

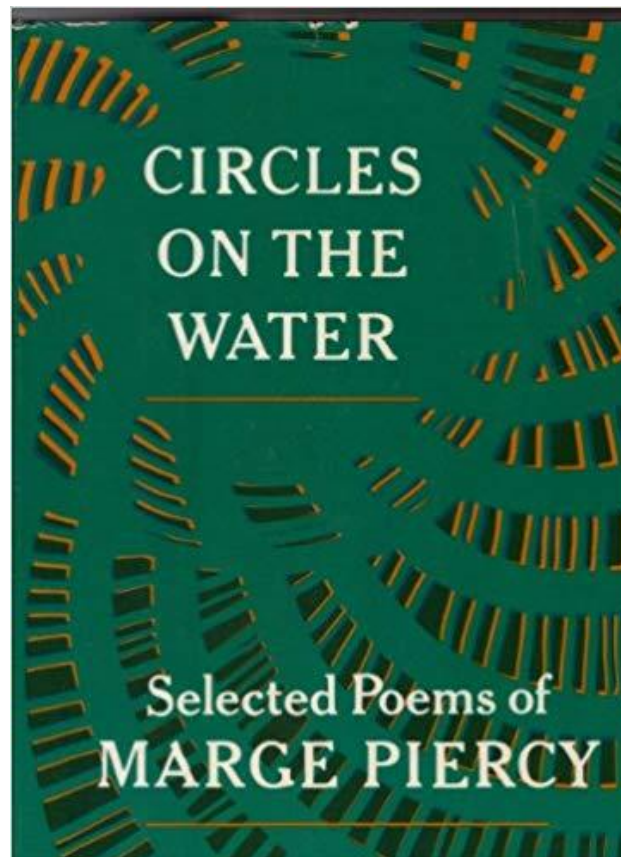
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

"Barbie Doll"

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 39, 1991)

by Philip Frisk



MARGE PIERCY. IN *CIRCLES ON THE WATER*. 1982.

"Barbie Doll." Marge Piercy. In *Circles on the Water*. 1982.

I have used this short poem of twenty-five lines to "teach" about sexism, and it has never failed to stimulate lively, productive discussion. The poem tells the life-story of a young woman (unnamed) who is normal in every way, except for a couple of minor "flaws" in her appearance. The narrative voice tells us that she has a big nose and fat legs, something she is cruelly reminded of by her peers at the onset of puberty. From then on, her life becomes an unending torment as she tries to follow everyone's advice regarding exercise, diet, and how to act ("wheedle") in order to overcome her "problem." None of it works: people still see a big nose on fat legs.

So the author, in a bitter, bitter touch of grotesque comedy, has her cut them off. Soon after, in the funeral parlor, she is displayed with a cute, little nose and long, straight, slim legs, and everyone says how good she looks.

Apparently, the undertaker has given her the Barbie Doll look after all. The poem ends with this bitter comment: "Consummation at last./to every woman a happy ending."

In discussing the poem, I try to bring out a number of questions regarding the Barbie Doll image: Where does it come from? Is it a creation of men or of women? What ethnic groups and what socio-economic status does Barbie represent? Whose economic interests are most served by the Barbie Doll ideal? How has the image of Barbie changed over the years and what do those changes reveal? More generally, what problems may women have in relating to an image of ideal beauty, which is imposed on them? What other forms of cultural imperialism can we identify? What are some strategies subordinate groups use to counteract the cultural myths and life-styles of more dominant groups?

"Barbie Doll" (as indeed any other symbolic object) can lead different groups in different directions. Using this poem with black students, for example, I often find that they pass rather quickly through the politics of gender (raised by the poem) in order to get to the politics of race, which they see as an analogous but more serious issue. For this reason, I find it best to first elicit from each member of the class some kind of personal response statement (to which I pay close attention) before I begin to develop my own agenda for discussion. (I may ask them, for example, to "tell us in writing about someone the poem reminds you of.") Otherwise, despite my own "enlightened and progressive" intentions, "teaching them about sexism" can easily be seen as just one more example of the kind of coercive pedagogy they are all too familiar with.



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