

*Third Wave Feminism: Under Rug Swept*

Third Wave Feminism in the Music and Videos of Alanis Morissette

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## Abstract

This essay examines the music of Alanis Morissette as an example of third wave feminist discourse. After detailing some of the key concepts involved in third wave feminism, the essay moves on to look at the ways in which Morissette's songs and videos present those third wave feminist values. However, the essay argues that Morissette often seems to do more harm than good to the third wave feminist agenda because of her preoccupation with sexuality, and with her abrasive persona (particularly on songs from her first album). The essay argues that Morissette's music can give the impression that sex is "all there is" to the contemporary feminist agenda. Further, this essay argues that much of Morissette's work on her second and third album seem to betray certain third wave feminist concerns.

*What part of our history is reinvented and under rug swept?*

*What part of your memory is selective and tends to forget?*

“Hands Clean” by Alanis Morissette

Introduction: *You Oughta Know* this isn't feminism

When Alanis Morissette's first American single, “You Oughta Know,” was popular, I once heard a radio announcer introduce it by saying “hell hath no fury like Alanis scorned.” Puns such as this seem to sum up popular reaction to “You Oughta Know” (Salvato, 1997, pp. 186-189), and Morissette's reputation as founder of the “woman you don't wanna mess with” subgenre of rock music still sticks with her seven years later (Browne, 2002, pp. 77-78). What we have in Morissette, then, is an influential music star who is widely hailed as embodying and representing values of third wave feminism (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001, pp. 194-208).

Specifically, third wave feminism embraces sexual expression, sexual desires, individual freedom of choice, and a confrontational approach to enacting these and other feminist values (Findlen, 1995 & Lamm, 1995). Without getting into specific examples from songs and videos yet, I think it is fair to say that these tenets of third wave feminism are present in Morissette's music. Having said that, I argue that her music's status as an example of third wave feminist rhetoric shows us some potential problems with third wave feminism, especially where its representation in the media is concerned. Further, I propose that much of Morissette's work betrays key tenets of third wave feminism.

This claim goes one step beyond what Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein propose in their essay on Morissette. Those authors seem to argue that Morissette's music packages and presents third wave feminism in such a way that it is reintroduced into dominant patriarchal codes and discourses (2001, p. 194). They seem to avoid any indictment of

third wave feminism per se, choosing rather to treat Morissette's music (as well as Kate Moss' modeling work and the television show *Ally McBeal*) as something like "bad examples" which come about because they are products of commercial media institutions.

My take is slightly different. This essay argues that Morissette's music demonstrates some flaws in third wave feminism. Further, significant portions of Morissette's rhetoric challenge and argue against some of the tenets of third wave feminism. This essay will examine several of Morissette's songs, including "You Oughta Know," "Ironic," "Thank U," "Unsent," and "Hands Clean." Further, the essay will also discuss the videos for "Ironic" and "Hands Clean." The analysis of these two videos will demonstrate how music videos can change, problematize, and influence the meaning of a song. My analysis serves to foster critical thought about third wave feminism through an analysis of one "rhetor." In doing this, it will hopefully cause readers (and myself) to think about ways in which contemporary feminism might be "done" better.

#### Alanis Morissette: Supposed former infatuation junkie

Lamm (1995) discusses the ways in which third wave feminism values a confrontational, "in your face" approach to handling conflict in which gender is involved (pp. 85-94). And, as Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein point out, the music on Morissette's first album, "Jagged Little Pill," is full of songs in which a wronged woman lets the man you did the wrong know, in no uncertain terms what she thinks about him (2001, p. 198). The authors point to this as a problem because confrontation is always linked to sexual exploitation (2001, p. 199). I think this is a valid argument, and I would like to take it a step further. If Morissette is indicative of contemporary women, then

what does it say about women if the only things worth getting “worked up” about are sex and love?

The music on “Jagged Little Pill” shows a definite preoccupation with sex and love (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001, p. 198), and as such serves as a demonstration of the third wave feminist tendency to embrace sexuality. But it also serves as an example of how sex has become, in the eyes of many, “all there is” to third wave feminism (Bellafante, 1998, pp. 54-62). That is not to say any form of feminism should not be concerned with matters of sex and love. But notice that sex is the only “specific” issue mentioned in the three basic tenets of third wave feminism as outlined by Findlen (1995), Lamm (1995), and Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein. The other major tenets (freedom of choice, feeling good about oneself, individuality, and a confrontational attitude) are all general. That is not to say they are not valuable. Because they are general, they can apply to everything. But they are also not directed to specifics. Sexuality is the only specific, at least when it comes to the type of “Reader’s Digest” version of third wave feminism that is likely to make its way into mass consciousness. Morissette’s music further fosters a type of feminism that could be said to be “sexcentric.”

It also doesn’t seem to me to be enough to offer an argument that Morissette (and third wave feminism) encourages women to express their anger when wronged, and that release can carry over into other areas of life. Appropriate reactions to jilted lovers are not the same as appropriate reactions to unfair bosses, or meddlesome family members, or any other sources of conflict in life. If Morissette’s rhetoric gives its audience nothing but confrontation tied to sexual exploitation, then she is only showing women how to respond to one unique form of oppression.

Consider the types of behavior Morissette sings about in “You Oughta Know.” She harasses her former lover by calling him “in the middle of dinner.” Further, she offers what could be interpreted as a veiled threat on his life in the following excerpt:

“And every time you speak her name,  
does she know how you told me you’d hold me until you died...till you died?  
But you’re still alive, and I’m here to remind you” (Morissette, 1995a).

In this, and other examples, we have a woman who displays the type of anger many of us (male and female) have felt toward former lovers. And it may be that we can get away with this type of discourse when it comes to former lovers. But would such an approach work in other areas of conflict? Morissette, then, seems in this example to be a third wave feminist rhetor who offers guidance on nothing but sexual issues. And “You Oughta Know” is not the only Morissette song that deals with love and sex. This essay isn’t long enough to go into all of them. A dissertation probably isn’t long enough.

Morissette’s latest song, “Hands Clean,” offers another important example of how she deals with sexual issues. And in this song (and the accompanying video) we see her going so far as to betray third wave feminist values on sexuality. In the song, Morissette sings of having an affair with a man, and then letting him dictate the future of the relationship. The following excerpt shows how she lets him “have his way” about avoiding the relationship for an extended period:

“We’ll fast forward to a few years later,  
and no one knows except the both of us.  
And I have honored your request for silence,  
and you’ve washed your hands clean of this” (Morissette, 2002).

The third wave feminist might go as far as to say that Morissette’s actions are indeed “feminist” if she is getting what she wants out of the relationship. In other words, it may

be acceptable for a woman to be used for sex is that's all she wants from the encounter. Freedom of choice, after all, is a cornerstone of third wave feminism. But such is not the case in "Hands Clean," as the following excerpt demonstrates:

"I wish I could tell the world  
'cuz you're such a pretty thing when you're done up properly.  
I might wanna marry you one day  
if you watch your weight and keep that firm body" (Morissette, 2002).

These lyrics betray third wave feminism in two ways. First, we learn here that ending the relationship and keeping it secret is not what Morissette wants in the song. She is allowing a man to have control in a sexual relationship. That is not sexual freedom. Second, she expresses a desire to tie the sexual relationship to a traditional relationship. This flies right in the face of one key purpose of third wave feminist sexual freedom: to free sex from patriarchal, heterosexual paradigms (Findlen, 1995). In "Hands Clean," Morissette offers a female character for whom sex is not independent of the potential for love. Rather, it leads to a desire to enter into the patriarchal institution of marriage with the man. She is playing on the very female stereotypes that third wave feminism seeks to break down.

The video for "Hands Clean" is also worth of consideration at this point. Music videos are their own texts and they can either support or undercut the messages of the songs they represent (Gow, 1996, pp. 151-161). I have seen most of Morissette's videos, and "Hands Clean" seems to be the most complex of all her videos. Most of her other videos have basically been performance videos. In instances where there is an accompanying narrative, it has sort of taken a back seat to Morissette's performance of the accompanying song. But in "Hands Clean," a story is front and center. In the video, Morissette plays a character who writes a song about the sexual encounter described in

the song. The video follows her as she sells the song, has a hit with it, and becomes famous because of it. Further, and most importantly, I would argue, the video shows several music fans reacting to and embracing Morissette and the song.

The central problem for the video, from a feminist perspective, is that it shows us an audience who makes Morissette's sexual betrayal popular. The fans in the video's storyline love the song and love Morissette (Lawrence, 2002). In other words, they "buy" and "accept" a narrative of a woman's sexual betrayal at the hands of a man. Certainly, the case can be made that the video shows Morissette turning her betrayal around for her own gain. And her character certainly does this in the video. But the song that is made popular in the video's fictional narrative is not about turning betrayal around. It is about a woman being betrayed by a man. In the video, the fans buy a story of about a woman whose sexual and romantic desires are subservient to those of the man. Further, Morissette's character becomes popular because she allows this to happen to her. The message, then, is that the audience will accept and reward a woman who "knows her place."

#### Alanis is woman, but is her roar worse than her bite?

So when it comes to issues of sexuality, the three examples examined here show how Morissette's rhetoric either shows the limitations of prioritizing sexuality as a feminist issue, or betrays third wave feminist sexual ideals altogether. There are two other tenets of third wave feminism that are important in the case of Morissette: individual freedom of choice and a confrontational discourse style. Specifically, Morissette's treatment of the woman's ability to make her own life and her own way can be examined through an analysis of the song and video for "Ironic." A lot of people don't know this, but "Ironic"

was actually a bigger hit than “You Oughta Know.” I bring it up, though, to demonstrate the importance of “Ironic” in the Morissette canon.

In the song, humans are given no “say so” in the events of their life. It is a terribly fatalistic song that, at every turn, undercuts any human choice and individuality. It is not a song expressly about a woman, but it does carry a philosophy that can not coexist peacefully with the broader philosophies upon which third wave feminist notions of choice and individuality rest. In the following excerpt, Morissette sings of things she can not control:

“A traffic jam when you’re already late,  
A ‘no smoking’ sign on your cigarette break.  
It’s like ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife.  
It’s meeting the man of my dreams...  
and meeting his beautiful wife (Morissette, 1995b).”

This is not a narrator who is in charge of the choices she makes. The song also subverts the notion of individuality (which is important to third wave feminists) when we consider that she is singing of things that happen to all of us. In other words, no one is really special in this song. We can all expect to be dumped on by life.

If we look at “Ironic” from a feminist perspective, then, we see that the song would necessarily have to argue that third wave feminists (and anyone else, for that matter) can try to make their own choices and work toward their own happiness, but such pursuits are pointless. The following excerpt demonstrates how, in Morissette’s view, other forces will take care of those things.

“Life has a funny way of sneaking up on you  
when you think everything’s okay and everything’s gone right.  
And life has a funny way of helping you out  
when you think everything’s gone wrong  
and everything blows up in your face (Morissette, 1995b).”

So it not necessarily a pessimistic song, but it is also not a third wave feminist song. Again, Morissette betrays the ideas of the movement of which she is supposedly the perfect pop culture manifestation.

The video for “Ironic” sort of turns some of the song’s meanings (at least as interpreted here) on their ear, though. Until “Hands Clean” came along, the “Ironic” video might have been the most “story” driven Morissette video. In the video, four women are traveling in a car while singing “Ironic.” Along the way, they experience various challenges, and each has a chance to manifest their own unique personalities, ranging from a pigtailed hippie to a potentially insane young woman (Finch, 1996). The twist, though, is that Morissette plays all four characters. Further there is no real attempt to “disguise” her or distinguish the physical characteristics of the four characters, beyond changes of clothing and hairstyles.

What we have then is perhaps Morissette’s purest enactment of a third wave feminist value. It is not a stretch to assume that each of these four characters represents various elements of one personality. So Morissette’s character relies solely on herself in the video and deals with various challenges and obstacles along the way. While we “see” four characters engaging various plot devices, it is, on a symbolic level, only one woman. She is making her choices, she is doing what she wants, and she seems pretty happy in the video, all four of her. The video seems to offer a positive slant on third wave feminist values of individuality and freedom of choice.

It would be interesting for that reason alone, but when you consider the interpretation of the accompanying song proposed here, the rhetoric of the video becomes even more relevant. It reinforces a lesson from the discussion of the “Hands Clean” video: music

videos are their own texts and can do things that the song may or may not do. Also, a comparison of “Ironic” the song and “Ironic” the video demonstrates how artistic creations can have contestatory and competing messages. This is important to me because I am offering my reading of several Morissette texts. Other readings of the same texts might reveal something that is in direct contrast to what I have argued. Indeed, I hope that would be the case. Then I might learn something else, as might they.

The final third wave tenet which needs to be examined in relationship to Morissette’s music is confrontational style. Lamm outlines the importance of a confrontational attitude for a third wave feminist (1995, pp. 85-94) and “Jagged Little Pill” was certainly a confrontational album. This essay has already touched on this issue by discussing the ways in which confrontational discourse is tied explicitly to sexual exploitation on the album.

There are other points to consider concerning the idea of Morissette’s use of confrontation in her music, though, and Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein develop an even more involved thesis concerning the album’s confrontational approach. They argue that Morissette’s songs are so intense and invective that they portray a “character” who is deranged and dangerously instable (2001, p. 200). This argument is consistent with the type of persona Morissette developed during the album’s run, and it says something about the dangers of the third wave feminist tendency to get “in your face.” What these authors don’t say, but I infer, is that we know what people often think of a woman who gets “in your face.” It may be a double standard, but it is not as socially acceptable for a woman to be confrontational. She runs the risk of being thought of as either a bitch or a “whacko.” Again, I am not saying I agree with this line of thinking, or that I think it is a

good thing. I am just simply stating my observation of a reality. If third wave feminism is going to value a confrontational approach, then the movement should be prepared to accept the risks that go along with it.

So perhaps “Jagged Little Pill” functions as another example of the extremes of third wave feminism. Morissette is over the top at times on the album, and maybe some third wave feminist rhetoric is over the top as well. But that’s not really the most important thing to consider here. What Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein don’t deal with is the turn away from confrontational discourse on Morissette’s second album, “Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie.” “Jagged Little Pill” was written during a time of personal turmoil for Morissette (Moll, 2001). “Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie” was written following a spiritual and emotional awakening for Morissette (Sheffield, 1998 & Moll, 2001).

Whether Morissette has any “responsibility” to embody and type of feminist values is a matter for another day, but it is still an important one. As far as I can recall, she’s never called herself a feminist, but others have. On “Jagged Little Pill” she sang about sex and seemed pissed off more often than not. A lot of that happens to dovetail with third wave feminist concerns. But on “Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie,” she tends to celebrate her new commitment to Hindu spiritualism and her “letting go” of old hurts. While I personally have more respect for this approach than I do the bitterness of “Jagged Little Pill,” I must admit two things. First, “Jagged Little Pill” is a better and more socially relevant album. Second, and most importantly, “Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie” betrays the third wave feminist tenet of having a confrontational attitude. But how can you be confrontational when you’re not angry anymore? Alanis...we hardly knew ye.

The song “Thank U” most strikingly embodies Morissette’s turn away from the “piss and vinegar” approach of her previous work. Indeed, one verse seems to work like something of an antithesis to the attitude of her first album:

“How about me not blaming you for everything.  
How about me enjoying the moment for once.  
How about how good it feels to finally forgive you.  
How about grieving it all one at a time (Morissette, 1998a).

She could indeed be singing to the same man who inspired “You Oughta Know” (rumor has it he is a professional hockey player. Another useless piece of trivia from my former life.) This time around, though, there is nothing confrontational in this verse.

Confrontation implies anger, and Morissette is working toward letting go of anger. She further develops this theme, and shows its benefits, in the following excerpt:

“The moment I let go of it  
was the moment I got more than I could handle.  
The moment I let go of it  
was the moment I touched down” (Morissette, 1998a).

If we take this verse, and reflect upon “You Oughta Know,” (and other songs from “Jagged Little Pill”) we begin to see a specific message. She seems to be saying that the confrontational approach of “Jagged Little Pill” did her no good. Rather, she found true happiness by getting rid of her anger, rather than acting on it.

The song “Unsent” takes the nonconfrontational approach and places it within the specific context of romantic relationships, an association only hinted at and left for the listener to infer in “Thank U.” In Unsent, Morissette sings about several former lovers and she begins each verse with the salutation “dear,” as one would do in a letter. “Dear” is a term of endearment, so right away we know we are in the neighborhood of a whole different approach to love and sex. Two verses specifically deal with men she would like

to be with, but cannot. Can you imagine the type of treatment these guys would have gotten on “Jagged Little Pill?” I shudder to think.

In “Unsent,” though, her approach to unrequited and unavailable love is much gentler, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

“Dear Matthew, I like you a lot.  
I realize you’re in a relationship with someone right now  
and I respect that.  
I would like you to know that if you’re ever single in the future  
and you want to come visit me in California,  
I would be open to spending time with you (Morissette, 1998b).

Dealing with “Matthew” in this manner is in no way indicative of a confrontational style. When we think of how “Thank U” validates letting go of anger, we clearly see Morissette working to establish a new “broken heart narrative.” There is another example from the song that follows the same pattern:

“Dear Lou, we learned so much.  
I realize we won’t be able to talk for some time  
and I understand that as I do you.  
I will always have your back and be curious about you (Morissette, 1998b).

What we have by the time Morissette releases her second album is a further abandonment of third wave feminist values. Hopefully this essay has shown that she has never exactly represented these values in their purest form, and with “Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie,” she is anything but a third wave feminist.

#### Conclusion: She’s got one hand in her pocket

Morissette has three studio albums out, and this essay has dealt with songs from each. Consistent in Morissette’s music is an unease with third wave feminist values. By that I mean that when she embraces and enacts them, she seems to do them more harm than good. Much of her first album can be taken as evidence for the position that third wave

feminism focuses too heavily on sexual issues at the exclusion of offering women paradigms for dealing with other forms of oppression. Her latest song and video, “Hands Clean,” seems to totally betray the sexual power and independence third wave feminism strives for by presenting a message where a woman’s sexual and romantic desires are subservient to a man’s. Morissette’s music also deals with issues related to individualism and freedom of choice, which are central to the third wave feminist agenda. The song and video for “Ironic” offer competing messages on these themes. But we do see Morissette engaging these themes in “Ironic.” Finally, she betrays the third wave feminist priority on a confrontational attitude in two ways. First, the persona she presents on her first album seems to go too far, and she comes off as deranged and unstable, rather than simply righteously angry. Second, she turns away from a confrontational attitude with her second album and presents songs in which such an attitude shift leads to happiness and fulfillment.

Whether she likes it or not, Morissette is considered by many to be a “feminist” artist. She may not want that distinction (then again she may), and to saddle her with it may or may not be fair. But because critics look at her in such a light, she is an important figure to examine when thinking about the state of contemporary women’s rhetoric. This essay has attempted to look at how some important pieces of her discourse function within the context of third wave feminism. Whether or not such an application is “appropriate” is not a decision Morissette or third wave feminists were given the opportunity to make. Morissette and third wave feminism are linked in popular culture, for better or worse. Maybe a central problem is that in a mediated, celebrity age, movements do not

necessarily get to pick their own spokespersons. But those spokespersons are put “out there,” and as such, their messages have rhetorical and social significance.

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