

Suggested responses: 'Under My Thumb'

1. Read the lyrics and highlight all examples of the singer controlling/influencing his partner.

'Under my thumb' / 'The clothes she wears' / 'The way she talks when she's spoken to'

2. Verse one alludes to the idea that the woman was the original oppressor. What does this suggest about attitudes towards feminism at the time?

These lyrics suggest that some people feared feminism as they associated it with aggressive and 'non-feminine' behaviour, such as that which was expected of a man (to be dominant instead of subservient).

3. Underline all examples of the woman being compared to a pet (dehumanised). What does this suggest about attitudes towards women?

'Squirming dog' / 'A Siamese cat of a girl' / 'She's the sweetest, hm, pet in the world'

The dehumanising lyrics suggest that the male feels superior to his partner and has the right to treat her however he wishes because she is under his control – his pet. Therefore, the female has no agency over her life. This suggests that some attitudes towards women were still deeply misogynistic in 1966.

4. Circle all phrases where the singer is bragging that the woman's change of behaviour is because of his actions. What does this suggest about attitudes towards women?

'Down to me, the change has come' / 'The way she does just what she's told down to me'

Similarly, these lyrics suggest that some males felt that women should be subservient to the wishes of their male partners, who performed the dominant role. It implies that some males had the attitude that it was their right to control the actions of their female partners.

5. What does this double standard suggest about attitudes towards women and sex at this time?

'I can still look at someone else'

This lyric suggests that some males felt threatened by growing female sexuality, as the singer has prevented his partner from looking at anyone else – 'Under my thumb, her eyes are just kept to herself'. However, there is a double standard because the male is at liberty to engage in sexual encounters with other females.

6. Does the song support/oppose the idea of changing gender roles in the 1960s? Write down three examples from the lyrics and explain each one.

The title and repeated phrase 'Under my thumb' imply that gender roles have not changed and, in fact, that women have become more repressed by the 1960s because the female in this song is seen to be under the constant control of her male partner. The lyrics of the first verse contrast this and suggest that some women have gained greater power in this period, as they can be seen as a dominant force ('once had me down' / 'once pushed me around'). The repeating lyrics 'it's down to me' imply that males still see their roles as being more dominant or decisive over their partners.

7. Based on your knowledge of 1960s culture and society, is this song reflective of the wider attitudes towards women at this time? Why/not?

The song is surprising, given the huge gains in female empowerment before 1966. Women had more sexual freedom (due to the pill), had access to better and more jobs than before, and were enfranchised and gaining larger roles in government. Traditional gender roles were still heavily perpetuated in advertising and through the media, but significant gains had been made by 1966, meaning that this song is likely more reflective of a proportion of society rather than society as a whole.

8. To discuss in class: How does the fact that this is a pop song affect its usefulness to you in analysing 1960s society?

The fact that it was written and grew to be popular suggests that many people enjoyed the song. However, this doesn't mean that they agreed with the lyrics, although some certainly may have done. It demonstrates that these outdated gender roles did still have an audience in the 1960s, but can't reveal how many people subscribed to these attitudes.