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Watch Those Blurred Lines

The essay critiques Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" as a misogynistic song that degrades women and promotes harmful stereotypes, analyzing its lyrics and video through the lens of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist perspective.



Amidst an urban backdrop, a woman in a red floral top exudes strength and defiance, challenging the stereotypes and objectification depicted in the controversial song 'Blurred Lines.'

The Robin Thicke song "Blurred Lines" has been highly debated. It has been called a rape song, a sexualized song, a misogynistic song, among other harmful things. The song features lyrics that are abrasive and derogatory to women. The video for the song negatively presents women as well. In this essay, the song will be examined as a song that ignores the rights of women, based on Mary Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

The song "Blurred Lines" has an infectious beat that will indeed have anyone with a pulse up and dancing to it. However, one must listen closely to the lyrics to see why women are in arms over the song. Making matters worse is a video featuring "three [fully clothed] male performers goof around with scantily clad (and, in one version, topless) models" (Lynskey). The song lyrics ask a woman to leave the man she is currently with, who has tried to domesticate her and is boring, for the fun-loving, sexualized man or men performing the song. The song calls the woman an animal and suggests it is in her nature to be an animal.

The performer wants to make a good girl bad. He wants to get nasty with her. He asks her to back her ass into him. He calls a former woman that he was with a bitch and then states that the woman in the song is worse than the woman he was with before. He tells her that he will give her something that will tear her ass in two. He tells her to do it like it hurts and asks her if it hurts. He tells her that he has some weed from Jamaica. He closes the song by asking everyone to get up and dance (Williams). It is understandable why some feminist groups have labeled the song a rape song. Kristy Haigh, the vice president of services of the Edinburgh University Students' Association, was quoted as saying, "It promotes a very worrying attitude towards sex and consent" (Lynskey).

The cultural resonance of "Blurred Lines" underscores a significant challenge in popular media's portrayal of gender roles. The song's pervasive popularity highlights how entrenched such views are and the difficulty of changing them.

Wollstonecraft writes, "But, whether she be loved or neglected, her first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself" (Wollstonecraft 504). Women should be appalled by this song because it degrades women and reduces them to sex objects. When the performer of the song says, "One thing I ask you, let me be the one you back that ass into, yo from Malibu to Paris boo" (Williams), he is suggesting that the woman is there to gratify the senses of the man. The performer seems to be doing the same thing that Wollstonecraft stated that Milton did to women. She writes, "...he meant to deprive us of souls and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man..." (Wollstonecraft 497).

Here, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the importance of self-respect and independence for women rather than finding their entire value in relationships with men. Her argument centers on the idea that women should aspire to be respected for their own merits and not merely depend on the affection or attention of men, who are equally flawed. This notion contrasts starkly with the song lyrics mentioned, where the female is portrayed primarily as an object of male desire. Wollstonecraft's assertion that women

should not be merely tools to "gratify the senses of man" parallels her broader critique of societal norms that reduce women to their relationships with men. By invoking Milton, she points to a historical continuity in literature and culture where women are depicted as inferior or subservient. Her call for women to seek respectability on their own terms is a challenge to such depictions, urging a reevaluation of women's roles both in literature and life. This elevates her argument from mere critique to a rallying cry for female autonomy and dignity.

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(Wollstonecraft 502).**

The performer of "Blurred Lines" wants to keep the woman in a state of compliance or obedience by offering her marijuana. He says, "Baby can you breathe? I got this from Jamaica, it always works for me Dakota to Decatur," (Williams). By giving the woman marijuana, the man will be able to control the woman better. The performer tries "to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood" (Wollstonecraft 497). The conduct is not suitable for the woman, but it is considered reasonable by the man because the woman gratifies his sexual needs.

Wollstonecraft's critique extends to the manipulative tactics that men may use to keep women in subordinate positions, essentially aiming to prolong their dependency and immaturity. In the context of the song "Blurred Lines," the male performer's offer of marijuana as a means to ensure compliance from a woman mirrors Wollstonecraft's observation about men striving to keep women in a "state of childhood." This strategy of offering drugs as a means of control is a modern echo of the broader societal patterns she criticizes—where men foster dependency on women to maintain control over them. Her argument underscores the moral bankruptcy of such maneuvers, highlighting that they are designed not for the benefit of the woman but to suit the selfish desires of the man. Her advocacy for women's autonomy is a call to resist such demeaning roles and to seek empowerment beyond the confines of male-imposed limitations, pushing for a societal shift towards recognizing and respecting women as full, capable individuals.

"Yeah, had a bitch, but she ain't bad as you" (Williams). The performer of the song calls two women a bitch in the song. The woman falls victim to the prejudice of men who refer to them as bitches. The song makes it seem that it is okay for a man to refer to a woman as a bitch. The woman in the music and the video blindly obeys the man touches him and caters to him. Wollstonecraft writes, "...they become prey to prejudices, and taking all their credit opinions, they blindly submit to authority" (Wollstonecraft 500). Lia Latchford of Rewind&Reframe was quoted as saying, "Young women have told us that it has a real impact on their day-to-day lives. They're tired of messages that depict women as highly sexualized passive sex objects" (Lynskey). This depiction of women as a "highly sexualized passive sex object" is yet another prejudice that women have fallen prey to in this day and age.

Mary Wollstonecraft's critique in this quote addresses the detrimental impact of societal prejudices on women, who are often depicted and treated as inferior or mere objects for male pleasure. In the song "Blurred Lines," the use of derogatory terms like "bitch" to describe women is a stark example of these ingrained prejudices that she condemns. She argues that such language and attitudes contribute to women internalizing a diminished sense of self-worth, leading them to "blindly submit to authority" — in this case, the authority of male-dominated cultural norms that view women as commodities rather than as full, equal individuals. The reference to Lia Latchford's observation about the negative effects of such media portrayals on young women further underscores the ongoing relevance of Wollstonecraft's concerns. By accepting these derogatory labels and their accompanying behaviors as normal, women unknowingly reinforce the very power dynamics that oppress them. Wollstonecraft's call for women to challenge these prejudices is about encouraging them to question and resist the roles society imposes on them, advocating for a shift towards true equality and respect.

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In the video, the scantily clad women parade around for the men in the video to look at, watch, and touch as they please. These actions and attitudes even extend to Robin Thicke's live performance of the song. Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke performed the song in August of 2013 at the Video Music Awards. "...During [the performance] ... Thicke popped up like some kind of sex-pest Zelig" (Lynskey), as Cyrus twerked like an animal in heat. The performance of the song at the awards show ignited more controversy to the song. The song's performance comes close to being porn, as well as making the woman a "coquettish slave to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man" (Wollstonecraft 502).

The insights into the objectification of women are sharply relevant when discussing the portrayal of women in media, such as in the notorious performance of "Blurred Lines" at the Video Music Awards. Wollstonecraft's quote critiques the way women are often depicted as mere objects of male desire, specifically pointing to the notion of making a woman a "coquettish slave" to enhance her appeal to men. When she uses the term "coquettish slave," she criticizes the way society expects women to be both alluring and subservient, essentially using their charm and beauty as a means to please and serve men rather than acting from their own agency or desires. This term encapsulates the criticism of a social role that combines the performance of attractiveness with a lack of autonomy, reflecting a sharp critique of gender roles that reduce women to objects of desire controlled by male expectations.

This imagery vividly captures the dynamics at play during the VMA performance, where the sexualized presentation of the female performers, particularly in the interaction between Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke, exemplifies the reduction of women to entertainment tools for a predominantly male gaze. Wollstonecraft condemns this portrayal, arguing that it not only dehumanizes women but also perpetuates a culture where their primary value is their ability to satisfy male desires. This performance, by turning women into spectacle and men into spectators or even controllers of the

spectacle, starkly illustrates the ongoing societal struggle against the objectification and subjugation of women—a core issue at the heart of Wollstonecraft's feminist philosophy.

There are broader cultural and societal implications of songs like "Blurred Lines," specifically, how they reflect and reinforce troubling gender norms. This analysis critiques the song and situates it within a larger framework of media influence on societal attitudes toward gender and consent.

The cultural resonance of "Blurred Lines" underscores a significant challenge in popular media's portrayal of gender roles. The song's pervasive popularity highlights how entrenched such views are and the difficulty of changing them. Despite the backlash, the song topped international charts, illustrating the tension between critical awareness and mainstream entertainment consumption.

Moreover, this song's impact extends beyond mere entertainment; it shapes public discourse about sexuality and consent. By presenting women as passive objects of desire, it perpetuates a problematic narrative that undervalues female agency and autonomy. Such representations can influence individual behavior and societal attitudes, subtly reinforcing that the objectification of women is acceptable and trivializing severe issues like sexual consent.

In academic contexts, Wollstonecraft's feminist critique provides a valuable lens through which students and scholars can examine how media influences gender perceptions. This approach critiques the content and encourages a critical examination of the consumers' role in perpetuating these themes. Engaging with this content critically allows for a more informed and conscientious consumption of media, which is crucial in efforts to combat gender-based stereotypes and promote more equitable representations.

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By continuing to challenge such cultural products, society can progress towards more respectful and empowering portrayals of all individuals, irrespective of gender. This essay, therefore, not only critiques a specific piece of media but also calls for a broader reflection on the media's role in shaping and reflecting societal values concerning gender and power dynamics.

"It is time to effect a revolution in female manners - time to restore to them their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners" (Wollstonecraft 502).

This quote calls for a radical reevaluation and transformation of societal norms and behaviors concerning women. She advocates for a "revolution in female manners," urging a fundamental shift in the roles and expectations that society imposes on women. By "manners," she refers not merely to etiquette but to the broader, ingrained behaviors and norms that define and often limit women's roles in society.

In her statement about restoring women's "lost dignity," she argues that societal constructs have stripped women of their inherent dignity and respect, reducing their roles to that of secondary citizens or mere adornments to men. She asserts that it is essential to uplift and recognize women's inherent worth, advocating for a societal acknowledgment that women possess the same capacity for reason and virtue as men.

She further emphasizes the need for women to take active roles in societal reform. She suggests that by empowering themselves and challenging the status quo, women can improve their lives and contribute significantly to global progress. This perspective underscores her belief in the potential of every individual, regardless of gender, to contribute meaningfully to societal advancements.

“I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.” -Mary Wollstonecraft

She clearly distinguishes between "unchangeable morals" and "local manners." She argues that true morals—universal ethical principles—should not be conflated with oppressive or outdated local customs that restrict women's freedom and roles. This distinction is crucial for recognizing what is ethically necessary and what is merely culturally imposed, allowing for a more enlightened and equitable society.

Wollstonecraft's manifesto for women's liberation challenges the social constructs around gender, much like the critiques aimed at the representations seen in the song "Blurred Lines." She urges a reimagining of women's roles in society, advocating for women to be seen and to act as full members of humanity. By addressing the demeaning portrayals and expectations as exemplified in controversial media like "Blurred Lines," She calls for women to be recognized not just as objects of desire but as capable individuals who can influence and improve the world alongside men.

While the song "Blurred Lines" is not the first or the last song to degrade women, women should be cautious of the song when choosing to dance to it in a club. Women must stand up and say they are tired of this type of song. Latchford says in the Lynskey article, "Young women are tired of seeing this kind of video, and they want to see a change." Women are tired of being "degraded by being made subservient to love or lust" (Wollstonecraft).

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