



2024

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Recommended Citation

Banerjee, Anushka; Mukherjee, Aishika; Chanda, Sayantan; Shubham, Shivam; and Dev, Mayurakshi (2024) "POETRY AND LYRICS IN LANGUAGE ACROSS CENTURIES: CLOSE READINGS OF METAL LYRICS," *International Journal of English Learning & Teaching Skills (IJELTS)*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 13. Available at: <https://research.smartsociety.org/ijelts/vol1/iss4/13>

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POETRY AND LYRICS IN LANGUAGE ACROSS CENTURIES: CLOSE READINGS OF METAL LYRICS

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Introduction

Ever since its inception into the realm of music during the mid-70, heavy metal has been hailed as one of the most extreme genres in terms of loudness, machismo and lyrical content. Throughout its existence, heavy metal has been mired with controversies; critics slighted the music by shunning it off as being riddled with overblown adolescent theatrics, and conservative groups have accused the genre of being provocative due to its evil lyrical content. In spite of all those adversities, heavy metal has held its stance as one of the most consistent forms of rock music. Metal music, through its efforts has reinstated the “ancient Indo-European spirit of vir”¹ through a Romantic, Faustian form of music culture. This has staggered the general concept of mainstream music and has hence, since long, remained controversial.

Heavy metal has never been popular with the mainstream masses, primarily due to the nature of the music. Amongst other things, lyrical content of the songs is one thing that is largely frowned upon and often considered to be one of the primary reasons why metal music has never struck a chord with the masses. But such allegations, while partly true, remain biased to a large extent. Clearly, such thoughts have been nurtured and brought up in the mind of people, who have never bothered to delve deeper into the aesthetics of this kind of music and unravel the plethora of literary influence in it.

This paper studies how English literature has influenced the metal genre. I have dealt with the incorporation of 18th, 19th and 20th century English poetry in metal music, and how the songs in turn have added to the essence of the literary themes. This paper shows how famous poems/novels have been adapted to suit the ideals of specific bands and genres, how literary works from these centuries have inspired songs and concept albums.

INCORPORATION OF 18TH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE IN METAL MUSIC

A Slumber did My Spirit Seal

William Wordsworth

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:

¹ “The Philosophy of Heavy Metal”, *dark legions archive*, <<http://www.anus.com/metal/about/philosophy/>> 10 Apr. 2011

She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

A fine example of the incorporation of 18th century poetry into metal can be seen in the song "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"², by the Swedish melodic doom metal band Draconian, based on the Lucy poem of the same name by 18th century Poet-laureate William Wordsworth. Although the words of the poem remain unchanged in the song, they are used to a vastly different effect.

In Wordsworth's poem, the "spirit" or "she" most probably refers to a certain lady, sister, muse, or lover, whom the poet refers to as ageless, as one who cannot feel "the touch of earthly years". However, he feels later on, that she has deserted him to his mortal death and age, while she herself has departed 'cruelly' from this world, to live in that of "rocks, and stones, and trees", as she no longer "hears nor sees".

The intro starts off in typical gothic opera rock style, with the female lead engaging in a 'haunting' rendering of the first verse. The song starts off with a very romantic piano intro with notes being played over chords. Within seconds of this romantic atmosphere being created, a wall of distorted guitars churn out some really heavy riffs, extremely melancholic in nature. This combined with the operatic vocals of Lisa Johansson works wonders in transporting the listener to another realm. The music is not surprisingly, very ethereal in nature, which in turn, is again very effective in bringing out the emotions of the poem, since Wordsworth talks about a spirit who was devoid of human fears and unaffected by time. After the first four lines of the song have been sung, there is an amazing violin solo, so melancholic in nature, that it almost touches our soul. The violin plays an important role in accentuating the 'opera' feel. After that, the song swings to classic Doom metal form, with synthesizer-music and growling taking center stage.

The "spirit" in this version, in my opinion, is actually the immortal soul, though with a demonic hue to it. True to the gothic doom genre, the kind of music played gives us the idea that the soul mentioned is first a tragic, unhappy soul which then becomes 'cruel' and unfeeling, and roams the earth as an inanimate being, seeing or hearing nothing, and thus taking its revenge on its unhappy life, indicated by the rebellious growling. There is a lot of variation in the music at this point with new melodies and riffs being added. This works well, as it portrays how the nature of the soul changes. Thus, without changing, or adding to the lyrics, the band creates a completely different theme, incorporating a classic poem, yet adhering to their own ideals, hence catering to both sections of a divided audience.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

² Draconian, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal", *Where Lovers Mourn*, Napalm Records, 2003

Written and composed by Iron Maiden bassist, Steve Harris, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”³, is rightly considered to be one of the greatest metal ballads ever written; in terms of music, composition and lyrics. Inspired and adapted from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by the 18th century poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, this song is considered to be one of the highlights of Maiden's career. The lyrics of the song are not the same as the words of the original poem, rather it is a summarised narrative of Coleridge's poem.

Considered to be a delight to the ears, this song is a riff fest, with each section of the song being carefully composed so as to adhere to the flow of Coleridge's classic poem. A careful listener will notice how the entire structure of the song has been segregated into approximately seven parts with the help of instrumental interludes and varying riffs. This is done intentionally so as to conform to the original poem.

The song starts off with an extremely catchy riff that sends every aural sensation into frenzy. A majestic galloping lead guitar riff kick starts the song with Bruce Dickinson's operatic vocals 'riding' on top of the riffs. The song starts off with the Mariner halting his guests and requesting them to “stay here and listen to the nightmares of the sea”. Here we'll notice that the riffing is repeated several times. This sets the stage for a turn of events that one will witness over the next couple of minutes. As the song progresses, the mariner kills the albatross, a bird which was the harbinger of good luck. It is a dramatic moment, for a hideous sin has been committed, and Iron Maiden make it even more interesting by introducing a new riff here. This accentuates the excitement of the song and creates an atmosphere of suspense and foreboding. The song goes on, with the crazy riffing sustaining the climax in the atmosphere. Then comes the section,

”Death and she life in Death,

They throw their dice for the crew

She wins the Mariner and he belongs to her now.

Then...crew one by one

They drop down dead, two hundred men

She...She, Life in Death,

This section displays how well the bass and the twin lead guitar attack effortlessly blend in with each other, to create a rhythm that almost propels the listener towards doom. The vocals here are some of the best in the song, powerful, distinct and impregnated with emotions. She lets him live, her chosen one.”

An instrumental section follows this, symbolising the excitement and the feeling of dread that the Mariner experiences.

After this, there is a slow section wherein the Mariner ponders over his actions. All the musical work here is done primarily by the bass guitar, with occasional lead guitar fills. There are

³ Iron Maiden, “The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner”, *Powerslave*, EMI, 1984

synthesized sounds of creaking doors and planks. It is a spoken part and is a verse taken directly from Coleridge's poem:

"One after one by the star dogged moon,
Too quick for groan or sigh
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
And cursed me with his eye
Four times fifty living men
(and I heard nor sigh nor groan),
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
They dropped down one by one."

This is the longest instrumental section of the song and is also the turning point in the song. The Mariner wishes that he had died. But he lives on, and so does his fellow companions (which we learn later). It is extremely interesting to note how Maiden change their riffing here. All along the song, till this point, the riffing was morbid in nature, but at this point, the riffing sounds 'happy', almost as if signifying a rejuvenation of some sort. And this is indeed fitting, as from this part onwards, the Mariner's sins are forgiven, and all his dead shipmates are resurrected. Soon after, the mariner sights his home. The ship sinks into the sea, and the Mariner is rescued by the hermit, who subsequently forgives the Mariner of his sins. Bruce finishes the tale by explaining that the Mariner had learnt how to have greater respect for all life by the time he returned home.

That is more or less the gist of how the song goes about. Steve Harris has done a wonderful job in emulating Coleridge's poem with his music. Cleverly composed, this song echoes the sentiments that one feels after reading Coleridge's poem. Just like the homonym poem being a summary of Coleridge's work, this song is also like a summary of Maiden's works up to that point, and possibly even a perfect introduction to the band for any new fan.

Other examples:

*Themes from William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*⁴ by Ulver (inspired by William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

"Xanadu"⁵ from *Fairwell to Kings* by Rush (based on the famous fragment *Kubla Khan* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

"Jerusalem"⁶ from *The Chemical Wedding* by Bruce Dickinson (Inspired by William Blake's poem *Jerusalem*)

⁴ Ulver, *Themes from William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Jester, 1998

⁵ Rush, "Xanadu", *Fairwell to Kings*, Mercury, 1977

⁶ Bruce Dickinson, "Jerusalem", *The Chemical Wedding*, Air Raid, 1998

INCORPORATION OF 19TH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE IN METAL MUSIC

The Charge of the Light Brigade

Lord Alfred Tennyson

An excellent example of how English literature has been artfully incorporated into heavy metal can be found in the legendary song “The Trooper” by Iron Maiden. Adapted from “The Charge of the Light Brigade” by 19th century poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson, this song not only recreates the warlike atmosphere of the charge but also goes a long way in portraying the enlightenment in history and literature that Iron Maiden went through during the 80's.

The Charge of The Light Brigade is an account of The Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War, between the British and the Russian armies. It is an account of how the British Army commander, Lord Raglan made an erroneous decision while commanding his troops against the Russian army, and how it consequently led to the mass slaughter of his army.

The overall commander, Lord Lucan received the following order from Lord Raglan:

"Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy, and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Horse artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate."⁷

In response to this order, Major General Lord Cardigan took a blind step and led his army right into the jaws of the sanguinary Russian army. It was unplanned, chaotic and misjudged. Cardigan's brigade was not completely destroyed but it suffered a major blow. Out of the 673 cavalrymen, only 195 men survived. Tennyson's poem deals with this incident.

The lyrics help to create the image of the animal rush of the charge, the chaos and the press of sweating horses and their riders pounding across the field into cannonballs, that knocked heads from men and sent animals sprawling into the dust in a mass of entrails.

”The horse he sweats with fear we break to run

The mighty roar of the Russian guns

And as we race towards the human wall

The screams of pain as my comrades fall”

The song begins with an incredible opening riff, which recreates the charge of the galloping horses. Lightening fast, this riff, combined with the galloping bass-lines of Steve Harris and the twin guitar leads of Adrian Smith and Dave Murray brings the essence of Tennyson's poem to life.

Steve Harris, the man behind the lyrics, places us inside the mind of a single cavalryman, galloping with full alacrity towards the Russian army amidst heavy firing. Throughout this song, there is a sense of relentless riffing. Bruce Dickinson's inimitable vocals combined with

⁷ “The Trooper-Iron Maiden, 1983 (heavy metal)” *What's That Song About?*, <
<http://www.rockremembers.com/2008/09/trooper-iron-maiden-1983-heavy-metal.html> > 16 Apr. 2011

the warlike drumming of Nicko McBrain add on to the chaotic atmosphere.

Iron Maiden don't just stop here. Even during the live performances of this song, Bruce Dickinson reads out parts of Tennyson's poem before beginning their musical onslaught. In all of their concerts, Bruce Dickinson prances around the stage, wearing a British cavalryman's coat and waving the Union Jack while belting out,

“You'll take my life but I'll take yours too!”

This song achieved cult status in heavy metal and reflects the extent to which Iron Maiden took their influences, mixed them with their impeccable musicianship and delivered to us, a thundering score in the form of 'The Trooper'.

Frankenstein (novel)

Mary Shelley

Father's Face's concept album *Soundtrack For A Closing Light*, has been almost entirely based on the sequence of events in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Each song progressively takes us through the run of the play that shapes the legendary novel. However, if one song has to be picked which is most faithful to the theme, then it must be “.... Or a Lonely Soul?”⁸.

The background is typical heavy metal, based on traditional melodies. But Father's Face also assimilate other influences, like the case of integrating subtle elements along the entire weight of the compositions, and especially the guidance offered by the classical guitar.

The lyrics of the song are constructed to represent Doctor Frankenstein's anguish at his 'crime' in turning the monster loose upon the world through his scientific aspirations. There are short interjections, where the Monster's anger is depicted in one of two lines of thought. The lyrics follow the course of the doctor's repentance. He seems to be praying to God, and his conscience, to understand that this had not been his intention. Here, the progressive nature of the music with its varying sections, interspersed with traditional heavy metal riffing, at the correct moments in order to conform to the lyrics, lay down the path for the rest of the song.

He has pieced together the horrid truth from a thousand pieces of evidence, just as he had “pieced together “the monster to give it life. He says that he had a vision in “gray” but that he never saw through it clearly enough to see the consequences, neither did he heed the dreams (or promptings of his moral sense) that came to him as warning, deeming them to be “liars” or deterrents to his genius. At this conjecture, Lucas' semi-guttural vocals with some clean vocals tossed in really convey the anguish in his voice. Simple powerchords paint a picture of remorse and angst.

“All those pictures in gray
I didn't see it so clear
Oh, my dreams, If I could trust
I'd know, They were no liars”

He then asks for forgiveness for trying to be too strong, and exceeding his bounds thus.

⁸ Father's Face, '...Or A Lonely Soul', *Soundtrack For a Closing Light*, Black Fables, 2010

"Forgive me father, yes, I was wrong
Why could I want to be so strong?"

Although the music is heavy metal, one will find a lot of the 'Gothenburg' sound in it. This is especially befitting, since it stays faithful to the gothic theme of Frankenstein.

He balks at the thought of the beast loose and thirsting for blood. The Monster's thoughts are cleverly introduced, with his anger and hurt at being treated like offal burning Through. He accuses the doctor, albeit without direct reference, saying that he undertook "an act with reaction unknown" and thus left him to be as he was, treated with revulsion and hatred, which were the feelings that he had towards himself as well.

He feels that he is losing control, blinded by rage and desire for revenge, and he is turning into 'it' again, "a walker with nothing inside". Or a lonely soul, with nowhere to turn to, and no one to turn to, but himself. This last verse of the song has been sung with a lot of emotion. The guitars create an atmosphere of gloom and uncertainty, as the song slowly fades out.

The remaining tracks in this album go about in a similar way, each dealing with the story in a very tactful manner, while at the same time, ensuring that they evoke the same feeling as the lyrics do via their music. While it's correct to say that heavy metal is the root genre of this album, one must note the numerous experimentations done with the music in this album. For most bands, this can turn out to be a disaster, but given the potential and the impeccable musicianship, Father's Face has brewed up a delicious concoction of Shelley's works and their music.

Other examples:

"A Fever Which Would Cling to Thee Forever"⁹ from *A Fever Which Would Cling to Thee Forever* by Eyes of Ligeia (inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *Spirits of the Dead*)

"Alone"¹⁰ from *La Masquerade Infernale* by Arcturus (inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *Alone*)

"El Dorado"¹¹ from *The Final Frontier* by Iron Maiden (inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *El Dorado*)

INCORPORATION OF 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE IN METAL MUSIC

A Dream of Death

William Butler Yeats

I dreamed that one had died in a strange place
Near no accustomed hand,
And they had nailed the boards above her face,
The peasants of that land,

⁹ Eyes of Ligeia, "A Fever Which Would Cling to Thee Forever", *A Fever Which Would Cling to Thee Forever*, Paragon, 2006

¹⁰ Arcturus, "Alone", *La Masquerade Infernale*, Music for Nations, 1997

¹¹ Iron Maiden, "El Dorado", *The Final Frontier*, EMI, 2010

Wondering to lay her in that solitude,
And raised above her mound
A cross they had made out of two bits of wood,
And planted cypress round;
And left her to the indifferent stars above
Until I carved these words:
She was more beautiful than thy first love
But now lies under boards.

Circle of Ouroboros is an experimental black metal band hailing from Finland. (The Ouroboros is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon swallowing its own tail and forming a circle. It has been used to represent many things over the ages, but it most generally symbolizes ideas of unity, or infinity).

This particular song, “Dream of Death”¹² from their split album *Auraeuge Raa Verduistering*, released in the year 2006, draws its roots from the poem titled *A Dream of Death* by the famous 20th century Irish poet, William Butler Yeats.

The wordings of the original poem have not been altered or modified and has been used in its entirety. However, one is forced to accept that the music of the song adds to the meaning and substance of the original poem. The song has an extensive soundscape with acoustic and piano intermezzos that helps the listener to form an association with occultism. This association with occultism does not come naturally to a reader when reading the poem for the first time. A single reading of the poem would probably bring to mind the image of a foreign land where a woman dies and is buried by unknown, indifferent people who do not bemoan her death. She lies in her grave, uncared for, till her lover (the poet) writes the words:

“She was more beautiful than thy first love
But now lies under boards.”

Hence, the general interpretation would be devoid of any links with occultism or supernaturalism. The song starts off with a raw feeling of doom, very dissonant in nature, with the same riff repeating itself in the background. The repetitive nature of the guitars evokes a feeling of dread and gloom. This feeling of doom can be associated with death. The ‘she’ who dies in this poem has been given a sinister identity in the song. The vocals on this song are not the typical Black Metal ‘shrieks’. On the contrary they are clean vocals that are almost uttered with a bit of a nasal twang in it and with no variations in the pitch whatsoever. This works particularly well, since it manages to induce a feeling of doom while at the same time maintaining the undercurrent of melancholy in it.

Given the fact that the poem itself has a rather melancholic strand in it, it would be right to say that the essence of the poem and the sense of despair present in it is heightened by Circle of Ouroboros’ melancholic style of playing metal.

Lord Of the Rings (novel)

J. R. R. Tolkien

In the metal scene, Summoning is synonymous with *Lord of the Rings*, the epic fantasy novel by 19th century English writer and poet, J.R.R Tolkien. This is primarily due to the fact that most of the lyrics of the songs of this band deal with themes and sagas from Lord of the Rings.

¹² Circle of Ouroboros, “A Dream of Death”, *Auraeuge Raa Verduistering*, Target: Earth Productions, 2005

Together with the unique lyrics which stand out on their own, the usage of grand musical instruments such as horns, create a very sweeping soundscape, which elevates the vastness of the scope of their albums. This particular album, *Dol Guldur*¹³ while not exactly a concept album, borrows heavily from Tolkien's novel and almost reeks of Lord of the Rings.

The sound of the chiming bells and the menacing effect created by the use of folksy keys makes the introduction to *Dol Guldur*, which is "Angbands Schmieden"¹⁴, sound like a prelude to a huge battle. The steady beats of the drums creates an atmosphere of heightened tempo, almost preparing one for a journey that has to be undertaken. The next song, "Nightshade Forests"¹⁵, contains references of Mordor. Also, there is a direct quote of Smeagal's words from The Two Towers (Part 2 of the trilogy):

"Cold Be Hand, heart and bone and
cold be my sleep under stone...
never more shall I rest on a snowy bed,
never...till the sun has failed and the
moon is dead."

There is extensive use of trumpets in the next song, "Elfstone"¹⁶. The blaring horns and the recurring riffing forces one to imagine about the search for the Elfstone in the book. It also has one of the best lines from The Two Towers, right before the occurrence of a glorious death.

"Now For Wrath, Now For Ruin...And A Red Nightfall."

"Khazad Dum"¹⁷, the next song, though has a very slow introduction, once the drum starts playing, an atmosphere of anticipation is created. The opening riff is fiery and transports the listener to Middle Earth and recreates the ambience of a post war battlefield. The audience is immediately reminded of the battle between Men and Elves and Sauron, where Sauron's foot broke Isildur's sword and the Ring Of Power was taken. The song "Wyrmvater Glaurung"¹⁸ is an instrumental filler piece. However, it adds to the feel and momentum of the album by the incredible use of the sound of clanging bells. "Over old hills"¹⁹ is a fitting track to end the album. The synthesizer goes back and forth from piano to horns and then to strings. The slow vocals and the medium pace of the song is broken by the faster than light riffing.

Summoning has successfully incorporated all the major elements of Tolkein's work in this album, and has added flavour to the concept with their original lyrics and music.²⁰

Other examples:

*Grond*²¹ by Orkrist (inspired by Tolkein's works)

¹³ Summoning, *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

¹⁴ Summoning, "Angbands Schmieden", *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

¹⁵ Summoning, "Nightshade Forests", *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

¹⁶ Summoning, "Elfstone", *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

¹⁷ Summoning, "Khazad Dum", *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

¹⁸ Summoning, "Wyrmvater Glaurung", *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

¹⁹ Summoning, "Over old hills" *Dol Guldur*, Napalm Records, 1996

²⁰ Paraphrased from 'VinterNatt1785', "Dol Guldur Summoning", Encyclopaedia Metallum: The Metal Archives,

< http://www.metal-archives.com/reviews/Summoning/Dol_Guldur/88/ > 20 Apr. 2011

²¹ Orkist, *Grond*, KRV, 2003

“The Substance Of Simplicity”²² from *Nighttime Nightrhymes* by Of the Wand & the Moon
(inspired by and adapted from Aleister Crowley's *Magick in theory and practice*)

CONCLUSION

Through a concise yet comprehensive analysis, I have tried to portray how artfully English Literature has been reflected in metal music and its various sub-genres over the decades. While it is not difficult to understand the extent to which literature has influenced and can influence metal, at the same time it must be kept in mind that covering each and every aspect of literature and its effect on metal music is beyond the scope of this thesis. In order to narrow down our field of study, I have primarily focused on three eras of literature and its impact and cited detailed examples of the same. It can thus be rightly said that it will be unfair to draw conclusions about the nature of metal music without doing an exhaustive study of its lyrical themes. While it remains true that various sub-genres of metal music deal with themes that are extremely morbid and provocative in nature, at the same time one must also realise that the entire genre cannot be pigeonholed into one category. This is what makes metal music so charming, so enthralling and so varied.

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