

Lesson Plan: Women in Hip-Hop: Queen Bee?

Focus: Literature and Gender Studies

This lesson will ask students to reconsider the role of women in mainstream hip-hop music. We will start off with a quickfire round where students can shout out names of any notable female hip-hop artists that they like and dislike, and why. The lesson can be adapted to a mixed or single-sex school, as we will discuss the relevance of female hip-hop artists and the different ways students feel connected with their music. Undoubtedly, Beyoncé's name will come up and the class will then focus on her music, as well as her self-image as artist, businesswoman, sex symbol, feminist, mother, and wife of Jay Z. Ronald Weitzer and Charis E. Kubrin concluded in their study of 403 rap songs from 1992-2000 that more recently, female artists "still contain contradictory mix of themes that challenge and perpetuate misogynistic themes."¹

We will explore this contradiction in Beyoncé's 'Flawless', where she supposedly celebrates female empowerment whilst telling other women to "bow down bitches."

The class will take a "multiperspectival" approach where students are encouraged to see how popular culture, exhibited within a particular song, is a site of resistance and domination.² To demonstrate this best, we will look at 'Flawless', which samples Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDxTalk, and discuss why and how this song has become a feminist anthem for many young girls and women. The students will then

¹ Ronald Weitzer and Charis E. Kubrin, 'Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings', *Men and Masculinities* 12.1 (2009), 3-29 (p. 24).

² Marc Lamont Hill, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009) (p. 7).

perform a close reading in groups of the song for 15-20 minutes and then feedback to the class, inciting discussion and a chance for students to grapple with opposing viewpoints. We will particularly focus on the lyrics, “don't think I'm just his little wife” and “bow down bitches”, and discuss how these may or may not fit with the sentiment of the rest of the song. We will then look at the music video for ‘Flawless’, which uses a variety of visual cues and film techniques to deliver her supposedly feminist message.

Learning Objectives

- Analyse the lyrics and music video of well-known female artist, Beyoncé, to consider the role of women in hip-hop culture
- Discuss the effects of these portrayals of women on young audiences
- Explore connections between how gender is portrayed in contemporary hip-hop culture and the position of women of colour in wider society

Discussion Questions

- Do you relate to Beyoncé's song, ‘Flawless’ in any way? Why and why not?
- Is Beyoncé a feminist in your opinion? In what ways does she offer empowerment for young girls and women and in what ways does her songs/music videos complicate this?
- What visual techniques are used in the ‘Flawless’ video and what effects do they have? Do they fit well with the lyrics?

- What is the effect of sampling Adiche's speech in the song?
- How does 'Flawless' fit other Beyoncé's songs that specifically talk about gender? (ie. 'Run the World', 'If I Were a Boy')

Appendix:

Lyrics to ‘***Flawless ft. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’ by Beyoncé Knowles

I'm bout that H, town coming coming down
I'm coming down, drippin' candy on the ground
H, Town, Town, I'm coming down, coming down
Drippin' candy on the ground

I know when you were little girls
You dreamt of being in my world
Don't forget it, don't forget it
Respect that, bow down bitches
I took some time to live my life
But don't think I'm just his little wife
Don't get it twisted, get it twisted
This my shit, bow down bitches
Bow down bitches, bow bow down bitches (Crown)
Bow down bitches, bow bow down bitches (Crown)
H Town bitches
H, H Town bitches
I'm so crown crown, bow down bitches

I'm about that H, town, coming coming down
I'm coming down, drippin' candy on the ground
H, Town, Town, I'm coming down, coming down
Drippin' candy on the ground

We teach girls to shrink themselves
To make themselves smaller
We say to girls
"You can have ambition
But not too much
You should aim to be successful
But not too successful
Otherwise you will threaten the man"
Because I am female
I am expected to aspire to marriage
I am expected to make my life choices

Always keeping in mind that
Marriage is the most important
Now marriage can be a source of
Joy and love and mutual support
But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage
And we don't teach boys the same?
We raise girls to each other as competitors
Not for jobs or for accomplishments
Which I think can be a good thing
But for the attention of men
We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings
In the way that boys are
Feminist: the person who believes in the social
Political, and economic equality of the sexes

You wake up, flawless
Post up, flawless
Ride round in it, flawless
Flossin on that, flawless
This diamond, flawless
My diamond, flawless
This rock, flawless
My rock, flawless
I woke up like this
I woke up like this
We flawless, ladies tell 'em
I woke up like this
I woke up like this
We flawless, ladies tell 'em
Say I, look so good tonight
God damn, God damn
Say I, look so good tonight
God damn, God damn

Momma taught me good home training
My Daddy taught me how to love my haters
My sister taught me I should speak my mind
My man made me feel so God damn fine

You wake up, flawless
Post up, flawless
Ride round in it, flawless
Flossin on that, flawless
This diamond, flawless
My diamond, flawless
This rock, flawless
My rock, flawless
I woke up like this
I woke up like this
We flawless, ladies tell 'em
I woke up like this
I woke up like this
We flawless, ladies tell 'em
Say I, look so good tonight
God damn, God damn
Say I, look so good tonight
God damn, God damn

Bibliography:

Hill, Marc Lamont, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009)

Knowles, Beyonce, '***Flawless ft. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie' in *Beyoncé*, (Los Angeles: Parkwood, 2013)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyuUWOnS9BY>> [accessed 7 March 2017].

Weitzer, Ronald, and Charis E. Kubrin, 'Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings', *Men and Masculinities* 12.1 (2009), 3-29