

# Anglophone Music as Poetry

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## Anglophone Music as Poetry

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## Abstract

Literature as a whole is usually divided into poetry, prose and drama (Solar 2006: 154) with fairly clear boundaries between them. When it comes to their subdivision and definition of specific literature and art type, the boundaries become unclear and many questions arise. One of the most difficult questions to answer is what poetry is and which criteria must be met in order for some work to be classified as poetry. It is known that authors such as Shakespeare, Byron, Cummings or Angelou are poets and their work is interpreted as poetry. However, can the circle of poetry and art be expanded to similar forms such as contemporary music? That is the topic of this thesis – analysis, explanation and specific examples of modern song lyrics which can be viewed as poetry and something more valuable in the art context than it actually is due to the commercialization of music. With songs performed by Tupac, Garbage, Leonard Cohen, Bill Withers and various artists who belong to different music genres and eras, poetry is broadened and upgraded to the 21<sup>st</sup> century level.

**Key words:** Anglophone music, music, poetry, lyrics, analysis, literature, art, contemporary, modern, intermediation, authorship

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 What is Poetry?

Literature is a wide term which can be divided according to literary genres, time period, movement, nationality of the author, the language on which it was written and many more subdivisions. When talking about the first level of literary division, the most common one separates prose, poetry and epic<sup>1</sup> (Solar 154). There are issues in this area as well because the boundaries between them and among them are blurry. It is not quantitatively determined when a short story ends and a novel begins; on the other hand, it is not qualitatively determined what is and what is not poetry. The criteria set to define poetry and literary art still remains an unsolved question, one of many that are not agreed upon yet.

The first place where you should start searching for a definition is – a dictionary. In order to try to find common connections among definitions of poetry, I have consulted several English and non-English dictionaries. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines poetry as “poems in general, or the art of writing them”. The first thing that needs to be done is to look up the new term “poem”, which is again described as “a piece of writing that expresses emotions, experiences, and ideas, especially in short lines using words that rhyme (= end with the same sound).” Without going into psychological details of describing what emotions are, the term itself is quite blurry and it cannot be exactly defined. Aren’t emotions present in other forms of literature such as prose as well? A lot of emotions are revealed in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* when Raskolnikov rethinks over and over his act, yet, this is not considered poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> The division is not agreed upon, but this three-way one is very often used and generalised.

*Oxford's Advanced Learner's Dictionary* provides a very simple definition as well that involves the term "poem" again: "a collection of poems; poems in general." Surprisingly, the definition of what a poem is shows carefully chosen words and more specific explanation:

"A piece of writing in which the words are chosen for their sound and the images they suggest, not just for their obvious meanings. The words are arranged in separated lines, usually with a repeated rhythm, and sometimes the lines rhyme at the end." (973)

Although this definition can help us in understanding the external structure of poetry and poems, it does not mention anything about the internal, emotional side of poetry. This is because the dictionaries are for general purposes and not specialized ones.

A more specialized dictionary must be consulted, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. There, the definition of poetry goes as follows:

"Language sung, chanted, spoken, or written according to some pattern of recurrence that emphasizes the relationships between words on the basis of sound as well as sense: this pattern is almost always a rhythm or meter, which may be supplemented by rhyme or alliteration or both. The demands of verbal patterning usually make poetry a more condensed medium than prose or everyday speech, often involving variations in syntax, the use of special words and phrases (poetic diction) peculiar to poets, and a more frequent and more elaborate use of figures of speech, principally metaphor and simile. (...) The three major categories of poetry are narrative, dramatic, and lyric, the last being the most extensive."

This explanation provides us with information about the external structure of a poem, but again, does not mention anything about the semantical value of it. It must be understood that defining poetry is not something that can be done in a couple of lines in a dictionary.

A more concrete textbook should be consulted, such as *An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature* by authors Vera and Ansgar Nünning. At the very beginning, it is noted that defining literature through the normative aesthetic based definitions should be avoided, but that the qualitative criteria definitions are problematic as well (16). However, the authors isolate several features that differ poetry from other forms of literature. These are: deviations from everyday language, subjective perspective of the speaker (lyric persona), rhyme scheme (47), compression of the subject matter (brevity) (48), deviation from the norm (52), just to name a few. Furthermore, they mention a high degree of diversity in the context of poetry as a literary genre and its subjectivity to historical change (48). The fact that defining poetry changes through the years, benefits the thesis that modern music can be looked upon as poetry. On the other hand, if we take a quick look into the very beginning of poetry and lyricism, we find that it involved a musical background. This musical background consisted of someone playing the lyre, a stringed instrument from which the word “lyrical” derived. As cited by the Nünning: “Thanks to this connection between poetry and music, musicality remains one of the main characteristics of poetry (...)” (49). Lovro Županović, a famous Croatian musicologist, also introduces a quick overview of the connection between music and literature in his book *Hrvatski pisci između riječi i tona*: “Connecting words and tone (literature and music) was manifested in the Greek culture in another, descriptive (verbal) way. It has a two-kind character: literary and scientific (...)” (Translation M.L., p. 9)<sup>2</sup>. Such musicality is seen through the rhyming scheme, rhythm of the poem, meter and various other stylistic literary devices such as alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, repetition, anaphora, epiphora etc. All these stylistic literary devices can also be found in music lyrics, as it shall be shown further in the text.

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<sup>2</sup> „Povezivanje riječi i tona (književnosti i glazbe) u grčkoj se kulturi očitovalo i na još jedan, opisni (verbalni način). On je dvovrsne naravi: književnički i znanstvenički (...)“

## 1.2 What is Music?

Since this work is about musical lyrics as poems, it should be clear what music is as well. Understanding music is simple – music can be plainly explained as playing any instrument or using one or more tools that produce sounds which are not made by the vocal apparatus. However, it should be clear as what a song is. As stated in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

“SONG (Lat. carmen, Fr. chanson, Ger. Lied). A term used broadly to refer to verbal utterance that is musically expressive of emotion; hence more narrowly, the combined effect of music and poetry (q.v.) or, by extension, any poem that is suitable for combination with music or is expressive in ways that might be construed as musical; also occasionally used to designate a strict musical composition without text, deemed "poetic" in its expressivity or featuring markedly "vocal" melodic writing for instruments.“ (1165)

By “the combined effect of music and poetry”, we come to the verbal component of a song that is known as the term “lyrics” in the context of contemporary music. This is another argument in favor of the potential equalization of music lyrics and poetry.

After researching several older and newer dictionaries dealing with literature, I have found only one trying to define lyrics in the musical sense, and that is *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*.

“In another sense, the lyrics of a popular song or other musical composition are the words as opposed to the music; these may not always be lyrical in the poetic sense (e.g. in a narrative song like a \* BALLAD). “ (143,144)



After this pre-research, we come to three key words important to understand before the actual analysis. Those are: *music*, *lyrics* and *poetry*. Their mutual relationship is intertwined with no clear hyponymy, hypernymy or other similar connections to one another. Generally speaking, this is not important to the analysis as they are to be seen as a whole rather than individually.

### **1.3 Music as Poetry and Potential Issues**

Now that both poetry and music have been defined and discussed, something shall be said regarding their connection and dependence. Songs nowadays have several components: the lyrics, instrumental music (which includes the beat, rhythm, tempo, etc.), the very singing and, broadly speaking, the visual basis in the form of a music video. To fully experience a song, all of the stimuli should be taken into consideration. In some songs the emphasis is on the instrumental part, such is the case with electronic music where the main goal is to get a physical response from the listener – dance. Electronic music and its subgenres have very little text, often just syllables that you can sing along to without much of lyrics to remember. Metal music offers strong distorted sounds accompanied by what is known as growling – singing with a very deep-like voice, often mistaken as screaming by people who are listening to it for the first time. This is not important for the basic understanding of musical lyrics as poetry. In order to try and understand it, instrumental music background, the music video (if such exists) and the performance or singing of the performer should be neglected. The problem is that the superfluous elements of repeating certain syllables or sounds need to be extracted as well should they not get into the way of the analysis. It is not easy to decide what these elements are; that is why it is necessary to listen to the performance of the song before conducting any analysis.

Another potential issue that may arise in this discussion is the transcription of the lyrics. The Internet provides us with many websites specialized for lyrics of contemporary music. Who are the authors who write down the lyrics? Hypothetically speaking, everyone. Literally every Internet user can upload their transcription of the lyrics which are, especially in the field of rap music, not so clear. Nonnative speakers of languages in which the songs are being sung dwell with the transcription as well. The lack of the author's vocabulary and understanding of both internal and external structures of a song can lead to a phenomenon known as "misheard lyrics". This means that people often sing a song with the wrong lyrics that rhyme with the actual words. An example of this is Jimi Hendrix's song *Purple Haze* of which he is the author as well. The original lyrics go: "Excuse me while I kiss the sky", while the misheard ones go: "Excuse me while I kiss this guy". Another example is the song *Paranoid*, written and performed by the band Black Sabbath. "I tell you to end your life I wish I could but it's too late" has somewhat replaced the original: "I tell you to enjoy life I wish I could but it's too late". This is mostly due to the incapability of the listener's speech segmentation and sounds tend to slur together with the neighboring phonemes, forming words with a similar phonetic pattern as the two (or more!) words in question. Since the lyrics are being sung, the role of the context becomes more important than in normal speech without the musical background and can often lead to - misheard lyrics.

Although it may seem funny and harmless, the band Whitesnake had to change the lyrics of their popular song *Here I Go Again* because of misheard lyrics. The song was written by Bernie Marsden and David Coverdale and it was published in 1982. The chorus was originally sung: "Like a hobo I was born to walk alone"; while in the 1987 version it was changed to: "Like a drifter I was born to walk alone". It was widely thought that they sung "homo" instead of "hobo", which is due to the fact that both phonemes /m/ and /b/ are bilabials.

When clearing that out of the way, we are left with a clear text that conveys information, feelings, emotions, doubts, fear and often leaves us thinking about it for days. If the function of poetry is the author's soul-relief, addressing the reader and telling him/her something, or it is just "art for art's sake"<sup>3</sup>, what is the difference between Coverdale and Lord Byron? The fact that bad music, vocal capabilities of the performer or lousy music video steals the spotlight from the whole package should not influence our understanding of the quality of the lyrics, the text itself. Does Byron sound more profound and sophisticated because of his language? Perhaps, but let us not forget that he had lived in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The English language has drastically changed since then. It is not meant to diminish Lord Byron's or any other poet's contribution to the language or literature in general. Think of how many words Shakespeare has enriched the English language with! The intention is to acknowledge songwriters and performers as artists and poets of the present.

#### **1.4 Authorship**

Although this is also an issue when stating that music is poetry, it is not included in the previous chapter because it needs special attention. In poetry it is clear who the author is and this poses no threat in our receiving and interpreting the poem. However, contemporary music is nowadays sometimes more of a business where a "songwriter" became a profession and the performer is more important than the author himself. People live of writing songs for performers and often compose music for them as well. The moral question is - do they do it with the same emotion or is it just fake money making? Let us discuss the role of the author and the performer in regards of contemporary music/lyrics.

One argument in favor of the performers is that they give the final touch to the piece with their interpretation or intermediation. They are the medium which emits the core of the

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<sup>3</sup> Referring to the 19th Century philosophy and movement *L'art pour L'art*.

piece to the receiver. The performer often interprets the lyrics so well, that the listener's focus can be on one tone and one tone only, regardless of the word or the meaning of it. To prove this, we must oppose something to it. Let us take an example of "The Star-Spangled Banner" performances at the opening ceremonies for the Super Bowl. When Whitney Houston performed in 1991 in Tampa, her performance was applauded and the crowd was excited and happy about it.<sup>4</sup> But when Roseanne Barr did the same one year before<sup>5</sup>, she sung it poorly, which resulted in the crowd booing her and showing their disapproval. This confirms that the role of the performer is important.

On the other hand, Roland Barthes figuratively kills the author's presence and meaning in his 1967 essay "Death of the Author". Barthes' hypothesis is that the author and his biographical information are not important in the relationship between the piece and the reader. Readers should not take into consideration the author so that they could completely understand the piece without any unnecessary interference.

My opinion is that the author is not important for understanding all literary pieces, but the text and the reader are enough for the process to be carried out. These two form a bond and become one, thus the presence of the author, i.e. his personal details may interfere with this relationship and interpretation of the piece.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N\\_ICmBvYMRs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_ICmBvYMRs)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ls1YVhcLD2c>

## 2 LYRICS ANALYSIS

Before the very analysis of the musical lyrics, it should be explained in which way this is going to be done. The formula is very simple – it consists of the external structure such as rhyming, stylistic figures used (metaphors, alliterations, comparisons, etc.) and internal structure or the meaning of the song, references in the text and the important information needed in order to understand it. It must be born in mind that redundant elements shall be ignored and ellipted. The redundant elements in this study are all superfluous elements which are in the lyrics only to serve the music, i.e. contribute to the rhythmical structure of the song. These elements are important when viewing the product as a whole (text, singing, music), but unnecessary when talking only about the text itself. The most common elements are exclamations and interjections which can often be found in so-called “bridges” in songs which serve to link the verses among themselves or with the refrain – “oh”, “yeah”, “uh” and so on. Furthermore, songs often have repetition, again, because of the rhythm and melody of the song, not because something needs to be repeated, thus emphasized. One must be very careful when deciding whether repetition is another superfluous element or needs to be kept.

The last thing that will be extracted is the difference between the author and the performer of the song, which was described in more detail in chapter 1.4 Authorship. It is not uncommon nowadays that the performer doesn't write the lyrics or even compose the music, arrangement or anything related to the final product, rather just sings. For this study, it is not important whether or not that is moral, but what the audience needs to ask themselves is if the song has lost its emotional values. Another challenging thing to do is to transcribe the lyrics from audio to text. Did Tupac say “young” or “youngin’ ” in his song *Dear Mama*? A minority of artists actually uploads their lyrics online on their official websites and in many

cases fans post the first version of the lyrics based on their own hearing and feeling (more of which can be found in chapter 1.3 Misheard Lyrics).

## 2.1 Grandma's Hands

*Grandma's Hands* by Bill Withers, a singer and songwriter born and raised in West Virginia. His most famous hits include *Lean on me*, *Ain't No Sunshine* and *Use Me*, alongside the song that shall be analyzed here.

Author: Withers, Bill

Title: Grandma's Hands

Album: Just as I am

Year of release: 1971

Label: Sussex

Grandma's hands

Clapped in church on Sunday morning.

Grandma's hands

Played a tambourine so well.

Grandma's hands

Used to issue out a warning.

She'd say, "Billy don't you run so fast,

Might fall on a piece of glass.

Might be snakes there in that grass",

Grandma's hands.

Grandma's hands

Soothed a local unwed mother.

Grandma's hands

Used to ache sometimes and swell.

Grandma's hands

Used to lift her face and tell her.

She'd say, "Baby, Grandma understands

That you really love that man.

Put yourself in Jesus hands",

Grandma's hands.

Grandma's hands

Used to hand me piece of candy.

Grandma's hands

Picked me up each time I fell.

Grandma's hands

Boy, they really came in handy.

She'd say, "Matty don' you whip that boy

What you want to spank him for?

He didn't drop no apple core."

But I don't have Grandma anymore.

If I get to Heaven I'll look for

Grandma's hands.

Rhythmically, the song shows great repetition of the main motif of grandmother's hands. Hands are perceived as a positive attribute of a capable and hard-working human being and are a common somatism in the English language. Wrinkled hands are evidence of diligence, there are numerous examples of phrases and collocations based on hands, e.g. "to

give someone a hand” which means to help someone, or “to do something with your own two hands”, i.e. to do something on your own without any help. In this song this is a motif which sometimes evokes an image of literally hands – a part of a human’s body, a limb, but they can also be seen as something abstract and figurative. For instance, in the first verse “Grandma's hands clapped in church on Sunday morning“, they are literal. Through this detail of one's hands, the author zooms out to a more general and broader view of the lyrical subject. The fact that the grandmother used to spend every Sunday in church participating in the mass shows us a great part of her personality and that she is a religious person, perhaps traditional and an active member of the community. This focusing on detail was a typical device used during the Renaissance era by poets who would go on and describe physical details of their golden hair, white teeth, pale hands and so on.<sup>6</sup> When looking the motif as a more abstract figure, we must look into the verse “Grandma's hands picked me up each time I fell.“. This is the part where language comes in the spotlight and where, thanks to the richness of English, this verse can be seen as both helping someone in any way, but again, literally picking up a child when fallen down after playing.

Not to focus on the main motif only, literary devices and figures should be mentioned as well. Rhyming scheme is inconsistent apart from some a-b-a rhymes like in the first verse. Our attention should be focused on the constant repetition of the verse “grandma’s hands” which gives the song a slower rhythm and stability of motif. We can assume the song is about the authors very own grandmother from the verse “Billy don't you run so fast“, where “Billy“ is Bill Withers himself. The ending of the song reveals that the grandmother is deceased through the usage of euphemism “But I don't have Grandma anymore“, with further mentioning of Christian motifs like heaven. Overall, Withers used one simple motif of hands in order to illustrate a complete person.

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Shakespeare mocked Renaissance's poets who used this kinds of collocations and descriptions in his Sonnet CXXX, also know as *My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun*.



## 2.2 Bleed like me

Garbage is an American-Scottish band<sup>7</sup> which started its career in the mid 90s by mixing electronic, rock and pop music. This song is from their 2005 album of the same title.

Author: Manson, Shirley

Title: Bleed like me

Album: Bleed like me

Year of release: 2005

Label: Geffen

Avalanche is sullen and too thin,  
she starves herself to rid herself of sin,  
and the kick is so divine  
when she sees bones beneath her skin,  
and she says: "Hey, baby, can you bleed like me?  
C'mon<sup>8</sup>, baby, can you bleed like me?"

Chris is all dressed up and acting coy,  
painted like a brand new Christmas toy.  
He's trying to figure out if he's a girl or he's a boy,  
he says: "Hey, baby, can you bleed like me?  
C'mon baby can you bleed like me?"

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<sup>7</sup> The singer, Shirley Manson is Scottish while the other three members – Butch Vig, Steve Marker and Duke Erikson are American

<sup>8</sup> "C'mon" is a common spelling of the phrase "come on" used when transcribing lyrics.

Doodle takes Dad's scissors to her skin,  
and when she does relief comes setting in.

While she hides the scars  
she's making underneath her pretty clothes  
she sings: "Hey, baby, can you bleed like me?  
C'mon baby can you bleed like me?"

Therapy is Speedie's brand new drug.  
Dancing with the devil's past has never been too fun.  
It's better off than trying to take a bullet from a gun,  
and she cries, "Hey, baby, can you bleed like me?  
C'mon baby can you bleed like me?"

JT gets all fucked up in some karaoke bar,  
after two drinks he's a loser, after three drinks he's a star.  
Getting all nostalgic as he sings 'I Will Survive'.

Hey, baby, can you bleed like me?  
C'mon baby, can you bleed like me?  
Hey, baby, can you bleed like me?  
C'mon baby, can you bleed like me?

You should see my scars.  
You should see my scars.  
You should see my scars.  
You should see my scars

Try to comprehend that which you'll never comprehend.

Try to comprehend that which you'll never comprehend.

Just try to comprehend that which you'll never comprehend.

Try to comprehend that which you'll never comprehend.

You should see my scars.

You should see my scars.

Here we encounter the first problem while analyzing contemporary songs as poetry, the subordination of some parts to the melodic rhythm. The constant repetition at the end: “You should see my scars” and: “Try to comprehend that which you’ll never comprehend” are abundant elements which need to be ignored and not taken into consideration. On the other hand, the repetition of the: “Hey, baby, can you bleed like me? C’mon baby can you bleed like me” part should be kept because it is injected into the verse and it plays an important role of linking several different characters and stories which form a whole. The song is about the inner suffering of lyrical subjects who mostly find relief in harming their body, either by cutting themselves, starving or getting drunk on alcohol. The first verse tells us the story of Avalanche, a name carefully chosen by Manson which probably forms an opposition between the very meaning of an avalanche – aggressive, strong, big, forward - and the adjectives that describe her afterwards - sullen, too thin. She suffers from an eating disorder which was developed on purpose - “She starves herself”. The next part is about relief and cleansing from sins, but sins of what? It is common in many religions to fast in order to clean one’s soul of sin and to show mutual solidarity for the poor and hungry, but in this case, after going through the lyrics as a whole, everything that is not skinny is a sin. This can be interpreted as modern-day pressure - young women have to look perfect as the models do on magazine covers. Little do they know photoshopping plays an enormous role.

Chris, not revealing whether it is a male or female nickname, is a person struggling with sexual confusion regarding gender identity. On the outside confident and dressed up, but on the inside confused, something many teenagers go through during their puberty.

Doodle, a common noun which is used to describe spontaneous drawing, is used as a female name in this context. However, the subject is not alone here, as the character of her father is introduced. Dad, spelled with a capital D, here represents traditional patriarchal society and rules that need to be followed. The very scissors Doodle takes to cut and scar herself can be viewed as an extension of her father's hand, i.e. the guilt of her need to cut herself lies on him. Assimilation of her outer wounds with the inner ones comes through bleeding and literally letting out a part of yourself, a common description young people who cut themselves give when asked why they do it.

Speedie is a character from one of JT LeRoy's novels, which deals with similar issues as Manson does in this song. A former drug addict, Speedie struggles to stay clean and take replacement medication prescribed as the therapy and even considers suicide. "Dancing with the devil's past" here may refer to the addiction itself, regardless if it is drug, alcohol or any other addiction. Again, JT in the next verse has references to JT LeRoy and alcohol. The subject drinks in order to forget and feel better, at least for a while. The "I Will Survive" song is a popular 70s song performed by Aretha Franklin where the main topic is getting over a break-up and depression. At the end, when several stories have been told, we have the repetition of blood and scars, intertwining of those which can be seen and those emotional ones which are not seen on the outside. The audience is invited to recognize others' pain and to respect it even though it cannot be completely understood ("Try to comprehend that which you'll never comprehend"). With specific cases, a general idea is being discussed and carried out, that of pain and emotional issues, as well as physical consequences. If we take a look at the language used in this song, we notice the use of the vulgarism "fucked up" which could be

replaced with “messed up”. The difference is in the strength of the phrase where “messed up” is not as strong as the first option. Curse words and swearing are very common in popular songs, regardless of the music genre. It gives the audience an excuse to use them, although verbal expression has changed and people tend to use bad words more in their everyday speech.<sup>9</sup> An issue of using the word “nigger” even in songs is a hot topic nowadays ever since rap and hip-hop music, which are saturated with this word, became popular among non-African-Americans. Such rap artist is the late Tupac Shakur, who had been shot in late 90s. As Bill Withers and Garbage, Tupac used to write his own songs, unlike some of today’s popular music artists.

### 2.3 Dear Mama

*Dear Mama* is dedicated to the author’s mother, Afeni Shakur, a former member of the Black Panthers<sup>10</sup>.

Author: Shakur, Tupac

Title: Dear Mama

Album: Me Against the World

Year of release: 1996

Label: Interscope

You are appreciated.

When I was young me and my mama had beef,

Seventeen years old kicked out on the streets.

Though back at the time, I never thought I'd see her face,

Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place.

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<sup>9</sup> Memišević, Anita and Matešić, Mihaela. “Pardon my English: usage and meanings of select English words and phrases in Croatian”.

<sup>10</sup> Civil rights movement during the 60s and the 80s which fought for the rights of African-Americans.

Suspended from school and scared to go home, I was a fool,  
With the big boys, breakin' all the rules.  
I shed tears with my baby sister,  
Over the years we was poorer than the other little kids.  
And even though we had different daddy's, the same drama,  
When things went wrong we'd blame mama.  
I reminisce on the stress I caused, it was hell  
Huggin' on my mama from a jail cell. And who'd think in elementary,  
Hey, I see the penitentiary, one day.  
And runnin' from the police, that's right,  
Mama catch me, put a whoopin' to my backside.  
And even as a crack fiend, mama,  
You always was a black queen, mama.  
I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy  
Tryin' to raise a man, you always was committed.  
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it.  
There's no way I can pay you back  
But the plan is to show you that I understand, you are appreciated.  
Lady, don't cha know we love ya? Sweet lady.  
Dear mama, place no one above ya, sweet lady.  
You are appreciated, don't cha know we love ya?  
Now ain't nobody tell us it was fair,  
No love from my daddy 'cause the coward wasn't there.

He passed away and I didn't cry, cause my anger  
Wouldn't let me feel for a stranger.

They say I'm wrong and I'm heartless, but all along  
I was lookin' for a father - he was gone.

I hung around with the Thugs, and even though they sold drugs  
They showed a young brother love.

I moved out and started really hangin'  
I needed money of my own so I started slangin'.  
I ain't guilty 'cause, even though I sell rocks,  
It feels good puttin' money in your mailbox.

I love payin' rent when the rent's due,  
I hope ya got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.  
'Cause when I was low you was there for me,  
And never left me alone because you cared for me.

And I could see you comin' home after work late:  
You're in the kitchen tryin' to fix us a hot plate.  
Ya just workin' with the scraps you was given,  
And mama made miracles every Thanksgivin'.

But now the road got rough, you're alone,  
You're tryin' to raise two bad kids on your own.

And there's no way I can pay you back,  
But my plan is to show you that I understand you are appreciated.

Lady, don't cha know we love ya? Sweet lady.  
And dear mama place no one above ya, sweet lady.  
You are appreciated, don't cha know we love ya?

Pour out some liquor and I reminisce, 'cause through the drama  
I can always depend on my mama.  
And when it seems that I'm hopeless,  
You say the words that can get me back in focus.

When I was sick as a little kid,  
To keep me happy there's no limit to the things you did.  
And all my childhood memories  
Are full of all the sweet things you did for me.

And even though I act crazy,  
I gotta thank the Lord that you made me.  
There are no words that can express how I feel,  
You never kept a secret, always stayed real.

And I appreciate, how you raised me.  
And all the extra love that you gave me.  
I wish I could take the pain away.  
If you can make it through the night, there's a brighter day.

Everything will be alright if ya hold on,  
It's a struggle everyday, gotta roll on.  
And there's no way I can pay you back,  
But my plan is to show you that I understand you are appreciated.



Lady, don't cha know we love ya? Sweet lady.  
And dear mama place no one above ya, sweet lady.  
You are appreciated, don't cha know we love ya?

Sweet lady, and dear mama.

Dear mama, lady, lady, lady.

When looking at *Dear Mama* as a whole, it is a song which speaks about common problems surrounding African-Americans while growing up in one of the USA's ghettos or poor neighborhoods. Drug dealing and addiction, guns, single parenting and dropping out of school are topics that Tupac mentions in most of his songs, not only this one. He starts his lines with mentioning "beef" with his mother and her kicking him out of their home. "Beef" is a common noun in African-American vernacular English (AAVE) and it depicts a quarrel or a fight between two or more individuals. It is often used in the context of rappers verbally fighting and diminishing each other via songs. In the very first line, we can see a jump in maturity between a teenager aged seventeen and a young individual (Tupac was in his twenties when he wrote this song). Teenagers are emotional and sensitive; this is why the author says he thought he would never see her face when she had kicked him out of their home – he could not forgive this. On the other hand, at the last line of this verse, he realizes the importance and love his mother had for him, even when that love was tough. Playing with the present and the past is common in songs that speak about someone's struggle whilst growing up, especially in rap songs and this song in particular. Not always grammatically followed by the proper tense, it can still be understood through the wider context what had happened some time ago and what is happening now. The next verse has several ellipses while talking about the influence and comfort found in a company outside one's family, often with older and troublesome young people. Here we still have a strong family motif when we

find out the author has a younger sister with whom he cried and shared deep emotions. Although he was the older brother, in some situation he could not withhold his tears and be a strong support. Furthermore, we come across a common problem in the poor African-American community<sup>11</sup> – fathers leaving their children. As the text goes: “And even though we had different daddy's (...)“ suggesting his sister is in fact his half-sister. This by all means does not suggest his father had left them (because he is older than his sister), but that is confirmed further in the text as follows: “No love from my daddy 'cause the coward wasn't there.“ As already mentioned, fathers who leave their families often because of financial problems or various vices is common among the African-American community; that is why rap songs are known for expressing negative emotions or even forgiveness for those who left. Often causing deviant behavior, the consequences of growing up in a wrecked home are seen through “doing the time”, i.e. going to jail, as Tupac reveals. It is interesting to find some AAVE phrases such as “put a whoopin' to my backside“ which means to spank a child on his bottom. Crack is mentioned here as a drug on which the lyrical subject was addicted (“crack fiend”), but nevertheless, she was respected by the author and not seen as a worthless drug addict. Drugs are another common motif in contemporary musical lyrics regardless of the musical genre or minority group the author belongs to. However, it is interesting that, although illegal, drugs are not always seen as something bad. The difference is seen through types of drugs mentioned in the lyrics and what they represent. While crack represents poverty and pure addiction, marijuana is not seen as something negative in musical lyrics, but as a mean of relaxing and pleasure which brings peace to the soul (reggae music, rap music, hip-hop music). Mention of cocaine can be found in electronic music<sup>12</sup> as well as in the rock genre. LSD and other hallucinogens are linked to rave parties and pschodelic rock such as

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<sup>11</sup> This is not only a problem with the African-American community, but it is quite common among them.

<sup>12</sup> Often without any lyrics or with just a few words, electronic music mostly focuses on music and not on the lyrics because its main goal is to make the audience move and dance, not to analyze the lyrics and think about them.

Pink Floyd. The difference in drug motifs in various music genres comes primarily from the financial status of the audience and the author, and from the location, culture, religion and customs. Crack is much cheaper than cocaine, thus it is logical that people of low financial status will satisfy their addiction to crack. While continuing with the financial problems, Tupac mentions the importance of providing for a family while on welfare. This is a minimum financial, social support<sup>13</sup>. The next part is the main verse of the song which is not so semantically important, but rather serves as a melodic balance between the textually rich verses.

The lack of a male figure and a father who had left his family is again present in the lyrics through rough emotions expressed by calling his father a coward and a stranger. From the “coward” usage, it can be seen that he did actually leave and not pass away, probably due to financial or other problems. “Thugs” are often mentioned in Tupac’s work and this noun refers to young, deviant persons who are often involved in illegal activity (they often sold drugs). However, by calling himself a “young brother”, we see an adolescent who needed a group in which he felt as a member, somewhere where he could belong. This can be traced to basic human needs for belonging in a group, but is again connected to family and narrow groups of people. They were his family at that time, so to say. “Moving out”, “hanging” and “slanging” are used to depict the subject started spending more and more time with this group of people and started acting as them, becoming involved in illegal activities as well. He knew selling drugs was a bad activity, but the money felt good and so did the saving (“putting money in the mailbox”). Tupac then switches his discourse to the second person singular and speaks to the subject of his song again, his mother, with the line: “I hope ya got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.” This is a kind of a paradox because it can be seen that he did not spend the illegally-earned money only for luxury and more illegal substances, but had the

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<sup>13</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Online

humanity and love to make a woman feel worth by buying her jewelry. A warm-hearted son who is giving back to his mother by selling drugs – this is a question of morality. The focus is always on the lack of money, as his next motif is Thanksgiving, which is famous for expensive dinners and eating a turkey together as a family. Turkeys are expensive, but the author remembers his mother “made miracles” without letting her children know times were difficult and they were in financial problems. He uses the metaphor of a rough road to describe the financial problems. A road is a very common metaphor for life, not only in contemporary songs (compare Whitesnake’s *Here I go again*), but also in what we perceive as poetry in general (ex. Robert Frost’s *The Road Not Taken*). Further in the text we find out the author is remembering his childhood and the rough times while drinking alcoholic beverages, a common image in literature all the way from Anacreon (5<sup>th</sup> Century BC) to Baudelaire (19<sup>th</sup> Century AD). At the very end of the song, there is a look into the future, a hope the author gives to his lyrical subject. After a short metaphorical walk through his childhood and adolescence to his adulthood, the author stops reflecting on the past and encourages his mother to take one step at a time, one day at a time.

## **2.4 Love me or Leave me**

Moving on from African-American music during the 90s, such as Tupac’s music, we go back late 1950s, when Nina Simone covered the song *Love me or Leave me*, written during the 1920s by Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn. Many performers had covered this song, but the Nina Simone’s cover is being dealt in this paper because it is the most famous one. Nina Simone was a famous singer and piano player who had left a mark in the African-American community by referring to Jim Crow Laws, the Montgomery Marches, segregation and other civil rights’ issues that were present at the time in her songs and live performances.

Authors: Donaldson, Walter and Kahn, Gus

Title: Love me or Leave me

Album: Little Girl Blue<sup>14</sup>

Year of release: 1958

Label: Bethlehem

Say, love me, leave me, let me be lonely.

You won't believe me but I love you only.

I'd rather be lonely than happy with somebody else.

You might find the night-time the right time for kissing.

Night-time is my time for just reminiscing.

Regretting instead of forgetting with somebody else.

There'll be no one unless that someone is you,

I intended to be independently blue.

Yeah, I want your love, don't wanna borrow,

Have it today, to give back tomorrow.

Your love is my love.

There's no love for nobody else.

Say, love me or leave me and let me be lonely.

You won't believe me but I love you only.

I'd rather be lonely than happy with somebody else.

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<sup>14</sup> The album was also released under the title "Jazz as Played in an Exclusive Side Street Club", as stated on Wikipedia

You might find the night-time the right time for kissing.

Night-time is my time for just reminiscing.

Regretting instead of forgetting with somebody else.

There'll be no one unless that someone is you,

I intended to be independently blue.

Say I want your love, don't wanna borrow,

Have it today, to give back tomorrow.

Your love is my love.

My love is your love, there's no love for nobody else.

In the first line of the song we see a stylistic literary device called alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of the same sounds mostly at the beginning of the word. In this case it is the repetition of the phoneme /l/ in words “love“, “leave“, “let“, “lonely“ and then further in the text “believe“, “love“, “only“. When reading the text aloud you can feel the natural flow of recitation because of the liquidity of the phoneme /l/. The same continues through the second verse, but this time in the syntagmas “might find“, “night-time“ and “right time“, continuing with “my time” and “regretting” with “forgetting”. The rhyme scheme is a-b in the first two verses, a-a in the third and a-a-b-c in the fourth verse. Taking into consideration the previously mentioned alliteration, it can be seen that the poetic fluency of the text is not in the rhyme like in most of the texts, but rather in the text as a whole.

This song is a love song written in first person addressing a person with grammatical imperative. I am emphasizing the “grammatical” imperative because pragmatically speaking, the imperative does not serve its primal function here – to order someone or give instructions – the actions had already happened in the past. If we were to express the idea of the lyrics

using the correct form, we would use zero conditional. Then the first part of the first verse would go as follows: “If you love me, leave me and let me be lonely, you won’t believe me but I love you only.” The second part of the first verse then logically semantically continues by using the second conditional, i.e. something in the future that is probably not going to happen “I’d rather be lonely than happy with somebody else.” When dissected into pieces and read between the lines, it can be seen that the addressee is the one who has ended a love relationship and that the lyrical subject is giving up on love in general if their love cannot be realized. This can be seen in the verse: “There’ll be no one unless that someone is you” where the syntagma “that someone” refers to a lover. “I intend to be independently blue” confirms this claim because “blue” is informally seen as a synonym for being depressed. If we take a closer look at the last line before the repetition, we can spot a hint which tells us why they have ended their relationship in the first place: “There’s no love for nobody else”.<sup>15</sup> Now we can return to the second verse which had been skipped on purpose and left for the very end of this analysis. Again, focusing on the internal structure, the lyrical subject states that the addressee finds “the night-time”, i.e. evenings and nights, for kissing. On the other hand, the author states that he/she just reminisces during that specific time of the day. It can be concluded that the addressee was not faithful and loyal in the relationship, which resulted in their end.

## 2.5 Dance me to the End of Love

Leonard Cohen, the author of this song, is not only a famous Canadian musician and singer, but also a novelist and poet. Now, if someone is already recognized as a poet, shouldn't his songs also be viewed as a type of poetry? Let us analyze his famous song *Dance me to the End of Love*.

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<sup>15</sup> The double negation used here is not typical for today's standard English, but in some varieties such as AAVE

Author: Cohen, Leonard

Title: Dance Me to the End of Love

Album: Various Positions

Year of release: 1984

Label: Columbia

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin,  
Dance me through the panic 'til I'm gathered safely in.  
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove,

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the end of love .

Oh, let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone,

Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon.

Show me slowly what I only know the limits of,

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the wedding now, dance me on and on.

Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long.

We're both of us beneath our love, we're both of us above.

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the children who are asking to be born.

Dance me through the curtains that our kisses have outworn.

Raise a tent of shelter now, though every thread is torn.



Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin.

Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in.

Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove.

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the end of love.

Dance me to the end of love.

The main motif in this work is a dance; something fluent and predictable, but spontaneously at the same time. When two people dance, they become one in harmony of body movement and soul compatibility at that moment. The author sees dance as an escape from everyday troubles and problems, but at the same time it is a symbol of a lifetime journey. In the first couple of lines, he uses syntagmas such as “burning violin” and “homeward dove”. The “burning violin” can be seen either as passionate music on which they are supposed to dance or as the passion of life – if dance is viewed upon as life itself. The violin is usually linked to classical music and tender sounds, therefore this can be a kind of opposition in the sense of literary device. The mentioning of the dove is referring to the Biblical sense of it. A “homeward dove” is linked to peace, safety and home: “Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove” – the author is becoming passive, leaving everything into the hands of his potential significant other. The main chorus is “Dance me to the end of love” – love, not life, but if we follow the song to its end, love and life can be equalized as synonyms. Furthermore, the mentioning of witnesses can be either people in general or witnesses at a wedding. From the starting point where they have met, to the point of being alone without witnesses is a metaphor for intimacy and honesty. He wants to see her true self, her “beauty”, as the author calls it. This “beauty” was a mild shift towards a more physical

love and sex, where “to move” as a verb becomes a well-disguised metaphor in the line: “Let me feel you move like they do in Babylon”. Again, a Biblical connotation where Babylon is seen as something more negative than positive with its been mentioned both in the Old and New Testament.

In the next verse comes the mentioning of the “wedding” and the author’s needs to be danced “tenderly” and “long”, which can be understood as his wish for a long and prosperous life with his significant other. Again, using the opposition and paradox “we’re both of us beneath our love, we’re both of us above”, he puts love in the position of something that cannot be completely understood or pinpointed, defined. The pleonasm “we’re both of us” has a function of emphasizing their unity and sameness.

“Children” are being mentioned in the following verse and we can recognize another literary device – gradation. From their first encounter, through intimacy (both emotional and physical), wedding, all the way to children, Cohen has danced his way through life in this song. “Dance me to the children who are asking to be born” reveals that his moment of speaking is present, but he is actually expressing the future, his wishes and dreams.<sup>16</sup> “Curtains” and “tent of shelter” is clearly a metaphor for a safe home and housing, while the adjective “outworn” and “though every thread is torn” refers to something old – their growing old together and old age in general.

The last verse is partly being repeated with a change in the last line before the chorus. “Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove” – I see this line as a great shift to the very present moment – the author is again in the “here and now” when he has not yet approached the lady and does not know if he shall be rejected or accepted. “The naked hand” is acceptance, as viewed in opposition to a hand in a glove (literally). The glove was

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<sup>16</sup> Unborn children are a popular motif among recognized authors, such as Kamov in his most famous poem „Pjesma nad pjesmama“

used to slap someone when being offended, thus “touch me with your glove” is a rejection.

Interestingly, Cohen stated this song was written for the victims of The Holocaust and some string-quartet players who were allowed to play before their death. However, I could not find the exact interview where Cohen had supposedly said that and if he did – it does not matter. As stated in the authorship chapter (1.4. Authorship) the focus is on the text itself and the immediate references in the text. As far as we are concerned, the violin can be a reference to the supposed string-quartet players on Titanic.

## 2.6. Use in Teaching

Methodologically speaking, music can be used in the first phase of a lesson – the motivation. As Rosandić points out (310), there are several types of motivation when having an interpretation of a poem in class.<sup>17</sup> He divides them to: experiential, linguistic, stylistic, literary and esthetical<sup>18</sup> (310, translation M.L.). Musical motivation is a subcategory of the esthetical motivation and Rosandić emphasizes the correlation principle as an important principle of modern education (318). Although his example is Vivaldi’s, nowadays contemporary music can be used as well. For instance, there is a chapter in the textbook *Spark 4* which is used by some schools in Croatia<sup>19</sup> in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The lesson *Bodies under Construction* deals with plastic surgery and visual representation of oneself. This is a proper topic to introduce some music in the classroom, such as *Beautiful* by Christina Aguilera<sup>20</sup> or the above-mentioned *Bleed like me* by Garbage.

Correlation with other subjects is very important for developing independent thinking and using various parts of the brain. When one is presented only with the text, the brain makes

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<sup>17</sup> Rosandić speaks specifically about teaching Croatian language as a native language.

<sup>18</sup> “Iskustvene, jezične, stilističke, književne, estetske”

<sup>19</sup> This was used in elementary school “Nikola Tesla” in Rijeka during school year 2014/2015 by teacher Ines Vuković Prpić, my mentor for my teaching practice.

<sup>20</sup> Album: Stripped, year: 2002, label: RCA, writer: Linda Perry

far less connections than it would if other types of media would be used as well. This goes hand in hand with the types of learner principle by which a teacher should vary the medium used so that all types could be equally represented (visual learners, auditory, kinesthetic etc.). Furthermore, by combining music into literature classes, thus respecting the correlation principle, it is easier for the learners to remember what they are supposed to remember and to connect the new matter from one subject with the new teaching matter from another one.

Intermediation is another term widely spoken about nowadays, especially in terms of literature and arts. As Pavao Pavličić defines it: “Intermediation is a procedure by which structures and materials which are characteristic for one medium are transferred to another medium, one of which is usually an artistic”<sup>21</sup> (170, translation M.L.). It is common to use musical adaptations of poems in teaching, there are many examples of such adaptations on the Internet, specifically – YouTube. An example from Croatian literature is the poem *Utjeha kose* by Antun Gustav Matoš and the cover made by the Croatian band Hladno pivo.<sup>22 23</sup>

However, the connection between music and literature discussed in this paper works in the opposite direction. Musical songs can be used in literature class to explain figures of speech. Specifically, let us take *Love me or Leave me* as an example. An teacher can use this song to extract the phonemes /l/ from the words and explain alliteration to the pupils. But, the point is not only that the teacher explains it, the point is that the students understand it and remember the term, eventually producing alliteration themselves to prove their understanding of it. Once they figure out the concept, the teacher can move on to more classical and conventional poetry. If our jobs as teachers is to develop a great amount of skills, including

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<sup>21</sup> “Intermedijalnost je postupak kojim se strukture i materijali karakteristični za jedan medij prenose u drugi, jedan od tih medija obično je umjetnički.”

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XzbXmBpGI0>

<sup>23</sup> The band’s frontman Milan “Mile” Kekin is a teacher of English and German literature. I find this important because he too had had methodology teachings and teaching education in general, therefore correlation and intermediation are familiar to him.

those communicational ones which include communicating with the text, among others, shouldn't we give all there is in our power to do so? Music is a great medium to do so.

### 3 CONCLUSION

After a theoretical background in the introductory part where several definitions and aspects were taken into consideration, the analysis which included both the internal and external structures of the lyrics in questions, I come to the conclusion that contemporary music carries an important and high quality, often accredited to poetry in its denotative meaning. Literature is not an exact science and it is difficult to pinpoint the differences, borders and draw the lines between various genres. Definitions must be taken with a dose of skepticism and literature should be considered as a form of art as well, not only science. Texts as old as Shakespeare's are not so close to today's pupils, neither in language nor in meaning. In this clash of theory and practice, i.e. reading poetry, sometimes the gap is too broad and music is a great medium which can be used for explaining the characteristics of other mediums and filling up that gap. Whether it comes to explaining the literary figures used or reaching that pleasure point which fulfills us, music is one of the possible answers. Let us not forget that the purpose of literature is to indulge; doesn't music have the same purpose?

People relate to the songs, become a part of them and form a new identity comprised of the author, the piece and the reader, or in this case, the listener, the receiver. This identity is shared with the rest of the artistic society and the art forms used. In this case, literature and poems as we know them have the same medium in common with music – words. When lyrics are extracted from their former identity with music and become words, they are of the same importance and value as poems are.

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