Feminist Rhetoric of “Nightmare”

Music has always had a strong and lasting impact on society. Even before cassettes, CD’s, or Spotify existed, communities shared experiences and stories using song and dance. In modern culture this is still true—the only difference is that that these shared experiences of song and dance are recorded and put on the internet forever. Modern singers try and breathe new life into lyrics by mixing genre styles and implementing meanings that can touch on cultural movements or trends. American musician Halsey, for example, creates her songs using a mixture of pop, electro-pop, synthpop, R&B, and indie genres that hit on problems in society and within individuals. This combination of unique sound and lyrical intention showcases how musicians can not only find success, but also make an impact in modern culture and society. A rhetorical analysis of Halsey’s “Nightmare” using a feminist lens reveals the cultural impact of the song’s lyrics, sound, and visual representation on women and society.

Before Halsey’s song can be analyzed, it is important to have an understanding of what a feminist lens looks at in rhetorical analyses. A common misconception is that “feminist” implies man-hating, when really this lens “begins from the assumption there is gender inequality between men and women” (Brummet 169). Using this assumption of inequality, a feminist lens specifically looks at how texts silence women by denying them a voice and not creating space for the expression of their female experience (Brummet, 172). A feminist lens not only seeks to explain sources of inequality, but also to discover sources of female empowerment and ways the inequality can be overthrown.

Specifically relating to media, music, and modern culture, a feminist lens looks for alternative ways of seeing the world expressed in texts. By “texts,” rhetorical critics mean a set of signs that all contribute to a shared meaning, which is usually how cultures are experienced (Brummet, 63). Feminist critics use a variety of texts to look for the ways in which broader and more inclusive points of view, grounded in female experiences, provide resources for empowerment (Brummet 173). In music and modern culture, people can create sources of empowerment through their music, writing, and visual representation by representing more female experiences and female-led projects. Not only do they simply represent the female gender, but they develop the females in a meaningful, dynamic, and realistic way so they are seen as more than just objects or individuals with flat personalities.

The current state of music videos, regarding gender and objectification dynamics, has mixed content. A formal analysis of sexual objectification across artists’ gender and musical genre (hip-hop, pop, and country) showed that female artists were “more sexually objectified, held to stricter appearance standards, and more likely to demonstrate sexually alluring behavior” (Stevens and Frisby). These findings were most prominent in the pop and hip-hop videos. A similar study that analyzed 462 popular music videos from 1995 to 2016 found parallel results that stated female musicians were more often portrayed as sexually objectified, and men were more likely than women to objectify individuals (Karsay et al, 2019). Part of these results stem from the constant use of derogatory words such as “bitches” and “hos” in music. This language depicts women as sexual objects that only exist to serve the desires of men and the patriarchy (Brummet 171). This language also allows women to be depicted as mere sexual objects because the derogatory language makes them seem less human and less important than their male counterparts.

As a musician and performer, Halsey tries to deviate from this negative depiction of women in music. More often than not, pop culture makes women into objects rather than subjects; this means they are something to be looked at, talked about, and desired, while men are the ones looking, talking, and desiring (Brummet 172). However, in Halsey’s music videos and songs, she is the one doing the looking, talking, and desiring. She is creating the action, acting as the subject, and surrounding herself with females, particularly in her “Nightmare” video. Halsey ensured that not only were women entirely represented in her “Nightmare” music video, but it was also a female-led project regarding the directing, casting, and production.

The lyrics in “Nightmare” are the strongest indication that Halsey is deviating from the typical female objectification shown in music. The song is meant to show how women can have many sides—pretty, dirty, angry, loud, sexy, fancy, etc. For example, many women are expected to look pretty and smile all the time and can be criticized if they don’t. Halsey highlights this in “Nightmare” by saying, “‘Come on, little lady, give us a smile’ / No, I ain't got nothing to smile about / I got no one to smile for, I waited a while for / A moment to say I don't owe you a goddamn thing” (Halsey 2019). In this portion of the song, Halsey is saying that women shouldn’t be expected to always have a happy smile on, especially if someone tells them they should. The first phrase is said by a man, and the language of “little lady” demonstrates the way people think of women as delicate objects rather than forces of nature themselves.

Halsey’s lyrics also shine a light on the insecurities women face, often at the hands of men. This is demonstrated in “Nightmare” when she says, “Stared in the mirror and punched it to shatters / Collected the pieces and picked out a dagger / I've pinched my skin in between my two fingers / And wished I could cut some parts off with some scissors” (Halsey 2019). This dissatisfaction with body image can be partially traced to media representation of women, particularly in the music industry, as demonstrated by the previous two studies on female objectification in music videos. When the marketed image of a “perfect woman” is usually tall, smooth-skinned, and slender, women in society begin to face growing insecurities with their own image, as Halsey highlighted in these lyrics.

The most powerful recurring lyrics of “Nightmare” are a rallying cry for women to not take any crap. They state, “No, I won't smile, but I'll show you my teeth” (Halsey 2019). Halsey’s lyrics are about women not needing to feel like they are required to go against what they want to do in order to please men. For example, women are often told to smile more in order to come off as welcoming, pleasant, agreeable, and “nice.” In reality, Halsey is saying women don’t owe anything to men or strangers, and can smile when they want to, not out of obligation. The phrasing “I’ll show you my teeth” brings to mind the imagery of bared teeth and fangs. This symbolizes strength and power, and Halsey utilizes this to show that instead of women grudgingly agreeing to smile when they are told to, they can instead bare their teeth as an act of strength and self-power.

This line of thought continues with the next lyrics about a woman’s conduct and deciding who and how many people to take to bed. The lyrics state, “And I'ma let you speak if you just let me breathe / I've been polite, but won't be caught dead / Letting a man tell me what I should do with my bed” (Halsey, 2019). Halsey is saying that women choose what they want, regardless of what society might try and pressure them into doing. Although women are still “polite” when involved in these discussions about their life choices, ultimately it is still up to them how they live their lives and use their sexuality.

Halsey’s lyrics in “Nightmare” are further emboldened by the decisions she made with the song’s instrumentation and vocal tones. The interpretation could have been different if she used soft string instruments or a slower pace, but instead her musical choices make “Nightmare” sound fierce rather than dainty. From the immediate first clash of instruments and drums, “Nightmare” makes sure the listener cannot miss the no-nonsense, hardcore vibe. This faster-paced, intense sound combines with biting, confident lyrics to mark “Nightmare” as a powerful female anthem that makes the listener want to rebel, act, and break the conformity in their life.

“Nightmare” is further solidified as a feminist anthem when the lyrics and sound are combined with the music video’s visuals. In the video, Halsey is portrayed as many variations of herself: sexual, angry, bloody from fighting, polished, wild, and classy. The first two scenes are in black and white with a blood red accent color. The first depicts Halsey in a police lineup with several other women, and the second features Halsey in a mosh pit of punk women on some city backstreet. In typical punk fashion, the women have disheveled hair, ripped clothing, and metal jewelry. Hanna Lux Davis, director of the video, shot the riot scene on 16 millimeter film to give it a grainy, raw quality. Davis said it was intended to be filmed as aggressive: “women can be really raw and rough and even ugly” (Roth). The hardcore and unapologetic tone of the music video is immediately set with this riot scene.

The punk riot scene cuts into another of Halsey as a glamourous housewife who is vacuuming an empty room. In one scene, she holds up a sign that says ,“you smile asshole” right around the time she sings, “No I won’t smile but I’ll show you my teeth.” Although she is dolled up and sexualizing both herself and the vacuum, the underlying message is that she is allowed to look glamourous and use her sexuality, but still doesn’t owe anyone a smile or pleasant attitude. In the second half of the video, Halsey links back to the punk scene by featuring a short cameo of an influential woman—Debbie Harry, the lead singer of Blondies. In this cameo, Halsey pays homage to Debbie Harry because she helped pave the way for other female singers to present themselves as someone with more to offer than just a pretty face.

Halsey further demonstrates this point when she is filmed in a mirrored room in a black dominatrix outfit. In this scene she thrashes around the room, licks the wall, and “has zero regard for her body and just throws herself around” (Roth). It is an extension of the housewife scene and is demonstrating that women are allowed to be pretty, sexual, and physically intense all at the same time. A housewife does not have to silently clean, but can instead be erratic, make ugly facial expressions, and act out “vulgar” sexual innuendos, such as grabbing at her crotch. Although Halsey is confined in a small space in each scene, both versions of herself break the strict confines of the space and make it her own rather than letting the boundaries stop her.

The second half of the video makes a stark change from chaotic, impulsive movements to that of polished, synchronized choreography. This transition takes place into a fancy room with diamond-clad, lingerie-wearing women acting out precise dance movements. They are also holding a newspaper with the bold headline of “It’s our turn!” Female representation is furthered in this scene by featuring high-class women of color and with large visible tattoos. “Rich people” are often associated with old white men, but in the “Nightmare” music video, Halsey is surrounded by diverse women who break the mold of what is typically associated with “high-class” living.

“Nightmare” is a song that lives by the ideas it is promoting. Halsey further underlines her message of female power by employing an all-female cast as well as a female director, choreographer, production manager, set dresser, and stylists (Roth). Director Davis was thrilled at this decision, saying, “if you preach girl power and if you’re going to have songs that are about women, for women, and fighting for women, you better have a female director” (Roth). Halsey and Davis intentionally made “Nightmare” female-centric to better depict the female experience in the music video. Oftentimes men direct female anthem songs, but nobody can represent the female experience better than a woman herself.

Music from the past and present have all found ways to intermix social movements and ideas with inventive, fun, and entrancing sound. Halsey is no different and finds her foothold by capturing peoples’ attention with engaging sound, lyrics, and music videos that carry important messages to the viewer. She is not afraid to break outside of musical, social, and visual conventions, but rather thrives on finding ways to invert these social norms. The cultural impact of Halsey’s music video “Nightmare” extends beyond simply being an addicting song—it is a rallying cry for women to break out of patriarchal norms and live how they desire rather than how they feel obligated to. Halsey uses precise lyrical, sonic, and visual choices to represent women as multi-faceted, dynamic, and powerful beings rather than the flat and sexualized versions that are most common in pop culture and the music industry.

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