

Eminem is a controversial rap singer who has written multiple popular songs considered misogynist. In “Like Toy Soldiers”, Eminem proposes a diverse gender perspective. Identify the gender stereotypes in this famous song and discuss different ways to interpret the role assigned to men from a gender theory approach.

“Like Toy Soldiers” is a song by rap artist Eminem. It was released in 2004 and features on his album “Encore”. The title of the song derives from the chorus which samples the 1988 song by Martika, called “Toy Soldiers” (Huber, 2022). The verses of the song express Eminem’s frustrations over feuds within the hip-hop community, with particular focus on his own disputes between fellow hip-hop artists Ja Rule and Benzino. He concludes with an appeal to put an end to the damaging and sometimes fatal disputes. One central theme of the song is masculinity, and several gender stereotypes are reflected in the lyrics, which will be of focus in this discussion.

‘Gender’ and ‘sex’ are terms that are often used interchangeably, though their meaning is not identical. ‘Sex’ refers to a person’s biology and physical anatomy. Gender, on the other hand, is a much more elusive concept. Sociologist Harriet Bradley (2013) describes gender as something which is “culturally defined and socially constructed”. It is part of a system of categorization used to divide people, from which derives certain rules and expectations for how one should live. It is believed that gender stereotypes derive from this categorization and differentiation of male and female social roles (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). Stereotypes are ideas or assumptions cast on people who happen to possess a particular characteristic. In the case of gender, stereotypes enforce binary

perspectives. For example, stereotypically, men are tough, competitive, and logical, whilst women are soft, submissive, and emotional.

Many of the lyrics in “Like Toy Soldiers” reflect some of the stereotypes and expectations placed on men. Eminem begins the song by placing himself in the thematic context when he expresses how he’s “supposed to be the soldier who never blows his composure” (Eminem, 2004). This conveys how he feels a responsibility to remain tough and stoic, even in the face of adversity. The word “supposed” implies the presence of certain rules and roles implemented by outside forces, such as wider society.

The song’s title plays into gender stereotypes in a meaningful way, as one way in which children are socialised into gender from an early age is through playing with toys (Vigule, 2013). Girls are often given dolls to encourage nurturing qualities, whilst boys play with toy soldiers and superhero action figures which internalise expectations to be strong, brave, and heroic. With this in mind, the song’s title could be referencing the expectations enforced on people as early as childhood to assume certain roles. There is also a juxtaposition to the title, as the imagery of toys elicit sentiments of innocence, which is contrasting with the lyrics which discuss aggression and violence.

In the first verse Eminem asserts that “there’s a certain line you just don’t cross” (Eminem, 2004). He goes on to clarify that this line, for him, includes talking about his daughter. This is a line that both Ja Rule and Benzino crossed in some of their lyrics.

This highlights the importance of honour and respect in hip-hop and rap. It also illustrates the stereotypical role of a father being the protector of his family, and feeling a need to respond aggressively if his family is threatened or disrespected in any way.

Hip-hop and rap music is often seen to reflect a stereotypical black masculine image. It is a genre which has been accused of proclaiming misogynistic and homophobic sentiments in its lyrics, and it is seen to promote a hypermasculine aesthetic which exudes extreme toughness, insensitivity, violence, and domination (Oware, 2011). For this reason, many people regard the genre as promoting and encouraging toxic masculinity. In other words, encouraging stereotypically masculine traits which ultimately have a negative impact.

One way that this hypermasculine aesthetic manifests is through engaging in verbal, and sometimes physical, disputes (Oware, 2011). It is common for rappers to use their music to perpetuate disputes by addressing fellow artists by whom they feel disrespected. This particular trend is referred to as “dissing”, a term which is widely believed to be a clipping of “disrespecting” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). However, there are numerous alternative possibilities with regards to its meaning, as it could also be a clipping of “dishonour”, “disparage”, or “disagree”. “Dis” is a prefix which, when added to a word, results in the opposite of the original meaning. For this reason, it’s a powerful word for which to refer to such verbal altercations, as the word ultimately sums up sentiments of opposing forces. This highlights a significant stereotype of masculinity, which is that men possess a competitive nature.

Eminem is not shy when it comes to dissing people in his music. In fact, twitter user Hip Hop By The Numbers (2019) shared calculations on the social media platform that he had dissed 137 people and associations on his solo albums. They calculate his total numbers of disses in his music to be a vast 1,255. This raises the question of why someone who is well known for his confrontational rhetoric would release a song criticising the culture of back and forth disputes.

One possible answer to this is that perhaps Eminem feels responsible for encouraging aggression through his lyrics. This is highlighted as he concludes the final verse with “I’m not gonna let someone else’s coffin rest on my conscience”. Fellow rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. both lost their lives to hypermasculine warfare (Oware, 2011), and in this song Eminem is essentially acknowledging how lyrical disputes incite physical violence and even death. One could describe this song as humanitarian, aiming to encourage compassion and a sense of brotherly love. It is not uncommon for positive sentiments to be expressed in rap music. Oware (2011) explores homosociality and black masculinity in rap music and concludes that the genre reflects a much more complex and multifaceted interpretation of black masculinity than what lies on the surface. Indeed, “Like Toy Soldiers” presents a vulnerable and compassionate sentiment that is contrasting with the tough and violent rapper trope.

“Like Toy Soldiers” highlights several gender stereotypes that men feel a societal expectation to fulfil, such as the expectation to be strong and stoic, and to exhibit the

qualities associated with a soldier at war. At the same time, it reflects a side of masculinity that is vulnerable, sensitive, and compassionate. In doing so, Eminem proposes a perspective on masculinity which is progressive and multidimensional.

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