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Claremont McKenna College

On the Total Communicative Efficacy of Music and Its Synthesis to Written Word
through Bob Dylan and Kendrick Lamar

submitted to
Professor Leland de la Durantaye

by
Skyler Addison

for
Senior Thesis
Spring 2021
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Introduction

When Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition," a cultural battle reignited amongst critics and common listeners alike.¹ Can some songwriters be accurately classified as poets? What, then, would stop all songwriters from considering themselves poets? What is the difference between song and poem? Bob Dylan emphatically answered this question for himself when he initially refused to pick up the award or attend the ceremony in Stockholm.² In 1992, Dylan stated that he did not feel qualified to classify himself as a poet:

Sometimes, it's *within* me. It's within me to put myself up and be a poet. But it's a dedication. It's a *big* dedication. Poets don't drive cars. Poets don't go to the supermarket. Poets don't empty the garbage. Poets aren't on the PTA. Poets, you know, they don't go picket the Better Housing Bureau. Poets don't even speak on the *telephone*. Poets don't even talk to *anybody*. Poets do a lot of listening and usually they know why they're poets.³

To make a definitive distinction between the songwriting and poetry would be an artificial, prescriptive solution. A listener may find deep meaning in any song, whether the lyrics are kaleidoscopic and contemplative or specific and concrete. Likewise, to say that written poetry lacks a sense of musicality would be misleading; the flow of poetic form necessitates a sense of rhythm or direction, wherein all poetry inherently contains its own musical form through the diction and interplay of its words.

¹ (2021), "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016," (online). *Nobel Media*. Accessed 20 Mar 2021.

² (2017), "Bob Dylan finally agrees to accept Nobel Prize for Literature," (online). *BBC News*. Accessed 29 Mar 2021.

³ Zollo, P. (2003), *Songwriters on Songwriting*. Cincinnati: De Capo Press. Page 74.

However, to say that music doesn't have a totality of lyrical staying power would be misguided. Music is, by definition, ephemeral. It escapes our ears after a few moments in time but leaves a lasting impression where phrases may linger like a mantra. As poetry has moved further away from schematic rhyming and into free verse, its melodic staying power has collectively dissipated from the immediate memory of modern popular culture; walking down the street, you are far more likely to hear someone reciting song lyrics than a poem.

The effect of music on the brain demonstrates its totality in communicative power. Listening to music is one of the few activities that can stimulate each part of your brain. According to neuroscientist Kiminobu Sugaya and renowned violinist Ayako Yonetani, music causes the motor cortex, cerebellum, auditory cortex, prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, sensory cortex, visual cortex, nucleus accumbens, and amygdala to light up on an MRI.⁴ Likewise, in a social conversation, words spoken carry less than 35% of the interaction's social meaning, with 65% conveyed by the non-verbal. While poetry relies on the word and its subtext, songwriting may also wield the other 65%.⁵

By dissecting the dynamic communicative aspects of song, modern poets may find useful ways in which they can make their lines have more staying power with the listener, encompassing both the rhythmic catchiness of their lines to an all-encompassing emotive transfer. We may isolate the interwoven components of a song that dictate how a story is told in order to better understand how it is rhetorically effective: its musicality, words, structure, and audience communication style, or more succinctly, a song's perspective, which is embedded within each mode.

Songs are, by nature, a shared form of storytelling. The speaker necessitates a listener. Patti Smith originally wrote poetry before moving to songwriting and believed the two hold inherently

⁴ (2021), "Your Brain on Music," (online). University of Central Florida. Accessed 15 Mar 2021.

⁵ Birdwhistell, R. (1972), *Kinesics and Context*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

different aims: “Poetry is a very solitary process, and when I’m writing poetry, unless it’s an oral poem, I’m not really thinking of it in terms of communicating it to anyone; I’m just writing my poetry and sometimes it’s obscure or complicated.”⁶ Songwriters perform their work to an audience, whether live or recorded. Poetry, in its written form, invites the reader to create their own isolated performance while reading. The inherent outward communicative composition of a song differs to poetry in this regard. Chomsky wrote that a unique aspect of our innate linguistic competence is the ability of a learner to create new sentences that are to be immediately understood despite the unfamiliarity at the syntactic level.⁷ British linguist John Lyons took this statement a step further, asserting that the duality of structure within grammar consists of a syntactic level and a phonological level. Words are combinations of meaningful units that are conveyed by phonemes, a distinct unit of sound within a language. As a result, Lyons implied that the way in which words are received relies upon more than merely text, but rather performance to convey emotional meaning.⁸

Like language itself, music cannot refer to a phenomenon directly but rather attaches a web of layered subtext and meaning.⁹ This is why there is no definitive correct interpretation of language and thus music. The purpose of art, however, is to communicate feeling from the artist to an audience. According to Leo Tolstoy, the degree to which this communication can be categorized as successful is dependent upon the degree to which another individual is “infected” by the work.¹⁰ This infection refers to understanding the emotional message expressed within the work, wherein the artist’s subjective thoughts become objectively understandable to the public.

⁶ Zollo, P. (2016), *More Songwriters on Songwriting*. Cincinnati: De Capo Press.

⁷ Chomsky, N. (1971), *Selected Readings*. J.P.B. Allen and P. Van Buren (eds). London: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Lyons, J. (1970), *Chomsky*. New York: Fontana/Collins.

⁹ Sim, S. (1992), ‘Structuralism and Post-Structuralism’, O. Hanfling, *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell/Open University.

¹⁰ Tolstoy, L. (1960), *What is Art?* trans. A. Maude (orig. published 1896). Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs Merrill.

This interpretation is disputed, however; many other musicologists discern that the listener cannot claim to know that the meaning they take from a song is what the artist intended.¹¹ Therefore, for the purpose and scope of this thesis, the degree to which we may measure the communicative efficacy of songs is contingent upon the social receptance of these works, which is measurable via critical reception and mass popularity, wherein large swaths of individuals may take away their own emotive relationship to a song while the collective may attach differing general meaning to the work. That is why this thesis will use Bob Dylan and Kendrick Lamar as case studies for songs with total communicative efficacy.

The research question for this thesis is as follows: How can we learn from the dynamic relationship between the components of a song (musicality, lyrics, and structure) to maximize a written work's total communicative efficacy with an audience?

This thesis aims to breakdown the process of songwriting into these three categories and to analyze the potential interplays between each component of the song. In doing so, I will demonstrate the range of ways in which a song may effectively convey a story from artist to listener across each category. I do not aim to provide an undisputed, full spectrum of songwriting styles, but rather provide a range of the most popular and well-known strategies that songwriters employ in order to communicate a lasting message with a listener. This will then showcase the ways in which songwriting is an effective medium for conveying a story and connecting with an audience.

These strategies may be of use outside the medium of songwriting and applied to other forms of writing. For the scope of this thesis, I will use poetry. One may find these unique combinations of interplay between word and sound helpful for the creation of narrative in a short story, for example. The outcome of this research will provide an array of combined written and

¹¹ Philpott, C. (2001), 'Is Music a Language?', in C. Philpott and C. Plummeridge, *Issues in Music Teaching*. London: Routledge Falmer.

auditory techniques which may then be isolated distinct from songwriting in order to maximize the subjective efficacy of total communicative power within a written work.

As a lover of poetry and songwriting, I myself have often wondered why I can memorize long sets of song lyrics with ease but struggle to remember more than a few stanzas of my favorite, oft-read poems. Why is it that when I already feel sad and wish to further wallow in a sea of despair, I find the expediency of emotion available in Leonard Cohen more effective than reading Sylvia Plath, for example. This is not to compare the power of either work, but rather a song's ability over a poem to encompass a direct line of emotive immersion. While personal preference between the two is inherently subjective, there are readily examinable aspects of songwriting style and its relationship to sound that distinguish its ability to convey emotion and transport through time. The ease of artistic escapism is more widely accessible through song, but what if modern poems were able to achieve a similar end by employing effective songwriting tools in their writing?

“Does asking oneself these questions in an attempt to see how the machine works spoil the enjoyment?” asks David Byrne of The Talking Heads. “It hasn't for me. Music isn't fragile. Knowing how the body works doesn't take away from the pleasure of living.”¹²

¹² Byrne, D. (2012), *How Music Works*. New York: Three Rivers Press. Page 11.

I. Who is music made for?

“There are only two types of music: good and bad; and whenever we disagree with an opinionated judge on one of the singing talent contests that have sprung up in every corner of the globe, it is because we feel that we instinctively know and understand our subject—we all possess a lifetime’s worth not only of linguistic, but also musical expertise.”

—DUKE ELLINGTON¹³

Music is written with the expectation of performance and the anticipation of connection. All songs seek interpretation just as all language does. The act of speaking aloud one’s inner emotional thoughts and observations inherently represents a mode of communication. Philosopher Suzanne Langer wrote that “songs are often spontaneous expressions of feeling that leap forth untamed; while expression refers solely to the condition of the songwriter, art occurs when expressions are given clearly for contemplation.”¹⁴ One may define songs as being “mobile, portable works of individual accent that possess levels of dynamic, intellectual, visceral, repetitive, contrasting, expressive, literal, metaphoric qualities.”¹⁵ A song is inherently an all-containing vesicle of sonic emotional experience. As a result, there is no right or wrong emotional reaction to a song. A ‘sad’ song, one typically played in major key, could bring about melancholy, reflection, nostalgia, or contentment. How is song used to communicate feeling then if there’s no exact prescribed meaning?

Much of historical storytelling was communicated via song; the ancient Greeks, for example, are said to have used music primarily as a means of handing down tradition through stories. These stories have survived, but the music has not, rendering this link more fraught.

¹³ Tucker, M. (1995), *The Duke Ellington Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, page 6.

¹⁴ Langer, S.K. (1953), *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pages 25 and 26.

¹⁵ West, A. (2016), *The Art of Songwriting*. New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, page 11.

Interpretation of these songs was less so contested for emotive meaning but rather their inferred purpose was to transmit culture and preserve a record of ancestry. This practice is said to be the root of folk traditionalists.¹⁶ Then there was also ancient Greek lyrical poetry that was written to be sung melodically. Sappho is among the most prominent of such poets and considered one of the first singer-songwriters. She invented a rhythmic scheme entitled the sapphic stanza, wherein “each four-line stanza consists of three metrically identical lines eleven syllables in length, followed by a shorter fourth line of five syllables.”¹⁷

In the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers viewed music as encapsulating ethereal knowledge that cannot be explained by reason alone, so much so that they classified song as a type of secular divinity.¹⁸ Ancient thinkers viewed the relationship between feelings and music to be intersubjective. Intersubjectivity, a term created by philosopher Edmund Husserl, may be defined as the empathetic interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, between two subjects.¹⁹ This intersubjectivity corresponds with imitation theory, which stresses music’s impact on one’s character and thus holistic society. Medieval theorist Augustine posited that music appeals to emotion and thus holds a sustained impact on personal and societal ethic code.²⁰

Modern philosopher Kathleen Higgins wrote that the Western relationship between music and emotions can be compressed to three modes: music represents emotions, it arouses emotions, and it expresses emotions. The influence of Kantian formalist structural analysis contributed to the decentering of music representing ethics; the primary interest in music shifted to a study of how

¹⁶ Abeles, H. (2010), *Critical Issues in Music Education: Contemporary Theory and Practice*. Oxford University Press, page 42.

¹⁷ Mendelsohn, D. (2015), “Hearing Sappho,” (online). *The New Yorker*. Accessed 12 Apr 2021.

¹⁸ Kivy, P. (1997), *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Cooper-White, P. (2014), *Intersubjectivity*. In: Leeming D.A. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. Boston: Springer.

²⁰ Hesmondhalgh, D. (2013), *Why Music Matters*. West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, page 12.

the structure of music creates emotion.²¹ Leonard Meyers' influential book *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, which has served as a bedrock for modern musical psychology, similarly stresses the importance of music's qualities (musicality, lyrics, and structure itself) over association and context in relation to communicative emotion.²² Philosopher Martha Nussbaum concurred this point, adding that emotions themselves have a narrative structure. Music, however, does not contain the narrative structure of raw emotion, as experienced by an individual in real-time as a reaction to an event. Its distinct language instead encompasses a structural form most related to dreaming where our reaction to song is instead colored by general emotion rather than a reaction to the plight of a named character.²³ Our emotional reaction to music is thus more emblematic of a synthesis of internal experience. Schopenhauer originally wrote of the power of music's semiotic ambiguity, stating that: "...it is such a great and magisterial art, it exercises so powerful an effect within us, is understood so deeply and entirely by us as a wholly universal language whose clarity exceeds even that of the intuitive world itself."²⁴ What results from interacting with music is a form of elevated emotional transcendence from our daily lives.

How do the qualities of musicality, lyrics, and structure generally convey communication of emotion when music itself is not sentient? It is the unconscious mode of communication between conscious, living beings. It has been said that "real power of music lies in the fact that it can be true to the life of feelings in a way that language cannot for its significant forms have that ambivalence of content which words cannot have."²⁵ Much academic discourse specifically relates

²¹ Higgins, K.M. (2011), *The Music of Our Lives*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

²² Meyer, L. (1961), *Emotion and Meaning In Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²³ Nussbaum, M. (2001), *Upheavals of thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁴ Norman, J., Welchman, A., Janaway, C, eds. (2010), "Third Book: The World as Representation, Second Consideration. Representation Independent of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: the Platonic Idea: the Object of Art," in *Schopenhauer: The World as Will and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 283.

²⁵ Langer, *ibid*.

to the question of whether music is a language; the quote from Langer posits that music has its own metaphoric language but not a specific expressive mode. Others, such as author Madan Sarup, have argued that music is a language by its definitional ability to transfer metaphoric meaning.²⁶ A more middle ground approach seeks to identify similarities between music and language. In *Musical Mind*, music and drama research professor Sloboda states that both are specific to humans, can be learned via models, and are examined in terms of phonetic, syntactic, and semantic structure, among other similarities.²⁷ If music is a language, then why is there no definitive, definitional meaning within music? We may better classify music as a form of shared aesthetic experience, which allows its form to communicate deeply held feeling. This classification may help explain how a song can evoke specific memories and their associated emotional recalls as well as its ability to provoke a vision of scenarios yet experienced.

While music is inherently an example of aesthetic experience, it distinguishes itself from other artistic, cultural, and social practices. It is intricately embedded within the personal and subjective from the perspective of the songwriter and the recipient, the listener. Music largely reflects a shared communal, collective experience of society, wherein private and public feelings reinforce one another.²⁸ Song reflects a process in which humans familiarize themselves with themselves and the world around them. It is a mosaic rather than a linear progression of storytelling, which allows song to embody the communicative tenses of past, present, and future.

With the development of the Walkman in 1979, listeners were able to listen to music privately in a public space. With headphones, one may distance themselves from ulterior acoustic

²⁶ Sarup, M. (1988), *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

²⁷ Sloboda, J. A. (1985), *The Musical Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁸ Hesmondhalgh, *ibid*.

distractions which allows for analysis to subtle detail within a song's production value.²⁹ This, in turn, has made it much easier for the average music listener to informally discern the relationship between the musicality, lyrics, and structure within a piece while in the outside world. Headphones allow for an intimate line of communication between the songwriter and listener. This also has enabled people to more closely associate songs with physical locations and people, whether going on a walk in your hometown or sharing earbuds with a friend. The invention of individualized musical experience thus makes its connection to poetry more analogous. Music can go straight into the mind as a poem on paper does, allowing for this thesis' following analysis of music as a highly effective communicative device.

²⁹ Byrne, *ibid.*

II. An Introduction to Bob Dylan, the Beatnik Poet

“As far as songwriting, any idiot could do it. If you see me do it, any idiot can do it [...] Everybody can write a song just like everybody’s got that one great novel in them.”³⁰
– BOB DYLAN

In 1965, Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” a freewheeling 6-minute-long odyssey of a bourgeois woman’s fall from wealth and subsequent battles with self-reliance and truth, hit no. 2 on the Billboard 100.³¹ It was the first song of this length and structure to not only captivate a popular audience, but break decades long dominace of formulaic pop songs. Bob Dylan knew that songs could do more than just an enjoyable form of entertainment. His music captures the linguistic intricacy of Shakespeare and Byron, the expansive experimentation of Ginsberg and Dali, and the American tradition of folk storytelling in Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams.³²

Dylan’s prophetic impact on American musical culture has landed him many titles, among them a poet and the voice of a generation. Dylan fervently rejects both.³³ Yet “Like a Rolling Stone,” perhaps his most well-known, embodies a case for both titles. It is full of rich allusions and enigmatic symbolism all the while sung as a soliloquy; it represents the evolving mores of a generation attempting to carve its own path independent of convention and capitalistic culture:

How does it feel, how does it feel?

To have on your own, with no direction home

Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone.³⁴

³⁰ Zollo, 72.

³¹ (2020). “Chart History: Bob Dylan,” (online). Billboard. Accessed 19 Apr 2021.

³² Zollo, 70.

³³ Inskeep, S. (2016), “Bob Dylan Doesn’t Accept Being The ‘Voice of His Generation’” (online). NPR. Accessed 10 Apr 2021.

³⁴ Dylan, B. (1965), “Like a Rolling Stone.” Track 1 on *Highway 61 Revisited*. Columbia Records.

To be a rolling stone is to be a vagabond with little regard for stasis and stability. A rolling stone needs no externalities besides its own momentum. Perhaps the rolling stone is a metaphor for Sisyphus' struggle wherein humans themselves are the stone, passively slogged along by the active forces of divine will and happenchance reality. Perhaps it could be more directly related to the Erasmus of Rotterdam's ancient Latin proverb: "A rolling stone is not covered with moss," which William Blake rewrote as "A Rolling Stone is ever Bare of Moss."³⁵ Dylan's reinterpretation of the phrase embedded itself deeply into popular culture, influencing the naming of Rolling Stone magazine and rock band The Rolling Stones.

Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were both originally sung.³⁶ Before the popularization of commercial music, poetry was an art embraced by the masses. Romantic poetry, written in meter and rhyme, was memorized and recited. Long poems were used as a tool to improve one's memory in order to improve one's knowledge of the Biblical verse. By the nineteenth century, recitation became more of a means to improve public speaking.³⁷ As Walt Whitman universalized the use of free verse, poets began to stray from traditional form.³⁸ This shift eventually coincided with the decreasing cultural prevalence of memorizing and thus reciting poems on a widespread basis. As a result, the melodic synthesis of lyrical interplay with structure and musicality within songs have come to hold similar cultural influence in modernity. Bob Dylan may be the artist we can most directly attribute this phenomenon to.

Keats referred to a central quality within Shakespeare's writing as "negative capability," which is when "a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubles, without any irritable

³⁵ "On the history of the 'Rolling Stone,'" (online). Merriam-Webster. Accessed 12 Apr 2021.

³⁶ Nagy, G. (2020), "An Iliadic Odyssey as a song of the Sirens," (online). Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University. Accessed 12 Apr 2021.

³⁷ Robson, Catherine. (2012), "Introduction." In *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press. Accessed 21 Apr 2021.

³⁸ Finch, A. (1993), *The ghost of meter: culture and prosody in American free verse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Accessed 10 Apr 2021

reaching after fact and reason.”³⁹ One of Dylan’s most recognizable traits as a songwriter and artist is his elusiveness. The sheer ambiguity behind the meaning of his lyrics lends itself to intricate analysis. “Motivation is something you never know behind any song,” Dylan once stated.⁴⁰ Naturally, this quality has cemented Dylan’s role in academic discourse. As early as 1972, Dylan’s work began appearing in scholarly journals utilizing the methodologies of classical literary studies.⁴¹ As modern American English departments have come to adopt the New Critical method of close reading and incorporating more cultural studies to expand the provenance of literary analysis to popular culture, Dylan’s work is more prominent than ever.⁴²

Artistic cultural institutions have similarly recognized the literary storytelling merit within Dylan’s work. Dylan was first nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1997. His initial nominating letter praised Dylan’s unique capabilities as a storyteller: “His words and music have helped restore the vital, time-honored link between poetry and music, and have so permeated the world as to alter its history.”⁴³ In 2016, he officially became the first musician to win the award, adding to his slate of accolades that includes the Pulitzer. While his nomination was fraught in controversy over questions of deserving and differentiation, the awards nonetheless display the cultural impact of Dylan’s songwriting. As a result, I am to incorporate examples of Dylan’s’ unique storytelling capabilities interwoven within his songs via musicality, lyrics, and structure.

³⁹ Noyes, R. (1956) *English romantic poetry and prose*. New York: Oxford University Press. Page 1211.

⁴⁰ Zollo, 72.

⁴¹ Dettmar, K. (2009) *Cambridge Compilation to Bob Dylan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 2.

⁴² Dettmar, 4.

⁴³ Ball, G. (2016) “I nominated Bob Dylan for the Nobel Prize more than a dozen times” (online). *The Washington Post*. Accessed 2 Apr 2021.

III.

An Introduction to Kendrick Lamar, Rap’s “Street Poet”⁴⁴

“Kendrick Lamar understands and employs blues, jazz, and soul in his music, which makes it startling. His work is more than merely brilliant; it is magic.” —TONI MORRISON⁴⁵

When high school English teacher and poetry club organizer Brian Mooney first heard Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he dropped his current lesson plan. His 9th graders were reading Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* where Morrison masterfully articulates on the pervasive effects of white supremacy on black identity. This thwarted desire for black celebration manifests in society’s most impressionable as 11-year-old Pecola prays for blue eyes instead of brown. Mooney heard Morrison in Kendrick’s lyrics:

Butterflies are beautiful, too – and they are full of color. Butterflies are so beautiful; they can’t be made any more so. They can’t be manipulated, exploited, controlled, or confined. So why does America keep trying to do these same things to people of color? Why does America keep trying to pimp the butterfly? Surely, we must know by now, the Civil Rights Movement was a metamorphosis from which we emerged into a colorblind, post-racial springtime, shedding the cocoon of Jim Crow, right? It’s 2015 and Kendrick Lamar doesn’t think so. His album continues the conversation that Toni Morrison started in 1970.⁴⁶

Mooney posed a question to his class, asking them to compare the works against the “Black is Beautiful” movement of the 1960s and consider how both authors comment on how oppression

⁴⁴ Sule, Akeem. (2015), *Kendrick Lamar, street poet of mental health* (online). Accessed 13 Apr 2021.

⁴⁵ Robinson, Lisa. (2018), *The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar* (online). *Vanity Fair*. Accessed 13 Apr 2021.

⁴⁶ Mooney, Brian. (2015). *Why I dropped everything and started teaching Kendrick Lamar’s new album* (online). Accessed 13 Apr 2021.

manifests itself as internalized racism. The responses went viral and Lamar himself visited the class to discuss the poetics of rap. Lamar was taken aback by the students' depth of articulation and understanding in his work:

I didn't think I made [*To Pimp a Butterfly*] for 16-year-olds," he continued. "I always get, like, my parents or an adult saying, 'This is great, you have a message, you have themes, you have different genres of music.' But to get a kid actually telling me this, it's a different type of feeling, 'cause it lets me know that their thought process is just as advanced as mine, even if I'm 10, 15 years older."⁴⁷

Kendrick Lamar is the streets' storyteller. His lyrics embody his life growing up Black, poor, and gifted in Compton yet hold a universalizing perspective. The auditory artistry of his work has popularized Lamar, but his storytelling has set him apart as the poet's rapper. The twelve-minute "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" introduces listeners to the oft-unheard perspective of a struggling prostitute. Lamar whispers "I'll never fade away, I'll never fade away, I know my fate," as the lyrics fade into the beat, which march on to the woman's next chapter before her life fades away without her.⁴⁸ Even this hyper specific life scenario provides a place for relatability in exploring the intersection between morality, mortality and reputation; when I asked my friends for their favorite Kendrick Lamar song, three of them said "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst."

Lamar's cultural influence comes from his ability to universalize his individual experience, codifying the complexities of racialized life in America under sustained political, economic, and social uncertainty into rhetorically rich lyrics with complimentary musical accompaniment. Kendrick Lamar was thus the first artist, apart from Dylan, to win a Pulitzer outside the genres of

⁴⁷ Murray, Nick. (2015). Kendrick Lamar Blows Teens' Minds, Hears Their Poetry at NJ High School (online). *Rolling Stone*. Accessed 13 Apr 2021.

⁴⁸ Lamar, K. (2012), "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst." Track 10 on *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*. Interscope Records.

jazz and classical music for his third studio album, *DAMN.*, which the Pulitzer board called “a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life.”⁴⁹

Lamar’s cultural popularity is undisputed. All three of his studio albums have individually sold over a million units. *DAMN.* debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 chart and spent four weeks at the top. It was his third straight No. 1 release, following the EP *untitled unmastered* (2016) and second album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015).⁵⁰ After *DAMN.* was awarded the Pulitzer, album sales soared 236%.⁵¹ Even before the Pulitzer win, Billboard posed the question: “Is Kendrick Lamar the Greatest Rapper of Our Generation?” Vince Staples, LeBron James, Kehlani, Ty Dolla \$ign, Don Cheadle, Mary J. Blige, and Chris Rock among others agreed. Actress Taraji Henson went a step further: “Absolutely. Because he has something to say. His metaphors are out of this world. He’s like a Shakespeare. He’s timeless.”⁵²

Lamar is not the first rapper to be endowed with a prophetic storytelling ability. Perhaps his most similar predecessor, Tupac toted this cultural role throughout his career. Yet even Lamar’s greatest artistic influences recognize his poetic contribution to the genre of hip-hop. In an interview with Complex in 2014, Nas stated:

There's not many like him. He's a breath of fresh air. His s--- is genius. This dude's a rhyming animal. I feel like he's going to be one of the most important writers of our time

⁴⁹ *The 2018 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Music: DAMN., by Kendrick Lamar* (online). 2018. Accessed 23 Apr 2021.

⁵⁰ Caulfield, Keith. *Kendrick Lamar Scores Third Million-Selling Album in the U.S. With 'DAMN.'* (online). Billboard. 2018. Accessed 23 Apr 2021.

⁵¹ Anderson, Trevor. *Kendrick Lamar's 'DAMN.' Rockets 236% In Sales After Pulitzer Prize Win* (online). Billboard. 2018. Accessed 23 Apr 2021.

⁵² Voziak-Levinson, Simon. *Is Kendrick Lamar the Greatest Rapper of Our Generation? Kehlani, LeBron James & More Weigh In* (online). Billboard. 2017. 23 Apr 2021.

as we watch him go forward. Without a question, you can already see that. It's definitely a high that I always get from the music.⁵³

Kendrick Lamar's discography provides an ideal blueprint for academic analyzation. His use of lyrics, music, and structure are unique to him as an artist, which has set him apart as a widely named "voice of a generation."⁵⁴ His recognition by the Pulitzer board further cements his cultural influence on creative storytelling.

The following four chapters will delve into each aforementioned component of a song. Within each, I will interweave examples of Kendrick Lamar songs alongside Dylan's as a case study for each category. Lamar represents a culturally popular, modern iteration of a poetic songwriter who successfully communicates their unique perspective to a universal audience. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the impressive storytelling prowess of Lamar and Dylan while simultaneously taking away key components of his methodology to be isolated for aspiring writers.

⁵³ Ahmed, Insanul. *Interview: Nas talks about Kendrick Lamar & The Challenges of Following Up A Classic Album* (online). Complex. 2014. Accessed 13 Apr 2021.

⁵⁴ Gaillot, Ann-Derrick. *How Kendrick Lamar Became the Voice of a Generation* (online). The Nation. 2020. Accessed 13 Apr 2021.

IV. On lyrics

The lyrics of a song are a central component of the song's soul. The words themselves constitute the soul but also the central mechanism for communicating the soul of the songwriter's story. We come to recognize an artist's creative essence through their unique syntax, diction, and tone. This is what we may call refer to as an artist's lyrical voice. A listener will search for the singer's identity when it isn't explicitly mentioned via their voice accent, vocal phrasing, and how the two intermesh with the music itself.⁵⁵ The lyrics of a song hold the mighty impetus of encapsulating the direct and indirect message of the song, from which music will complement or contrast and structure will organize.

Of course, the way in which these lyrics are sung will play a large role in determining how the message is communicated and thus received; as a result, many sung lyrics bear little relation to how they appear as written. At a base level, this can be explained by the vocalists' rendering of these words. The characteristics of paralinguistic communication, including accent, speed, loudness, continuity, voice quality, and tone are all qualities embedded into song by the singer's performance of it.⁵⁶ Songs are thus even read in the speech pattern of the singer. The vocal intonations that escort speech carry what the listener recognizes as the singer's attitude.⁵⁷ The song itself has semantic meaning, but vocal tone also creates a structure of sound that conveys emotion and character.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ West, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Wilkinson, A. (1975), *Language and Education*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁷ Halliday, M.A.K. (1976), cited in G. Kress (ed.), *System and Function in Language*. London: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁸ Frith, S. (1989) "Why do songs have words?" (online). *Contemporary Music Review*. Accessed 12 Apr 2021.

There is also an inseparable interplay between the singer and instrument in a song, a relationship in which one must be dominant. Who is singing for who? Lyrics do not necessarily reinforce the implications of the music itself. They can create a subtext of meaning through contrast. This relationship will be explored further in the next chapter on musicality. Within this chapter, I will illustrate the aspects unique to songwriting lyrics, which is differentiated from poetry. While lyrics and poetry are functionally similar, in that they use verbal language, use stylistic and rhetorical devices, and propose ideas about the individual and the collective, poetry's lyrical voice is generally internalized once written.⁵⁹ Song lyrics are definitionally external and cannot be conceived outside their recorded performance. Lyrics, even written, are therefore a performance art. As stated by Christopher Small, "its meaning lies not in created objects but in the acts of creating, displaying and perceiving" a song's lyrics.⁶⁰

Noting the inseparability of voice with lyrics, this chapter will explore the lyrical function of selected Bob Dylan and Kendrick Lamar songs. I will examine how the syntax, diction, and tone within their lyrics is unique to songwriting and thus an effective mode of emotive storytelling communication. I will also explore the use of perspective within each song, noting the effect of narrative point of view and the intended subject for the song to be received by.

Not all lyrics are created to serve the same function; not all lyrics represent elevated forms of rhetorical communication. A Guardian review of Coldplay's 2005 album "X and Y" critiqued their songs as "dealing only in generalities, the lyrics have been buffed until anyone can see their reflection in them... at their worst they are so devoid of personality that they sound less like song

⁵⁹ Eckstein, L. (2010), *Reading Song Lyrics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

⁶⁰ Small, C. (1987), "Performance as Ritual: Sketch for an Enquiry into the true Nature of a Symphony Concert," *Lost in Music: Culture, Style and the Musical Event*. Sociological Review Monograph. London and New York: Routledge.

lyrics than something dreamed up by a creative ad agency.”⁶¹ This may be explained by the function of lyrics within a Coldplay song. Singer Chris Martin is not privileging lyrics as the primary mode of communicative meaning. He rather attempts to engage the listener within the realms of emotive feeling, evoked by lyrics vague enough to be universal that rely on the transcendence of the music itself. Dylan and Lamar seek to engage the listener on a primarily verbal level with musical accompaniment that complements the lyrics. When both artists are critically reviewed, the basis of this analysis relies upon the poetic essence of their lyrics, which encompass a rich, detailed storyline and perspective.

Their lyrics are delivered in conversational prose which privileges the representation of the common voice. In music, this authenticity is prized as an aspect of universalism because individuals inherently see themselves as unique. In this sense, there’s an inherent balance between defamiliarizing a subject while rendering it recognizable to the listener, who is unfamiliar with the narrator and their emotional perspective. The feelings of a songwriter are fundamental to the transferable emotive quality of a song. To exclude the affective realm in songwriting would result in a piece that holds no meaning for the songwriter and thus the audience. To ground the listener’s perceptive senses and attempt to align them with the songwriter’s, lyrics may then oscillate between the external and internal to connect the two. A common and explicit example of this phenomenon, found in both Dylan and Lamar’s work, is the tendency to associate vividly described sensory images to internal feelings.

In Dylan’s “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go,” Dylan breathlessly encapsulates the longing and heartbreak of a fleeting summer romance. A hallmark of this song is

⁶¹ West, page 19.

how Dylan links the temporary beauty of a picturesque day with the temporality of a romantic fling. He states:

Dragon clouds so high above

I've only known careless love.

It always has hit me from below.⁶²

The image of two lovers laying in the grass, picking out swirling, mythical images in the clouds is a universal one, yet is made specific and personal through the descriptor of “dragon clouds” and first-person narrative. It is an inherently carefree act, grounded not in reality but imagination. There is no real-world importance linked to the act of finding pictures in a cloud; the activity represents sheer imaginative pleasure at its finest, removed from the impetus of work and responsibility. Dylan ties this visceral image to the idea of “careless love,” directly relating the nature of this romantic relationship to the connotative idea of cloud watching. He speaks the two sentences in the same breath, invariably connecting the two further. The following line is spoken in the same breath as well until “from below,” which comes after a cesura. The second syllable in below is also stressed, straying from the usual downbeat pronunciation. Doing so adds an emphatic urgency to his message that comes across as upbeat yet contrasts the forlorn meaning. Intonation patterns such as this communicate at an unconscious level, enabling the listener to organize the meaning of sentences since people indicate the end of a thought with a break.⁶³ To enable a listener to absorb this meaning, detailed sections should be followed by a pause.⁶⁴ The first two lines also rhyme, with the third breaking the pattern to add more emphasis. This modifier ultimately relates his

⁶² Dylan, B. (1975), “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go.” Track 5 on *Blood On The Tracks*. Columbia Records.

⁶³ D’Souza, W. (1989), ‘Non-Verbal Communication’, in B. Hodge, *Communication and the Teacher*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

⁶⁴ West, *ibid*.

internal sentiments back to the couple's physical positioning beneath the clouds. In the next stanza, Dylan continues this trend:

Purple clover, Queen Anne lace
Crimson hair across your face
You can make me cry, but you don't know⁶⁵

Dylan creates a bucolic, intimate portrait that ties nature with natural longing. Purple is a color of passion and clovers are resilient, growing in many climates against all odds. Queen Anne's Lace is a delicate wildflower garden, sometimes called an invasive weed, that grows in spring and summer. Both flowers are easily recognizable and closely tied to the vitality of warm weather. Both have lifespans that are inseparably tied to the spring and summer, much like Dylan's beautiful whirlwind romance. We see a woman with red hair, lounging carelessly among the purple and white flowers, to which Dylan confesses her power over him in her stated ephemerality. The image he paints is personal and nostalgic, yet accessible and poignant for a listener unfamiliar with their relationship. The listener doesn't even know the woman's name, creating more mystique around their short-lived affair that changes with the seasons. Much like the aforementioned stanza, Dylan uses the same cesura for the last stanza that admits to his feelings, adding a stressed accent to "know." The end of the song transitions from carefree wilderness to the tangibility of societal responsibility:

I'll look for you in old Honolulu
San Francisco or Ashtabula
You're gonna have to leave me, now I know
But I'll see you in the sky above

⁶⁵ Dylan, *ibid.*

In the tall grass in the ones I love

You're gonna make me lonesome when you go.⁶⁶

Dylan uses an AAB CCB rhyme scheme that creates a continuity between the seasons changing in conjunction with his love affair. He uses specific locations that remind him of her, showing how places are tied to memories. Using these different named places creates a dynamic yet elusive portrait of their relationship, implying that he'll see her shadow in the places they shared together. This specificity is poignant in its universality, which may evoke a similar mental callback within the listener, who hears the names of cities and then thinks on the places they shared with a fleeting love. The lover does not want to leave, but must, as the urgency of the modern life calls her back from the fields of pleasure. Dylan admits that he will see her visage in the clouds when he looks up at them alone and will feel her next to him in the lone grasses they shared. His use of the personal first-person narrative adds a vulnerable intimacy, as though letting the listener in on an internalized secret. He doesn't say which grasses he loves, implying that the lover is the intended subject for the song because she knows the spots they shared. This device creates a universal recall within the listener, beckoning them back into their own shared romantic locations. Knowing that we are an external party to this relationship, the listener is inclined to seek more meaning in their ability to relate themselves to the situation.

Kendrick Lamar's "These Walls" is a love song with an opposing force to Dylan's that employs the same technique of tying external imagery to an internal emotional state. The title refers to the aphorism "If these walls could talk..." which is a speech function used to state that many intriguing events have happened in a room, though you may not know all the details. This construct is useful for conveying Lamar's deteriorating relationship to an audience wholly

⁶⁶ Dylan, *ibid.*

unfamiliar with the scenario. The song illustrates Lamar's romantic affair with a woman who has children with a man imprisoned for murdering Lamar's friend. He feels an insurmountable guilt for seducing this woman via his fame and wealth to find a thwarted justice for his friend. The walls are a metaphoric euphemism for the woman's vagina and the room they share together, as well as the prison walls the woman's partner resides behind:

If these walls could talk, they'd tell me to swim good

No boat, I float better than he would

No life jacket, I'm not the God of Nazareth

But your flood can be misunderstood

Walls telling me they full of pain, resentment

Need someone to live in them just to relieve tension⁶⁷

The personification of walls refers to the barriers that the woman erects between herself and Lamar. He creates an image of the two in the room physically together but emotionally apart. The walls physically within her blockade an ocean of feelings, which Lamar struggles to stay afloat in. He attempts to think within the mind of the woman through her walls, touching on her pain and resentment she must feel towards her partner in jail and towards Lamar for being a placeholder. The syllables for each line follow an eleven, nine, twelve, nine, eleven, then thirteen. Tension adds the extra syllable to the last line, emphasizing the disjointed situation. Swim, flood, float, and tension are all sexual innuendos that refer to the tension within a contested territorial space, which in this case is the woman's body:

Me, I'm just a tenant

Landlord said these walls vacant more than a minute

⁶⁷ Lamar, K. (2015), "These Walls." Track 5 on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Interscope Records.

These walls are vulnerable, exclamation

Interior pink, color coordinated

I interrogated every nook and cranny.⁶⁸

Lamar adds to the feeling of him being a placeholder for the woman's partner by describing himself a tenant of her body. He paints the image of him sitting in the room while simultaneously describing her vagina. He claims to know each nook and cranny of her physicality, which implies that he comes to understand her emotional state via her sexuality. The brevity of the first line, being only six syllables, adds to the vulnerability that Lamar feels himself when he's with her and within her. His use of fragmented and kaleidoscopic imagery that connects a physical room to sexual intimacy leads the listener through a list of visual scenarios that allows the listener to almost touch upon the songwriter's experience.

Another integral dynamic of a songwriter's lyrics is the use of perspective. Most lyrics tend not to stray from an initially established narrative voice as not to confuse a listener, who will then waste time attempting to establish who is speaking; however, failing to add a new narrative dynamic may create too predictable of a structure, as listeners are accustomed to anticipating singularity within musical communicative expression.⁶⁹ The different ways of balancing narrational perspective will affect where the listener's attention is drawn to, affecting how one ultimately relates to a song.

I and you lyrics, for example, contain two named subjects: the singer and the person the song is directed towards. These lyrics are written in the narrational voice of the singer in first person perspective, such as the aforementioned Dylan song, "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go." We may either relate to the singer or imagine that we are them; we can also

⁶⁸ Lamar, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ West, *ibid.*

envision being sung to, or being an outsider looking in. Perhaps the listener may feel all the above. Subverting expected narrative perspective for love songs may allow a listener to experience a wider scope of emotive feeling. For a song to effectively communicate its emotional message, a proper balance must be found between the comfort of predictability and the surprise of the unanticipated; too much predictability is boring, whereas not enough can create stress in an audience.⁷⁰ In “Just Like A Woman,” Dylan incorporates the first-, second-, and third-person perspective. It is an anti-love song ballad that is written with vitriol but sung with regret, simultaneously acknowledging his lover’s assets and flaws. The first stanza addresses everyone and no-one as Dylan muses to himself:

Nobody feels any pain
Tonight as I stand inside the rain
Everybody knows that baby’s got new clothes
But lately I see her ribbons and her bows
Have fallen from her curls
She takes just like a woman
Yes, she does, she makes love just like a woman
Yes, she does, and she aches just like a woman
But she breaks just like a little girl⁷¹

In speaking for himself, Dylan attempts to also speak for the collective and for the woman sung about. He provides an emotional background to his present-day heartache as he stands alone in the rain, stating that no one sympathizes with him. We come to find that this is due to the apparent

⁷⁰ Beall, E. (2009), *The Billboard Guide to Writing and Producing Songs that Sell: How to Create Hits in Today’s Music Industry*. New York: Billboard Books/Watson Guphill.

⁷¹ Dylan, B. (1966), “Just Like A Woman.” Track 8 on *Blonde on Blonde*. Columbia Records.

predictability of his predicament with the generality “just like a woman.” There is an apparent detachment to the woman sung about as though he is addressing a person familiar with the woman in question through the third person her and she. However, halfway through the song after the second chorus, Dylan switches to the intimate second-person narrative, directly addressing the woman:

It was raining from the first and I was dying there of thirst

So I came in here

And your long-time curse hurts, what what’s worse

Is this pain in here, I can’t stay in here, ain’t it clear⁷²

The listener then realizes that Dylan was originally addressing the woman in the beginning of the song as he presently stands in the rain. He speaks to her in the third person, recounting how he views her when she isn’t around. The rain becomes an extended metaphor when he states that it’s been raining since the conception of their relationship. Dylan was vulnerable and thirsting for love which is why he overlooked what others knew to be true of her, hence why “nobody feels any pain” for him. We realize when he tells her “your long time-curse hurts” that he is ending their relationship through the song, which culminates when he changes from third person to second person narrative in the last chorus, stating “you ache just like a woman/ But you break just like a little girl.”⁷³

Similarly, in “m.A.A.d city,” Kendrick Lamar oscillates between age and other people’s dialects to convey the viscerally complicated sociocultural and spiritual geography of Compton. By providing a scope of perspective that includes his personal growth and that of his peers, Lamar creates a living portrait that immerses the listener into his community and coming of age. There is

⁷² Dylan, *ibid.*

⁷³ Dylan, *ibid.*

much interconnected narrative richness to each song on the concept album *m.A.A.d city*, so much so that a college course was created that synthesizes it to works from James Joyce, James Baldwin, and Gwendolyn Brooks.⁷⁴ The titular song evolves around the catch-22 of gang life as Lamar grows up; without the gang, he has no protection, but with it comes inevitable violence. Lamar prefaces the song with spoken word, stating that if all the gangs got along, “they’d probably gun [him] down by the end of the song”⁷⁵ for talking about them. He jars the listener by interjecting with a different voice, presumably one of the gang members, who forcefully assert their power over him by asking “where you from?” and “where your grandma stay?” before telling him “this m.A.A.d city I run.”⁷⁶

Lamar then returns to his narrative, telling the listener to “brace yourself, I’ll take you on a trip down memory lane.” He begins the story at age nine, naming his friends and describing them hanging by a burger stand in a territory occupied by an unnamed gang. He bleeps the name of the gang to replicate the feeling of fear from speaking about gangs in public. He describes witnessing a shootout there, only to be interrupted again by a different, older voice, presumably one of the men involved in the violence. He interjects again with the words of his mother, telling him “Aye y’all. Duck” when they’re eating lunch together. Right after, he switches to the voice of the aggressor again, who yells out “you killed my cousin in ’94, fuck yo’ truce.” Lamar continues to switch verbal codes and perspective throughout the song, creating a sense of unease in the face of instability. Halfway through the song, MC Eiht takes over to embody the full perspective of a gang member in Compton from the burger shootout scene. He states:

I’m still in the hood

⁷⁴ Jones, J. (2014), “Georgia students study Kendrick Lamar for class,” (online). *USA Today*. Accessed 13 Mar 2021.

⁷⁵ Lamar, K. (2012), “m.A.A.d city.” Track 8 on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Interscope Records.

⁷⁶ Lamar, *ibid*.

Loc yeah that's cool
The hood took me under so I follow the rules
But yeah that's like me, I grew up in the hood where they bang
And niggas that rep colors is doing the same thing.⁷⁷

The man reflects on how despite aging, he still hasn't been able to leave Compton. He defers with a blasé attitude, indicating the necessity of deference to the city's pull. He personifies the city by extension of the gangs who occupy it, stating that their acceptance requires him staying. He doesn't know another life though, because like Lamar, he was born into it. His passivity towards remaining is necessary for his survival, which he reiterates through the groupthink of others doing the same as he. Lamar interjects into his story to reiterate its synthesis through generations, asking: "If I told you I killed a nigga at sixteen, would you believe me?". The last verses of the song are rapped through a distorted voice that mutilates slightly with each line, indicating the breadth of communal experience with gang affiliation in Compton, no matter age or affiliation. One of the lines states:

And it's safe to say that our next generation maybe can sleep
With dreams of being a lawyer or doctor
Instead of a boy with a chopper that hold the cul de sac hostage⁷⁸

Lamar's kaleidoscopic use of perspective throughout the song defers the definition of Compton away from his personal experience to embodying that of the whole community. In doing so, Lamar portrays an emotionally vivid living scene of Compton that delves through action-based events, recollections, and philosophical musings. The multi-faceted function of perspective within the song allows for his emotional experience to be shared and felt by the listener, who likely has never experienced Compton themselves.

⁷⁷ Lamar, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Lamar, *ibid.*

In addition to narrative perspective, we may identify three different types of “interchange” communication in songwriting: self-expression of the individual, establishment and maintenance of external relationships, and an analysis of the world as it was, is, or may be.⁷⁹ The elements of this discourse involve the singer, the listener, and the song’s subject, which in turn creates a range of possible outcomes regarding what is happening, did happen, or may happen.⁸⁰ An early establisher of structural linguistics, Roman Jakobson proposed a theoretical model of the six language functions of emotive communication: the expressive function of the speaker’s feelings; the conative focus on the person spoken to; the poetic function of language aesthetics; the phatic function that highlights the predisposition of the speaker towards the receiver; and the metalinguistic function based on mutual understanding of linguistics.⁸¹

Lyrics written in one tense exclude contextual information about the singer’s past and future desires, rendering understanding more difficult for the listener. To encapsulate all the aforementioned functions of emotionally expressive language most effectively, a songwriter may choose to incorporate all three tenses.

In “Shelter from the Storm,” Dylan uses all three tenses to describe a storm that has passed, is present, and is oncoming. The storm, which may be substituted by the listener as a metaphor for any difficult life event, represents a failed marriage. He recounts how a woman took him in as a lover when his relationship deteriorated, ending each past-tense story recollection with a phrase combining the past and present tense: “Come in, she said/ I’ll give ya shelter from the storm.” This lyrical feature of the song allows the listener to simultaneously learn about Dylan’s past emotional experience while living within it. The effect of this also shows how the memory is a living story

⁷⁹ Wilkinson, page 56.

⁸⁰ Moffatt, J. (1978), *Teaching the universe of Discourse*. Boston, HN: Houghton Mifflin Co.

⁸¹ West, page 49.

that continues to inform Dylan's emotions. He introduces the song by stating "'Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood," to show the event is far removed from his present self. Yet in the next verse he moves to the future tense: "And if I pass this way again, you can rest assured/ I'll always do my best for her, on that I give my world." He continues to recall their history together before moving into the present: "Now there's a wall between us, somethin' there's been lost/ I took too much for granted, I got my signals crossed." Dylan connects the present with the past for the listener, explaining that the two are separated because he took advantage of her. However, we also know that he hopes to see her again in the future to reconcile their differences. He encapsulates the full scope of this longing and regret within the last stanza by combining all three tenses:

Well, I'm livin in a foreign country but I'm bound to cross the line

Beauty walks on razor's edge, someday I'll make it mine

If I could only turn back the clock to when God and her were born

Come in, she said

I'll give ya shelter from the storm.

There are clear biblical allusions throughout the song. The woman is a savior to him from the storm of toil and blood; however, her kindness is unsustainable as Dylan takes advantage of it. He now lives in a foreign country, back on Earth and no longer sheltered from sin. The idea of redemption is possible to him in the future, for he has learned that kindness granted upon him requires personal reciprocation. Embodying the three tenses within this song serves to viscerally illustrate the complex duality of love and loss that goes along with giving and taking.

In "The Blacker the Berry," Lamar uses all three tenses to convey his personal emotional experience as a Black man. This lyrical strategy also functions to make an overarching statement on the dynamic collective lived experience of being Black in America. It states a litany of racist

stereotypes designed to demean and demoralize Blackness in order to subvert them. He recalls being born into the “War on Drugs,” tracing the effect that mass incarceration and police brutality has on afflicting his ethnic pride and how it does and will continue to inform collective Black identity.

The first line of a song will also play an integral role in attracting the interest and earning the trust of an audience. If the lyrical introduction to a song has little emotive meaning, the song’s statement is likely to be buried or not preset.⁸² In “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” Dylan introduces the elusive titular ingénue with the line “With your mercury mouth in the missionary times,” its alliteration emphasizing her ephemerality.⁸³ In “Desolation Row,” which has been referred to as Dylan’s iteration of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” he opens with the line: “They’re selling postcards of the hanging, they’re painting the passports brown.”⁸⁴ Kendrick Lamar prophesizes “I am a sinner who’s probably gonna sin again” in “Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe” as he goes on to show that sin is an ingrained feature of humanity rather than a flaw.⁸⁵ In “Alright,” Lamar emphatically states “Alls my life I has to fight, nigga,” framing the song as an anthem of active force against Black oppression.⁸⁶

Through the combined strategies of striking a balance between internal thought and external circumstance, the use of all three narrational perspectives and tenses, and creating unique tonal patterns, a writer of the written word may strike closer to the heart of total communicative efficacy displayed in song.

⁸² Rodgers, J.P. (2003), *The Complete Singer Songwriter: A Troubadour’s Guide to Writing, Performing, and Recording*. Milwaukee, WI: Backbeat Books.

⁸³ Dylan, B. (1966), “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.” Track 14 on *Blonde on Blonde*. Columbia Records.

⁸⁴ Dylan, B. (1965), “Highway 61 Revisited.” Track 9 on *Highway 61 Revisited*. Columbia Records.

⁸⁵ Lamar, K. (2012), “Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe.” Track 2 on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Interscope Records.

⁸⁶ Lamar, K. (2015), “Alright.” Track 7 on *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Interscope Records.

V. On musicality

The most obvious differentiation between lyrics and other written works is the inclusion of musical accompaniment within a song. However, there is an indisputable cadence within speech and written words. We may then compare the musicality of songs to the musicality of words, which will allow a written work's inherent musicality to be altered by word choice and placement. This chapter will explore how the tonal register of a song interacts with the lyrics and alters their meaning. Does the music emphasize the emotion being sung about or create tension with it?

Within a song, either lyrics or the music must be the dominant driving force. The listener will inevitably place more attention to the element that presents itself more audibly.⁸⁷ Music is a counterpart to lyric within a song. Not all communication within a song is transferred through words.⁸⁸ Non-verbal behavior may affirm or deny verbal communication, holding the ability to convey conflicting emotions.⁸⁹ Paralinguistics are an aspect of spoken communication that do not involve words, ranging from physical body movement to the tone and pitch of voice. Linguistic scholars, such as Trager, assert that paralinguistics act as a communicative mode alongside spoken language.⁹⁰ As a result of this interplay between lyrics and music in which one must be privileged, both Dylan and Lamar place the musicality of their songs as malleable to the importance of their lyrics. This makes both artists an apt case study for applying the tenants of musicality within a song to that of a written work.

⁸⁷ West, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Wilkinson, A. (1975), *Language and Education*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

⁸⁹ Hills, P. J. (1986), *Teaching, Learning and Communication*. London: Croom Helm.

⁹⁰ Trager, G. L. (1958), 'Paralanguage: A First Approximation', *Studies in Linguistics*.

Listeners are socialized to remember and favor unpredictable sound patterns within a musical soundscape through centuries of attentive listening.⁹¹ A song's musicality will incorporate a signature sound, texture, vocal intonation, and rhythmic identity.⁹² An effective strategy to incorporate this notion, without jarring the listener with too many unpredictable musical patterns, would be to oscillate between expected chord sequences and moving into a different key. Major chords evoke a more assertive and positive connotation whereas minor chords are more passive and melancholic.⁹³ A minor triad is also heavily associated with R&B harmonic structures, which preferences attention towards lyrics. Within these keys, repetition of chords also create a circularity that may function in different ways. This stability, depending on the music's key, can call more attention back the lyrics. In relation to the music itself, this structure can either add a sense of permanence, claustrophobia, or hypnosis.⁹⁴

Dylan often uses repetitive and revolving chord sequences to draw more attention to his lyrics. In "All Along the Watchtower," one of Dylan's most widely covered songs, there are only three chord sequences.⁹⁵ This lends more autonomy to the singer to draw attention to the lyrics and create a personalized version via differentiated speech patterns employed while singing. Dylan also creates musical space between his verses, such as in "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding." The tempo is fast paced and precise, functioning so that each line is heard at a disorienting speed. Doing so replicates the emotional background of the lyrics. There are only five chords in each verse that correlates to the five lines within each. The words cascade in rhythmic waves which the chords echo, emphasizing the restless, passive aggressive cynicism within the lyrics:

⁹¹ Braheny, J. (2006), *The Craft and Business of Songwriting (Third Edition)*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books. Page 114.

⁹² West, *ibid*.

⁹³ Powell, J. (2010), *How Music Works*. London: Particular Books.

⁹⁴ West, *ibid*.

⁹⁵ Dylan, B. (1967), "All Along the Watchtower." Track 4 on *John Wesley Harding*. Columbia Records.

Darkness at the break of noon
Shadows even the silver spoon
The handmade blade, the child's balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon
To understand you know too soon
There is no sense in trying.⁹⁶

This verse refers to the relentless, inexplicable order of the world that defies expectation. Dylan reflects man's passivity in the face of the ceaseless pattern of life by speaking in a low, monotonous tone and favoring unstressed syllables. The end of each phrase follows the same rhyming scheme besides the last line that deters from pattern. Each set of verses between the song's chorus audibly bleed into another, echoing the title and theme of the song. This is emphasized by the end of each of these connected verses correlating in rhyme. The first three verses end in trying, dying, and crying. Dylan amplifies their interconnectivity by placing emphasis on each syllable of the last word, creating the auditory effect of uptalk. In doing so, he mimics a vocal cue that calls in the guitar chords between verses to echo the last word sung. This guitar chord echo effect mimics natural speech patterns between the end and beginning of a verse by resembling a breath between thoughts.

Kendrick Lamar incorporates musicality into his rap verses as a classical jazz musician does. His rhythmic sense lends itself to creating intricate and varying timing between syllables and words that move in conjunction to the song's beat, either challenging or complimenting it.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Dylan, B. (1965), "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)." Track 10 on *Bringing it All Back Home*. Columbia Records.

⁹⁷ Moore, M. (2020), "Kendrick Lamar Thinks Like A Jazz Musician," (online). *NPR*. Accessed 12 Mar 2021.

In “DNA.,” Lamar wanted to create an atmosphere of chaos.⁹⁸ He does this through employing a driving, forceful beat that cuts against his fast-paced, hard-toned words. The resulting auditory effect is one of complimentary discord. The words and music are similar yet have the tendency to sound like both components are provoking one another to a fight. This strategy evokes the central emotional theme of the song which refers to the mental trauma created by tension. The song describes how “an impartial world views Kendrick’s blackness versus how he views his own.”⁹⁹ What results from this forced exploration of identity is a mutating relationship between fear and faith, love and lust, and pride and humility, all of which are all songs that follow “DNA.” within the album *DAMN*. The beat in this song represents the outside world forcing its presence onto Lamar, who feels a need to respond back with competing force. The resulting product is that of violent cyclicity both within the music and the meaning of “DNA.”

The effect of musicality on the communication of emotional message is largely dependent on its relationship to the lyrics. The vocal tone of the words may ebb and flow with the variant beats in accordance with the note’s emotive character and the emotional register of the word as emphasis; it may also present a dichotomy of emotional meaning by contrasting the connotational tone of the lyrics. How may we relate the sound of a song to that of a written work? One must consider the phonetic qualities of a word and the inherent emotional state associated with the sound. Is it a flat, monotone word that droops, or a sharp, vivacious word that shines? A written work may increase its communicative efficacy by subverting these phonetic sound conventions around either complementing or contrasting the connotational and denotational associations of a word and the work’s overall emotive message.

⁹⁸ Carmichael, R. (2017), “How Mike WiLL Made-It And Kendrick Lamar Created The Year’s Most Urgent Music,” (online). *NPR*. Accessed 12 Mar 2021.

⁹⁹ Pearce, S. “‘DNA.’ Track Review,” (online). *Pitchfork Media*. Accessed 13 Mar 2021.

VI. On structure

In the age of digital streaming, listening to individual songs has become far more common than listening through an entire album. As a result, songs are expected to have individualized fingerprints with a distinctive beginning, middle, and end. While standardized song forms have existed since the dawn of recorded commercial songs, the structure and sequential placement of different musical sections are endless in variation. A standard song tends to proceed in the following order: introduction, verse, pre-chorus, chorus, post-chorus, bridge, solo, and coda.¹⁰⁰ However, many popular and thus memorable songs tend to subvert this structure slightly to engage the listener. Structure is integral to informing a song's meaning by adding continuity, variation, division, and emphasis. An effective structure will function deliberately to direct a listener's attention towards a specific object or theme.

Both Lamar and Dylan favor structurally unique song formats. They subvert traditional form to assimilate different perspectives into their stories. In doing so, both artists utilize structure to create a more viscerally potent emotional background for the listener to engage with.

Within "Swimming Pools (Drank)," Kendrick Lamar explores the pervasive influence of alcoholism from the perspective of someone who "grew up 'round people living their life in bottles."¹⁰¹ The unique A-B-C-A-B-C-A-D-C-A structure of the song allows Lamar to embody different perspectives while traversing through sobriety to intoxication, encompassing the emotional attitudes associated with each phase.

¹⁰⁰ West, *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Lamar, K. (2012), "Swimming Pools (Drank)." Track 9 on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Interscope Records.

The introductory mantra represents the bleak circuitry of alcoholism, which flanks the song's beginning and end. It represents the stronghold that consumption and addiction hold over Lamar through his physical action and subsequent reaction:

Pour up (drank), head shot (drank)

Sit down (drank), stand up (drank)

Pass out (drank), wake up (drank)

Faded (drank), faded (drank)¹⁰²

The echo recall after each phrase functions to emphasize his dependence upon liquor. He personifies the role it plays in his subconscious, as though yelling out demands to him throughout the day. The next two verses follow the B pattern, serving to illustrate Lamar's conscious inner thoughts as the night progresses. The phrases provide a snapshot of emotional clarity and explanation into Lamar's addiction from a person first person perspective. He provides historical background into the origins of his alcoholism, which stems from family and his community at large. He describes interwoven biological, psychological, and social mechanisms that create dependence before relating them to his current state while at a party in the next verse.

The chorus breaks through Lamar's inner dialogue to display the effect of external pressures to partake in overconsumption. It takes on the perspective of a peer egging on Lamar to drink more, asking why he only has two or three shots. The next verse of the chorus transitions back to Lamar's vapid preoccupations at the party that are shaped by external social pressures. The next verse reverts to song's A mantra to display his emotional regression. The following verse returns to the B structure of inner dialogue where Lamar's conscious begins to speak to him, urging moderation. This pattern continues to ebb and flow between verses, displaying the back-and-forth

¹⁰² Lamar, *ibid.*

of internal and external pressure. This unique structure facilitates Lamar's ability to convey an emotionally dynamic storyline that incorporates various perspectives, allowing the listener to immerse themselves more closely in Lamar's experience.

Conversely, many of Dylan's songs utilize a simplistic single stanza structure to convey a complex lyrical narrative. In "Desolation Row," Dylan shuns a clear narrative form, giving way to wild, yet claustrophobic stanzas. It is a freewheeling conglomeration of memories and emotional history. The first line, "they're painting the passports brown" refers to the lynching of three Black men in Duluth, as seen by Dylan at eight years old.¹⁰³ The rest of the song swerves into different events of oppression and discord, detailing the racial strife resulting from Black migration into city centers, "they're painting the passports brown." He refers to a police commissioner who orders his squad not to use their weapons to protect the accused Black men from a lynch mob; he compares Cinderella to Stalin and Romeo to Hitler. He weaves worries about the nuclear Armageddon from the Cuban missile crisis in his existentialism. There is no one clear meaning to "Desolation Row," but the simplicity of its verses certainly helps add clarity. At the end of each verse, he mutters a different iteration of someone hanging around the street Desolation Row.

While these two song examples from Lamar and Dylan differ in both content and form, they both manipulate structure to better suit their storylines and their ensuing emotional message. They craft a balance between using structure to add layers of complexity or streamline a nuanced, layered narrative. Both subvert the expected form of song to preference the communication of lyric, a function easily applicable to the written word that encourages experimentation.

¹⁰³ Dylan, *ibid.*

VII. The act of songwriting

Songwriting is an inherently creative act, but what is creativity within this capacity? How do creative processed work and what can we learn about songwriting from creativity itself? Creativity itself necessitates the joining of unique combinations of elements previously considered independent and unsimilar but come to be useful when reorganized.¹⁰⁴ Creative songwriting therefore does not require the inception of new ideas but rather new combinations of ideas. The linguistic definition of creativity has evolved alongside artistic mediums but generally requires a combination of flexibility, originality, and sensitivity to ideas, allowing the writer to escape from normative thinking patterns.¹⁰⁵

While one may logically assume that creative songs are heavily informed by historical predecessors, it may benefit the writer to be willfully ignorant of convention to produce a memorable and original work of art.¹⁰⁶ To be technically knowledgeable to functions of lyric, musicality, and structure should be balanced with personal intuition to create a novel and thus emotionally memorable song. This requires a balance of convergent and divergent thought processes. Convergent thinking refers to reorganizing and reapplying set techniques to create a single outcome, which applies to the reorganizing and finalizing stage of songwriting. Divergent thinking involves shifting one's perspective to generate multiple outcomes, which applies to the compositional phase of songwriting.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Getzels, J.W. and Jackson, P.W. (1962), *Creativity and Intelligence*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

¹⁰⁵ Torrance, E.P. (1967), 'Creative Teaching Makes a Difference', J. Foster (1967), *Creativity and the Teacher*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

¹⁰⁶ West, *ibid*.

¹⁰⁷ Cropley, A.J. (2001), *Creativity in Education and Learning: A Guide For Teachers and Educators*. London: Kogan Page.

Despite the necessity of audience reception in determining the transferable emotive capabilities of a song, actively considering the desires of an audience will decrease artistic motivation, interest, satisfaction, and the quality of the piece.¹⁰⁸ Within the compositional phase, a songwriter must then have a sense of their authentic voice and the emotional message they wish to convey.¹⁰⁹ An authentic voice is created by capturing what is real and tangible to oneself and one's own life experiences, which may be shaped through divergent thinking. Once the initial burst of creativity subsides, one must also acknowledge the shared cultural and critical understanding of what the writer hopes the song to convey through convergent thinking. This dynamic process necessitates gradual evolution through a series of generative ideas that eventually necessitates the creator to think as the receiver.¹¹⁰ Kendrick Lamar spoke to the importance of the divergent thinking phase within his own writing:

'Execution' is my favorite word. I spend 80 percent of my time thinking about how I'm going to execute, and that might be a whole year of constantly jotting down ideas, figuring out how I'm going to convey these words to a person to connect to it. What is this word that means this, how did it get here and why did it go there and how can I bring it back there? Then, the lyrics are easy.¹¹¹

We may then think of songwriting through two phases: creating a bond between the imagined song and the songwriter and between the song and the audience. The songwriter must have an authentic connection to the work they create but must also be able to recognize its accessibility to

¹⁰⁸ Amabile, T.M. (1983), *The Social Psychology of Creativity*. New York: Basic Books.

¹⁰⁹ West, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Gruber, H.E. (1980), *Darwin on Man: A Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹¹¹ Robinson, *ibid.*

an audience. Bob Dylan emphasized the importance of forming a connection to one's individual voice: "The world don't need more songs. ... unless someone's gonna come along with a pure heart and has something to say. That's a different story."¹¹²

These elements within the process of songwriting may be applied to any written creative work. A songwriter, like any other writer, is tasked with creating a visual environment that synthesizes novel observations with relatable emotions. On a surface level examination, a creator who writes stories instead of songs cannot possibly employ the same communicative techniques used in music because they are wholly different mediums. However, if we consider the previously mentioned tenants of creativity, an adept writer may learn to subvert the written form they write in to more closely align with the creative methods used in song's lyrics, musicality, and structure.

¹¹² Zollo, 76.

VIII.

Synthesizing communicative methods of song to written word

How may we apply the unique communicative tenants of songwriting, found in both Lamar and Dylan, to the written word? This jump, like any creative endeavor, requires the generation of novel ideas, the shaping of these ideas, and the combining of the two to yield a richly potent and unique written work that conveys a totality of emotional experience.¹¹³ An apt point to begin may first be unearthing one's connection to a location, a person, or general lived emotional memory. This form of solipsism, which can be overly introspective and lack a communicative aspect, works to form a bond between the author and their work to highlight an emotional authenticity.¹¹⁴ The original solipsistic link will then branch out to the audience, who then may find a thread of emotive relatability within the author's total communicative medium.

A song's communicative lyrical quality is well transferable to the written word. Dylan and Lamar both showcase the authenticity of their voices through the strategic interplay of internal realization with external circumstance. They do this in grounding their solipsism within a richly detailed sensory world, allowing the receiver to relate their own mode of emotions to a visual scene evoked by the work. They use all three narrational perspectives and time tenses to convey a depth of perspective and context, allowing the receiver to discern the motivators, fears, and dreams behind the work; in doing so, the receiver may then relate these emotional states back to their own life, creating new personal meaning within the song. Dylan and Lamar both utilize a range of rhetorical strategies commonly found in literature such as extended metaphor, personification, and alliteration to name a few. However, the way in which these elements are incorporated into their text is through their personal voice instead of a more formal, stilted mode of speaking. This effect

¹¹³ Arieti, S. (1976), *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis*. New York: Basic Books.

¹¹⁴ Dewey, J. (1958), *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.

enhances the human authenticity of their work, as though the receiver is being addressed personally.

Within the musicality of songs, there is an inseparable link between cadence and word. All written words have their own flow and sounds, which may be manipulated to either emphasize or contrast the actual meaning of the work. Phonetic sounds have an emotive character when we consider the sound's connotation. This thesis earlier discussed the emotive qualities of major versus minor chords, which is applicable to the words themselves. One may consider the shape, length, and sonic pitch of a word in relation to others nearby it to alter the intended musicality of a work. This is an important facet of rendering a work memorable and pleasing, as it incorporates the ephemeral emotions associated with a range of sonic possibility.

The structure of a song refers to its ordering of the lyrics. Structure is an integral component of song, and thus a written work, by adding continuity, variation, division, and emphasis in communicative narrative. Structure functions to direct a receiver's attention towards a central or auxiliary object or theme. To incorporate different elements of the lyrical mode, such as altering perspective or tense, structure may be manipulated accordingly. The structure may also be used to indicate the auditory pronunciation of words when in the written word. Changing the appearance of words to indicate their intended sound meaning could be one form of experimentation. Line enjambments may also be used to indicate continuity depending on their contextual use. These structural components can also be illustrated visually on a page, with verses starting at different points on the page to indicate cesuras or a shift into new thought. A more complex narrative may benefit from a deceptively simplistic structure, whereas a simpler narrative can be made more intricate with a structure that favors unexplained shifts in perspective.

Written works may also benefit from elements of the songwriting process itself. Using a communicative framework wherein the artist incorporates personal experience with more universal signifiers will increase the emotive accessibility of a work. The lyrics to songs are typically written first in a chaotic, creative scramble called divergent thinking. The reordering and streamlining of these thoughts in convergent thinking allows the artist to best consider an audience's reception while still allowing for autonomous creative thought. The importance of centering one's original, authentic voice is also easily applied to the written word, which may be considered an artist's fingerprint on a work. Is the writing style more verbose or brief? Is it more wry or eager? Identifying these characteristics will enable a work to communicate its emotional meaning more fully.

Why should the written word want to accommodate the communicative modes of song? Art is constantly evolving by simultaneously learning and rebelling from itself. As critical literature awards have been given to musical artists, one should consider the implications of this classification to the written word. The differentiation between music and poetry has been and will continue to be contested by academics and the public alike. However, it would be careless to assert that the written word has nothing to learn from the totality of emotive expression within music. As musical genres and practices evolve, so should the communicative techniques of the written language. Constant evolution is a necessity to relevant, emotionally visceral art. There is no invention, but rather constant rediscovery for the potentiality of art.

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