Barbie: A Sex Symbol?? Essay, Research Paper

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Barbie : The Sex Symbol?

Barbie, America’s number one selling doll, was not a sex symbol. With the aid of a child’s imagination, she could be -and do- anything a child wanted. Barbie has endured through decades of social and political upheaval -not to mention the countless attacks by feminists. How did she do it? By staying abreast of the times and by employing some of the savviest marketing in American business history. Barbie is sold in more than 140 countries, accounts for 38 percent of Mattel’s sales, and has had more than 500 make overs in her career.

It all started when Ruth Handler noticed her daughter Barbara playing with paper dolls and imagining them in grown up roles. Ruth realized that dolls on the market at the time were all baby dolls. She also realized that there was a need for a doll that would inspire little girls to think about what they wanted to be when they grew up. Thus Ruth came up with the idea for the teenage fashion model, Barbie, whom she named after her daughter.

Barbie has more clothes in her closet than some small department stores. She can be anything from a doctor to an airplane pilot. Barbie can be black, white, or Asian; have brown, blue, or green eyes; and have blond, brown, black, or red hair. Barbie, through her amazing ability to morph before one’s eyes, gave young people a chance to expand their horizons by showing that race or sex was not a factor in one’s future.

When Barbie was first introduced in 1959, the Women’s Movement was just gaining momentum. In a time when women were stay-at-home wives, Barbie was out skiing or perhaps nursing a sick foal back to health. Forty years later, Barbie has her own Corvette and motor home, dream house, and website where you can design your own Barbie. I went to Barbie’s website and made my own Barbie, although I have not played with a Barbie in more than 5 years. A liberated teenager, I would not approve of anything that even remotely denounced me as a woman. Barbie is just a doll to me, a symbol of my childhood.

I remember receiving a Barbie Corvette on my sixth birthday. I did not get to play with it for long because my brother, older than me by two years, decided to take over. He placed my “hard-bodied” Barbie in the car and they were off, racing down the streets of San Juan or another equally exotic place. I never wondered why Barbie had large breasts, because all women had breasts of some sort. In actuality, Barbie’s breasts were less like breasts and more like large mounds of excess plastic. At ten, Prager states that she found Ken’s genitalia-oppressed state ominous. At that age, I had no idea what genitalia were, nor did I care. The last thing on my mind was the sexual habits of two dolls. Prager also states that she did not marry because she could not find a guy who “looked as good in clam diggers” as Ken. She was not so worried about Ken’s genitalia that she would not marry him.

It is said that if Barbie were human, she would be almost 8 feet tall, have a 39-inch bust and a 23-inch waist. If Barbie were human, she would either be the most sought after basketball player or the highest paid model in history. Yet Barbie is not human. She is an eleven-inch piece of plastic. Any person who would find fault in Barbie’s body had deeper issues than a doll’s bust size. Prager says that she questioned the type of woman who would make Barbie; obviously Barbie’s maker was a very loving mother. Barbie’s maker gave her daughter a chance to grow emotionally and intellectually. My mother never designed a doll for me, but she did supply me with many Barbie’s.

In Prager’s essay, “Our Barbie’s, Ourselves,” she ends by suggesting that we are all trapped in “Barbie’s world” without chance of escape. I was never part of Barbie’s world; Barbie was part of mine. I put Barbie in situations that occurred in my everyday life, and I put Barbie in my dreams. Through her, I could go anywhere I desired, but I could also put Barbie back on a shelf after playtime. In her essay, Prager says that, in movies, women are always topless and men are always covered because of Barbie. Topless women and covered men were not novelties in 1959, nor are they in 1999. One doll did not account for the events both before and after her creation.

The insinuation that, if a man made Barbie, then all things were explained is ridiculous. Barbie was not made by a man, and was not made in the image of a man’s perfect woman. She was formed to give a young girl a realistic idea of her future, not necessarily in looks, but in her ability to do what she fantasized most about. Barbie was not made to be a sex symbol. She was created to make dreams seem possible.