

**Gender, Power, and Emotion: A Feminist Stylistic Analysis of Beyoncé's 'If I Were a Boy'****Nia F Situmorang<sup>1</sup>, Lydia permata Sari Sibarani<sup>2</sup>, Febrian Valentino Simbolon<sup>3</sup>, Kerwin<sup>4</sup>  
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**Abstract**

This study applies Sara Mills' feminist stylistics to Beyoncé's 'If I Were a Boy' to examine how linguistic structures reveal gender inequality in romantic relationships. The analysis at lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels shows how the song constructs and critiques dominant gender roles. Through hypothetical language and role reversal, the female narrator exposes emotional double standards and critiques male privilege. Key findings highlight how male autonomy and emotional detachment are normalized, while women are burdened with empathy and accountability. This study contributes to gender studies and media analysis by demonstrating how feminist stylistics can uncover embedded power imbalances in mainstream music.

**Keywords:** Feminist, Stylistic, Gender, Inequality, Emotional, Woman, Man**Citation:**

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender has become one of the common issues of interest to researchers from various fields, especially linguistics. If we talk about gender, we also discuss our personal lives, our social and community lives, and our culture. In addition, gender is also a challenge for us, especially in terms of justice, identity, and identity, and even survival. Gender has been a common issue in the past, so it is no longer an unpleasant thing in everyday life. Due to many thoughts in favor of equality between femininity and masculinity, which are even spreading and being publicized rapidly around the world, gender issues are now starting to diminish.

The study of feminist stylistics is crucial in understanding how language reflects and perpetuates gender inequalities. Feminist stylistics examines the ways in which language use can reinforce or challenge societal norms related to gender. This research is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary feminism and gender studies, as it provides insights into the linguistic structures that contribute to the construction of gender identities and power dynamics same with feminist stylistics developed by Sara Mills, provides a critical framework for examining how language constructs and reinforces gender roles within texts. This approach extends beyond content analysis, delving into linguistic structures, narrative positioning, and the ways in which gendered power dynamics manifest through discourse. Mills' theory highlights the importance of subject-object relations, point of view, and lexical choices in uncovering how texts perpetuate or challenge societal norms regarding gender. This theoretical approach is particularly relevant in analyzing media and literary works, as it reveals underlying biases and systemic inequalities embedded within language.

The way gender is perceived in society is often shaped by stereotypes—oversimplified beliefs about the traits and roles assigned to men and women. These stereotypes create rigid expectations that can limit individuals' ability to express themselves freely and pursue their aspirations. As a result, gender norms influence not only personal development but also the broader social structure, reinforcing disparities in power and opportunity. *If I Were a Boy* is particularly powerful when viewed through the lens of feminist stylistic analysis, as the lyrics directly address emotional inequality in romantic relationships by reversing traditional gender roles.

The song employs a hypothetical scenario where a woman envisions life as a man, highlighting the freedoms and social leniencies often granted to men while exposing the emotional burdens frequently placed on women.

By utilizing a first-person viewpoint and employing hypothetical conditional phrases, *If I Were a Boy* compels listeners—particularly male listeners—to reconsider the entrenched gender norms in relationships. The song critiques emotional inequality by illustrating the disparities in accountability and agency between men and women. Through strategic linguistic choices and storytelling techniques, Beyoncé challenges the long-held assumption that men possess greater autonomy in relationships while women bear the emotional burden of understanding, patience, and forgiveness. By using a feminist stylistic approach, this study seeks to question the status quo and advance a more equitable understanding of gender in discourse in addition to analyzing language. For academics studying gender studies, linguistics, and allied disciplines, the research's conclusions will be important because they will offer a better understanding of how language both influences and is influenced by gendered experiences.

"A Feminist Stylistics Analysis in Rupi Kaur's *The Sun and Her Flowers*" was carried out by Siamir Marulafau, Eddy Setia, and Saskia Febiola Siregar in 2020. Using feminist stylistics, this study investigates how men and women are portrayed in literature. In addition to examining the roles of women and how ideas and events are represented in the text, it uses stylistic analysis to examine linguistic patterns and their effects on society. The study focuses on gender-specific elements in the book and uses a qualitative methodology.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The approach used in this research is qualitative in nature, as defined by Mackiewicz (2018), who described it as a research approach aimed at exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. This approach is characterized by emergent questions and procedures, data collection in participants' natural settings, inductive data analysis, researcher interpretation with reflexivity, flexible report structures, a primary focus on participant meaning, and the development of a holistic account. In this study, the participants involved are the lyrics of Beyoncé's

song "If I Were a Boy." The data collection process was done through listening to the song, understanding its lyrics, and analyzing the text along with its social context.

The analysis was conducted using Sara Mills' (1995) feminist stylistics framework, which involves three key levels of linguistic investigation: the lexical level (word choice), the syntactic level (sentence structure), and the discourse level. At the lexical level, the analysis focuses on adjectives, nouns, and verbs that describe male and female roles, paying particular attention to the semantic fields associated with each gender, such as emotional sensitivity, authority, or passivity. The syntactic level examines the structure of sentences using transitivity analysis to identify the grammatical roles assigned to male and female figures—who performs actions (active agents) and who receives them (passive participants), revealing power dynamics in language. The discourse level explores how the text positions the reader or listener and constructs gendered ideologies, focusing on whose perspective dominates the narrative and how societal expectations of gender roles are either reinforced or challenged. The research follows stages such as the selection of text, transcription and segmentation of lyrics, coding and annotation using feminist stylistics, and interpretation through the lens of feminist linguistic theory to uncover underlying gender ideologies and validate the findings. This systematic and theory-driven approach highlights the way gender is represented and challenged through linguistic strategies in the song's lyrics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Lyrics of "If I Were a Boy"

If I were a boy, even just for a day  
I'd roll outta bed in the mornin'  
And throw on what I wanted, then go

And chase after girls  
I'd kick it with who I wanted  
And I'd never get confronted for it  
'Cause they'd stick up for me If I were a boy  
I think I could understand  
How it feels to love a girl  
I swear I'd be a better man

I'd listen to her  
'Cause I know how it hurts  
When you lose the one you wanted  
'Cause he's taken you for granted  
And everything you had got destroyed

Tell everyone it's broken  
So they'd think that I was sleepin' alone

I'd put myself first  
And make the rules as I go  
'Cause I know that she'd be faithful  
Waitin' for me to come home, to come home

If I were a boy  
I think I could understand  
How it feels to love a girl  
I swear I'd be a better man

I'd listen to her  
'Cause I know how it hurts  
When you lose the one you wanted (wanted)

Cause he's taken you for granted (granted)  
And everything you had got destroyed

It's a little too late for you to come back  
Say it's just a mistake  
Think I'd forgive you like that  
If you thought I would wait for you  
You thought wrong

But you're just a boy You don't understand  
Yeah, you don't understand, oh  
How it feels to love a girl, someday  
You'll wish you were a better man

You don't listen to her  
You don't care how it hurts  
Until you lose the one you wanted  
'Cause you've taken her for granted  
And everything you have got destroyed

### Word-Level Analysis

At the lexical level, Beyoncé's "If I Were a Boy" uses strategic word choices to challenge traditional gender roles. The title phrase "If I were a boy" immediately introduces a hypothetical framework that allows the female speaker to occupy a male role, thus questioning the default assumptions of masculinity. The noun "boy", rather than "man", emphasizes immaturity, subtly criticizing the emotional irresponsibility often associated with male partners in heteronormative relationships.

*"Drink beer with the guys and chase after girls"* → This line suggests a normalized male behavior pattern rooted in freedom, indulgence, and emotional detachment. It reflects a cultural narrative in which male recklessness is socially accepted, while female behavior is more strictly judged.

*"I'd listen to her, 'cause I know how it hurts"* → The verb "listen" here signifies emotional labor, commonly expected of women. It reinforces the disparity wherein men are often portrayed as emotionally unavailable, while women bear the burden of understanding and emotional support.

*"If I were a boy, I think I could understand"* → The verb understand suggests men lack empathy under normal circumstances.

*"I think I could understand"* – The modal "could" implies that male empathy is not assumed; it's speculative. This supports the idea that men are not expected by society to be emotionally in tune, further revealing gender-based emotional inequality.

These lexical choices highlight the privileges men have in relationships while exposing the burdens placed on women to accommodate and forgive. The contrast between these word choices critiques traditional gender roles, showing how societal expectations grant men more autonomy while placing emotional expectations on women.

### Sentence-Level Analysis

On a syntactic level, the song repeatedly employs modal verbs and conditional clauses to construct an imagined reversal of gender roles. Key lyrics for sentence-level analysis:

*"If I were a boy, I think I could understand"* → The use of the subjunctive "were" and the modal "could" frames empathy as a conditional male trait — something not naturally present, but hypothetically attainable

*"I swear I'd be a better man"* → The phrase juxtaposes traditional masculinity ("better man") with emotional maturity. It critiques the common stereotype of emotionally inept men by offering an idealized, emotionally competent male figure — one that the speaker imagines herself becoming.

*"You don't listen to her, you don't care how it hurts"* → The second-person direct address confronts the implied male listener, emphasizing his inaction. This sentence structure strengthens the critique by making the listener complicit in the emotional inequality being described.

*"I'd be just a little more masculine / I'd wear what I wanted"* → The phrase "just a little more masculine" highlights the societal pressure on men to conform to a certain kind of toughness or emotional restraint, while the freedom to.

*"Tell everyone that it's broken"* → This implies deceit and emotional evasion, common tropes in representations of toxic masculinity, where men are socially permitted to avoid accountability.

*"If I were a boy, I would turn off my phone / Tell everyone that it's broken"* → The use of the second-person pronoun "I" directs the narrative to the listener and engages them in imagining a different world where gender roles are reversed. By directly addressing the audience through a personal hypothetical ("I would"), the sentence structure invites them to question the norm and experience what it might be like to have more freedom as a man.

The consistent use of conditionals and modals (could, would, might) establishes empathy, honesty, and emotional responsibility as qualities that are neither expected nor modeled by men — unless reimagined through a feminine lens.

### Discourse Level Analysis

At the discourse level, the song follows a narrative arc from hypothetical reflection to critical confrontation. The speaker envisions herself in a male position, only to expose the double standards in romantic and emotional expectations.

If I were a boy  
I think I could understand  
How it feels to love a girl  
I swear I'd be a better man

In Beyonce's song "If I Were a Boy," this particular line, which reads, "If I were a boy, I think I could understand, How it feels to love a girl, I swear I'd be a better man," provides a deeply nuanced critique of gender, emotion, and power. It is more than just a lament, it is a scathing critique of the way masculinity is socially constructed and how it affects close relationships in general. The speaker thinks that by putting herself in his position, she could learn about love from a male perspective that he does not yet possess. This suggests a deeply rooted social criticism: that males frequently lack the emotional intelligence or empathy necessary for really reciprocal love because of their upbringing. "I think I could understand" implies a lack of understanding of the emotional terrain of a woman in love, which she directly relates to his gender. The statement "I swear I'd be a better man" conveys the speaker's intense emotional distress and annoyance as well as her significant dissatisfaction with her partner's behavior. It is a need for a love that is not only accepted but also completely returned with compassion and work. By implying that the ideal of "manhood" in a loving relationship should entail empathy and attentiveness, this remark turns the hypothetical into a direct critique of the male partner's actions. The speaker is calling for a thorough reevaluation of relationship power and gendered emotional labor, not merely a physical transformation.

I'd listen to her  
'Cause I know how it hurts  
When you lose the one you wanted (wanted)  
Cause he's taken you for granted (granted)  
And everything you had got destroyed

The song "I'd Listen to Her" explores the impact of gendered power dynamics on emotional well-being in relationships. The opening line, "I'd Listen to Her," challenges patriarchal norms where women's voices and emotional needs are often marginalized or unheard. Listening is seen as a form of affective power, symbolizing validation, respect, and relational agency. However, its absence, attributed

to the male partner, creates an emotional vacuum that disempowers the female speaker. The line, "Cause I know how it hurts," reflects the speaker's personal emotional experience of pain, emphasizing the male partner's power to inflict pain through emotional detachment. This power imbalance is exemplified in "Cause he's taken you for granted," where the emotional labor and contributions of women are assumed without reciprocal effort or appreciation. This passive power erodes the partner's self-worth and agency, leading to the collapse of relational capital, trust, shared hopes, and emotional investment. The song serves as a feminist indictment of how gendered power structures can lead to profound emotional devastation and the annihilation of shared relational worlds.

It's a little too late for you to come back  
Say it's just a mistake  
Think I'd forgive you like that  
If you thought I would wait for you  
You thought wrong

This lyrical section establishes a powerful narrative perspective that fundamentally challenges traditional gender power dynamics through the speaker's assertion of agency and boundary-setting authority. The opening rejection "It's a little too late for you to come back / Say it's just a mistake / Think I'd forgive you like that" immediately positions the female speaker as the controlling authority in the discourse, subverting conventional expectations of female compliance and endless forgiveness in romantic contexts. This discourse functions as both a critique of masculine entitlement and an empowering declaration of independence from traditional gender roles that assume female availability and accommodation. The speaker's ability to definitively refuse reconciliation represents a significant reversal of typical relationship power structures, where women are expected to absorb harm and provide unconditional forgiveness while men assume their minimal efforts at apology will be accepted. The phrase "If you thought I would wait for you / You thought wrong" serves as a powerful rejection of the double standard that permits men to cause harm and expect reconciliation while placing the burden of patience and emotional labor on women. Through this discourse, the lyrics validate women's right to prioritize self-respect over traditional feminine virtues, challenging societal norms that excuse male harmful behavior while expecting female tolerance and creating a space for feminist empowerment through the clear establishment and maintenance of personal boundaries.

But you're just a boy You don't understand  
Yeah, you don't understand, oh  
How it feels to love a girl, someday  
You'll wish you were a better man

This section fundamentally restructures gender discourse by positioning emotional maturity and understanding as inherently feminine qualities while characterizing masculinity as emotionally underdeveloped and lacking in authentic comprehension of love. The deliberate linguistic choice of "But you're just a boy / You don't understand" creates a powerful juxtaposition that subverts traditional stereotypes portraying men as naturally more rational, experienced, or emotionally stable, instead presenting masculinity as inherently immature and deficient in emotional intelligence. This discourse challenges conventional relationship narratives by suggesting that understanding "how it feels to love a girl" requires a level of emotional sophistication that the male subject fundamentally lacks, thereby reversing typical gender hierarchies where men are often positioned as having superior judgment or relationship experience. The prophetic authority demonstrated in "someday / You'll wish you were a better man" establishes the female speaker as possessing superior insight into consequences and emotional development, a form of intellectual and emotional authority traditionally not attributed to women in relationship discourse. Through this positioning, the lyrics expose double standards in emotional expectations while critiquing societal patterns that allow men to remain emotionally underdeveloped while still expecting access to women's emotional labor and forgiveness. The controlled, decisive tone maintains emotional superiority throughout, contrasting sharply with stereotypical expectations of female emotional volatility in relationship conflicts and instead asserting rational judgment and intellectual authority that challenges fundamental assumptions about gendered emotional capacity and relationship competence.

## CONCLUSION

Through feminist stylistic analysis, this study effectively demonstrates how Beyoncé's song "If I Were a Boy" challenges gender standards and reveals emotional disparity and male privilege in relationships. The results show that the song's language at the lexical level highlights men's perceived freedom and lack of emotional accountability for the burdens women bear. Gender equality is positioned as a hypothetical ideal at the sentence level through the consistent use of conditionals and modalities. This underscores the structural nature of inequality. In addition, the narrative effectively demonstrates multiple norms in romantic relationships at the discourse level, encouraging critical consideration of established gender roles.

Ultimately, this research aids gender studies by deconstructing the linguistics of emotional inequality and male privilege in popular culture. Moreover, this research shows that feminist stylistics has a strong ability to uncover systemic biases and inequalities embedded in widely consumed cultural texts. This enriches media analysis. For future research, it is recommended to conduct a comparative analysis of other songs that address gender themes, explore audience receptivity to such critiques, and integrate multimodal analysis to examine how visual and auditory elements further influence song messages.

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