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Devils, Doppelgangers and Darkness from Eminem

Marcia Alesan Dawkins · Thursday, July 14th, 2011

On a clear night in June I watched a man kill himself. He said he was going to do it. I don't know why. And I'm not the only one.

All we have to go on is the note he left behind. It said that he was "space bound." Everybody seems to have an opinion but nobody really knows what it means.

Rumor has it that the man was missing something. That he had a hole in his heart. That he'd been cheated on. That he was tired of being misunderstood. That he was just plain evil.

None of these rumors sufficed. And like many others I just couldn't shake the feeling that there could be other explanations. Maybe the man had multiple personalities. Maybe he was possessed by the devil. Maybe having multiple personalities is simply a secular expression for possession. Either way, the man seemed to have lost control of his identity to someone else.

The man, of course, was Eminem. So was his alter-ego (Slim Shady). And so was the devil.

In his latest video, "Space Bound," Eminem exhibits the classic symptoms of someone with multiple personalities. For starters, there are two of him in the video–split screens for split personalities. Each Eminem is different from the other and each is dominant at a particular time. And the dominant personality determines his behavior. Several times throughout the video it's as if one personality is waking up from a dream and can't believe what he appears to be doing–choking his girlfriend, checking her phone for texts, wondering why she picked him up on the side of the road. It seems that each of Eminem's personalities is complex and integrated with its own unique patterns of behavior and social relationships. And what one personality knows about the other could range from complete to nil. Even if Eminem's personalities are completely dissociated their bond can't be dissolved.

At least one of Eminem's personalities appears to be aware that the other exists. And he wants to break the relationship. From what we know about Eminem it's not hard to imagine his conversations with his alter-ego and girlfriend in "Space Bound" as a metaphor for the futility of breaking up.

But there is another way to see it: The devil made Em do it.

As ridiculous as it sounds, Eminem is one of several successful rappers that has been accused of selling his or her soul to the devil for success. He addresses the accusations sarcastically in lyrics and by naming his new album (with Royce Da 5’9) “Hell: The Sequel.”

But in “Space Bound” Eminem could very well possess and be possessed by the devil in the same dysfunctional ways he describes possessing the woman (Sasha Grey) he loves to hate. According to popular culture expert and communication professor Ebony Utley, “the devil is not a new hip hop personality. The violence the devil creates–shattering glass, gun cocks and shooting–are in line with how Eminem experiences love even as he does verbal battle with his own demons.”

“Space Bound” is not the first of Eminem’s lyrics and videos to demonstrate this obsessive-possessive pattern. Many of the songs that made him famous describe abusive, obsessive love-hate relationships and are accompanied by shocking video imagery. Some of the songs are explicitly about the mother of his children, including the controversial “Kim” (2000). Others, like “Crazy in Love” (2004) and “Love the Way You Lie” (2010), are about oppressive relationships in general. Some are even odes to the devil himself like “My Darlin'” and “Hell Breaks Loose” (2009). In Eminem’s lyrics, intimacy equals violence and love equals total possession.

So, “Space Bound” could be Eminem’s latest attempt to destroy the devil and the “evol” love with which he possesses. And it could be an attempt to cure multiple personality disorder by putting himself out of his misery. At this point the answer is unclear. What is clear–as clear as a night in June–is that neither a devil nor a disease can be destroyed with a single bullet to the head. Their holds are unbreakable. It doesn’t matter how much blood is spilled. Both are powerful enemies capable of returning to remind us of what is always already within.

Whether it’s splitting a personality with Slim Shady, clinging to a love that’s already lost or being possessed by the devil himself one of Eminem’s many messages in “Space Bound” is that everyone and everything has two faces. Even love. Love really can be “evol.” And for Eminem the path to love–the greatest expression of human goodness and kindness–all too often finds expression in the heights of human irrationality, the depths of despair and the pains of darkness.

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