



“Praying,” #FreeKesha, and #MeToo: How an Artist and a Song Can Reflect a Movement

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

In what ways might Kesha’s legal battle and her song “Praying” reflect larger issues present in the #MeToo movement?

OVERVIEW

When Kesha Rose Sebert signed her first recording contract in 2005, she realized a near lifelong goal. Only 18, the singer and rapper was now to record on the Sony Records subsidiary Kemosabe. Sebert would be produced almost exclusively by “Dr. Luke” Gottwald, then a guitarist in the Saturday Night Live band whose short production career included elevating Kelly Clarkson into the upper echelons of the Billboard Hot 100 charts. Though it took a few years, in 2010 the singer—now just “Kesha”—topped the pop charts in eleven countries and broke all previous records for digital downloads with her first single, “Tik-Tok.” Kesha had “made it,” and her success continued through several subsequent releases. According to the singer, however, the experience was not what it seemed.



Photo: Gavin Huang

Kesha’s Kemosabe contract stipulated that Dr. Luke produce at least six songs on her first six albums. Kesha claims, however, that the producer attempted to control her life outside the professional boundaries of their musical collaboration. In 2014, she filed suit against Dr. Luke for sexual assault and battery, sexual harassment, gender violence, emotional abuse, and violation of California business practices. She also claimed that he had drugged and raped her on two occasions. Kesha filed an injunction that requested her release from the Kemosabe recording contract. Dr. Luke, who denied the allegations, countersued, claiming defamation.

Kesha’s allegations made headlines from the start, but images of a slumped, teary Kesha listening to a New York State Supreme Court judge rule against her release from the Kemosabe contract in February 2016 went viral, inspiring passionate fans to post hundreds of thousands of messages of support with a “#FreeKesha” hashtag. Kesha received public statements of support from celebrities including Lady Gaga, Adele, and, most notably, Kelly Clarkson, as well as a quarter-million dollar donation to offset legal fees from Taylor Swift. Kesha lost her first court case, but emerged at the forefront of a movement that bore her name: “#FreeKesha.”



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

Despite her fans' wishes, Kesha was not "freed" from the Kemosabe record label. The judge—a woman—felt that voiding such a contract, willfully signed by both parties and with no language that allows for such an exit, would set a legal precedent with far-reaching ramifications. Furthermore, she suggested that Kemosabe's offer to record Kesha without Dr. Luke's involvement would insulate the artist from the man she claims abused her. The judge also ruled that the statute of limitations had expired for many of Kesha's claims. Though disappointed, Kesha recorded *Rainbow*, an album produced for Kemosabe without the input of Dr. Luke. According to Kesha, recording the album was invigorating: "[*Rainbow* is] a record I'm extremely proud of, from the bottom of my guts," she told *Rolling Stone* magazine in October 2017, "I excavated the most gnarly lyrics that were so difficult for me...I feel like I'm being seen for what I actually am, and people are OK with it."

As a groundswell of collective support for a woman who made a public statement regarding sexual abuse, the #FreeKesha movement could be seen as the beginning of a broader, much larger wave of public expression regarding women's rights issues that emerged in 2017. The Women's March of January 2017, which was attended by an estimated 2-3 million people nationwide, was the largest mass protest in U.S. history. Later in 2017, following *New York Times* reporting on Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment allegations, the hashtag "#metoo," an expression of female unity, was used 12 million times in 24 hours.

In this lesson, students explore key moments in the history of the women's rights movement, and consider how the #FreeKesha campaign relates to broader women's rights issues. Then, students will discuss why Kesha's song "Praying" was embraced by many as a theme for the #MeToo movement.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The relationship between music and social movements
- The origins of the #FreeKesha movement
- The origins of the #MeToo movement

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain the differences and similarities between the #FreeKesha and #MeToo movements through paired discussion.



ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that they will watch the official music video for Kesha's "Praying" (*Note: this link will open to the official video on YouTube, we suggest loading the video before class to avoid showing advertising during class*). On a piece of paper, have students note anything that stands out to them from the opening monologue, the song's lyrics, or the imagery of the video. Ask students:

- What do you think might have inspired Kesha to open the song with this monologue? To what do you think this monologue might refer?
- What are some of the recurring images in this video? What do you think they are meant to represent?

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute Handout 1 - Women's Rights Timeline. After completion, ask students:
 - What is the order of events?
 - Why did you chose that order?
2. Display Image 1, "Women's Rights Timeline Answers" and have students compare the timeline they created with the correct sequence of events. Ask students:
 - What differences did you find between the timeline you made and the actual order of events? Were any of these surprising? Why?
 - Which of these events or pieces of legislation might have bearing on women who hope to have professional careers as performers, or anything else? How?
3. Break students into A/B pairs. Give students in Group A Handout 2a - The #FreeKesha Movement, and students in Group B Handout 2b - The #MeToo Movement. Give each student a copy of Handout 2c - 3-2-1 Worksheet. After they have read the handouts, ask students to share what they learned from their handout with a partner who had the other handout, and then individually complete the activity on Handout 2C - 3-2-1 Worksheet.
4. Discuss students' responses to Handout 2C - 3-2-1 Worksheet as a class, then ask:
 - What connections do you see between the #FreeKesha and #MeToo movements? In what ways might they be different?
 - What do you think the Time magazine authors might mean when they suggest, "We're still at the bomb-throwing point of this revolution, a reactive stage at which nuance can go into hiding"? Is there anything that makes you uncomfortable about the #MeToo movement? Beyond believing or not believing someone, what ways might people engage the movement productively and with "nuance"?



SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Show Image 2, Kesha Quote. Ask students:

- Thinking back to the video that began this lesson, how might "Praying" and the album *Rainbow* have been therapeutic to Kesha? (*Encourage students to consider the connections between Rainbow and #MeToo. The album was, in some ways, her hashtag. She used it to tell her version of a story.*)

2. Ask students:

- In what ways do you think the #MeToo movement might address issues the legal system cannot? In what ways do you think the legal system might address issues in a way the #MeToo movement cannot? (*Encourage students to think about ways "#MeToo" might have emboldened some women to share experiences they otherwise would have kept secret, and how this might change their lives. Also, encourage students to explore the way that same public sharing can become public shaming, and consider productive ways those stories might help enact positive change. Students should consider the legal system's strength as a place in which evidence can be presented, yet also its seeming lack of capacity to act in situations where evidence is not physical.*)
- Many have described the #MeToo movement with analogies such as a "dam bursting" or a "pot boiling over," what might these analogies suggest? How do you think we might address other lingering issues in a way that might prevent them from erupting in a similar fashion?



STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity



Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading

NJSLSA.R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

NJSLSA.R6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

NJSLSA.R8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

NJSLSA.R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Writing

NJSLSA.W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

NJSLSA.W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects, utilizing an inquiry-based research process, based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



NJSLSA.W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

RESOURCES

IMAGE RESOURCES

- Women's Rights Timeline Answers
- Kesha Quote

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Women's History Timeline
- Handout 2a - The #FreeKesha Movement
- Handout 2b - The #MeToo Movement
- Handout 2c - 3-2-1 Worksheet