

**Gender Roles in Pop Lyrics**  
**A discourse analysis of the lyrics of Lady Gaga**

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## Introduction

Not all poetry is read or heard by millions of young people. When this is the case, the urgency of analysing the content and meaning of the lyrics is great. As a teacher I daily meet teenagers who are music fans. This has made me curious about the pop lyrics of today. The field of song lyrics is vital in the sense that it is widely spread and much of it appeals to a young audience, namely those who hold the future in their hands. Some lyricists are conscious of the impact they have, and my firm belief is that Stefani Germanotta is one of them. In 2010, she was included in *Time Magazine's* annual list of the hundred most influential people in the world as well as *Forbes'* list of 'The World's Most Powerful Celebrities' (ladygaga.com). This paper will look closely at the songs that are in so many people's hearts and minds.

The lyrics of Lady Gaga, or Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, are well known and become the words on many a young person's lips. She was born March 28, 1986 and has released three full length music albums. Her stage name is influenced by the rock group Queen and their song *Radio Gaga*. She writes or co-writes all her songs herself. The lyrics of the songs mentioned in my essay have no co-writer (Wikipedia "Lady Gaga").

My original idea was to analyze images of girls/women in pop lyrics. When researching which lyrics seemed to be the most influential, I realized how dominating Lady Gaga was and above all, that she wrote most of her own lyrics and music. I narrowed my selection of pop lyrics down to her most recent production, the album *Fame Monster* from 2009. In March of 2011, when the single *Born This Way* was released, I took the opportunity of also including that.

In this essay I will argue that in the album *The Fame Monster* and the single *Born This Way*, Lady Gaga demonstrates her quest for freedom and power both sexually and personally. Both in Lady Gaga's lyrics and performance, the theme of sexuality is important. The lyrics of *Bad Romance*, *Monster*, *So Happy I Could Die* and *Born This Way* all explicitly deal with sex. This is to be expected in this style of contemporary pop lyrics. Interestingly, some of Lady Gaga's female

characters seem to lack interest in a relationship, yet they focus on convincing a man/”boy” to have sex with them. What this emotional detachment signifies is part of what I intend to analyze in chapter one, *Gender Roles*. In this context vampirism has its place as well as other means of empowerment.

Since Gaga's pop lyrics reach mainly a young audience, it is understandable that they reveal a certain ambiguity towards relationships. This ambiguity serves to make girls/women in Gaga's lyrics complex and credible. My analysis of this is a part of chapter one.

Her exaggerated blonde stereotype, following in the tradition of Marilyn Monroe and Madonna, has proven to bear great significance for the artist. I believe this is a conscious method in the work of Gaga. I will try to reveal what this signifies.

In chapter two, *Celebrating Otherness*, I will scrutinize Gaga's opinion about sexual orientation and the meaning of her numerous references to animals and monsters. Also, I will look at what her references to sadomasochism mean. Finally, I discuss her resemblance with a trans-sexual drag queen.

Books which deal with popular music and gender were my first secondary sources. My main source is the British book *Women in Popular Music*, 2000, by Sheila Whiteley. Also Cecilia Björck's doctoral thesis *Claiming Space* 2011, proved central to my discussion. Kevin Gaffey's discoveries in *The Lady Gaga Saga* provided me with further evidence to support my claim. In my first thorough reading of the lyrics I was careful not to let the interpretation of others affect me too much. I read her lyrics as poetry and dissected each stanza to form an initial understanding. Subsequently, the internet has been a source of knowledge, where Gaga is the focus of several articles and essays. Among my sources, there are some which analyze the performance aspect of Gaga's art, which is only partly literary. I believe in also interpreting the supplementary artistic expressions available to any reader/listener of Gaga's lyrics, since today is a time of multiple art forms. The method of this essay is discourse analysis from a gender perspective.

My intention in defining key concepts is to keep them simple. It is an attempt to take any western reader's/listener's point-of-view. By gender, I mean social and cultural interpretations of sex. Feminine and masculine refer to assumed core differences within our cultural context. Accurate or inaccurate they still represent a tradition where the male has the initiative and the female assumes a more passive role. Freedom, in my essay, is absence of constraints, but also voluntariness. To be able to do what you believe that you want to do is, to some extent, freedom. This is the essence of a liberal standpoint. Power, for me, comes from within the human being. It is a power to act, and an energy flow in human relationships. It is a reason why people listen to you and follow you.

## Chapter One: Gender Roles

Numerous studies show how gendered stereotypes are reinforced by popular music. Hillevi Ganetz's *Feedback Loop*, 2009, is one of the books on this topic. As Ganetz argues, "there is a wider range of options in performing masculinities and sexualities, in contrast to the limited range of feminine expressions" (214). In her doctoral thesis from 2011, Cecilia Björck reaches the conclusion that "staging oneself as an agentic subject in any type of musical interaction in itself appears as a challenge threatening femininity, at least traditional femininity as un-loud, un-expansive and un-active" (57). This provides the critical context in which I will discuss the lyrics and performance of Lady Gaga and is the starting point for an attempt to explain her unique status.

I would argue that Gaga challenges gender roles through her performance as well as in her lyrics by being loud, expansive, and active and by addressing the theme of sexuality in several of the songs on *The Fame Monster*. She for example makes the female first person's demand for sex the main feature in the lyrics of *Teeth*:

Need a man now show me your fangs<sup>1</sup>

The characterization of the imperative communication in this song, with summons such as "show", "take", "tell", "open", "help", "let me see", and "don't", assures the man that she is experienced, and that he should not be afraid to engage in sexual activity with her. She calls him "boy", a diminishing connotation that reduces him and empowers her in the relationship. It makes her act of reassuring him even more brazen, even though we find out that she is most likely addressing somebody she believes already is, or wants to become, a vampire, since she exhorts him to take a bite and to show his teeth. The focus on teeth, the mention of fangs, and the invitation for him to take a bite all suggest vampirism.

The first person of *Teeth* therefore comes across as a sexual subject, rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrics and videos can be accessed at the Haus of Gaga homepage ([www.ladygaga.com](http://www.ladygaga.com)).

traditionally female position of object. According to Rosemary Tong, “Because male dominance and female submission are the norm in something as fundamental as sexuality [...] each and every element of the female gender stereotype is sexually charged” (quoted in Whiteley, 56-57, 119).

Gaga, being a lyricist and choosing the topic of sex, challenges the stereotype, while also staging the slim, young blonde, thus provoking reactions from her many readers/listeners. According to Björck,

The poststructural notion of subjectification can be used to make sense of the fine line between empowerment and objectification. [...] To claim space can thereby be seen as a work of mastery to make oneself seen and heard, but in doing so, having to subject oneself to the gaze and its disciplining functions, pulling the female subject back into the framework of the heterosexual matrix. (59-60)

What Gaga is trying to do seems to be a balancing act, which has various parameters, some of which are out of the writer's control, among them being this notion of “the gaze”, which is an interpretation each individual is making when viewing her performance and lyrics.

On the internet, there is a debate about whether Lady Gaga is a hermaphrodite. Rumors like that could naturally be dismissed as nonsense, although there is a possibility that they are sprung from a sense of confusion when somebody does not meet the expectations of the contemporary audience. Gaga is not the first independent successful female musician whose gender has been questioned. Jennifer Batten, lead guitarist in the band of Michael Jackson on tour in the 1980s, “was constantly asked whether she was a man or a woman, in spite of her long blond hair and red lipstick”, as noted by Björck (61). There seems to be something provocative about a woman who has initiative and exercises power. Kevin Gaffney notes, “It is, then, unsurprising that Lady Gaga has been rumoured to be a man or a hermaphrodite. She threatens mainstream ideology (both the audience and her contemporaries) with her polymorphous gender (which she exaggerates and mutates) and her aggressive sexuality”. (17) In the very beginning of *Dance in the Dark* Gaga uses an expression about girls not being willing to “dance to the beat of the track”, which Annamaria

Erdedi interprets in her C-Essay *Connected at the cunt*, 2010, as a metaphor for not adjusting to rules of conventions.

Gaga's portrayal of active female sexuality can also be seen by her use of the word "bitch". The term has long been used in a denigrating way when in reference to women. In the second verse of *Teeth* she uses the word "bitch", and "in a feminist context it can indicate a strong and assertive woman, one who might make men feel threatened" and "its original use as a vulgarity, documented to the fourteenth century, suggested high sexual desire in a woman" (Wikipedia "bitch"). Gaga uses the word in three of the songs on *The Fame Monster*, although the pronunciation in the songs *Dance in the Dark*, *Bad Romance* and *Teeth* is "bit", which means that Gaga is censoring herself to please the American media. The word, and its meaning, is too provocative for the American public. In *Teeth* she is calling her poetic self a "bad girl", who initiates, demands, and needs, "a man who makes her alright", something referred to as an addiction, which she therefore attempts to satisfy by challenging a boy to show his vampire teeth.

I would like to define Gaga's lyrics as gender-bending, a fairly new term which describes what happens when women become more masculine or when men become more feminine. This can either be linked to biology or to a form of social activism, similar to what Gaga seems to be involved in. The most obvious features of this in the lyrics of *Teeth* are the noticeable difference in power between herself and the man interpellated in this song as well as her clear position as sexual subject. In *So Happy I could Die* there is a line which is also interesting in this context, and which can be perceived as a quotation or almost a proverb:

Just know when that glass is empty, that the world is gonna bend

I regard this as her comment on what happens when you indulge in a lesbian love affair, and as a sign of her social commitment to gender-bending and sexual diversity. The song starts with Gaga's female voice declaring her love for "that lavender blonde". According to internet sources this is most likely referring to the female actress Kim Novak. Instead of taking the initiative and



approaching her she touches herself. *So Happy I could Die* is also about drinking, however, so there might not be a deeper meaning than intoxicated dizziness, which makes everything bend.

As an example of Gaga's relaxed attitude to sex, there is a verse in *Monster*, where the first person states that she is not really sure whether they had sex or not:

I asked my girlfriend if she'd seen you round before  
She mumbled something while we got down on the floor, baby  
We might have fucked, not really sure, don't quite recall

Erdedi claims that this challenges the norms of female sexuality and reverses traditional gender roles. It can be interpreted as her having had many sexual partners or as her not caring enough to remember (19). In addition to this I can read some other possible scenarios: The “girlfriend” was there while the first person engaged in sex with the monster (exhibitionism) or the girlfriend also took part in the sexual act (threesome). If drugs and/or alcohol were involved, the loss of memory would even be more plausible. In my reading of Gaga this seems like a deliberate play with words and imagination; a treat for the devoted reader/listener, yet also a statement that she does what she wants or whatever the occasion calls for and as an expression of liberal values.

The female popular music singer-songwriter's quest for freedom and power both sexually and personally has been noted many times before, for example in the 1960s:

Janis Joplin's outspoken attitude towards sex was widely publicised, but if her favourite, and most quoted metaphors, 'singing as fucking' and 'fucking as liberation' conformed to the ideology of rock, there was, at best, a limited congruence. At one level it signified a symbolic journey, from chastity to freedom of choice, a valorisation of female hedonism, the active female rather than the passive recipient. However, as sexual freedom continued to be defined by the male as availability, a woman who wholeheartedly embraced the dictum of unlimited fucking remained essentially, submissive. As such, the blurring of the boundaries between 'loved' and being 'fucked', being 'wanted' and being 'available' provoked a confusing instability. (Whiteley 53-54)

These two sides of the matter, wanting everything that the men have and still being trapped in an unwanted submissiveness, are also present in the lyrics of Gaga. *Teeth* has a sense of focus on the sexual act only, in an expectation of an anonymous encounter, as if the subject is not seeking to actually meet a person. At the same time the lyrics express the need of a man, which reveals her

dependency. Whiteley argues about Joplin, “In retrospect, it would appear that she was confronted with the personal and, probably, subconscious choice of reversing the codes associated with masculine/feminine, attempting to neutralise their effects, or demonstration and gendering can be independent of phallogocentrism” (66). When reading Gaga, the characters' own sexuality is in focus, rather than any part of the man's body. Assuming a casual approach to mere exploitation of sexuality, without involving love is a way to enter a male context. History reveals that this was not entirely easy or satisfying for Joplin. Will it be for Gaga? In an interview in Metro in 2011, Gaga says, at the age of 25, “It is not until now that I enjoy sex” (24). If we regard her lyrics as sprung from her own experience, we might perceive incoherence and perhaps even deceitfulness in some of her female characters. Photographer Kevin Gaffney argues,

*Poker Face*, is an interesting example of how Lady Gaga transgresses the commercial restraints of pop music by luring the audience into a false sense of security through entertainment and trashy ‘low brow’ sensibilities. After listening to the repetition of *Poker Face*, you begin to expect to hear “p p p p poker face, p p poker face,” when in fact she is singing “p p p p poker face, p p fuck her face.” She mimes “poker” rather than “fuck her” in the accompanying music video and sings “poker” on televised performances, and through all of this “fuck her face” ends up all over the radio uncensored. (34)

Not everybody will apprehend this, even though it is implied in the title *Poker Face/Poke Her Face*. Gaffney continues, “*Poker Face* contained the grim assertion that 'baby, when it's love if it's not rough- it isn't fun.' Perhaps violent sex is a good analogy for talking about Lady Gaga's music: on the surface it is indulgent and pleasurable, fetishized and shallow, but the subtext below all of these distractions is desperate and lonely” (35).

In the lyrics of *Teeth*, one can in fact see a contrast between Gaga's gender-bending and a more traditionally female wish:

Tell me something that will save me [...] Tell me something that will change me

This suggests an ambiguity toward sexual revolution. The imperative is addressed to a male figure, “a man who makes me alright”. The female protagonist wants to be changed through the help of a man. Erdedi also notes the contradictions in the lyrics of *The Fame Monster* and regards them as

unintentional, something I would question. The fact that Gaga wrestles with the same issues Janis Joplin struggled with makes her lyrics interesting. As sociologist Victor P. Corona, argues in his article *Memory, Monsters and Lady Gaga*, 2011, the songs on Gaga's album “reflect the 'demons' with which she has wrestled throughout her life” (2). She is young and writes something which her fans can relate to, which in itself has contributed to her success and to us reading and interpreting her lyrics. I believe incoherence and ambiguity is important in her art.

However, the verses and chorus of *Monster* are about a girl, Baby, who is bullied by her boyfriend:

She looks good, but her boyfriend says she's a mess  
now the girl is stressed [...]  
when he's looking she falls apart

Her way of dealing with it is by dancing in the dark, where she can't be seen. Music and dancing in the shield of darkness offers her a sense of freedom when her self-confidence is low, due to unkind remarks from her own boyfriend.

The lyrics of *Telephone* take up a similar theme of distrust between girlfriend and boyfriend:

You should have made some plans with me  
you knew that I was free  
and now you won't stop calling me  
I'm kinda busy

She disapproves of her boyfriend wanting her to respond to his spontaneous calls, whereas she would have preferred them to make plans in advance and now she refuses to be available on stand-by. Her phrase “kinda busy” suggests that she is not really busy, only reluctant. A look at the music video reveals an absurd vengeance, when sexy Gaga and her hot friend, played by R&B-singer Beyoncé, go on a murder trail. They poison a man, and many of the other guests at the restaurant, and then drive off in a *Thelma-and-Louise*-like manner. Given this context, the song can be seen to portray the quest for reclaiming power over one's own life and sexuality. The lyrics indicate that his habit of taking his girlfriend for granted has built up an aggressiveness in her. Possibly, the fuel also

comes from the experience of low self-esteem another female character voices in *Dance in the dark*. Gaga's female characters are contradictory and complex, like most of us, and the lyrics of *Telephone* also show how power to act can come from solidarity between two women. Beyoncé not only stars in the video, but also sings on the album together with Gaga on *Telephone*.

While some of her lyrics put the female completely in charge (*Telephone*, *Teeth*) some express submission: *Monster*, *Dance in the Dark*. As shown in the essay by Erdedi, the first few lines of *Dance in the Dark* can be interpreted as contradictory:

Silicone, saline, poison, inject me.  
Baby, I'm a free bitch, I'm a free bitch

The compounds are used in cosmetic surgery, and using them would not primarily be a sign of her being a free person. Erdedi interprets it as parody. While some people see cosmetic surgery as an expression of free choice, Gaga addresses the issue in a somewhat elusive way. Erdedi also mentions the change of first person from “I” to “we” after the intro and interprets the “we” as a sign of solidarity. I would also claim that the exclamation “Tell'em how you feel, girls” in *Dance in the Dark* echoes Madonna's “Come on girls!” in *Express Yourself*. It is basically a political call. Parody can also be found in *Bad Romance* with an urgent request to put your body on display at the catwalk:

Walk, walk, fashion baby, work it, move that bitch c-razy

Gaffney's analysis of the video points to more parodic elements, which aim to make us laugh at the passive, blonde stereotype:

Lying beside her dead man, she is the image of female submission and passive sexuality for the male gaze. As the camera zooms in, her robotic breasts fire sparks and, at once, she is ridiculing herself and her presented sexuality as well as the male gaze for believing it when, in actuality, her femininity/breasts are a weapon that possibly killed the corpse beside her. (45-46)

Seeing the ridicule, it becomes so much clearer that Gaga makes a statement against women as decorations or commodities, something which is debated on the internet in regards to this particular

video. My claim is that by repeatedly using the blonde, passive, submissive, silent beauty she wants us to have to react, form an opinion, and take a stand on this global phenomenon of narrow gender roles. Through her performance she then offers us an escape by becoming active, by taking on the role of subject, as well as by playing with our imagination and with the roles. Like Madonna before her, our whole interpretation relies on whether we apprehend or regard it as parody or not.

## Chapter Two: Celebrating Otherness

In his article Corona argues that Gaga “attempt[s] to explicitly link herself to categories of individual Otherness. By celebrating the 'monster', the 'freak', or the 'misfit' in multiple expressions – not 'fitting in' at school or being gay – she is able to build a sense of subcultural membership among fans while the catch-all liveliness of her music works to sustain mass appeal” (2). This is what led to my writing an essay about her lyrics, noting how influential she has managed to become before the age of 25. The energy with which she creates and produces art and performance can be seen as coming from this experience of feeling like a “misfit”.

In analyzing Gaga's celebration of monstrosity and otherness, I will first focus on the animalistic metaphors evident in the lyrics. In the second part of the chapter I will look at Gaga's treatment of otherness in perhaps its most controversial form, namely sexual orientation.

As I have already shown in chapter one, Gaga's song *Teeth* makes clear references to vampirism. The following line is important in the lyrics:

Take a bite of my bad girl meat

The request of the first person for a male figure to take a bite of her and to show his fangs means that she challenges him to become as beastly as she is, which means stepping up to vampirism. This vastly popular cultural phenomenon includes thoughts of eternal life and eternal youth in the presence of death and blood.

In the song *Monster* the male character is portrayed as mean. The female voice declares that he is bad, “a wolf in disguise”, which reminds us of Little Red Riding Hood. Even though she tells him: “Get your paws right off of me”, he manages to get her in bed. He is a monster with paws, who ate her heart. Erdedi interprets the song as being about men who try to manipulate women, since it seems that the monster is acting against her will (19). She indicates that he has been abusing her, yet she confesses her fascination for him and says:

I can't stop staring in those evil eyes

This puts her in a needy, addictive, almost enslaved position, which offers a contrast to the female subject in *Teeth*. Her quest for freedom faces a challenge in physical attraction, which draws her towards this mean male monster.

The concept of Monster contains a certain ambiguity in Gaga's writing. While in the above context it is both threatening and mean, in the lyrics of Gaga it more often has a positive connotation and we are forced to interpret it on a scale that has other values than good and bad, supposedly power as opposed to passivity. Nevertheless, the concept holds a central role. As noted by Corona, her 2009-2010 tour was called *The Monster Ball*,

a term that evokes the 'monster's ball' tradition of English jailers in which they would celebrate on the night before a prisoner's execution. She consistently addresses her fans as 'my little monsters', a term which they eagerly use among themselves. The word 'monster' is thereby used to indict past relationships and fame, and to celebrate the products of that fame, her fans. Monsters becomes a metaphor for the maddening swirl of images, anxieties and fads in hypermodern life. (8)

The context of monsters and animals offers Gaga's fans, frequently referred to as her “little monsters”, an escape from living up to ideals and expectations from other media or from society. They can acknowledge their monstrosity, also the monstrosity of the complex cultural “swirl of images, anxieties and fads”, and experience some sort of freedom or relief, perhaps even power over their lives.

Corona also analyzes the *Bad Romance* video, which features a number of different animals, in order to “lend a bestial flavor to the [it]”. His conclusion is that “the contrast of beast and beauty is used to provoke a reckoning with prevailing ideals of appearance, tolerance, justice, and sexuality” (8). My belief is that Gaga's language is all but random and Corona may very well have put his finger upon the most central point of this essay in that phrase, namely that Gaga undermines dominant notions of conformity and conventions.

The mention of Baby in *Dance in the Dark* as both an animal, “bitch” and “she's howlin' at

him”, and as a vamp, matches the use in *Teeth*. The word ”bitch” in *Teeth*, *Bad Romance* and *Dance in the Dark* is also an animal word. She lets the girl in *Dance in the Dark*, Baby, become a dog, a wolf, or a werewolf, which howls as an expression of the stress and then dances to shake the discomfort off. The transformation into werewolf is also a significant feature of the music video to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, as Corona brings up in his article about Gaga’s monsters (9). Gaga is therefore adding yet another cultural reference to her song.

She's a tramp, she's a vamp, but she still kills the dance.

I would argue that the word “vamp” is used as word play in the following three meanings: Firstly, a short form of vampire, which leads to the second use: the word for a femme fatale, which got its meaning from Rudyard Kipling's poem *The Vampire*, where a woman is said to have seduced a man and therefore she is labeled a vampire. Thirdly, the musical term of repetitive harmonies, something Gaga must be very familiar with, since she is working with dance music, which has a looping, repetitive feature (Wikipedia “vamp”). The word vamp also appears in *Teeth*, which gives the image of a femme fatale, although the expression is “just got my vamp”. If it is something she has, that could mean that she only has her music. *Teeth* as a whole, alludes to vampirism and thereby it is plausible that Gaga is again playing with the word.

In my own reading the animal/monster/vampire elements of Gaga's lyrics give a sense of being out of control, not caring about rules or laws, acting on impulse and thus releasing the animal/monster within. Most animals live under different circumstances than humans, with survival and multiplication in focus and with a minimum of social conventions. Thereby they represent features which Gaga celebrates. The animal reference comes back in Gaga's latest lyrics *Born This Way* in the very introduction of the song:

Just put your paws up, 'cause you were born this way, baby.

In her quest for freedom Gaga is aiming at perhaps the most controversial “otherness”, namely sexual orientation. This second part of my chapter *Celebrating otherness* discusses the fact



that Gaga's characters in her lyrics, the 'misfits', long for our approval. Both werewolves and dogs have paws, still the most striking image of the above lines from *Born This Way* is that of a well-trained dog putting its paws up to get candy. Why does she start her new song and her entire new album with an image of a happy hound eagerly awaiting its treat? It is as if the dog is saying: Please, make me happy! Show your approval! The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender social movement, which Gaga's song is arguably about, can be seen as waiting for the public to accept their disposition, much like the dog in Gaga's lyrics. When reading *Born This Way* it is clear that the song is promoting equal rights for different sexualities:

No matter gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, transgendered life  
I'm on the tight track baby

*Born This Way* has a straightforward message of diversity, including ethnicity. Gaga has also recorded a country road version of the song, which is sold for the benefit of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network.

In *Born this way*, Gaga uses both God and her own mother to support the idea of accepting your sexual preferences as innate, perhaps in the way ethnicity is:

She said, 'cause he made you perfect, babe' [...]  
God makes no mistakes

The textual "I" is referring to her mother saying that God created her and that what God makes is perfect. Throughout the song the listener is encouraged to be who they are, even if they are gay. She even goes as far in *Born This Way* as saying that there is no other way, minimizing the possibility of choice. This seems to contradict my claim that Gaga is on a quest for freedom. In her latest song Gaga represents an essentialist standpoint, claiming that the specific nature of one's sexuality is biologically determined, innate, and inevitable. In *The History of Sexuality* (first published in 1984) Michel Foucault argues that homosexuality and the whole concept of sexuality, is a social construction, which has its meaning largely in its cultural connotations. The compulsion to reveal one's sexuality as opposed to keeping it private is closely connected to a Catholic society. Thus, the

whole idea of sexual categories is closely linked to Catholicism. In this process, sexual behavior has been more noticed in society and supposedly reinforced. Initially, I defined freedom as absence of constraint, but also voluntariness. A homosexual lifestyle, for example, could also be regarded as an option, or a choice and not a fatalistic destiny.

When reading the lyrics of *Born This Way* as a whole, the theme encourages us to pursue our dreams and achieve our goals, although the title and other lines give an impression of coercion:

In the religion of the insecure, I must be myself

Gaga has many fans who follow her, and perhaps she is god in the religion of the insecure. In the lyrics, the textual “I” declares that she must be herself. Fans all over the world sing with her “I must be myself”, while they are following their leader, often with a desire to resemble her.

How much of what we see and hear of Gaga's performance is Stefani Germanotta? Can her artistic self be her self? Corona notes how “Gaga has avoided the authenticity dilemma by affirming that she *is* the persona she inhabits on stage”. Gaga herself claims: “The largest misconception is that Lady Gaga is a persona or a character. I’m not – even my mother calls me Gaga” (Corona, 7). For the listener/reader it can be perceived differently, due to the exaggerated staging of both her literary characterization and performance character, which give an impression of drama.

Another aspect of Gaga's reliance on drama can also be seen in her references to sadomasochism. In *Teeth* the first person says that she is going to love him with her hands tied. *Bad Romance* makes more obvious references to S/M, and some of the videos have those features, especially *Monster*. In pop lyrics and performance, this is not uncommon. R&B singer Rhianna released a single by the name S&M in February of 2011, but already in 1989, American singer-songwriter Madonna wrote the lyrics *Express yourself* and the music video to that song has elements of S/M. Whiteley has made an in-depth-study of both lyrics and video, and this is what she concludes:

Madonna's combination of the male suit with the feminine striptease are opened out and

given a new layer of meaning as she playfully exposes her black bra while groping her crotch to challenge the myth of female castration by questioning the 'real' of the 'phallic' feminine. [...] Madonna is manacled by a dog-collar to a large white bed. Just as the suit is associated with male power, Madonna's nakedness carries connotations of submissiveness. However, as Valerie Steele has argued, 'SM adherents uniformly stress... (that) the slave figure is very often the one "really" in command'. As such, the question is raised as to 'whose fantasy it really is'. [...] The key word to understand S/M is fantasy. The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are part of a drama or ritual [...] The S/M culture is a theatre in which sexual dramas can be acted out. (141)

In my understanding of Gaga, this is exactly how she operates. Where there is a chance to use lyrics, music, dance, textile/fashion and images combined to a drama, she will use as much as possible. Corona describes her style as “an easily recognizable identity on a cultural landscape brimming with performers desperately trying to stand out” (12). The style in itself becomes part of her expression of manifoldness. With S/M she manages to combine being sexually explicit, which gives her performance attention, with a message of sexual freedom and diversity. I am still using freedom as absence of constraint, and not claiming that by using these images Gaga is proving to be free. She is on a quest for freedom.

While indulging in roles offers some sort of freedom, another way could be to engage in autoerotic practices. Her own imagined love (or rather that of the first person) for “that lavender blonde”, also referred to as “she”, is found in *So Happy I Could Die*, where masturbation is a significant feature. Irigaray suggests that “autoeroticism” is “pleasures that can be sustained without being subordinated to the Freudian penis”. She claims that “sexuality, textual practice and political practice become inseparable, and philosophical, scientific and literary discourses are all exposed as primarily sexualised in a masculine way.” That is given as a reason to why “adult women should confront patriarchy by engaging in autoerotic practices, in lesbianism, in exploring the whole terrain of the body” (quoted in Whiteley 121). Being openly bi-sexual, Gaga is right in the core of the political discourse with her statements as well as her persona. Internet hits for “lavender blonde” suggest that she means Kim Novak, who played Madeleine in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, a film about a man who makes his wife transform into the woman he is stalking, Madeleine. Gaga makes

the lyrics become the voice of the stalker, who dreams of a life with the lavender blonde, yet it remains only a dream of an unattainable beauty, whom she is stalking, and instead of approaching her she turns to auto-eroticism. On the other hand, Gaga herself has been seen with lavender and blonde hair. That would imply that she is talking about herself, the lavender blonde, that she loves. Auto-eroticism, in the full sense of self love, is then the central theme of *So Happy I Could Die*.

“That lavender blonde” is the second reference to Hitchcock on the album. The other mention of Hitchcock’s production is found in *Bad Romance*, where we find the titles of three of his films, namely *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and *Rear Window*:

I want your psycho, your vertigo stick  
want you in my rear window, baby you're sick.

The use of the word “want” (or the French “veux”) over 45 times in the song is proof of her persistence. What she wants is something of a contradiction: a “bad romance”. It is surrounded by words like “criminal”, “disease”, “ugly”, “revenge”, and “crazy”. All these are a deliberate flirt with the forbidden fruit, something illegal, dangerous, or simply bad. Gaga clearly pushes the limit of taboos. In another song on the album she makes a reference to Benet Ramsey. JonBenet Ramsey took part in beauty pageants, thus being a 6-year-old beauty queen. Gaga is pushing the boundaries of her cultural references to the point where it is arguably provocative. She also brings up other dead icons: Marilyn (Monroe), Judy (Garland), Sylvia (Plath), and princess Diana. Gaffney calls this “camp as entertaining tragedy” (37). The concept of “camp” is “an aesthetic sensibility that regards something as appealing because of its bad taste and ironic value. The concept is closely related to kitch” (Wikipedia “camp”). Gaffney regards this as a feature of the gay community, who love the vulnerability as well as the iconography of these women and this girl.

There are five versions of the *Bad Romance* lyrics on Gaga's homepage. One of them has the word “room” instead of “rear”. Three have “rear” and one lacks that verse. When she sings it is difficult to hear which of the two words she uses and this leads me to believe that she expected the

expression to upset the listeners. The reference to “rear window” in Gaga's lyrics can be interpreted as the female character asking for anal sex, in the “rear window”. The following phrase “baby, you're sick”, could mean both that what she wishes for is sick and that she gives him a compliment for being willing to do almost anything, a more positive meaning of sick. One reason for such a connotation could be that it is unusual and extraordinary, perhaps taboo. In my reading of Gaga, that seems reason enough, although we could also reach the conclusion that she identifies with homosexual men.

According to Mary Ann Doane's theories on viewing, the man's lust for the woman is foundational to a performance situation, where these lyrics are often heard. The chance for a woman (Lady Gaga) to take a man's position as a viewer is to stage transvestism and masquerade. Via the cross-gender standpoint, the woman maintains a distance to the object and behind a mask she hides her masculinity through an abundance of femininity (quoted in Nero, 7). My point is that this is how Gaga creates a distance to her own performance, turning it into a play with gender and sexuality, all in order to open up for her audience to be a part:

The masking of feminised identity through exaggeration, 'miming the miming' imposed on women, thus has the potential to challenge phallogocentric discourse by 'overdoing' the stereotype. If, as Irigaray suggests, women exist only in men's eyes, as images, then they should take the images, magnify them, and reflect them back. Conformity to image, to representations of established femininity can then become so exaggerated as to become confrontational. (Whiteley 122)

It is notable how well this describes Gaga's performance, although perhaps it takes more than a superficial reading or listening to arrive at this perspective. When she has millions of readers/listeners discussing this, she has started something, which partly we ourselves must finish. Her display of the quiet, passive, blonde, slim female stereotype is a droplet on the stone of prejudice. Every droplet helps to create a slight indentation, and bit by bit she is, in her own words, “changing the world one sequin at a time” (ladygaga.com).

In many ways, *Born This Way* has become her credo. While obviously celebrating otherness

the lyrics also have the juvenile touch, as the singer repeats:

Don' be a drag – just be a queen

Being a drag means that you are boring. It is accepted to be “black, white, beige, chola descent” (woman of native American ancestry), “lebanese”, “orient”, “outcast, bullied or teased”. However, you must not be boring. Rather the contrary, Gaga wants us to be queens. That childlike attitude can be seen as a typical feature of her generation, and by recognizing how many fans Gaga has, we can assume that this language and imagery appeals to many millenials (the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s). Combining the words drag and queen also creates the image of a transvestite, who dresses in an overly feminine fashion. In an analysis of her artist name, Lady Gaga, Gaffney observes,

“Being a 'lady' is a construction- you are born a girl/woman, and become a 'lady' through social training and learning- which is why 'lady' is often used in drag to comment on the construction of your 'ladylike' gender: By overcoding her creation, by investing it with all the cliché signifiers of 'femininity', a drag queen embodies the Ideal Woman, she who by definition does not exist. As she constructs an identity from scratch, the drag queen deconstructs the dictatorship of gender. By definition, the drag queen is rebellious; she frightens and destabilizes people when she points out the artificiality of the very concept of femininity in our society”. (16)

There is no such thing as a perfect woman. Feminine attributes like clothes, hairstyle, and make up are a part of the construction of gender. The drag queen rebels against constraints, and in doing so deconstructs gender. Lady Gaga has taken the stereotype as far as to where we must question it.

Looking herself like a drag queen on stage, Gaga now goads us into transvestism, only to have us join her in a celebration of otherness.

## Conclusion

The result of my analysis is a deeper understanding of the images Lady Gaga conveys of girls/women in her lyrics. I found support for my original thesis statement: “In the album *The Fame Monster* and the single *Born This Way*, Lady Gaga demonstrates her quest for freedom and power both sexually and personally”. Gaga's girls are armed with sexuality. They break with gender roles. They seek to exercise power in being active as opposed to passive. They are often sexual subjects rather than objects. Despite all this, they also exhibit feelings of low self-esteem and admit to a certain dependency on boys/men, while the reclaiming of power over their own lives is the goal. They find strength in female companionship and are no strangers to lesbianism or auto-eroticism.

As a comment on what Gaga is really achieving I want to question the outcome in forms of emancipation. Her focus on sex admittedly leads to attention on her performance and arouses great interest in mainly a young audience. The result is no more “fucking as liberation” for Gaga and her fans than it was for Janis Joplin. When portraying a female sexual subject, Gaga risks becoming, like Joplin, trapped in an unwanted submissiveness. The difference between being 'loved' and being 'fucked' remains of importance even for Gaga and her listeners/readers. There is still a defining difference between being 'wanted' or being 'available' to the vast majority of people. Still, ambiguity is an important feature of Gaga's lyrics, since we can relate to those feelings. The casualness and carelessness, even violent sexual fantasies, are contrasted with her wish to be saved and her commitment to being herself.

It can be argued that this world is complex, something we are more aware of through our access to the world wide web. Gaga plays with the stereotypes of the “monster” and the “blonde girl” - the beast and the beauty. When we join in, our understanding of gender issues stands a chance to deepen. Parody, most obvious in the video of *Bad Romance*, changes our perspective and helps us laugh at the ridiculousness of traditional, stereotype gender roles. Whiteley says it all: “conformity to image [...] can become so exaggerated as to become confrontational” (122). The

blonde beauty is frequently contrasted with beastly monsters and every single one of the millions of readers/listeners is challenged to interpret/confront the images expressed in the text and the performance. This stereotype is exaggerated in a manner that resembles transvestites, thus putting sexual diversity on the agenda.

In the statement “I was born this way” lies the whole essentialist standpoint, which is really contrasted to the concept of the constructed “lady” in her assumed name, as well as with the liberal values Gaga usually expresses. Not only was she “born this way”, but she claims God made her the way she is. It is a beautiful thought that each and every person is made by God exactly the way they are and that they therefore are perfect, because “God makes no mistakes”, stated in the lyrics of *Born This Way*. It supports diversity and manifoldness as ideals. However, it also undermines the idea of free will, as argued in chapter two.

For a young person growing up, Gaga’s performance does not offer an easy solution to the issues of gender roles and gender equality. Her art can lead to important conversations, debates and discussions, which can help anyone who tries to form a lifestyle of their own. On the other hand, the need for confessing for instance one’s sexuality (coming out) seems linked to the sacrament of penance in Catholicism. The focus in itself contributes to our over-sexualized society, where we are constantly exposed to expressions of sexuality. Emancipation is not achieved through an abundance of sex, although we might need to be able to talk about it. Gaga dictates our agenda. Hopefully, in the future, there will be no need to define oneself as homosexual, heterosexual or autosexual. Humans are sexual.



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