

## **The Complexity of Lyrics in Indie Music: The Example of Mumford & Sons**

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### Abstract

In the network of genre agnation, song lyrics present an interesting example of a subgenre belonging to the poetic genre family. I will discuss some selected characteristics of song lyrics written in English in the music genre of indie rock by focusing in particular on lyrics from the album *Sigh No More* by the English band Mumford & Sons. I will present some features of lexical and grammatical patterns, intertextuality and topics that can be found in the songs from this album.

At first sight, the genre of indie rock perhaps seems like a bad fit for the band Mumford & Sons, because their music is played with old instruments and has a distinct folk music flavor. In order to defend our classification of Mumford & Sons' music, I will first propose a tentative definition of indie rock. Indie rock is short for independent rock. When looking more closely at music generally classified as indie rock, the definition seems rather elusive. There is the so-called "traditionalist" definition of the term, which focuses not so much on the characteristics of the music itself, but rather on its external characteristics, simply claiming that indie music refers to any pop or rock-style music that is not released by the Big Four conglomerates of the recording industry - Sony/BMG, EMI, Warner and Universal (MacDonald, n.d.). According to this definition indie music is thus music that challenges the major labels. This, of course, is a very broad definition, which does not include any of the characteristics of the music itself.

Another complication with this definition is that it also includes bands that start out small, then become more successful, perhaps get a hit single and later, whether or not they sign on with a major label, are still considered "indie" A typical recent example is the American band The Killers.

A more appropriate definition of what is indie music should thus also include the characteristics of the style of music itself, but a definition based on the criterion of the music itself is not without its own problems, given the fact that styles of music labeled as indie or indie rock are very diverse and could be classified into many subgenres. I thus offer the following tentative definition of indie rock. Musically, indie rock in its different versions is

for the most part guitar-based pop music with more complex artistic explorations of sound. Thematically, indie rock generally presents more complex reflections about the world and thus usually contains poetically more challenging expressions of meaning. Nowadays, the terms indie rock and guitar pop rock are sometimes used interchangeably as an opposition to non-guitar based pop music such as hip-hop, rap and rhythm and blues, a notable recent example being the rock band The Foo Fighters, which is sometimes referred to as indie rock and sometimes just as rock. It seems that an internal definition based on the features of music is difficult because the different styles of music defined as indie are linked by their ethos more than a musical approach, but what they all seem to have in common is that despite the fact that they belong to the genre of pop or rock music, they retain an outsider status, less testosterone driven than mainstream rock. According to Erlewine, it is rock music that is “too sensitive and melancholy; too soft and delicate; too dreamy and hypnotic; too personal and intimately revealing in its lyrics; too low-fidelity and low-budget in its production; too angular in its melodies and riffs; too raw, skronky and abrasive, /.../ too oblique and fractured in its song structures; too influenced by experimental or otherwise unpopular musical styles” (2002: 1344-6).

The band Mumford & Sons started in December 2007 and consists of four multi-instrumentalists led by Marcus Mumford. At first they played in smaller venues, and their breakthrough success came with their debut album *Sigh No More*, released in 2009, which they self-financed in order to avoid artistic and technical compromises. They have licensing deals with different record companies, but they haven't signed to any major record labels (<http://www.mumfordandsons.com/biography>). They have been touring heavily recently, also presenting songs for their planned third album. The music they play is sometimes described as folk rock, which developed as part of the West London folk scene. The band members themselves reject the label folk, claiming that although they include some elements of folk, they do not belong to a scene, but rather to a community, which is much more diverse than a scene (Adams 2010).

Band members variously play guitar, drums, keyboard instruments, bass guitar, and traditional folk instruments such as accordion, banjo, mandolin, and resonator guitar. The band name originates from the fact that Marcus Mumford was the most visible member at the time, it was supposed to invoke the sense of an antiquated family business name. In addition to the folk overtones of the instruments they play and their name, the band members also cultivate some kind of old-time retro image of a family business of the past which is consistent with traditional elements of their music and their band name. It is clear from their

origin, as well as from their music and videos, that the folky sound and the retro image of the band are not meant as a strengthening or authentic recreation of some musical roots or tradition but rather as a potential for using the traditional musical elements for creating a new sound and exploring the universal topics of life, death and love. This is consistent with the aims and elements of most indie rock.

For illustration, I will look at part of their official video for the song “Lion Man” from the album *Sigh No More*, which illustrates some of these points. The overall visual appearance of the band, together with the music played on traditional instruments, suggests a well-thought out artistic consideration behind the overall image of the band, its music and its videos. In their videos, the band members are usually featured with their instruments, either playing on the stage in front of an empty hall (as in the video for Lion Man), or carrying their instruments (*Sigh No More*). The outdoor scenes often show band members walking through the woods, on dusty roads or through high grass, often having to brave the elements while doing so (as in *Sigh No More*). The scenes from the videos are intensely symbolic and intensify the artistic impression of the music and song lyrics.

Song lyrics from the band Mumford & Sons are an example of lyrics used in indie rock that show more complexity compared to the simpler templates of pop, hip-hop, or mainstream rock music. I will focus on the songs on their album *Sigh No More*, and raise the question to what extent can lyrics in indie rock music be referred to as poetry.

The above mentioned definitions and descriptions suggest that compared to the genre of mainstream pop or rock music, indie rock enjoys a special status because of its relative autonomy to explore more complex sounds, emotions and subjects which do not necessarily appeal to mainstream audiences. So we can expect that the lyrics used in indie rock will deal with more complex topics and express more nuanced emotions than lyrics in more mainstream pop, hip-hop or rock music, in other words that song lyrics in indie rock will retain a great degree of their artistic value independently from the music they are set to or the videos they are shown in.

The album consists of 12 songs: “Sigh No More” (which is also the name of the album), “The Cave”, “Winter Winds”, “Roll Away Your Stone”, “White Blank Page”, “I Gave You All”, “Little Lion Man”, “Timshel”, “Thistle & Weeds”, “Awake My Souls”, “Dust Bowl Dance”, and “After the Storm” (Released in 2010 by Glass Note).

Just by looking at the titles of the songs themselves we can see that they all depend to a large degree on the context of the song lyrics themselves. The only title from the album standing out as perhaps less context-dependent compared others is the title “I Gave You

All”, a line from everyday language which typically suggests a relationship quarrel or a break up.

The most easily recognizable characteristic of the song lyrics from “Sigh No More” that separates them from the lyrics in other popular music genres is their heavy intertextuality. Most of the songs contain references to a classic work of world literature. “Sigh No More”, for example, consists almost entirely of lines from *Much Ado About Nothing*. The few lines used in the song which are not a reference to Shakespeare (“Love; it will not betray you/ Dismay or enslave you, it will set you free/ Be more like the man you were made to be”) function more like a superimposed coda to the overall message of the song about the complexity and power of love, consisting almost entirely of Shakespearean quotes.

In addition to the heavily intertextual song “Sigh No More”, the album contains other songs that also contain references to literary masterpieces. The song “I Gave You All”, for example, contains indirect references to *King Lear* (“the blind man sleeps in the doorway, his home; /But I gave you all”), while the song “Roll Away Your Stone” uses lines reminiscent of lines from *Macbeth* (“Stars hide your fires/ For these here are my desires”). In addition to Shakespeare, there are also other references to literary classics. The song ‘Timshel’ contains references to Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, (the word Timshel is Hebrew for Thou Mayest “You have a choice, and was used Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*). The songs “Dust Bowl Dance” and “After the Storm” also appear to be inspired by *Grapes of Wrath* (a narrative about a young man who did something wrong to redress injustice). The song “The Cave”, on the other hand, probably contains references to *The Odyssey*, especially in the lines about the sirens’ call. The reference to the cave could also be interpreted as taken from *The Odyssey*, but it could also refer to Plato’s cave. In addition to references to works of fiction, some songs seem to contain indirect biblical references, for example, “Thistle and Weeds” with its indirect references to the gospel of Matthew. Some of the songs also contain religious references, but not as a question of faith or belief in a Christian God, but rather as a way of conferring folk patina to the dealing with existential topics of life, suffering and death, as in the song “Awake my Soul” (“Awake your Soul/ You were made to meet your maker”)

The pronouns used for the poetic personae are mainly expressed through first person and second person pronouns, which is at first sight very similar to songs about love in mainstream popular music, but in the case of Mumford & Sons song lyrics, the poetic personae are very hard to pinpoint due to the occurrence of sudden shifts in perspective and internal dialogue. Indeed, most songs on the album are about love, which again is not that different from mainstream pop music, but it can be claimed that the topics of the songs are

much more nuanced here. Different forms of love are referred to, and the range of feelings goes from self-loathing, regret, hope and fulfillment, frivolity and even rage. Some of the songs deal with distinctly spiritual and existential topics such as coping with death (“Timshel”) and the purpose of life (“Thistle & Weeds”).

It is not always clear if the poetic personae of the songs are specific or generic. The fluid line between the too in poetry allows for the highly specific and intimate experience can be generalized into universal feelings, a potential which The Mumford & Sons song lyrics exploit fully. The intensity of feeling expressed in the songs is compounded by the retro image of the band and the traditional elements in their music, which at the same time achieve a kind of distance from the intimacy and specificity of the experience depicted, making into a truly universal experience.

Let us take as an example the lyrics of the song “Little Lion Man”. This song does not have any direct literary references, but there is probably some intertextuality if we interpret the main participant who is called the lion man as a reference to the lion from the *Wizard of Oz* and his pretend courage. The lion as a Christian symbol is probably a less appropriate interpretation here.

The lion man is referred to with the pronoun *you*. This *you* can be interpreted as the authorial voice of the song writer in an internal dialogue with himself (“Weep for yourself, my man/You’ll never be what is in your heart). There is a shift to the first person singular in the refrain, which could be interpreted as a shift from *you* from the first stanza in which the lion man is being referred to as *you*. *You* in the refrain is no longer the lion man but somebody the lion man, who is now expressed as the first person singular, is directly addressing, probably a lover or an ex-lover, the lion man enters into a dialogue with (‘But it was not your fault but mine/And it was your heart on the line/I really fucked it up this time/Didn’t I my dear?’). This is interestingly the only example of the use of profanity and of a rhetorical question in the whole album.

We could interpret this song as a song of self-loathing and inadequacy (“Weep for your self, my man, You’ll never be what is in your heart.../ Rate yourself and rake yourself”), wasting of energy and courage of matters of little importance (“Take all the courage you have left/Wasted on fixing all the problems that you have made in your head”; “Your grace is wasted in your face”), and also inability or impossibility to correct one’s faults because of the damage already done (“Your boldness stands alone among the wreck/You’ll never settle any of your scores”).

At first sight this is the classic scenario in a romantic relationship where the break-up is accompanied by the following apology by the lover who caused the break-up: it is not you, it is me... But in this case, the apology is too full of self-loathing, maybe even sarcasm in some of the overtones, to be valid as a sincere apology or to be interpreted or as simple window-dressing.

The participants in the main grammatical functions of subject, object and subject complement are, in addition to the deictic pronouns *you* and *I*, abstractions such as “the courage”, “all the problems”, “any of your scores”, “your grace”, “your boldness”, “your days”, “own neck”, “your heart”. Most of these nouns are connected to the perceived self-image and problems due to that self-image, such as courage, problems, scores, grace, boldness, and vulnerability of emotions (neck, heart).

There is an interesting line in the song that is quite ambiguous: “Now learn from your mother or else spend your days biting your own neck”. Biting one’s own neck probably means continually punishing oneself and never learning from one’s own mistakes, as a lioness bites the neck of her cubs when they do something wrong.

Marcus Mumford himself offers the following explanation:

It’s a very personal story, so I won’t elaborate upon too much. Suffice to say, it was a situation in my life I wasn’t very happy with or proud of... and sometimes when you can’t describe a feeling with your own words, it’s almost easier to express in a song. And then, when you get asked about the songs, it’s quite difficult to explain. It’s a conundrum — you don’t want to seem self-indulgent explaining yourself; it’s always awkward. Which is weird again, because it’s never awkward actually singing them. I suppose the song should stand on its own and people draw their own interpretation from the words. But for me, personally, it’s the lyrics that I listen to again and again in a song. I place specific importance on them. I can’t write lyrics unless I really feel them and mean them, which can sometimes be quite frustrating — because if you’re not feeling much at the time, you’re stuck. (Countdown: Hottest 100 - 2009". ABC Online. 27 January 2010. Retrieved 27 January 2010.)

One of the definitions of poetry suggests that poetry is primarily governed by idiosyncratic forms and conventions to suggest differential interpretation to words, or to

evoke emotive responses. Devices such as assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and rhythm are sometimes used to achieve musical or incantatory effects. The use of ambiguity, symbolism, irony, and other stylistic elements of poetic diction often leaves a poem open to multiple interpretations (Strachan and Terry: 2000).

Based on this definition, it can be claimed that the song lyrics by Mumford and Sons from the album *Sigh No More* can be described as poetic. They are open to multiple interpretations, they use different stylistic devices and deal with complex emotional and existential topics. Their poetic effect, however, depends to a great degree on the music they are set to, in terms of rhythm and rhyme. Based on their dependence on a non-textual medium, song lyrics in general can be described as context-dependent and multimodal texts (Rose, Martin 2008), so even in their highly poetic form they do not function exactly the same as poems in general. The English term we propose for such song lyrics would be *poetic song lyrics*, which would have a similar role as the lyrics of *la chanson* in French musical tradition or *Slovenska popevka* in Slovene musical tradition. In this way such texts could be distinguished from poetry in the strict sense of the word, on the one hand, and from esthetically and thematically much simpler and esthetically less valuable lyrics used in pop and rock music, on the other.

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Video for Little Lion Man

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLJf9qJHR3E>