

Be a Man: A Marxist Rhetorical Analysis of Will Wood's "I/Me/Myself"

In Karl Marx's day, questions of gender identity were usually far and few between, and when had, they were kept away from polite society. Instead, questions of gender roles were being discussed. In our modern day, when gender identity is a hot button issue, artists like Will Wood presuppose an understanding of so-called "traditional" gender roles. This essay does the same. In its exploration of "I/Me/Myself," an explorative single from Wood's *The Normal Album*, this essay assumes that the reader possesses an understanding of those gender roles. This paper does not assume, however, that the reader possesses an understanding of Will Wood and his body of work and, being that the material conditions that a piece of art arises from are critical to its understanding, will include an introduction to Wood's own relationship with identity, as well as the production of both *The Normal Album* and Wood's two previous albums, *Everything is a Lot* and *SELF-iSH*. From there, it will introduce the two primary artifacts to be analyzed, the lyrical content of "I/Me/Myself" and the musical style with which it is presented. Following the introduction of these artifacts, a series of arguments will be presented, first for what the artifacts mean in separation, and then for what they represent as a unified whole. In doing so, this essay will demonstrate that Will Wood's complex lyrical content and ironic musical presentation work together to subvert American capitalist society in a way that is built upon Wood's personal complexities. All of this analysis will be done through a modified Marxist lens, one which is still primarily concerned with the material conditions and distribution of power associated to the piece of art, but also asks a question derived from the work of Parkhurst and Hammel in their article "On Theorizing a 'Properly Marxist' Musical Aesthetics" for the *International Review of*

the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music. What social norms influenced this art, and how does it influence them in return?

Before beginning analysis, a proper background is required. Will Wood, as a person, is not very public. He doesn't actively use social media, instead shying away from it almost entirely. There are, of course, some exceptions, as Wood runs a Patreon which he uses, in conjunction with IndieGoGo, as a method to fund his music career. He has produced content in several different ways over the years, not just his music. He also directed and starred in a Doc/Mockumentary called *The Real Will Wood* as well as his (usually) monthly art book, *The Prescription*, and his blog, entitled *The Stethoscope*.

While Wood is usually very private about himself, he has been very open about his sexuality and gender in particular, and his identity as a whole. However, in a very Will Wood fashion, this openness comes with a caveat. Although Wood has been very public discussing the topic, he maintains a complicated relationship with labeling either his gender or his sexuality. In the blog post "Gay Icon Will Wood," Wood discusses his relationship to labeling what he is, and his complicated history with labels and the pressure they bring as an artist in the public eye to be a role model for that community. He concludes that labels aren't for him, saying "I don't want a label. I want to just be." (Wood) In another post, a lyrical analysis of "I/Me/Myself," Wood identifies himself as a man, but pushes back against traditional gender roles. (It should also be noted that while this blog post was published almost a year before the post in which Wood renounced labels, Wood refers to himself as a man in that post as well, suggesting a continuation

of this philosophy.) This is a key topic in understanding “I/Me/Myself,” especially lyrically, as Wood asserts that the song is about his personal struggles with identity.

The other critically important thing to consider in relation to “I/Me/Myself” is the production of *The Normal Album* in relation to Wood’s previous albums. *Everything is a Lot*, Wood’s debut album, was written over a large span of time, with some of the oldest songs being written years before the album’s debut (namely “Aikido,” which, according to Wood, was written when he was 17, around 2010 or 2011). This meant that Wood had “the best songs of four years” to choose from when putting the album together, according to his blog post “The Normal Album.” *SELF-iSH*, however, went into pre-production only months after *Everything is a Lot* debuted, giving Wood only a few months to write songs. Both of these albums were written during incredibly tumultuous and dark times in Wood’s life, as he quit drinking right before *SELF-iSH* (Wood struggled with alcoholism) and didn’t go into treatment for Bipolar II until after. These albums come in stark contrast to *The Normal Album*, which wasn’t released until 2020, giving Wood another four or so years to write songs, now on mood stabilizers and “off booze” as he puts it. With that came a different approach to writing songs and producing an album. Wood writes that songwriting is “less burst of angst and more focused effort,” when compared to his previous efforts.

It’s also important to note that *The Normal Album*’s production was detailed (in a sort of post-modern way) in a documentary entitled *What Did I Do? (The Making of The Normal Album)* that was posted to Wood’s YouTube channel. This documentary shows the remarkably casual way that the album was produced. While *The Normal Album* is a distinctly personal piece of art for Wood, its production is remarkably communal, with many of Wood’s friends having

significant influence on the album's production and gang vocals heavily featuring in background parts. The production follows independent the philosophy of independent label Say-10, who helped fund and distributed the album for Wood, which is to put out music they like with their friends. This also ties into the remarkably collective way that the album was funded. While Say-10 did help fund the album, the album was primarily funded through crowdfunding site IndieGoGo, where it raised 28,000 dollars, according to an article by the New Jersey Stage on their website.

With that critical background on Will Wood established, we can now consider the two primary artifacts that will be analyzed in this essay. These artifacts together make up the greater artifact that is "I/Me/Myself," which is, of course, the topic of this essay. These artifacts will first be analyzed apart before they are put together and the song, as a whole, is analyzed as a complete artifact. The first artifact is the lyrical content of the song. This artifact will largely be analyzed for the meanings of the signs that make it up, rather than its prosody or musical ability. It will be analyzed more as a piece of literature than as a piece of music. The second artifact is the musical content of "I/Me/Myself," which will be analyzed principally for its style. The reason that these two artifacts are being analyzed separately first, then together as a whole is due to the dichotomy between the nostalgic sound of the song and the anti-societal lyric. Once they are fully understood, however, that conflict can be better understood in a holistic way to provide more context for the song's true rhetoric. Of course, the modified Marxist lens mentioned early in this essay will be used throughout to better understand not only how these artifacts exist, but how they interact with society.

We begin, then, with the lyric. Whether fortunately or unfortunately, Will Wood has provided us with his own analysis of “I/Me/Myself” in his blog post “#57: I/Me/Myself Lyric Breakdown.” However, using this analysis thoughtlessly would leave the overall essay at risk of missing interpretations, not to mention that, while the author is certainly important, it is the audience that truly defines the meaning of an artifact. Will Wood himself even seems to recognize this, as he writes in the blog post, “I wouldn’t take these breakdowns as a direct and full ‘this is what the song means.’” Finally, before the analysis begins, these lyrics are taken as transcribed by Wood on the same blog post.

The first verse and pre-chorus read:

“I’ve been feeling lightheaded since I lost enough weight to fit back in my skin. Flower pedals and feathers tether me to the ground. Pound for pound. Take my tea with formaldehyde for my feminine side since the day that I died. While I whittle my bones until I’m brittle. Am I pretty now? For some reason I find myself lost in what you think of me. And too confused to choose who I should be. And now you’ve got me thinking...” (Wood)

These lyrics speak to a couple different themes relating to gender identity and expression. The opening line, “I’ve been feeling lightheaded since I lost enough weight to fit back in my skin,” provides us with a double meaning, both an endorsement of losing weight to feel attractive and a discussion of the negative health effects of the same thing. While Wood does not have an eating disorder, that hasn’t stopped fans from speculating about him having one, something he discusses in his blog post “moth dive-bombing a gaslight” (stylized in all lowercase). This exploration of the deteriorating effect that social pressures for beauty have continues with the

line “Take my tea with formaldehyde for my feminine side since the day that I died,” that appears shortly after, culminating in the lines “While I whittle my bones until I’m brittle. Am I pretty now?” (Wood) These lines hint at an exploration of the damaging nature of the societal norms that influence gender identity. By exploring these damaging pressures, Wood reflects the societal norms that influenced his music back on the conception of agency that produced them and, by extension, the relations of production that influenced that conception of agency. This is all according to the model put forth by Parkhurst and Hammel, which they adapt and modify from Max Weber’s work *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*. In this model, any given society’s relations of production influence their conception of agency, which influences their musical norms. The caveat is that these relationships are dual-sided. At the same time, the musical norms of a society influence their conception of agency, which influences their relations of production. Essentially, by calling attention to the damage that America’s conception of agency causes, Wood is seeking to change that conception of agency, and therefore America’s relations of production.

This is where Wood’s own analysis of the song becomes fascinating. Wood does not acknowledge the physical damage caused by society’s conception of agency, but rather the emotional damage. Wood’s interpretation of the aforementioned lyrics is not one of physical deterioration, but instead of emotional carving, removing parts of his identity that he feels were thrust upon him in order to find his ‘true’ self. In fact, his interpretation goes so far as to say that he will keep “shedding necessary things to the point of becoming psychologically fragile, in order to be appreciated and seen.” (Wood) In the second verse, he acknowledges the damage that removing parts of his identity has caused him, and instead opts to ignore what society wants and

cloak himself in darkness, as he refers to it. The lines “You’ll be walking out early, but the show must go on. No, I know that I’m wrong,” speak to a sense of societal rebellion, that Wood doesn’t want to fit into what people define him as. This ties back to his blog posts about his identity, namely “Gay Icon Will Wood,” where Wood refuses to choose a labeled identity.

That same sense of rebellion is mirrored in the bridge, where Wood wails “Let me be the void you fill with taxidermy fingerprints, taxonomize our differences.” This, according to Wood, is him choosing to step into a role of passive support, allowing his audience to express their false sense of “being wholly unique,” as Wood puts it, and their need to label every individual difference between people. This dichotomy sees Wood both asserting that no one is entirely unique, and that it is silly to label the differences between people, as everyone is unique. This contradiction is no stranger to Wood, however, whose struggles with identity color the entire song. Wood sees no point in labeling individual differences, as he says several times, because we are all unique, so why not just be who we are? However, Wood is also near fatalistically opposed to the idea of individuality, writing:

“We’re not even truly separate organisms, no more so than one brain cell is from another in the same brain. We’re all part of The One that is everything, we’re all hallucinations. No one is ‘valid,’ and someday we’ll all truly realize that the self in its entirety is unnecessary.”

This opposition to the validity of identity is echoed in the final words of the song, which read “All identities are equally invalid, don’t you think that there’s a chance that you could live without it?” Wood posits that no identity is truly real and every difference between people is a social construct. Therefore, Wood suggests, we would all be happier just being who we are. This

line of thinking is echoed in the chorus, which utilizes the aesthetics of identity to satirize it. Wood sings “I wish I could be a girl, and that way you’d wish I could be your girlfriend, boyfriend,” not because he wants genuinely to be a girl, but instead because he wants the level of emotional availability that the social role of womanhood expects. Wood finds these expectations absurd, and satirizes them with the line “Am I pretty enough? Am I pretty enough to fucking die?” Wood takes the societal pressure on women to be pretty to its extreme (logical or illogical) to demonstrate the foolishness of the social constructs that we call identity.

Wood’s most triumphant cry for a rejection of societal identity comes with the line “really I’d prefer it if you would use I/Me/Myself.” Here, he uses the format established to communicate pronouns, primarily on the internet, as a vessel to proclaim his cry for freedom from societal expectations. Will Wood may claim to be a man, but he chooses not to identify as a man, instead rejecting the societal expectations that identity is burdened with. Those societal expectations permeate the song, but Wood recognizes them, and intentionally subverts them. In a Marxist sense, Wood is recognizing the material conditions that created these identities, and how those identities were constructed to benefit those in power, primarily cisgender men, and is instead choosing to use the aesthetics of those identities to distribute that power more evenly by destroying those identities. Even if Wood was not explicitly successful in destroying those identities, Parkhurst and Hammel’s model demonstrates that by changing the reflection of a society’s conception of agency, you can change that conception of agency and by extension the relations of production. So, while Wood may not have destroyed identity in a flashy explosion, by changing the societal norms in his music, he is able to subvert the systems that originally created those norms, ever so slightly.

. The material prosperity of the 1980s allowed for comparisons back to the 1950s as “the way it ought to be,” leading to a resurgence in societal nostalgia in the decade. Now, in the early 2020s and late 2010s, a wave of 1980s nostalgia has swept popular culture with the rise of millennials yearning for the aesthetics of their early childhood. That nostalgia is somewhat detached from Wood, who was born in the early 1990s instead of the 1980s, allowing him to take the aesthetics of the mainstream and satirize it. Wood plays the antiquated Doo-Wop sound for a joke, mocking the nostalgia while simultaneously utilizing it. The joke arises from the nature of Doo-Wop, which, apart from being rhetorically associated with the 1950s, a time of intense sexism and bigotry, is noted by Hoffman to be incredibly male dominated, enough to have any female entrants relegated to the subgenre of “Girl group Doo-Wop.” (655) The irony of such a deeply sexist and conservative style of music played by such a progressive and androgynous figure as Wood, who challenges the very idea of gender, let alone gender roles, is palpable in “I/Me/Myself.” By using this irony, Wood takes power away from those who would blindly idolize a bygone era (twice over) and distributes it to the people that were oppressed in those times. In a sense, Will Wood claims power over the 1980s nostalgia scene by undermining its conservative, 1950s roots.

When the deeply complex lyric of “I/Me/Myself” and the ironic instrumentation are viewed together, they make a strangely cohesive whole. When viewed together, the irony of the Doo-Wop aesthetic is heightened, as the incredibly male-dominated genre is subverted by Wood questioning the very identity of masculinity and his role within it. At the same time, by using society’s collective nostalgia for the 1980s, Wood is able to more effectively criticize and subvert society in his lyric. Essentially, the more that Wood is able to distort the reflection of musical

norms, the more change he is able to effect on society's conception of agency and therefore relations to production. Wood isn't changing society in the vein of Punk, with aggressively anti-society lyrics and alienating sounds, but is instead adopting the aesthetics of society to change it from the inside out. This is, in large part, what most of *The Normal Album* is doing, adopting the aesthetics of "normal" to question what "normal" is. "I/Me/Myself" is using the aesthetics and expectations of gender identity in order to subvert gender identity and change the systems that created it.

"I/Me/Myself" is by no means a simple song, nor is this the only way to interpret it. However, it cannot be denied that Will Wood, from a Marxist point of view, is recognizing the effect that society's conception of agency has on his music and is deliberately warping that effect to undermine it, so as to undermine society's relations to production. "I/Me/Myself" is a product of Wood's own struggles with identity and the aesthetics of societal nostalgia blended together to destroy the very gender identities that that nostalgia holds dear. In doing so, it seeks to reduce the hierarchies inherent to gendered American society and place everyone on equal footing, able to accept themselves without identity and the assumptions that come with it. Finally, to answer the guiding question of this analysis: what social norms influenced this art, and how does it influence them in return? "I/Me/Myself" is influenced by American capitalist norms of gender identity, and it, in return, androgenizes them, destroying the expectations associated with identity.

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