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The Influence of Lauryn Hill

If I were to ask about traits that superheroes have, people might say “super strength, telekinesis, or invisibility.” While these powers might make them a superhero it does not make them a rhetorical superhero. My definition of a rhetorical superhero focuses on the influence that an individual has on their audience. Whether they speak about social issues or provoke emotions through their art, they should make an impact on others. When I think of my rhetorical superhero, singers usually come to mind. I look up to singers that make me feel connected to their music due to the reliability of their lyrics and the ability to tell a story through music. It can be a struggle to find words that capture strong emotions that you have experienced in life, but this artist has proved through their work that they are capable. That is why I chose “Doo Wop (That Thang)” written by Lauryn Hill. This song uses pathos, Kairos, and ethos to address societal and cultural issues that were present at the time of the release.

On May 26, 1975, Lauryn Hill was born to two loving parents in East Orange, New Jersey. Her family later moved to South Orange, New York where she would soon start her music career. Hill has always had a passion for music since she was raised in a music-oriented household, her mother played the piano and her father sang at local weddings and

events. In 1991, Hill had her first minor appearance in an Off-Broadway play. Although the play was not successful it led her to being discovered by an agent. Two years later she had her first breakout role in *Sister Act 2*, starring alongside Whoopi Goldberg. Shortly after Hill would join the musical group, The Fugees, in 1994 but would only last with them until 1996. By the age of 21 Hill was enrolled in Columbia University before deciding to withdraw her sophomore year to focus on her music career. In 1998, Hill released her first and only studio album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. This album gave us the sensational single, “Doo Wop (That Thang).”

“Doo Wop” was named the best single of the year by Rolling Stones. The song experienced an immense amount of success, it won two Grammy Awards for best female R&B vocal performance and best R&B song. In the song, “Doo Wop,” Hill talked about the challenges faced by the Black community at the time, covering issues such as relationship dynamics and the portrayal of Black women in the media. The song explored themes of self-respect, empowerment, and the struggles of relationships. In the intro the lyric, “Sirat al-Mustaqeem” is sung which is an Arabic term that means to follow the straight path. In the context of the song this line indicates that she is going to give us straightforward advice. Even if we might have strayed from the path, it is never too late to find the right path through guidance and advice.

Being a Black woman herself, Lauryn Hill used her lyrics to directly connect with the Black community. Hill ties in her personal experiences and reputation to convey ethos throughout her song. Hill shows us listeners that she is credible through this lyric, “Now

Lauryn is only human/ Don't think I haven't been through/ the same predicament." She is relating to her audience by telling us that she has been through similar challenges, creating a sense of understanding. Hill is not judging anyone in their current situation, instead she wants them to reflect on their current mindset as she once did.

Another lyric that establishes ethos is, "You know I only say it cause/ I'm truly genuine/ Don't be a hard rock/ when you really are a gem." Hill is wanting her audience to understand that she has good intentions, stating that she is 'truly genuine.' Hill uses the metaphors, "hard as a rock" and "gem" so listeners are encouraged to embrace their true worth and beauty. These lyrics build on her credibility because she wants to connect to her audience on a vulnerable level.

Throughout "Doo Wop" the song uses pathos to resonate with her audience. Towards the end of the song Hill advises her female listeners that they should be weary of men. She says, "Girls, you know you'd better watch out/ some guys are only about/ that thing." In this line, Hill is stressing the importance that women should be cautious of men that they want to pursue a relationship with, because some are only focused on sexual desires instead of a genuine connection. A warning is even given to male listeners, "Guys, you know you better watch out/ some girls are only about/ that thang. Both lines are used to emphasize the concerns that people face while looking for relationships.

In the outro of the song Hill draws emotion from her audience on what it means to be in love. In the conversation at the end, they discuss the feelings they have for someone when they are in love. A key point from the conversation was when someone said,

“...You’re taking that person for what he or she is no matter what he or she looks like...”

This conversation can evoke listeners to want to experience this kind of unconditional love and acceptance that comes with it. The conversation prompts the listeners to understand that physical appearance is not that important when it comes to love.

Lauryn Hill used Kairos as an opportunity to speak on issues that were being faced in the Black community. Upon its release in 1998, the song addressed the issues within hip-hop and R&B culture, while it was at the peak of popularity. During this music era multiple male rappers and singers were objectifying Black women in their songs. Male artists at the time would reinforce stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards through their actions. Hill wanted women to reject this type of pressure from men. She goes on to say, “Showing off your ass ‘cause you’re thinking it’s a trend,” this lyric suggests that young women were influenced by the media they were consuming. The phrase “thinking it’s a trend” implies that their behavior is not genuine, and they are following popular trends to conform to the new beauty standards that are constantly changing. Hill understands that pressure is put on women by society, but she wants them to know that it is important to prioritize their own personality.

The topics of empowerment and embracing yourself are brought up throughout the song. Hill’s lyrics are a timeless diss on the pressure that the media puts on young people to change themselves to fit in. Especially with the rise of social media, many people compare themselves to online personalities. There were times when I would compare myself to others and follow certain trends to fit in. As a Black girl, it was hard to navigate my own

style and appearance growing up. I changed my look by straightening my hair and wore clothes that were popular at the time. During this period of my life, I did not feel like my true self. Once I got to high school, I started to find my own style and embraced my natural hair. I am still trying to find myself, but the first step was to accept my natural beauty. Accepting yourself, the way I did, is the message that Hill wanted to convey to her audience. Although it is common to succumb to the pressure of society, many people are still trying to break the habit of conforming to a specific appearance to be accepted.

The narrative that was told through “Doo Wop” is a timeless tale, that anyone can relate too, regardless of the era. Hill expertly blended three rhetorical contexts to create a lyrical masterpiece. Through Kairos, she brought attention to societal issues that were prevalent at the time of the song’s release. Additionally, Hill established an emotional connection with her audience by giving them advice on how to proceed in a relationship. She also emphasized the importance of self-respect and being genuine to yourself. By sharing her own experiences, she established her credibility and resonated with listeners on a personal level. Lauryn Hill is a rhetorical superhero because of her ability to create meaningful messages to send to her audience. Many, including myself, connected with her message sent about self-expression and empowerment. Throughout her time in the industry Lauryn Hill has inspired countless people to advocate for themselves through her artistry.