

Analyzing 1980s' Gender and Materiality: Madonna's *Material Girl*

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This thesis deals with Madonna's work, *Material Girl* (1985), and reveals crossing the gender line and her intention to reverse gender roles. It will be shown that Madonna challenges the stereotypical gender mold and redraws the gender boundary, focusing on the material success. As Susan McClary points out, some scholars have analyzed Madonna in terms of whether she is feminist or not. The lyrics and story of the *Material Girl* video express Madonna as a strong feminist and Madonna's obvious domination over rich men, as she has attained more material wealth than those men. Ironically, men beg for her love using their money, but she is not interested in their wealth. When men who have succeeded materially come up to her by turns, just sings, "That's all right." She is a big — and material — girl; thus she knows that material men are not attractive and they easy come, easy go. Moreover, the video is a remake of Marilyn Monroe's "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Madonna utilizes Monroe's stereotypical gender role in the 1950s.

Music historian Katherine Charlton states, "Madonna gained commercial appeal and success, much with the help of MTV" (21). Music Television (MTV) was started in 1981 by Warner Communication and American Express (Woideck 15), dramatically changing the cultural landscape both in and outside the United States. Musicians in the 1980s such as Madonna and Michael Jackson expressed their ideology by using visual media and They resisted authority or social stereotypes of racial and sexual minorities. Because not only the music but also the images transmitted through MTV expressed the musicians' ideas, most previous studies on Madonna have analyzed her music videos, lyrics and concert performances.

The *Material Girl* video was released in 1985. In the United States, as

briefly discussed, the 1980s were symbolized by the presidency of Ronald Reagan from 1981 to 1989 (the “Reagan Years”), a time that epitomized the rise of conservatism as the dominant creed in American political and cultural life. Historian Haynes Johnson says that the 1980s’ “Reaganomics” gave more power to corporate business. Much of the 1980s was characterized by social conservatism and political backlash against feminism. The era, increasing global telecommunications and liberal market economies, was also characterized by a new blend of conservative values. In addition, the Religious Right attracted the “silent majority” and exerted strong influence over people’s ethics and social issues (140). The 1980s are often referred to as “the Greed Decade,” reflecting the economic and social climate (Nachbar and Lause 4). The 1980s was a time of social and cultural conservatism that would reconsider the American liberal character.

During the Reagan era, feminism lost its momentum. Madonna debuted in the middle of this era. In those days, some viewers recognized her as an icon of feminism, while others did not. After she released her third single *Like a Virgin* (1984), she was attacked by feminists because they feared that her attitude damaged the women’s liberation movement. Her dress and the lyrics of *Like a Virgin* are sexy and womanly, and the video explicitly stresses women’s sexual relationships with men. Dave Marsh, a *Time* magazine writer, wrote: “Madonna seemed to be advertising some unholy sacrament. . . . [She is] the product of the shopping-mall culture” (qtd. in Anderson 156). An editor of *Billboard*, Paul Grein, also commented: “Madonna will be out of the music business in six months” (156). To such criticism, Madonna has responded with somewhat discontented and protesting feelings: “I get so much bad press for being overtly sexual. When someone like Prince, Elvis, or [Mick] Jagger does the same thing, they are being honest, sensual human beings. But when I do it: ‘Oh, please. Madonna, you’re setting the women’s movement back a million years” (qtd. in Anderson 156–7).

Then, Madonna repeatedly voiced her feminist message such as “Believe in yourself,” and “I do everything of my own volition. I’m in charge.” Her message gradually reached to both general viewers and feminists alike. One of the most famous Madonnaphiles, Camille Paglia, asserts, “Madonna is the true feminist. . . . Madonna has taught young women to be fully female and sexu-

al while still exercising control over their lives. Madonna shows 'girls how to be attractive, sensual, energetic, ambitious, aggressive, and funny — all at the same time'" (4). Since then, most of the previous studies on Madonna have stressed the fact that she is a liberating icon. By the end of the 1980s, Madonna was fully engaged with feminism.

John Fiske analyzes *Material Girl* in terms of the relationship between Madonna and her fans and Madonna's feminist attraction for them (the "wannabes"). Madonna has been sending radical messages, and wanna-bes have projected their experiences on Madonna. Fiske asserts that fans are not "cultural dopes" (97); they choose such information and messages are acceptable to them. And if they intentionally choose Madonna's message, it means that the wanna-bes possibly oppose domination by males.

Fiske also points out the close relationship between Madonna and Marilyn Monroe. He says of *Material Girl*: "Her [Madonna's] physical similarity to Marilyn Monroe is stressed, . . . [and it is] an intertextual reference to another star commonly thought to owe her success to her ability to embody masculine fantasy" (96). However, there is a clear difference between the two. To Madonna, to be sexy and womanly does not contradict to be strong and independent. Madonna was definitely a feminist.

Monroe was obviously in Madonna's mind. Her video is Monroe's remake (see Figure 1 and 2). At a glance, *Material Girl* and "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" share a materialistic aspect. However, Madonna's characterization



Figure 1 Source: "Diamonds are Girl's Best Friend."



Figure 2 Source: *Material Girl*.

does not agree with that of Monroe, especially in the treatment of the role of gender. Monroe is a representative actress of the 1950s. She was a Hollywood icon and was idolized by Hollywood as a sex goddess even after her death. Marilyn Monroe is an established American myth. American novelist Norman Mailer applauded Monroe's sexuality: "She was our angel, the sweet angel of sex. . ." (qtd. in Hubert 5). During Monroes time, mass audiences looked upon her as a sex symbol, and at her death, the American sex object became an American myth. Feminist Gloria Steinem wrote an article on Marilyn in *Ms* in 1972. The main aim of Steinem was to "reevaluate the life of Marilyn Monroe" (38). Indeed, Monroe was not only a sexual actress but an intelligent woman. Though she projected a sexual image, she struggled to overcome it; she tried to alter her sexual image, but general public, and especially Hollywood, did not change their view of her.

On the other hand, Madonna is always in the midst of various social issues. She intentionally raises sexual, gender and racial questions. At the beginning, feminists attacked her sexual appearance. However, they have gradually reversed their analysis of her, claiming that she embodies feminism in her works. Thus, the fact that Monroe's stereotypical gender role is used by Madonna clarifies their difference. It can be said that Monroe was a victim of Holly-

wood's patriarchal system, and masculine desire that forced her to remain as an "angel." Monroe caught Madonna's attention as Madonna wanted to challenge the myth of an American sexual goddess and struggled to reverse Monroe's image. Monroe was not an angel but a victim exploited by Hollywood's patriarchal system. Madonna says of Monroe, "Marilyn Monroe was a victim, and I'm not. That's why there is really no comparison" (St. Michael 89). This comment shows that, Madonna distinguishes Monroe from herself.

Next, the *Material Girl* video will be analyzed in terms of the redrawing of the gender boundary. The video's rough outline is a love story between a man who pretends to be working-class person (he is actually a rich producer) and a female performer (Madonna) who has succeeded in the film industry. The producer is watching a film performed by Madonna and insists that she is brilliant. He wants to approach her, and is waiting for her near her dressing room. Madonna arrives with a stylish man. Then, she is on the phone and tells someone: "He [a male dancer who has appeared in the film] thinks I would be impressed by receiving expensive gifts. . . . You want it [the gift]?" She is surrounded by many gifts; however, she seems dissatisfied with them. The producer overhears the conversation and throws his present into the garbage. Instead, he gives wild white daisies to Madonna (see Figure 3). The video ends



Figure 3 Source: *Material Girl*.



Figure 4 Source: *Material Girl*.

with Madonna and the producer kissing as rain falls on the window.

In another scene, Marilyn Monroe-like Madonna is dancing with many male dancers. They give jewels and gifts to fascinate her, but she comically rejects them (see Figure 4), because she, a movie star, has enough money to get those by herself. She is not controlled by material on male economic status. She is dancing with seven dancers, and they are begging for her attention. It seems they are her servants. Though she seems to have an interest in their gifts, she never accepts them, and she changes her dancing partner by turns. In addition, there is a suggestive scene where Madonna forces a dancer to fall down to the floor, and stomps on him (see Figure 5). The scene expresses her domination over male dancers. It can be said that Madonna consistently has the power to control the male dancers. They show off money and economic success to her, but her wealth is beyond theirs. She has the control and can choose whom she wants to dance with and date. In other words, she takes the initiative with males by having achieved economic success, and it seems to reflect women's economic advancement and independence in the conservative but prosperous 1980s.

Madonna's criterion for reversing gender roles is prosperity. This can be seen in the lyrics. She sings:



Figure 5 Source: *Material Girl*.

Some boys kiss me, some boys hug me
I think they're o.k.
If they don't give me proper credit
I just walk away

The first stanza shows Madonna's domination over men. She does not have a special interest in boys, just saying, "They're o.k." She sings that she wants proper credit. From this, it can be understood that she desires social respect and prestige, which guarantee her independence.

They can beg and they can plead
But they can't see the light, that's right
'cause the boy with the cold hard cash
Is always Mister Right, 'cause we are
Living in a material world
And I am a material girl
You know that we are living in a material world

And I am a material girl

The second and third stanzas express a satirical view of wealthy men. Even if they attain “cold hard cash,” they cannot gain the love and attention of Madonna. These lines evoke Marilyn Monroe, who sang,

Men go cold as girls grow old
 And we all lose our charms in the end,
 But square cut or pear shape
 These rocks don't lose their shape
 Diamonds are a girl's best friend (“Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend”)

The lyrics claim that men achieve dominance over women by means of material success. If women grow old, men lose interest in them. Monroe could achieve fame as a sexual icon and material success as a film star in Hollywood, but she was afraid of growing old and losing sexual charm. Women's internal maturity was not evaluated in the song. She represented a stereotypical gender role in Hollywood in the 1950s. Madonna, however, is not exploited by the capitalist system; she achieves material success and obtains as many diamonds as she wants by herself.

Some boys romance, some boys slow dance
 That's all right with me
 If they can't raise my interest then I
 Have to let them be
 Some boys try and some boys lie but
 I don't let them play
 Only boys who save their pennies
 Make my rainy day, 'cause they are [living in material world.]

These stanzas clarify that Madonna refuses to lose herself by any kind of men. The men in the video look all rich and they show that materialism covers their identity. Madonna says they are not attractive at all and believes that only social respect can influence her; thus she does not play with rich boys (dancers). Only the producer gives her white wild daisies, which seem to represent non-material values such as humbleness, naturalness, honesty and simplicity.

Such values attract Madonna. She is attracted to a man who has spiritual values and who can enrich her with new experience.

Boys may come and boys may go
 And that's all right you see
 Experience has made me rich
 And now they're after me, 'cause everybody's [in material world.]

“Experience has made me rich” is Madonna’s message. Men who succeed materially come up to her by turns, but Madonna just sings, “That’s all right.” The lyrics show that although these rich men are begging for her love, she refuses them because they do not give her proper values and beliefs. She is also a big material girl; therefore, she knows that materialistic and rich men are everywhere. She succeeds materially; thus she can achieve domination over men. At the same time, she is not simply rich — she is “experienced” and her experience attracts men. Monroe was submissive to men in terms of power and material success, but Madonna is not. Madonna keeps the initiative and chooses the man she wants. Thus she redraws gender role boundaries.

In conclusion, Madonna redraws gender boundaries, and reversed the gender roles. In the 1980s, known as the Greed decade, the feminist movement entered into another dimension, focusing on middle-class, working-class, and non-white women. Madonna released *Material Girl* in the midst of that era, encouraging those women to be strong. Also, she projected the spirit of the prosperous decade into her lyrics and video. This chapter has analyzed it from the viewpoint of gender roles based on her material success. She depicts her dominance which is confirmed by her own experience. She believes that women must be positive and powerful. Moreover, she refers to the 1950s icon, Marilyn Monroe, who was assigned a stereotypical gender role by Hollywood’s patriarchal system. Though Monroe struggled with this, she was unable to change it. While Monroe was exploited and could not reject her stereotypical female image, in contrast, Madonna illustrates domination in her video and lyrics, redefining gender dynamics by focusing on material success.

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