

Course: ILP

Competence A-1-A: Can interpret works of art and relate them to one's own experience.

Winter Quarter, 2016

APA citation style

“Fast Car”

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate my competency in interpreting works of art and relating them to one's own experience. This paper will discuss how an artist's writing style combined with a listener's individual experiences can create different personal meanings and interpretations of a song. I will utilize my own personal experiences and understanding of the writer and compare that to what others interpret to be the meaning in order to illustrate how these items can create varying interpretations of the art.

Introduction

Over the years I've learned that interpretations of art, whether books, paintings, or ballets, can vary greatly. This is also true for songs. Whether it's due to emotional ties, personal experiences, or for other reasons, people tend to connect in varying ways to music lyrics and create their own unique interpretation. In addition to personal factors, some artists compose songs in order to express a message based on their own personal beliefs which can also influence how listeners interpret the song. One of my favorite artists, Tracy Chapman, is known for writing songs to illustrate her personal experiences and thoughts regarding social injustices and inequality. Her tendency to voice this message through her songs has been found to have a notable impact on many and how they interpret her songs.

To illustrate how interpretations can vary based on personal experience and the artist's intent, the following essay will begin by outlining Tracy's tendency to express her personal message through the majority of her songs. The essay will continue by personally interpreting one of her

songs, “Fast Car”, using my past experiences and reflections in order to determine whether that message is present. At the end of this essay, I will then briefly discuss how my interpretation may correlate or differ from others to illustrate how all these factors impact how the interpretation of art can vary.

Artist Background

Tracy Chapman was born in 1964 and spent most of her life growing up in Cleveland, Ohio with her mother and sister (Anonymous, 2015). While attending Tuft University, Tracy began exploring the folk art scene by performing on the street and at clubs and colleges where she was discovered by Elektra Records (Decurtis, 1988). Elektra signed Tracy to a record contract upon her graduation from Tuft University in 1986 and began working on her first album “Tracy Chapman”, which was released in 1988. The album quickly reached number one in both the U.S. and the U.K. due to hit songs like “Fast Car” and “Talking about a Revolution” (Pond, 1988).

After release of her first album, many critics began to see a pattern within Tracy’s writing as a generational spokesperson (Wells, 23). Through her lyrics, it quickly became apparent that many of her songs are based on her emotions towards social injustices and inequality as well as her life experiences. Topics such as materialism, poverty, revolution, and violence were indicative of Tracy’s songs (Wells, 17-18; Rojas, 120). Tracy quickly became labelled a protest singer for her social commentary about life struggles and societal issues (Smith, 89) which is prevalent in her song: “Fast Car”.

Personal Interpretation

One of my favorite songs by Tracy Chapman is "Fast Car" which was released in 1988. This song depicts a person who was born into a poor, bad situation and continues to struggle through life always hoping to escape. It aligns with Tracy's other works via her underlying message of social inequality in our society. To illustrate this correlation, the following paragraphs will summarize my personal interpretation of the lyrics, whether Tracy's underlying message is present, followed by explaining the basis of my interpretation and how they relate to my personal experiences.

At the beginning of the song, the lyrics depict a young woman growing up in a bad situation and her desire to escape. The woman finds a mate and feels that together they can leave their current situation for a better one. She's wants to leave it all behind and start new. This is apparent in the lyrics: "Any place is better; Starting from zero got nothing to lose..." Through the next sections of the song, the woman is growing older. She's reflects on her past and her alcoholic father and how she ended up in this situation. She continues to look forward to being somewhere else and is doing all she can to make it occur. She illustrates this using the lyrics of: "I been working at the convenience store; Managed to save just a little bit of money; Won't have to drive too far...And finally see what it means to be living." She feels they have to make a move soon or they won't leave at all which is prevalent by stating: "We gotta make a decision; Leave tonight or live and die this way."

The lyrics of the first half of the song strongly illustrate Tracy's message of inequality. She was born into a bad situation and wants to leave but doesn't have the means like others do nor the

opportunities that would be available in the city. She knows to have a better life, she needs to leave the area which is holding her back and controlling her. Her past and situation where she lives dictates her life and that can't change unless she is somewhere else.

The lyrics of the next half of the song depict the woman getting older and how she has given up on her dreams and is just trying to make it work. She has a family now and her mate is still unemployed. She realizes her dreams have never come true, she's now stuck there for many reasons, and her mate turns out to be the same as her father. She is frustrated with him and now sees she doesn't need him anymore and wants him to leave. She expresses this by stating: "I got no plans I ain't going nowhere; So take you fast car and keep on driving." At the very end of the song, she finally has had enough and gives him an ultimatum which is illustrated by her changing the final verses to reflect just him leaving:

You gotta make a decision

Leave tonight or live and die this way

In the lyrics of the last portion, Tracy's message isn't as prevalent but is still there. The situation the woman was born into has now dictated her entire life. She was not able to leave because she didn't have any money; the man she was with wasn't able to find work; and now unfortunately, not leaving has put her in exactly the same situation she grew up in.

Personal Experiences

The basis of my interpretation of this song relates directly to my past and what I have experienced regarding inequality while growing up in a very small rural town. My parents and

family were very poor and it was not a pleasurable experience. While growing up there, all I wanted to do was leave. I did not feel like I belonged or was accepted in that place due to the situation I was born into and the judgement that came with it. It truly is amazing in a scenario like that, how the town's view of someone can dictate one's life and options. Throughout my teen years, I continued to dream about what my life would be like if I could leave and chase my dreams. I worked hard and eventually left there. Like the girl wanted in the song, I sold everything I owned and left for a better life. It came down to one decision, which I think is what the girl in the song is realizing.

Twenty years after leaving, I reflect on my memories while living there to connect to the last half of the song. Growing up, I watched many families struggle with unhappiness that turned to alcoholism. There were not a lot of opportunities in that town and many were just working as laborers trying to get by. Whether for family reasons, fear, or just lack of opportunity, many of my peers never left and remain there today. I realize now that in order to escape the inequality that exists in those situations, it really does come down to one decision: "Leave tonight or live and die this way".

Other Interpretations

After writing my interpretation of "Fast Car" by Tracy Chapman, I turned to investigate what other people think is the meaning of the song. As there are not any scholarly papers written on this song that I could find, I had to turn to books, internet blogs, chat rooms, and other places where listeners could post their interpretations.

In contrast to my personal opinion, some listeners feel that the song is about being in a relationship. At the beginning it's invigorating and you feel like you can do anything, but in the end nothing has changed and those feelings were not real life (Anonymous, 2011). This is shown through the chorus and the change in the words from "we" to "you" at the end (Anonymous 2015).

One commentator pointed out that Tracy defined what the song was really about during an interview. In the interview, Chapman indicated it was a story of two people making a life together and facing challenges (Aurelie, 2011). During the interview, Tracy does not elude to whether the song has her usual underlying message regarding societal issues. Some critics think the song is actually about the poverty within the USA due to the line "Starting from zero, got nothing to lose" (Wells, 18) which aligns with my interpretation.

Summary

The song "Fast Car" by Tracy Chapman, like any art, can have many interpretations and meanings. These varying meanings can be due to personal experiences and a writer's style. By analyzing the song lyrics based on my knowledge of the writer and my personal experiences, and relating my findings to other viewpoints, I have demonstrated my competence in interpreting a work of art and relating that interpretation to one's own experiences to illustrate how the interpretation and meaning of art can vary.

Works Cited

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