

ENGL 1103

Student: Sarah Landry

Teacher: Miriam Brown Spiers

Power from Pain

Word for bleeding word, Alanis Morissette's 1995 hit single "You Oughta Know" is, well, a lot more than just a hit single. The lyrics, coupled with the heavily symbolic music video, prove to be a journey through outrage, suffering, and envy, and Morissette has a peculiar way of following her written path. Instead of shying away from her agony, she embraces it, allowing her edgy, uncut voice to stagger through each injustice until she has overcome her struggle. Overall, the song is an angst-filled roller coaster of emotion that the listener and the artist must endure together. But how does one endure this? What is it, specifically, that Alanis Morissette seems to be drawing her harsh resilience from? The answer is gender roles. As Morissette sorts through the emotional wreckage of her failed relationship, she challenges and manipulates the strengths and weaknesses associated with both genders in order to establish herself as a strong, honest woman.

Coming from an album that *Words & Music* describes as a "fearless set of songs on which she [Morissette] empties herself of pain," the duality of emotion in "You Oughta Know" is hardly surprising. Just as it makes up the core of the song's meaning and intent, it will also make up a good deal of this analysis. First, every aspect of Morissette's vocal and physical performance alerts listeners that she is

feeling aggressive and angry and that she doesn't plan to remain silent about it.

A certain sadness defines the performance too, although if one watches carefully, that feeling also structures her actions in the video.

Although Morissette prefaces "You Oughta Know" with the soft, unassuming declaration that she "wishes the best" for her past lover and his new lover, she quickly dives into the rage that carries the entire song (Morissette). The listener finds herself peppered with accusatory questions and statements that Morissette's growling voice only enhances. "Did you forget about me, Mr. Duplicity?" she seems to demand, each syllable in the word "duplicity" emphasized like an individual punch (Morissette). As she reels across the video's makeshift "stage," swaying and thrashing and allowing her hair to fall over her face in an untamed mass, one can only assume that she is feeding the same fire that rests behind the lyrics. By venting her aggression in this way, Morissette is ultimately drawing from an emotion that is typically associated with males, therefore challenging what is expected of her in terms of gender. The purpose, however, comes across in the fact that she appears bold and unafraid. She doesn't care that she isn't behaving like a calm, "decent" woman, but remains true to what she feels.

Believe it or not, the underlying sadness in Morissette's performance does not contradict her aggression. It actually builds on her strength. The artist herself told *W & M* that this song (along with many others on the album *Jagged Little Pill*) gave her the "opportunity to not only be honest with myself, but in some cases,

with the people I was upset with.” So, with brutal honesty and a complex twist on an otherwise pathetic emotion, the vocalist wails through the chorus, stating, “It’s not fair, to deny me / Of the cross I bear that you gave to me.” In the music video, her face curls inward as if she is crying, and during later repetitions, she even “crumbles” or falls to her side with an equally pained expression (Morissette). Admittedly, sadness (especially when shown openly) is considered a weakness of the female gender, but Morissette toys with her agony, and as the listener becomes aware that she is unashamed by this display of emotion, they see her as a strong, independent, and perhaps outspoken woman.

To delve deeper into Morissette’s lyrics is also critical. A large part of what makes the song so daring and emotional is the uncensored use of vulgar words and statements. Alanis “discusses sex in a frank voice,” making continual reference to the sex lives of both herself and her ex-lover (Schilt). It should also be mentioned that she manages to drop the f-bomb at least once. Once again, she is challenging a characteristic that one would generally list as a masculine gender trait. Even if cursing and talking about sex aren’t considered terribly feminine, Morissette’s crassness is actually an advantage because it makes her overall statement bold and noticeable. And due to the fact that vulgarity is associated with the masculine gender (and therefore with strength), the singer emerges looking tougher than ever.

Another moment within Morissette’s lyrical genius that deserves consideration is introduced only at the beginning of the song, but the sheer

force of it manages to echo across the entire performance. “Does she speak eloquently / And would she have your baby? / I’m sure she’d make a really excellent mother,” Alanis exclaims, dragging a plethora of feminine gender issues into the mix (Morissette). Motherhood and grace are two attributes of society’s “typical female,” and by questioning her “replacement’s” ability to live up to these attributes, Morissette inevitably attacks a female strength in order to bolster herself. Alanis then implores, “Would she go down on you in a theater?” and one is left to ponder the importance of oral sex alongside a woman’s more traditional role in a relationship (Morissette). In truth, this is a clever gap in the continuity of the song’s thirst for anger and emotional release. Placing two opposing attributes of feminine worth back-to-back challenges the singer and listener to reconsider what they believe a female is expected to do, and Morissette is seen as brutally honest just for acknowledging this.

The various outfits Alanis dons over the course of the four or so minutes (as well as her general appearance) also suit the singer’s purpose. Red lipstick and long hair are both decidedly feminine gender traits, but Morissette uses them to enhance her aggression and prove her own strength. Basically, she identifies with her gender in such a way that she produces the opposite of the intended effect. As for clothing, Morissette starts off her video in a black dress that bares her shoulders and transitions to an all white ensemble that consists of a top, jacket, and pants. While this is obviously symbolic of the fact that she is “moving on,” it allows her to display her growing strength as the song plays out. The dress is

feminine (weak), and the outfit with pants, which she also wears while on stage, is more masculine (strong).

With less than a minute left in her grand emotional exposition, Alanis grips the microphone and sings, “And every time I scratch my nails / Down someone else’s back I hope you feel it / Well can you feel it?” and the listener feels the waves of outrage crest and reach their peak (Morissette). Morissette doesn’t pretend to be cold and completely unscathed by her relationship. She lets her emotions play on the varying aspects of both genders and the constraints that society places on them, and as she does so, her call to overcome her anguish floods forward with nothing to hold it back. Consequently, her audience sees her as a much stronger figure with a message that runs deeper than revenge. Alanis “embodies what it meant to be a woman expressing anger through rock,” and female listeners everywhere are able to find a strength of their own (Schilt). In short, a lyrical lesson in female empowerment exists in the fact that Morissette stands her ground and wears anger, sadness, and sexuality with pride.

Works Cited

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