

Madonna: How Her Message Changed the Social and Cultural History of the 1980s

To what extent did Madonna's message reflect and impact societal movements of the 1980s?

Individuals and Societies: History

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Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Contents.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Reflecting on the Moral Majority and Rise of the Christian Right.....	4
The Female Empowerment Movement.....	8
A Voice for the Homosexual Revolution	11
Conclusion.....	14
Bibliography.....	16

Introduction:

The 1980s were a polarizing and history-defining time in the social history of the United States, especially in the musical industry. Madonna was one of the most defining musical figures of the time due to her rebellious image, controversial actions, and songs with provoking lyrics and messages. The 80s were a time when conservative ideals were widespread as the Moral Majority, a politically conservative group with a strict, religious agenda, took over the political and social world (wiu.edu). Women were still viewed as inferior in the workplace, social life, and relationships. Homosexuality was seen as a sin by conservatives and members of the Church as it contrasted the “traditional family” recognized by people of the Moral Majority (wiu.edu). A resurgence of the counterculture erupted as teens and young adults embraced anti-traditionalist ideals and provocative movements Madonna helped begin (wiu.edu). Known as the Queen of Pop, Madonna’s impact on the 1980’s culture and reflection on society provoked the question; “To what extent did Madonna’s message reflect and impact societal movements of the 1980s?” Madonna’s message positively impacted the younger generations of the 1980s as it brought awareness to social issues, empowered men and women, and encouraged a cultural revolution as she reflected the opposing views to widely accepted subjects of the time.

Madonna grew up under an Italian Catholic household in Michigan which would play a major role in her music later on along with the death of her mother from breast cancer. Her Catholic upbringing was one of the biggest aspects of her life and the mystery of it inspired her music. As she pursued a career in dance, her music career followed suit and she became “the long-reigning queen of reinvention” and the Queen of Pop (bbc.com). She said in 1986 in the New York offices of Warner Bros. Records, "I like challenge and controversy - I like to tick

people off". Her music provoked intense reactions and created an "atomic impact" on the society around her especially for traditionalists and conservatives (bbc.com). Her songs, fashion, and behavior sparked a movement similar to the counterculture of the 60s as she was explicit and concerned traditionalists. Her music and style appealed to teens and young adults as the content was considered radical, rebellious, and revolutionary. Madonna was not only controversial, she is highly acknowledged in the music industry. She holds seven Grammy wins and twenty-eight nominations, twenty MTV music awards with thirty-one nominations, along with many other awards (grammy.com, mtv.com). Her music was not only recognized by the people of the 1980s, she was also highly acclaimed in the industry itself.

The religious innuendos Madonna included in her songs provoked an outraged reaction from Catholics and the Republican Party. Her song "Like A Prayer" (1989) received intense negative feedback from Catholics and traditionalists. Madonna claimed in an interview with *NY Times* that the song is about "a passionate young girl so in love with God that it is almost as though He were the male figure in her life" (*Weingarten*). . However, some perceived it with innuendos to oral sex and most saw it as a form of disrespect to Catholicism. Despite this response, she topped charts around the world and solidified her role as one of the most influential musicians of pop. Madonna was "obsessed with the taboo connection between sex and spirituality" as this song portrays (*Rolling Stone*). The music video for "Like A Prayer" was a "cleavage-and-blasphemy cocktail" which, of course, sparked controversy (*Rolling Stone*). She also addresses the "mystery and magic that surrounds" religion, hence the opening lyrics "Life is a mystery/Everyone must stand alone" (*Holden*). However, the accompanying music video and widespread interpretations believe it was much more blasphemous and disrespectful to God and

His followers. The American Family Association denounced the video and song as “offensive” (*Holden*). She is provocatively dressed in the music video and it “features burning crosses and stigmata”, a term used by the Catholic Church to describe marks, scratches, cuts, etc. in the places where Jesus’ crucifixion wounds are (*TIME*, catholiceducation.org). The video received such immense backlash that Pepsi-Cola denounced the song after using it in a commercial because of the bad press they received for it (*TIME*). Her lyrics, message, and actions reflected the opposing side of the traditionalist values of the Christian Right. By releasing such a controversial song and video, she brought awareness and reflected on the constricting views of the Moral Majority. Andrew Greely, writer for America Magazine, said in 1989, after its release, that Pepsi must be boycotted because the song “dares to link her sexuality with God and religious images” (*America: The Jesuit Review*). “Like A Prayer” was denounced by Catholics and Catholic leaders due to its message and content as they challenged their fundamental views. Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority in 1979, was a “conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Christian who represented many people” in the movement (wiu.edu). Lewis Gould, author of *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* said Falwell used modern fundraising techniques which aligned the evangelicals with the Republican party (415). The new force in politics, the evangelical voter, brought great success to the Reagan and Bush Administrations. Madonna’s cross burning, seducing of a black Jesus, revealing clothing, and stigmata shown in the music video appalled this group of voters as they saw it extremely disrespectful to their religion and ideals. The depiction of a black Jesus was especially blasphemous to the religious right (*Huffington Post*). However, the controversy was refreshing and provided the youth an avenue to express themselves in other ways and with options different

to those of the Moral Majority. While the song created a great disputation in the religious right, it was the type of disruption needed to pave the way for the youth to create a future of variety and expression. It triggered a positive movement as her fame grew, she connected with the younger generation, and encouraged them to express themselves by straying from societal norms. Her historical impact on the 1980s was profound as it was one of the greatest challenges to ideals at the time. It defined the political and social opposition of the Moral Majority which would take effect as democratic ideals grew before the Clinton Administration took office.

Madonna also sparked opposition and controversy over the release of “Like A Virgin” (1984) which seemed to mock the Virgin Mary and the traditionalistic bride encouraged by members of the Moral Majority. A *NYTimes* article said she portrayed a “traditionally chaste stereotype of a blushing bride” and *Billboard* called it a “complex song about purity and sex”. These different interpretations created the controversy Madonna wanted and the reason the song is one of her most well known and was her first #1 Pop Hit (“Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' at 30”). She sings that she feels “like a virgin/touched for the very first time” which describes and intimate feeling of love that had not been so outwardly expressed in the past. Explicitly talking about sex and virginity was outrageous to many religious groups as this was a subject discussed behind closed doors. Conservative groups protested the song because of its “theme of premarital sex and corrupted family values” (Knazev). However, this song spread alternate values that challenged those of the Christian Right and Moral Majority. This challenge was necessary for society to progress because it brought awareness to the fact that there are other ways of living life and other ways to have a family. The song made it less of a stigma to express sexuality and recognized sex as a part of everyday life as it “most explicitly tackles sexual politics and

explores that whole virgin-whore thing so central to her image.” (“Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' at 30”). While it seems to mock the Virgin Mary, she uses this reference to explain love and the way she feels around this man: something that was not discussed in this way before, especially so linked to sexuality. Her song “Till Death Do Us Part” also challenged traditional Catholic beliefs. She describes a failing marriage with drinking, violence, arguments, and a self-hating husband but they are locked in misery by their vow (*Holden*). She uses this song to express how her marriage with Sean Penn could have ended up had they not broken Catholic values and filed for a divorce (*Holden*). This song, while less well-known in comparison to “Like A Virgin”, continues the theme of encouraging people to break from tradition if that is what will make them happy. By rebelling against traditional, Catholic values, Madonna provided the youth with other ways to go about their future to not be chained to these ideals. She challenged Catholic values and the Moral Majority which furthered the social and religious revolution she began.

“Material Girl” (1984) mocked the materialism of the Reagan-Era and the loss in values of living life and increase in values of appearance and items. According to Gil Troy, author of *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's*, claims that the Reagan Administration triggered an “Era of Good Feelings” which led to a “capitalist renewal” and ultimately a society “that prized materialism”. With Reaganomics sweeping the economic system, the rich received more money that, theoretical, is supposed to “trickle-down” to the lower classes. However, the influx of money brought a materialistic wave over the 1980s. The rich focused on the importance of items and how one looked or what one owned became the defining aspect of their rank. Because Madonna mocks these values in one of her most well-known songs, this increases awareness of how shallow American values have become and

simultaneously encourages the youth to stray from these ideals. She accepts that she is a “material girl” and can be shallow but she also “lives in a material world” which ridicules the simplistic, superficial society that has made her this way. The song makes the audience pity the “material girl” which encourages the youth and upcoming generation to stray from the materialistic ideals of the 1980s during the Reagan Era.

Her billboard hit “Material Girl”, also encouraged women to establish themselves and stand up for what they want. Even though she mocks the materialism throughout the song and music video, “Madonna is clearly in control of the scene[s] playing out” (americanpopularculture.com). She is depicted as a woman in full possession of herself and what she wants for herself, “she doesn’t stop at diamonds” (americanpopularculture.com). She takes a man’s ring, pushes multiple men away, takes money from a man’s pocket, and is lifted up by men (youtube.com). Over the course of the music video, she is lifted above the male dancers which symbolizes her rising above the male superiority in society. She takes what she wants, when she wants, and seems to dictate the relationships she is in, especially when she takes the man’s ring. For example, in the song she says in the opening lyrics, “They can beg and they can plead” which defines her individuality and ability to control what comes and goes in her life. This was an important message to women in the 1980s as they were still seen as inferior to men, especially with the widely accepted idea of a “traditional family”. Madonna expressed the capabilities of women contrary to the views of the Moral Majority. Also, while she claims throughout the video that she is a “material girl in a material world”, she makes it clear that she does not see the amount of money and jewelry the defining factor in a relationship. In the end, she decides to start a relationship with the man that brought her flowers rather than jewelry. This

concept teaches her young audience the true values in life, beyond materialism, and that women can value other aspects of a relationship. This encouraged women to be less submissive to men and make their own decisions without materialistic incentives.

Another one of her most controversial songs was “Papa Don’t Preach”, released in June 1986. The song is about a girl who is “finds herself pregnant and insists her stern father” that she will keep the baby (Taraborrelli, 118). The song caught the public’s attention and worried adults over the consequences it could have on the youth’s decision making. The song was released at a time when there were over one million teen pregnancies per year, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a national research organization (*Dullea*). The *NY Times* reported that “a campaign to discourage teen-age pregnancy began earlier this week [September 18, 1986], from the Mayor's Office of Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Services. Subway posters, television and radio spots will carry the slogan "Be Smart About Sex””. Madonna stated in the song that, “but I made up my mind, I'm keeping my baby...” and people, especially adults, were outraged as they saw it as her encouragement of teen pregnancy. The music industry also responded to the song’s release when LL Cool J recorded a "Smart Sex Rap” to spread ideals about safe sex to counter how many interpreted Madonna’s song (*Dullea*). However, because her song was so provocative, it sparked a conversation about safe sex and teen pregnancy choices. This provided women, especially young adults and teens, with adequate information to make safe, educated choices about their pregnancies. Alice Radosh, the office coordinator for Mayor's Office of Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Services, commented that “We're using the same medium to put across a very different message about being smart and avoiding teen-aged pregnancy,” as the “timing of the Madonna song concerns us” (*Dullea*). This song does seem to discourage

abortions and promote teen pregnancies like the one Madonna describes, however it demonstrates her independence and self-reliance to make her own decisions. Her controversial song sparked this conversation and created a positive impact as women were now educated on the possibilities of pregnancies from these responses. The song itself depicts the possibilities of an independent female straying from the status quo. Alfred Moran, Executive Director of Planned Parenthood at the time said that Madonna was promoting that “getting pregnant is cool” and not to “listen to your parents, the school, anybody who tells you otherwise” because she says to her father “Papa don't preach to me” (*Dullea*). While this may be true, this message is just what the public needed to increase awareness of teen pregnancies and empower women to make their own choices based on what they feel is best, not what a man tells them is best. Madonna’s provocative music started a discussion on societal issues and a movement for people to be more accepting of a woman’s decision.

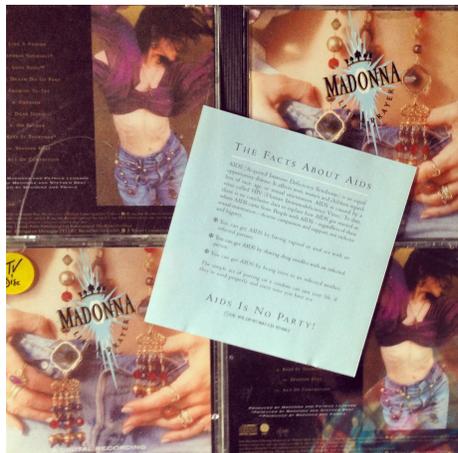
Her song “Express Yourself”, from the *Like a Prayer* album, became a hit as it promoted feminist ideals to the youth and challenged the stereotypes of the time. She lets women know that they can take control of their own life and don’t need to constantly obey the patriarchy. She sings “Second best is never enough/You'll do much better, baby, on your own” which exemplifies the fact that women can have self-reliance and they should not compromise themselves for a man. The lyric “‘Don’t go for second best baby’ became a catch phrase for strong women who were sick of being treated like second class citizens” which helped create a positive movement for a change from traditional values (*Huffington Post*). In 1991, Susan McClary wrote that “one of Madonna’s principal accomplishments is that she brings this hypocrisy to the surface and problematizes it” in her book *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender,*

and Sexuality. By bringing awareness of the strengths and possibilities of women, she encourages and creates a movement to change the social spheres of the time. In the music video, Madonna wears her famous cone bra and a variety of lingerie, one of the fashion statements she is most known for. Madonna “takes an undergarment... designed to confine a woman's sexuality and mask it.” and makes it a piece of clothing that supports women and is used to express their sexuality (Gaugler, 27). In drawing attention to her chest, a traditionally hidden body part, she rebels against the values of the past. She encourages them to embrace their sexuality and body which empowers young women and girls across the world. While encouraging women to own their bodies, this led to men treating them more like objects because of their revealing clothing and outfit choices. Her fashion emphasized the female body which began a much more radical trend in which women were viewed solely for their bodies. But, she challenged traditional views of the body and paved the way for a new wave of feminism to embrace their body and themselves. At a time when anti-feminists and Christian Right leaders used “the media for the purpose of defeating the women's movement and reducing its achievements”, Madonna’s song came at a perfect time to challenge and rebel against these movements (Bradley).

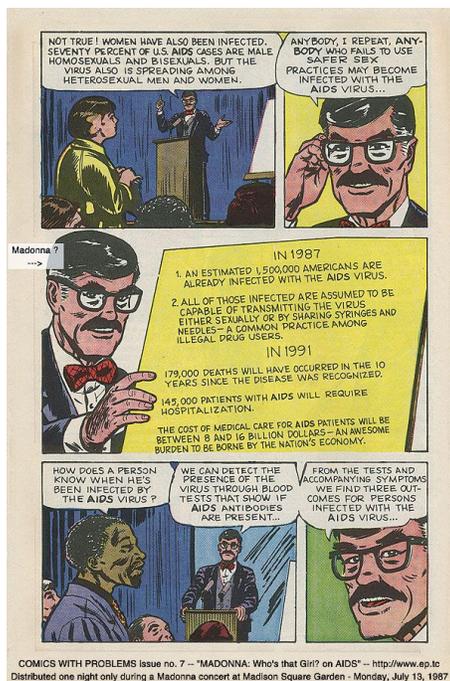
“Express Yourself” is also used as an empowering anthem to the LGBT community as it encouraged members to “express” themselves. In 1981, Jerry Falwell wrote a letter expressing his, and the Moral Majority’s, view on homosexuality stating that it is a “sin” and that “homosexuals do not reproduce! They recruit!” and “are out after my children and your children”. These statements reflect the views of most of society which is why “Express Yourself” was such a revolutionary song. It encouraged ideals that were uncommon and not spoken of until then. One gay man remembers that when he was just discovering his

homosexuality, Madonna released “Express Yourself”, and he said “it immediately spoke to me” (topgaysongs.com). He particularly enjoyed and related to the message of this song “because of its outspoken nature in regard to human identity including the role love and desire plays between men and women, hetero- and homosexual alike” (topgaysongs.com). This teen no longer felt alone and was empowered by Madonna’s song which demonstrates the voice she was for LGBTs. She sings “You deserve the best in life/ So if the time isn't right, then move on/ Second best is never enough”. She becomes an example to society to embrace people for who they are, because they, like others, “Don't go for second best”. He also explained that the song forced him to realize that he is “a human being with dignity, deserving of respect, socially, sexually, and romantically” (topgaysongs.com). By creating a song that relates to how so many people of minority groups felt during the 1980s is how she positively impacted movements of the time by rebelling against traditionalist ideals. She became a voice for the movement and addressed social issues, like the ostracization of homosexuals, through her music to create a conversation and change the traditionalist views that were so rampant at the time. It allowed women to express their sexuality while encouraging homosexuals to recognize and be proud of who they are.

Madonna’s *Like A Prayer* album angered the religious right not only because of the musical content, but also because she spread awareness about AIDS, a disease Catholics believed God punished gays with for their sexual orientation. Madonna used her platform to educate people on “AIDS and safe sex at a time when schools, the media, and religious institutions stayed away from the topic” (*Huffington Post*). By challenging the societal norm of not talking about AIDS and safe sex, Madonna’s impactful voice spread beyond the music industry. She included an AIDS pamphlet in each copy of *Like A Prayer* that was sold in order to keep her



audience educated. With a better understanding of the consequences of unsafe sex and AIDS, it took the blame off of the LGBT community. Madonna explained in an interview with Andy Towle, a New York City based media commentator and blogger, that “the gay community and people who were HIV-positive were treated so badly” which is why she stood up for these people that did have the same platform she did (ageofreagan2017.edu). Challenging the moral majority, religious right, and traditionalist ideals were a common theme throughout Madonna’s work and did not stop here. AIDS continued to grow as a raging issue during the 1980s and many religious right members said it was God’s punishment for being homosexual. Jerry Falwell claimed “AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals,” and Pat Buchanan, Ronald Reagan’s communications director, said in 1983, AIDS is “nature’s revenge on gay men” (thinkprogress.org). Both of these men held powerful positions in 1980s society so their views spread rampantly. This exemplifies the ridicule the gay community received by the majority and how Madonna became a voice for minority groups and lifted them with her efforts and music. She spread awareness with her music, concerts, and albums to counter the claims of Falwell, Buchanan and their followers. Paul Cameron used the “AIDS crisis to suggest that ‘the extermination of homosexuals’ might become necessary” at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 1985 (splcenter.org). Tensions and accusations continued to grow, so, in 1987, at her Madison Square Garden concert, she donated all proceeds to the American Foundation for Aids Research and handed out comic books with important information (ageofreagan2017.edu). The comic books



told attendees how to protect themselves from HIV and combat[ed] the many ugly myths surrounding AIDS” (Towle). These pamphlets portrayed a very serious topic in a more approachable way. Madonna effectively educates her audience of alternative views to issues and appeals to their interests. She worked to prevent a serious disease from spreading more by providing information and educating people on the actual causes of AIDS, not the propagandized argument of Falwell. Nowhere on this pamphlet does it link AIDS and homosexuals which is how Madonna defended them and made sure the public was correctly educated on the causes and repercussions of AIDS.

Conclusion:

The 1980s were a time full of social and cultural changes and movements. The Moral Majority dominated politics and implemented their traditionalistic ideals throughout society while women were still seen as inferior to men. The LGBT community gained members and

momentum which was challenged by many religious followers. Madonna managed to reflect on each of these aspects of 1980s society and created a revolution through her music, videos, and actions inside and outside the music industry. The controversy she created among political groups and traditionalists sparked a movement in the right direction for women, homosexuals, AIDS prevention, and religious exploration. She gave a voice to minority groups that were either too afraid to speak or were drowned out by opposition. Madonna's ability to use powerful lyrics and images in her songs and videos are what created the controversy, scandal, and revolution needed to change many widely accepted ways of 1980s society. Becoming the Queen of Pop and one of the most influential artists of all time, Madonna changed the culture of the 80s forever and helped begin a movement for the youth, Generation X. Her recognition and empowerment of the younger generations helped increase the youth voter turnout in the Clinton election because she included them in current events and didn't see them as inferior to the older generations. Young adults began to be seen as equals to older adults due to the increased recognition of their importance in society. Madonna's lyrics, videos, messages and actions not only reflected the social struggles minorities faced during the time but also began revolutions that would change the course of social history. Her work for the anti-traditionalists, women, homosexuals, and AIDS relief left an astounding impact on history, especially during the 1980s.

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