

An Analysis of Power Relations and Emotional Imbalance in the Song Manchild by Sabrina Carpenter through Feminist Criticism

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Abstract

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This study analyzes power relations and emotional imbalance in the song “Manchild” by Sabrina Carpenter through feminist literary criticism. Emotional inequality in patriarchal relationships remains an important issue, but emotional dependency as a form of patriarchal domination is still rarely discussed in popular music studies. Therefore, this study aims to identify the representation of patriarchal power and unequal emotional labor in the lyrics and examine the female narrator’s resistance to traditional gender expectations. This study employs a qualitative literary criticism approach using the song lyrics as the primary data source. The data were analyzed through textual analysis and thematic interpretation based on feminist literary criticism, focusing on Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “the Other” and Kate Millett’s theory of patriarchy to interpret representations of power relations and emotional imbalance within the lyrics. The findings reveal that the male figure depends emotionally on the female narrator while avoiding responsibility, causing unequal emotional labor. Patriarchal domination also operates subtly through emotional dependency, while the female narrator expresses resistance through sarcasm, irony, and criticism. Therefore, Manchild functions not only as a feminist critique of emotional inequality and patriarchal relationship patterns but also contributes to feminist literary scholarship by demonstrating the value of contemporary popular music as a cultural text for examining gendered power relations, emotional labor, and patriarchal ideology in modern society.

Kata Kunci:

*Kritik Sastra Feminis ,
 Relasi Kekuasaan ,*

Abstrak

Studi ini menganalisis relasi kekuasaan dan ketidakseimbangan emosional dalam lagu “Manchild” karya Sabrina Carpenter melalui kritik sastra feminis.

*Ketidakseimbangan
Emosional , Manchild,
Lirik Lagu*

Ketidaksetaraan emosional dalam hubungan patriarki tetap menjadi isu penting, tetapi ketergantungan emosional sebagai bentuk dominasi patriarki masih jarang dibahas dalam studi musik populer. Oleh karena itu, studi ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi representasi kekuasaan patriarki dan kerja emosional yang tidak setara dalam lirik serta meneliti perlawanan narator perempuan terhadap ekspektasi gender tradisional. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kritik sastra kualitatif dengan menggunakan lirik lagu sebagai sumber data utama. Data dianalisis melalui analisis tekstual dan interpretasi tematik berdasarkan kritik sastra feminis, dengan fokus pada konsep “Yang Lain” dari Simone de Beauvoir dan teori patriarki dari Kate Millett untuk menafsirkan representasi relasi kekuasaan dan ketidakseimbangan emosional dalam lirik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tokoh laki-laki bergantung secara emosional pada narator perempuan sambil menghindari tanggung jawab, yang menyebabkan kerja emosional yang tidak setara. Dominasi patriarki juga beroperasi secara halus melalui ketergantungan emosional, sementara narator perempuan mengekspresikan perlawanan melalui sarkasme, ironi, dan kritik. Oleh karena itu, Manchild tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai kritik feminis terhadap ketidaksetaraan emosional dan pola hubungan patriarki, tetapi juga berkontribusi pada kajian sastra feminis dengan menunjukkan nilai musik populer kontemporer sebagai teks budaya untuk meneliti relasi kekuasaan berbasis gender, kerja emosional, dan ideologi patriarki dalam masyarakat modern.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of interpersonal relationships are often depicted in literary works to reveal power relations and emotional imbalances. Power in a romantic relationship does not always manifest through physical domination, but rather through emotional control and avoidance of responsibility (Seidler et al., 2021). When one party consistently bears the burden of emotional labor to maintain harmony, while the other remains passive, this creates a structural imbalance (Erlich, 1984). More than just an arrangement of aesthetic words, literature plays an essential role in questioning these established norms, challenging structural

injustices in the private sphere, and opening up a space for dialectic for its readers to understand the world from various perspectives (Eagleton, 2011).

In modern society, the form of literary works has evolved significantly beyond the traditional boundaries of print media. Literature is now dynamic and easily accessible to a wide audience, one example being through the lyrics of popular songs (Damono, 2018). Song lyrics are essentially a form of contemporary poetry set to music, making them one of the most potent literary mediums in influencing the emotions and cognition of their listeners (Perrine, 1963). Through this medium, the public not only consumes the beauty of the melody but also unconsciously absorbs critical narratives that address contemporary social issues.

One example of modern literature rich in social commentary is the lyrics of the song “Manchild,” popularized by Sabrina Carpenter. The song, included in the album *Emails I Can’t Send*, explicitly dissects the dynamics of a dysfunctional romantic relationship, in which the female narrator is confronted with a man who is emotionally very immature (Pebrawaninggil & Nurhayati, 2025). The term “manchild” refers to a psychological and sociocultural phenomenon involving adult men who maintain childish behavioral patterns, refuse to take full emotional responsibility, and treat their partners as surrogate mothers (Illarionov & Makarova, 2023).

Textually, the lyrics of the song “Manchild” capture the frustration of a female character who is indirectly forced to assume a maternal role within a relationship that is supposed to be equal (Ambarita et al., 2024). To provide an initial glimpse into this dynamic, one lyric in the song explicitly states: “If I’m not there, it won’t get done.” This sample perfectly captures the essence of emotional imbalance and a skewed power dynamic, where the male partner remains entirely passive, thereby forcing the female narrator to shoulder the entire responsibility for the relationship’s survival. The diction explored by Carpenter transcends the clichéd outpouring of heartbreak found in most pop songs; it transforms into a sharp and intelligent social critique packaged within an easily digestible popular culture medium.

An analysis of the lyrics to the song “Manchild” offers significant benefits, both academically and in terms of social practice. Academically, this examination of the song’s lyrics enriches the literature on popular literary studies, while also demonstrating that modern pop culture products possess a textual depth that warrants scientific analysis (Storey, 2021). This song provides highly relevant primary data for dissecting how language and figures of speech are used to deconstruct gender roles in 21st-century romantic relationships (Nurgiyantoro, 2018). Socially, this song has pragmatic benefits as a tool for raising awareness among its listeners, validating the experiences of women trapped in the trap of unappreciated emotional labor (hooks, 2019), and encouraging the establishment of healthy boundaries (Gottman, 2018).

To deconstruct the structures of injustice represented in the song’s lyrics, this study employs a Feminist Literary Criticism approach. Specifically, this study follows the framework proposed by Kate Millett (2016) in *Sexual Politics*, which views patriarchal power as operating subtly within private and intimate relationships. Millett’s theory serves as the primary analytical tool to examine how men’s inability to manage emotions constitutes a form of indirect domination. This is further supported by Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) feminist theory, which argues that women have historically been conditioned to assume the role of caregivers and “fixers” for men. The combination of these two thinkers is effectively used to analyze the asymmetrical dynamics within the “manchild” phenomenon.

While the concepts of emotional labor and patriarchal power have been extensively studied in sociological contexts, previous research tends to focus on structural and psychological settings. For example, Vial & Cowgill (2022) examined gendered patterns of emotional labor within leadership and professional environments, while Oschatz et al. (2024) explored the intimate costs of emotional labor in romantic dynamics. Furthermore, studies on power relations, such as Körner & Schütz (2021), have analyzed how positional power affects relationship quality. However, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding how these unequal dynamics are specifically represented, normalized, and actively contested

within contemporary popular culture, particularly through the lens of modern music.

Most previous studies analyzing the work of Sabrina Carpenter or female representation in pop music have yet to address this intersection. For example, Pebrawaninggil & Nurhayati (2025) analyzed radical feminism and expressions of freedom in the song “Feather,” while Ambarita et al. (2024) focused purely on the linguistic aspects of deictics in the album *Emails I Can’t Send*. Because previous literary research tends to focus on broad themes of women’s empowerment or aesthetic linguistic structures, there is a lack of empirical research that examines how modern pop music specifically articulates the “manchild” trope as a subtle tool of patriarchal domination.

This study fills that gap and offers a novel contribution by bridging feminist literary criticism and the sociological concept of emotional labor. This research goes beyond standard lyric analysis by theorizing the song not merely as a reflection of a toxic romantic trope, but as empirical evidence of how 21st-century popular culture documents and resists the unequal distribution of emotional responsibilities. By doing so, this study provides a new scientific contribution to the intersection of feminism, emotional labor, and pop culture studies, demonstrating that modern pop lyrics are a critical site for deconstructing systemic gender inequality in the private sphere.

Based on this background, this study formulates two main questions:

- 1) How are power relations and emotional imbalances depicted in the lyrics of Sabrina Carpenter’s song “Manchild”?
- 2) How does the female narrator in the song deconstruct and resist patriarchal expectations regarding emotional labor?

Furthermore, to introduce a new concept, this study directly links this textual analysis to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: Gender Equality). The elimination of discrimination against women must extend to the private sphere (United Nations, 2016). The imbalance in emotional labor in this song is the micro-root of macro-gender inequality, and achieving equality means that women are no

longer burdened by disproportionate responsibilities in maintaining their partner's emotional balance (Boserup et al., 2013).

1) *Power Relations in Gender*

Power relations refer to how power is produced, maintained, and negotiated within social and interpersonal relationships, especially in gendered contexts. Power does not always manifest in the form of overt dominance or authority; it can also operate through subtle and indirect mechanisms within everyday interactions (Körner & Schütz, 2021). In masculinity studies, power is often expressed through emotional control, communication patterns, and behavioural expectations.

According to Seidler et al. (2021), dominant masculine norms emphasize independence, emotional restraint, and self-reliance, shaping how men interact in relationships and often discouraging open emotional expression. As a result, men may exercise control not through direct authority, but through emotional withdrawal, silence, or avoidance of conflict. In the context of this study, such dynamics are important to understand the "Manchild" phenomenon, where power is maintained through a lack of emotional engagement rather than overt control.

2) *Emotional Imbalance in Gender*

Emotional imbalance refers to a condition in which individuals struggle to understand, regulate, and express their emotions stably and appropriately. In masculinity, this imbalance is strongly influenced by social expectations that discourage vulnerability, leading men to suppress emotions such as sadness, fear, and anxiety while expressing anger or frustration more openly, creating an imbalance in emotional communication that may lead to misunderstanding and tension in relationships.

According to Chen and Liao (2021), emotional regulation is a key factor in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, as individuals who lack these skills tend to struggle with communication, conflict resolution, and empathy, resulting in unstable emotional interactions where feelings are either suppressed or expressed inappropriately. In this study, emotional imbalance becomes a central concept in analysing the "Manchild" character, particularly in how emotional immaturity affects relationship dynamics.

3) *The Manchild Song*

The term "Manchild" is commonly used to describe adult men who exhibit emotional immaturity, dependency, and avoidance of responsibility. Although the term is informal, it reflects real patterns discussed in masculinity studies, particularly in relation to emotional development and social expectations. According to (Oliffe, 2023), restrictive masculine norms limit men's capacity for emotional vulnerability, often leading some men to become dependent on their partners for emotional support, decision-making, and conflict resolution. In the context of this study, the "Manchild" figure represents a pattern of emotional underdevelopment shaped by gendered socialization rather than individual failing.

4) *Emotional Labor and Gender Inequality*

Emotional labor refers to the effort required to manage one's own emotions and respond to others' emotional needs to maintain social relationships, including activities such as showing empathy, managing conflict, and maintaining emotional harmony. According to Vial and Cowgill (2022), women engage in more emotional labor than men, self-regulating their emotions to attend to the needs of others, a pattern reinforced by gendered social expectations. Women are socially conditioned to be emotionally responsive and nurturing, placing the burden of emotional care disproportionately on them, which reinforces gender inequality by rendering their emotional contributions invisible and unrecognized (Oschatz et al., 2024). In this study, the concept of emotional labor is central to understanding the relational dynamics depicted in "Manchild," where the female perspective reflects the unequal distribution of emotional responsibility.

5) *Feminist Literary Criticism*

Feminist literary criticism is an analytical approach that examines how literary texts represent gender inequality, power relations, and the construction of masculinity and femininity within a patriarchal system. In this study, the framework is grounded in the theories of Kate Millett and Simone de Beauvoir to provide a deeper understanding of how power operates in gendered relationships.

According to Millett (1970), patriarchy is a political system in which men maintain dominance over women through both direct and indirect forms of control.

In *Sexual Politics*, Millett argues that power is embedded in everyday interactions, including emotional dynamics, behavioral expectations, and relational roles. This means that male dominance does not always appear as overt authority, but can also function through subtle mechanisms such as emotional withdrawal, avoidance of responsibility, and passive dependency.

Meanwhile, Beauvoir (1949) explains that women are socially constructed as "the Other," positioned as secondary in relation to men. This concept highlights how women are expected to fulfill emotional, supportive, and nurturing roles within relationships, while men are granted autonomy and subjectivity. As a result, women often carry a disproportionate emotional burden, including managing communication, maintaining relational stability, and responding to their partner's emotional needs.

By combining Millett's concept of patriarchy as a system of power and Beauvoir's notion of women as "the Other," feminist literary criticism serves as a tool in this study to analyze how gender inequality is reproduced through emotional imbalance and dependency. This perspective is further supported by Walby (2020), who explains that modern gender relations continue to reproduce inequality through both structural and interpersonal dynamics, affirming that subtle forms of power embedded in emotional relations remain a central concern in contemporary feminist analysis.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a feminist literary criticism approach, using qualitative content analysis to select and interpret lines of lyrics that represent power relations and emotional imbalance in Sabrina Carpenter's song "Manchild." According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research explores meanings constructed by individuals or groups within specific social contexts, producing findings that are holistic and contextual in nature. This approach is therefore appropriate for revealing the dynamics of gender relations and emotional experiences embedded in the song lyrics, as it allows the lyrical excerpts to be examined in depth through the feminist perspectives of Beauvoir and Millett.

The data in this study were obtained from twenty selected lines of the lyrics of the song "Manchild" performed by Sabrina Carpenter, chosen because they depict gender inequality between the male and female figures portrayed in the song. This song was selected as the data source because it represents women's experiences in navigating unequal relationships, particularly in terms of emotional dynamics and power relations. Through its lyrics, the song portrays a relationship with a man who exhibits emotional immaturity, making it relevant for analysis within a feminist literary criticism framework. Furthermore, qualitative data may take the form of texts or documents carrying symbolic meaning, making song lyrics a legitimate subject of analysis in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The data collection techniques employed in this study include library research and documentation. According to Adlini et al. (2022), library research is a data collection technique carried out by searching and reconstructing information from various sources such as books, journals, and existing studies relevant to the topic under investigation. Meanwhile, the documentation technique is a systematic process of collecting and analyzing documents as data sources in qualitative research (Zahroh et al., 2025). In this study, the documentation technique was applied by collecting the lyrics of "Manchild," analyzing them in depth, and identifying sections that reveal power relations and emotional dynamics within the lyrics.

Data analysis in this study was conducted systematically following the model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which consists of four stages: (1) data collection; (2) data condensation; (3) data display; and (4) drawing and verifying conclusions. This process was carried out to simplify and organize the data for clearer comprehension and to produce valid findings. Additionally, the analytical process was further guided by steps encompassing data management, thorough reading, coding, theme generation, data display, and interpretation (Creswell, 2010, 2014, 2018). Thus, data analysis in this study was conducted comprehensively and systematically to uncover power relations and emotional inequalities within the analyzed song lyrics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The song *Manchild* by Sabrina Carpenter describes a relationship between women and men that is not equal emotionally and psychologically. The male character in this song is represented as an immature, dependent, and irresponsible figure, while the female character bears the emotional burden in the relationship. Lyrics like "Why you always come a-running to me?" And "taking all my loving from me" show that there is a relationship inequality that is the focus of the analysis from the perspective of feminism.

Finding

First lyrics

"You said your phone was broken, just forgot to charge it."

This lyric portrays irresponsibility and avoidance of accountability. Through Beauvoir's theory, it illustrates how society permits male irresponsibility by expecting women to constantly compensate and maintain relational stability, forcing the narrator into a disproportionately responsible role. Furthermore, applying Millett's perspective, this behavior reflects patriarchal domination operating through everyday interactions. By normalizing these unequal gender roles, the man easily avoids accountability while forcing the woman to carry the entire emotional burden.

Second lyrics

"Whole outfit you're wearing, God, I hope it's ironic."

This lyric uses sarcasm to criticize the man's appearance and self-presentation. Symbolically, the "outfit" represents masculine identity and maturity. According to Beauvoir, gender identity is socially constructed rather than naturally formed, and the narrator's criticism exposes how the man performs masculinity externally while lacking emotional maturity internally. From Millett's perspective, this functions as resistance against patriarchal masculinity, as the narrator openly mocks the man's immaturity rather than passively accepting it, directly challenging the traditional expectation that women should tolerate male flaws without question.

Third lyrics

"Did you just say you're finished? Didn't know we started."

This sarcastic lyric reflects severe emotional disconnection, questioning whether the relationship ever truly existed. Through Beauvoir's concept of The Other, it highlights unequal participation, the woman invests emotionally while the man remains passive, rendering her needs entirely secondary. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory, this dynamic illustrates how patriarchy normalizes male emotional withdrawal. By forcing the woman to single-handedly preserve relational stability and communication.

Fourth lyrics

"It's all just so familiar, baby, what do you call it?"

This lyric highlights a predictable, recurring pattern of emotional immaturity. Through Beauvoir's perspective, this "familiarity" reflects how patriarchal culture socially conditions women to repeatedly accept unequal, emotionally exhausting caregiving roles. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory, this repetition reveals patriarchy as a structural system rather than an isolated, individual issue. Ultimately, the "manchild" phenomenon is exposed as a broad social pattern where men structurally depend on women for emotional support while remaining entirely passive themselves.

Fifth lyrics

"Stupid / Or is it slow? / Maybe it's useless."

These lyrics express the narrator's deep frustration and disbelief toward the man's incompetence. Through Beauvoir's theory, they highlight the social burden placed on women to continuously tolerate male inadequacy, forcing the narrator into an exhausting nurturing role. Furthermore, applying Millett's perspective, this emotional incompetence acts as a mechanism of indirect patriarchal domination. By avoiding responsibility, the man forces the woman to expend her own emotional energy to maintain relational order.

Sixth lyrics

"But there's a cuter word for it, I know."

This lyric uses irony to criticize society's tendency to soften male irresponsibility through humorous labels such as "manchild." According to

Beauvoir, patriarchal society normalizes women's tolerance toward immature male behavior. Instead of demanding emotional accountability from men, society often expects women to patiently accept such behavior. Millett's theory strengthens this interpretation because patriarchal culture maintains male dominance by minimizing or romanticizing male irresponsibility. The phrase "cuter word" sarcastically exposes how society disguises unequal emotional dynamics as harmless personality traits.

Seventh lyrics

"Man-child"

The term "man-child" symbolizes an adult man who remains emotionally immature and dependent. Through Beauvoir's perspective, this reflects the social construction of women as caregivers, forcing the narrator into a mother-like role that limits her freedom by tying her identity to emotional support. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory, this term illustrates how patriarchy operates in private relationships. Even though the man appears weak, he still benefits from a system that forces the woman to perform his emotional labor, turning his dependency into a hidden form of indirect patriarchal power.

Eight lyrics

"Why you always come a-running to me?"

This lyric highlights emotional dependency. The man repeatedly seeks comfort and emotional support from the woman. According to Beauvoir, women are socially expected to nurture and emotionally rescue men. The lyric reflects how the woman becomes emotionally available at all times, sacrificing her own emotional needs. From Millett's perspective, the repeated dependency reinforces unequal power relations. The man depends on the woman emotionally without providing equal support in return. This creates imbalance because the relationship revolves around male emotional needs.

Ninth lyrics

"Fuck my life / Won't you let an innocent woman be?"

This lyric expresses emotional exhaustion and resistance. The narrator feels trapped by the burden of caring for the emotionally immature man. Using

Beauvoir's theory, the phrase "innocent woman" reflects how women are unfairly burdened by patriarchal expectations. The narrator did not create the imbalance, yet she is expected to continuously support the man emotionally. Millett's theory interprets this as resistance against patriarchal domination. The narrator openly rejects the emotional exploitation imposed upon her. Instead of remaining silent, she questions why women must sacrifice their emotional well-being for immature men.

Tenth lyrics

"Never heard of self-care."

This lyric criticizes the man's inability to manage his own emotions and responsibilities. According to Beauvoir, patriarchal systems often prevent women from achieving personal freedom because they are expected to prioritize men's emotional needs above their own. Here, the man lacks self-awareness and self-management, yet the woman is expected to compensate for this deficiency. From Millett's perspective, the lyric reflects how patriarchy allows men to remain emotionally dependent while women become unpaid emotional caretakers. Emotional labor is therefore unequally distributed in the relationship.

Eleventh lyrics

"Half your brain just ain't there."

This lyric uses sarcasm and hyperbole to emphasize the man's emotional immaturity. Through Beauvoir's theory, the narrator's frustration emerges because the relationship fails to provide equality or mutual growth. Instead, the woman becomes trapped in a caregiving role that limits her emotional freedom. Meanwhile, Millett would interpret the lyric as criticism toward patriarchal masculinity that allows men to avoid emotional development while still benefiting from women's support. The man's immaturity becomes normalized, while the woman.

Twelfth lyrics

"Man-child / Why you always come a-running, taking all my loving from me?"

This final lyric summarizes the unfair emotional balance in the song. Using Beauvoir's idea of The Other, it shows the man selfishly draining the woman's

energy without giving love back. Using Millett's idea, this proves that patriarchy works through emotional abuse in private relationships, where men get all the benefits with zero responsibility. By complaining about this out loud, the narrator fights back, turning a simple breakup song into a strong feminist message.

Thirteenth lyrics

"Why so sexy if so dumb?"

This sarcastic lyric highlights the sharp contradiction between physical attractiveness and emotional immaturity. From Beauvoir's perspective, it illustrates how patriarchal culture rewards superficial masculinity, valuing a man's external desirability while completely overlooking his emotional incompetence. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory, this dynamic demonstrates how patriarchy privileges men even when they fail emotionally. By tolerating this incompetence, society unfairly shifts the heavy burden of emotional compensation onto women, exposing a deep inequality in how men and women are evaluated in relationships.

Fourteenth lyrics

"And how survive the earth so long?"

This hyperbolic lyric expresses disbelief at the man's inability to function independently. From Beauvoir's perspective, women are socially positioned as caretakers, implying that men's survival relies entirely on unpaid female labor and nurturing. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory, this dependency illustrates a form of indirect patriarchal domination. Even in his incompetence, the man benefits from a system that forces the woman to maintain his emotional and practical stability, making his dependency a hidden form of male privilege.

Fifteenth lyrics

"If I'm not there, it won't get done"

This lyric reflects an emotional and practical imbalance, in which the narrator's presence is the sole force sustaining the relationship. Through Beauvoir's concept of The Other, her existence becomes functional rather than personal, valued only for what she provides. Millett's theory reinforces this, revealing how patriarchy quietly assigns women unpaid emotional and domestic labor while men evade

accountability. The lyric ultimately exposes the narrator's exhaustion from carrying a relationship built on her effort alone, rather than mutual partnership.

Sixteenth lyrics

"I choose to blame your mom."

This lyric sarcastically blames the man's mother, criticizing how family structures shape male immaturity. Through Beauvoir's concept of socially constructed gender roles, it suggests the male figure was raised in a system permitting unchecked emotional dependency, whereas women are taught to nurture. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory of the family as a patriarchal agent, the lyric implies that traditional parenting reproduces unequal roles, mothers may unconsciously overserve sons, conditioning them to expect the same emotional labor from female partners. Ultimately, this highlights that the "manchild" phenomenon is a systemic, socially produced issue rather than a mere personal flaw.

Seventeenth lyrics

"Oh, I like my boys playing hard to get."

This lyric uses deep irony and sarcasm to criticize emotionally unavailable men, despite pretending to describe a romantic preference. According to Beauvoir, women are socially conditioned by patriarchal culture to romanticize difficult or emotionally distant men, teaching them to chase male validation instead of prioritizing their own well-being. Furthermore, using Millett's theory, a man withholding emotion is a form of patriarchal control. It creates an imbalance by forcing the woman into one-sided emotional effort to win his affection. The narrator's irony proves she recognizes this toxic pattern and rejects its normalization in modern romance.

Eighteenth lyrics

"And I like my men all incompetent."

This ironic lyric reflects the narrator's self-aware critique of repeatedly experiencing relationships with emotionally immature men. Through Beauvoir's theory, it illustrates how patriarchal expectations trap women in caregiving roles, conditioning them to act as "fixers" rather than equal partners. Furthermore, applying Millett's concept of patriarchy, the lyric highlights how male

incompetence actually preserves male privilege, because women consistently compensate for male failures through emotional labor. Patriarchal structures normalize this incompetence, knowing women will always manage the consequences.

Nineteenth lyrics

“And I swear they choose me, I'm not choosing them.”

This lyric reflects the narrator's attempt to distance herself from toxic relationship patterns by insisting that emotionally men are drawn to her. Through Beauvoir's perspective, this reveals how patriarchal conditioning forces women into nurturing roles, naturally making them magnets for emotionally dependent men. Furthermore, applying Millett's theory, the lyric illustrates how patriarchy traps women in a continuous cycle where male dependency repeatedly seeks out female emotional labor. Ultimately, it highlights the narrator's frustration and emotional conflict in facing a recurring, systematic pattern that feels unavoidable.

Twentieth lyrics

“Amen, hey, men.”

The lyric uses irony and wordplay to criticize inequality in patriarchal relationships. “Amen” appears to agree but actually satirizes the normalization of emotional imbalance. Meanwhile, “hey men!” phonetically resembles “amen” but directly addresses men as a collective group, transforming passive agreement into direct criticism. From Beauvoir's perspective, this shows women positioned as “The Other,” expected to fulfill men's emotional needs. Additionally, Millett's theory explains that patriarchy operates subtly through emotional dependency in private relationships. Therefore, the lyric represents resistance toward patriarchal relations.

Discussion

The analysis of this study reveals two interrelated key findings in Sabrina Carpenter's song "Manchild." The first is the patriarchal power dynamic that operates through emotional dependence, and the second is the imbalance in emotional labor imposed on the female narrator. These two findings are consistently

reflected across the twenty analyzed lyric excerpts and are grounded in the feminist frameworks of Beauvoir and Millett.

The first finding indicates that power in this song is not manifested through violence or direct authority, but rather through the male character's emotional incapacity and a passive yet systematic avoidance of responsibility. Millett (1970) demonstrates that patriarchal power does not always appear in open forms of domination, but rather infiltrates expectations of behavior considered normal in daily life. In this song, the male character never actively exerts control. On the contrary, he allows himself to be incapable, and it is that very incapacity that indirectly forces the narrator to bear the entire burden of the relationship alone. Further analysis reveals that this pattern is not merely a reflection of one person's flaws, but part of something far larger and deeper. The lyric "It's all just so familiar, baby, what do you call it?" feels significant here because the narrator herself recognizes that what is happening is not and that she is already too familiar with this kind of dynamic. That systemic impression grows even stronger with the line "I choose to blame your mom," quietly pointing to the family as the first place where unequal gender roles take root, long before anyone thinks to question them. As Millett stated, inequality does not suddenly happen in a relationship but has already been created over years of upbringing. Oliffe (2023) supports this by saying that inflexible masculinity norms encourage emotional dependency not because of personal weakness, but because men have never been taught otherwise.

The second finding concerns the unequal distribution of emotional work. Beauvoir's notion of "The Other" is a useful lens. It talks about the socialization of women to serve men's emotional needs, often at the expense of their own. This is well demonstrated in the lyric "If I'm not there, it won't get done". The narrator needs to be there for the relationship to work. The term "man-child" really sums up this dynamic. The male character is weak and needy, but he is benefiting from a system that sees women as unpaid emotional caregivers. In contrast, the song presents the narrator as a powerful figure. The use of irony, like "Why so sexy if so dumb?" and "And I like my men all incompetent," challenges the ideas of patriarchy. Also, the wordplay on "Amen, hey, men" turns passive acceptance into

active criticism of the community. This resistance pattern supports Beauvoir's view that by awareness of oppressive structures, women can recover their identity.

This research expands on earlier studies by closely examining how emotional dependence serves as a subtle way of maintaining patriarchal control. This aspect was not specifically discussed in Pebrawaninggil and Nurhayati (2025) or Ambarita et al. (2024). More broadly, these findings show that true equality, as promoted by SDG 5, cannot be achieved only through changes in institutions. It also requires shifting emotional responsibilities in private spaces, since inequalities are quietly repeated in everyday romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of "Manchild" by Sabrina Carpenter, this study concludes that the song portrays unequal power relations and emotional imbalance through an emotionally immature male figure and an emotionally burdened female narrator. The findings show that the male partner depends emotionally on the woman while avoiding responsibility, causing unequal emotional labor within the relationship. Through Simone de Beauvoir's theory, the female narrator is positioned as "The Other," whose role centers on fulfilling male emotional needs. Meanwhile, Kate Millett's theory explains that patriarchy operates subtly through emotional dependency and unequal emotional labor. The study also finds that the song functions as a form of feminist resistance, as the narrator challenges patriarchal expectations through sarcasm, irony, and criticism. Therefore, "Manchild" serves as a feminist critique of emotional inequality and patriarchal relationship dynamics.

Based on the findings of this research, the following suggestions are proposed: (1). Readers are expected to develop a more critical understanding of how power relations and emotional imbalance are represented in song lyrics, particularly in revealing gender inequality and women's experiences within romantic relationships. (2). Future researchers are encouraged to explore emotional labor and gendered power relations in a wider range of contemporary cultural texts

and cultural contexts. And (3). Researchers, educators, and practitioners are encouraged to use contemporary song lyrics as cultural texts for discussing gender inequality, emotional labor, and power relations.

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