

Miley Cyrus' political platform in "Mother's Daughter"

Cyrus creates a political platform for sex and gender roles. The use of diversity in celebrity castings, her "nasty and evil" lyrics, and her use of costumes and cinematography create this political platform that is pro feminism, women power and gender non conforming power.

Luella Fitzgerald

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Professor Michele White

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Miley Cyrus is a current day popstar and source of media discussion. Since her days as Hannah Montana on Disney Channel, Cyrus has become a role model to young girls and women across the country. Musically she has won several awards and even been nominated for Grammys. Yet, unlike many other superstar performers, some of her videos and performances have become extremely controversial. Her music video for the song “We Can’t Stop” had many criticisms as her first video post teenie-bop era. The lyrics were problematic stating that “We Can’t Stop” and “We Won’t Stop” which is alluding to a sense of rebellion. In addition to the lyrics, the video had many images in reference to sex and drugs, and was noted by many to be over the top. Later that same year, Miley did a performance with musician Robin Thicke where she seemingly introduced the “twerk” dance movement. Authors Dan Berokowitz and David Asa Schwartz cite the performance as “quickly [catching] the nation's attention. [And that] Her performance set a record for peak Twitter tweets at 306,100 per minute.”<sup>1</sup> This provocative performance caused much controversy as it wasn't seen as appropriate for younger crowds (her fan base). Since then it appears as though Miley settled down with her “Younger Now” album and more tame country tunes such as “Malibu.” Yet, her new EP just released in May of 2019 seems to suggest otherwise. Cyrus has found a way to use her successful platform to create a very important dialogue about women and body image. In particular, she does this with her music video for her new song “Mothers Daughter.” In it, Cyrus creates a political platform for sex and gender roles. The use of diversity in celebrity castings, her “nasty and evil” lyrics, and

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Berkowitz, David Asa Schwartz “Miley, CNN and *The Onion*” Taylor & Francis Online, October 16th, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2015.1006933>

her use of costumes and cinematography create this political platform that is pro feminism, women power and gender non conforming power.

There is definitely a lot to unpack in this video. To start, the video uses a variety of celebrity cameos. Cyrus does this not only to heighten viewership, but to also display a diverse set of body positive role models. The guests on her video offer a variety of different orientations and bodies. One transgender man shows his breast augmentation surgery scars. Another states their gender identification with “they, them” written on their shirt. Cyrus tries to capture as many different and diverse images of body empowerment in order to make a statement. One of the key lines of her songs chorus is “don’t fuck with my freedom” which directly relates to the sexuality of everyone in her video. This is politically provoking the idea of accepting all bodies, images and sexualities.

Diving deeper into transgender body image, researchers from the 18th Volume of *Body Image* describes how such transformations can have very negative impacts on body consciousness. The researchers discovered findings on transgender body images, stating that “Data demonstrated how gender, body size, and the intersection of gender and body size influenced personal perceptions of body dissatisfaction and satisfaction.”<sup>2</sup> Cyrus’ video seeks to challenge this, by empowering people of all backgrounds, sexualities and genders and body size to love the way they look.

Another video that has similar messages to Cyrus’ is Miss Eves’ “Thunder Thighs.” In this video the topic of weight is very present, as it is in the title. This video celebrates women with all sorts of different sized bodies, in particular ones with larger “thunder” thighs. Cyrus

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<sup>2</sup> Jenifer K. McGuire, “Body image in transgender young people: Findings from a qualitative, community based study,” *Body Image*, vol. 8 (September 2016): 96-107.

celebrates body image as well. Her video goes beyond Miss Eves video as to not only celebrate weight, but all genders and sexual orientations as well.<sup>3</sup>

Cyrus' music video also has several textual shots, all of which provoked feminine power. They include "Every Woman is a Riot," "Virginity is a Social Construct," "Sin is in Your Eyes" and "L'héroïsme de la chair" which translates from french to "the Heroism of the Flesh." Notably, "Virginity is a Social Construct" has gained the most amount of attention. Cyrus has even begun selling t-shirts and other merchandise with this phrasing printed on them. Also, shortly after the nanosecond clip, the video flashes to a young girl dressed as a superhero. The relationship of the two images has created much controversy. Yet, the idea is that virginity is subjective and that's okay. It really isn't about the young girl shortly following the clip. She is separately a display of young powerful femininity.

As a counter argument to the music video, an author from *Vigilant Citizen* greatly dislikes the video because of how "out there" it is. The notion of "Virginity is a Social Construct" really bothers this author as they argue that the "video actually celebrates only one thing: The corruption of everything that is pure and sacred."<sup>4</sup> Yet, this isn't what Cyrus is going for. She is demonstrating that Virginity, in particular, is dependent on the person's perception of it. It should not be a social construct, or something that is so set in stone as to what the definition is.

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<sup>3</sup> Miss Eves "Thunder Thighs" Youtube, October 16th, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fY1o9igy0a0>

<sup>4</sup> Vigilant Citizen "The Twisted Meaning of Miley Cyrus' "Mother's Daughter," *The Vigilant Citizen*, (July 2019)

Her textual piece of the video “Sin is in Your Eyes” brings up an interesting thought. This idea is that sin is only in what one believes in. It's in the eye of the beholder. Cyrus is clearly arguing that one's perception of sin can change. Another interpretation for her words could be that Cyrus is making “Sin” out to be a good thing. She is saying that “Sin is in Your Eyes,” and with the notion that the eyes hold the soul, sin is thus in your soul. But she doesn't highlight it as a bad thing, she uses it so as to empower her viewers. In contrast, sin, in terms of religion, is a loaded word. It emphasises bad and wrong doing things as well as the notion that one must avoid sin in order to be accepted by God. In her article, Eleanor Heartney sites that

“Mary is the ultimate heroine to some, for others she is a symbol of the Catholic Church's arctic attitude toward women. A crucial part of her persona is her purity. This manifests itself in her lifelong virginity and her “Immaculate Conception.” The miraculous circumstance by which she was born without the stain of Sin that infects the soul of all other humans ...By denying Mary a sexual nature, many modern commentators believe that the Catholic Church has seized upon a doctrinal justification for its refusal to deal honestly with female equality and human sexuality.”<sup>5</sup>

Heartney is arguing that the Catholic Church, in particular, is making female equality and human sexuality a Sin. This directly correlates to Cyrus' representation of the word, as it is clear that the artist is questioning it. It's apparent that Cyrus is calling out the meaning of Sin, and how we should view these so-called Sins that religion often instills in individuals and cultures.

Going off the idea of sin, Cyrus wears very sexual and promiscuous outfits in her video. She wears a skintight red leather suit, and at times the camera focuses on her vagina area where sharp bedazzling has been added to the look. The skintight look accentuates sexuality and provocativity. It symbolizes her power in being female. Additionally, the color red can be tied to

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<sup>5</sup> Heartney, Eleanor. "Thinking through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination." *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 3-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810972>.

bleeding and dark matter in this video. It hints at feminism because of period blood. Her costume thus drives forth this notion of power and acceptability of the “dirty.” There are also clips of period pads and c-section scars which also hint at this idea of the dirty. Cyrus drives forth the notion of being powerful through her identification of sex and bodily femininity.

Also in regard to costume, it seems as though Cyrus is portraying herself as dehumanized and animalistic. Her costume makes her out to have fangs or teeth on her vagina, and the singular color hints at something inhuman. At one point she dances on all fours and crawls towards the camera in a jerky movement. This constitutes the idea of being unnatural. Yet, Cyrus takes power and positivity into this. She wants to create feminism and positive standards through doing so. She is calling out this idea of a “nasty” woman, one who acts animalistic, and putting it in a positive light. Rather than using it as an insult, she is making it into something women should be proud of.

At the end of the video Cyrus dresses as Joan of Arc. This ties into her entire premise of the video. She is pointing out that women have had power and been powerful for centuries. Cyrus uses this important female figure to allude to female strength throughout time. Author and professor Nadia Margolis argues that

“The figure of Joan of Arc endures uniquely as both product and progenitor of the medievalistic impulse, mustering its diverse subdisciplines into her service. Rediscovered and in a sense saved by nineteenth-century medievalism, her presence in turn generated and continues to generate further avenues of similar inquiry, particularly in her shifting political associations.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Margolis, Nadia. "Joan of Arc: Maneuverable Medievalism, Flexible Feminism." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 22, no. 1, (1996): 21-25. Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship.

Cyrus has used the shifting political associations of Joan of Arc in her video. She is creating a conversation of the long standing, feministic, hero to create empowerment. Just as Margolis points out, Joan of Arc has been rediscovered time and again and is used as symbolism for feminism. So why wouldn't Cyrus honor her in her music video on feminism empowerment?

In reference to the 2016 presidential campaign, Cyrus reclaims both the words “nasty” and “evil” to use them as an expression of women's freedom and empowerment. She directly calls out hegemonic masculinity in doing so, by reclaiming the words in a positive rather than negative light. There is often a stereotype of the “nasty” woman, accusing a notion of dirty. The concept that women's sexuality, bleeding from periods, body hair and several other similar examples, alludes to society perceiving the female as “nasty” and “dirty.” This is a direct opposite to the pure figure, that the Virgin Mary alludes. Michelle Smirnova talks about hegemonic masculinity in regard to the 2016 political campaign and President Donald Trump's remarks on rival candidate at the time, Hillary Clinton. She states that:

“Hillary Clinton was criticized for being fat, unfeminine, and undesirable, criteria for the successful accomplishment of womanhood in the United States. Women seeking positions of authority in a patriarchy are often silenced or discounted by being deemed too masculine, insufficiently feminine, or through the process of objectification and othering.”<sup>7</sup>

The theme of nasty and dirty is apparent in this quote as well as the idea of being unfeminine or undesirable. Cyrus' lyrics state shes “nasty and evil” which is what President Trump called Hillary Clinton as an insult. Cyrus turns it into a compliment, celebrating the so-called dirty and impurities of feminine sexuality. In regards to the Smirnova quote, many of the people in

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<sup>7</sup> Michelle Smirnova, “Small Hands, Nasty Women, and Bad Hombres: Hegemonic Masculinity and Humor in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, vol 4 (2018): 1- 16

“Mother's Daughter” are not stereotypically feminine. They are examples of the unfeminine and thus undesirable that hegemonic masculinity promotes. Cyrus drives forth the notion that this is untrue, and that all bodies and sexualities are great; they are not undesirable.

Kate Dube's article “What Feminism Means to Today's Undergraduates” uncovers why many young people are uneasy about identifying as feminists. In most cases it has to do with being undesirable. Dube cites that there is a very negative image of a being a feminist, and it is often looked at as those who are: “bra-burning, hairy-legged, man-hating lesbians.”<sup>8</sup> Yet again, Cyrus seeks to destroy this image and make being different cool. She is celebrating our differences in society. Similarly, in an Interview of Cathy J. Cohen titled “Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism,” the perception of contemporary activism is brought up. Cyrus' music video is a direct example of contemporary activism, as it feeds directly into social media and pop culture. Cyrus becomes an activist through her visually packed video. Cohen states that feminism should “require us to think broadly and radically about what we are fighting for—the outcomes we seek to the oppression that we face.”<sup>9</sup> Cyrus' video allows for that thought, and brings up oppression faced.

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<sup>8</sup> Dube, Kate. “What Feminism Means to Today's Undergraduates,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 18 June 2004, p. B5.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, Cathy J. and Sarah J. Jackson. “Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 4 (2016): 775-92.



On the topic of the term feminism, Jessica Osborn has a good definition of the word. She says that “Feminism seeks to liberate women from this subordination and to reconstruct society in such a way that patriarchy is eliminated and a culture created that is fully inclusive of women’s desires and purposes.”<sup>10</sup> So is Cyrus a feminist? Yes, this paper proves that Cyrus is most definitely a feminist, and further more she is promoting feminist values as well as the acceptance of all feminen and gender non conforming bodies.

In conclusion, Cyrus has developed a platform for individuality and expression with her music video. She seeks to empower and celebrate all body and people types. Her language, costumes/visual images, and celebrity castings prove her intentions. She uses politics and current day events to demonstrate the importance of her message. Additionally, because of the popularity of Cyrus’ as an artist in her own right, she has the power to establish this political platform she has created. In an interview with comedian James Corden and in relation to her original controversy with “twerking” and the VMA performance with Robin Thicke, Cyrus stated that it has caused her to become “The activist I am now because I realized that if that many people were going to talk about something that I did or talk about something that I do, that I should make it a good thing and I should make it something that can change people’s lives.”<sup>11</sup> This is exactly what she has accomplished in her “Mothers Daughter” video. She has

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<sup>10</sup> Osborne, Jessica. “feminism,” In *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*, ed. Edgar, Andrew and Peter Sedgwick. London: Routledge, 1999: 143-45.

<sup>11</sup> James Corden Show “Miley Cyrus Carpool Karaoke” Youtube, October 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9k6S9v0FKzI>

demonstrated an important topic, one that is powerful and enlightening, and could change people's lives and perceptions.