

Reading Songs Reading Poetry

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A couple weeks ago I attended a party at a friend's house. My friend turned forty and inevitably the evening involved music from the 1990's. Among the albums played was U2's seminal *Achtung Baby* from 1991. (And yeah, we still listen to something as old fashioned as albums). Revisiting *Achtung Baby* almost 25 years after its conception felt like seeing an old friend back from an extended trip to the most remote parts of the earth. It was slightly awkward, exhilarating, distinctly shabby in places and, of course, brought back a host of very specific memories.

One track in particular stood out and has stayed with me since that evening. *Acrobat* is not one of the most familiar U2 songs. It has never been performed live by the band and yet it contains a piercing, memorable hook and some of the strongest lyrics from Bono's hand.

On the one hand, these lyrics are ambiguous and seem to offer a slight resistance to interpretation. On the other hand, the imagery is vivid enough to catch your attention and the dominant ideas of the song are quite easy to grasp once you break through the surface and begin to pay attention to what is going on.

In other words, *Acrobat* seems perfect for teaching students how to read poetry.

Poetry is dull, difficult and completely irrelevant

In my experience, students tend to dismiss poetry in general as dull, difficult and completely irrelevant. It is, however, also my experience that a lot of students actually find that working with poetry which strikes a chord in them is both interesting and fulfilling. But making them reach this conclusion is sometimes painstakingly hard.

Regardless of how difficult they really are, song lyrics are usually perceived as *less difficult* to understand than "real" poetry and thus may help students overcome their preconceived notions about the genre.

The trick, I think, is to find song lyrics that have just the right level of complexity to be rewarding to work with and enough bite to make the students react. With hook lines such as "don't let the bastards grind you down", the enigmatic figure of "the acrobat" and poetic lines like "what happened t'your face of melting snow", I believe *Acrobat* is an example of a song that meets both these demands.

In the following, I would like to discuss some of the problems that arise when teaching students how to read poetry and show how using a song lyric like *Acrobat* may help to cross these obstacles.

So why engage it?

Apart from the sense of accessibility, I believe there are several benefits of working with song lyrics in the classroom. Most obviously they:

1. are relatively short and can be dealt with in one session
2. have a straightforward composition
3. make use of images, ambiguity and figurative language
4. tend to focus on the thoughts and emotions of an individual speaker

5. make the importance of rhythm and sonic qualities stand out
6. often point directly to themes and leitmotifs by repetition of a chorus
7. require close reading to reveal their full semantic potential

Song lyrics are perfect candidates for introducing poetry analysis because, in the best cases, *they are poems dressed in less intimidating clothes*. Song lyrics are the Instagram food shot - the manga version of Shakespeare.

For this very reason song lyrics are also susceptible to the common misconception among students that all interpretations are equally valid. Thus using song lyrics in the classroom invites a debate of interpretive practices and methods for approaching literature and may help students realize that some interpretations actually are *more* valid than others. And that the best interpretation is the one which is supported by the most textual evidence.

One way of achieving this might be to take the reception of the song into consideration and allow students to explore and discuss interpretations made by people on the internet.

But I've read somewhere that Bono actually...

While researching for this essay, I came across the website *songmeanings.com*. The site publishes lyrics to popular songs and allows users to give their interpretation and discuss the meaning of a particular lyric in the comments section. A useful classroom exercise would be to ask the students to read and recognize common patterns in the way users approach interpretation. Working inductively with user comments could lead to a very fruitful class discussion about the hermeneutical approach to literature.

Apart from uncritical praise, the comments on *Acrobat* show five main problems of interpretive practices that need to be addressed when approaching poetry – and literature in general:

1. interpretation of the entire song based on individual lines with no regard for context
2. offering a basically valid interpretation without textual evidence
3. interpretation based on the reader's religious/ideological point of view
4. interpretation based on the reader's preconceived notions about the band's ideological/religious point of view
5. repeating hearsay about the author's intention

The above problems are all hermeneutical in nature, but whereas the first two relate directly to insufficient analytical skills and misinterpretation of the text itself, the subsequent three are all extraneous to the text as they are based in the preconceptions of the reader or a complete failure to give an interpretation. In most cases it seems that users seek the consensus rather than forming their own opinion.

While responses based on the first two interpretive practices actually often give valuable insights into certain aspects of the song, responses based on the final three are usually unproductive as they completely disregard actual analysis of the text and only further preconceived notions along the lines of: "U2 are a Christian band thus their lyrics (should) all basically praise God"; "U2 are from Ireland and known for their political stance therefore the song deals with the Irish conflict"; "I've heard that Bono actually wrote about the pressures of being a rock star."

In my experience, the problems identified in the comment section on songmeanings.com are not far removed from the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Allowing students to work with these comments just might lead to the conclusion that reading poetry is not only about the more technical aspects of analysis and interpretation, but also about approaching the text with an open mind.

A poet has to be a writer, a singer and a painter at the same time

When dealing with poetry or song lyrics, I think it is valuable to present students with the following three statements and allow them to reflect on them in writing:

1. A poem is a poem because what is said in it cannot be said in any other way
2. The Italian word *stanza* means room. Take this seriously. The poem is a three dimensional space. Step into it. Look around. Take your time. Examine all words from all perspectives.
3. A poet has to be a writer, a singer and a painter at the same time.

The purpose of this exercise is, of course, to focus the students' attention on the analytical task ahead and make them realize that understanding poetry takes time and attention to detail.

Reading Acrobat

In the final part of this article, I would like to give an example of just how the principles and approaches discussed above may be brought to bear on the song *Acrobat*.

The penultimate track on the album *Achtung Baby* opens with a confusion of noise that gradually develops into a siren-like guitar riff which instills a sense of urgency and alarm in the listener before the opening lines of the lyrics are sung.

In the text, a speaker (I) directly addresses a second character who is identified in the first stanza by the line "When I first met you girl". In addition to the girl, the speaker repeatedly refers to an unspecified third party known only by the pejorative "the bastards". The song is composed of alternating stanzas and pre-choruses that lead to the repeated chorus/hook line "So don't let the bastards grind you down." The song can be thematically divided into three parts, which I will address below.

I

As should be evident by the end of this analysis, the speaker makes use of complex figurative language and contrasts throughout to develop the song's main themes. At the same time, however, the reliability and moral character of the speaker are thrown into question by his own choice of words. Thus the full meaning of *Acrobat* may not be as straightforward as it might appear at first glance.

The key themes and problems of reliability come into play in the very first stanza:

Don't believe what you hear, don't believe what you see
If you just close your eyes you can feel the enemy.
When I first met you girl, you had fire in your soul.
What happened t'your face of melting snow
Now it looks like this!

The opening apostrophe negates the use of sight and hearing as reliable sources of information and instead focuses attention on inner qualities "If you just close your eyes you can feel the enemy". This suggests that the noise and opinions of the outside world are fallible and irrelevant. The speaker claims that rather than seeking answers and blaming the external world, the addressee needs to focus

on internal problems. The enemy is not located on the outside but resides in the addressee's inner demons. This idea evolves further in the subsequent lines which identify the addressee as "you girl" and present an image of her state of mind.

The speaker begins by establishing a contrast between a previous state "When I first met you girl, you had fire in your soul" and the present "Now it looks like this!" The process of change between then and now is indicated by the speaker's question "What happened t'your face of melting snow".

The image is rather complex. First of all, it develops the contrast between inside and outside from the first part of the stanza. Secondly, it poses a new contrast between the heat of the girl's previous conviction and energy – the fire in her soul – and the coldness of the present state in which her face has turned to melting snow. A face of melting snow must look like a face streaked with tears and thus it seems evident that the girl is now despairing and despondent. Fire is quenched by water. Finally this transition from one state to another is underpinned by the image of snow turning from a solid rather beautiful state to a fluid murky transparency (melt water). Hence, it seems that the girl has lost the clarity of conviction and is now trapped in an ill-defined and hostile world.

Contrasts and metaphors remain the dominant poetic devices throughout the rest of the song, which should be evident from a brief look at the first pre-chorus:

And you can swallow or you can spit
You can throw it up, or choke on it
And you can dream, so dream out loud
You know that your time is coming round
So don't let the bastards grind you down.

The speaker clearly states that the girl must choose between two alternatives. Either she allows herself be bogged down by the pressures of the outside world or she repels these pressures violently "You can spit it out, or choke on it". The speaker evidently tries to empower the girl to cast off her looming depression by telling her to "dream out loud" and not "let the bastards grind you down". The significance of the speaker's words is formally stressed by the repetition of "dream" and the assonance of the three concluding lines. The line "You know that your time is coming round" indicates that the future has better things in store for the girl, if she chooses to stand up for herself.

In addition to the themes of alienation and personal responsibility, the chorus also introduces "the bastards" as an unspecified opponent, a "they system" which provides an image of the repressive forces and norms of society that seek to censor and control the individual.

II

The following stanza and pre-chorus gradually shift the attention from the girl to the speaker and simultaneously develop the sense of alienation and frustration that arise from living in a society with unclear boundaries and no fixed values.

No, nothing makes sense, nothing seems to fit.
I know you'd hit out if you only knew who to hit.
And I'd join the movement
If there was one I could believe in
Yeah, I'd break bread and wine
If there was a church I could receive in.

The first two lines give an impression of the girl's mounting displacement, frustration and a latent aggression without specific cause or target which in turn reinforces the image of an individual pinned down by societal norms that she neither shares nor knows how to change: "You'd hit out if you only knew who to hit".

Focus then shifts to the speaker who claims that "I'd join the movement / If there was one I could believe in / Yeah, I'd break bread and wine / If there was a church I could receive in". According to the speaker, the antidote to life in a meaningless universe apparently lies in the possibility of both political action and religious faith. His choice of Holy Communion as the image of religious practice is interesting, however, as it directly links the sacrifice of Christ to the speaker, and at the same time, alludes to the need for mankind to wash away its sins. The allusion to sin is further emphasized when the speaker states that there is no church he can "receive in" – an admission which suggests that the speaker is not completely innocent.

Significantly, the speaker distances himself from both religion and politics by the repeated use of the conditional: "if". He is willing to take action and believe only on condition that the political cause or religion appeals to him. This, apparently, is not about to happen anytime soon as the speaker uses the hypothetical modal verb "could" in both instances. Action and faith thus remain distant hypotheses and not real solutions for the speaker and, consequently, his promise of support to the girl seems insincere and superficial.

III

The text, then, betrays the speaker and begins to undermine his authority, which forces the reader to reconsider the relationship between the speaker and his audience – both within and outside the text. The problem of reliability is developed to an even larger extent in the second pre-chorus which focuses on the speaker's need for gratification via the cup-metaphor (which also alludes to the blood of Christ) and introduces the central figure of the acrobat:

'Cause I need it now.
To take the cup
To fill it up, to drink it slow.
I can't let you go.

And I must be an acrobat
To talk like this and act like that.
And you can dream, so dream out loud
And don't let the bastards grind you down.

An acrobat is a performer. A person who earns a living from his agility and skill. A thrill seeker who dazzles audiences by performing tantalizing stunts at the circus. When the speaker says that he "must be an acrobat / to talk like this and act like that" he inadvertently lifts the curtain from a discrepancy between words and actions. Evidently the speaker's words and actions do not always coincide. As a result, taking into account the apparent superficiality shown in the analysis above, the speaker comes off as a hypocrite – a demagogue who deceives and seduces people with brazen words about faith and supporting the right causes. In reality he appears to be all talk and no action, a condition he recognizes and appears to exploit when he says "(Oh, it hurts baby) / What are we going to do now it's all been said / No new ideas in the house and every book has been read".

The speaker's intention in the final part of the song is ambiguous, however, as the words above could be construed both as phony *weltschmerz* and a genuine wish to reform that is reflected in his need for the girl "I can't let you go". Furthermore his insistence that the girl "can find [her] own way out" and

his attempt at willing himself into believing in a change for the better “And you can build, and I can will” suggest that the speaker is fed up with his own hypocrisy. A notion which is underscored in the desperate plea “And I can love, and I can love / I know that the tide is turning round / So don’t let the bastards grind you down.

Finally, the ambiguity of the speaker’s words deepens when he returns to the concept of personal responsibility in the line “In dreams begin responsibilities”. One interpretation of this statement might be that it is an existential choice of the individual to create meaning in a world which brings no new insights and is content to endlessly rehash the same old truisms. The only problem is that the speaker’s statement of personal responsibility comes directly after the lines “And you can call, I can’t wait until / You can stash and you can seize” with its connotations of secrecy and sudden violence. Again the speaker insulates himself from the action by the contradictory use of a beautiful cliché and the suggestion of future violence by the girl.

IV

When the speaker – the rhetorical circus performer – accidentally shows his sleight of hand, the song’s opening call not to trust your senses and feel the enemy inside takes on a new significance. As it turns out, the real enemy is not the girl’s inner demons but the two-faced speaker by her side, who offers solace with a hand in her pocket. As the title suggests all along, the hypocritical acrobat is finally revealed to be the real focus of the text as it explores themes of hypocrisy and demagoguery.

In the final analysis, then, it is clear that the song/poem expresses a sense of alienation and displacement in a modern world with no moral absolutes, no genuine faith, no believable political causes. At the same time it exposes the hypocrisies which arise when shifty demagogues claim to lead others to salvation but ultimately offer nothing but commiserations.

The speaker may be genuinely exhausted with his role as acrobat in the circus of reality and trying to empower the girl to make better choices for her future. On the other hand he may be trying only to exploit her apparent vulnerability to his own end. Perhaps he is doing both at the same time? This ambiguity is never resolved – and in the end, when all is said and done, the trouble with being a liar is that no one knows when you *are* telling the truth.

The devil is in the detail

My analysis and interpretation of *Acrobat* shows, hopefully, just how much there is to be gained by close reading song lyrics. But how does taking song lyrics as our point of departure translate into a better understanding of poetry for the students?

Songs and music often speak to our strongest emotions. Good song lyrics can define the spirit of age, capture the beginning and end of a relationship, or be felt directly in the heart of the listener. Everyone, regardless of age, has had the experience of being touched by a particular song, whether it be the song you danced to with your first boyfriend or the soprano you passed on a street corner in Oxford.

The method I propose in this article is basically the well-known concept of an inductive pre-reading session based on reception analysis and a highly abstract reflection on specific definitions of poetry; close reading of the text itself and a post-reading session that might take several different routes depending on the context in which it is read.

Acrobat might open up to a second (higher level) discussion of interpretive practices. It might be followed by analysis and interpretation of “real poetry”, or it could be part of a module on *zeitgeist*, rock lyrics in general or comparative readings across genre and periods – consider, for instance,

Andrew Marvell' s *To his Coy Mistress* vs. *My Humps* by The Black Eyed Peas. Whatever you choose, *the devil is in the detail*.