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A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF OPPOSITIONAL YOUTH MUSIC OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

ABSTRACT

This essay examines how Eminem's music and lyrics function together to convey messages opposing mainstream ideology. Relative intensity and release patterns in music must be ascertained contextually in relation to characteristics of a particular genre and musical style of a particular artist and recording. Congruity between music and lyrics can make more poignant motives for engaging in unethical, immoral, or illegal behavior. Incongruity can heighten persuasive appeal by transforming lyrical messages or by usurping them altogether. The pervasive underlying themes of helplessness, hopelessness, and mere coping with fate illuminate the need to examine these messages—rather than censure them—in order to understand and respond appropriately to what they may be telling us about the thoughts and feelings of youth in the new millennium.

Key words: illusion of life, musical rhetoric, Eminem, dramatism.

INTRODUCTION

The notion that oppositional youth music advocates rebellion against the status quo is not new. In fact, some argue that such music plays a necessary role in the identity-seeking process adolescents undergo as part of their rite of passage into an adult world (e.g., Bennett, 2000; Brown & Hendee, 1989; Grossberg, 1992a, 1992b; Lacouse, et. al., 2001; McLean, 1997; Tarrant, et. al., 2001). To clarify, adolescence is a transitional period characterized by a genuine search for identity, which is formed partly through group membership (Milius, 2001). Moreover, adolescents necessarily join groups based on musical preferences in an attempt to gain autonomy from family and acceptance from peers (e.g., Epstein & Pratto, 1990; Grossberg, 1992b; Lacouse, et. al., 2001; Lull, 1992). Oppositional youth music, then, often represents what youth think and feel with regard to "resist[ing] authority at all levels, assert[ing] their personalities, develop[ing] peer relationships," as well as resisting "social institutions, values, and practices." (Lull, 1992 pp. 27-29). Music often does so through its "heavy beat, sexual lyrics, and aggressive tone" (p. 29). If this is true, then perhaps oppositional youth music should not be banned or censured or even rebuked, but rather be heard and examined as it represents what adolescents may be thinking and feeling.

The music of Elvis Presley and the Beatles, for example, served that role for youth in the 1960s; and the protest music of Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Joan Baez among others served a similar role in the 1970s (e.g.,

Bloodworth, 1975; Denisoff, 1983; Gonzalez & Makay, 1983; Knupp, 1981; Stewart, et. al., 1994; Rodnitzky, 1999, 1976). Likewise, the music of artists like Eric Clapton, Bruce Springsteen, the Sex Pistols, and U2 did so in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Mackey-Kallis, 1990; Szatmary, 1987). The music of R.E.M., Guns-N-Roses, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana, among others functioned comparably in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Fricke, 1999; Marcus, 1999; Pietroluongo, 1999; Scott, 2001). Finally, the music of performers such as Green Day, Blink 182, Eminem, Papa Roach, and Nickelback appear to serve this role for youth today (e.g., Binelli, 2002; Bozza, 2000; Rock of Ages, 2001; Waddell, 2002).

In recent years, controversial lyrics in youth music have been causing alarm and, in some cases, a tightening of censorship efforts (e.g., Lacaese, et. al., 2001; Brown & Hendee, 1989; Wright, 2000). Such reactions by the mainstream are also not new. Parents and authority figures in each generation have voiced concerns about the messages conveyed in youth music of the time. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, a public outcry arose against rock songs like Ozzy Osbourne's "Suicide Solution," Van Halen's "Jump," and Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" that seemed to "celebrate suicide" (Grossberg, 1992a, p. 156). Others feared that the youth music of the time glamorized sexual promiscuity and drug abuse. Still others contended that music like Guns-N-Roses' "Used to Love Her" and Bruce Cockburn's "Rocket Launcher" glamorized murder. Such reactions are not surprising, since the music is calling into question an existing social order embraced by the status quo. We contend, however, that banning such music is essentially denying the real thoughts and feelings of the youth, discounting them as insignificant and, perhaps, even nonexistent.

One of the current storms of controversy in the music industry surrounds rapper, Eminem. Also known as Marshall Mathers and Slim Shady, Eminem is hailed by some as highly creative and clever, an artist who is simply expressing himself (Grantham, 2001). In direct contrast, his critics argue that his lyrics and persona encourage homophobia, misogyny, drug abuse, and violent behavior (Kim, 2001). Interestingly, others claim that his music is "safe" as baby boomers also listen to it. Eminem is "as cuddly as Beaver Cleaver" and listening to his music "doesn't feel quite so rebellious . . . if your mom is rapping along when he describes how he'd like to rape and kill his mom" (Dowd, 2002, online).

Although Eminem has released only three mainstream solo albums, he has achieved significant commercial success. His first mainstream album, *the Slim Shady EP*, went triple platinum (Coral, 2000). In the first week after its release, Eminem's second album, *the Marshall Mathers LP*, sold 1.7 million copies, and has sold over eight million copies to date (Holland, 2001). Eminem's latest album, *the Eminem Show*, sold 3.6 million copies in the first six months, making it the best selling album of 2002 (Christman, 2002). Eminem's semi-auto-biographical film, *8 Mile*, has also garnered positive reviews (Fall Arts Preview: Movies 2002).

Eminem won two Grammy Awards in 1999 for best rap solo and rap album, and three Grammy awards in 2000 for best rap solo, rap duo or group, and rap album (Renna, 2001). In 2002, Eminem won five awards at MTV's

Video Music Awards for best video of the year, best male video, best rap video, viewer's choice, and best direction in a video (Hay, 2002). He won in every category in which he was nominated (favorite hip-hop, pop-rock male artist, hip-hop album, and pop-rock album) at the American Music Awards (Saxon, 2003) and a 2003 Grammy for best rap album. Most recently, Eminem won a best song Oscar for "Lose Yourself" in 2003.

Interestingly, even the nominations themselves garnered controversy. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences was flooded with protests after the announcement of the 2002 Grammy nominations. The protests came not only from special interest groups, such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLADD) and the National Organization for Women (NOW), but also from parents, music fans, and his own mother who sued him for defamation of character (Holland, 2001; Renna, 2001).

The controversial nature of the topics of Eminem's music is clearly not new. Oppositional youth music throughout the decades has focused on rebellion against the status quo. Likewise, the role musicians like Eminem play in representing adolescent angst is neither new nor necessarily cause for alarm. What may be less clear, however, are the underlying themes embedded within Eminem's music and the role music plays in conveying them. In this study, we ask: What underlying messages are communicated in Eminem's oppositional music? Furthermore, how do lyrics and music interact to convey these messages? Doing so may increase our understanding of how oppositional youth music serves as a vehicle for expressing ideas that do not support mainstream ideology, as well as what those messages are for youth today.

ANALYSIS

To understand how Eminem's music functions rhetorically, we ground our analysis in the illusion of life rhetorical perspective (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001).¹ We begin with an examination of the intensity and release patterns offered in the music. Second, we consider lyrics as virtual experience embellished by Burke's notions of victimage, transcendence, and mortification. Ultimately, we examine the dynamic interaction between music and lyrics as it impacts the actual messages conveyed. The illusion of life perspective expands the study of music as rhetoric by providing a means by which to understand how lyrics and music work together to communicate and persuade. Just as the meaning derived from oral communication often comes more from nonverbal than verbal cues, so does the meaning in musical works often come more from music than lyrics. The illusion of life perspective addresses the fact that the musical elements communicate as much as, and sometimes more than, the lyrical elements. Hence, music communicates by "creating an illusion of life for listeners through the dynamic interaction between virtual experience (lyrics) and virtual time (music)" (p. 399). This essay extends the illusion of life model as it demonstrates that intensity and release patterns must be ascertained in relation to the genre and artist style. For example, the rap genre is typified by a fast, electronic tempo. Hence, all rap music might be described as employing primarily intensity patterns; but, as this analysis reveals, accurate intensity and release patterns must be determined in relation to the rap genre, as well as Eminem's musical style.

The rhetorical nature of music is ascertained by examining the

interaction between virtual experience (lyrics) and virtual time (music). That is, the two dimensions can be primarily congruent or incongruent. Congruent patterns consist of (a) comic rhythms in the lyrics combined with intensity patterns in the music or (b) tragic rhythms in the lyrics combined with release patterns in the music. Incongruent patterns are represented by tragic lyrics with intensity patterns or comic lyrics with release patterns.

Congruent patterns can function persuasively by making messages more poignant. Incongruent patterns, on the other hand, can do so by couching controversial messages in palatable musical sounds (Sellnow, 1999). In other words, listeners are initially drawn to the musical form and are ultimately “less prepared to argue in opposition to the projected message” (Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972, p. 273).

Virtual Time (Music)

Although music and lyrics do not function in isolation, we begin with an analysis of Eminem’s music. We do so because young people are typically drawn initially and primarily to the musical sound (Lull, 1992). In fact, “a song is music in words and music may be the better half” (Booth, 1976, p. 242). To understand Eminem’s musical rhetoric, we examine the intensity and release patterns offered in the rhythmic structure, melodic structure, harmonic structure, instrumentation, and phrasing. Intensity and release patterns are differentiated by the overall tempo of the song. A faster tempo is characterized as intensity, while a slower tempo is release. Obviously, each element does not exist in a vacuum. Hence, we ultimately code the musical form of each song holistically in relation to the other elements, the rap genre, and Eminem’s musical style.

Initially, it might be presumed that all of Eminem’s rap songs would represent intensity patterns. We agree that, when heard casually in isolation of the rest of the CD, each song might be coded as primarily representative of intensity. Upon listening to the songs on each CD holistically, however, identifiable shifts in intensity and release patterns emerge among them. In fact, when considered contextually, 11 of the 29 songs actually use primarily release patterns (see Table 1).² For example, “97 Bonnie and Clyde,” is essentially a love song Eminem sings to his daughter as they drive to the beach to bury her mother at sea (Mathers, et. al., 1999, track 7). Musically, an organ plays long-held tones, while a harp sounds broken chords in the background. Interestingly, this musical release pattern conjures images of a funeral march. In “Rock Bottom,” long-held organ tones and a choir humming in the background create a similar effect, as does the electric bass playing a repetitious riff in “As the World Turns” (Mathers, et. a., 1999, track 17). In “If I Had,” a female voice sings long-held tones in slow tempo also representing release (Mathers, et. al., 1999, track 5). In “Marshall Mathers,” Eminem himself sings the slow long-held melody in a minor key representing release (Mathers, et. al., 2000, track 9).

In contrast, 18 of the 29 tracks offer intensity patterns in the music. The intensity patterns are achieved similarly in each one. Rhythmically, these tracks offer fast and

Table 1

Intensity/Release Relationship

Song Title	Intensity	Release
<i>The Slim Shady EP</i>		
My Name Is	X	
Guilty Conscience	X	
Brain Damage	X	
If I Had		X
97' Bonnie and Clyde		X
Role Model	X	
Lounge		X
My Fault	X	
Cum on Everybody	X	
Rock Bottom		X
Just Don't Give A F**k	X	
As the World Turns		X
I'm Shady	X	
Bad Meets Evil		X
Still Don't Give a F**k		X
<i>The "Marshall Mathers" LP</i>		
Kill You	X	
Stan		X
Who Knew	X	
The Way I Am		X
The Real Slim Shady	X	
Remember Me?	X	
I'm Back	X	
Marshall Mathers		X
Drug Ballad	X	
Amityville		X
Bitch Please II	X	
Kim	X	
Under the Influence	X	
Criminal	X	

irregular tempos, as well as syncopation (a displacement of rhythm). In terms of melody, they offer unpredictable disjunctive melodies and short-held tones.

Although there is no harmony in a conventional sense, there are multiple sounds competing with one another simultaneously, creating a sense of intensity begging for a release that never comes. Likewise, the tracks do not employ conventional instrumentation, however, the competing sounds symbolize a similar intensity pattern for the listener. Finally, the intensity songs employ louder volumes than the release songs and often build to Eminem shouting his message by the end.

For example, “Guilty Conscience,” employs vigorous intensity patterns that never seem to resolve until, finally, they are silenced by a series of abrupt gunshots. Curiously, the gunshots come as a welcome relief (Mathers & Dre, 1999, track 3). Musically, then, the madness is over. Similarly, on “Kill You” the fervent intensity patterns beg for a musical resolution that never comes until the final phrase when Eminem yells “gonna kill you!” (Mathers, et. al., 2000, track 2). Again, musically there is a sense of relief that the madness is over, albeit via murder. The remaining 16 intensity pattern songs never provide any musical resolution. Rather, the intense musical patterns merely fade away. Hence, the listener is left searching emotionally for a means of resolution that doesn’t come, further reinforcing the intensity pattern.

Certainly, the musical patterns employed in most of Eminem’s songs represent intensity rather than release. Moreover, the intensity pattern songs typically fade away rather than offer any hint of resolution. Only two intensity pattern songs offer a sense of musical resolution (“Guilty Conscience,” and “Kill You”). The songs that employ primarily release patterns do so via the background music in all tracks but one. In that track (“Marshall Mathers”), Eminem himself does so in his vocal solo. Rhetorically, when heard in isolation each song might be coded as representing primarily intensity patterns. When heard contextually, however, shifts emerge. The ultimate meaning of these shifts can only be ascertained by examining the dynamic interaction between music and lyrics. Such interaction cannot be ascertained, however, until virtual experience is analyzed.

Virtual Experience (Lyrics)

Virtual experience can be examined as primarily poetic (backward-looking with a sense of finality) or dramatic (forward-looking with a sense of uncertainty). Lyrics can be understood further via primarily comic (optimistic) or tragic (pessimistic) rhythms. Comic lyrics are characterized as the protagonist beating the odds to capitalize on his or her fortune, whereas tragic lyrics focus on the protagonist coping with his or her fate (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, pp. 400-401).

The lyrics of all 29 of Eminem’s songs can be characterized as primarily dramatic (see Table 2). It is interesting to note, however, that although the lyrics look forward into the future, they do so in ways that convey resolve rather than uncertainty. For example, in “Drug Ballad,” Eminem sings:

That's the sound of a bottle when it's hollow, when you swallow it all wallow and drown in your sorrow. And tomorrow you're probably going to want to do it again. What's a little spinal fluid between you and a friend? Screw it. And what's a little bit of alcohol poisoning? And what's a little fight? Tomorrow you'll be boys again. (Mathers, et. al., 2000, track 13)

The message is clear. Regardless of what you do, you cannot impact who you'll be or what the world will hold for you tomorrow.

Also, although the songs are primarily forward-looking, there are references to a backward-looking poetic illusion in many of them (24 of the 30 songs). These references to the past are offered as reasons for current behavior. For example, in "Brain Damage," Eminem sings "way before my baby daughter Hailey, I was harassed daily by the fat kid named D'Angelo Bailey. An eighth grader who acted obnoxious, cause his father boxes, so everyday he'd shove me in the lockers" (Mathers, 1999, track 4). And in "As the World Turns," he argues "it all started when my mother took my bike away cuz I murdered my guinea pig and stuck him in the microwave. After that, it was straight to the 40 ouncers" (Mathers, 1999, track 17). By inserting these backward-looking scenarios, Eminem's current actions are cast as someone else's fault and inevitable.

In terms of comic and tragic rhythm, Eminem's songs are fairly evenly split (16 comic and 13 tragic). Comic rhythms are "characterized by the protagonist's contest with the world" (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 400). In these comic songs, the "world" consists of Eminem's critics, fans, family, friends, and peers. In "Still Don't Give a Fuck," for example, he shouts "for the weed that I've smoked – yo this blunt's for you. To all the people I've offended – yeah fuck you too! . . . the rest of you assholes can KISS MY ASS" (Mathers, et. al., 1999, track 20).

The protagonist "coping with fate" characterizes tragic rhythms (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 400). In his tragic songs, Eminem offers a pessimistic outlook based on his innate nature. In "Drug Ballad," for example, he claims he cannot overcome his drug and alcohol abuse problem when he cries "every time I try to tell them 'no' they won't let me every let them go. I'm a sucka all I gotta say, these drugs really got a hold on me" (Mathers, 2000, track 13). Likewise, in "Rock Bottom" he sings "When this life makes you mad enough to kill, that's rock bottom. When you want something bad enough you'll steal, that's rock bottom. . . . my life is full of empty promises" (Mathers, 1999, track 14).

In essence, regardless of whether the songs are comic or tragic, or framed in a primarily dramatic or poetic illusion, a similar theme pervades them. That is, the protagonist only gives others what they deserve. As he tells his wife who cheated on him in "Kim," "now shut the fuck up and get what's coming to you. You were supposed to love me. Now Bleed! Bitch Bleed!" (Mathers, et. al., 2000, track 16).

Table 2

Virtual Experience Relationships

Song Title	Dramatic	Poetic	Comic	Tragic
<i>The Slim Shady EP</i>				
My Name Is	X	verses	X	
Guilty Conscience	X	verses		X
Brain Damage	X	verses		X
If I Had	X			X
97' Bonnie and Clyde	X	verses	X	
Role Model	X	verses	X	
Lounge	X			X
My Fault	X	verses		X
Cum on Everybody	X	verses		X
Rock Bottom	X	verses		X
Just Don't Give A F**k	X		X	
As the World Turns	X	verses		X
I'm Shady	X	verses	X	
Bad Meets Evil	X	verses	X	
Still Don't Give a F**k	X	verses	X	
<i>The Marshall Mathers LP</i>				
Kill You	X	verses	X	
Stan	X	verses		X
Who Knew	X	verses	X	
The Way I Am	X	verses		X
The Real Slim Shady	X	verses	X	
Remember Me?	X	verses	X	
I'm Back	X	verses	X	
Marshall Mathers	X	verses	X	
Drug Ballad	X	verses		X
Amityville	X	verses		X
Bitch Please II	X		X	
Kim	X	verses		X
Under the Influence	X	verses	X	
Criminal	X	verses	X	

Table 3

Justification for behavior

Song Title	Rule(s) Broken	Transcendence	Victimage	Mortification
My Name Is	Physical violence		X	
Guilty Conscience	Theft, Murder, Dismemberment		X	
Brain Damage	Vandalism, Physical Abuse		X	
If I Had	Alcohol abuse, sexual violence		X	
97' Bonnie and Clyde	Murder		X	
Role Model	Physical violence, Drug abuse, murder		X	
Lounge	Drug abuse		X	
My Fault	Drug abuse, murder Self-mutilation			X
Cum on Everybody	Self-Mutilation, Suicide, Murder		X	
Rock Bottom	Theft, Murder		X	
Just Don't Give a F**k	Drug abuse, Murder		X	
As the World Turns	Alcohol abuse, Physical and sexual violence, Murder		X	
I'm Shady	Terrorism, Murder, Drug and alcohol abuse, suicide		X	
Bad Meets Evil	Murder, Drug abuse	X		
Still Don't Give a F**k	Alcohol and drug abuse, physical violence		X	
Kill You	Murder, Rape		X	
Stan	Murder, Alcohol abuse		X	
Who Knew	Drug abuse, Sexual violence	X		
The Way I Am	Drug abuse		X	
The Real Slim Shady	Drug abuse, vandalism		X	
Remember Me?	Murder, Physical violence		X	
I'm Back	Sexual violence, Vandalism, Drug abuse		X	
Marshall Mathers	Physical violence, Murder, Suicide		X	
Drug Ballad	Physical violence, Drug and alcohol abuse		X	

Amityville	Rape, Murder, Alcohol abuse		X	
Bitch Please II	Physical violence	X		
Kim	Murder		X	
Under the Influence	Drug abuse, Murder		X	
Criminal	Murder, Theft		X	

To deepen our analysis of the role of motives in Eminem's music, we draw from Burke's (1954) notions of dramatism. Burke contends that human beings justify breaking the rules of a society in one of three ways: (a) transcendence (following the calling of a "higher" order), (b) victimage (scapegoating, that is, blaming someone or something else), or (c) mortification (punishing oneself). Initially, all 29 songs examined for this analysis focus on breaking some rule of society (see Table 3). Moreover, 25 of the 29 songs offer victimage as the means by which to justify the behavior. More specifically, Eminem justifies behaviors such as physical abuse, sexual violence, theft, murder, self-mutilation, vandalism, and drug abuse by blaming someone or something else. In "Kim," he justifies killing his wife because she cheated on him. In "I'm Back," he justifies cutting "a kitten's head off and [sticking] it in this kid's mailbox" because the kid had "punched and bullied" him (Mathers, et. al., 2000, track 10). Finally, although he blames a variety of people for his behaviors, he blames his mother most often. In "Criminal," for example, he claims "my mother did drugs . . . the baby came out . . . it was a seed who would grow up just a crazy as she . . . that baby was me" (Mathers, et. al., 2000, 18).

Of the remaining four tracks, only one employs mortification to absolve guilt. In "My Fault," Eminem implores "My God, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" when he realizes Susan just died from an overdose of drugs he provided (Mathers, et. al., 1999, track 11). In the other three tracks, he justifies murder, dismemberment, theft, physical and sexual violence, as well as drug abuse via transcendence. He claims he simply cannot adhere to society's rules in "Bad Meets Evil," for example, when he sings "this is what happens when Bad Meets Evil. We hit the trees till we look like Vietnamese people. He's Evil, and I'm Bad like Steve Segal. Above the Law cuz I don't agree with police either" (Mathers, et. al., 1999, track 15). The "higher" calling Eminem professes to follow in these four tracks, however, is not good but evil—a calling that cannot be avoided given the hopeless circumstances.

Interaction Between Virtual Experience and Virtual Time

The rhetorical nature of music can only be ascertained by considering the interaction between lyrics and music. Congruent lyrical and musical messages make messages more poignant. Incongruent messages can (a) couch a controversial message in ambiguity, making it more palatable to a broad range of listeners or (b) alter the meaning of the lyrics altogether (Sellnow & Sellnow 2001; Sellnow 1999). Our analysis reveals rhetorical strategies of both congruity and incongruity in Eminem's music.

Of the eleven songs that offer primarily release musical patterns, seven actually employ congruent tragic lyrical messages about coping with fate ("If I

Had,” “Lounge,” “Rock Bottom,” “As the World Turns,” “Stan,” “The Way I Am,” and “Amityville”). In these songs, the pessimistic argument is made more poignant. Moreover, since all of them are set in the forward-looking dramatic illusion, a clear message about no sense of future is also put forward. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that all seven use victimage to excuse unethical and illegal behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse, murder, and sexual violence. Essentially, a vivid argument is offered that he is not to blame for his actions because someone or something else caused him to do so. Moreover, he cannot help himself given the circumstances. There are no consequences since no sense of future is conveyed. If more songs had employed this combination of poignantly pessimistic congruent patterns, it is possible that Eminem’s success would have been less dramatic (Sellnow, 1996).

Only four of the eleven release pattern songs offer incongruent lyrical comic rhythms (“‘97 Bonnie and Clyde,” “Bad Meets Evil,” “Still Don’t Give a Fuck,” and “Marshall Mathers”). These songs are less poignantly pessimistic than the aforementioned seven in that a sense of hope that the protagonist will conquer his unfair circumstances is conveyed. Moreover, in three of the four tracks, he places blame for his actions on someone who wronged him. In “‘97 Bonnie and Clyde,” for example, he claims his wife was “real real bad. She was being mean to dad and made him real real mad” so he had no choice but to put her in “time out” (Mathers, 1999, track 7). In “Still Don’t Give a Fuck” and “Marshall Mathers,” he blames his fans and society for causing him to commit “irresponsible acts” like physical violence, drug abuse, murder, and thoughts of suicide (Mathers, et. al., 1999, track 20; Mathers, et. al., 2000, track 11).

In only one release pattern song with comic rhythms, “Bad Meets Evil,” does he stray from victimage to offer transcendence as justification. Rather than blame someone or something, he claims that he and bad guy “Royce Da Five-Nine” are simply following a higher calling. That is, they are “above the law” and not “eager to be legal” because “this is what happens when Bad meets Evil” so “see you in hell for the sequel” (Mathers, 1999, track 19). This incongruity essentially makes drug abuse, suicide, and murder sound appealing, just like it was for “Jesse James and Billy the Kid” in an old Western movie. Yet, this sense of following a different hierarchy in combination with perseverance in the comic lyrical rhythms and resolved musical release patterns ultimately send a message of hopelessness—of predetermined fate which cannot be altered.

Not surprisingly, most of the tracks offer primarily intensity pattern music (18 of 29). Of these, 12 employ congruent, comic lyrics about a determined protagonist against the world. Ten of the 12 offer backward-looking references to his past as justifiable motives for stealing, murdering, raping, terrorizing, vandalizing, dismembering, and abusing alcohol and drugs. In these references, Eminem blames his mother, his wife, the music industry, past bullies, and even his fans. For example, in “Remember Me?” he argues “my baby’s mom, bitch made me an angry blonde, so I made me a song, killed her and put Haley on” (Mathers, 2000 track 9). Essentially, these congruent relationships between lyrics and music send a poignant message that he is absolved of any guilt in the matter, since his victims usually deserve it. Ultimately, someone else is always to blame.

In two of the six congruent comic/intensity pattern songs, Eminem offers reasons other than victimage for his actions. In "Who Knew" and "Bitch Please II," he justifies drug abuse, sexual violence, and physical violence via transcendence, that is, he is evil by nature not nurture. In doing so, he creates a sense of resolve about his actions in that he cannot be held responsible because he was born that way. Again, a poignant message is sent that he is not to blame and that his future is hopelessly predetermined.

Six of the 18 intensity pattern songs offer incongruent tragic lyrics ("Guilty Conscience," "Brain Damage," "Cum on Everybody," "Drug Ballad," and "Kim"). Yet, the argument remains clear: He is not responsible for his behavior. Interestingly, however, by using incongruent intensity patterns, the tragic message is transformed to that of angry pessimistic resolve about what must, from his perspective, inevitably occur. This is due, in part, to the fact that he continues to interject references to his past and experiences where he was treated unfairly as justifiable motives for murder, physical and sexual abuse, self-mutilation, and suicidal thoughts.

Finally, in one song, "My Fault," Eminem does accept blame for causing Susan to die of a drug overdose. He even goes so far as to say "she's gonna die" and "I know and it's my fault" (Mathers, 1999, track 11). Interestingly, however, this message tends to be overpowered by the incongruent intensity patterns in the music. Listeners could easily miss his guilty plea because it is couched in incongruent intensity patterns and a forward-looking dramatic illusion. Moreover, he interjects at several points a contradictory verbal message, as well. That is, "I didn't mean to," which also tends to blur the impact of his guilty plea. Doing so again reveals an underlying theme of helplessness. Hence, this one instance of mortification is probably lost, not only in this particular track, but also in the overriding themes of victimage threaded throughout both CDs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We sought to discover how Eminem's music and lyrics function rhetorically to convey messages opposing mainstream ideology. Doing so revealed four general conclusions. First, relative intensity and release patterns in music must be ascertained contextually in relation to characteristics of a particular genre, as well as in relation to the musical style of a particular artist and recording. Second, congruity between musical and lyrical messages makes more poignant or meaningful arguments that both victimage and transcendence are justifiable motives for engaging in unethical, immoral, or illegal behavior. Third, incongruity between musical and lyrical messages may actually heighten persuasive appeal by transforming those messages justified by victimage or transcendence. Finally, incongruity between musical and lyrical messages where behavior is justified by mortification can result in emotional messages that usurp linguistic messages altogether, removing any notion of personal accountability for such actions.

This analysis extends the work by Sellnow (1996, 1999) and Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) to reveal that intensity and release patterns in music are most accurately ascertained as they relate to a particular genre, artist, or

recording. Important distinctions between relative patterns of intensity and release could easily be overlooked in Eminem's music if not considered in this way. These pattern shifts reveal meaningful insights into the rhetorical potential of Eminem's songs, insights that might be less apparent upon hearing each song in isolation. Hence, our analysis supports Irvine and Kirkpatrick's (1972) conclusions published some 30 years ago that arguments couched in music can be more persuasive because listeners do not anticipate persuasion. Moreover, the rhetorical power of relative patterns of intensity and release may prove most insightful when analyzed contextually, not only within a particular song, but also based on a particular recording, genre, and artist style.

Second, congruity between musical and lyrical messages makes more poignant arguments focused on victimage and transcendence as justifiable motives for immoral, unethical, or illegal behavior. Although Eminem uses both victimage and transcendence as justification, victimage is relied on most heavily. In some cases, victimage is offered as giving the victim what he or she deserves, which was the case for Eminem's wife who apparently deserved to be murdered because she had sex with another man. Other times, victimage is used to excuse current behavior based on unfair treatment in the past. Although Eminem's abusive mother is cited most often as the scapegoat, childhood bullies, teachers, the music industry, and fans are also indicted to justify current behavior. While transcendence is not employed as often as victimage (3 times as opposed to 25 times), it is also an effective rhetorical strategy to absolve personal responsibility for current actions. Perhaps most interesting about this conclusion is the underlying tragic theme that pervades these messages. That is, the protagonist is depicted as helpless and his circumstances as hopeless. Hence, his behaviors appear to be the only means by which to cope with his fate (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). Eminem's messages offer important implications for youth today. . The coping messages suggest that blaming others can be an acceptable motive for breaking society's rules for living. This comes at the expense of accountability and responsibility.

Many of the songs employ intensity patterns and comic rhythms, which heighten a sense of urgency to follow through with the behaviors. In fact, the intensity patterns are so unyielding that the ultimate resolution, albeit via physical or sexual violence, tends to come as a relief. This rhetorical strategy entices the listener to accept as necessary the behavior, as well as the motive for carrying it out. Moreover, since adolescents are drawn to intense musical patterns as part of their desire to rebel against the status quo, they might not "anticipate persuasion" and, consequently, might more readily accept the ultimate means of resolution as inevitable (Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972, p. 273).

Congruent release patterns accompanied by tragic lyrics sharpen a sense of coping with fate where there is no sense of future. Crudele and Erickson (1995) point out that adolescence is a period when young people discover "often painfully, that life has many disappointments," and when they encounter these "roadblocks," they tend to "sense major doom" (p. 74). Similar messages of doom and lack of future are represented in these poignantly pessimistic songs; messages accompanied by motives justifying immoral and illegal behavior that are compellingly couched within the music.

Third, incongruent lyrical and musical messages enhance persuasive appeal by transforming any meaning that might have been gleaned from lyrics alone. When comic lyrical rhythms are combined with incongruent release patterns, the ultimate argument conveyed is one of inevitability. That is, there is really no other choice but to engage in the behavior (in this case, murder, rape, dismember, abuse, and so on). When tragic lyrical rhythms are combined with incongruent intensity patterns, the lyrical message is transformed to that of angry determination. Doing so sends a message that the behavior is in some way excusable. Finally, incongruity allows the ultimate argument to unfold incrementally, making the somewhat controversial messages seem legitimate (Sellnow, 1999, p. 78). This analysis extends Sellnow's argument beyond merely controversial messages to also include messages that are conceived of as immoral, unethical, or illegal by the status quo.

Fourth, on only one track does Eminem blame himself for committing an immoral or illegal act, that is, when Susan dies from a drug overdose in "My Fault." Interestingly, the incongruent intensity patterns in this song tend to overpower the tragic lyrical admission of guilt. Hence, listeners might miss the mortification altogether. Furthermore, by interjecting "I didn't mean to" at several points during the track, the argument is also clouded by an alternative justification more akin to victimage. Hence, the one song that might offer redemption via mortification is lost in the incongruent musical pattern. Ultimately, the argument conveyed is that immoral and illegal behaviors may be excused when they are not intentional. Again, the sense of the protagonist's helplessness becomes justification for coping with fate via these means.

The target audience of oppositional youth music—that is, music that opposes the status quo—consists primarily of people between 12 and 20 years of age (Chesebro, et. al., 1985; Frith, 1978). Research on adolescent development suggests further that teens use music as a means by which to develop autonomy from their parents and other authority figures. Hence, the fact that such music often advocates rebellion against the status quo is not cause for concern. To the contrary, such music often functions to help adolescents move from childhood into adulthood. One must question, however, what messages are being sent about adulthood and how to cope with the stress of life.

Moreover, this phenomenon of oppositional youth music and identity development is not new. In fact, "each generation remains relatively more favorable toward the music of its youth than generations raised either before or after the advent of a genre of music" (Smith, 1994, p. 43). Rock songs of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, have been described as "declarations of the [youth] counter culture's dream for a recast America and a changed world" (Bloodworth, 1975, p. 304). The heavy metal music of the 1980s has been described as representative of an "age old struggle between the generations" where youth "reject the norms and values of society" in order to "validate their own agenda" (Gross, 1990, p. 129).

Furthermore, there is nothing alarmingly new or even inherently harmful in oppositional youth music that uses profanity, or that talks about abuse, suicide, sex, or crime. Certainly, oppositional youth music of previous generations did so, as well. What is important to understand about oppositional youth music of a particular period, then, is not that it advocates rebellion against

the norms or values of a society but, rather, what it offers in their place. The issue of concern rests with the motives offered as justification for such behaviors. If music speaks for youth, then it is important to hear what the music is telling us. In essence, doing so may shed light on how young people think and feel in ways that may never be articulated in conversations with them. The subsequent question becomes: What might not doing so lead to?

The pervasive underlying tragic theme revealed in this analysis suggests that protagonists today feel helpless and deal with their hopeless circumstances by coping with fate rather than overcoming obstacles, beating the odds, and capitalizing on fortune as was often depicted in oppositional youth music of previous decades (e.g., Grossberg, 1992a; Lull, 1992; Sellnow, 1996; Szatmary, 1987). If this music does, in fact, speak for youth as the research suggests, then the underlying messages of helplessness and hopelessness are surely troubling. The potential consequences of ignoring them are equally disturbing.

In this rhetorical analysis, we examined the dynamic interaction between music and lyrics in Eminem's musical messages of rebellion against the status quo. If similar messages of victimage as justification pervade oppositional youth music today, what might that tell us about adolescent angst? It is imperative to expand the existing research base by conducting similar analyses of music from a variety of genres. Country music songs like Garth Brooks' "The Thunder Rolls," the Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl," and Martina McBride's "Independence Day," for example, appear to espouse similar motives. Why do these songs portray protagonists as helpless victims with limited choices? These and other questions ought to be explored as we seek to deepen our understanding of music's power to communicate and persuade.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Illusion of Life rhetorical perspective is rooted in Susanne Langer's theory of aesthetic symbolism as explained in her book, *Feeling and Form* (1953). Her philosophy was developed to study art and dramatics, however, the Sellnow's adapted it to help understand how music may function rhetorically to communicate and persuade.

² We did not include five tracks from *The Slim Shady LP* (Public Service Announcement, Paul, B****, Ken Kaniff, and Soap) and four tracks from *The Marshal Mathers LP* (Public Service Announcement, Paul, Steve Berman, and Ken Kaniff). We did not feel it appropriate to include them as they are not songs, but merely telephone message or public service announcements.