

FEATURES

Calling Barbie 'Anti-Male' Is Ridiculous

The internet's unhappy culture warriors are obsessing over a simplistic reading of Greta Gerwig's Barbie, which is ironic for a film that asks them to put their weapons down and end the self-pity parties.



By [David Crow](#) | July 26, 2023 |

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– Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

👁 *This article contains **BARBIE** spoilers.*

Over the weekend, Ben Shapiro, a conservative media personality and perpetual online attention-seeker, likely made the kind of splash he was looking for when he scowled in a photo standing next to a **Barbie** poster. Clad head-to-toe in black, which either by coincidence or design resembled Ryan Gosling's Ken at his most whiny in the movie, the conservative firebrand lamented to the world that his producers "dragged me" to **Barbie**. And he hated it so much, he felt compelled to make a 43-minute video screed that included him decrying that the film says, "The only way you can have a happy world is if the women ignore the men, and the men ignore the women." He then torched his Barbie dolls on a grill as if he were an alt-right Wednesday Addams.

We're not going to link to that video, but you can find it easily enough, as well as many other similar ones on social media and YouTube where audibly distressed men freak out about the colorful doll movie, declaring it "114 minutes of spiteful, bitter, mean-spirited, borderline unhinged hatred of men and everything even vaguely associated with them." As one Fox News talking head announced on Thursday, thereby giving the American conservative echo chamber its marching orders, the film is "anti-male."

This criticism is as intellectually dishonest about the film Greta Gerwig made as it is simplistic and facile about what's depicted in the movie. **Barbie** is not anti-male, but it may ask some male viewers to think (mildly) about gender roles. And like Gosling's Ken in his all-black get up, it is causing a hilarious amount of performative outrage and exaggerated emotional anguish.

Barbie, which was co-written by Gerwig and her partner Noah Baumbach, does have a decidedly dim view of the patriarchy—the centuries-old system(s) that span continents and governments, but in the U.S. still massively influences everything in our daily lives from how women are paid 16 percent less than men for doing the same work (that gap widens for Black, Latinx, and other non-white women demographics) to how male-dominated state legislatures around the country believe it is their responsibility to decide what women do with their own bodies. It even influences the appearance of the

plastic dolls young girls play with, creating a very specific slender, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed image as the feminine ideal.

Yet the reason why **Barbie** is such an effective comedy is it doesn't belabor underlining these well-worn and obvious elements of our society, turning as some would claim into a feminist seminar. Rather it uses the fantasy world of pink and plastic Malibu Barbieland as a construct unto itself; one that asks viewers to consider the exact reverse of our modern world.

The film does not hate men, or even "just Ken," as Ryan Gosling's bitingly realized comedic creation croons in a musical ballad that wouldn't be out of place on 4chan. Instead the movie creates a scenario where Gosling's Ken and all the other guys in Barbieland feel as stifled, manipulated, and condescended to as women in the "Real World." Barbieland isn't about patriarchy; it's a matriarchy where, to quote Will Ferrell's male Mattel CEO, "No one has cared about Ken, ever." The plight of Gosling's character in the first act is that Barbie takes him for granted, and in Barbieland all he has to do is wait until Barbie decides she wants to spend time with him.

"For Barbie, every day is a great day," explains the narrator. "For Ken, it is not a great day unless Barbie looks at him."

There have been many, *many* movies about the unfair, cruel, and often pernicious disadvantages women have faced throughout history. There have also been pointed allegories that consider the same paradoxes in a heightened reality, be it **Rosemary's Baby** (1968), **The Stepford Wives** (1975), or just last year's heavy-handed **Don't Worry Darling**.

But in the 21st century, Gerwig gets more mileage out of neatly turning the tables and poking fun at the idea of an upside-down patriarchy by way of light comedy. Hence her Ken is desperate to cling to Barbie's pink convertible when the independent woman goes off on an adventure. He's her accessory for an adventure, one who's as shocked as her when they learn in the real world men handle the dangerous power tools of a construction site. Their astonishment might make one think about the infamous quote

by English polymath Samuel Johnson: “Sir, a woman’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.”

The movie isn’t hating men, it’s asking men to put themselves in women’s shoes by way of a beach blond himbo. And if that treatment enrages you, maybe think about what dealing with that everyday feels like?

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Of course, as we’ve written about here, Ken turns out to be something of a villain in the movie when he takes the lessons of the real world’s patriarchy and brings them back to Barbieland. Even then, however, the movie is not hating men so much as turning Ken into what so many of the irate internet voices sound like when talking about **Barbie**: someone who is unhappy with the world, so he decides to overcompensate with excessive displays of hyper-masculinity. Ken complains about the Barbies (read: women), because it’s the only way he can express his sexual frustration, and he creates a system to dominate them in order to give his life a sense of control.

Yes, this portion of the movie digs into gendered clichés, but as someone who probably did try to “mansplain” ***The Godfather*** in college and thought Matchbox Twenty’s “Push” was one of the greatest songs of all-time in 1996, this writer could cackle at the deeper truths and the cartoonish exaggerations of a dude who wants to call his home “Ken’s Mojo Dojo Casa House.”

It’s garish and over-the-top, but so is a dream home with a pink slide from the second floor. It’s also using these comedic bits to gently force Ken (and hopefully the audience) to recognize the performative nature of gender roles and constructs. Gosling’s Ken feels hurt for justifiable reasons (uselessness in a matriarchy), he also is motivated by petty, immature, and selfish resentments (Barbie doesn’t want to kiss me!). Neither rationalization though justifies his attempt to put the women of Barbieland into a

patriarchal system. Yet by building one from nothing, the film shows how contrived and absurdist all gendered concepts are, right down to insisting the black/pink dichotomy of “Barbenheimer” is a “boy/girl” divide.

There shouldn't be a divide. Ken's actions are villainous because they mimic the real world ugliness of an insidious system, but the movie doesn't damn him for it. It even forgives Ken when he can admit that he doesn't really care about the patriarchy; he just thought it made him look cool and that it might make Barbie like him.

Somewhere in the labyrinth of Ben Shapiro's 43-minute rant, he critiques the ending of Barbie being some post-humanist dystopia which suggests men and women should have nothing to do with one another, and that both sexes should live and die alone. This claim is due to the fact that after all the selfish shit Ken did, he (and maybe some viewers?) still expect Barbie to wind up with the handsome guy with six-pack abs.

This of course doesn't happen. Even if Ken hadn't revealed himself to be a bit of a shit, Barbie was never into him like that. So she (*OF COURSE!*) declines to kiss him. However, she does kindly encourage him to keep working on himself. To construe from this conclusion of their dynamic that the movie is saying men and women can never be together is a bizarrely desperate take. Such a reading might even suggest that many conservative thinkers have fallen for the faux happy ending of many romantic comedies of the past, where the boy always gets the girl as a reward for an iota of self-growth.

This is a Hollywood fantasy that cinema has repeated for a century, which again may speak to the limited imagination of stories written and directed only by men. The thinking of those who believed such stories also seems pretty thin. Margot Robbie's Barbie is no prize for Gosling's Ken, although not every Barbie and Ken is the same story. Consider that in the movie's ending, Emma Mackey's Barbie seems much happier to be reconciled with Ncuti Gatwa's Ken. And their collective ending doesn't suggest the Kens of Barbieland must be condemned back beneath the yoke of the patriarchy. The Barbies now see that as wrong. As, you would hope, the audience also does.

This finale is about doing away with any sort of preconceived expectations (or



That's obviously not true, even if they're Barbie and Ken.

So no, Gerwig's **Barbie** does not hate men, but men who hate **Barbie** might want to ask themselves why.

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Barbie

Comedy

Greta Gerwig

Margot Robbie

Ryan Gosling



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