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“LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME”: AN ANALYSIS OF LOVE AS A POLARISED DISCOURSE IN POP MUSIC

For centuries, love has been a central theme in western literature, and a pivotal element of western culture as a whole. From the classical era to the 21st Century, uncountable stories, poems and songs have tirelessly been constructed around the concept of romantic love. In the western classical literary tradition, a part of the canon is reserved to pieces revolving around this concept, such as Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. As Hecht points out in his introduction to *The Sonnets* by Shakespeare, literary pieces in which the author immortalises “his beloved in deathless verse” are part of “a poetic convention that can be traced back to classical antiquity” (10-11). Hecht mentions Homer and Virgil in order to support his thesis, and still many other classical authors, such as Sappho's poetry, could be added to the list. Since the classical era, love also played an important role in the religious system; gods and goddesses were adored in its name. For example, the goddess of fertility was already worshipped in the prehistoric era, and the Greeks named Aphrodite their own personal goddess of love. Likewise, the theme of love reappears in medieval imagery where it was used as a motor force for the construction of legends, tales and stories. Instances can be found in the legends of *Tristan and Iseult* and *Saint George and the Dragon*, first dated from the 12th and 13th centuries respectively. As Hogarth highlights, this type of stories were usually created under “Greek” and “Latin” influence (17). As a result, and out of this mixture of influences, romantic love as we know it today, begins to take shape during the age of Medieval feudalism (Hecht 11). In modern times the list of authors who have given love a distinctive place in their work becomes endless. The literary canon is composed of writers who, to one degree or another, devoted their work to the concept of love: Petrarch, Shakespeare, Cervantes and

even Goethe. From Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, love has often been perceived as a problematic source of tension, and thus a motor for literature. The result is the creation of a range of stories which may have nothing else in common than the theme of love itself, but that still connect with each other precisely because of this. As C.S. Lewis argues, "an unmistakable continuity connects the Provençal love song with the love poetry of the later Middle Ages, and thence, through Petrarch and many others, with that of the present day" (qtd. in Hecht 12).

The influence of this western cultural tradition constructed at least partly around the idea of love is still highly prominent nowadays. In fact, its weight is so strong that today, although Shakespeare's plays are taught in schools and universities, it is *The Sonnets* that outsell everything that he wrote (Hecht 1). It is clear that this relationship between love and culture has survived up to the 21st Century, and that the two parties still share an active relationship in which they influence one another. In this regard, songs, movies, TV shows and advertising have become major *cultural* products for the public's mass consumption¹. Due to the high popularity of this kind of media, the discourses and images that they offer have become a recurrent input in the life of a considerably high number of subjects. In this regard, pop music is broadcast and consumed massively and repeatedly; it presents repetition on the very structure of the songs, often constructed upon a chorus which contains and reinforces the main message. As Swiatowicz defines it, pop music includes "short song length ... intelligible lyrics, recognizable themes and subject matter, predictable or formulaic song structure, and at least one 'hook'" (26). Moreover, this repetition is allied with its rhythm and rhyme. Pop music takes these layers of music to its favour and deliberately generates patterns that will be enjoyed by a major number of people. Songwriters and producers design lyrics and rhythm patterns carefully, sometimes even following more classical types of poetry, as shown in Ariana Grande's "7 Rings", which uses the iambic pentameter the same way, and with the same intentions, that romantic poetry did.

Subsequently, after observing that love is the most common topic in western popular

¹ According to statistics from the British government, "daily internet use has more than doubled since 2006" ("Internet Access"), and similarly, both in 2001 and 2006, watching television was rated as the first leisure activity in Catalonia ("Primera Activitat Realitzada").

music (Swiatowicz 22, 33, 41; Christenson et al. 206; Madanikia and Bartholomew 5), it is reasonable to analyse love and lyrics together. However, as Judith Butler argues that there exists a “constructed and performative dimension of gender” (xxiii), the same could be discussed about our performance and understanding of love. Under the argument that pop music presents a polarized conception of love that is constructed upon irreconcilable dichotomies, this paper will analyse song lyrics that have love as their main theme in an attempt to discover their common features and highlight similar patterns. By doing so, the common performance and understanding of love found in western culture may arise as “instructed” rather than “natural” or “innate”.

With all that in mind, this paper will argue that mainstream music creates a concept of love in absolute terms and through the exclusion of other types of love. This analysis will be carried out by examining the following four dichotomies. Firstly, in mainstream music, romantic love is positively defined as eternal, while sex is defined as ephemeral. Thus, the frame of the mind, related to love, and that of the body, related to sex, are unnaturally separated and become taboos in each other's field. Secondly, pop music describes romantic love as an absolute bliss, and the lack of it as a source of total pain, blocking communication between the two states. Thirdly, pop music defines successful relationships as those in which lovers live in total self-abnegation, while the lack of such devotion is presented in negative terms. Fourthly, those who take part in a romantic relationship are also defined in pop music under the binary system based on the roles of dominance and submission, naturalizing states in which one party loses power over the other.

In order for the selection of lyrics to be as representative as possible, the collection will include songs from as early as The Everly Brothers and Elvis until the latest pop celebrities, as is the case of Ariana Grande or Pitbull. Likewise, most songs chosen were hit singles and charted on US Billboard for several weeks at the time of their release. Thus, readers will be in most cases familiar with the analysis. On the other hand, in order to avoid repetition, although the terms pop music and mainstream music do not mean exactly the same, these have been used as partial synonyms.

Always forever

As Christenson et al. observe, out of the nineteen themes that they could identify in their study of song lyrics, “relationships/love” and “sex/sexual desire” were the two themes that appeared the most (198, 200). That is, pop music separates one reality from the other, as very often a song that includes one of these topics will exclude the other. In this regard, pop lyrics tend to associate eternal love with romantic feelings, authenticity and depth of emotion; while ephemeral love is linked to sex, party and pleasure.

To start with, love is presented as a feeling that must last forever. Accordingly, *forever* and *always* become two key terms when analysing mainstream love songs. For instance, in Celine Dion’s best-selling hit “My Heart Will Go On” she sings to a lost love that despite the distance –physical or spiritual– keeps appearing on her dreams. This love is revealed as everlasting when she states that “In my life we'll *always* go on” (emphasis added), and she later concludes that love will never cease as she says “You're here, there's nothing I fear / And I know that my heart will go on / We'll stay *forever* this way” (emphasis added). In addition, eternal love may also involve social norms, an idea that can be found among ABBA’s repertoire. On the one hand, their song “I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do” connects eternal love with the institution of marriage; it uses repetition on the basis of a polarized love in which the leading voice presents two options to the lover: “love me or leave me”. However, on the other hand, another of the band’s major hits shows a glimpse of criticism towards that kind of love system. In “The Winner Takes It All”, after a break-up, the lead voice mentions the traditional values in which she had believed, summarising them under the metaphor of someone building a house for her. However, right after having mentioned this traditional type of love, a turn on the tone of the lyrics appears as the lead voice mentions that she “was a fool, playing by the rules”. This statement is significant because it describes traditional systems of love as “rules” and hence as an imposition which can therefore be changed.

If the exploitation of the words *always* and *forever* in pop music were not significant enough, search engine AZLyrics produces multiple results with combinations such as “Always forever”, “Always and Forever”, “Forever and Always” and “Forever and ever”, and a vast majority of the results have eternal love as the main topic in their lyrics. Although

these constructions might be regarded as redundant, it seems that no efforts should be spared in order to convey such meaning. With this in mind, Donna Lewis's 1996 hit single "I Love You Always Forever" presents a dream-like life "standing in a timeless dream / Of light mists with pale amber rose" with a partner that has "the most unbelievable blue eyes I've ever seen", while sharing a life of rounded bliss "As we lay there under a blue sky with pure white stars / Exotic sweetness, a magical time". In conditions like that, the singer could do nothing but declare "I will love you always forever", just in case *always* or *forever* alone did not convince the addressee. It is only in this "exotic" and "magical" space, constructed by means of abstraction behind time and reality itself, that this extreme conception of eternal love can work. Because of this, pop songs construct fairy-tale settings, more classical in the style of Taylor Swift's "Love Story" –"You'll be the prince and I'll be the princess / It's a love story baby just say yes"– or even postmodern and dystopian as seen in Rihanna's hit "We Found Love", with the verse "we found love in a hopeless place" repeated sixteen times throughout the lyrics. According to Bel Olid, this idealising conception of love has been drilled in our minds by almost every single form of cultural expression and hence we tend to believe that such love will accompany us for the rest of our lives (73, 75). Similarly, Swiatowicz argues that "the pursuit of relationships is still an ideal of youth", and he goes on by indicating that "[t]hat itself has not changed since the classic era" (69). Ironically enough, despite the high popularity of these songs, the crude divorce rate in the EU has more than doubled for the last fifty years; in fact, slightly above two million marriages and almost one million divorces took place in the EU in 2016 ("Marriage and Divorce Statistics").

On the other side of the coin, in opposition to everlasting love, pop songs also present ephemeral relationships with an essentially sexual aim. For example, in Pitbull's 2011 hit single "Give Me Everything", although language is not explicit, the singer insists on sexual engagement. In this regard, up to six times he uses the expression "Let's do it tonight". In order to succeed in his pursuit for sexual engagement, he resorts to his monetary achievements and tells the candidates that he is "an American Idol" and "get[s] money like Seacrest". In the same way, he also uses the word *love* in "Nothing is enough / 'til I have your love", but in this case it could be easily argued that this word is used as a synonym for *sex*.

Equally important, it is noticeable that words like *always* and *forever* are virtually absent in this type of lyrics; such words convey a loyal, romantic relationship that is way apart from the connotation of immediate, sexual intercourse. Pitbull goes on by warning his sexual target that he “can't promise tomorrow / but, I promise tonight”. In fact, he may consider that tomorrow is pointless when he promises that “baby I'ma make you feel so good tonight / cause we might not get tomorrow”. Interestingly enough, while he never mentions the words *always* or *forever*, he actually sings the word *tonight* forty-seven times in barely four minutes.

Besides, although American pop music “continues primarily focused on relationships, love, and sexuality ... pop songs have become far more often sexually explicit over the years” (Christenson et al. 206). Although sex has been present in pop songs for decades, it is its “directness” and “explicitness” that has increased over the last twenty years (Christenson et al. 207). As Christenson et al. point out, sex could be found also in Roy Orbison's 1964 hit single “Oh, Pretty Woman”; there he sings “I need you / I'll treat you right / Come with me baby / be mine tonight” (207). The shift to more explicit sex can be observed when analysing how differently Lil' Wayne's illustrates a sexual encounter in his 2008 hit single “Lollipop”. As Christenson et al. highlight, the song features direct expressions like “That pussy in my mouth had me lost for words” and “I made that ass jump” (207). Besides, Wayne uses the word *love*, but as a synonym of *body* or *lust*, as in “little mama had a swag like mine ... man, she ain't never had a love like mine”. Likewise, research carried by Madanikia and Bartholomew suggests that from the 1970s until 1990s, most love songs could be labelled as love-only songs (5). However, they observe a change in the trend, and for the last twenty years there has been a shift “from lust themes being presented in the context of romantic feelings towards lust themes being presented in the absence of romance” (5). In like manner, Christenson et al. argue that love and sexual desire have been the two main themes in top-40 songs: while the gap between the two was a 52% in favour of ‘love’ in the 1960s, the gap is reduced to a 32% margin (200). Accordingly, such change might be due to “a growing cultural acceptance of sexuality outside of the constraints of committed romantic relationships” (Garcia et al. qtd in Madanikia and Bartholomew 5). What is more, popular music could be argued to contain more sexual content than any media directed to young

audiences (Pardun et al. qtd in Madanikia and Bartholomew 1). To explain this phenomenon, some researchers suggest that “shifts in themes of lust and love in music lyrics likely reflect cultural changes in attitudes toward sexual and romantic relationship” (Madanikia and Bartholomew 6). In fact, “the increasing focus on sex [in pop songs] is paralleled in other teen-oriented media content” (Christenson et al. 207).

Walking on sunshine

It is easy to notice that pop hits present love through a dichotomy that establishes the experience of romantic love as an immediate source of bliss, and the lack of it as naturally equivalent to pain. That is, pop songs present love in a polarized way that establishes romantic love as the only true type of love, imposing itself among other types of affection. For instance, love in relation to family or loss is usually problematised, as seen in Eric Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven”. In this system of love promoted in mainstream music, the experience of romantic love and the lack of it are presented as extreme and opposite poles, attached to essential emotions of happiness and despair which become irreconcilable and undebatable.

Love songs that talk about the experience of romantic love describe it as the ultimate source of bliss and of emotional pleasure. For instance, Selena Gomez, in her song “Love You like a Love Song”, describes her lover in relation both to bliss and fantasy. Thus, her lover becomes a “melody” that will “play on and on”, as well as a “dream come alive” which she herself describes to be “incredible” and implicitly unattainable as a result. As seen in that example, romantic love is described in such fantasy terms that it needs a whole world of fantasy to exist, and the world that accompanies this idealized concept of love must be as well utopian. Its representations go from more traditional settings, as seen in Taylor Swift’s recreation of Romeo and Juliet in “Love Story” to more contemporary ones, such as Katy Perry’s “Teenage Dream”, which again insists on the idea of dreaming, together with that of youth and a certain sense of immortality:

No regrets, just love

We can dance until we die

You and I

We'll be young forever

You make me feel like I am living a teenage dream

Similarly, in their 1985 hit single “Walking on Sunshine”, Katrina and the Waves sing about someone who is in love. After some time of uncertainty –“I used to think maybe you loved me”– the singer asserts that “I’m sure” and “now I know that it’s true”. This corresponded love results in the lover being in a complete state of bliss as she sings “I’m walking on sunshine”, a metaphor again used to describe a utopian setting for a utopian feeling, while she later addresses the listener by rhetorically asking herself “and don’t it feel good?”. The effect of repetition in this song is particularly significant since the concept of *sunshine* is repeated fourteen times, and the confirmation of this being a positive feeling as in “and don’t it feel good?” is repeated nineteen times throughout this four-minute song. As hinted in the previous examples, love becomes associated to a kind of abstract bliss which is highly insisted upon but paradoxically only described in terms of surface. In fact, it is by means of this precise abstraction that the love and the happiness described in pop music get to be personal and collective at the same time, allowing subjects with very different backgrounds to identify with very similar types of lyrics and stories.

Therefore, it could be argued that pop songs teach that romantic love, in order for it to be true and to be right, must bring happiness by essence. However, no information is given on how to achieve and to maintain this pre-supposed happiness, and not even the implications of this happiness are described. Love and happiness thus become words constructed in isolation, with absolute meanings attached to them, used universally in an attempt to transform a multiplicity of emotions into a single one by means of semantics. Pop songs have a tendency to describe emotions by using hyperboles; and it is at the highest peak of this abstraction and mystification that they can even relate love to spirituality and religiousness. There is a high amount of times in which pop lyrics have related the romantic experience with the religious and the spiritual one. Madonna, who has been considered to “exemplify the postmodern era” (Canavan and McCamley 4), was one of the first pop music performers who exploited and subverted religious imagery by directly associating it with emotional and

physical pleasure. She dedicated more than one song to the exploration of the relationship between these two different spheres. Her songs “Like a Virgin” and “Like a Prayer” both associate religious imagery and spiritual bliss to romantic love and to sex, and all the emotions associated to it. Instances of pop songs that have related love to spiritual bliss expand to different variants of the genre, as is the case with The Cure’s “Just Like Heaven” or Robbie Williams’s “Angel”.

It is clear that a large number of pop music songs associates romantic love with an absolute kind of bliss and pleasure, establishing it as the only source of true happiness. However, and as a direct result of this understanding, there is another large set of songs that talk about the absence of this kind of affection as a natural cause of pain. For example, in their 2010 hit “Need You Now”, Lady Antebellum sing about someone who is desolate after a break up, engaging with the emotions uncritically and almost celebrating them. The lyrics are clear and direct: “And I don’t know how I can do without, I just need you now / Another shot of whiskey, can’t stop looking at the door / Wishing you’d come sweepin’ in the way you did before”. Other similar examples may include Eminem and Rihanna’s “Love the way you lie”, and Taio Cruz’s “Break Your Heart”. Likewise, Blondie’s 1979 hit single “Heart of Glass” reveals that love equals pain when a love that was “divine” happens to be taken over by “mistrust”. This makes the singer realise that, instead of a strong heart, she “soon found out” that she has a “heart of glass”. This pain is caused by the fear of losing the other, and living like this is what makes the relationship painful. She therefore states that “there’s no peace of mind / if I fear I’m losing you”. In the penultimate stanza of the album version, she actually describes this relationship as “a pain in the ass”, although it seems that she is not willing to break it up. All in all, this pain could be summarised in Lady Gaga’s 2009 hit single “Bad Romance”. Throughout the song, the singer talks about her love affair as something not particularly pleasing as she claims that “I want your disease”, “I want your drama”, “I want your horror”, “I want your psycho”; she even calls her lover “criminal”. In spite of what seems to be a harmful partner, Lady Gaga insists in the fact that “You know that I want you / And you know that I need you / I want it bad, your bad romance”. As a result, she embraces the potential pain of such relationship and accepts that they are “caught in a bad romance”.

My life would suck without you

Another duality that love songs present is that of having a complete life in self-abnegation in opposition to a miserable life in loneliness. That is, many lyrics reveal an ideal of love in which one of the partners must give everything to the other in order for the relationship to succeed, which implies losing part –or the totality– of their individuality. On the other side of the coin, love songs often describe the failure of this process of self-abnegation by means of negative terms and painful associations.

A prototypical example of a self-abnegated relationship can be found in the hit “Without You”, popularized by Harry Nilson first and Mariah Carey later but originally written by Badfinger in 1970. The song tells the story of a love affair that has just ended as the singer regrets having let the other walk away “When I think of all my sorrow / When I had you there but then I let you go”. Because the love story is over, the singer finds no reason to live as he repeatedly sings “I can't live / if living is without you / I can't live / I can't give anymore”. This could be considered as an example of this kind of love that nullifies the individual, leaving the person with a damaged sense of identity when it goes away. In this type of relationship presented so often in pop music, subjects are so devoted to their beloved ones that when the romance is over, their sense of identity seems to end as well; life in singleness becomes meaningless as a consequence of such a demanding relationship. Similarly, Kelly Clarkson’s 2009 hit single “My Life Would Suck Without You” tells the story of a girl that thanks her partner for coming back –“said you'd never come back / but here you are again”. It is the following lines that reveal the kind of attitude that is being analysed in this section. Clarkson is not certain that the relationship should continue or not since “*maybe* I was stupid for telling you goodbye” (emphasis added). However, despite her uncertainty she declares that “either way I found out / I’m nothing without you”, and she goes on by adding that “You got a piece of me / and honestly / my life would suck without you”. Lastly, she seems to depend totally on that relationship; she is unable to carry on even though she acknowledges the fact that her partner may not be a good influence, and so she concludes that “being with you is so dysfunctional / I really shouldn't miss you / but I can't let you go”.

Once more, there is no place for individuality; life makes sense only in a romantic relationship that dissolves one's identity. As seen in Clarkson's lyrics, pop music makes romantic love grow beyond moral, and hence it could be argued that it becomes a moral on itself. In this way, it could be stated that, in such a system, life fully depends on a relationship which, for better or for worse, is better than being single.

Such lyrics may resemble the many stories in which one commits suicide after knowing or presuming that his/her beloved has died; this has been a popular idea in western literature since the times of Homer (Poole xx-xxi). The myths of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, *Hero and Leander*, the *Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes*, as well as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are all based in this concept (Poole xxi), and this tradition is in actual fact still present in today's music. For instance, lines like "I can't live / if living is without you" (Badfinger), "I guess this is our last goodbye / and you don't care so I won't cry / but you'll be sorry when I'm dead / and all this guilt will be on your head ... I can't stand losing you" (The Police), "When you're gone, time moves so slow (I would die)" (Miley Cyrus "I Would Die for You"), "I'm only up when you're not down / don't wanna fly if you're still on the ground / ... / and I know everything about you / I don't wanna live without you" (Taylor Swift "I'm Only Me When I'm with You"), they all may resemble the hinted tragedies. In this regard, Olid points out that people tend to believe that a strong love will give sense to their life, and she later warns the reader that when we believe that our partner is the most important thing in our lives, that person then becomes the centre of our existence, and hence we subordinate everything else (76). In fact, she argues that such an unconditional conception of love is quite exclusive because it seems that there can only be one person in our life and that he/she deserves our total love; therefore, in her view, the love for friends, family and children grows weaker next to an idealised romantic story (74-75).

On the other hand, in stark contrast with such a fully devoted life to a romantic partner, life without such an excluding relationship is seen as an inferior state, even a disgrace. Lyrics that foster this idea tend to highlight the positive side of being in a romantic relationship and the negative part of being alone. Therefore, *alone*, and *lonely* tend to be used as synonyms. Back in 1957, in their debut "Bye Bye Love" The Everly Brothers already sung

about this idea; the lyrics suggest that breaking a relationship is equivalent to saying that life from now on cannot be joyful: “Bye bye *love* / Bye bye *happiness*” (emphasis added). Likewise, the new state of singleness is described with negative terms as in “Hello *loneliness* / I think I’m gonna *cry*” (emphasis added). It is interesting to note the following dichotomy: *love* and *happiness* in opposition to *loneliness* and *cry*. In addition, instead of a free personal option, being single is considered as the opposite of a joyful life, as the following lines may illustrate: “I’m-a through with romance / I’m a-through with love / I’m through with a-countin’ the stars above / and here’s the reason that I’m so *free*” (emphasis added), where *freedom* seems to have a negative connotation. Such negativity is connected with the self-abnegation discussed in the previous paragraphs; the state of not being in a romantic relationship is considered so inferior that the chorus ends with what might be interpreted as another fatal intention: “I feel like I could die / Bye bye my love goodbye”. Moreover, in Justin Bieber’s 2009 single “One Less Lonely Girl” the singer is sure that by finding him, a girl will be less lonely as he repeats “there’s gonna be / one less lonely girl”. Up to forty times the chorus is repeated throughout the barely four-minute song. Furthermore, he tells this girl that her life will be perfect if she follows him because she will need not find anyone else “How many bags you packed / just to take them back? ... but no more if you let me inside of your world”. He acts as her superhero: she needs to be rescued from such a negative state, and so he tells her “I’m coming for you” because after all “when you’re mine, in the world / there’s gonna be one less lonely girl”. The song even denies other types of love and the possibility that happiness can be found in solitude and in company of family or friends when he sings “Christmas wasn’t merry / 14th of February not one of them spent with you”. In this Bieber’s example we can see how the word *lonely* is used as a synonym for *alone*. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, while *alone* just conveys the idea of “without any other people” and by no means does it entail unhappiness, *lonely* involves a negative connotation of sadness (33). Consequently, by the predominant use of the latter, it can be argued that love lyrics tend to depict single life as negative.

I am yours

One of the dichotomies that construct mainstream music's imagery establishes that one of the partners must show a dominant behaviour while the other must play the submissive role. The dominant-submissive division of roles is very much present in the imagery of pop music, which insists on a certain idea of ownership between the two partners of the couple. The affirmation "I'm Yours" is the ultimate representation of this relationship model, and was chosen by Jason Mraz as the title of his worldwide hit with lyrics that attach the idea of ownership to that of destiny by claiming that "this is our fate, I'm yours". In this regard, pop songs insist on the idea that it is adequate, and even pleasurable, to lose control over one's sense of identity. As the role of submission is essentially given to one of the partners, this model of relationship takes for granted that one of the subjectivities will be sacrificed in favour of the other. For example, Katy Perry dramatically sings about this idea in her song "Pearl"; there a girl that "is a pyramid" becomes "just a grain of sand" because of a "love that is too strong".

Conversely, while the submissive partner takes the claim of "I am yours", the dominant one takes an opposite position by stating that their partner is part of their property. For example, in Elvis Presley's song "Surrender" the loved subject falls into possession of the leading voice of the song, as he tells his partner: "won't you please surrender to me / your lips, your arms, your heart". He later demands total submission as he commands "be mine forever / be mine tonight". In this sense, the role of the dominant partner is established even before the creation of the couple itself, and this role of domination is usually associated to a masculine point of view. In a cultural system still highly heterocentric, song lyrics that offer this perspective usually insist on the presupposed masculinity of the dominant partner. For instance, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines", which became controversial because of the associations between its lyrics and rape, is a clear example of that. The leading voice addresses a feminine sexual partner by calling her a "good girl" and assuming that, although she might not be initially open to giving him pleasure, he will be able to "domesticate" her while telling her "I know you want it". According to Dorian Lynskey from *The Guardian*, this song could be labelled as "the most controversial song of the decade" since it could be considered a "rape song" that is about "a libidinous R&B party jam about a woman in a

nightclub who may or not be interested [in the man singing]”. In this regard, the article also highlights the fact that many expressions in this song have been reported to be quite commonly used by rapists. Interestingly enough, the opposite example can be found in Ellie Goulding’s *Fifty Shade of Grey*’s soundtrack “Love Me Like You Do”. There, it is a woman that asks a partner to take advantage of her as she sings “I’m not thinking straight / I can’t see clear no more [...] what are you waiting for?”. It could be argued that in this example the woman has internalised the role of submission that these lyrics foster.

This tendency that pop music has of establishing the roles of a relationship in terms of dominance and submission is not exclusive of this particular musical genre. In fact, this unstable system of relationship is part of the western literary tradition. Chivalric romances often displayed a masculine figure portrayed as a saviour with strong abilities. On the other hand, the other half of the couple, the submissive partner, is connected to previous instances of female literary characters which have been described as trapped and fragile, like women characters in female gothic fiction. Although the association of such roles with a particular representation of gender has somehow started to be problematized in the last decade, popular music has actually not ceased to construct romantic relationships in a dominance/submission exchange. For example, female singers have indeed problematized the role of sexual submission that has traditionally been assigned to them, with lyrics that point at a willingness of taking control of their own behaviour and mode of life. Miley Cyrus’s “Can’t be tamed” or the more recent Ariana Grande’s song “Break with your girlfriend I am bored” are examples of a new attitude of sexual dominance which, initially associated with Madonna, has seen an increase in the recent years and especially among new female pop singers. Following the previous examples, both Cyrus and Grande’s songs display a similar attitude traditionally associated with masculinity. The leading voice assumes that masculine subjects around them are willing to give them sexual pleasure. In this sense, after affirming that she “can’t be tamed”, Cyrus says that “everywhere, every guy gives me mad attention”, and in the same way Grande puts herself in a position of power in which she simply asks someone to end a romantic relationship because she is bored. Examples like this, however, prove that while popular music has started to subvert the notion of sexual power in relation to gender, it is still

not able to design a system for relationships that does not construct the role of the partners in terms of power and submission.

Conclusion

To review, the theme of love in pop music has been explored by means of four dichotomies. First, love in pop music is presented as either eternal or ephemeral. That is, singers –who act as lovers– try to convince their beloved that they will remain loyal for good; terms such as *forever* and *always*, and the use of the verb phrase “will love” are quite common. On the other hand, love may also be revealed as a synonym for *sex*, and consequently it is an ephemeral affair that is sought. Second, love is also depicted as a source of complete bliss in opposition to pain. Pop songs present an essential and universal type of happiness, and attach it only to romantic love. Thus, a state in which this romantic love is lacking will be, in mainstream music, a state of extreme pain. Third, love as illustrated in pop music reveals a relationship in which self-abnegation is fostered; the romance is hence based on an excluding love that puts that person at the centre to the detriment of individuality and other relationships. Conversely, the opposite of a full life in self-abnegation is presented as a lonely existence in singleness. Finally, pop music also reproduces a dominant and hence submissive love. It creates two opposed roles as elements that precede the couple itself, and to which the parties of the couple will have to adapt.

With this in mind, there remains a reflection to be considered; that is, whether these songs influence the way listeners conceive love. As Hobbs and Gallup point out, although romantic novels are much longer than pop songs; the latter contain “a high incidence of reproductive messages” despite their “relatively small number of repetitive verses” (402). In fact, in their research Hobbs and Gallup found that “the most popular/best-selling songs contained significantly more reproductive messages” (390). This data shows the insistence of pop music upon certain discourses of love and love performances - leaving the door open to the question around the implications between some of the particular choices of mainstream music. As Firat and Venkatesh point out on his study on marketing and postmodernity, contemporary mainstream culture stimulates “a new reality throughout the power of

communication” which is “accepted to be true” (230). Taking this into account, it could be argued that this type of music works as a marketing tool for a certain way of understanding of life and also of love, creating a “new reality” by means of a “spectacle” and a “voyeuristic exposure to the spectacle” that work as a daily influences upon average consumers, constantly telling them that love will either be extreme or nothing (Firat and Venkatesh 231). These findings lead to the question of to what extent listeners are influenced by the four dichotomies embedded in love songs as it has been analysed throughout this paper. On the one hand, Christenson et al. argue that “despite clear evidence that popular music may directly or indirectly influence young people, exposure to music is just one of many factors influencing adolescents” (208). Similarly, Hobbs and Gallup believe that lyrics are not as relevant as they may seem at first sight due to the fact that the success of a song may involve other factors such as “the instrumentation, melody, tempo, sex of the artist, and sound of the singer’s voice” (403). Nevertheless, the two authors also highlight the fact that since the number of reproductive messages “contributes significantly to sales/popularity”, this means that “listeners are in fact processing [the lyrics] at some level” (403). For that reason, Olid states that she would like to see another construction of love in mainstream music, a construction that she herself considers to be harmful (qtd. in “Això No Són Cançons d’Amor”). As she asserts, such construction of love “generates unrealistic expectations about how it should be a relationship and therefore causes a lot of frustration” (74, own translation). However, when asked whether we should still listen to such songs or whether we should rather discard them, Olid considers that it is natural that anybody may feel like singing along while listening to these songs, yet she concludes that “we should listen to them less seriously” (qtd. in “Això no són Cançons d’Amor”, own translation). In conclusion, since love is a recurring theme in pop music, and will still probably be in the future (Swiatowicz 70), the analysis of such a widespread theme in such a popular style of music becomes fundamental in order to understand that love in mainstream music is a construction. Whether it may influence listeners, many other inputs must be taken into account, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

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