

# She Creates, She Controls, She Commands Respect: Feminist Readings of Women as Deities in Classic and Modern Rock

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines how women have been represented in Western rock music through their role as deities. In particular, it aims to understand how these portrayals can reflect the evolution of feminist thought and theory in the Western world. A comparative analysis of Rhiannon by Fleetwood Mac and Lazaretto by Jack White aims to demonstrate how these depictions connect with and respond to Western feminist thought from the second wave of feminism in the 1970s to the fourth wave of feminism in the 2010s. Along with musical characteristics, the analysis of these portrayals focuses on spatial and temporal factors regarding the relation of the deity to the narrator while incorporating discussions of systemic issues that have impacted women in both the music industry and general Western society.

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It would be an understatement to claim that feminism and Rock & Roll have a complicated history. Women have customarily been barred from the genre through both male-dominated management creating a marketable image of the ideal female musician (characterized by submissive, conventionally attractive, emotion-driven women using the voice as their primary instrument) and the often sexist portrayal of women in the lyrics of rock songs themselves; a topic which has been debated since the birth of the genre (Frith and McRobbie 321). However, the portrayal of women in both classic and modern rock music can serve as a reflection for how feminism has evolved. One key way feminism has informed Rock music is through the genre's portrayal of women as deities. Analyzing "Rhiannon" by Fleetwood Mac and "Lazaretto" by Jack White demonstrates that the portrayal of women as deities is key to understanding how the genre incorporates and responds to continuously evolving feminist beliefs and practices; from the second wave of feminism occurring in the 1970s, to the ongoing fourth wave of feminism. This paper will engage with these ideas by analyzing the tone of the relationship between the deity and the narrator inhabiting the profane realm, and how physicality (or the lack thereof) is portrayed in relation to the deity. This can help put into context the evolution of critical concepts, such as independence in second wave feminism, or physical power in fourth wave feminism. These analytical tools can serve an important purpose for scholars in women's studies and musicology, as they provide historical context to music typically deemed trivial pieces of pop culture.

### “Rhiannon” by Fleetwood Mac

In her discussion of Emo music and culture, Jessica Hopper talks about the genre’s female-focused lyrics as putting women “on a pedestal, on [their] backs. Muses at best. Cum rags or invisible at worst” (1). While one could argue that the portrayal of women as deities lacks any affiliation with women in the profane world, this trope portrays the women as many of these attributes simultaneously. This quote highlights the way that this portrayal has traditionally worked in songs such as “Rhiannon” by Fleetwood Mac, with the women’s agency being removed through her discussion in relation to a male in the profane world. The most damning part is that the figure of the deity is, quite literally, invisible in the profane world that is inhabited by the person she is being discussed in relation to. As Hopper puts it, “Their lives, their day-to-day does not exist, women do not get colored in” (1).

In “Rhiannon”, it can be argued that the woman discussed in the song is not a deity at all. Instead, she is perceived as one from the narrator’s point of view. In order for a being to be classified as deity, they must hold both omnipotence (an all-powerful presence) and omnibenevolence (the ability to be a perfect being) (Trigger). The narrator of the song is responsible for ascribing these traits to the woman through lyrics such as “She rules her life like a bird in flight” (Mac 2:00-2:02), and “She is like a cat in the dark/And then she is to darkness” (Mac 0:46-0:51). The third person pronouns both contributes to these traits, but also to an ambiguity and mystery felt by the narrator about her presence. Instead of a literal, life-like deity (such as an earth mother tasked with protecting nature in the profane realm, or a deity associated with an institutionalized religion) the song’s deity is shown to be an object of temptation, with the narrator emphasizing her allure through open ended questions. This is most clear when the narrator asks, “And wouldn’t you love to love her?” (Mac 0:19- 0:21) and “And who will be her lover?” (Mac 0:27-0:29).

This portrayal of a deity as a temptress figure is reflected upon in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Despite being published in 1949, it is credited with kickstarting the rise of second wave feminism (beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s) which focused on women’s independence from male power (Spencer). In the book, de Beauvoir uses ancient myths to highlight the historical association

of women with evil, resulting in women being othered and discriminated against. One example credited in *The Second Sex* is the Ancient Greek myth of Pandora. After being given a jar containing all the evils of the world, Pandora’s curiosity results in her opening the jar and Zeus blaming Pandora for releasing the evils. In this case, Pandora is perceived as taking away Zeus’s power to keep the jar closed.

As a result, she is punished and viewed as subservient to him. “Rhiannon” functions in a similar way, with the focus on the imbalance of power between the female deity and those she tempts resulting in the deity exclusively being discussed in relation to those who desire her love. In simpler terms, “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself” (de Beauvoir 5).

This perception of women’s inferiority to men was omnipresent in rock at the time, and female rock stars had begun responding to enforcement of how they should look, dress, and act. Thus, reflecting the individual freedom encouraged throughout much of the second wave of feminism. Through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir’s observations of how the patriarchy has attempted to justify women’s inferiority, this practice could be shown through how “rebellious men are still seen to be in control of themselves whilst rebellious women are protesting at their own lack of control” (Reynolds and Press 329). One well documented response to the genre’s sexism was female rock stars, such as Janis Joplin and Joan Jett, acting like ‘one of the boys’ in order to carve out an inauthentic niche and succeed in the industry (Brabazon 212). Since the sole songwriter of “Rhiannon” is Stevie Nicks, the song could be interpreted as an example of this phenomenon. Although this strategy has traditionally focused on appearance, with lyrics being an afterthought, Norma Coates notes that the voice plays an influential part in this strategy as well, arguing “they must talk like a man, or more accurately, as if they were men” (83). These lyrics, while retaining a male voice through their tone and disregard of the female deity’s personhood, can accurately fit this description.

### “Lazaretto” by Jack White

Unlike “Rhiannon”, much of “Lazaretto” portrays the female deity (in this case, quite literally “God herself” (White 0:32-0:34) as an egalitarian figure in relation to the male in the profane world. During the second wave of feminism, egalitarianism (or the

belief in equality) had been debated in relation to male structures of power, with some questioning if true egalitarianism could even exist if women were to have any relation to men (Brunell and Burkett). Female separatism, a belief that women couldn't liberate themselves without being separated from men, was seen by some radical feminists at the time as a way to overhaul the social structures deeply rooted in women's subordination. Some founders and popularizers of radical feminism, who believed in separatism to varying degrees, acknowledged that this was in part due to how these power imbalances translated to our physical forms. Andrea Dworkin points to how women's bodies are seen as spaces to invade and conquer in patriarchal societies, and Adrienne Rich identifies that "the woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is ejected" (55). This dynamic of a female deity and a male from the profane world is helpful in connecting similar ideas to the fourth wave of feminism. This wave began in 2012, approximately two years before this song's release, and focuses on similar physical forms of inequality, such as: body shaming, rape culture, and domestic abuse (Brunell and Burkett).

The equality in the relationship between the female God and man in the profane world is initially established musically. Discussing "Lola" by The Kinks, Tara Brabazon elaborates on the "instability and ambivalence" created through the combination of "aggressive power chording and rhythm guitar patterns" and lyrics about "a heterosexual woman dominating a man" (222-23). In "Lazaretto"'s case, the rhythmic and frequently changing guitar patterns offer the song stability. This stands in contrast to "Rhiannon", where the instruments and vocals are largely separated throughout most of the song, and the melody at the end of each musical phrase never resolves; resulting in a sense of musical instability that is often read as queer. The lyrical relationship between the two subjects is then established through a mental acknowledgement. Expanding upon "Rhiannon"'s focus on inner thoughts and feelings, the lyric "And even God herself has fewer plans than me" (0:30-0:37) serves to address the deity prior to direct acknowledgement of her physical presence. While it is not known if this could be a projection onto the deity, as was the case in "Rhiannon", it implies an initial power imbalance between the subjects. By subverting the role of the mysterious temptress musically, while beginning with this lyrical power imbalance, "Lazaretto" finds a way

to connect with core feminist beliefs in an indirect, subtle manner.

As the song continues, strong emphasis is placed on physicality, first with the lyric "She takes a stick and then she pokes it at me" (White 0:37-0:39), and later with the lyric "Then I shake God's hand" (White 1:20-1:22). The latter further emphasizing the egalitarian relationship between the female God and man in the profane world. Since the female God is emphasized in these interactions, she gains autonomy through physical power and control, which is greatly emphasized in fourth wave feminism. This idea has been discussed previously in both religious studies and feminist research. Ally Moder's article "Women, Personhood, and the Male God" discusses the positive impact that the portrayal of women as the Judeo-Christian God can have on women coping with domestic abuse, by explaining that "divine naming cannot be void of gendered sexuality as humans attempt to relate to and embody the divine life. A retrieval of feminine imagery and language for God is thus important for women to regain personhood". Despite its surface level effectiveness as a tool of subversion, there is an ironic edge to this portrayal. As although the roles of deities can vary greatly among belief systems, deities in many western Rock songs are intended to be confined to a spiritual realm. This portrayal of a female deity crossing into the physical realm serves to humanize her by allowing her to have individualized thoughts that can be acted upon. It gives the deity the ability to critique others in the profane world and reject traditional notions of femininity (such as passivity, and the focus on emotion and intuition). Through the lens of the man (that the female God is discussed in relation to), the subversion and rejection of these characteristics causes him to increasingly value the female God.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the portrayal of women as deities can be a key resource to help Rock fans and feminist scholars alike dissect both the state of feminism at the time of a song's release, and how feminist practices and beliefs have evolved. Through "Rhiannon", which was released during the second wave of feminism, this was shown by the female deity being perceived by the narrator as mentally controlling or tempting those in the profane world into romance. It reflects frustrations and guiding theories in second wave feminism by portraying the woman exclusively in relation to how the narrator of the song felt about her (both in lyrics, and in the songwriter's creative process). Through Simone de Beauvoir's theory, we can see how second wave feminists acknowledged the othering of women as bringers of evil, a sentiment the song reflects. "Lazaretto" reflects the shift in feminist ideology from frustrations about the othering and demonizing of women, to the use of physical power in order to push back against injustices that stem from these beliefs. In the context of fourth wave feminism, this physical portrayal of the deity is used to give her power by rejecting traditionally feminine ways of being. While much has changed over the last 50 years of feminist thought, the belief in fighting for a more equitable world has stayed the same. As long as women are fighting for this, it will be sustained and reflected in music.

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