

Hip-Hop Music and Social Identity - An Analysis on the Construction of Jim Smith in the Movie '8 Mile'

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Received: October 20, 2021

Accepted: November 20, 2021

Online Published: November 23, 2021

doi:10.20849/ajsss.v6i4.952

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v6i4.952>

Abstract

When it comes to American hip-hop music and rap music, people always think of the African American singers in loose clothes, the flashing lights on the dirty stage, all kinds of alcohol and cigarettes, as well as many drunken scenes. However, such a familiar scene is indeed an authentic portrayal of the United States. If you have heard about hip hop music, it is not difficult to find that many hip-hop lyrics are often full of dirty abuse, cold ridicule and sharp criticism. In a sense, hip hop music and rap music can be considered a kind of 'voice resistance' from the lower class of American society. However, it has not changed their current situation, and hip hop music and rap music are still regarded as inappropriate for children and teenagers. It is noteworthy that in recent years, with the popularity of hip-hop music, people from all over the world have gradually paid attention to this unique music style. At the same time, more and more people from the lower class of the United States are also concerned by the U.S. government.

Keywords: hip hop music, rap music, African American, movie, 8 mile, racial discrimination

1. Introduction

The movie 8 Mile is a biographical movie starring hip-hop singer Eminem, and it tells the personal experience of a young man from Detroit (Grundman, 2006). In this film, instead of using novel narrative techniques to make the film plot more attractive, the director uses simple narrative lines throughout all of the plots, which makes this film more likely a documentary in terms of impressions. The film's protagonist is called Jim Smith, who is a character based on the personal experience of actor Eminem (a famous American rap star). In the film, Jim Smith is a blue-collar worker living at the bottom of the heap, working in a dilapidated car factory and living in a rented trailer with his compulsive gambling mother and young sister, Jim's life gray as an old abandoned old house. Besides, Jim is also a misfit within a crowd of black hip-hop singers; he always mingles with his black brothers who idle about all day. In fact, they are all facing pressure from family, work, society and all the other aspects. In the film, these miserable young people are the victims of the same fate, who jointly form the lowest class of the whole United States (Charles, 1990).

The movie 8 Mile has not only reflected some most serious problems that exist in American society, for instance, the racial discrimination and class solidification problems but also express the original American culture hip-hop to the audience, which has also made this movie have profound cultural deposits. This essay will first talk about hip-hop music and the film protagonist from a social class perspective and give a brief introduction to hip-hop music. In addition, this essay will discuss the identity construction of the film protagonist Jim Smith from the aspects of racial discrimination and hip-hop culture. In the end, this essay will discuss what caused Jim Smith's life in dire straits.

2. Social Class and Hip-Hop Music

The film 8 Mile tells a story that happened in 1995 in Detroit, a city once prosperous but now in a state of tattered. The 8-mile road in the film also exists in real life, and it is considered as the boundary between the most African American community and the middle-class white community. However, in the film, the '8 Mile' is more like a metaphor, which represents the insurmountable barrier between race and class. As Wang (2009) stated that in the process of its modern development, the United States had always been suffering from economic imbalance and the huge gap between the rich and the poor. After World War II and until the end of the 1970s, the United

States had entered a period of economic prosperity, and the problem of unbalanced economic development was alleviated for a short time (Wilson, 1987). However, since then, the gap between the rich and the poor in America has been continuing to widen, which has also intensified the class differentiation. In addition, racial discrimination in the United States has always been a major and unsolved problem in the whole society.

Moreover, with the development of urbanization in 1970s America, the whole society has formed typical black communities gathered in the city center and the middle-class white communities that gathered in the suburbs. However, although living in the center of a large city, life for most black families is still not easy. Mckeen (2002) stated that according to the statistics of the U.S. government in the 1980s, about 30% of the families were below the poverty line. Moreover, until the end of the 20th century, there are still a large number of lower-class African Americans facing the problems like low-quality education, short of medical and health resources, and most of them are from single-parent families (Seal, 2019). These factors have no surprise, exacerbated the solidification of class and weakened the mobility between classes.

As mentioned earlier, Jim Smith in the film, a white blue-collar worker who lives in a black community, comes from a low-income family, lives with his gambling-addicted mother, and still needs to look after his young sister. These deadening factors have undoubtedly made Jim trapped at the bottom of the heap. Although Jim is young and he is white, Jim is still like most of his black brothers, lived in poverty and worked with a small salary. On the one hand, Jim in the film is not a special case. He has a similar experience with the other black guys. On the other hand, Jim is special because he is white, but his white identity does not bring him any benefits. On the contrary, he is ostracized and discriminated from the black community.

Jim in the film has shown the charm of hip-hop music, and this kind of music is popular in the black community. From the movie, we can see that hip-hop culture is an indispensable part of the black community, and its significance has gone far beyond the scope of entertainment. Hip-Hop, which is originated from the impoverished black community in the United States, was born in the Bronx district of New York City in the late 1970s (Forman, 2002). When talking about hip-hop music, people may think subconscious thinking of a group of Africa Americans with colorful dreadlocks, pompous jewellery, sunglasses, and loose clothes (Armstrong, 1993), the image of such a hip-hop singer seems to have been deeply rooted among the people's mind, which can also reflect the amazing influence of hip-hop culture. What's more, as a kind of subculture dominated by young, 'poor' African American groups, hip-hop music has the feature of rebellious, unique and innovative (Huo, 2020). These features have greatly satisfied the young people's curiosity and rebellious psychology, which is different from the white middle-class traditional concept. In the movie 8 Mile, hip-hop music as a medium for Jim to express his attitudes has dramatically shown his resistance to American society unfairly. Thus it can be seen that hip-hop music is not only a way to entertain the public, but it is also the epitome of whom from the bottom of the heap.

3. Rap Music & 'Discriminated' Jim Smith

Rap is a form of hip-hop music, which is pioneered by Africa Americans and is popular around the world (Armstrong, 1993). In the film, rap music is one of the clues that pierced through the whole movie plot. It not only enhanced the whole movie plot development and the music effect but also witnessed the 'growth' of Jim Smith. In public perception, African Americans are usually a group of people discriminated against in society. However, in the rap music world, black people undoubtedly stand on the top and have been 'dominating' rap music for decades (Yang, 2019), so that when people were talking about rap music, the image of black rappers comes to mind. As a kind of music originated from the lower, poor black community, rap music is more popular around Africa Americans. As is known to all, 'money', 'crime', 'sex' and other elements are often appears in rap lyrics, which is hard to be accepted by the white middle class, but it is inseparable from the real life of the black people (Rose, 1998).

Growing up in such an environment of material scarcity, most black people have an instinctive yearning to lead a voluptuous life. At the same time, because there are always so many different gangs in one black community, and each gang may have their own "rap belief", so it can be said that rap music and gang culture are inseparable (Rose, 1998). Jim in the film is a young white man who lives in a black-dominated slum in Detroit. Growing up in a rented trailer, Jim is obviously a 'poor white man'. Living in such an environment, Jim naturally accepts the culture of the 'black slum' - its habits, code of conduct, its unique language and, of course, its music. The first scene of the film is Jim prepares for his performance in a bar's damp, messy bathroom, the dim lighting, chaotic environment, and the sound of vomiting and fighting from time to time all seem to set off the miserable life of Jim, a white man who lives in a low-class community. As the movie progress, it is easy to see that Jim is really a poor guy in this 'damn America society'. After breaking up with his girlfriend, he gives her his only car. As a

grown man, he had to live in a rented trailer with his confirmed gambler mother and young sister, but he could not even pay for the rent. What's more, sometimes he also needs to deal with his mother's rogue boyfriend (actually Jim's middle school classmate) but is beaten up.

This kind of life seems to pressure Jim breathless, suffocating growth. Environment makes Jim deep into the bottom of the heap but unable to struggle. In the movie, Jim's black brothers are not a group of decent fellows, but fortunately, everyone is a kind heart, and Jim gets a lot of help from his black brothers. In addition, it is not hard to see that Jim's black brothers actually live better than Jim. At least some of them have a permanent house, but Jim really had nothing. Working in a car factory, Jim has to bear the exploitation of his boss, living with his addicted mother and young sister, Jim's life seems to have no future, and music has become his only consolation. In the film, Jim's identity is very clear. As a poor, white young man living in the black community, Jim has never gained any benefit from his white identity. On the contrary, he is teased and ridiculed by some black young people from the other gangs (Mitchell, 2018). In the film, he is ridiculed and can only leave awkwardly when he performs for the first time. It seems like Jim can never really integrate into these black groups, and it is hard for him to break through the cruel reality.

4. Conclusion

This essay mainly discusses the life experience of Jim Smith and hip-hop culture. In the film, as a young white man who lives in the black community, Jim is often discriminated against by the other black gangs because of his white identity. In the movie, even Jim, like most black people in the community that lives a poor, hard life, however, these black groups will never pity him, just like Cobb (2003) used specified that 'proletarian workers' are all victims of the whole American capitalist system because Jim and these black guys are all 'workers' from the bottom of the heap of the whole America society. At the end of the film, Jim depends on his fantastic rap skill and performance beat doc papa (who had humiliated him before), which established his prestige among the other black groups, even the black thug leader who did not let him enter the bar before also showed his appreciation for Jim.

In general, the arrangement of the film plot is logically reasonable, and the whole film is developed fluently, especially in the characterization, the image of Jim, a real and plump poor white young man. As a white youth living from the bottom of the heap, Jim in the film makes a valid and frank self-mockery of his white identity and his hapless life experience, which also makes a mockery of the social dross of class solidification and racial discrimination in America. The film's end scene is Jim once again going to that neon alley alone and continuing his work in the car factory, just like a lonely western hero disappearing in the sunset (Steve, 2003). In fact, it is not difficult to see that as a person from the bottom of the heap, even if they occasionally get a little charity from others, they still can not change anything at all. Life always has to continue because it is always difficult for lower-class people to achieve class crossing. In the meantime, Jim also refused his friend's kindness (to host the rap competition with his friend), which in a sense also showed that Jim finally refused to integrate into the that 'rap world' dominated by the other black groups, and finally embarked on his own road. In a sense, this is actually Jim's helplessness and sadness about the difficulty of crossing the barriers of 'racial discrimination'.

In the aspect of character image building, the movie 8 mile has vividly portrayed the protagonist Jim Smith by showing his living environment, suggesting his identity and status, showing his psychological changes to make Jim become a more realistic and vivid character. Moreover, in the film, hip-hop music as one of the core elements supporting the development of the whole film has enriched the film's cultural connotation and makes the film have a fantastic audio-visual effect. Nowadays, hip-hop music relies on its free and interesting style makes it one of the most popular music styles in the United States and even the world (Wang, 2021). As a music style originated from the lower-class community, hip-hop music has achieved the leap of class from some perspective. However, as for people from lower-class status, it is still hard for them to have a stable life, a bright future, and break away from their primitive environment, and maybe this is the sorrow of the whole capitalist system.

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