analyzing how literary texts, such as Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll*, critique dominant social narratives. Using myth and symbol theory, the poem's representation of femininity reflects and rejects the cultural ideals imposed on women through deeply ingrained symbolic imagery.

Piercy critiques the myth of ideal femininity, a story that American culture tells about what it means to be a woman. Within Smith's framework, the *Barbie Doll* symbolizes childhood and rigid gender norms and expectations. Through this symbolism, Piercy reveals the harmful consequences of internalizing socially prescribed beauty standards. Using this myth in a poetic context mirrors Smith's idea that literature often encapsulates and critiques the myths. This theory also reflects literary devices such as symbolism and imagery in poetry. Through this theory, literary devices like symbolism and imagery can be seen as artistic tools and ways to reveal and critique the cultural values embedded in myths.

Psychoanalytic Feminism

The poem powerfully critiques the psychological effects of societal beauty standards and gender roles, making it a compelling subject for analysis through the lens of psychoanalytic feminism. This theoretical framework investigates how patriarchal ideologies infiltrate the unconscious mind, shaping an individual's identity, sense of self-worth, and behavioral patterns from an early age. In *Barbie Doll*, Piercy presents a poignant narrative of a young girl who gradually internalizes societal expectations regarding femininity and appearance. As these expectations become deeply rooted

within her mind, they contribute to her emotional deterioration and eventual self-destruction. The poem thus serves as a representation of how external pressures can lead to internalized oppression. By applying psychoanalytic feminism, this study seeks to uncover the hidden emotional and psychological struggles beneath the surface of this tragic narrative and reflect women's broader experiences in society.

The book *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 1949, 26) refers to women as "the other," as they are nothing other than what man decides; then they are thus called "the sex." This means that the male sees her as a sexed being. In society, women are constructed as the second sex, where everyone sees women as only domestic workers who worry nothing but their families and appearances. Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex* that women in the upper classes often lived independently and had to follow the rules set by men, which made it hard for them to make their own choices or take action (Beauvoir 1949, 182). It reflects how patriarchal societies define women not as autonomous individuals but as men, reducing them to their biological function and societal roles.

This notion is found in Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll*, where the protagonist is shaped by external expectations rather than her desires. The girl in the poem is not seen for her intelligence or individuality. However, she is instead judged by her physical appearance, reinforcing the idea that women exist primarily as objects for male validation. Beauvoir's argument that women are subjugated to the patriarchal system is mirrored in the poem's depiction of how beauty standards dictate a woman's worth. The poem serves as a critique of how internalized oppression forces women to conform to rigid gender roles, reinforcing the idea that they must sacrifice their authentic selves to meet the expectations imposed upon them by a male-dominated society.

Psychoanalytic feminism explores the notion that women are more submissive than men. Hence, they are only seen as a reproduction vessel to bear another generation (Bottinelli and Laxton 2018). Through the lens of psychoanalytic feminism, the poem offers the concept of internalizing oppression. The social expectations emphasize physical beauty, creating a conflict within women between their internal selves and the idealized image imposed upon them. Beauvoir supports this idea by exploring how the unconscious internalizes women's "other" status. This internalization shapes women's desires, identities, and self-perceptions, often aligning them with societal expectations undermining their autonomy.

In addition, this theory helps analyze how early childhood socialization and internalized gender expectations contribute to the protagonist's psychological distress in the poem. This theory defines the societal emphasis on physical perfection as a manifestation of the unconscious pressures imposed by patriarchal ideologies, reinforcing the belief that a woman's worth is tied to her appearance rather than her intellect or capabilities. Psychoanalytic feminism reveals that the girl's inability to reconcile her natural self with the imposed image of perfection results in a fractured identity, where she suppresses her true self to satisfy external demands. The poem reveals that it is not only an individual experience but also highlights the broader societal mechanisms that perpetuate these oppressive norms, where internalized misogyny and social pressures distort a psychological conflict that can lead to devastating consequences.

Gender Roles

Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll* profoundly critiques how gender roles are constructed and imposed upon individuals in patriarchal societies. Rooted in feminist theory, the poem examines how rigid expectations of femininity and masculinity shape personal identity and societal value systems. Gender roles, as defined by cultural norms, prescribe behaviors, appearances, and aspirations for individuals based on their assigned sex, often leading to harmful consequences for those who fail to conform. Gender roles are rooted in traditional beliefs, forcing people to fit into social standards and making

people feel restricted in their bodies (Angelina and Arianto, 2022). This theory addresses gender roles and allows for a deeper understanding of the societal pressures the character faces in Piercy's poem and the tragic outcomes of such pressures.

Gender is not something people are born with but something they perform through their actions, behaviors, and desires. Over time, these repeated actions create the false idea that gender is a natural part of who we are. Society reinforces this idea to maintain traditional rules about gender and sexuality, primarily to support the expectation of heterosexual relationships. (Butler 1995). In other words, Butler employs the idea that gender may refer to the repetitive acts, gestures, and speech through which individuals enact and embody their gender identity. The repetition of these behaviors solidifies the illusion that gender roles are natural or inevitable when, in reality, they are culturally imposed performances.

Gender roles theory examines how societal norms and cultural expectations dictate behaviors, responsibilities, and identities based on one's assigned sex. In Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll*, this theory is crucial in understanding how the protagonist is shaped by rigid gender norms prioritizing physical appearance over personal ambition or individuality. Gender roles theory can be applied to *Barbie Doll* by analyzing how societal expectations shape the protagonist's sense of self and how society teaches girls to prioritize external validation over self-acceptance, reinforcing that their worth is tied to their looks rather than their abilities. By using gender roles theory, the poem can be understood as a critique of how these rigid expectations limit women's potential and contribute to their emotional distress.

Additionally, the poem highlights the consequences of enforcing strict gender roles, particularly how they punish those who fail to conform. The protagonist's struggle with societal beauty ideals demonstrates how gender expectations create an impossible standard for women, leading to self-destructive behavior when they feel they cannot measure up. It symbolizes how women are only entirely accepted by society when they adhere to these expectations. This reinforces the idea that gender roles shape behavior and determine social acceptance and worth. Gender roles create gaps and inequalities between men and women, as society still stereotypes women as a submissive and powerless party (Nurwahyuni 2015). Through this lens, *Barbie Doll* exposes the dangers of these rigid roles, encouraging a deeper examination of how they continue to influence modern perceptions of gender and beauty.

A theoretical framework focusing on gender roles allows for critically examining the cultural and psychological mechanisms that uphold patriarchy. Piercy's *Barbie Doll* exposes the dehumanizing effects of these mechanisms, particularly as they relate to beauty standards and societal validation. By situating the poem within this framework, this analysis reveals how the enforcement of gender roles not only restricts women's potential but also exacts a profound emotional and psychological toll on those who are unable to meet these arbitrary standards

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically content analysis, to examine the literary devices used in Marge Piercy's poem *Barbie Doll*. Content analysis, which initially emerged as a quantitative method for identifying patterns in qualitative data, has evolved into a widely used qualitative technique (Nicmanis 2024, 1). Using this approach, the researcher systematically analyzed the poem's language, imagery, and symbolism to uncover its underlying themes and critiques of societal beauty standards and gender roles. This approach helped analyze and interpret the literary work's theme (Puspitasari, 2024). The study further incorporated the myth and symbol paradigm to explore recurring myths, symbols, and archetypes within the poem, providing a framework for understanding its deeper societal meanings (Rahman 2023, 2). Additionally, the research was guided by feminist theory, focusing on how literature perpetuates or challenges gender inequalities, oppression, and societal expectations

imposed on women (Kent 2022, 9). This theoretical lens allows the study to highlight the textual analysis, addressing how gender roles are impacting.

The primary data source for this study was Marge Piercy's poem *Barbie Doll*, which serves as the foundation for analyzing literary devices that critique gender norms and beauty standards. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, contemporary feminist writings, and social media advertisements, which provide context on how modern beauty standards and gender roles impact women's perspectives on self-acceptance. Combining primary and secondary sources ensured a comprehensive examination of the topic, allowing for a comparison between Piercy's era and contemporary society. These sources helped show how beauty standards and gender roles still affect how women see themselves today. Social media ads are especially relevant because they show the kinds of messages women receive about how they should look and act. By comparing these modern examples shown in the poem *Barbie Doll*, the study showed that the issues Marge Piercy wrote about are still happening now.

Data collection involved closely reading the poem and identifying and categorizing literary devices such as metaphors, irony, and symbolism. Additionally, scholarly discussions on gender roles and beauty standards were reviewed to establish the poem's relevance in current societal discourse. Data validation was achieved through cross-referencing with feminist critiques and existing literature on gender representation, ensuring the reliability and credibility of the analysis. The study aimed to provide a well-rounded perspective on how beauty standards influence self-perception by integrating multiple sources. The validation process also included consulting various academic perspectives to minimize bias and enhance the depth of the analysis. The triangulation of data from different sources strengthened the study's findings, reinforcing its argument regarding the continued impact of societal beauty standards on gender roles.

For data analysis, this study applied content analysis by systematically examining the poem's use of figurative language, including imagery, symbolism, and metaphor, to uncover more profound implications on societal beauty standards and gender roles. The myth and symbol paradigm were employed to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded within the poem, such as the figure of the *Barbie Doll*, reflecting cultural ideals and recurring themes of female oppression, conformity, and societal expectations. This approach allowed the study to identify how traditional narratives are constructed and challenged through poetic expression. Furthermore, under the lens of feminist theory, the poem was critically analyzed to explore how it either resists or reinforces dominant gender stereotypes. By combining these analytical tools, the study sought to uncover the poet's underlying critique and contribute to broader conversations about gender equality and women's self-acceptance in both historical and contemporary contexts

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion of this research delve into the intricate ways Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll* critiques societal beauty standards and gender roles, emphasizing their detrimental impact on individual identity and self-worth. By analyzing the poem through psychoanalytic feminism frameworks, this section explores how the protagonist's life becomes a poignant reflection of the oppressive cultural norms prioritizing appearance over substance. The discussion highlights the mechanisms through which beauty standards and gender roles are internalized, perpetuated, and enforced, revealing the psychological toll and systemic inequalities they create. Furthermore, the analysis connects Piercy's critique to contemporary issues, drawing parallels between the poem's themes and ongoing struggles against unrealistic beauty ideals and rigid gender expectations in modern discourse. Through this exploration, the research underscores the enduring relevance of *Barbie Doll* as a powerful literary critique of societal norms and their far-reaching consequences.

Societal Beauty Standards Critique

Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll* critiques societal beauty standards, illustrating how these ideals impose unrealistic and harmful expectations on women—proven in the title of *Barbie Doll*, who is not familiar with the traditional famous doll from time to time? They physically appeared as pretty women with skinny, long blonde hair and cute outfits. Ironically, barbie dolls have familiarized themselves with kids, meaning that even from a young age, women are already fixated on the standard of beauty. It has been widely noted in academic literature and popular media that Barbie represents an idealized standard of female beauty, with body proportions often criticized as unrealistic and potentially harmful (Sabiston et al. 2019, 1).

Playtime is a golden time for children to remember and imitate their environment. All girls want to be Barbie dolls in order to be beautiful. The title is a form of sarcasm, not to praise the Barbie doll but for the society that forces every woman to be a Barbie doll to fit in and be accepted in society.

“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. (Piercy 1969, lines 1-6).

Piercy starts the poem with the life of a healthy young girl and an ordinary start for her. Like other young girls, she is given toy miniatures that mimic bodily functions, reflecting traditional gender roles and expectations from a young age. She is also given make-up, emphasizing the importance of appearance and grooming from early childhood. However, since she reached puberty, people started to point out her physical flaws, marking the beginning of her struggle with body image.

Compared with the physical attraction of a *Barbie Doll*, the poem contrasts sharply with the superficial attributes deemed acceptable by society. A pivotal and transformative period in a young girl's life is often referred to as "the magic of puberty," where there will be wonderful feelings of changes in growing up but also changes in the societal dynamic. Young girls will experience physical, mental, and emotional changes, yet society also intensifies their external judgment. The previous stanza proves that society's judgment can be powerfully influence someone in shaping their self-perception. When the classmate points out her flaws, it reveals that beauty standards were already fixed at that time, and little differences in standards were considered flaws.

“She was healthy, tested intelligent, / possessed strong arms and back, / abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity / She went to and for apologizing / Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.” (Piercy 1969, lines 7-11).

Societal beauty standards are also shown in this stanza, where physical appearance becomes a societal priority rather than self-accomplishment and achievement. Despite the criticism of her flaws, she was described as healthy and intelligent, possessing positive attributes that should be valued. She is also physically strong, indicating her capability and resilience. The mention of her sexual drive and dexterity highlights her natural human qualities and potential. However, her body image is worsened, and society's judgments are affecting her self-esteem, so she starts to apologize for her flaws. This stanza reveals that society is only fixated on physical appearance rather than other positive qualities that someone has. This judgmental behavior is toxic as women cannot be the best version of themselves; to be smart, to be kind, to be helpful, as society will not see it as a valuable trait if they are not up to the beauty standards.

Beauty standards are socially constructed and reinforced by dominant societal groups, often leading women to alter their bodies to conform to these externally

imposed ideals (Yarni and Wahyuni 2022, 416). It is a bitter truth knowing that the societal construction of beauty has a powerful influence in altering women's viewpoint of themselves. Many women are terrified to be different because society will judge that they are not pretty based on the standards, resulting in such efforts made by women to transform themselves in order to please society. These facts are also shown in Piercy's last stanza, where, after enduring relentless pressure to conform to an idealized image of femininity, the girl ultimately succumbs to these demands by altering herself drastically, leading to her tragic death.

“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.” (Piercy, 1969, lines 17-23).

The hard truth comes from the pressure of societal beauty standards; women are willingly doing anything to alter their bodies according to the standard, even if it is in a dangerous way, for instance, plastic surgery. The declaration of "pretty" only appears when she is dead, meaning that meeting these impossible standards requires the ultimate sacrifice of her life and identity. Ironically, society's pretty standards are based only on artificial beauty or make-up, not other qualities or behavior

Construction of Gender Roles

The traditional construction of gender roles has been embedded in people since adolescence. It is also socially constructed, which dictates appropriate behavior, appearance, and responsibilities for individuals based on their gender. To illustrate, in society, men have to be the breadwinner for the family, while women are always associated with domestic work and responsibilities. It can be seen from the different toys given to children, the activities they are encouraged to pursue, and the rewarded or discouraged behaviors. For instance, girls might be given dolls and play kitchen sets, signaling an expectation to nurture and manage household duties. In contrast, boys might be given action figures and toy cars, suggesting roles that involve adventure and independence.

Gender roles are socially constructed expectations and norms that define behaviors, responsibilities, and opportunities considered appropriate for individuals based on their perceived gender. These roles are deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and societal contexts, shaping how people express their identities and interact with one another. In the construction of gender roles, various factors such as family upbringing, media representations, education, and cultural traditions play a significant role in reinforcing or challenging traditional stereotypes. Gender roles can be seen as an attitude that society sees as acceptable based on their assigned sex since birth, and if someone deviates from it, they may be outcasted from society (Bailon 2019). Understanding the dynamics of gender roles is essential for promoting equality and addressing biases that limit individual potential and perpetuate societal inequalities.

Gender stereotypes are a big issue in the construction industry because most decisions are made by men (Akinlolu and Haupt 2020, 196). The stereotypical gender roles are restrictive and limit the potential and self-expression of individuals by confining them to narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity. In several cases, these roles are also contributing to systemic inequalities, where men and women are valued differently and given unequal opportunities and treatment.

“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.” (Piercy 1969, lines 1-4).

Through four lines in the first stanza by Piercy, the construction of traditional gender roles is shown. She is given dolls that mimic bodily functions, reflecting traditional gender roles and expectations from a young age. Other than that, miniature domestic appliances and makeup all of which symbolize the traditional expectations placed on women. This shows a societal norm that forces women to prioritize domesticity and beauty from a young age. Women must be nurturing and responsible for domestic work while prioritizing their appearances and attractiveness. Pervasive societal standards towards women are highlighting how restricting these gender roles are.

“She was advised to play coy, / exhorted to come on hearty, / exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.” (Piercy 1969, lines 12-14).

The construction of traditional gender roles is not only restricting the fixated careers and roles between genders in the future but also how girls and boys should behave. The three lines above show that the girl is encouraged to adopt a demure and modest behavior, aligning with traditional expectations of femininity where women are expected to be reserved and submissive, particularly in romantic and social interactions. However, she is still being forced to live freely and cheerfully, meaning that women should be able to balance modest and outgoing behavior, showing that society often imposes unrealistic and contradictory standards on women. Aside from behavior standards, women must prioritize their physical appearance, where exercise and diet reflect the societal obsession with a slender and toned body. In contrast, women always appear happy and pleasant, regardless of their true feelings, and can charm to get whatever they want.

Contemporary Beauty Standard and Gender Roles Discourses

Issues of societal beauty standards and gender roles in *Barbie Doll* were happening during the second wave of feminism, which brought up the topic of the classification of roles between genders, which should be abolished. However, similar issues are still happening today. People still prioritize physical appearance over other positive qualities, forcing women and men to fulfill society's acceptable standards. Some argue that advertisements often create an unrealistic beauty standard for women, who are expected to be thin, tall, slender, white, and have smooth faces (Amalia et al. 2023, 2).

In contemporary society, beauty standards have become a powerful force shaping gender roles and expectations. These standards often prescribe idealized physical traits for men and women, perpetuated through media, advertising, and popular culture. For women, the emphasis frequently lies on achieving a slim figure, flawless skin, and youthful appearance, while men focus on muscularity, strength, and confidence. These narrow definitions of beauty reinforce traditional gender roles by associating women with physical attractiveness and nurturing qualities and men with power, dominance, and practicality. As a result, individuals are often pressured to conform to these ideals, leading to challenges like body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and, in extreme cases, harmful behaviors such as disordered eating or excessive cosmetic procedures.

In recent years, social media advertising has been pivotal in shaping and reinforcing societal beauty standards and gender roles. The media plays an important role in shaping how people view beauty and gender roles by presenting images in advertisements and films that influence how individuals think and behave (Lal and Kumar 2022, 46). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are complete with images and videos that promote an idealized version of beauty, which is often characterized by flawless skin, slim figures, and trendy fashions. These idealized images create a pervasive pressure for individuals, particularly young women, to conform to these narrow standards. The rise of cosmetic surgery, skincare regimens, and fitness trends can be

directly linked to the desire to meet these social media-driven standards. The constant exposure to perfect images can lead to negative self-perception, anxiety, and a relentless pursuit of an often unattainable ideal. Body image anxiety is the psychological stress and unhappiness people feel about the way their bodies look (Tian 2023, 51). The branding of most brands mainly has a bright skin tone, implying that people who have darker tones do not fulfill beauty standards.



Figure 1: Skintific's posts about the importance of bright skin
(https://www.instagram.com/p/C4u__15yW6A/?igsh=MW9hMWpyd2t2b25hZw==)

The feelings of inferiority felt by Panchito as a result of the form of racism he received from this school made it difficult for him to cross boundaries. This is one of the mental barriers that Mexican Americans have crossed. These borderlands are not found or are overcome by crossing California but by simply coming to terms with the things that make a person who they are with one's own identity. This border is increasingly difficult to cross, especially for children who do not have enough knowledge and experience to overcome this problem.

Beauty advertisements that feature a beauty product highlight how modern advertising continues to assert and reinforce societal beauty standards. The image above, with the emphasis on flawless skin, promotes the idea that achieving such perfection is attainable through the use of specific products. This representation sends a subtle yet powerful message: that beauty is defined by smooth, glowing, and blemish-free skin. Beauty brands often contribute to women's pressure by showcasing an idealized version of appearance, forcing them to meet these unrealistic expectations. As a result, beauty products function not only as self-care tools but also as symbols of conformity to a narrow and commercialized definition of attractiveness that dominates social media.

Moreover, social media advertising not only perpetuates beauty standards but also reinforces traditional gender roles. Advertisements often depict women in roles that emphasize beauty, caregiving, and domesticity, while men are shown as strong, successful, and independent. These portrayals perpetuate stereotypes that limit the potential and aspirations of individuals based on their gender and are proven in many beauty product advertisements that mainly market women as their models and customers, implying that women are always associated with appearance. In this era, young and beautiful women in beauty advertisements functioned to gain physical attraction and engagement for the brand (Tanyildizi and Yolcu 2020, 50). While men primarily aim for fitness, advertisements highlight their strength and success.

Advertisement content on social media continues to reinforce outdated gender roles and traditional societal expectations. While there has been some positive change in recent years, with more brands embracing diversity and inclusivity in their campaigns,

these shifts are still relatively limited. The dominant narrative in social media advertising continues to uphold traditional and often restrictive gender norms, especially in how beauty and femininity are portrayed. As Silalahi (2023) notes, the media plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining beauty standards by carefully selecting advertising models, images, video clips, and leading roles in films that align with conventional ideals of female attractiveness. These portrayals reflect and reinforce what society has come to expect, creating pressure on individuals, particularly women to conform to unrealistic and narrowly defined standards of beauty, which can negatively impact self-image and confidence.



Figure 2: Pantene's posts related to woman's beauty shot
(<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8HNPoCS-zC/?igsh=MTgxNXpjYWt0ZTZvbv==>)

The female model with flawless makeup, styled hair, and a confident pose shows an image that aligns closely with the idealized standards often seen in beauty advertisements. Such portrayals emphasize perfect physical features, including clear skin, symmetrical facial structure, and a polished appearance, reinforcing the notion that beauty is visible and measurable. In many beauty advertisements, women are consistently represented as having near-perfect looks, creating a narrow image of what is considered attractive. This constant exposure to idealized beauty can lead to unrealistic expectations and pressure, especially among young women who may need to attain these appearances to feel accepted or valued.



Figure 3: Proteinbomb's advertisement on men's strength
(<https://www.instagram.com/p/B9qw09AB-Kf/?igsh=N2ZmYmhpBHZqcHd3>)

The Instagram photo presents a male model with a well-toned, muscular physique. An image that strongly reflects the way masculinity is often portrayed in advertising. In many media campaigns, male models are consistently associated with physical strength,

toughness, and athletic builds, reinforcing the idea that being muscular is essential to being a "real man." This repeated imagery promotes a narrow and stereotypical standard of male attractiveness, suggesting that strength and dominance are key traits of masculinity. As a result, men may feel pressure to conform to these ideals, potentially leading to body dissatisfaction or the pursuit of unrealistic physical goals. Such portrayals not only limit the diversity of male representation but also contribute to the rigid gender norms that define how men are expected to look and behave in society.

Advertisement content on social media reinforces outdated gender roles and societal expectations. While some progress has been made, with a growing number of brands embracing diversity and inclusivity in their campaigns, the predominant influence of social media advertising still largely upholds traditional and often restrictive gender norms. However, contemporary beauty standards and their influence on gender roles have also become central to critical discourses challenging these norms. Movements like body positivity, gender-neutral beauty, and inclusivity campaigns have sought to dismantle rigid stereotypes, advocating for diverse representations of beauty across gender identities, body types, and cultural backgrounds. These discourses highlight traditional standards' artificiality, encouraging individuals to embrace their unique traits and reject societal pressures. By questioning the intersection of beauty and gender roles, these conversations contribute to a broader push for gender equality and acceptance, where beauty becomes a form of self-expression rather than a tool for enforcing societal hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll* powerfully critiques how cultural narratives construct and enforce rigid beauty standards and gender roles. Through qualitative content analysis and using myth and symbol theory, psychoanalytic feminism, and gender role theory, the poem is explored as a reflection of the internalized oppression women face under patriarchal norms. The Barbie doll serves as a mythic symbol of idealized femininity, reinforcing unattainable societal expectations from early socialization. These standards shape identity, often leading to emotional distress and fractured self-worth. By linking symbolic imagery with psychological struggle, the poem becomes a lens for examining how women are pressured to sacrifice authenticity for acceptance, highlighting the psychological cost of conformity to idealized gender norms.

Few prior works engage deeply with *Barbie Doll* through an integrated literary and psychoanalytic feminist lens, often limiting discussions to external stereotypes or sociocultural critique. This analysis fills that gap by offering a close reading that uncovers the unconscious forces at work behind societal expectations and their impact on female identity formation. Contributions extend to literary and feminist psychoanalytic fields by demonstrating how poetry encapsulates and resists dominant ideologies. The poem's relevance endures, resonating with contemporary issues surrounding media influence, self-objectification, and body image anxiety. Through this critical exploration, Piercy's work challenges gendered constructs and affirms literature's role in deconstructing oppressive myths and promoting agency through feminist discourse.

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