

# Children's Sexualisation and Toys

## Barbie Doll as a Sexual Token in Sarah Strohmeier's *Barbie Unbound*

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**Abstract** This article offers an analysis of children's sexualisation in children's literature by focusing on the collection *Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession. With Photos by Geoff Hansen (1997)* by Sarah Strohmeier. In the book, the Barbie doll is used as a medium to discuss sexual issues. Away from her typical pink, glossy and superficial world, in Strohmeier's collection, Barbie is depicted while facing real problems; thus, she gets involved with dramatic historical events and violent life experiences, at a variety of social roles. Inasmuch as the famous toy is easily identifiable by a children's, adolescent, and adult audience, *Barbie Unbound* addresses a crossover readership, and stimulates an intergenerational debate about sexuality. Yet, since adult writers and readers usually repress children's relationship with sexuality, sex in *Barbie Unbound* is depicted in anti-theoretical fashion. On the one hand, Strohmeier offers detailed theoretical instructions to her young readers, and discusses topics of current interest. On the other hand, she tries to limit children's and teenagers' actual sexual experiences by stressing their terrible consequences, such as rape and venereal diseases, thus offering a dual interpretation between transgression and politically correct.

**Keywords** Barbie doll. Children's sexualisation. Gender stereotypes. Lesbianism. Sexual violence.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: Adult Writers and Children's Sexualisation. – 1.1 *Barbie Unbound* by Sarah Strohmeier, with Photos by Geoff Hansen. – 1.2 *Barbie Unbound* and Sexualised Gender Stereotypes. – 1.3 *Barbie Unbound* and Rape: Children's Sexuality Must Be Punished. – 2 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction: Adult Writers and Children's Sexualisation

Today, when we think of children, the first image that comes to our mind is connected with carefree innocence, a concept that we find to be alien to our adult condition. Yet, childhood and innocence have not always been so inextricably linked. On the contrary, before the nineteenth century, believing in the Christian religion and in the doctrine of the original sin, most of the population used to think that all human beings had been contaminated since birth by a form of depravity, inherited from the first human creatures on earth, Adam and Eve. The only way to escape this terrible stain was to grow up and become aware both of their sin and of the means needed in order to obtain redemption. Therefore, parents in the past did not regard childhood as a separate life-phase from conscious adulthood; on the contrary, they sought to hasten their children's emotional, physical, and spiritual growth in every possible way (Gubar 2011, 122).

It was not just a religious issue. Before the eighteenth century, the childlike features that today may seem adorable, such as babbling and crawling, were considered as serious limitations when compared to the physical and intellectual completeness of the adults; these limits made children more akin to animals than to the dignified human-kind (Gubar 2011, 122).

The Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was the first thinker to oppose this ideology. In fact, according to his theories, children are born in a state of innocence 'in nature', which in time, through puberty, is corrupted by the spoiling forces of 'human society'. Controversially, in his writings, Rousseau suggests that children are born innocent and pure, rejecting the belief that they are afflicted since their birth by the original sin. Consequently, the corruption of the child occurred during his growth and development in an injudicious society. For this reason, adults had to preserve children's innate innocence as long as possible, and defend it through careful education.

Given this interpretation that still affects our contemporary conception of childhood, it becomes clear that children's innocence is only an adult construction. Furthermore, children's alleged innocence is theorised through a series of 'lacks' compared to the complete adult life-experience: the *lacks* of guilt, guile, knowledge, and experience. In his *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman maintains that the association between innocence and the so-called 'lacks' derives from Freud's theory of 'sublimation', which traces a link between innocence and sexual inexperience. By 'sublimation' Nodelman and Freud mean the ability to replace an intrinsically sexual discourse with another discourse, which may be valued more highly and which is not sexual (Nodelman 2008, 199).

James Kincaid, an American controversial<sup>1</sup> academic, in his *Erotic Innocence* has emphasised the association between children's innocence, lack of eroticism and sexuality. According to Kincaid, the label of 'innocence' that we apply to children transforms them into empty containers, ready to be filled in by adult projections and experiences. This is happening because our conception of 'innocence' is implicitly but indissolubly tied to its opposite, experience. This way, our culture tends to attribute sexual connotations to children, while denying doing such thing. In order to demonstrate his statement, Kincaid mentions as an example the highly eroticised figure of the child actor Shirley Temple (1928-2014), pointing out that the aesthetic features that characterise our idea of the 'innocent child' - "among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous" (Kincaid 1998, 14) - correspond to the contemporary conception of what is sexually attractive.

Joanne Faulkner in her *The Importance of Being Innocent* reminds us that innocence is interconnected with the concept of vulnerability and the need for protection, which, in turn, are loaded with sexual connotations in a culture like ours, where sexual relationships are considered in terms of the stronger person winning over the weaker (Faulkner 2011, 45). We implicitly endorse and promote a cultural representation of children that is both innocent and sexualised at the same time. Yet, if, as Kincaid and Faulkner state, our culture and society are so much inclined to sexualise children, why do we deny the obvious and insist in defining children as innocent? In her *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose tries to explain this ambiguous position. According to her interpretation, adults perceive themselves as the only legitimate sexual beings. Their conception of children, conceived as 'other' and not-adult creatures, must necessarily be devoid of sexual connotations. In this case, sexuality is considered solely in the physical sexual act, and not as an integral part of each person's identity. Consequently, accepting children's sexuality will force adults to reconsider all the concepts they have developed about their own nature, even in the sexual sphere; thus, children's sexuality threatens the adult construction of adulthood.

Freud is known to have undermined the concept of childhood innocence, but his real challenge is easily lost if we see in the child merely a miniature version of what our sexuality eventually comes to be. The child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child

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<sup>1</sup> Several critics accused Kincaid of legitimising paedophilia in his *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992). According to their interpretation, the author argues that paedophiles are a social necessity, becoming the scapegoat for a latent sexual desire that the whole adult community feel toward 'innocent' children.

as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality – it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own (Rose 1992, 4). By insisting on representing children as pure and innocent creatures, and by persuading young readers to follow the example of their naïve peers in literature, adults succeed in maintaining the stereotypical – yet, socially and communally acceptable – perception they have of themselves. Thus, they can avoid confronting those aspects of their sexuality that they have repressed or wished to repress.

In agreement with the theory expressed by Rose, Gubar suggests a literary trend in support of it. While writing on children's alleged innocence, Gubar stresses that the rise of sexual maturity and the resulting loss of innocence are usually represented in children's and young adult literature in coincidence with catastrophic and potentially irreversible events. In Brain de Palma's movie adaptation (1976) of Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (1974), the main character's first period coincides with the sudden discovery that her mind has the supernatural ability to destroy and kill anyone who treats her ill. Likewise, in the famous *Twilight* saga (2005-08) by Stephanie Meyer, the main character's first sexual experience calls for her transformation into a dreadful vampire.

The difficult relationship between sexual experience and perdition is likely to arise from a motif in horror films that show young girls surviving their monstrous opponent only when still virgin and sexually pure (Gubar 2011, 126). Referring to the same type of sexually repressive dualism, Nodelman reminds his readers that most of the female characters in children's literature only achieve an important role in the story when asexual, usually being described as substitute mothers (Nodelman 2008, 276). Thus, the sexual experience in children's literature seems an insurmountable taboo.

From the literary point of view, this evolution in the relationship between adults – who tend to play the predominant roles within the publishing world for children –, children, and sexuality marks an equally significant trend. The books addressed at a children's audience, in fact, recently show an overcoming of the literary trends from which they had been characterised both from content and formal point of view. As Nikolajeva observes,

an ever-growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of post-modernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity, and metafiction. (Nikolajeva 1998, 222)

In the same way, the contents in children's literature also evolve: they become more complex, face discussions on important historical

and social issues, question and suggest reflections on current topics. Moral teaching remains the ultimate goal of the narrative, but the psychological description of the child character moves deeper, authorised by the idea that

transgressive behavior [is] no longer seen as a synonymous with bad character; good-hearted children [can] be shown as engaging in amusingly naughty behavior. (Barker 2016, 102)

The sexual characterisation, in particular, becomes a recurring topic in terms of queer sexuality, coming out, prevention of pregnancies and STIs. This transgressive approach to a realistic depiction of life in literature is not always appreciated and shared by the critic; several theorists would prefer that children's books maintain a lighter style, a less bloody and truthful vision of the world; in short, a more politically correct approach.

### 1.1 *Barbie Unbound* by Sarah Strohmeier, with Photos by Geoff Hansen

In her children's literature periodical *The Guardian of Education* (1802), Sarah Trimmer was the first writer to recognise the existence of 'young adulthood', thus creating a new category of readers, separated from those of children and adults. She defined readers from the age of 14 to 21 as 'young people'. Trimmer's primary aim was to recommend her readers books that seemed most suitable, according to the needs of their age. Anyhow, for both children and teenage readers, she promoted the kind of fiction that would shape well-mannered, submissive, and innocent young people (Talley 2011, 229). Sex was carefully excluded from Trimmer's reading list.

As opposed to Trimmer's suggestions, in recent years there has been a change in the way children's and young adult literature interacts with sexual issues. Despite the fact that until World War Two, writers banished sexually explicit content, and represented children only according to the stereotyped idea of innocence and sexual inexperience, some contemporary novels discuss sexuality, while addressing a young readership. This is happening despite the frequent criticism by many adult readers.

As Kimberley Reynolds asserts in her *Radical Children's Literature*, in the wake of the age of 'sexual liberation', also witnessed by the growing spread of the contraceptive pill, since the 1970s children's and adolescent literatures recognise that their young readers are interested in sex. Thus, literature also turns into a written testimony to those social changes that challenge the heteronormative lifestyle, exploring a wide variety of non-conventional experiences and sexu-

al orientations (Reynolds 2007, 115). This new approach is supported by the idea that, in an age dominated by a widespread discussion of sexual issues and pornography, to which even the youngest ones can access through internet, children's literature must carry out the task of sexual education, and provide accurate instructions that can make children and teenagers sexually aware (Reynolds 2007, 117).

Although children's literature and young adult fiction relate to sexual contents in different ways, the cultural construction of 'childhood' and 'youth' are similarly limited by the adults' dual approach of sexualisation and repression. Whereas the 'child' is considered as a gender-less and sex-less creature, with an immature, yet sexualised body, young adults are provided with a mature pubescent body, but are not considered as mentally mature enough to control it. As a practical example, in her analysis of girlhood, Shauna Pomerantz suggests that girls are construed in popular culture narratives as subjects with potential agency – as in the famous slogan "Girl power" –, as well as clueless creatures in need of adult surveillance for their own good (Pomerantz 2009, 150).

Therefore, despite the new trend in using literature to discuss sexual contents, most of the books addressing a young readership still tend to protect children's alleged innocence, by dissuading young people from experiencing their sexuality, and by maintaining the association between sexual act and exemplary punishment (Reynolds 2007, 115). In fact, most of the novels addressing a children's readership and discussing sexuality still focus on the problems resulting from direct sexual experiences, such as unwanted pregnancies.

The way these two antithetical attitudes coexist in the collection *Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession* (1997) by Sarah Strohmeyer is particularly interesting, and provides the case in point. Through the literary technique of parody, Strohmeyer wishes to highlight the limitations and false statements embedded in our social and cultural conventions. Thus, using a toy as a sexual token, the book works as an unconventional guide to sexual education, also promoting discussions on topics of current interest, such as the free choice of abortion, and the homosexual identity. Yet, at the same time, in her literal interpretation, Strohmeyer is unable to overcome the limits set by biased adults when representing preadolescent and adolescent sexuality. Hence, in the collection, sex is also depicted from a perspective that is at once conservative and sometimes punitive.

As clearly suggested by the title, *Barbie Unbound* consists of a series of parodic adventures that present the famous Barbie doll, her inseparable friend Midge, and her faithful partner Ken as the main characters. Barbie, marketed by Mattel since 1959, is the most famous fashion doll in the world (Mattel Global Brand Communications). The toy achieved such a success that, over the years, its supply has been enriched with several fellow dolls – including Midge and

Ken -, with fashion accessories matching any possible lifestyle, vocation, and career, and trans-medial adaptations and spin-offs, such as photo romances, books, animated films, and videogames.

However, over the years, Barbie's commercial success has incurred a series of criticisms about the socially unpleasant ideas this doll suggests, although being marketed specifically for a children's audience. The term 'Barbie' has often assumed the disreputable meaning of a 'pretty, but superficial and substantially stupid girl'. Moreover, the body of the doll was accused of promoting an anatomically unrealistic feminine image, with the consequent risk that girls would aspire to achieve that kind of body, bringing them to eating and psychophysical disorders. For this reason, since 1997, Barbie's body has been moulded in order to have larger hips, and recently Mattel has developed new models that take into account different physical features and aesthetic criteria, thus creating the new versions "Tall", "Slim", and "Curvy" Barbies and Kens.

In addition to this, Barbie and other Barbie-like dolls are highly sexualised. As suggested by Lisa Cunningham, the same specific qualities Kincaid had identified as common characteristics of children's innocence and sexually desirable femininity are also frequently shared by dolls, in the way they are represented and advertised (Cunningham 2015, 209). In fact, these dolls have an over-emphasised feminine body and are too sexy for the young girls who are their commercial target. This detail has raised great concern, as recent studies have shown that dolls are a constant reference model for children in the way they perceive the world, construct their identity and socialise (Hains 2012, 122). This way, the main aim these toys seem to suggest to their young owners is to 'be seen', and, even worst, to 'perceive themselves as sex objects', thus endorsing children's sexualisation, and adults' dual attitude, at once supportive and repressive.

Inspired by the criticisms incurred by Barbie as an unsuitable toy despite her constant updates, Strohmeyer created a collection that depicts the adventures of this doll in a realistic setting. No longer in her typical high-gloss and muffled world, Barbie has now to face the ordinary experiences every woman faces during her lifetime, in different geographical and historical environments. Whereas the setting is realistic, Barbie's nature is still characterised by the stereotypes that define her identity - naive, absent-minded, and unwillingly sexualised -, thus producing surreal and amusing results.

With great wit, and using supplementary tools - explanatory illustrations such as clever photographs, instructions for use, and discussion questions -, Strohmeyer intends to stimulate an intergenerational discussion on contemporary society and culture, transforming Barbie from the emblem of consumerism and unattainable beauty into a feminist teaching instrument.

Regardless of the serious topics discussed in it, the collection addresses at once a children's, young adult, and adult readership. The asterisk-ed subtitle "for grown-ups" must not mislead the readers. In fact, in the "Introduction" to the collection, it is clearly stated that *Barbie Unbound* wishes to involve both parents and their young "Barbie-obsessed daughter[s]" (Strohmeyer 1997, 2) into an inter-generational discussion. Indeed, Barbie's universal success makes her an icon, easily recognisable by a crossover audience. Yet, it also interesting to note that the parody of some cultural peculiarities in *Barbie Unbound* might fail in being decoded and understood by its younger readers. Indeed, as stressed by both Sandra Beckett and Sue Walsh when discussing children's literature and irony, although today's children are more proficient readers and viewers of parody than their peers were in the past, they still have a narrow repertoire of allusion they are able to recognise (Beckett 2001, 176). Then, parodies with multiple coding in Strohmeyer's collection are used in order to provide different levels of complexity and entertainment for its cross-over audience.

It is possible that the multiple readerships addressed by *Barbie Unbound* are the reason why sexual subjects are depicted in such a contrasting manner in the collection. On the one hand, the text aims at stimulating a critical, yet theoretical, discussion about different approaches to sexuality in contemporary society. On the other hand, the collection suppresses every practical desire by constantly referring to the tragic consequences children and teenagers would face if they ever decided to adapt to the sexual freedom promoted by the doll.

## 1.2 *Barbie Unbound* and Sexualised Gender Stereotypes

Barbie and Barbie-like dolls are usually charged with accuses of instilling gendered stereotypes in children and young girls. Thanks to Strohmeyer's wit, and to Geoff Hansen's hyper-realistic photographs, Barbie in *Barbie Unbound* seems to overcome this limit. In the collection, Barbie leaves her traditional world behind, and experiences real life in several societal, historical, and geographical contexts. The real Barbie doll has always enjoyed many social roles and working careers. Strohmeyer takes this aspect to the extreme, so that in the collection Barbie becomes an isolated and overweight high-school girl, a pregnant teenager, a hippie who lives in a feminist community, and the manager of a sweatshop. On the occasion of the fortieth-birthday of the Mattel doll, Barbie is even depicted as a woman in menopause, who fights the signs of aging with plastic surgery – after all, Barbie is entirely made of plastic. In addition to this, in the collection, Barbie also puts herself in the shoes of famous women of the past and of the present, role models and antimodels to which any girl might refer



to: Joan of Arc (1412-1431), the queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793), Marie Curie (1867-1934), Eva Braun (1912-1945), and even the former candidate to the US presidency Hillary Clinton (1947-). By developing the features of Barbie through so many different characterisations, Strohmeier intends to define the many facets by which the feminine gender is characterised in reality, thus overcoming the stereotypes by which women and Barbies have always been imprisoned. Indeed, in the "Introduction" to the collection, the author writes:

Barbie Unbound is here to the rescue. After nearly forty years in her pink plastic prison [Barbie] is on parole, exploring the roles REAL women have assumed for years. And, with this guide, she will take you with her. (Strohmeier 1997, 2)

In *Barbie Unbound*, Strohmeier intends to overcome gendered stereotypes, also when applied to sexuality. It is interesting that, among the many realities experienced by Barbie in the real world, she is also called to walk a mile in the shoes of some gay characters; this way, Strohmeier supports the concept that homosexuality is nothing more than another legitimate aspect of individual identity.

As noted by Kimberley Reynolds, the theme of sexuality has become so frequently examined in children's and young adult literature – albeit with many limitations and conservative conventions –, that now novels describe its less traditional aspects, such as dating with more than one partner and same-sex relationships (Reynolds 2007, 127). In the latter case, novels turn mostly into "problem novels" in which homosexuality is represented as one of the main traits of the character's identity. Thus, such stories pay great attention not only to the sexual implications of the character's life, but also to his/her intimate reflections, and to the consequences in a wider social context, such as accepting one's own homosexual nature, and the fear of the coming-out (Flanagan 2010, 35).

*Barbie Unbound* represents several gay celebrities: Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Alice B. Toklas (1877-1967), Ellen DeGeneres (1958-), and K.D. Lang (1961-). The episode "Barbie Stein and Midge B. Toklas and their Paris Salon" deals very superficially with homosexuality, mostly referring to trivial anachronistic stereotypes about the gay community, while focusing mainly on the literary and intellectual authorities to which the names of the two dolls refer. On the contrary, the episode "midge d. lang and Barbie DeGeneres: A Love Story" discusses the difficulties of self-identification as a homosexual doll.

After an unsatisfactory heterosexual experience, Barbie DeGeneres draws the conclusion that she is gay. This wise self-analysis does not diminish her self-esteem or her doll identity. Barbie DeGeneres only starts worrying about her sexuality when she must confront the rest of the world. Having obtained the immediate support

of her friend Midge – a symbol of Barbie's most intimate acquaintances –, the doll fears that she might be discriminated at work:

“Midge, I know 10 percent of Barbies are lesbians and I am one of them”, [Barbie DeGeneres] sobbed. “But if I let everyone know that, Mattel will throw me back in the closet. They'll accuse me of causing market losses and of being inappropriate for family viewing”. (Strohmeier 1997, 46)

However, Barbie DeGeneres's worries are completely unmotivated. As Strohmeier suggests, the Mattel Board Directors, who have always been more than mindful about the commercial implications of the behaviour and the nature of each of their Barbies, support her homosexual orientation, because their marketing studies have revealed that there is a sizable niche for a gay doll.

The unexpected conclusion of the episode, in which the acceptance of homosexuality is subjected to market laws – as it happens in the real world –, is depicted in the text with such irony that it cannot diminish the real message Strohmeier wishes to discuss. When Barbie DeGeneres fears that she might be branded as an “inappropriate toy”, her friend Midge immediately reminds her of the overly sexualised clothing provided to official Barbies. In addition to this, in the “Discussion Question” at the end of the episode, the author suggests an intergenerational debate on homosexuality, by asking

Which is more morally offensive – a ‘well-developed’ doll that overstimulates a young girl's prepubescent sexual curiosity while closing her mind to alternative female images or a doll who prefers other dolls? (Strohmeier 1997, 47)

Hence, Strohmeier underlines Barbie's real limits as a toy: not her possible queer sexuality, but her identity as a projection of men's desires.

This way, accepting Barbie DeGeneres's homosexuality symbolically implies celebrating Barbie's ‘Unbound-ness’, or, in other words, the freedom of the doll from all the gendered stereotypes that have influenced her perception since her first appearance in 1959. Finally, Barbie, depicted in the less conventional feminine aspects – slave-driver, teenage loser, lesbian icon, and Nobel-Prize awarded scientist –, turns into an “ultimate feminist teaching tool” (Strohmeier 1997, 2).

### 1.1 *Barbie Unbound* and Rape: Children's Sexuality Must Be Punished

In her *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta Seelinger Trites analyses the way rape is described in children's and young adult literature. According to Trites, adults perceive sexuality as a source of power. Consequently, in literature, young people's sexuality is usually repressed and punished. In most teenage novels depicting rape episodes, the victims express an increasing sexual desire before the violence takes place; thus, rape becomes a symbolic tool to limit and punish a kind of sexual desire, which is opposed to children's presumed innocence. This tendency is so deeply rooted that even when an author describes a teenage sexual relationship, intending to praise a girl's sexual freedom, the event is still depicted in an implicitly repressive way (Trites 2000, 116). In "Rape Scripts and Rape Spaces", Aiyana Altrows considers the representation of rape and its physical and psychic consequences in four novels aimed at a young readership. She argues that all the texts examined offer a practical representation of social control on the female body: the novels punish female sexual desire and insist on gendered social rules, connecting teenage sexuality with alluring clothing and eating disorders (Altrows 2016, 53). A similar narrative dynamics is depicted in Strohmeyer's collection when discussing Barbie's sexuality.

*Barbie Unbound* deals with sexual violence on several occasions. The episode "Anita Hill Barbie" is inspired by a sexual scandal of the 1990s. In 1991 the Afro-American lawyer and university professor Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment. At the time, Thomas was a US Supreme Court nominee, and he had been her boss at the US Department of Education and at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. According to Hill, during her two years employment as Thomas's assistant, after her refusal of dating him, Thomas used work situations to discuss sexual subjects (Fassin, Swenson 2002, 132-9). A controversy took place; although several witnesses and proofs testified to Hill's credibility, Thomas's supporters claimed she was only seeking revenge and questioned why she had followed him on a second job and had met Thomas on various occasions after they no longer worked together.

In *Barbie Unbound*, Strohmeyer creates a Barbie-version of Anita Hill, and supports her pleas stating that, because of sexist blames, nobody believed her charges to be true. Anita Hill-Barbie is accused of being "too much of a Barbie, despite her Yale law degree" (Strohmeyer 1997, 112), thus some Senators and Ken Thomas's supporters think she is just seeking revenge because she has not married a Ken yet. In the "Discussing Questions" at the end of the episode, the author even suggests that a social reflection might arise from this sad event. This way, Strohmeyer wishes to stimulate an intergeneration-

al debate on the role of women in contemporary society. In fact, she asks her readers:

What's the point of working hard, getting a scholarship to college, a degree from a prestigious law school and a job as a law professor if, in the end, society will think of you only in terms of being a sexual object? Now do you see why Barbie skipped all that tough stuff and went straight to the sexual object part? (113)

Yet, despite her clear support to the victim, Strohmeyer insists in describing Barbie's sexy clothing, suggesting that they might be the actual reason why she was molested, and might even be a justification for the violence she had to face. In her episode, Anita Hill-Barbie seems to be aware of the sexualisation she expresses through her attire. She does not bother being considered a sexual object, as long as nobody says it clearly.

Even Barbie knows that while boys are supposed to notice pretty dresses, they're not allowed to talk about them (Ken never does). That's called sexual harassment and it's a violation of Barbie's civil rights. (112)

The situation is not limited to this episode. Barbie's body- and clothing-shaming is a recurring subject in the collection. For instance, the episode "Let's Go Navy! Barbie Gets Her Tail Hooked" represents another sexual outrage of the 1990s: the Tailhook scandal. In 1991, during the 35th Tailhook Association Symposium in Las Vegas, more than 100 US Navy and United States Marine Corps aviation officers were alleged to have sexually assaulted their female colleagues. This time, Strohmeyer creates a Barbie-version of Lieutenant Paula Coughlin, the whistle-blower who reported the events of the Tailhook conference in 1991, thus contributing to the start of the investigations. Regardless of her bravery in accusing her colleagues and superiors, Lieutenant Coughlin resigned from the Navy in February 1994, stating she had to face abuses in retaliation for her allegations.

In *Barbie Unbound*, Lieutenant Barbie Coughlin attends the Tailhook convention and becomes the victim of the indecent conduct of her colleagues. Although supported by Strohmeyer, Lieutenant Barbie fails in gaining the emotional help of the characters inside her story. The supervisors to whom she reports the atrocious event do not take her seriously because of her sexy attire:

'Was that a mini-skirt you were wearing?' the Pentagon investigators asked, their lower jaws dropping in shock. 'Now how could these men have pulled down your underwear when Barbies don't wear underwear?' (14)

Barbie's charges are not taken into consideration because her clothing is perceived as a legitimisation for the violence she has had to face. Her rape seems less credible because of her attire. In the end, Barbie is the only one who is punished for the scandal, and she is fired. Literally, a children's toy is condemned for being so intrinsically sexualised.

In the episode "Teenage Pregnant Barbie", Strohmeyer states that the adolescent Barbie is unintentionally dressed for sex. This is the reason why she becomes an easy sexual target for "Hormonally-Overcharged Ken". The young Barbie has never received a proper sexual education, inasmuch as, whenever she dared asking questions about it to her creators, she only got tips on keeping her legs closed, and remarks that Barbies do not have sex nor can get pregnant. Consequently, Barbie does not understand what Ken is after; she spends the night with him, does not take precautions, and gets pregnant. Ken seems nowhere to be found.

Addressing children's, adolescent, and adult readerships at once, this episode alludes to the importance of sexual education as a form of prevention against unwanted pregnancies. This idea is also expressed in "Safe Sex Barbie", when the author stresses the importance of the condom as an indispensable tool in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Yet, despite the laudable didactic intent of the episode, when the news of Barbie's pregnancy spreads, instead of feeling sorry for the consequences of Barbie's naivety and sexual inexperience, the other dolls blame her attire.

Meanwhile, the American Girls dolls started pointing their pudgy fingers at her. 'That's what you get for parading around in those clothes,' sniffed Felicity Merriman. 'Twentieth century slut'. (10)

Once again, Barbie's sexualisation is condemned by focusing on her sexy attire.

In addition to those remarks, the association between sexy and showy clothes and sexuality is not limited to Barbie's character. Ken's apparel is questioned in "Safe Sex Barbie":

And how come he was so concerned with his tan and what about those clothes? Matching faux leather loafers and briefcase, please! But when [Barbie] confronted him about his experimentations in the seventies, Ken was mum. He just lay there with that stupid grin on his face. (22)

The allusion to Ken's homosexuality in *Barbie Unbound* can remind readers of the scandal-provoking release of "Earring Magic Ken" by Mattel in 1993. The updated look of that male doll included blonde highlights in its traditionally brown hair, a queer outfit consisting of a purple open-work t-shirt and a lavender faux-leather vest, an ear-

ring in its left ear, and a 'curious' necklace, inasmuch as it looked like a sex-toy (Savage 1993). Due to its peculiar apparel, "Earring Magic Ken" was sold in record numbers among the gay male community, becoming the best-selling Ken model ever produced. The clothing displayed by Ken in "Safe Sex Barbie" conforms to that worn by the "Earring Magic Ken", both bearing a resemblance to stereotypical gay men in the 1990s.

Thus, Strohmeier's statements support the association between sexy clothes and sexual experience. Although her repeated use of this dichotomy might be read as a parody of the 'asking for it' argument, it seems unlikely that Strohmeier's younger readers will be able to get the irony embedded in her humoristic description of the issue. Hence, this meaningful connection testifies to the opposite dynamics of children's sexualisation and repression. Even in Ken's case, the sexuality of young people - and their toys - cannot exist without terrible consequences: whereas Barbie is seduced and dumped, or becomes the victim of sexual harassments, Ken risks his health. In this episode, in fact, Strohmeier suggests that a male-doll, dressed in such a showy fashion, must have had a controversial and transgressive sexual behaviour, a kind of behaviour that fails in sticking to the image of innocent child, and to the conventional adult sexual norms. Ken must be punished for his experience; thus he is likely to be infected with several venereal diseases, including AIDS.

## 2 Conclusion

As already expressed in the theories offered by Nodelman, Kincaid, and Faulkner, contemporary culture and literature share a schizophrenic conception of childhood, where innocence and inexperience contrast against strong implied sexualisation. Like in other similar texts, the style in *Barbie Unbound* must consider the dual cultural approach between transgression and politically correct, when relating children and sexual topics. Supporting the widespread discussion of sexual issues in children's and adolescent fiction, the over-sexualised Barbie in *Barbie Unbound* seems to educate the young audience on sexual matters. The collection discusses with great irony and wisdom subjects of current interest, such as the acceptance of homosexuality and sexual prevention; thus, it provides an unconventional education on sexual issues, while entertaining its young readers at the same time. By representing Barbie in different realistic backgrounds, the collection seems to overcome the doll's stereotypical limits of 'shopaholic and superficial bimbo', thus turning the dull toy into a useful societal teaching tool.

Yet, Strohmeier connotes her sexual instructions in a positive way only in those episodes in which sex stays unexpressed and theoret-

ical. In fact, it is interesting to note that the positive connotation of Barbie DeGeneres's sexuality does not contradict the repressive attitude with which children, adolescents, – and their toys – and sex are usually associated. Although revealing herself as a lesbian, Barbie DeGeneres never expresses her sexuality in a practical manner: she merely shares the room with Midge D. Lang, and walks naked on the back porch, but only during the weekends.

Through her parodic descriptions, Strohmeyer reveals socially deep-seated moral values and their dual interpretation according to gender. Barbie doll, standing for a (post)teenage girl, is punished for her sexy clothes and fails in gaining the support of the other characters in the stories, including female characters, who seem to perpetuate the biased moral judgements amongst each other. When Ken wears sexy clothes, his masculinity is questioned, suggesting he might have had gay experiences, and he is punished just as Barbie is.

By representing in a satirical fashion a famous icon of children's and teenagers' material culture, such as the Barbie doll, Strohmeyer draws her readers' attention to the conservative and sometimes punitive perspective on the 'difficult' association between young people and sex. She seems to support an adult male heteronormative perspective when discussing sexual issues, but this biased view contrasts with her satirical tone and witty comments. Yet, as suggested by Walsh, young readers might not be able to decode all of Strohmeyer's satirical allusions, inasmuch as the author provides different levels of complexity and interpretation to her cross-over audience. Whereas adult readers are satisfied with her parodic description of contemporary culture and morality, children and teenage readers will presumably read *Barbie Unbound* in its literal meaning. Hence, the dual description of Barbie's relationship with sex (tolerated when theoretical, punished when put into practice) testifies to the adult writers' schizophrenia when discussing young people and sexuality.

Her transgressive approach does not succeed in its intent; indeed, it seems that it conforms to the most conventional dictates of political correctness. Along with an apparently instructive attitude, Strohmeyer winks at her adult readers, maintaining a conservative and repressive approach that allows the continuation of the idealistic representation of children's innocence. Following the widespread association between juvenile sexuality and exemplary punishment as suggested by Gubar and Trites, Strohmeyer's dolls are always damaged by their promiscuity. Barbie Anita Hill and Lieutenant Barbie Coughlin become victims of sexual violence; Teenage Pregnant Barbie turns into an adolescent single mum. Even Ken, a male toy, is likely to contract AIDS for his excessive sexual experience. Hence, *Barbie Unbound* becomes a written testimony to children's sexualisation and adults' opposition to it.

However, it is useful to reflect on the evolution of culture and society, and the way in which this process has a significant impact in

literature; this impact is even more relevant when applied to children's literature, considered its prominent role as a teaching instrument for real-life dynamics. We may consider a linguistic example. Reflecting on the racist vocabulary in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, Jan Lacina suggests that the use of censorship on the very frequent N-word would be an unjustified simplification, inasmuch as children need to learn the historical context in which a book from the past was situated.

The collection *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994) by James Finn Garner offers an exasperation of this censorial approach by proposing an updated version of the most famous fairy tales, rewritten in a politically correct fashion according to both lexis and content. The result is highly humorous: for example, in Little Riding Hood, the young main character goes to her grandmother by virtue of an instinct of female collaboration; the wolf who devours her grandmother and wears her clothes, simply demonstrates tendencies to transvestitism in opposition to the heteronormative precepts on gender; finally, the hunter who intervenes to save the two women endorses the stereotypical representation of a white man and is obviously pushed away: "Sexist! Speciesist! How dare you assume that womyn and wolves can't solve their own problems without a man's help!" (Garner 1994, 4).

Thus, following this line of thought, we can suggest an approval of the ways in which *Barbie Unbound* manages the dichotomy between transgression and politically correct, and children's literature in general nowadays. Until the advent of the sexual revolution in the 1970s it was almost unthinkable to address young readers about 'scandalous' topics in a direct manner. Yet, following the new social evolution, both culture and literature have adapted, opening to broader discourses, also including sex and sexuality. Maybe the future hides new possibilities: Strohmeyer moves in small steps in this innovative direction, waiting for new books for children, which might be finally free to be transgressive.



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