

In each era a simple everyday object can possess historical significance and can represent important memories. For instance, a close examination of my mother's Barbie dolls and her accessories from 1960-1974 captured the tension between the societal ideals of women and the average women of that time period. In the early 1960s the Ken doll was symbolic of the notion that girls should not be independent. As seen through Barbie's clothes this tradition trapped Barbie in her role as a housewife, which was a role many older women no longer appreciated. By the late 1960s, some younger women expanded the list of ideals they found offensive, one of which included the unrealistic standard of beauty. By resenting this societal norm it can be speculated that the Barbie doll was also objectionable to feminists. Thus, in reaction to the new women's movement Barbie's appearance shifted subtly.

The introduction of the Ken doll upheld the 1950's tradition in which women were not supposed to be independent. According to Diane King, an individual who grew up during the early 1960s, the Barbie doll was a toy that all of her friends had. Many of her play dates as a child often consisted of the young girls playing with these dolls. She furthered to say that many of her friends "wanted to be like Barbie."¹ Yet, the females old enough to own a Barbie doll when she was first introduced in 1959 did not have a Ken doll to accompany Barbie. As Elaine Tyler May, a historian who specialized in the Cold War era and gender noted, the 1950's "conservative attitudes towards gender still prevailed in the early 1960s."² Thus, an independent woman should not exist. So a female being by herself, even if she was a doll, sent a socially incorrect message to girls who aspired to be like her. On some level Mattel, the toy company who created Barbie, appeased the majority of the nation's feelings by having Barbie dressed up like a bride to be in the first ever commercial of the doll in 1959.³ So even though Barbie does not have a significant other she still dreamed of marriage. However, once Barbie became a house hold icon the company quickly created the Ken doll in 1961. The first commercial involving Ken portrayed Barbie

¹ Diane King, telephone interviewed by author, March 31, 2011.

² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 210.

³"1959 The First Ever Barbie Commercial." [Video] retrieved April 1, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8-avPUxyo>.

and Ken as boyfriend and girlfriend. Yet, the commercial implied they were to marry since the narrator in the last frame of the clip said “see where the romance will lead” with the two in their wedding attire.⁴ The company rapidly changed Barbie’s image because so many girls, like Diane King and her numerous friends, played with the doll. As people developing their values and opinions, these children were still impressionable. Thus, Mattel had to align Barbie with the norms of society to send young females a clear message of what was considered the right place for women, so that they could grow up to make the correct choice.

In the early 1960s Barbie’s clothes further perpetuated the traditional women’s place in society, which was a role some older women were starting to resent. During this time most of Barbie’s wardrobe consisted of frilly dresses and skirts. She owned maybe four pairs of pants, all of which had to be highly fashionable. For example, one pair of white pants was made feminine by decorating the fabric with black flowers and vines. Such an ensemble was not appropriate for work. These types of garments were better suited for her to go out shopping, on a date, or to some sort of party. Similar to how many of the women in the 1950s went to college and found a husband, this style of dress encouraged Barbie to participate in activities that would gain her a significant other.⁵ After all, Barbie and Ken met at a dance party.⁶ With a partner Barbie could properly pretend to be a house wife, an ensemble Mattel even created for her. This article of clothing was representative of Barbie’s first clear occupation. Later, a few of Barbie’s outfits gave her the opportunity to be an employee outside the home as a secretary or teacher. According to May females during the 1950’s were allowed to work in those types of jobs in order to make money for their house hold. Yet, even with a second job most women were still looked at primarily as house wives.⁷ By limiting the Barbie to the position of a house wife who occasionally worked

⁴ “1961 Barbie Dolls Boyfriend First Ever Ken Commercial.” [Video] retrieved April 1, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5pcyHT838g&NR=1>.

⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 78.

⁶ “1961 Barbie Dolls Boyfriend First Ever Ken Commercial.”

⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 159.

in low level jobs her ambitions were stifled similar to women in the 1950s. As May's book illustrated, women of the 1950s chose to be house wives because they took a realistic evaluation of their options and saw there were not enough opportunities for them in the job market.⁸ They settled because that was what society wanted females to do. Feminist Betty Friedan furthered this point in her 1963 book the *Feminine Mystique* when she proclaimed that women who wanted to be "poets or physicians or presidents" were classified as "neurotic."⁹ However, most house wives were the ones who felt ill. Psychologists thought they were fine and often concluded that "there was nothing wrong really."¹⁰ Yet, Friedan's book displayed how the feelings of helplessness and unhappiness that many women exhibited were a real problem. Once women read Friedan's story, many wrote to her and declared that they did not want their daughters to lead the same miserable life they did.¹¹ Ironically, since the Barbie doll was so popular, many of these mothers probably let their young girls play with a toy that symbolized the oppression that they wanted their children to avoid.

By the late 1960s another social norm that young women rejected was the idealized form of beauty that Barbie encompassed. The United States had an unrealistic standard of beauty as seen through the modifications made to Bild Lilli, a 1953 German doll that inspired Mattel to create Barbie. Bild Lilli differed from Barbie in that Barbie had a narrower waist, bigger breasts, and heavier make up.¹² Few women could resemble this American doll without the aid of cosmetic surgery; yet Mattel thought its final product was more than an acceptable body type. In fact, the first ever commercial for Barbie by Mattel praised the doll for being "beautiful" and urged other girls to be like her when they grew up.¹³ Soon after Barbie appeared, department store tried to help girls attain the dolls level of beauty. They

⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 78-9.

⁹ Betty Friedan, "The Problem That Has No Name," in *Major Problems in American History since 1945*, ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 282.

¹⁰ Friedan, *Major Problems*, 283.

¹¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 200.

¹² Google Image Result for Bild Lilli, accessed April 7, 2011, http://fashiondollcollectorsclubgb.co.uk/ESW/Images/IM_0777_zl.jpg.

¹³ "1959 The First Ever Barbie Commercial."

sold padded bras for children starting at the age of ten and dresses for young females in sizes three through six only.¹⁴ While Mattel did their best to market girls the proper doll to model themselves after, young females had a mind of their own. For instance, one of the dolls Mrs. King often played with as a child had a chunk of her hair missing. Such experimentation with Barbie's looks signified that not all girls from the early 1960s obediently followed the notions about beauty that Mattel marked. Once some of these girls became older they used different techniques, such as protesting at the Miss America pageant in 1968, to challenge the beauty standard. According to their manifesto, the protesters would liberate the Miss America participants to become "de-plasticized, breathing women." One of the reasons feminists wanted to free the contestants was because they resented the "Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol" that pageant runners represented.¹⁵ While these points were aimed at the contestants these objections could also be applied to Barbie. At this protest, the women had a symbolic trash can where they threw in items that represented their oppression. As the Miss America of toys it seems logical that the Barbie doll also belonged in the freedom trash can.

The actions of the women's movement correlated with a slight change in Barbie's appearance. Many of the young adults during the mid to late 1960s actively protested against their role in society. As Robin Moran, a radical feminist proclaimed the women's protest at the Miss America pageant "announced our existence in the world."¹⁶ However, Mattel did not react to this announcement until the early 1970s. For instance, in 1971 Barbie's eyes looked straight forward for the first time instead of off to the side. By looking straight forward Barbie actually seemed to be physically present since the new form of eye contact no longer gave the impression that she was submissive. Her clothes also changed. In 1971 a third of Barbie's wardrobe consisted of plain pants. Such attire made Barbie look more

¹⁴ Friedan, *Major Problems*, 282.

¹⁵ The CWLU Herstory Project, "No More Miss America," *A History of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union*, <http://www.cwluherstory.com/no-more-miss-america.html> (accessed April 1, 2011).

¹⁶ Alice Echols, "Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in *Major Problems in American History since 1945*, ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 299

authoritative. Furthermore, these types of outfits gave Barbie access to more masculine activities like playing sports. Thus, these alterations allowed for her to look and act less like a normal house wife. Yet Mattel did not alter Barbie's appearance, because they suddenly had an epiphany that how they portrayed women was offensive to some individuals. Mattel modified Barbie because of the competition they received from other toy industries. During the 1970s Ideal, a different doll company, generated more money than Mattel. Another toy establishment, Haymen, created dolls aimed at feminist mothers since the parents were the ones buying the products for their children.¹⁷ Due to such competition Mattel had to modify Barbie in order to attract more consumers or they would lose money. Since Mattel changed Barbie to garner more profit, they did not truly believe in the feminist cause. Their lack of commitment to woman's rights explains why the adjustments made to Barbie were only slight. If they really supported the cause, Mattel could have taken longer strides in transforming Barbie's appearance. For instance, her breast size could have been decreased or her collection of frilly dresses could have been eliminated, yet neither of these occurred. In fact, the majority of Barbie's clothes were still tight dresses. Thus, Mattel catered the bare minimum to feminists to turn a profit.

Overall, a close analysis of Barbie showed how she was of great significance to the memory and history of the 1960s and 1970s. While Mattel marketed Barbie as how the ideal women should look and act in the early 1960s, the company had to slightly adjust the dolls appearance and clothes by the early 1970s. There were few signs that the company would eventually have to change the Barbie doll to appease consumers. For instance, the young girls who played with Barbie sometimes experimented with the doll in a manner contrary to the company's marketing message. Furthermore, older women were no longer happy with their respective place in society as early as 1963, which some young women became actively vocal about by the late 1960s. The protests of the societal norms during the late 1960s were also a rejection of standards Barbie embodied; thereby forcing the company to shift with the people's

¹⁷ *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Claudia Mitchell et al. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 2:32.

attitude. However, since the modifications were made begrudgingly, Barbie encapsulated the tensions between the ideal women society wanted and the real women many wished was acceptable.

Kendra King

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