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"What was I made for?": exploring femininity through the Barbie doll

Relatrice
Prof.ssa Renata Morresi

Laureanda
Veronica Vittoria Peruzzo
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Abstract

This thesis explores Barbie's role in society and her revolutionary impact on the concept of feminism. Since her debut in 1959, Barbie has evolved from just a toy into a powerful cultural icon that mirrors and influences society. This doll reflects women's increasing inclusion in various fields with her numerous professions, challenging traditional gender roles and inspiring young girls to envision limitless possibilities for their futures, including roles traditionally reserved for men. This study highlights how Barbie has disrupted the old ideals of femininity centered on domesticity, promoting a vision of ambitious and independent women. The historical context of the "cult of true womanhood" or "cult of domesticity" contrasts with Barbie's intentions. For this reason, this paper aims to analyze the differences between these two phenomena and how feminist movements can inspire social change and empower women to envision a future unlimited by outdated gender norms.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to analyze and explore the history behind one of the toys that has had a significant cultural and social impact: Barbie. Introduced in 1959 by Ruth Handler, her creator, the doll has always represented and influenced the concept of femininity and, consequently, the role of women in the entire world. The Barbie doll has been always considered more than just a toy: she played a fundamental role in social change, shaping new ideals of personal fulfillment for women since early childhood. Presented as a role model for girls, with a wide choice of jobs and lifestyles, she was immediately criticized. Various debates were focusing on how she displayed, in a negative perspective, the female body's representation, gender stereotypes, and inclusivity. To understand better the reasons why this harmless doll has achieved a great deal of success but at the same time caused controversy among people, it is necessary to look at the past, contextualizing both historical moments before her birth and in which she made her debut. First, it is essential to take a step back to investigate what was happening previously in the American society. The *Culture of Domesticity*, also known as the *Cult of True Womanhood*, became predominant during the 19th century in the United States. This leading ideology described role separation and female inferiority. At that time, women were considered angels, obliged to stay at home. Their only duty was to take care of their family and their home. Their lives depended solely on this, they could not aspire to reach or get other positions in the fabric of society as these were reserved only to men, their husbands. In fact, this way of perceiving women, giving them rigid and well-defined roles, limited the development of their personalities and wills. Devoted wife, loving mother, confined at home: these were the characteristics women had, and they absolutely could not change for any reason. Paradoxically, the cult of true womanhood did not always accurately describe what was happening in the lives of 19th-century women: there were women not married and without children who dedicated their lives to political issues, for example the right to vote. Moreover, various women were excluded from the cult of domesticity: the ones who migrated, poor women and women of the working class, millions of African American women, and Jewish women. All of these were considered clearly in contrast with the main ideal of femininity, which was exclusive to White middle-class women.

In the first chapter, the socio-cultural context preceding the launch of Barbie will be inspected in depth, focusing particularly on the figure of the woman in the time stated above. The fundamental principles of the predominant ideology, the *Culture of Domesticity*, will be explored, focusing on how it defined specific roles for women. Virtues of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity were indispensable values. The discussion will study how these stereotypes influenced the perception women had of themselves and their abilities, thus limiting opportunities outside the domestic sphere. To support this, texts written directly by women of the time will also be taken into consideration, to give voice to their thoughts. Finally, this section will address the changes that consequently led to the transformation of femininity's concept within society. The Cult of Domesticity was a cultural backdrop against which early feminist movements reacted and which also led to later feminist waves, as Betty Friedan critiqued in her 1963 work "The Feminine Mystique". Starting from the overcoming of the previously mentioned Cult of Domesticity, moving on to the feminist movements in the following centuries, what will be analyzed are the cultural, political, and other achievements that helped redefine the concept of femininity, broadening opportunities for every single woman.

The second chapter intends to present more specifically the Barbie phenomenon, starting from how the idea of this doll was born and how it was developed then. For the doll, it was not easy to become part of consumers' lives given the enormous amount of criticism it received. To overcome these negative comments Mattel, Barbie's manufacturer, decided to expand the range by introducing different ethnicities and new role models of various kinds, a clear message of inclusiveness to counter the previous criticisms. Finally, it will be explained how the dreams and ambitions of girls changed thanks to this simple toy, and how Barbie has helped shape their future expectations and personalities.

To conclude, the third chapter will analyze the recent Barbie film. Released in 2023, it addresses all the social issues mentioned in the previous chapters from a modern perspective. The important messages are conveyed through both the narration and characters, always with attention to inclusivity. One of the main goals of the film is to highlight and deconstruct toxic masculinity. In order to do this, the film tries to bring the focus to this issue by comparing Barbie's world (*Barbieland*) and the real world. These

two are the opposites: in Barbie's pink world, dolls are in power, and everything revolves around them. While Kens... they are just Kens. On the other hand, the real world shows how only men hold important top positions. The film therefore intends to promote a message of equality and mutual respect. As was done with the dolls, the actors chosen to portray the various characters are also of different ethnicities, aiming to show a more welcoming and varied society. The conclusion of this study will describe the representations of contemporary women and how they fight for equality. This aspect also is depicted in the film, (the famous America Ferrera's monologue) and unfortunately is still ongoing today. The daily challenges women must face are difficult but with greater overall awareness, step by step, everything is possible.

1. Between home and revolution: Domesticity and Feminism

1.1 *Contextualizing the history of the Culture of Domesticity or Cult of True Womanhood*

Between 1820 and the Civil War, a new middle class emerged in America. A rapid and significant industrial development marked this period. Numerous inventions shaped the American society, along with the expansion of new industries, businesses, and professions. The Industrial Revolution¹ changed the American economy, transforming the agricultural work into factory-based work, which contributed to urbanization and growth of cities. The increase of commerce, banking and new urban services led to the rise of a class of people who were neither wealthy elites nor poor workers. This new class gained influence and contributed radically to the nation's cultural, social and economic development. Therefore, they had a different lifestyle compared to the previous ones: men worked in the industrial sector while women were usually left at home. As a consequence, "when husbands went off to work, they helped create the view that men alone should support the family" (Lavender 1998, 1). To consider the world of work as a rough world, dangerous and full of trouble was one of the main beliefs at that time. As Sánchez-Eppler says, "American society considered both the American home and woman as something that remained not corrupted by negative influences" (1992, 348). It was considered natural for women to avoid and/or be excluded from political life and labor, there was too much individualism in most public activities. Additionally, 19th century Americans saw the home as distinct from the workplace: men depicted themselves as breadwinners and women were seen as angels who only had to take care of the house: "A woman's place was therefore in the private sphere, in the home, where she took charge of all that went on" (Lavender 1998, 1). The ideal woman was expected to be a symbol for her husband, she was a sign of his success. "True woman" was associated only with home and family as women were believed to belong to domestic works. Within the walls they were safe from the aggressions of the world of business, public affairs and even politics. The house was considered their natural place where they could effortlessly take care of their family and be a moral guide for the husband and kids.

¹ The so-called Second Industrial Revolution, also known as the Technological Revolution, took place between the 19th and 20th centuries. It saw the growth of new industrial sectors such as steel, electricity, oil, and chemistry, unlike the First Industrial Revolution, which focused on textiles, iron, and coal.

Based on these beliefs, an ideal that affected people's lifestyles and behaviors spread widely among middle classes in the United States: The Culture of Domesticity, often shortened to Cult of Domesticity, or Cult of True Womanhood. Throughout the 19th century, the lives of American women were significantly influenced and characterized by this ideology that had to do with what was expected from women, shaping a new ideal of femininity. To be considered as women, they had to observe strict standards in order to devote themselves to only specific duties while their personalities and characteristics were put aside. Proper women were characterized and defined by four essential virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. In fact, Lavender reports accurately the description of these four qualities:

Ideal Number One: Piety

Nineteenth-century Americans believed that women had a particular propensity for religion. The modern young woman of the 1820s and 1830s was thought of as a new Eve working with God to bring the world out of sin through her suffering, through her pure, and passionless love. Religion was thought to be a good thing in women, a salve for a potentially restless mind, an occupation which could be undertaken within woman's proper sphere--the home. (Lavender 1998, 2)

For middle classes, religion played a crucial role as it provided a guide for personal behavior and family life. Often communities were organized around churches or religious institutions which gave a sense of belonging. Irreligion was "the most revolting human characteristic" (Lavender 1998, 2). A non religious woman could be easily compared to Eve, the first woman in biblical lore, who was held responsible for the original sin. Instead, women were expected to save the world by freeing it from sin.

Ideal Number Two: Purity

[...] Without sexual purity, a woman was no woman, but rather a lower form of being, a "fallen woman" unworthy of the love of her sex and unfit for their company. [...] The marriage night was advertised as the greatest night in a woman's life, the night when she bestowed upon her husband her greatest treasure, her virginity. From thence onward, she was dependent upon him, an empty vessel without legal or emotional existence of her own. [...] Despite any male attempt to assault her, she must remain pure and chaste. She must not give in, must not give her treasure into the wrong hands. (Lavender 1998, 2)

This socially imposed concept of virginity and consequently sexual innocence defined and limited women. For centuries female virginity has been viewed as a symbol of moral integrity leading to personal pressure and low self-esteem. Plus, the family's reputation depended on the purity of the women in it. The loss of this virtue could cause serious consequences. Women had to pay attention to their actions, as they could be

misinterpreted by others. A woman could never seduce a man, and she was expected to dress properly. All these norms clearly reinforced gender roles, elevating the power men held over women as their behavior was not taken into consideration.

Ideal Number Three: Submissiveness

This was perhaps the most feminine of virtues. [...] men never supposed to be submissive. Men were to be movers, and doers--the actors in life. Women were to be passive bystanders, submitting to fate, to duty, to God, and to men. Women were warned that this was the order of things [...] A true woman knew her place, and knew what qualities were wanted in her opposite. [...] "A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority and therefore grateful for support. " "A woman has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love. " (Lavender 1998, 3)

Once again, men were superior. Women had to obey to their husbands and respect them every day. This idea of women's subordination to male authority was validated by the interpretation of the Scriptures as a reflection of God's will. Women were not autonomous; they depended on men, and it is relevant to note that if women were not married, they had to submit to their fathers' will. This virtue helped to emphasize the gender hierarchy: women remained in secondary roles within the family and society, supporting the imposed patriarchal structure.

Ideal Number Four: Domesticity

Woman's place was in the home. Woman's role was to be busy at those morally uplifting tasks aimed at maintaining and fulfilling her piety and purity. Housework was deemed such an uplifting task. [...] Needlework and crafts were also approved activities which kept women in the home, busy about her tasks of wifely duties and childcare, keeping the home a cheerful, peaceful place which would attract men away from the evils of the outer world. (Lavender 1998, 3)

Women were angels of the house. Their primary responsibility and fulfilment were found within the home. A true woman had to create a nurturing, moral environment managing household tasks, raising children, providing support and ease to her husband. This kept women in the private sphere, making them responsible for handing out values to their children. The house was a safe place where men did not have to worry about anything: all the negative aspects of the world of work stayed outside the domestic sphere. Men could relax because women cooked for them, cleaned everything, managed to maintain a fresh and well-organized atmosphere always. Women were the moral center of the family.

These virtues outlined a restrictive vision of femininity but in what ways did these ideals progressively permeate women's lives, leading to a homogenization of their

experiences? All these features were broadly described in novels, sermons, religious writings, and even in women's magazines which also included tips of fashion, cooking, and housekeeping, such as how to tend flowers. These media provided examples, stories, and guidelines on how to follow and respect this ruling ideology, embedding all the ideals. A woman could find recipes for meals, tips for personal appearance and dress, as well as instructions on how to correctly maintain a household, sharing a common identity with other readers. As a consequence, these magazines influenced women's opinions and strengthened their expectations regarding family and society rules. A clear example was the famous *Godey's lady's book*², a magazine published by Louis A. Godey. Another symbolic example of 19th century literature was Catherine Esther Beecher's³ work called *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* published in 1841. These books were important for women at that time and the difference between them lies in their aims: *Godey's Lady's book* focused more on aesthetics and fashion within the domestic sphere, while Beecher's treatise provided a detailed description of women's duties and responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of their role within the home.

Actually, Beecher's book was her major work, and the first American treatise to cover all aspects of domestic life. Over the years it went through fifteen editions, with various reprints and revisions, and its success was notable. The work is divided into chapters, each with distinct and effective titles, addressing the various tasks mentioned above with clear explanations. To cite some of them, "*Chapter six, on healthful food*", "*Chapter twelve, on domestic manners*" or "*Chapter thirty-one, on the care of chambers and rooms*". The book had an enormous impact on society due to its written content. Beecher, besides being a supporter of equality in all the fields, especially education, was a teacher. She firmly believed that women were uniquely capable of educating and raising children, whether they were mothers or teachers (Michals 2015). As she said in the

² American publication that, from 1830 to 1898, pioneered a format still employed by magazines devoted to women's issues. During the first six years of its existence, it included mainly articles clipped from British women's magazines and hand-coloured plates reproducing fashions of the day. Godey, wanting to provide more original content by American authors, bought the *Boston Ladies' Magazine* in January 1837 and invited its editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, to edit the revamped publication, called *Godey's Lady's Book*. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ellen-Louise-Chandler-Moulton>).

³ Catherine Beecher (1800-1878) was an American educator and social activist, known for her commitment to promoting women's education and for her role in defining the "cult of domesticity" in the 19th century.

preface, she was the first of a large number of siblings. Unfortunately, her mother died when she was young, so she had to take care of her family and home.

[...] How came the Author to write such a book? She answers, Because she has herself suffered from the want of such knowledge, in early life; because others, under her care, have suffered from her ignorance; and because many mothers and teachers, especially in reference to matters pertaining to health, have so much occasion to sympathize in the regret with which this acknowledgment is made. [...] being the eldest of a large family, she has, from early life, been accustomed to the care of children, and to the performance of most domestic duties. It has also been her good fortune to reside, most of her life, in the families of exemplary and accomplished housekeepers, [...] most of the domestic operations, detailed in this work, have been performed by the writer. (Beecher 1841, 7).

Without a doubt, her experiences reinforced her beliefs about women's role which were consequently reflected in her works and actions. She illustrated her thoughts on the topic emphasizing responsibility in nurturing the next generation of citizens and establishing a good shelter for their families within the home (Michals 2015).

Later in her life, she decided to fund with her sister Mary⁴ the Hartford Female Seminary, one of the first educational institutions for women in the United States. The school's goal was to provide higher education for women, despite their limited educational opportunities. It was one of a kind because it offered subjects such as literature, philosophy, science and mathematics that were aspects traditionally reserved for men. Catherine Esther Beecher believed in the importance of education for women; she argued that they should be well educated not only to be good wives and mothers but also to take part in society. There was, in fact, a need for a figure who could preserve the principles of the American society. Beecher was a vivid reflection of the era's mentality, emphasizing the distinct separation of male and female roles and specifying exactly what women should and should not do.

Thus the Americans do not think that man and woman have either the duty, or the right, to perform the same offices, but they show an equal regard for both their respective parts; and, though their lot is different, they consider both of them, as beings of equal value. They do not give to the courage of woman the same form, or the same direction, as to that man; (Beecher 1841, 7).

What emerges from reading specific sections of the treatise is that Catherine Esther Beecher firmly believed in the superiority of women, not in comparison to women from other countries, but in terms of their position within a powerful and exceptional country,

⁴ Better known as Mary Foote Beecher Perkins after her marriage. She did not pursue public life, and she disliked teaching. She married Thomas C. Perkins, a prominent lawyer in Hartford, and settled there for the rest of her life. She was the grandmother of author Charlotte Perkins Gilman. (<https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/harriet-beecher-stowe/family/>)

namely America. She saw in women the potential to both elevate and sustain the country's progress through their work. According to her, American women, through their efforts in this area, could exert a greater moral influence in their state compared to women from other countries.

However, she opposed granting women the right to vote, arguing that women should dedicate themselves merely to the home and school (Michals 2015). In her opinion, a woman's primary roles were as educators and caretakers. Nevertheless, the Hartford Female Seminary became a model for many other women's schools in the United States and contributed to the women's education movement of the 19th century. Some of its students carried on Beecher's mission to promote women's education, reflecting a strong desire and will to radically change women's conditions.

The school promoted an ideal of domestic education only for married women and mothers, reflecting the core principles of the dominant Cult of Domesticity. The Cult of True Womanhood did not always provide a perfectly accurate description of what was happening in the lives of 19th century women. Firstly, there were women not married and without children. Secondly, women involved in social causes were often considered subversive. Women who did not conform with the figure of the true woman often found themselves on the margins of society or faced criticism. Unmarried and childless women were often viewed with suspicion or pity, as they did not fit the prescribed role of wife and mother. They were perceived as “incomplete”, “deviant” or even as “failure”, as marriage and motherhood were considered essential to a woman's identity. Moreover, unmarried women had fewer economic opportunities: without the support of husbands or children, they often struggled financially. Legally, they also had fewer rights; a woman's rights and status were often defined by her relationships with male relatives. In fact, women without a husband could work, but only in charitable or religious work, which were seen as a socially acceptable ways for them to contribute to society. On the other hand, women who dedicated their lives to political issues, such as the right to vote, abolitionism or suffrage, openly challenged traditional gender roles and fought for broader equality. Women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote against the oppression of women, questioning the ideal of “True Womanhood” through their literary works. Charlotte Perkins was born in Connecticut, where her early life was marked by poverty when her father abandoned the family. Her mother, left with two children on her own,

managed to raise them under difficult circumstances. She married Charles W. Stetson, an art teacher and illustrator. However, as she entered married life, Charlotte became increasingly aware of injustices faced by women, particularly those dealing with the traditional domestic roles. She understood that she was not suited to domestic life and the birth of her daughter intensified her feelings, leading to a deep depression. In response, she was advised to undergo treatment under the care of Dr. Weir Mitchell, the most prominent American neurologist of the time. Then she divorced her husband, and when he remarried soon after, she decided to have her daughter to live with them. As the affair became the focus of public scandal, she moved to California where she became a professional author.

Despite the challenges she went through, Charlotte chose to become an independent and vocal advocate for women's right. She recognized that life for white middle-class women was oppressively restrictive, and she sought to challenge and rewrite the stereotypes of what a woman should be. Rejecting the prevailing masculine society, she lived much of her life on the margins, producing polemical feminist writings. Charlotte firmly believed that women could never truly be free as long as they were bound by the domestic mythology that kept them dependent. These beliefs were mirrored in her most renowned work *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She began to write it a few years after she left her husband, right when she started to analyse her mental deterioration, which started a few days after she began a treatment prescribed by the doctor. Dr. Weir Mitchell debated the so-called "woman question", as he believed that when a woman wanted to overcome her natural limits, then there could be issues, problems, and disorders. He prescribed Gilman a "rest cure", which required she had to stay home several weeks and limit her intellectual activity. She was not allowed to work, read, draw, write, because it was considered dangerous for her health. The story was written in just a few days, and readers were impressed by the rapid deterioration of the protagonist's mental health within several weeks. The description clearly reflects Gilman's situation, making the story partly autobiographical. Moreover, the narrator is a woman who is prescribed a "rest cure" by her husband, a doctor, who confines her to a mansion in the countryside for three months. During this time, she is isolated from all human contact and lives in a former children's nursery, a bright room with barred windows. This room is central to the story, as it has the yellow wallpaper which becomes a symbol of her mental decline. Her safe topic is

writing about the house, she feels more at ease when thinking of it. However, the paper in her room irritates her and the pattern confuses her eyes.

How the husband treats the narrator suggests the causes of her illness; he dismisses her feelings and concerns, attributing them to her supposed hysteria rather than considering her perspective. As a result, she keeps a journal in secret, finding relief in writing. The deterioration can be followed by reading this diary, which she called “dead paper” (Gilman 1892, 647). Her husband exerts total control over her life, dictating her actions, behavior, sleeping arrangements, and even the room she should live in. This need to control everything worsened her mental condition rather than alleviate it.

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage. [...]. John is a physician, and perhaps - (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind -) perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency - what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing. So I take phosphates or phosphites - whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? (Gilman, 647-648)

By reading some passages of the book, it is evident that the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity are strongly emphasized and that the author herself aims to highlight them in order to reject them.

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious. [...] John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him. Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way! I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already! [...] Dear John! He loves me very dearly and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; (Gilman, 649-651)

In these passages, the writer highlights her sadness about being not able to fulfill her duties. She wanted to conform to the ideal of a woman who takes care of the house and creates a relaxing environment for her husband after his hard days at work. But since she is ill, she cannot provide this nurturing atmosphere. Her husband does not let her do anything: his oppressive treatment reflects the societal norms that stifle women's autonomy. He fails to see the harm he is causing because he believes is doing what both a husband and a doctor should do.

The oppressive domestic role reflects Gilman's broader critique of the restrictions imposed on women by a patriarchal society. In her non-fiction work, *Women and Economics*⁵, she explores how women's economic dependence and limitations imposed on them contribute to their lack of autonomy. Gilman argued that economic dependence was a barrier that prevented women from achieving both freedom and equity. As a result, their professional development could not expand, by staying in their homes they remained limited. She pointed out that women's economic dependency from men was wrong for the entire human species, the sexual and the maternal aspects of women had been too much emphasized while other aspects of their personalities had been repressed. To benefit the nation, women should have been allowed to work, as it would have been positive for them to develop their qualities while also contributing to countering male models of aggression. She believed that limiting women's potential contributed to societal inefficiency; hence, women and men should have the same possibilities and opportunities to work. Gilman envisioned a society where women's values were not based only on their attractiveness or their ability to run a household, but where they were a fundamental part of public activities and professions. Only then, she claimed, would society develop and progress, leaving behind an outdated vision that wrongly permeated the fabric of society.

To the young man confronting life the world lies wide. Such powers as he has he may use, must use. If he chooses wrong at first, he may choose again, and yet again. Not effective or successful in one channel, he may do better in another. The growing, varied needs of all mankind call on him for the varied service in which he finds his growth. What he wants to be, he may strive to be. What he wants to get, he may strive to get. Wealth, power, social distinction, fame, - what he wants he can try for. To the young woman confronting life there is the same world beyond, there are the same human energies and human desires and ambition within. But all that she may wish to have, all that she may wish to do, must come through a single channel and a single choice. Wealth, power, social distinction, fame, - not only these, but home and happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter,- all, must come to her through a small gold ring. (Gilman 1898, 71)

1.2 Female figure's gender stereotypes

The cult of domesticity derives from another ideology present in the American society known as Separate Spheres. "The metaphor of the "sphere" was the figure of speech, the trope, on which historians came to rely when they described women's part in American culture" (Kerber 1988, 10). This theory supported the concept behind

⁵ *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*: A feminist manifest published in 1898 that helped redefine the concept of femininity despite facing resistance and criticism.

domesticity, as it marked and reinforced boundaries between the two sexes. By doing so, the female and male spheres were well delineated: the female sphere, which was considered as a private environment where a person's intimacy was relegated to domestic walls, from the world outside, which instead belonged to the public sphere and offered public activities, which only men could participate in. This strong sense of domestic intimacy contrasted sharply with the idea of engaging with everything that was outside the home but at the same time participated in the idea of nation building: "In this context domestic has a double meaning that not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home" (Kaplan 1998, 581). Domesticity laid the foundation for strengthening national identity by representing the nation as one's home - the safe place in contrast to the outside world, which was seen as dangerous. "Domestic in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery" (Kaplan 1998, 582). Women, in their role as educators, were crucial not only because they had to raise responsible citizens capable of upholding the nation's values, but also in precisely delineating the borders between civilization and savagery. "Women's work at home here performs two interdependent forms of national labor; it forges the bonds of internal unity while impelling the nation outward to encompass the globe" (Kaplan 1998, 587). The home was an emblematic element in the American women's lives, especially because they perceived it differently from their British counterpart. In fact, a common belief was that "the design and management of that 'place' is integral to the dynamics of a highly gendered society, rather than just the architectural or environmental counterpart to a static set of social relations." (Gill 1998, 18). Women's experiences antecedent to this historical moment were crucial. As Beecher argued, she "codified femininity in the spatial and material layout of the home, creating, thereby, a rhetoric of containment for women that passed itself off as a recognition of influence" (Gill 1998, 17). In her book, Beecher also suggested how to arrange furniture and emphasized the importance of a proper home structure. However, not all women agreed with this perspective. One of them was Gilman, who "urged her audience to consider their logic in assigning women to the home" (Gill 1998, 17). She believed that, as American society was undergoing a period of change, the women's role also needed to evolve: "the status quo of women as the overseers of the

home was itself open to—in fact, in need of—change” (Gill 1998, 17). However, at that time, defining the nation’s boundaries was challenging, as America was expanding through its expansion program. For this reason, it was essential to observe the boundaries between the private sphere, or home, and the outside world to prevent chaos from entering. Immigrants were generally considered foreigners and aliens because they were not part of the nation and therefore a clear sign of danger. Their presence was thought to cause disorder, threatening the integrity established by Americans. In addition to this, it was believed that Americans had a colonizing mission to teach the colonized how to behave. Blacks, who were not voluntary migrants but were first deported by force and then kept in bondage by violent oppression, were the first group to be targeted by the ‘civilization mission’: “That is the greatest mission of our Republic, to train here the black man for his duties as a Christian, then free him and send him to Africa” (cited in Kaplan 1998, 587). African Americans were thus to be subjected to white American supremacy also through the ideology of domesticity: “America is figured as a mother raising her baby, Africa, to maturity (Kaplan 1998, 595).

Although these theories claimed to universally shape American female citizens, they were not applied uniformly among every woman. As stated, the Cult of Domesticity primarily affected the lives of the white middle class; a copious number of women were excluded from this phenomenon mainly due to stereotypes. Not only unmarried or childless women but also enslaved women were ignored, women who migrated from southern Europe or other places, including poor women and women of the working class. Women who pursued careers in industry, literature, or social activism directly challenged the idea that a woman's place was solely in the home. A woman working outside the walls of her home, intending to cover male occupations, was often considered as a threat. Ladies from the working class couldn’t devote themselves only to their houses, they often needed to work to live and at the same time to help support their families. Moreover, additional prejudices against them made their lives harder; they had to face psychological offenses. They were portrayed as less feminine and not entirely women, aggressive, brutal, hypersexual, ugly, gross and so forth. They were far from the ideal women described in the cult. At that time, these strong prejudices were directed similarly at people who immigrated from other states, especially those with a different skin tone. In the United States, African Americans were numerous, but their rights and opportunities were far

fewer, especially for women. Millions of enslaved women were not protected by domesticity but often exploited by their female owners. They were employed in low-paying jobs and treated poorly. Even after emancipation they worked as domestics in white households, where they toiled strenuously, making the idea of them as "angels of the houses" unimaginable. White society did not see these women as embodying the same moral values they held. The same treatment was extended to Indigenous, and other minority women. All these women had different roles and expectations within their communities and faced double discrimination, both racial and gender based. A leading figure among them stood out: Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century abolitionist and activist for African Americans' and women's rights. Her true name was Isabella Baumfree. She was born in New York and at a young age she was sold to a slave owner. She experienced sexual abuse along with beatings and whippings by her master. She wrote about her awful conditions, but one day she escaped from her horrible situation, one year before the abolition of slavery in New York was approved. After having gained her freedom, she became a free woman and one of the first things she did, was to fight for his son's freedom. He was illegally sold to an enslaver. She decided to go to court, making her way in severely adverse environment, and she fought tooth and nail, finding strength in her faith. This episode triggered in her the desire to struggle for justice for as many people as possible. Inspired by religion, Isabella Baumfree decided to change her name to Sojourner Truth in 1843 and the following year she joined forces with abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass. She can be considered both as a preacher and an early women's rights advocate as she, led by her faith, wanted to instill God's values and principles, talking also about her slavery experience to the community, denouncing oppression among African American people and women. Her sermons were engaging, and she delivered her most famous speech at the Ohio women's rights convention "*Ain't I a woman?*". It was powerful, it dealt with work equality that was executed by black people in general. It did not matter if they were men or women, free or unfree people. They were treated poorly, working in hard and bad conditions. With her words she wanted to debunk the myth that women are weak and need support from men. She fought deeply in order to make freedom accessible for anyone. For this reason, her abolitionist campaign and fight for women's rights lasted until the day she died. Based on similar ideals, other female figures tried to draw attention to their conditions. A strong will for emancipation

was shared among these women, who had a main goal: to radically change the society in which they were living.

1.3 *Evolution of the concept of femininity in society*

According to the dictionary, femininity is defined as “the fact or quality of having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for a woman”⁶. Therefore, it can be inferred that certain attributes, behaviors, features and roles are generally considered appropriate for women. These traits have been influenced by cultural norms and historical periods across cultures. In fact, what has been expected of women has changed over time, determined from past events; a major influence was exerted by factors such as social class and ethnicity. That is why the concept of femininity is socially constructed and imposed - it is not innate, but rather created by human beings. Femininity is frequently represented through stereotypes that emphasize characteristics that reflect the ideals of women during the Cult of Domesticity (such as purity and subordination to men). For instance, long hair is considered more feminine than short hair, and wearing skirts, heels, or using colors such as pink reinforces a limited definition of femininity. These societal norms restrict a woman’s personality by imposing traditional and confining roles. For a long time, the only ambition a woman could have was to be a mother, a wife, and a caretaker of the home - roles considered fundamental to femininity. However, over time, these ideals were challenged. As highlighted by Bennett, it is relevant to consider the challenges women faced throughout history in order to keep them in mind and progress: “The hard lives of women in the past; the material forces that shaped and constrained women’s activities; the ways that women coped with challenges and obstacles - all of these things can too easily disappear from a history of gender [...]” (Bennett 1989, 258). Women began to break out of these rigid patterns, and new social movements arose. One of these is feminism, a movement that aimed to promote gender equality by countering discrimination faced by women. Its main goals include advocating for equality in civil and political rights, equal employment opportunities, wage equality and fight against gender-based violence. Feminism seeks to challenge traditional norms by promoting a new and broader definition of womanhood where every individual should

⁶ Cambridge University Press (n.d.). Femininity. In Cambridge dictionary. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/femininity>.

be able to express themselves as they wish. This movement, which began as a social and cultural force, has evolved through various periods throughout history known as waves. Each wave has its specific characteristics, strategies, and goals but they are all interconnected. “Although this metaphor of ‘feminist waves’ is helpful for people to distinguish between different eras of women's activism, it is impossible to accurately pinpoint specific dates that started or ended each wave of feminism” (“Feminism: the First Wave” 2021). However, it is useful to make distinctions between these phases.

The first wave covers the historical period between the 19th and 20th centuries. Its main objective focused on equal civil and political rights, especially the right to vote. The demand for women’s suffrage was led by the famous suffragettes in various European countries and in the United States. At the same time, feminists also succeeded in drawing attention to other important issues, such as access to higher education and legal equality. First-wave feminists were influenced by the broad activism of women around the world, particularly the efforts of French women during the French Revolution. Numerous middle class women decided to participate in this movement, but the predominantly male-based society often did not allow women to give public speeches. In July 1848, more than three hundred women held the first Women’s Right Convention in the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. On the first day, Elizabeth Cady Stanton made a speech to explain the convention’s aims:

We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed – to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support, to have such disgraceful laws as give man the power to chastise and imprison his wife, to take the wages which she earns, the property which she inherits, and, in case of separation, the children of her love; laws test against such unjust laws as these that we are assembled today, and to have them, if possible, forever erased from our statute-books, deeming them as a shame and a disgrace to a Christian republic in the nineteenth century.... (New York: Robert J. Johnson Printers, 1870)



Figure 1 - Women walking with signs in their hands (<https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/573c58af8259b5b384b39bc3/1517915799967-K2GFD6XR8R7HQVFAE9KW/suffrage-1517850345.jpg?format=2500w>)

In the following years, feminists continued to fight, believing that gaining the right to vote would help them secure other rights as well. The first wave of feminism ended in the 1920s, laying the foundations for the second wave, which began in the 1960s in the U.S and then spread to the rest of the world. Within this wave, women’s demands expanded: “its top priorities included gender roles, reproductive rights, financial independence, workplace equality, and domestic violence.” (Soken-Huberty 2023). Feminists wanted substantial equality, not only mere nominal political rights; they aimed to obtain the same formal rights as men. Focusing on reproductive rights, one critical aspect is that “the ability to have agency over one’s body was cited as one of the most important steps in gaining freedom for women” (Symkowick 2021). At that time abortion was still considered illegal, so women “lobbied for laws that granted access to safe and legal abortions” (Symkowick 2021). Along with health rights, they fought for divorce laws, as they needed to free themselves from oppressive marriages without penalties and rebuild their lives. Deciding whether and when to become mothers should be a choice made by the woman herself, not dictated by an imposed concept. Domestic violence and marital rape were also crucial topics. Moreover, feminists advocated for equal rights and

safety in the workplace as “during WWII, as men left their jobs to fight, women in the US and UK took their places as mechanics, engineers, and other ‘masculine’ roles. When the war ended, many women left their jobs – or were fired – but they’d proven they could work just as successfully as men.” (Soken-Huberty 2023). Women opposed discrimination and harassment in the work environment, as well as advocated for fairer wages.

Emerging in a postwar context where the civil rights movement had taken root in society, the second wave sparked also thanks to Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*. Published in 1963, this book criticized the belief that a woman’s primary role was to marry and have children. What was written in the book had a powerful impact on women because it dealt with injustices commonly shared by women. However, none of them could talk about their issues. As Friedan wrote “we can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’”. (Friedan 1963, 32). The book analyses the feelings experienced by women of the time - a common sense of dissatisfaction. In order to avoid the persistent question in their minds, women kept themselves busy with tasks like making beds, buying groceries, or thinking that a possible solution to the problems could be changing neighborhood or to redecorating the house differently. No woman had the courage to speak about the feelings, not even with their husbands as they were not understood. Instead, they were reminded that they should feel fortunate not to have a boss or rigid working hours. Why should they complain? Women had always believed that a “true woman” did not want a career, higher education or rights to fight for: “All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children” (Friedan 1963, 16). At that time, the average age of marriage dropped drastically to 20 years old, and women did not go to college to study but to find husbands. An excellent level of education was seen as a barrier to marriage – a peculiar situation given that, a century earlier, women had been fighting for equal educational opportunities. As Friedan reported, “words like ‘emancipation’ and ‘career’ sounded strange and embarrassing” (1963, 20); gradually, they all realized that they shared a problem that did not have a name; “Sometimes a woman would say, ‘I feel empty somehow... incomplete’. Or she would say, ‘I feel as if I don’t exist.’” (Friedan 1963, 20). Commercials on television depicted a happy

housewife, an image that did not reflect reality at all. Women felt left out, yet a great deal of men and women did not understand that this problem was real.

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the third wave arose in response to the limitations that characterized the second wave. “[...] Third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” (Snyder 2008, 176). This wave had inclusion as its main goal, supported by the ideals of freedom and justice. Its focus was on the intersection of gender and other forms of oppression, such as race, class, and sexual orientation. Third-wave feminists criticized the previous wave’s mindset, as it often referred only to white middle class women, without considering other women. For this reason, there was a need to include these perspectives and to radically change the concept of femininity. These feminists promoted a new image of female sexuality, one that was not oppressed as it used to be in the past. Women could define themselves as they most wanted to, possessing total autonomy in discovering their true identities. New, fluid gender identities that did not conform to rigid standards were embraced. Every woman could define her own concept of the feminine; there were no rules. The publication of books such as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, written by Judith Butler, helped deconstructing traditional gender ideas. The author emphasized the distinction between sex, a biological factor, and gender, the result of a social construct. She asked, "If gender is cultural and sex natural, why are there only two genders and why must they always follow from sex?" (Martin 1991, 420). Another important writer inspiring for intersectional feminism was Gloria Anzaldúa. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she gave voice to marginalized groups such as Chicanos, indigenous, queer individuals, and women of colors.

Finally, the fourth wave concerns modern times, against any form of sexism, inequality and objectification. Sexual violence is still a critical issue to fight for, along with other gender injustices like the gender pay gap and occupational sexism that despite time, continue to persist. Today’s feminism is highly communicative, amplified by the advent of social media, which allows information to spread quickly. Through the use of hashtags or keywords, numerous women's issues and personal stories have gained visibility. A story from a remote part of the world can now engage the whole population.

For instance, the story of Mahsa Amini, which went viral as she fought for the freedom of women in her country, Iran. Although women have been fighting for many years and continue to do so, progress has been made but it is still not enough. In many parts of the globe, women are still dependent on men. Thanks to social media, more and more awareness is spreading, yet all women know that there is much more to be done.

2. The birth of Barbie

2.1 *A new kind of doll*

“It all began in a garage in 1945, as a collaboration between Ruth and Elliot Handler, and Harold “Matt” Matson” (Mattel, Inc. | Corporate Website n.d.); in the mid-twentieth century Mr. and Mrs. Handler decided to found, along with Matson, what would become one of the largest companies in the toy world: Mattel creations. The name Mattel is a fusion of the two founding partners’ names. As expected, the name of the only woman was left out. Due to the uncertain wartime economic situation they were experiencing and some health issues he was facing, Matson quit only a year later, leaving everything in the hands of the Handlers. Ruth and Elliot did not lose heart; they continued pursuing their project, even without the other founder. “Elliot not only believed in the future, he believed in futuristic materials— Plexiglas, Lucite, plastic” (Lord, 2010). The company’s first toy was a colorful instrument for children called *Uke-a-doodle*. It was a success, but Ruth’s vision was determined to revolutionize the toy market, she wanted more. New materials proposed for toy construction, together with the rising standard of living of American families afterwar, helped foster the Handlers’ winning mentality. In 1955, another factor created a competitive advantage for the company: “Mattel begins television advertising through the Mickey Mouse Club, revolutionizing the way toys are marketed” (Mattel, Inc. | Corporate Website n.d.). It was the first time that a toy company sponsored a tv series and it was risky. With this strategic move, however, Mattel began gaining fame; toys were no longer sold only during Christmas season but all the year, thanks to regular television commercials. Driven by her desire to bring something new to the market, Ruth Handler began observing her daughter Barbara as she played with her toys. She soon realized that the available toy options for young girls were limited; Barbara preferred playing with paper dolls she made herself over baby dolls, which were commonly used among young girls at that time. “She got the idea watching Barbara play with paper dolls who were “never the playmate or baby type,” but rather “the teenage, high-school, college, or adult-career type.” (Lord, 2010). Ruth noticed that her daughter was imagining herself as an adult, moving the dolls and making them talk as if they represented real people. From this, Ruth was determined to create a doll with adult female features and “a fare in modo che sua figlia e le altre bimbe abbiano il giocattolo che serve loro per tirar fuori le ansie sul destino che le attende e le assista nello sviluppo psicologico, ma come tutti gli

autentici eroi innovatori del mito americano si scontra con l'attaccamento al passato degli altri, che si limitano a ripetere la tradizione” (Scacchi 2005, 242). She believed that this toy would stimulate creativity, serving as a role model for young girls. Ruth wanted to transform completely the way girls played by replacing baby dolls, which still reflected outdated values that needed to change. With a baby doll, girls could only imagine themselves as mothers, focused on caring for the baby. These limited activities reinforced the idea that girls were destined to be mothers and nothing else, shaping restrictive feminine ideals from a young age. But what if their dreams went beyond becoming mothers? An adult-looking doll would allow girls to radically shift their play from nurturing to empathizing with a figure they could mold to their wills. With their imagination, they could decide what the doll would do, how she would act, and even what she should wear. Ruth Handler understood that exerting control over a doll and deciding its fate was something little girls needed in order to play freely. Thus, in 1959, Barbie was born. The doll was named after Ruth's daughter Barbara—affectionately, Barbie. A family trip to Europe was central in the creation of the doll. During their stay in Switzerland, Barbara spotted a doll with the appearance of an adult woman in a store window. Enchanted by what she saw, she immediately asked her mother if she could buy it for her so she could play with it: that was *Lilli*. Also known as *Bild Lilli*, this character was the protagonist of a comic series. Lilli was created by Reinhard Beuthin, a cartoonist for *Bild Zeitung*, a famous German newspaper. To draw her, he was inspired by the delicate features with provocative lines of American pin-ups. As it can be seen in the various vignettes, Lilli always interacts with wealthy men attracted by her beauty. She has a provocative attitude, often speaking with ambiguous quips. Lilli, clearly, was not intended for little girls but for an adult audience. She was portrayed as sexually uninhibited, and thanks to her popularity, she soon became a real doll that, unlike later Barbie, was sold in adult toy stores. There were a few models of the doll on display, but the main problem was that you could not change the clothes, so Barbara had to choose just one. Ruth decided to buy the doll to use it as a model and then develop her own version. Starting from the impossibility to change Lilli's clothes, she came up with the idea of offering more interchangeable outfits options as well. Initially, Lilli and the prototype were quite similar as they were the first doll not resembling little girls, with firm shapes and long blonde hair, red lips and the same side-eye glance. Ruth was aware that her doll was ‘sexy’

and provocative compared to the other toys. But this specific element determined her success. Barbie made her debut at the American International Toy Fair in 1959, wearing her iconic black and white striped dress. Priced at only three dollars, she was affordable to anyone. This price was crucial to Ruth's intentions, as she wished to produce a doll that was both available and desirable to as many little girls as possible. There was just one problem: most of the customers who went to the fair were men, who criticized harshly the toy. They did not like it at all, adding that no mother would buy an object that was too sensual for their daughters. But they were wrong.



Figure 2 – Lilli (on the left) whose appearance inspired the creation of Barbie (on the right) (<https://www.history.com/news/barbie-inspiration-bild-lilli>)

2.2 Barbie as a tool for women's emancipation

“For every mother who embraces Barbie as a traditional toy and eagerly introduces her daughter to the doll, there is another mother who tries to banish Barbie from the house.” (Lord, 2010). Being different from the typical dolls that filled little girls' homes, as mentioned earlier, was the key to Barbie's success. However, that does not diminish criticism she received. When Ruth Handler conceived the idea of creating a new doll, she believed she was crafting a very powerful object. Although this may seem trivial today and, in several contexts, even difficult to understand, at the time such a seemingly simple step was of radical importance. A sudden shift in young girls' mindsets would dramatically change their approach to life. They would come to realize that they were not solely or exclusively destined to become mothers or wives. Being born female did not limit them to a predestined future; they could aspire to be more than that and dream far

beyond traditional roles. Ruth Handler designed the doll as an adult female figure with whom little girls could identify, which was previously lacking. At that time, when society mainly promoted the role of women as mothers, Barbie represented a woman with her own career and life. Starting with the smallest details, Ruth envisioned numerous customizable elements for the doll, allowing each girl to interact with her as she liked. She imagined a wide array of accessories, shoes and even clothes. Barbie's creator wanted to provide girls with a figure that would inspire them to see themselves as free and independent women, capable of choosing their own futures, even pursuing professions that at the time were reserved only for men. Barbie — a woman doll, created by a woman, with the intent of changing the social and cultural status of women. The doll embodied everything that challenged the patriarchal system, representing both professional roles and lifestyles that aimed to expand female empowerment. This is precisely why Barbie can be considered as a symbol of women's emancipation, having had a significant impact on society.

It can be inferred that the doll serves as a reflection of American cultural values and perceptions of femininity (Lord, 2010) mostly because “ha riprodotto fedelmente l'evoluzione della società americana, dando vita a un microcosmo nel quale è possibile leggere la storia culturale degli Stati Uniti nella seconda metà del Novecento.” (Scacchi 2005, 237). Ruth Handler, inspired by Lilli doll, recognized the need of adaptation to align with the American market's preferences. Consequently, Barbie was reimagined as a typical American middle-class girl, who, in regards to girls “le educava al loro titolo sociale e snobbata perché, nonostante il glamour, con il suo amore eccessivo per i lustrini tradiva origini proletarie.” (Scacchi 2005, 237). Any references to her European predecessor's sexual connotations were removed, as the American middle class “is not indifferent to sex, but it defines itself in contrast to the classes below it by its display of public propriety” (Lord, 2010). The two dolls did not have any notable differences, and at first glance, they are so similar that it is easy to be confused. A clear example of adaptation made by Ruth, which distinguished the two dolls, was their feet. Barbie's new feature was her arched feet, while Lilli's feet did not exist. Her legs ended with stilettos, that could not be removed since they were printed on the doll. Barbie's well-groomed appearance and wealthy lifestyle, coupled with her image of physical and social perfection, aligned seamlessly with this social class. Nevertheless, Barbie's life did not

revolve around a man, nor parents or children. She was always portrayed as free and independent, at least initially. Despite the gradual shifts in societal attitudes, what remained prevalent was the persistent notion that a woman who reached an adult age without a husband was automatically a failure. If Barbie wanted to become a role model, that is, to be identified as a toy that accompanied little girls from childhood to adulthood, she had to have a boyfriend by her side. As a result, Mattel felt compelled to introduce a male counterpart to Barbie, namely Ken. This choice was personally significant to Ruth, as he was named after her son Kenneth, commonly shortened to Ken. He, however, was considered as a mere accessory. In 1961, despite every risk, the male doll was introduced to the market as a boyfriend for Barbie, to satisfy the customer demand.

In fact, in spite of an initial period of uncertainty, the doll became a widely purchased item among Americans, though it did not achieve the same level of success in other countries, such as in Europe. Only after firmly establishing itself in Barbie's birth country, Mattel decided to expand into Europe as well. Their motivations were not only to expand their empire ten years after Barbie's creation, but also because the toy was facing a critical situation in the U.S. At that time, emerging movements had begun accusing her of representing a completely wrong model for young girls. For the second wave feminists, the doll was clearly at odds with the battles they were fighting to eradicate patriarchy. They argued that Barbie, first of all, promoted inaccessible beauty standards: a skinny physique with a narrow waist and measurements that would not be humanly possible. The doll showcased a lifestyle that was in contrast with the values feminism wanted to promote, focusing on superficial aspects such as clothes and hair. Barbie was seen as frivolous, by no means a useful tool in advancing the battle for gender equality; paradoxically, she compromised it. What was emphasized and reinforced was the idea that women's values were not based on their intelligence or abilities, but on how they looked and what they wore.

Moreover, the toy was criticized for representing the wrong concept of femininity and beauty. Critics believed that girls, by emulating her, were pressured to engage in unhealthy behaviors in order to achieve a physique similar to hers. Barbie was not considered as an ideal role model for girls, given that she "è stata accusata di proporre un modello femminile caratterizzato esclusivamente dall'aspetto fisico e dalla propensione al consumo ed è stata denunciata come stereotipo razzista dalle minoranze etniche"

(Schacchi 2005, 237). Feminists also argued that the doll embodied a stereotype of the perfect woman, suggesting that anyone who did not conform to it was automatically deemed imperfect. In response, Mattel addressed the criticism first by claiming that the measurements chosen for the doll's body were only functional and practical, certainly it was not an aesthetic choice. The shapes' design allowed to quickly dress and undress the doll. It was not Mattel's intention to perpetuate physical ideals, let alone impose a stereotype of beauty. To counter all the criticism it received more strongly, the company decided to expand Barbie's line, not limiting itself to the classic American blonde girl, but including new nationalities and different body types. Through various versions, Barbie offered a wide range of choices for young girls, reinforcing the ideal of self-determination. The diversity of outfits, accessories, professions and even the ability to change clothes were fundamental elements that encouraged imaginative play, allowing girls to explore different interests. While Barbie fought against criticism by expanding its representation, another example of how toys contributed to young girls' education in a more conscious way, emerged: the American Girl dolls. These dolls also offered a wide and diverse depiction of different backgrounds as "this intersection of stories has always been the intention of the brand, which was created as a way to bring history alive for young girls, providing them with opportunities for imaginative play that are more wholesome than, say, a Barbie." (Shearn 2020). Unlike Barbie, the American Girls represented various historical periods by addressing issues such as slavery and civil rights. The line included a pioneer girl named Kirsten Larson, Virginia colonist Felicity Merriman⁷, Addy Walker—an African American girl who escaped from slavery— Kaya, a young woman from an indigenous tribe, an inspiring reporter living through the Great Depression and Maryellen Larkin, a polio survivor in the decade after World War II⁸. These dolls provided young girls an educational and historically accurate narrative capable of teaching them important aspects of history. This was made possible through attention paid to detail in their clothing, accessories and furniture, also thanks to "an accompanying set of six books that place each "real girl" in her particular place and period in American history, with stories and illustrations portraying each girl/doll in clothes, accessories, and settings that evoke the period" (Shearn 2020). "The beloved line of

⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/evolution-american-girl-dolls-180977822/>)

⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/evolution-american-girl-dolls-180977822/>)

fictional characters taught children about American history and encouraged them to realize their potential” (Solly 2023). However, one factor limited the success of these dolls, making them less popular than Barbie: the price. Not all families could afford to spend between 65 and 110 dollars. Despite this, these dolls made a significant impact on society and represented a huge step in the toy industry.

Often associated with success and determination, and despite the criticism, Barbie helped girls to understand that their lives depended on them, not on others, and certainly not on the presence or absence of a man. Besides, in 1961, Barbie’s first Dreamhouse was introduced, where “with its mid-century modern décor, girls can imagine entertaining friends or relaxing in their stylish living room.” (Mattel, History). Although it came out a year after Ken, he was not included; it was only Barbie’s house, a place in which she could be totally herself.

2.3 Introduction of different ethnicities and lifestyles of the doll

In 1965 a brand-new version of Barbie made her debut: Barbie Astronaut. As the Mattel website reports, “Barbie Astronaut goes to the moon. She gets there four years before Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin become the first people to land on the moon” (Mattel, History). At that time, no woman had ever been seen in such a profession, nor was it considered even possible. It would take years before the first woman would actually land on the moon. This was the first of numerous unexpected careers that Barbie would explore. The choice of an astronaut was a symbolic one, intended to show girls that they should never give up and always reach for the stars, going beyond the limits imposed on Earth. It was a powerful message, encouraging young girls not to accept established boundaries and to aspire to roles that were traditionally and mistakenly reserved only for men. A Barbie with an ambitious career was undoubtedly a symbol of both inspiration and empowerment. Thanks to her existence, it slowly became possible to normalize the presence of women in various fields like space and science. In fact, Barbie later ventured into a wide range of careers: she became a ballerina, flight attendant, nurse, Olympic gymnast, actress, tennis player, doctor, army medic, firefighter, chef, and more. Had anyone ever seen a doll running for president while also being interested in science before? Of course not, but with Barbie *you can be anything*. She portrayed alternative lifestyles and unconventional careers to challenge gender stereotypes.

Barbie Astronaut was an effective initial response to all the criticism, proving that the doll was not just about aesthetics. However, the critics were far from over. A multitude of people still felt excluded. Firstly, people with a different skin tone felt underrepresented. Despite her various professions, Barbie maintained her blonde hair and her pale skin, overlooking societal diversities. In response to this, Mattel introduced Christie, the first Black doll and one of Barbie's earliest friends. Christie had dark skin, short 60s-style hair, and a look that was completely different from Barbie.



Christie, Barbie's friend (<https://www.businessinsider.com/black-barbie-dolls-history-mattel-african-american-diversity-2023-7>)

This new doll was crucial for inclusivity, permitting young girls of colors to feel represented while playing. Christie gave them the chance to embrace their own features and not feel inferior compared to other children. Before the introduction of the first African American doll, black dolls were rare. The few that were available were often simply painted black, and their features were exactly the same as white dolls. Mattel made this mistake with a doll released before Christie, but it was a completely failure that this doll is not even mentioned on their website. Christie, however, was different. Every detail, including her hair, was carefully chosen to reflect reality as closely as possible. Still, Christie was only Barbie's friend, a secondary character, not considered as important as her blonde friend. It would take more years before the first Black Barbie was introduced

in the 1980s, with the box proudly stating ‘She’s Black! She’s Beautiful! She’s Dynamite!’.



The first Black Barbie designed by Kitty Black Perkins (<https://www.businessinsider.com/black-barbie-dolls-history-mattel-african-american-diversity-2023-7#1980-black-barbie-5>)

Christie, and later the Black Barbie, were just the first steps that helped Mattel to focus and promote greater integration. The company decided to expand the doll line to include not only Black dolls, but also dolls of other nationalities, such as Asian and Latina, while carefully respecting not only their features but also their different body types. Furthermore, to embrace more cultural diversity, other international versions of Barbie were produced. While maintaining the doll’s typical traits, the Barbies were dressed in specific ways to represent their countries. This included Parisian Barbie, Scottish Barbie, Irish Barbie, Swedish Barbie, Peruvian Barbie, Swiss Barbie, Greek Barbie, Native American Barbie and more. Over the years, groups of people who were completely forgotten were also included. For instance, women in wheelchairs, without a leg, and only recently the first Barbie with down syndrome. One issue arose in 1977 when Becky, the first doll in a wheelchair, was launched: the creators did not consider a practical fact — with the wheelchair, the doll could not be used in the dollhouses as she could not fit through doors. This oversight was heavily criticized, and Mattel promised to change and pay more attention to their design.

Finally, but equally important, is the mention of the *inspiring women* line, which included fourteen famous women. Over the years, Mattel decided to reproduce dolls representing celebrities and also important figures, like these women. They were chosen because they marked significant historical events thanks to their works or lives. This line offers positive, but most importantly, real-life role models of women who have had significant global impact. Women such as Frida Kahlo, Rosa Parks, Amelia Earhart, and Kathrine Johnson were chosen to encourage little girls to aspire to big goals, without being afraid of nothing. Despite the common aim of supporting women's empowerment, this line received complaints. It is not always easy to accurately represent historical figures. The Frida Kahlo doll, for instance, was at the center of this issue, as people, including her family, argued that the doll did not represent her. "The Mattel doll does not reflect Kahlo's heavy, nearly conjoined eyebrows, and that her costume does not accurately portray the elaborate Tehuana-style dresses the artist used to wear" (Welle 2018). Regardless of the criticism, Mattel has demonstrated multiple times that they are committed to Barbie's feminist mission, expanding their boundaries year after year. Barbie remains a strong and inspirational model for girls, not a symbol to imitate or an ideal to achieve.

3 Barbie: the movie

3.1 Deconstruction of hegemonic and toxic masculinity

Nowadays, the most iconic doll in the world is still Barbie; there is hardly anyone who does not know who she is or has not at least heard or seen her. Her logo, which typically features her name written in cursive in a bright pink, together with her profile silhouette showing her face and her hair styled in a high ponytail, is easily recognizable. Without a doubt, pink has become her color, it is associated with her: the bright, bold shade is often referred to as ‘Barbie Pink’. It represents the doll’s femininity and glamour, and used in everything related to her, making it a key part of her identity. The vast majority of girls have had at least one Barbie doll among their toys. She continues to hold her place as a cultural and social icon, that is constantly evolving. Thanks to a society that has changed dramatically, it is now easier to find Barbies of all kinds, with different skin tones and as various physical shapes compared to the past. On store shelves, it is not uncommon to find Barbie in a wheelchair for example, accompanied with her guide dog. Representation is power, and Mattel has carried on its mission to include more and more people so that no one feels excluded. Seeing the joy on children’s faces as they are represented by a doll, delivers a powerful message and it is not a minor factor—it should not be underestimated.

After numerous versions, the doll also debuted on the small screen with various cartoons dedicated to her, and over the years, countless movies have been released portraying her in different lifestyles and a thousand adventures. Most recently, in 2023, the long-awaited live action featuring the famous actress Margot Robbie as the main character, Barbie came out. This film, directed by Greta Gerwig, had been planned for years but for various reasons, it had never come to a conclusion. It was only after the actress, that personally discussed the project with Mattel, that this incredible movie came to life, and the filming was able to begin. As Margot Robbie stated in an interview, Mattel was initially concerned about this movie, fearing it might harm and discredit the company’s image, but she promised to make something fun and memorable but still respecting their product and property: the producers’ main goal was to honor the brand

without avoiding difficult or problematic topics; otherwise, it would not have been a movie they were interesting in making⁹.

This film is the result of years of dedication and hard work. They knew it would have a big impact on social media and among people—and it did. After all, they were dealing with the most legendary doll in the world, sparking interest and curiosity across the globe. However, it did not take long for criticism to follow. This was expected, as both Margot and Greta were fully aware that since Barbie’s debut, the doll has been both loved and hated, with audiences holding divergent opinions about her. Despite this, they aimed to portray a story behind the doll, though dealing with such a complex and conflicting object was challenging. The director admitted she was initially terrified by the idea, as it could have been a career killer move for her¹⁰. What scared her was the fact that there was not an actual story of Barbie and there were places she could put a foot wrong and then be off on a terrible tangent, but it made kind of intriguing¹¹. Despite initial uncertainties, the movie was a global success. Immediately after its release, all the newspapers and television, everywhere news labeled it ‘the biggest Movie of the year’: Barbie is on top of the world¹². The box office results are clear proof that this film has struck a chord globally, even though it was banned in several countries. Moreover, there has been a renewed interest in the aesthetics and values associated with Barbie, thanks to a phenomenon known as *Barbie core* or *Barbi mania*: as reported by Kim and Riga (2023 in Byrnes et al. 2024, 2) it “proliferated across online memes, cross-promotions and tie-ins: including collaborations with fashion retailers Gap and Hot Topic, a dating event with Bumble, a bookable Malibu Dreamhouse on Airbnb, and numerous other examples”. As mentioned before, the world of Barbie is full of pink, and this trend embraces everything that reminds of Barbie, especially her predominant color. Barbie mania included Barbie posters spread everywhere, celebrities dressed in pink, and even clothing lines created specifically for the movie. The film’s marketing was tremendously catchy, it emphasized the iconic color, leading the fans to embrace the movie’s theme by being dressed in pink

⁹ Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie discuss Barbie’s surprising feminism: <https://youtu.be/GuWr-v3TOO8?feature=shared>

¹⁰ Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie discuss Barbie’s surprising feminism: <https://youtu.be/GuWr-v3TOO8?feature=shared>

¹¹ Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie discuss Barbie’s surprising feminism: <https://youtu.be/GuWr-v3TOO8?feature=shared>

¹² TIME <https://time.com/6304654/barbie-box-office-biggest-movie-2023/>

when going to the cinema. The trend of dressing up went viral on social media as people shared their outfits, their opinions and experiences online, encouraging others to join in order to create a viral moment. To cite one of the movie's songs by Lizzo, *Pink*, "we like all the colors, but pink just looks so good on us" (2023).

This success can also be attributed to a combination of multiple factors. One of the most important was the choice of the two main characters. It is no coincidence that the actress chosen to portray Stereotypical Barbie, the most famous Barbie of all in Barbieland, was a girl with long blonde hair with blue eyes. Furthermore, Margot Robbie is considered one of the most beautiful women in the world. If Barbie were human, the collective imagination would envision her exactly like the actress. As Margot reveals, she did not audition for the film, she cast herself and identifying Ken was not difficult either: the directors had one name in their minds from the very beginning of the writing process, and that was Ryan Gosling. In the script, it always said "Barbie, Margot" and "Ken, Ryan Gosling"¹³ even before he was officially asked to take on the role. Behind every dialogue, dress and setting, there is meticulous attention, symbolizing how everything has been handled with great care and awareness. It is evident that the backdrop, starting with the protagonist's house, is inspired by the toy version, and that the outfits worn by Stereotypical Barbie are, for all intents and purposes, those worn by the real doll. Chief among them is the iconic black-and-white striped bathing suit, which appears immediately in one of the film's opening scenes.

Through all these captivating visual elements and a narrative filled with meaning, the film aims to promote a collective reflection on important issues. Beyond the celebration of the doll, deeper messages are hidden in this live action, characterizing a new approach to Barbie and everything surrounding her: "whereas Mattel's Barbie doll has become synonymous with sexist, infantilised and unattainable womanhood in the cultural imagination, Gerwig and Robbie's Barbie engages directly and overtly with notions of feminism and women's experience" (Byrnes, Loreck & May 2024, 2).

The movie presents elements of irony, showcasing superficial aspects on femininity, along with the image of women, and their contradiction. Thanks to stereotypes, the situations ironically highlight how absurd certain expectations related to women are. This approach can bring viewers to a reflection on social norms in a humorous way. "I also

¹³ How Margot Robbie Became Barbie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ebMbqkdQdg>

wouldn't call it a funny film because that discredits the fact that it's got a lot of heart and it's got a lot of emotion [...] it is funny, that is a huge part of it, it's a comedy, but if you just call it a funny film, you almost make it sound like it does not have a lot having going on and it does"¹⁴, said Margot Robbie. She also wanted to underline that Barbie is a feminist film, "she's actually the level up from that because if you look at Barbieland at the beginning, the barbies are on top and the kens are kind of disregarded and that's not equal [...] towards the end when they balance things out, then it might be feminist". However, not all spectators know exactly what feminism is; they hear the word 'feminism' without associating it to its real meaning, that is the belief that men and women should be equal. Some people hear the term and associate a lot of negative baggage with the word¹⁵, and misinterpret the meaning. This is the main reason why the messages behind the film may not be delivered correctly to everyone, causing negative comments as "even without the benefit of Gerwig's framing of Barbie as 'certainly feminist,' the film's address is to an audience already steeped in popular feminism; its story of Barbie versus the patriarchy becomes conceivable and its jokes intelligible in this context."(Byrnes, Loreck & May 2024, 5).

The movie addresses feminist themes by challenging traditional femininity's assumptions while providing examples of how everything in reality revolves around men and the concept of masculinity. Moreover, it "shifted our focus from Barbie to Ken, marking the first occasion when Barbie has provided a platform for exploring representations of masculinity both in the patriarchal society and in popular culture." (Yakalı 2024, 1). Numerous aspects that misrepresent how a man should be are called into question, such as the idea that men cannot express their emotions but must, at all costs, keep everything inside. They are also not supposed to cry at all, otherwise they would be considered weak. "Many tales subtly impart the message that girls are to be sweet, conforming, dependent, and concerned about physical appearance, whereas the message for boys is they are to display strength by being adventurous, strong, rugged, and independent." (Wason-Ellam 1997, 430).

¹⁴ Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie discuss Barbie's surprising feminism: <https://youtu.be/GuWr-v3TOO8?feature=shared>

¹⁵ Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie discuss Barbie's surprising feminism: <https://youtu.be/GuWr-v3TOO8?feature=shared>

In this movie, Ken is the character who most embodies these ideals of toxic masculinity, and it is no coincidence that he faces various crises throughout the movie. “Barbie has a great day everyday but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him”¹⁶ is one of the narrator’s lines in the first minutes of the production. This supports what was said earlier. Ken has a constant need for approval, this desire to be liked and noticed by Barbie highlights the pressure men feel to prove themselves through the approval of others. As it can be seen in the movie, he tries to catch Barbie’s attention under any circumstances, even going so far as to hurt himself. He is initially presented as a character who conforms to the standards of a strong and attractive man: “in a patriarchal society, men are conditioned to be rational and aggressive, neglecting their emotional and experiential life” (Yakalı 2024, 3). For this reason, he often enters into competition with the other Kens, suggesting another ideal of toxic masculinity that reflects the notion that men must constantly compete and surpass each other to assert their superiority. This kind of masculinity can develop in a more emphasized form called hypermasculinity that according to Alonzo and Guerrero (2009 in Yakalı 2024, 4) it “suggests a firm belief in male superiority and performances of stereotypical male gender roles associated with power, dominance and control which contribute to issues such as sexism, misogyny, and violence against women”. During the course of the film, however, all of these behaviors are overcome as he begins to express his emotions and insecurities.

In Barbieland, live all the Barbies, the Kens and Allan, and on the surface, it seems like a perfect world, at least from the Barbie’s perspective. Everything is in perfect harmony; there is no envy: “thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved, at least that’s what the Barbies think... after all, they’re living in Barbieland¹⁷”. Every day the dolls wake up happy, greeting each other until one day when everything changes. At a party organized by Barbie, after some dancing, she creates a great scandal among all the present when she suddenly asks her friends, “You guys ever think about dying?”. The music stops, no one dances anymore, stunned by Stereotypical Barbie’s question. To make up for it, she quickly says, “I’m just dying to dance” and everything magically returns to normal —everything except for Barbie. She then leaves Barbieland, following Weird Barbie’s advice, to find what causes her strange feeling.

¹⁶ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023.

¹⁷ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

Setting out on her journey to the real world, she is followed by Ken, who intruded without Barbie's permission. It is exactly here, in the real world, that the paths of the two protagonists diverge, allowing the film to focus more on themes of feminism and the criticism directed at Barbie doll, while also addressing patriarchy, Ken's new discovery. Barbie needs to find her owner and she believes she found her but the girl, Sasha, is a teenager who has nothing nice to say to her. In fact, Sasha criticizes Barbie for promoting wrong beauty standards, also undermining feminist ideas. Barbie then runs away, after realizing that this world is nothing like Barbieland. Her expectations do not match the reality she is facing in the real world, sparking a desire to discover more deeply who she really is. To do so, she decides to go where it all began: the Mattel headquarters. The film shows how "Barbie's existential crisis mirrors that of Gloria, Sasha's mother, and a Mattel employee, who began playing with Sasha's old Barbie toys, unintentionally setting off Barbie's internal turmoil and existential crises" (Yakalı 2024, 5). A notable thing to underline in this passage is when Barbie wants to talk to those in power, specifically the Mattel Board of Directors, she is confronted only by men: "attention is drawn to this fact through the dialogue and a roughly ten minutes scene with the board" (Sculos 2023). Mattel tries to imprison Barbie in a box, but she escapes and succeeds with the help of Gloria and Sasha, making her way back to Barbieland. But she does not imagine what expects her: after learning about patriarchy in the real world, Ken shares his knowledge with the other Kens. Ken is fascinated by this new concept, as it gives him a sense of power that he never experienced before in his entire life in Barbieland. He is determined to bring patriarchy and establish a male dominated society. As reported by Greta Gerwig "Ken is a person with no status in this world so in this kind of reversed world that person who has no status is in a completely untenable place"¹⁸, he has always been in a situation without a defined role or purpose. When he faces this new reality, it seems to him that he has finally found his own path, independent from Barbie. The Kens now are in power while Barbies are submitted to secondary roles: "Ken's transformation and the establishment of Kendom within Barbieland offer an illustration of the makeover paradigm, particularly in the context of gender roles and identities" (Yakalı 2024, 7). All the iconic Barbies' features are replaced with stereotyped masculinity symbols, such as

¹⁸ Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie discuss Barbie's surprising feminism: <https://youtu.be/GuWr-v3TOO8?feature=shared>

horses, passion for sports and other factors celebrating men's power. Thanks to a clever ruse, however, the Barbies manage to restore everything to the way it was by manipulating the Kens, setting them against each other: "Kens cannot resist a damsel in distress. You have to make them believe that you're complacent. That they have the power. And when their guard is down, you take the power back."¹⁹

3.2 *Character inclusivity*

The strong message of inclusion offered over the years by Mattel's dolls is, in turn, represented in the film. Various actors of different nationalities can be seen among both the Kens (such as Asian Ken) and the Barbies. The diverse representation of the dolls in the film, showcasing as well different body types and sexual orientations, not only enriches the narrative but also offers a powerful message of acceptance. As aforementioned, Barbieland consists only of Barbies, Kens and Allan; "there are no multiples of Allan, he is just Allan"²⁰. Everything can be summarized by one of the film's slogans: 'She is everything, he is just Ken'

From the very beginning, it can be seen that there are actually Barbies that are real, having been produced by Mattel. This obviously pays a homage to the company while also emphasizing the importance of representation: even when everyone is dancing, Barbie in a wheelchair danced with them, proving that no one is excluded. There are not only blonde Barbies with light skin, but also Barbies of other colors, covering a multitude of professions. Among the carriers, Barbie is depicted as a doctor, president, astronaut, chef, nurse, pilot, engineer, explorer and even a mermaid because "Barbie can be anything, women can be anything"²¹. Ironically, a doll with a controversial history, Midge, is also included in the plot. In fact, this doll was a Barbie's friend and the first pregnant doll: "produced in response to consumer demand, Mattel has tried for decades to accessorize Barbie with a baby without making her a mother" (Lord 2010). Barbie could not have babies, otherwise her main goal would not have been respected. So, Mattel decided to introduce this doll with red hair and a lilac dress (features depicted faithfully to the reality in the film) but unfortunately, she had a short life. Short as her description

¹⁹ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

²⁰ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

²¹ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

in the film “but let’s not show Midge actually she was discontinued by Mattel because a pregnant doll is just too weird”²². However, years later, a new version of this doll came out as “Mattel gave Midge a boyfriend (Allan) and dumped a younger sister (Skipper)” (Lord 2010). Another key character for inclusion in the film is Allan. He is a particular character as he distinguishes himself from the others. The movie perfectly represents this figure as challenging of traditional gender norms, providing an example on diverse perspective on the role of men in a context dominated by female figures. Allan is the opposite of Kens even though when the doll came out, he was introduced in the toy market as Ken’s friend; besides this, in the movie he does not represent the stereotypical masculinity but instead he embodies a form of masculinity that embraces emotion and vulnerability. He is clumsy, awkward, reserved and his goal is not to catch Barbie’s attention. In many scenes of the film, he might go unnoticed, because unlike everyone else, he is quiet and more introvert than extrovert. He does not take part in the subversion of Barbieland into Kendom but instead he helps Stereotypical Barbie to bring back everything to normal. This character evokes a theory among viewers that has spread via social media: most people associate him with the LGBTQ+ community. This perception is supported by various aspects, such as his constant confusion deriving from the fact that he knows he is neither a Ken nor a Barbie. In the movie, he says “I’m confused about that”²³ after Barbie greets him. He finds difficult to identify himself, being the only one of his gender. It should also be noted that in Barbieland, there are no impositions, everyone feels free to be who they want. Numerous members of the LGBTQ+ community felt represented by this character, which allows for a broader inclusion. Another thought that gained popularity on the web is the belief that Allan does not fit in the ‘common’ man role. He is different, does not adhere to the imposed standards of masculinity, and for these reasons, he is automatically not considered ‘man enough’. Allan disagrees with Kens; he does not share their patriarchal views.

Although some of the characters, such as Ken, might seem stereotypical in their appearance and behavior, the film consciously uses these stereotypes to subvert them and bring attention to their effects. Through contrasting with figures like Allan, the movie aims to invite reflection on what it really means to be a man in modern society: “this

²² Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

²³ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

narrative strategy aligns with concept of gender performativity, suggesting that gender identities, including toxic masculine behaviors, are enacted performances shaped by societal expectations rather than innate qualities.” (Yakalı 2024, 8). Introducing also Asiatic Ken represents a step forward in gender and racial diversity. With his presence, he opposes the classic and traditional idea of Ken, which is typically associated with Caucasian characteristics. Thanks to all these different representations, both the film and the doll provide a perfect example of how inclusivity is a crucial theme and how extremely important it is to correctly represent the contemporary society.

3.3 Women today

In a constantly changing world, the representations of women, which occur more frequently through the media, have the capacity to confront and oppose social norms. The Barbie movie is not just an imaginary journey or one of the various adventures the doll must face. It is a reflection of how the concepts of feminism and femininity are continuously evolving while still maintain strong principles. The beginning of the film represents a sharp break with the past, where little girls, intent on playing with their baby dolls, tea sets, cooking and ironing, are immediately attracted to something unknown: it is, of course, Barbie. Little girls are fascinated by this new toy and begin to destroy all their old toys, symbolizing the need to break with the past and the classic expectations of femininity. This scene is highly emblematic and clearly refers to the reasons why the original Barbie doll was created. As the narrator suggests, “the girls could only ever play being mothers, which can be fun at least for a while anyway”²⁴. Thanks to Barbie, everything has changed.

In the movie, Barbie faces several modern issues that women experience, one of them being the conflict between her perception of herself and how women view her. She realizes that the real world is far from the idealized version she had imagined, and she becomes deeply disappointed and disheartened by this situation: seeing a world where women are relegated to secondary positions, and in addition, her image is not loved as it is in Barbieland, she feels disillusioned, and wants return home. But when she returns, the situation gets even worse. Here she is overwhelmed by a deep sense of defeat, which

²⁴ Gerwig, Greta. Barbie. USA/Canada: Warner Bros, 2023

leads her to feel incapable of doing something and no longer beautiful. She is without her iconic arched feet, they are flat, and she even has cellulite. Barbie wants to give up, as the situation has gotten completely out of control, and she no longer knows how to fix it until Gloria intervenes with a powerful speech. It is thanks to her words that Barbies' feminist spirit returns, allowing her to overcome her negative state. This speech, however, was not only a useful reminder to Barbie, but to all the female viewers:

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong.

You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people.

You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood.

But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful.

You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.

I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know.²⁵

Gloria, played by the actress America Ferrera, has touched the hearts of a multitude of women with those words. Each sentence perfectly delivers one of the central messages of the movie: how difficult is to be a woman, especially nowadays. It emphasizes not only the critical aspects and contradictions that women experience daily, but also displays how impossible is to fulfill social expectations. Gloria's words reinforce the common feeling that women are expected to respect predefined roles, while maintaining an idealized appearance and behavior. This speech addresses the same pressures women had to deal

²⁵ Gloria's full monologue from Barbie (2023) <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a44725030/america-ferrera-barbie-full-monologue-transcript/>

with in the past, particularly during the period of the cult of domesticity. Although time has passed and progress has been made, this connection highlights how women continue to struggle against social norms. Despite being a symbol of feminism progress, Barbie herself struggles with the unachievable standards imposed on her. Moreover, today's feminism has a big problem: social media. On one hand, they can be useful and help raise awareness, but on the other hand they subject women to constant pressures, as they are always reminded of images and messages representing perfection.

However, while the Barbie movie promotes greater opportunities and freedom for women, it is fundamental to acknowledge that for many women, the fight for equity is still a daily struggle. Unfortunately, a significant number of countries today have not embodied the social changes brought by feminism but have remained anchored to past values. In these nations, women are still dependent on men in every aspect. It is precisely in these places that the screening of the film has been prohibited. One of them is Algeria, as, according to their opinion, it "promotes homosexuality and other Western deviances" and that it "does not comply with Algeria's religious and cultural beliefs."²⁶. Other countries, like Kuwait and Lebanon banned the film. Similarly, Barbie herself faced opposition in some parts of the world: “negli Emirati Arabi, dove da più di dieci anni ne è proibita la vendita, nel 2003 è stata bandita come simbolo della decadenza e perversione dell'Occidente” (Scacchi 2005, 239).

The fight for equality is still a very delicate issue that requires commitment. The important thing, for society, is to start focusing more on the values of women and not on what is expected from them. Disappointingly, disparities are still present in the world, and it is necessary to continue fighting for freedom.

²⁶ Algeria bans 'Barbie' movie, media and official source say <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algeria-bans-barbie-movie-media-official-source-say-2023-08-14/>

Conclusion

As previously outlined in the chapters, this thesis analyses the importance of Barbie as a symbol of social and cultural change. Barbie has not been only a simple toy, but she embodied, and still nowadays embodies, the concept of femininity and gender roles. She is clearly a pioneer, that helped little girl envision their future life and dream, free from all traditional gender stereotypes.

Specifically, I found interesting the idea to use her as a symbol to break with the past: since her birth, her creator Ruth Handler, knew she would have been a crucial mean to provide social and cultural change. Barbie challenged the traditional opinion of women, being an outbreking model of femininity that is no longer obliged to remain within the home. The doll breaks the domestic sphere barriers to be opened to new professional and personal possibilities. She did not promote the old, limited ideals of women; she was not confined to the only roles of wife and mother. She was an independent woman, capable to aspire to lifestyles considered unconventional.

Another aspect that I found intriguing and important to be discussed, is the evolution of the doll over time, with the introduction of versions featuring different ethnicities and professions. This helped in the making of her identity, as representation of all girls and a symbol of inclusion. It contributed to spread the idea that every girl can aspire to become whoever she desires, covering every profession or role in society. This powerful message was, however, not seriously considered before Barbie, and even in the everyday life, numerous categories of women were excluded from society. Furthermore, Barbie challenged another time patriarchy when Mattel introduced different careers for the doll. The doll intent was to encourage girls to pursue their dream career, even if that was traditionally dominated by men. No dream is too big for Barbie.

Although these positive aspects, I decided to inspect also the negative sides. The doll received criticism over the years because of her unrealistic appearance which sparked complaints about the beauty standards she promoted. That is why, Mattel responded by introducing new types of Barbies, featuring all different body shapes and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, the recent movie explored in a modern way the concept of feminism related to Barbie. It promoted equality and the deconstruction of toxic masculinity. With an ironically approach, the film displays the whole Barbie world.

In conclusion, to sum up, Barbie evolved from a simple toy to a powerful cultural tool, representing empowerment, transformation of women's lives and approaches to society. Thanks to her ability to be always modern and not outdated, Barbie remains an icon, inspiring girls to keep on dreaming.

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Summary in Italian

Questa tesi ha l'obiettivo di illustrare come il fenomeno Barbie abbia cambiato il concetto culturale e sociale sia del femminismo, che della concezione di femminilità. Il cambiamento promosso dalla bambola non è stato immediato e nemmeno semplice, proprio per questo motivo era doveroso analizzare tutto ciò che aveva preceduto la sua creazione.

Partendo dal capitolo numero uno, nella prima parte, viene analizzato il periodo storico riguardante la domesticità. Questo fenomeno, che si basava su una teoria conosciuta come teoria delle sfere separate, promuoveva degli ideali specifici per gli uomini e per le donne: la sfera privata, anche detta intima, riguardava solamente le donne in quanto la casa era considerata il centro della loro vita. Loro dovevano rimanere a casa, prendersene cura e allo stesso tempo crescere i figli, confortare e supportare il marito che invece apparteneva alla sfera pubblica. Quest'ultima aveva a che fare con tutto il mondo esterno alle quattro mura, il quale era pericoloso. Le donne dovevano proteggersi da tutte le negatività che provenivano dall'estero rimanendo a casa. Proprio perché gli uomini erano considerati gli unici a poter ricoprire cariche pubbliche, solo loro potevano permettersi di lavorare. Le donne, quindi, erano considerate come angeli del focolare ma allo stesso tempo erano fondamentali perché con il loro ruolo, crescevano futuri cittadini americani consapevoli dei loro valori e portatori di sani principi. In questo modo però le personalità e le emozioni delle donne venivano messe da parte in quanto loro dovevano sottostare a dei rigidi ruoli imposti. Per essere considerate vere donne, dovevano rispettare quattro principali caratteristiche: la pietà, la purezza, la sottomissione e la domesticità. Queste virtù delinearono una visione ristretta della femminilità conducendo a un'omogeneizzazione delle loro vite. Tutti questi ideali furono ampiamente descritti in romanzi, scritti religiosi o riviste per donne che fornivano informazioni dettagliate su come rispettare questa ideologia dominante. Il trattato di Catherine Esther Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, divenne influente nel plasmare il ruolo delle donne all'interno della famiglia e nella società. In seguito, il capitolo analizza più nello specifico alcuni pensieri di determinate figure di spicco appartenute a quel periodo storico. Le autrici che sono state prese in considerazione, la sopra citata Catherine Esther Beecher assieme a Charlotte Perkins Gilman, hanno però visioni contrastanti: la prima era a favore del ruolo delle donne come madri e insegnanti in quanto era fermamente convinta che le

donne fossero perfette per insegnare e tramandare tutte le conoscenze; la seconda invece non era assolutamente d'accordo con questo pensiero e anzi, era favorevole ad una maggiore presenza delle donne in diversi ruoli professionali. Il fenomeno della domesticità però riguardava solo un ristretto gruppo di donne, ovvero coloro che rientravano nella classe media, senza considerare tutte le pluralità che esistevano sul suolo americano. Nel corso del tempo però la concezione della femminilità ha subito trasformazioni soprattutto grazie ai movimenti femministi. Molto importanti furono le varie onde femministe nella lotta per i diritti delle donne: la prima ondata caratterizzata dalla lotta per il diritto al voto, la seconda ampliò le richieste includendo il diritto all'aborto, la parità salariale, l'indipendenza economica e la lotta contro la violenza domestica. La terza ondata si concentrò invece sull'inclusività e intersezionalità, riconoscendo l'importanza di considerare non solo il genere ma anche la classe e orientamento sessuale nelle battaglie femministe. Nella quarta ondata si focalizza sulla lotta contro le diseguaglianze persistenti.

Il secondo capitolo introduce ed esamina la storia di come è nata la bambola più famosa al mondo, analizzando come tutti i fattori riguardanti la precedente teoria della domesticità vengano superati attraverso un giocattolo. L'idea della creazione di Barbie, portata avanti dalla sua creatrice Ruth Handler, Le venne osservando sua figlia giocare con bambole di carta che lei immaginava fossero donne adulte. Ruth comprese che le uniche bambole presenti sul mercato rafforzavano l'idea che le bambine dovessero crescere con l'unico scopo di diventare madri. Barbie fu quindi creata per offrire l'alternativa ideale che permetteva alle bambine di sognare e immaginarsi in vari ruoli professionali, stimolando così sia creatività che ambizione. Proprio grazie alle innumerevoli carriere Barbie si affermò come simbolo di emancipazione femminile. Rappresentava una donna indipendente che poteva aspirare anche a ruoli professionali tipicamente considerati maschili. Nonostante ciò, la bambola venne duramente criticata e accusata di promuovere ideali di bellezza non reali perpetuando un'immagine superficiale di femminilità basata solamente su aspetto fisico e abbigliamento. La risposta alle critiche di Mattel non tardò: introdussero nuove versioni della bambola rappresentando diverse etnie e corpi differenti nel tentativo di promuovere una maggiore inclusività. Un punto fondamentale del successo di Barbie è di fatti l'ampliamento della linea; nel corso degli anni Mattel introdusse anche la prima Barbie nera. Da allora Barbie cominciò ad includere

diversi stili di vita come, per esempio, Barbie in sedia a rotelle o Barbie con la sindrome di Down. Tutto questo progetto di inclusività ha permesso a più bambine di sentirsi rappresentate e accolte nel mondo di Barbie rafforzando il messaggio di emancipazione.

Nel terzo e ultimo capitolo invece viene preso in considerazione il film di Barbie, uscito nel 2023 diretto da Greta Gerwig. In questo live action vengono affrontati i temi complessi come la mascolinità tossica e nuovamente il femminismo. A Barbieland, le Barbie sono al potere mentre i Ken svolgono ruoli secondari. Questa rappresentazione è chiaramente utilizzata per mettere in luce gli stereotipi di genere, usando l'ironia. Il film punta a decostruire l'idea che gli uomini debbano essere sempre forti, aggressivi e incapaci di mostrare emozioni. Anche loro devono essere liberi dalle aspettative oppressive della società patriarcale. Nel film una tematica importante è l'inclusività. Il cast è eterogeneo con attori di diverse etnie e orientamenti sessuali, riflettendo così l'intenzione di Mattel di una rappresentazione più ampia della società. Questo aspetto è evidenziato anche nella scelta di rappresentare diverse versioni di Barbie e Ken con fisici e tratti distintivi diversi. Il film tratta inoltre anche delle difficoltà che le donne continuano ad affrontare oggi. Attraverso il toccante monologo di America Ferrera, viene esplorata la lotta quotidiana delle donne per essere all'altezza delle aspettative sociali. Il film si conclude con un messaggio di speranza suggerendo che nonostante le sfide le donne possono continuare a lottare per un futuro più equo e inclusivo.

La tesi quindi si conclude mettendo in evidenza di come nonostante il tempo sia passato e il progresso si sia evoluto, Ci sono ancora purtroppo tanti casi dove l'uguaglianza tra uomini e donne non è ancora minimamente presente. Nonostante il tempo e le sue numerose versioni Barbie continua a rappresentare un modello per le giovani generazioni invitandole a sognare senza limiti sfidando gli stereotipi di genere.