

Themes and narrative structures  
in the lyrics of *Hozier*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a narrative analysis of popular music lyrics. It focuses on the first self-titled album of the singer-songwriter Hozier and investigates the song lyrics using thematic and structural narrative analysis. In line with the principles of practical criticism, the focus of the analysis is on the textual level, leaving outside possible musical or performative narratives. The thematic analysis follows the example of Clarke and Braun (2017), while the structural analysis utilizes close reading in order to understand how the narratives are structured and achieve their effect.

Narratives and popular music are consistently present in our everyday lives. However, narrativity of popular music has been an underrepresented subject in academic literature (Randle & Evans, 2013). Hozier is a successful contemporary popular music artist, but his work lacks academic attention. Given the absence of previous narrative analysis on his work, this thesis aims to understand the meaning making and literary merits of his lyrics, which show features of storytelling.

The analysis discovered general unifying features on the album: the lyrics include narratives built between two main characters, and the narrators are homodiegetic first-person narrators, i.e., they appear as characters in the story. The themes in the album center around depictions of relationship and humanity; the songs include a variety of different narratives within the themes. The similarities in themes and presentation form the album into a whole. Even on the textual level, a connection to the media of song is observed in the narrative structure: the singer gives voice to the narrator, and the role of the actual listener connects to the implied narratee.

## **Tiivistelmä**

Tämä tutkielma on populaarimusiikkisanoitusten narratiivinen analyysi. Se keskittyy laulaja-lauluntekijä Hozierin samannimiseen albumiin ja tutkii laulujen sanoituksia käyttäen temaattista ja rakenteellista narratiivista analyysia. Kirjallisuuskritiikin mukaisesti tutkielman kohteena on sanoitusten teksti, ja mahdollinen musikaalinen tai performatiivinen kerronnallisuus jätetään analyysin ulkopuolelle. Temaattinen analyysi seuraa Clarke ja Braunin (2017) esimerkkiä, kun taas rakenteellinen analyysi hyödyntää lähilukemisen työkaluja selvittääkseen miten kerronta on rakennettu.

Kerronnallisuus ja populaarimusiikki ovat osa jokapäiväistä elämäämme. Tästä huolimatta populaarimusiikin kerronnallisuus on ollut aliedustettuna akateemisessa kirjallisuudessa (Randle & Evans, 2013). Hozier on menestynyt nykypäivän artisti, mutta hänen työnsä on jäänyt vaille akateemista huomiota. Aikaisemman narratiivisen analyysin puutteesta johtuen tämä tutkielma pyrkii ymmärtämään merkityksen rakentamista ja kirjallisia saavutuksia Hozierin sanoituksissa, jotka sisältävät kerronnallisuuden piirteitä.

Analyysi löysi albumilta yleisiä yhdistäviä tekijöitä: sanoitusten narratiivit ovat rakennettu kahden päähenkilön välille, ja kertojat ovat homodiegeettisiä ensimmäisen persoonan kertojia, toisin sanoen hahmoja tarinan sisällä. Albumin teemat käsittelevät ihmissuhteita, rakkautta, ja ihmisyyttä; laulut sisältävät erilaisia tarinoita näiden teemojen sisällä. Samankaltaisuudet teemoissa ja kirjallisessa toteutuksessa tekevät albumista yhtenäisen. Vaikka analyysi toteutettiin tekstin tasolla, yhtymäkohdat laulun mediaan ovat nähtävissä: laulaja antaa äänen kertojalle, ja tekstissä kuvatun kuuntelijan ja todellisen kuuntelijan roolit yhdistyvät.

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## 1. Introduction

Popular music is part of our everyday lives and our urban audio landscape. It fills our ears when we go about our day, playing in shops or in the car radio. Often, we might listen to it without great concentration, and it is present in the same space as us. This does not mean we cannot listen to popular music with intent, and people have their favourite songs accompanying them through their lives: music, and often popular music, can have an important place in our self-image and social interactions. Considering this, the singer-songwriter Hozier has mentioned in interviews that he regards music always to be political. He claims that “if something concerns the experience of people, it concerns some political dimension”, even when the word political seems to have negative connotations in contemporary conversations (Hozier-Byrne, 2018, 01:42). Hozier’s music is a somewhat rare example among contemporary popular music; the blues-rock shows how inclusive popular music can be in terms of genre, and his lyrics hold substance, which is something popular music is sometimes said to lack in its profit-oriented production.

The song ‘In a Week’ opens with a calm melodic intro, easing you into thinking you are going to hear a folky, traditional love song. “I have never known peace / Like the damp grass that yields to me”. The enviable scene is painted before your eyes: the main character is lying in a field somewhere. However, the fantasy is broken with the second sentence pricking your ears: “I have never known hunger / Like these insects that feast on me” (Hozier, 2014). This thesis is the academic result of this confused feeling of juxtaposition between the expectations of a listener and the contents of the lyrics. A question arises concerning what is happening in this love song with dark imagery of corpses and decomposition?

The self-titled album by the singer-songwriter Hozier was published in 2014. To distinguish the album from the artist, henceforth the name of the album is written in italics, i.e., *Hozier*. The album, just like the viral hit lead single ‘Take Me to Church’ achieved great success. This thesis is a literary analysis of popular music lyrics, and the research aim is to understand the meaning making and literary merits of Hozier’s lyrics which show features of storytelling. While literary analysis of popular music lyrics is not a new field of research, it has been debated if song lyrics should be considered literature or not. Despite this, song writers have claimed Nobel Prizes for literature, lastly Bob Dylan in 2016 (*The Nobel Prize*, n.d.).

This thesis combines methodologies of narratology and literary criticism in an experimental way and offers a brief commentary on similar previous studies. Secondary research aim is to determine if thematic and structural narrative analysis can offer insight into analyzing narratives in popular music lyrics. *Narratology*, the study of narratives, has its roots in literature studies but has in the recent years gained popularity in other field of study. Outside literature narratology is called *narrative theory*. In human sciences and psychology, narrative theory studies how humans use narratives to make sense of the world and how they are part of our memories and personal biographies, for example. Even though this thesis will remain in the field of literary theory, the notion that stories, just like music, are something innately rooted in our society and humanity make this study even more worthwhile.

Both the success of Hozier's first album and the way he views making music prompts the analysis of his work. His work has been references in popular music study less so the main topic of analysis; the scarce academic attention is where this thesis will try to find its place.

## 2. Background

This section introduces the term popular music and the field of popular music study. A short overview on previous literature relevant for this thesis is provided.

### 2.1. Popular music

In 1990, Booth and Kuhn argued that economic and transmission factors are essential elements in defining genres of music. According to them, “the basis of pop music economics is indirect patronage by a mass audience” (1990, p. 419). This same sentiment can be found in the contemporary definition for popular music: “[it is] music written and marketed with the intention of achieving mass distribution and sales now principally in the form of recordings” (*Merriam-Webster*, n.d.).

Even though Hozier did not necessarily intent his first-ever published single to take him to world fame, the sales and the wide radio play of his album situate his music under this category. Since the definition of popular music is more closely linked to how the music is distributed and how vast in numbers its consumers are, popular music — sometimes shortened to pop music — houses a wide variety of different genres. It could be argued that “pop [encompasses] just about anything that isn’t classical music” (Hornby, 2014, as cited in Bradley, 2017, p. 5). Booth and Kuhn (1990) divided all music to pop, folk, and art music, too. Historically, “many early pieces of popular music shared general features with classical music of the day, they were briefer and simpler, making fewer demands on both performer and listener” (Hamm, n.d., as cited in Booth & Kuhn, 1990, p. 413). This kind of simpler form is true to modern popular music as well. This thesis uses the term popular music to refer to music that is popular and has a mass audience, since the term pop music, even though often used synonymously, has also been referred to as a subcategory.

The mass audience and its place in our society more than justifies the study of popular music and there is already a vast amount of research in the field, including dedicated journals. Studies focus on the craft of a particular artist or investigate the interface music provides for cultural and human studies. Methodologies vary from semantic, linguistic, and thematic analyses to narrativity, psychoanalytical, and discourse analysis, to name a few. Popular music, as any part of culture, is constantly evolving and has distinctive historical phases, changing phenomena and trends. New study, be it about the history or contemporary elements of popular music, is

on that ground valuable and current in its own right, similar to literary analysis of classical and contemporary literature.

The aspect of consumerism associated with popular music also calls for critique. Due to common generalization, popular music with its easily consumed style suffers from a stigma of being artificial, mass produces, and shallow. The genre has a great variety in what kind of stories it tells and how those stories are told. Narrativity and literary complexity in the lyrics varies greatly from song to song and artist to artist.

## **2.2. Overview on previous research**

Plenty of previous research exist on narrativity in popular music. For example, Nicholls (2007) discusses how narrative theory can be used as an analytical tool in the study of popular music texts. Nicholls (2007) called the combination of narrative analysis and popular music “not the most obvious bedfellows” since popular music songs describe scenes which are more static than kinetic in nature, focusing on vignettes and states of mind (p. 297). He suggested five levels in which narrativity can function in popular music, ranging from no story in lyrics or musical setting to pieces where “a complex narrative discourse is rendered through multiple media, including lyrics, music, prose, and artwork” (Nicholls, 2007, p. 301).

Music and narrativity also have one structural feature in common, which Nicholls (2007) addressed: even though in previous research it has been argued if music as a media can carry narratives, “the temporal dimension of narrative immediately suggests a potentially strong link to [music] that almost uniquely depends on time for its measurement” (p. 298). Popular music songs, even when short, have a clear beginning and an end, and move forward in time. Additionally, this thesis suggests a second common feature: repetition. Repetition is both a narrative device and a common feature in songs.

Randle and Evans (2013) embrace a contrary view to the common opinion and previous research in the field and claim that even “meaningless dance hits oftentimes offer some obvious or underlying narrative” (p. 125). Partly building on Nicholls (2007) and offering a typology to analyze narratives in popular music, Randle and Evans (2013) presented a two-axis approach where the popular music narratives are divided to defined or undefined, and open or closed: defined narratives have narrative features such as events, actors, time, and setting, while in undefined narratives they are unclear; closed narratives offer one literal meaning,



whereas open narratives have metaphorical or allegorical meanings. The typology is simple, and this thesis uses tools of narratology and close reading to offer a deeper level of analysis and precision.

Randle and Evans (2013) argued that “narrativity of pop music is underrepresented in academic literature” (p. 125). That is true for Hozier as well: his work has not received a lot of scholarly attention, and the most popular item of study has been the lead single ‘Take Me to Church’, possibly due to its popularity. To the best of the author’s awareness, there is no previous narrative analysis conducted on his work. The lead single has been mentioned in the context of queer analysis of popular culture (Gordon, 2016), criticizing religion (Quilty, 2019), and in studies of sexism in contemporary popular music (Chin et al., 2019); the song seems to emerge in discourse-based analysis of contemporary society and social critic. As for the rest of the songs or as an actual item of analysis, the album has gathered even less attention. Grad (2019) used Hozier as an example in their philosophical contemplation about the discourse on death in contemporary society. Related to this thesis, Grad (2019) awoke the idea that in connection to life and death, a lover is the chance for *transcendence*: a chance to be remembered, and in doing so cheat death (p. 111). This offers an interesting view on the intermingling of death, love, and time, themes which all manifest in Hozier’s lyrics. Grad (2019) named the refusal of death one of the main themes in the contemporary discourse about death (p. 108). Similar themes emerged in the analysis.

Serat (2017) centered her analysis on the use of metaphors in Hozier’s work; she used semantic approach to identify the literal and metaphorical meanings and types of metaphors. Serat (2017) focuses on four songs on the album, and comments on the connection between the meanings and the theme. The classification of metaphors into categories provides an idea about metaphor use. This is a systematic way to investigate the meaning making in the text, even though restricting the metaphor around one center word seems in some places to restrict the reading of the text. Serat (2017) reported that: “Although having the same theme, the songs are unlike in terms of its different settings” (p. 65). This thesis will further analyze, how those settings are presented.

### 3. Data

This section provides more information about the album *Hozier* and how it is used as primary data in the analysis.

#### 3.1. Hozier: album and the artist

Andrew John Hozier-Byrne is an Irish singer-songwriter, known by his stage name as “Hozier”. The self-titled *Hozier* (2014) was his first studio album following the success of his viral debut single ‘Take Me to Church’ in 2013. The hit single was Grammy nominated in 2015, and the music video has 456 million views on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com>) at the time of writing this thesis. The album has sold triple multi-platinum in the USA alone, translating to 3 million in certified sales (RIAA, n.d.).

The album was published through Island Records, and Rubyworks Records. It has 13 tracks which cover themes of love and relationships, sex, abuse, drugs, and nature. The music draws from genres of folk, soul, and rhythm and blues, but is often categorized under rock music. Hozier’s second album, *Wasteland, Baby!* was released in 2019, which solidified his position among the recognized popular music artists of the 2010s.

#### 3.2. Lyrics as text

Music is a multimodal experience. Songs in popular music come with a variety of accompanying material and possible sources for analysis. To use *Hozier* (2014) as an example, the songs include instrumentalization and textual lyrics which are sung along with the music. The album, depending on the format of distribution, comes with an accompanying booklet with lyrics printed on it and art painted specifically for the album. Some songs from the album also have performance or music videos. According to Nicholls (2007), all these aspects can potentially tie into an overarching narrative. Due to the variety of materials and the scope of a Bachelor’s thesis, some boundaries were set for the analysis. This thesis concentrates only on the song lyrics and treats them as text. This leaves all the musical elements and the vocal performance by the artist outside the analysis, with the exception of the song ‘In a Week’ performed as a duet, which is treated as a dialogue between two distinctive characters. The texts are acquired from a cd-album’s official booklet.

## **4. Methodology**

This thesis is a narrative analysis of song lyrics. The methodological framework is literary analysis and more precisely practical criticism. Narratology is a subcategory of practical criticism since the features analyzed are a part of the text itself. For terminology of narratology, Culler (1997) and Fludernik (2009) are referenced. The mode of narrative analysis will be thematic and structural, as presented by Riessman (2005). To study what themes are present in the album, the entire album will undergo inductive thematic analysis, which follows the steps developed by Clarke and Braun (2017). For structural analysis of the narratives, points of interest are discussed using close reading. The next subsections will explain the methodology in more detail.

### **4.1. Narratology**

In literary theory narratology is grouped under practical criticism. Practical criticism, unlike its counterpart theoretical criticism, aims to study text without outside influences. It studies the meaning making in the text itself, its merits, and how the text achieves its effects. The aim of this study is to stay as true as possible to the practical close reading. Although the reader always plays a part in the reading process, the intent is not to respond personally but to study and assess what the author is doing and what merits the text has as objectively as possible.

Narratology is the study of narratives. In literary analysis, it studies the story form found in various texts. Riessman (2005) divides the analysis of narratives into four modes: thematic, structural, interactional, and performative. The thematic analysis emphasizes “what” is said in the story over “how” it is said. The analysis investigates common thematic elements and patterns. While being a qualitative method, in many studies thematic analysis has been used on larger amounts of data since it can be approached with quantitative methods to some extent. In this thesis, thematic analysis was chosen because it offers a systematic way to go through the data and provides a base for the structural analysis. Structural analysis requires closer attention to specific narratives, which would encourage a smaller amount of data. Structural analysis asks the question “how” the narrative is told; what different narrative devices are used, and what is the story’s form. The interactional mode focuses on dialogic features of the text between the teller and the listener. This mode still utilizes the beforementioned two modes but adds the idea that story telling is a co-process between the

teller and listener and that the meaning is created collaboratively. The interactional mode and performative analysis are outside the scope of this study.

## 4.2. Close reading

Close reading is a method of literary analysis widely used for different kind of literary texts and criticism. Close reading emphasizes close attention to the text itself and aims to study not only the meaning of the text, but the meaning making and how particular effects in the text are achieved. The point of interest in structural analysis is “how is the story told”, and close reading is used as a tool to answer that question. To refer to components of narrative in the structural analysis, a suitable terminology is needed. This thesis utilizes terminology compiled by Culler (1997) and Fludernik (2009), both basing their works on classical studies in the field of narratology such as Labov and Waletzky (1967), and Genette (1980, 1988).

Culler (1997) divides the features of narrative into *plot*, *presentation*, and *focalization*. Plot is formed of events, the beginning and ending for example, which are placed in some sort of meaningful order. *Discourse* in this context is used to refer to two points of interaction in narratives: the relationship of the events and the plot, and the plot and how it is presented. Presentations of the same plot can vary greatly, and the structural analysis focuses on these choices.

Presentation includes the features of *narrator* and *narratee*: Narrator is the voice who tells the story, and narratee is the audience of the narrator (Culler, 1997). Narrator is not to be confused with the author of the text. Narratees can be interpreted as characters in the story or the reader of the text. According to Genette’s classical definition, narrator can be described as *homodiegetic*, meaning they are a character in the story, or *heterodiegetic*, not a character in the story; narrator who knows the whole story is an *extradiegetic* narrator (n.d., as cited in Fludernik, 2009). Extradiegetic narrator has omniscient power: they may have access to characters’ emotions and thoughts, comment on the discourse of the story itself, or have a larger knowledge of the world.

Related to the field of view of the narrator, Culler (1997) uses the term focalization to describe the choice of perspective in the story. Focalization works as a kind of lens through which the story is seen. Readers’ view of the story may be somehow restricted or manipulated. The focalizer who provides the view of the story does not have to be the narrator. Other factors

that play into focalization are time, distance and speed relative to the events, and limitations of knowledge.

## 5. Analysis

This section is dedicated for the thematic and structural analysis of the lyrics. Findings are further discussed in the following discussion and conclusion section.

### 5.1 Thematic analysis

The data for the thematic analysis includes the lyrics of the 13 tracks on the album *Hozier* (2014, see Appendix I). Thematic analysis aims to identify common themes and topics, ideas, and repeating patterns of meaning. This means reading the texts carefully and *coding* them according to Clarke and Braun's (2017) example. The aim is to work *inductively*, without prior attitudes or emphasis on certain themes.

In order to answer the research question about meaning making in the lyrics, the first aim is to find out "What is the narrator saying? What is he/she talking about?" and "What is the song about?" To emphasize, the thematic analysis concentrates on the narratives. It will not only tell us what the songs are about but specifically what the narrator or characters in the songs discuss.

The texts were coded manually, consisting of highlighting sections of the text, and assigning them labels, i.e., codes (Clarke & Braun, 2017). These labels are then generalized into themes, which are broader than the codes. The analysis process is iterative; the texts go through several rounds of coding, generalization, and review. The codes and themes are reviewed, connected, and codes removed as seen necessary, to ensure that the resulting codes will best represent the themes in the lyrics. Since the data is lyrical text, the coding will use a *latent approach*, acknowledging the subtext and assumptions behind the poetic expression. This of course always results in some level of subjectivity which is hopefully overcome with compiling topics into larger themes most strongly present in the lyrics. The following structural analysis also offers insight into how these themes are presented in different songs.

Table 1. Example of generalizing themes in ‘Sedated’

#8 Sedated				
Addiction	Relationship	Escapism	In order to	Small amount
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>rush</i></li> <li>– <i>my veins are busy</i></li> <li>– <i>poison that never stung</i></li> <li>– <i>so we’re slaves</i></li> <li>– <i>any semblance of touch</i></li> <li>– <i>we should quit, but we love it too much</i></li> <li>– <i>darling, don’t you join in</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>babe</i></li> <li>– <i>you and I</i></li> <li>– <i>darling</i></li> <li>– <i>don’t you stand there watching</i></li> <li>– <i>any semblance of touch</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Escape the world</li> <li>– <i>death and guns</i></li> <li>– <i>to derail the mind of me</i></li> <li>Numb</li> <li>– <i>to distract</i></li> <li>– <i>sedate</i></li> <li>– <i>never stung</i></li> <li>– <i>deaf</i></li> <li>– <i>numb</i></li> <li>– <i>we can feel none of it</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>to feel dizzy</i></li> <li>– <i>to derail the mind of me</i></li> <li>– <i>to distract and sedate</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>just a little</i></li> <li>– <i>hush</i></li> <li>– <i>little words</i></li> </ul>
Dying	Sickness	To make worse	Medical vocab.	Large amount
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>I keep catching little words but the meanings thin</i></li> <li>– <i>I’m somewhere outside my life</i></li> <li>– <i>I keep scratching but somehow I can’t get in</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>derail the mind</i></li> <li>– <i>deaf</i></li> <li>– <i>something isn’t right, babe</i></li> <li>– <i>our teeth and lungs are lined with the scum of it</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>atrophy</i></li> <li>– <i>adding shadows</i></li> <li>– <i>thin</i></li> <li>– <i>derail</i></li> <li>– <i>lined with the scum of it</i></li> <li>– <i>too much</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>my veins</i></li> <li>– <i>my heart</i></li> <li>– <i>atrophy</i></li> <li>– <i>our teeth and lungs</i></li> <li>– <i>sedate/sedated</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>too much</i></li> </ul>
Want to be saved	Wasting youth	Is this love?	Freedom	Animalistic vocab.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>I’m somewhere outside my life babe; I keep scratching but somehow I can’t get in</i></li> <li>– <i>Lord, we should quit come and save me from it?</i></li> <li>– <i>you’re supposed to draw me away from it</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>free and young and we can feel none of it</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>my heart’s in atrophy</i></li> <li>– <i>you’re supposed to drag me away from it...</i></li> <li>– <i>we love it too much</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>so we’re slaves</i></li> <li>– <i>free and young and we can feel none of it</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>cave</i></li> <li>– <i>nursing</i></li> <li>– <i>scratching</i></li> <li>– <i>stung</i></li> </ul>

\*some themes omitted for the sake of visual presentation.

Table 1 demonstrates the generalization of themes. The themes have differences: some are structures in the text (“In order to”), repeating vocabulary (“Medical vocab.,” “Animalistic vocab.”) or more complex topics (“Addiction”, “Want to be saved”). Latent approach enables assigning codes such as “rush” under the theme of “Addiction”, connecting the code to drug use. The iterative process can be seen in how some themes are grouped together. When the initial themes in the songs were known after the first round of coding, effort was made to use similar names for the themes appearing in all songs. Example of this is the theme of “Escapism”, which in the song ‘Sedated’ can be seen in the themes of “Numb”, and “Escape the world”.

The theme of escapism is also present in the songs 'Jackie and Wilson', 'Someone New', and 'To Be Alone'. Appendix II compiles the common emerging themes for the whole album.

## 5.2 Structural analysis

This part of the analysis focuses on selected features in the presentation of a narrative. Points about characters and plot are discussed, including narrator, narratees, side characters, events, and mentions of time and place. Lastly, observations about the structure are provided.

### 5.2.1. Characters

Common feature in the narratives of *Hozier* is that they are built between two characters. Some songs also include additional characters, but the two lovers are in focus. From now on, the main characters are referred to as the narrator and the lover.

In all the 13 songs, one first-person narrator is the most common with the exception of two songs with two narrators. 'In a Week' differs from all the others on the album with the narrators portrayed by the means of the song as media: the song is performed as a duet. In 'To Be Alone', the characters are made distinct in the text with structure and focalization. They both sing one verse and a pre-chorus. The difference can be seen for example in the pre-choruses;

*Pre-chorus 1*  
*You don't know what hell you put me through,*  
*To have someone kiss the skin that crawls from you,*  
*To feel your weight in arms I'd never use,*  
*It's the God that heroin prays to...*

*Pre-chorus 2*  
*But I don't know what else that I would do,*  
*Than to try to kiss the skin that crawls from you,*  
*Than feel your weight in arms I'd never use,*  
*It's the God that heroin prays to...*

*'To Be Alone' (Hozier, 2014)*

In this example, the repetition typical of songs is extending upon to show two different perspectives to the same narrative. The first one is sung by a character who has experienced abuse and who is being kissed on the second line. On the second chorus, the kisser sings. The phrase "arms I'd never use" has different meaning in these two voices: the first describes the apathy of not being able to function due to trauma, whereas in the second pre-chorus it can be interpreted as a promise not to hurt the other one; in the arms I would never use against you.



Hozier's narrators are homodiegetic narrators, just like in the example above. The focalization this kind of narrator offers is often in their own voice, and there is nothing omniscient about their nature: they describe the other character, but they do not have insight into their thoughts or their side of the story. The way they are portrayed is human and realistic.

The narratives can be divided into two groups depending on whether the narrator addresses the lover as a direct narratee or not; the divide is almost perfectly half and half of the album. In the case where the narrator does not address the lover, the narratee is unspecified. Special exception of 'Work Song' will be addressed later. The lover is described by the narrator to the unspecified listener: either their physical appearance ("her straw blond hair, her arms hard and lean", 'Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene', Hozier, 2014) or other traits ("she's the giggle at the funeral", 'Take Me to Church', Hozier, 2014). When the lover is the narratee, this kind of description is not usually present. The lover is addressed with a pet name or with the pronoun "you". The only exception, where the narrator does describe the lover while talking to them, is 'From Eden' ("there's something tragic about you / Something so magic about you", Hozier, 2014).

When the narrator addresses the lover directly, the narratives resemble a spoken conversation. The tone towards the reader is none-existent which creates intimacy between the characters in the song. Although many songs might share a similar narrator or narratee, other narrative devices make the songs different. In 'Someone New' the lover listens to the monologue of a self-centered narrator. The narrator uses belittling sentences ("Would things be easier if there was a right way? / Honey, there is no right way", Hozier, 2014) and shifts blame to the lover ("You knew who I was with every step that I ran to you", Hozier, 2014). Interestingly, the narrator of 'It Will Come Back' uses the same devices but has a stronger antagonistic nature: the lover is blatantly threatened by the narrator ("I warn you, babe", Hozier, 2014). 'It Will Come Back' builds an analogy between the act of being kind to some sort of animal, "it", and a hope for a relationship. Based on the thematic analysis, 'Someone New' is a break-up song, and 'It Will Come Back' depicts a toxic one-sided love. 'It Will Come Back' uses vocabulary from nature and horror to create a subtle feeling of dread, which make the reading open: multiple interpretations of the narrative are possible. One interpretation would be to consider the narrator as a werewolf, dangerous and howling outside the lover's door; the analogy used would fit this reading.

'Work Song' is one of the songs where the lover is not addressed directly. It has a narratee which the other songs on the album do not share: a specific audience addressed by the narrator.

*Boys, when my baby found me,  
I was three days on a drunken sin,  
I woke with her walls around me,  
Nothing in her room but an empty crib.*

*'Work Song' (Hozier, 2014)*

'Work Song' is the only song in the album where the song title does not appear in the lyrics. The title suggests the song is sung while working to pass the time, and provides a frame for the story and a specific group of narratees: the other workers. The listener, unspecified or not paid attention to in other songs, is here grouped in with the boys, listening to the monologue of the narrator alongside them. The narrator tells us about his "baby": she is sweet as can be and he thinks she loves him. The narrator tells how she forgives him and does not judge his past; "My babe would never fret none / About what my hands and my body done" (Hozier, 2014). The narrator raises her to a high pedestal, so high that he swears his love is greater than death. But amidst all this boasting and devotion, her silence leads one to think that the reader does not know the whole story, or it is partly sugarcoated for the retelling, especially knowing the context. The topic is subject to how the narrator chooses to present it. All the reader knows about her is what he tells us. The line "nothing in her room but an empty crib" would suggest that either she wants a family, or she had one before; she has a past or an objective. This kind of focalization using limitations of knowledge keeps the reading open to interpretations and expands the world it builds.

The background characters appear in subtle ways but are important for the plot; the abusive figure in the personal history of the narrator in 'Foreigner's God', antagonistic society in 'Take Me to Church' and 'Sedated', and "they" who find the lovers 'In a Week'. The characters or groups are vague and often are more than one person. This provides contrasts between the two main characters and those in the background: they are something the main characters are not part of.

### 5.2.2. Plot

This section focuses on the events which comprise the plot, and the presentation of temporal and spacial surroundings of these events. Making generalizations about the plot similarly to the narrators is not as easy, since the settings differ between songs.

Being saved by a lover is a narrative, which emerged as a theme in the thematic analysis. It was present in multiple songs with different presentations. For example, in 'Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene' a love affair after a heartbreak makes the narrator "feel more human", in 'Jackie and Wilson' love saves the narrator alienated from society from suicidal thoughts, and 'To Be Alone' describes the slow healing process of someone who has experienced abuse. 'Sedated' introduces the opposite, how the lover who should be a savior shares a drug habit which leads to the assumed death of the narrator. In 'Work Song', the lover makes the narrator leave the life of "drunken sin". The narrator feels his love can overcome death itself, a theme similarly presented in 'Like Real People Do'. This shows the variety within a similar theme. Stylistic choices and focalization make these narratives distinctive.

There are songs which do not have specific plot, such as 'Take Me to Church'. The song builds imagery with the religious vocabulary and mentioned places, but there are no clear events which could be defined as plot. As a contrary example, a clear sequence of events is found in 'Jackie and Wilson': The main character is tired of his life, "she blows out of nowhere" and they have a short affair, which ends in her leaving (Hozier, 2014).

Time is used in versatile ways in different songs and the events described might be in the present, future, or past. 'Work Song' arises again as a point of interest since it portrays storytelling. The narrative is layered: the narrator tells the story in real time to an audience, and the story itself has events with a timeframe and an order. In 'Jackie and Wilson', the narrator imagines possible futures. The whole chorus uses modal auxiliaries: "she will" and "she would" do something. This suggest that none of the things actually happen but are imagined by the narrator as a kind of prolepsis. Behind this day-dreaming, it is hard to say how long the relationship between the narrator and the lover actually lasts, and the abrupt end of the relationship creates an effect: in his infatuation he plans baby names and is ready to spend his life with her but the next moment he is left smoking a cigarette in bed, over the relationship, and ready for a next one. The contrast captures the frivolity of the whole relationship and the personality of the narrator. 'Like Real People Do' uses retrospective retelling: "I had a thought,

dear / However scary / About that night / The bugs and the dirt” (Hozier, 2014). There are questions regarding the past, which are not answered.

‘In a Week’ mentions time to create uncertainty. In the song, two lovers lie in a field surrounded by nature. Plants, and animals are a major part of the vocabulary and create a vivid surrounding imagery. But looking at the events, anything beyond the opening scene is left vague. The scarcity of explanation even leaves out such an essential detail of whether the lovers are alive or not. There is no action described beyond the peaceful resting, and the frequent mentions of time go against each other: the lovers lay in the field for years or for hours; different seasons are mentioned; they will be found in a week, but also lay so long they become flowers. The confusing time suggests that the characters themselves have limitations of knowledge: how did they get here, and how long will they be there. This leaves the reading of the narrative open: are they possibly victims of murder, a double suicide, or is it all just make-belief between two lovers who want to escape the world? The uncertainty is paired with realistic depictions of nature all the way to the implied smell of decomposition: “And they’d find us in a week / When the weather gets hot” (Hozier, 2014).

In Hozier’s songs, the surroundings are often undefined compared to the narrator and the characters. The locations mentioned serve a function: a yard where to bury your former self in ‘Jackie and Wilson’, or the “cave” the lovers occupy in ‘Sedated’, separating them from the world and humanity. Beforementioned ‘Someone New’ lacks mention of place altogether. ‘From Eden’ only uses places with metaphorical intent. The title appears in the line “I slithered here from Eden just to sit outside your door” (Hozier, 2014). The narrator is compared to the snake in the garden of Eden. This comparison to the mythical figure is the closest a narrator on the album comes to omniscience. However, outside the romantic way to symbolize life experience and wickedness there is nothing to suggest that the narrator would actually be omniscient or as ancient as the text might lead one to believe. The place outside her door appears in a similar manner as a metaphoric place in ‘It Will Come Back’. Door is an entryway to somewhere, maybe home; it is a place close to the lover or a way to get access to them. Some songs do offer more context instead of these metaphorical expressions: ‘Work Song’, and ‘In a Week’ mentioned before have more concrete surroundings.

### 5.2.3. Structure

The texts include a lot of repetition, which is typical of songs, but also a narrative device. It was noted in the thematic analysis, that the themes discussed in repeating parts like choruses come through more strongly. However, something to be mentioned only once has a different but nonetheless distinct effect. The repetition is used varyingly; in some songs the repeated parts are slightly altered over the course of the song. For example, in 'In a Week' the number of repetitions of the line "I'll be home with you" is increased after each chorus; the claim becomes more powerful as the song goes on (Hozier, 2014). 'Like Real People Do' also uses subtle variation in the chorus: "I will not ask you" changes to "I would not ask you", and "I could not ask you" (Hozier, 2014). This fits the style of a spoken conversation mentioned earlier.

The chorus of 'Work Song' provides an example of how the narrative structure is used to influence the meaning making of the text;

*When my time comes around,  
Lay me gently in the cold, dark earth,  
No grave can hold my body down,  
I'll crawl home to her.*

*'Work Song' (Hozier, 2014)*

The first lines depict the narrator to be buried; "one's time to come around" is an idiomatic expression for death. Only after that it is said that he will crawl home to her. The order of these events produces a vivid image of the main character leaving the grave after being placed there in the first two lines and makes the whole chorus into a metaphor for love greater than death. The word choices seem to deliberately make the act sound as real as possible. The verb "crawl" produces a strong visual image of the action. Use of the word "body" avoids the idiomatic expression "cannot hold me down" and grounds the action in reality. Body is a tangible part of a human and can also refer to a corpse.

No one can realistically cheat death with the power of love, but the horror genre does feature bodies crawling out of graves. This act is present in the song 'Like Real People Do' as well: the literal reading of the song resembles a horror story, which can be seen as an allegory for past relationships. A choice is made in the text, where the title and the vocabulary used match the horror genre, which shifts the balance away from the underlying metaphorical meaning to a literal reading. The same can be said for the beforementioned 'It Will Come Back', which used vocabulary and analogy to blur the line between realism and fantasy.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand the meaning making in the lyrics of *Hozier* and investigate the literary merits of the song writer. Thematic analysis showed that the songs on the album center around themes of love and relationship, and humanity. The narratives inside the main themes have many subcategories (see Appendix II). The structural analysis investigated narrative features. The meaning making starts all the way from the vocabulary level. Some general unifying features were discovered in the analysis: *Hozier* includes narratives build between two main characters, and the narrators are homodiegetic first-person narrators. The similarities in themes and presentation form the album into a whole. The connection between songs is not strong enough to call the album a *concept album*. Concept album is “a collection of songs about a specific theme or story” (*Merriam-Webster*, n.d.). *Hozier* is generally not considered to suit this category because the album lacks an overlaying story which would span the whole album. As a collection of small stories, it succeeds in being an album which can be analyzed both as a whole and as individual songs. The unity in theme and presentation was not hypothesized but emerged from the data. For every point discussed in the analysis, there was always a song which worked differently, which shows the variety in the narratives. *Hozier* is not limited to only one specific way of storytelling and seems planned from the structural level to the word choices; this demonstrates both traditional literary craftsmanship and control of the media.

Most of the songs adhere to Nicholls’ (2007) discussion about the nature of popular song narratives: they portray scenes which are static vignettes (p. 297). This describes songs like ‘Someone New’ and ‘Sedated’ very well; they are moments in time. Hozier presents these narratives as spoken conversation happening in real time, with a start and a finish which match the start and end of the song. In one example, it seems that this static nature is even used as a device: in ‘In a Week’, stillness is a theme which is already enhanced with the vocabulary used. In other words, in the cases where the text is lacking a defined plot, the presentation matches the medium of the song. As made evident in the analysis, there are also songs with storylines and features of time and space. Using Randle and Evans’ (2013) typology, the album includes both undefined and defined narratives, as well as open and closed readings. For example, the meaning making between realism and fantasy was investigated in the analysis

section. The effect was achieved using vocabulary, narrative structure, and literary devices such as analogy. The narratives are open for multiple interpretations.

'Work Song' was also part of the metaphorical analysis by Serat (2017). In her thesis, Serat (2017) argued that "grave" is a structural metaphor, which has the metaphorical meaning of death (p. 45). While true, it can be argued that the metaphor is not contained in one word: the whole act of crawling out of the grave is a metaphor, which is made more powerful with the narrative structure of the chorus, as discussed in the analysis section. Grad (2019) mentioned the "romantic core in Hozier's music, a core that perfectly matches the key trait of the romantic age of the beautiful death" (p.115). Romanticism is a movement in literature. While this thesis does not comment if Hozier's texts fit the genre, the theme of death was present in the album. In 'Work Song' and 'Like Real People Do', love appears greater than death.

One of the research questions of this study was to determine if thematic and structural narrative analysis offer insight into analyzing narratives in popular music lyrics. Based on the results of this thesis, the answer would be "yes". The thematic analysis was useful in the way it provided a starting point for the structural analysis, and it drew out the connections between the songs on the album. The view of practical criticism allowed an extensive analysis of the structure of the lyrics. In retrospect, choosing a deductive research approach might yield more precise understanding about the construction of individual songs. Hozier is also generally known to be claimed as an icon by the LGBTQ+ community. Deductive thematic analysis or theoretical criticism of his work could shed light on this phenomenon or investigate further any theme named in this analysis. As a limitation to this study, all musical and performative elements were left outside the analysis. Further musical analysis could investigate if the narratives found in the literary analysis are supported by the musical setting.

'In a Week' stayed as mystical as it appeared in the introduction, but the intention behind the confusion was revealed. The analysis revealed that every song had something noteworthy, and they did not seem any shallower in literary analysis than poetry or other written literary media, if it is reasonable to even make such comparisons. Lyrics are not poetry and treating them as such does not give them full justice; when analyzed without their intended media, they are always lacking something. But even when the lyrics were treated as text, some notions seem to connect to the media of song. Some popular music songs use third person narration, for example 'Living on a Prayer' by Bon Jovi (1986), but *Hozier* features only first-person narratives.

The narratives seem to integrate the act of listening and singing in the structure: the singer gives voice to the narrator, and there is interaction between the implied listener and the actual listener. The actual listener is never addressed in the lyrics in an omniscient way, which keeps the narrative contained in the world it builds, but the presence of an undefined or one-person narratee gives the listener a place to observe the narrative from; the event of listening to the song, and the vignette it portrays are united. This could be a place of further study focusing on the interactional analysis of narrative as presented by Riessman (2005): how is the storytelling a co-operation between the artist and the music listener.

According to Hozier, the aspects that touch the human condition, including popular music, have some sort of political dimension (Hozier-Byrne, 2018, 01:42). Narrative theory studies the social and psychological aspect of storytelling. Based on this, narrative analysis of popular music songs is close to our everyday lives. It can shed light to things we might not pay our attention to, but which are present in the same space as us: music playing on the radio.



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## Appendix I Track list

1. Take Me to Church
2. Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene
3. Jackie and Wilson
4. Someone New
5. To Be Alone
6. From Eden
7. In a Week (feat. Karen Cowley)
8. Sedated
9. Work Song
10. Like Real People Do
11. It Will Come Back
12. Foreigner's God
13. Cherry Wine (live)

## Appendix II Themes

Love and relationship	
-sex	Take Me to Church, Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Someone New, Work Song, Foreigner's God, Cherry Wine
-affection	Jackie and Wilson, To Be Alone, From Eden, In A Week, Like Real People Do
-love affair	Someone New, It Will Come Back, Cherry Wine
-breakup	Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Someone New
-idealizing the lover	Take me to Church, Work Song, Foreigner's God, Cherry Wine
-describing the lover	Take me to Church, Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Jackie and Wilson, From Eden, Work Song, Cherry Wine
-trust; no judgement	Jackie and Wilson, To Be Alone, From Eden, Work Song, Like Real People Do, Foreigner's God,
-love and religion	Take Me to Church, Work Song, Foreigner's God, Cherry Wine, Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Jackie and Wilson
-toxic relationship	Sedated, It Will Come Back, Cherry Wine, Foreigner's God, Cherry Wine
-love greater than death	In a Week, Work Song
Humanity	
-to feel human	Take Me to Church, Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, To Be Alone
-self-degrading	Take Me to Church, Angel of Small Death and Codeine Scene
-unmoral behaviour	Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Jackie and Wilson, Someone new, Work Song, From Eden
-being saved; healing	Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Jackie and Wilson, To Be Alone, Sedated, Work Song, Like Real People Do
-mental health	Jackie and Wilson, Someone New, To Be Alone
-trauma; abuse	Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, To Be Alone, Foreigner's God, Cherry Wine
-not human	From Eden, Like Real People Do, It Will Come Back
Society	Take Me to Church, Sedated, Foreigner's God, Jackie and Wilson, Like Real People Do
Death	Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Jackie and Wilson, In a Week, Sedated, Work Song, Like Real People Do
Drugs	Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene, Jackie and Wilson, To Be Alone, Sedated
Escapism	Jackie and Wilson, Someone New, To Be Alone, Sedated

Referencing music	Jackie and Wilson, Someone New
Fantasy	From Eden, In a Week, Work Song, Like Real People Do, It Will Come Back
Nature	In a Week, Like Real People Do, It Will Come Back
Humor	Take Me to Church, In a Week
Time	From Eden, In a Week, Like Real People Do, Jackie and Wilson, To Be Alone