THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LYRIC WRITERS’ CONCEPT IN COLD PLAY’S VIVA LA VIDA SONG LYRICS

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Abstract

The purposes of this research are to interpret the lyric writers’ concept in writing and narrating the Viva La Vida lyrics and to interpret the representation of the first-person narrator used in the lyric. The analysis method of this research is descriptive interpretation. In analyzing the lyrics, the Saussure’s dyadic or two-part model of the sign is used in interpreting the denotative meaning.

Keywords: Semiotics, Saussure’s dyadic model, linear analysis, first-person narrator

1. Introduction

Music is often claimed as a language of human’s soul. Music and language have a similar goal; they want to communicate a particular meaning and share the feelings. In music, lyrics are made as a communication place that contains meaning for the listeners. Gaines (2010) said that people assume to know and understand the world through what they find in the media. In this case, the lyrics can be interpreted by the listeners as a form of communication because the lyrics are used to convey something, although sometimes they are not clear to whom, what, and how they are intended. Although the lyrics of music use a narrative structure in their writing, they always provide a lot of meaning and sometimes are hard to be interpreted and understood. In lyrics, there are so many unusual themes to listen and understand. They must be understood comprehensively and then they can be well-interpreted by the listeners.

1.1 Literature Review

Viva la Vida is a song which belongs to Coldplay. The song lyrics are written by Coldplay. It is in their fourth album entitled Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends in 2008. This song has a set of interesting lyrics to be analyzed. Its lyrics can make listeners curious to find out and guess what the writers want to convey because its lyrics has a deep meaning. This song had achieved a great success. It won the Grammy Award for Song of the Year at the 51st Grammy Awards in 2009.

1.1.1 Lyrics Text: Viva La Vida

I used to rule the world
Seas would rise when I gave the word
Now in the morning I sleep alone
Sweep the streets I used to own
I used to roll the dice
Feel the fear in my enemy's eyes
Listen as the crowd would sing
"Now the old king is dead! Long live the king!"
One minute I held the key
Next the walls were closed on me
And I discovered that my castles stand
Upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand
I hear Jerusalem bells are ringing
Roman Cavalry choirs are singing
Be my mirror, my sword and shield
My missionaries in a foreign field
For some reason I can't explain
Once you go there was never
Never an honest word
And that was when I ruled the world
It was the wicked and wild wind
Blew down the doors to let me in
Shattered windows and the sound of drums
People couldn't believe what I'd become
Revolutionaries wait
For my head on a silver plate
Just a puppet on a lonely string
Oh who would ever want to be king?
I hear Jerusalem bells are ringing
Roman Cavalry choirs are singing
Be my mirror, my sword and shield
My missionaries in a foreign field
For some reason I can't explain
I know Saint Peter won't call my name
Never an honest word
But that was when I ruled the world

2. The Analysis of Lyrics

Semiotic approach analysis is used in analyzing and describing the interpretation of lyric writers’ concept in the process of writing the lyrics and the representation of the first-person narrator used by the writer. Saussure’s model of the sign is applied in this analysis. Kaartinen and Latomaa in Hamel (2011) stated that we understand something when we are able to connect signified to signifier, or meaning content to sign vehicle, content to expression. In other words, we understand something when we have mental sign which means something or represents something. The understanding process can be examined in an empirical meaning making process by following empirical dialogue and linguistic expressions.

2.1 The Narrative Point of View

The lyric writers used the word I as the main narrator. It is used as the first-person narration. This writing of narrative style is applied because the lyric writers wanted the listeners to see and understand their way of seeing or interpreting events to feel like an eye-witness to those events. The first person narrator actually can create a similar contact because they are referring to themselves as if they are telling people about their own lives and experiences. But in using the first-person narration, the direct interpretation could be bias because it is interpreted by their limited knowledge.
2.2 The Interpretation of Lyrics Writer's Concept

The lyric writers’ concept for Viva La Vida lyrics can be stated as an inspiring figure that make the lyric writers inspired in writing the lyrics. The lyrics are the signifier, or can be stated as X, and the writers’ concept is the signified, or can be stated as Y. It means the lyrics writer used the linear analysis perspective in interpreting the concept of lyrics. It means the lyric writers want to tell people their interpretation directly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lyric</strong></td>
<td><strong>Writer’s Concept</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the process of interpreting the lyric writers’ concept, to make it easier to be interpreted, the lyrics are divided into seven parts to make it clear.

**Part 1**

I used to rule the world  
Seas would rise when I gave the word  
Now in the morning I sleep alone  
Sweep the streets I used to own

In clause *I used to rule the world*, the writers’ concept was someone who ever governed or controlled an area, a country or world, and in clause *seas would rise when I gave the word*, the writers’ concept was someone who had the enormous power and was very influential because every word he or she said would always be heard and become a worldwide concern. In clause *now in the morning I sleep alone*, the concept was someone who ever controlled and had power and suddenly lost his or her power and in *sweep the streets I used to own*, the writers interpreted it as someone who became an ordinary person in the area that he had once conquered.

**Part 2**

I used to roll the dice  
Feel the fear in my enemy’s eyes  
Listen as the crowd would sing  
Now the old king is dead! Long live the king!

In part two, the clause *I used to roll the dice*, the concept was someone who had the power and could easily do the conquest and just chose the region to which he or she wanted. In *Feel the fear in my enemy’s eyes*, the concept was someone who liked watching people suffer in expanding his or her territory. Meanwhile, in both clauses, *Listen as the crowd would sing* and *Now the old king is dead! Long live the king!* the writers’ concept was someone who had the enormous power and always believed that he or she could defeat the enemy he faced.

**Part 3**

One minute I held the key  
Next the walls were closed on me  
And I discovered that my castles stand  
Upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand

In this part of lyric, the writers’ concept was someone who had power but he or she governed and controlled his or her region not for a long period. It can be implied in clause *one minute I*
held the key. In next the walls were closed on me, the concept was someone who was suddenly trapped in his or her own power. He or she, then, realized that his or her power was trying to make him or her down and what made him or her down was his or her own organization that was destroyed by his or her people. It is implied in both clauses, and I discovered that my castles stand and upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand.

Part 4

It was the wicked and wild wind
Blew down the doors to let me in
Shattered windows and the sound of drums
People couldn’t believe what I’d become

In the fourth part of lyrics, the writers’ concept was someone who achieved his or her power by crimes. He or she destroyed the regions to achieve his or her power. It can be implied in clauses it was the wicked and wild wind, blew down the doors to let me in and shattered windows and the sound of drums. In people couldn’t believe what I’d become, the writers’ concept was people around him or her didn’t believe that he or she became a tyrant and did everything to achieve his or her absolute power.

Part 5

Revolutionaries wait
For my head on a silver plate
Just a puppet on a lonely string
Oh who would ever want to be king?

In this part, the writers’ concept was someone who had power was hated and waited for his or her falling era by a lot of people. It can be implied in revolutionaries wait for my head on a silver plate and just a puppet on a lonely string. In oh who would ever want to be king?, the concept was the people succeed to drop the figure who had the enormous power through the revolution.

Part 6

I hear Jerusalem bells a ringing
Roman Cavalry choirs are singing
Be my mirror my sword and shield
My missionaries in a foreign field

In the sixth part, the concept was someone who did the conquest against other regions under the pretext of religion. It can be seen in I hear Jerusalem bells a ringing. The ‘Jerusalem Bell’ is commonly used by Jewish priests. He or she was doing the conquest foreign land and ordering his or her armies to attack the other regions, it can be seen in roman cavalry choirs are singing, be my mirror my sword and shield and my missionaries in a foreign field.

Part 7

For some reason I can’t explain
I know Saint Peter won’t call my name
Never an honest word
But that was when I ruled the world

In the seventh part, the concept was someone who had power did not know why he or she did the crimes. It is implied in for some reason I can’t explain and but that was when I ruled the
world. But finally he or she realized that his or her government was full of crimes and he or she never said the honest word or always lied in governing. It is implied in *never an honest word*. He or she could not explain why he or she did those crimes and after he or she stopped governing, he or she realized that he or she would not have a place in heaven after death. The figure Saint Peter in Christianity is claimed as the main apostle. It can be seen in *I know Saint Peter won't call my name*.

Table 1. The signifier or the interpretation of lyric writers and poured it in lyrics writing, and signified or the concept that caused the writers in interpreting the lyrics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNIFIER (LYRICS)</th>
<th>SIGNIFIED (THE CONCEPT OF THE LYRIC WRITING)</th>
<th>SUFFERED IN EXPANDING HIS/HER TERRITORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I used to rule the world</td>
<td>Someone who ever governed, controlled an area, a region, country</td>
<td>Someone who had the enormous power and always believed that he or she could defeat the enemy he or she faced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seas would rise when I gave the word</td>
<td>Someone who had the enormous power and was very influential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now in the morning I sleep alone Sweep the streets I used to own</td>
<td>Someone who ever controlled and had power and lost his or her power and became an ordinary person</td>
<td>In achieving his or her power. He or she did it by the crimes. He or she destroyed the regions to achieve the power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used to roll the dice</td>
<td>Someone who had the power and he or she could easily do the conquest and he or she just chose the region to which he or she wanted</td>
<td>People didn’t believe that he or she became a tyrant and did everything to achieve the absolute power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel the fear in my enemy's eyes</td>
<td>Someone who liked watching people</td>
<td>People succeed to drop someone who had the enormous power through the revolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I hear Jerusalem bells are ringing
He or she did the conquest against other regions under the pretext of religion.

Roman Cavalry choirs are singing
Be my mirror, my sword and shield
My missionaries in a foreign field
He or she was doing the conquest foreign land and ordered his or her army to attack the other regions,

For some reason I can't explain
Someone who had power did not know why he or she did the crimes

I know Saint Peter won't call my name
He or she realized that his or her government was full of crimes

Never an honest word
He or she always lied in governing

But that was when I ruled the world
He or she could not explain why he or she did those crimes

2.2.1.1 The Representation of ‘I’

Danesi (2002) stated that the process of recording ideas, knowledge, or messages in some physical way is called representation. This can be defined more precisely as the use of ‘signs’ (picture, sounds, etc.) to relate, depict, portray, or reproduce something perceived, sensed, imagined, or felt in some physical form. In interpreting the representation of ‘I’, as the main narrator used in the lyrics, semiotic approach is used as a theoretical tool to examine the linguistic signs in the song lyrics. Saussure’s model of the sign will be applied. Saussure in Chandler (2002) offered a ‘dyadic’ or two-part model of the sign, a signified as concept and a signifier as sound pattern. For Saussure, both signifier and the signified were purely ‘psychological’. Also, in the process of its interpretation, the denotation approach will be applied. Martin and Ringham (2000) stated that denotation designates the process of referring to the dictionary meanings of a word. It can be distinguished from connotation which relates to additional meanings resulting from the context in which the word is applied. The word ‘rose’, for example, denotes a flower or the shrub bearing it. In a particular context, however, the word ‘rose’ might connote love, or the House of Tudor.

Table 2. The linguistic sings for signifier and signified in interpreting the narrator ‘I’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNIFIER</th>
<th>SIGNIFIED (THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG WRITER IN WRITING THE LYRIC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A king, queen, leader, president, governor</td>
<td>1. I used to roll the dice,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. I held the key,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Be my mirror, my sword and shield,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. My missionaries in a foreign field,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. And that was when I ruled the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>Seas would rise when I gave the word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cruel, sadistic</td>
<td>1. Feel the fear in my enemy’s eyes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Listen as the crowd would sing “Now the old king is dead! Long live the king!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. It was the wicked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and wild wind
4. Blew down the doors to let me in
5. Shattered windows and the sound of drums

| Hated   | 1. Revolutionaries wait for my head on a silver plate
2. I know Saint Peter won’t call my name |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liar</td>
<td>Never an honest word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careless, stupid, silly</td>
<td>And I discovered that my castles stand upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interpretation of I as the main narrator is interpreted from the signified or concept that inspired lyric writers in writing the lyrics. The narrator ‘I’ can be represented as a king, president, leader, or governor who was powerful, cruel, sadistic, hated, liar, careless, stupid or silly.

5. Conclusion

The lyric of Viva La Vida song is full of narration. By using the first-person narration, the lyrics become a set of meaningful lyrics. In the process of writing the lyrics, the lyric writers wrote their own perspective by using the interpretation of linear analysis. That is why these lyrics contain a lot of meaning and make them interesting to be interpreted by the listeners.

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References