

## LYRIC: 'WHERE'S MY SNARE?': EMINEM AND SYLVIA PLATH

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*Approach: Psychoanalytic Criticism*

Released on 16 September 2002, Eminem's song 'Cleanin' Out My Closet' signals itself as a child's rebellion in its title by alluding to the common parental demand to clean up private space in the family home and using this as a metaphor for emotionally and mentally exorcising past traumas inflicted by the parent.<sup>1</sup> Presented as an image of the repository for the clutter and 'skeletons' of the past, the closet is also both the psyche of the singer and a representation of the child's space in relation to the mother, ultimately the womb.<sup>2</sup>

In Ian McEwan's Kafkaesque short story 'Conversations with a Cupboard Man' in *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), the narrative stages a monologue delivered to a social worker by a man who repeatedly shuts himself in a cupboard to escape the world. One of the first things the narrator says is: 'I never saw my father because he died before I was born. I think problems started right there – it was my mother who brought me up and no one else . . . She was twisted up, you know, that's where I got it from.'<sup>3</sup> The cupboard man says he has never learned to be an adult, that his mother infantilised him and was obsessed with him remaining a child, 'busy trying to push me back up her womb' until he was 17: 'That's why I spit on the memory of my mother because she made me this way.'<sup>4</sup> When his mother then marries the cupboard man feels neglected and leaves for an institution, until he is 21, where he tells the social worker he painted a picture of his mother: 'I made large red mouths all over the paper – that was her lipstick – and in the mouths I painted it black. That was because I hated her. Though I didn't really.'<sup>5</sup> After leaving the home, the narrator is abused at work, leaves and takes to stealing, for which he is imprisoned. Now, released from jail:

I want to be contained. I want to be small . . . I go in [that cupboard], I lock the door behind me and sit in the darkness for hours . . . I envy these babies I see in the street being bundled and carried about by their mothers . . . I want to be one year old again. But it won't happen. I know it won't.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to elements of violence and maltreatment, McEwan's story and Eminem's song have similarities of abandonment by the father and ambivalence towards the mother, whom the child hates and loves, resents and implores, loathes and desires. Above all, each text suggests the importance of the speaker's relationship with the mother, in the significance attaching to the womb-like closet/cupboard. In the second verse of the song, Eminem sings 'I got some skeletons in my closet' which he wants to expose, 'before they thrown me inside my coffin and close it', thus completing the womb-to-womb imagery that, by the association of death and birth, takes him back to the first year of his life: 'I'll take you back to '73 . . . I was a baby, maybe I was just a couple of months', when his father left home: 'I just fuckin wished he would die.' The use of the past tense ('wished') associates a desire for the death of the father with a very early childhood wish, an Oedipal desire. Eminem then avers that he would never leave his own child, even if he hated his wife – a significant comment because the lyric is a song of hatred against his mother: his father's wife. This is asserted in distinction from his own father and is underlined by the reference to recent events in Eminem's life when in response to his wife's infidelity he chose violence over desertion: 'What I did was stupid, no doubt it was dumb, But the smartest shit I did was take them bullets outta that gun, 'Cuz I'da killed em; shit I woulda shot Kim and them both.'<sup>7</sup> Notably, the assertion that he will not leave his child does not mean Eminem will not leave his wife, which in turn could mean that he is not allowed to see his child by a court (especially given the intimations of violence and the possibility of murder suggested by the song). The implication, by the direct juxtaposition and implied comparison, is that his father should have left his wife, Eminem's mother, but not the child, Eminem.

The lyric is in large measure a denunciation of Eminem's mother Debbie Mathers-Briggs, who had recorded a rap CD entitled 'Why Are You Doing Me Like You Are' to tell her side of the story of their dispute in Eminem's medium. She explained in interviews that she had sued her son on advice from her lawyer (she eventually was awarded \$1,600), because Eminem needed to understand the seriousness of his actions when he spoke publicly against her. As noted in the song, his mother herself has been accused of suffering from Munchausen's syndrome: harming her children to gain attention for herself (by contrast, Eminem says, 'I would never diss my own momma just to get recognition'). In 1996 Mathers-Briggs was taken to court by school officials for allegedly abusing Eminem's half-brother Nathan. She later pleaded 'no contest' to reduced charges.<sup>8</sup>

Though Eminem in the song says that he would not leave his own child the way that his father left him, there is a parallel and a displacement involved here. The person he would abandon is his mother, and in this abandonment he, the father, would also take away her granddaughter. Though the specific action of his father, abandoning his child, is vehemently refused, the general action of rejecting family members (as long as they are adults) is accepted.<sup>9</sup> Indeed

Eminem re-enacts one behavioural aspect of the father from whom he asserts his difference by repudiating his mother – the woman his father deserted. Also his rejection of his mother is portrayed in terms of completing and healing the pain caused by the father's abandonment of *him*.

Eminem had earlier acted in a similar way – making private matters public before they were known privately – by taking his daughter from her mother to the recording studio to contribute some vocals to a song aimed against Eminem's wife. Which is to say that as much as a response to his mother's actions, the recording of the song acts like a snare: a device that traps or entangles someone unawares. A snare is itself a double-sided device in its operation it both attacks and holds, harms and domesticates the other. So, Eminem's reference to the snare drum at the start of the song illuminates his intention towards his mother,<sup>10</sup> to catch her out and cause harm but also to exercise control and stop her fleeing (Eminem muses as the song begins: 'Where's my snare? I have no snare in my headphones – there you go. Yeah . . . yo, yo').

Music lyrics are not the same as poetry; but this is a statement that is worth examining. Before the novelist Giles Foden compared Eminem to Robert Browning in 2001,<sup>11</sup> a debate in the 1980s concerned the relative merits of the lyrics of Bob Dylan and the poetry of John Keats – an ultimately futile discussion inasmuch as Dylan's lyrics are specifically written to accompany music and Keats's poetry is not. They are thus different art forms and comparing them in certain respects is little more edifying than comparing a novel and a film. However, in other respects, comparisons may be profitable, for example with regard to theme, intertextuality and uses of language such as rhyme and enjambement. A lyric can be considered separately from the music it accompanies in a performance or recording, but to do so is not to discuss the song, it is to discuss the words as a separate text, as critics may do with a playscript in isolation from its dramatic performance(s).

His stage name being itself a pseudonym taken from the initials of his real name Marshall Mathers, Eminem's earlier lyrics adopted personae, most obviously Slim Shady, the alter ego on his first album. 'The Eminem Show', the title of his third album, is mentioned in 'Cleanin Out My Closet' to reference the way in which a life in the glare of publicity is a life lived publicly, permanently on show. Yet, 'Cleanin Out My Closet' appears to have little or no assumed identity – it is as close to an uncensored lyric of self-expression as poems by Wordsworth or Heaney. The chorus's repeated assertion of self through the repetition of 'I' at the start of every line emphasises the aspect of confession. The lines of the lyric are self-reflexive to the extent that they argue the singer would not launch a tirade against his mother in public 'just to get recognition', while implying that this is precisely what she did in relation to her son. The lyric is also repeatedly ambiguous in terms of its use of the second person, and shifts its apparent address in each of the first and third verses. Listeners are liable to believe that they are being addressed by such lines as 'Have you ever been hated or discriminated against?' or 'put yourself in my position', but by the end of

each of these verses the lines are being addressed directly to the singer's mother. The second verse is also ambiguous when it declares 'I'll take you back to '73', while there seems to be a direct statement to the audience in the line, 'I'd like to welcome y'all to "The Eminem Show"', though this may be rhetoric or a simple idiomatic expression rather than an address to the listener.

Either way it is read, this final line is a reference to modern-day TV culture and the ways in which celebrities' lives are not just performed but constructed in public, though it may also allude to confessional talk shows like those hosted by Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer. Indebted to the spiritual and the confession, the contemporary music lyric frequently offers to reveal, to declare and to testify. In doing so, once the artist has become famous, it often critiques or promises exposure of the celebrity. As Mick Jagger sings on 'It's Only Rock n Roll' (1974):

If I could stick a knife in my heart  
Suicide right on stage  
Would it be enough for your teenage lust  
Would it help to ease the pain? . . .  
If I could dig down deep in my heart  
Feelings would flood on the page  
Would it satisfy ya . . .

Such a lyric acknowledges the messianic aspect to rock musicians' personae but also the psychological investments fan(atic)s have in the emotional revelations of performers, which can be expressed in terms of a desire for physical, even visceral exposure. As Jacques Lacan argues, the motivation behind the voyeur's 'passive' act is to see everything because of the sense that something is always hidden.<sup>12</sup> There is no end to the striptease until the stripper is stripped of everything and nothing remains to be revealed – all that remains is no-body. This is echoed in the video accompanying Robbie Williams's song 'Rock DJ' (2001) in which, standing in the centre of a recording studio that has become a miniature roller-skate rink, he tears off his clothes and then his flesh to throw to the women circling him – until he is only a skeleton. The fan's or the media's desire for (the possession of) celebrities is an aggressive act that wishes to tear away layers to reveal what is(n't) hidden. To an extent, critical analysis is characterised by a similar desire for revelation.

While acknowledging the formal difference between poetry and music lyrics, from a literary perspective it is worth considering how 'Cleanin' Out My Closet' has several facets in common thematically with a poem that has undergone considerable critical analysis: Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy'. In her guise as confessional poet, Plath has had some direct and indirect influence on popular music. For example, a closer immediate comparison for Plath's poem would be Madonna's song 'Oh Father' from her album *Like a Prayer*. Madonna has named Plath, whom she read as a teenager, as one of her inspirations, and in some respects the lyrics to her song bear direct comparison with 'Daddy'.<sup>13</sup>

This is also true of 'Daddy' and 'Cleanin' Out My closet'. For example, in addition to the sustained address to the parents, there are the profane, vituperative attacks: 'You selfish bitch; I hope you fuckin burn in hell for this shit (Eminem) and 'Daddy, I have had to kill you . . . Daddy, daddy, you bastard I'm through' (Plath). Plath has said that 'Daddy' is about a girl with an Elektra complex and it would be possible to read Eminem's lyric as Oedipal in its wish to kill the father as well as control the mother as a "motherfuckin" kid'. Given that he was raised without a father at home, his mother also occupies a double position as both parents simultaneously.

Points of comparison between Plath's poem and Eminem's lyric must also include the way in which they are principally interested in matters of psychical transference and performance: in both poem and lyric we find the appeal of confessional texts that engage the listener by seeming to offer understanding and catharsis.<sup>14</sup> The following two observations are drawn from Anne Stevenson's critical biography of Plath:

'Daddy' operates by generating a duplicate of Plath's presumed psychic state in the reader, so that we reexperience her grief, rage, masochism and revenge, whether or not these fit the 'facts'.<sup>15</sup>

Anyone who has heard the recording of 'Daddy' that Sylvia made for the British Council that October will remember the shock of pure fury in her articulation, the smouldering rage with which she is declaring herself free . . . The implication is that after this exorcism her life can begin again, that she will be reborn.<sup>16</sup>

In the last four stanzas of the poem, like Eminem's equal disgust at his mother and his wife, Plath shifts her venom towards her husband, whom she sees as 'a model' of her father: 'A man in black with a Meinkampf look'. Similarly, Eminem sees his wife as an image of his mother, and his daughter as a representation of himself when a child. This is the child (his daughter and his young self) he wants to protect, while he vows he will refuse the male parental role model with which he has grown up (all of the lyric pitches good children against bad parents, in which Eminem sees himself as one of the former determined not to become one of the latter)<sup>17</sup>. This intimates how the family triad creates a template for the child's adult relationship. Plath is explicit about this, as she seeks replication of the father while rejecting childhood relationships, and Eminem creates the paradox in which he can declare 'I'm not sick' while claiming he is reflecting society's sickness, thus projecting his 'badness' onto society in order to see his actions as a symptom of that society.

Elizabeth Bronfen notes that Plath's poem deals with familiar childhood fantasies, embracing the parental loss that denies a traditional happy family. Like Eminem, she seeks to become self-sufficient through self-assertion:

As she declares 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through,' she embarks upon yet another family romance, the fantasy of the orphan, no longer

suffering from the reminiscence of a lost seaside childhood and its parental representative but rather fully innocent of the traces of the past – indeed so self-reliant is this utter dislocation from any family root as not to need any paternal addressee at all.<sup>18</sup>

This is similar to the ambiguity of address in Eminem's lyric, in which he also strives for a transcendent position free from both the parent and the past. Where Eminem differs from Plath, however, is in deciding, in the last line, to stage his death rhetorically to a living parent, rather than bury a dead one ('I am dead – dead to you as can be'). In both texts, however, death is not an emotional release; instead the speakers endeavour to persuade themselves of a psychological ending by declaring and asserting the finality of death. In their different ways both texts insist upon a final breaking free from the parent. In 'Daddy', Plath asserts that she has finally killed in her psyche the father who died when she was a girl ('You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white'). Eminem's lyric also aims to expunge once and for all the negative influence of a parent on the eve of his 30th birthday.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of affect, what the poem and the lyric have in common is rage (and his is not just from the speakers, for example, 'emotions run deep as ocean's exploding/Tempera flaring from parents'). In Eminem's lyric this is most strongly expressed in terms of death. Aside from explaining that he would have killed his wife Kim and her lover if he had had bullets in a gun he was carrying, Eminem's lyric envisages his mother's funeral, states a wish that his father was dead (echoed in the mother who 'wished' Eminem had died), and declares himself dead to his mother. These are aspects of the act of 'cleaning out my closet': expelling the skeletons of the 'dead', expressing the mind's aggression to clean it out, and projecting the bad parts of the self onto the mother.

Melanie Klein explains this in terms of object-relations theory in which the infant develops through the psychic interaction between external and internal (mental) objects and in which relationships with important objects (of which the most important is the mother) contain a mixture of love and hate.<sup>20</sup> In this psychodynamic view, the infant's ego-development requires defences such as splitting the object and creative/destructive impulses, idealisation, introjection and projection, and the denial of inner and outer reality. Klein says that projection is used as an ego defence-mechanism and it originates from the deflection of the death instinct outwards.<sup>21</sup> Here, whereby the bad parts of the ego are split off and projected into the mother, the mother is felt to be the bad self:

Much of the hatred against parts of the self is now directed towards the mother. This leads to a particular form of identification which establishes the prototype of an aggressive object relation. I suggest for these processes the term 'projective identification'. When projection is mainly derived from the infant's impulse to harm or to control the mother, he feels her to

be a persecutor. In psychotic disorders this identification of an object with the hated parts of the self contributes to the intensity of the hatred directed against other people.<sup>22</sup>

Aspects of this view are present in Eminem's lyric, not least in the aggressive portrayal of his mother as the one who should be hated, not himself. The verses also shift between Eminem's position as someone who is 'hated', 'discriminated against', 'protested and demonstrated against' to someone who hates: 'give 'em hell long as I'm breathin'. However, the climax of the song is a specific attack on the mother who is seen as the bad object trying to portray herself as the good: 'See what hurts me the most is you won't admit you was wrong/Bitch do your song – keep tellin yourself that you was a mom!' In terms of the psychological development of the child, early feelings of overpowering rage aimed at not just the physical mother but also her internalised image make it impossible for the child to synthesise 'good' and 'bad' parental images. Thus, for Eminem the split occurs between the 'good' parent (here seemingly a role taken by himself in relation to his daughter) and the 'bad' parent, his mother.

Lastly, if one were to look at the lyric differently, it might be said that Eminem's song foregrounds a disturbing portrayal of a contemporary Western crisis of masculinity in its indirect attack on not mothers but husbands and fathers. Both the singer and his father are portrayed as delinquent: the father through abandonment, the singer through violence and armed assault. Yet Eminem is content to blame his behaviour on his environment: on his parents and society more generally – he sees himself as a sign of the times. It is also clear that the racial politics of contemporary music involves broader questions of collective identity running alongside personal, psychological factors. In the chapter on Michael Jackson, that singer's complex relationship to chromatism was broached, but the elements of passing, mimicry and cultural appropriation operate in many directions. In some profiles of Jackson, the singer is considered to be a black man who wishes to be white, yet the history of postwar mainstream white popular music is frequently characterised in terms of the appropriation of black musical forms. The most recent of these are rap and hip-hop, black street styles that have entered the mainstream after and perhaps only through the fame of Eminem, the first global rap superstar because the first significantly successful white rapper.<sup>23</sup>

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