

Spring 2020

Rhetorical and musical synthesis and the strategies for inter-generational resonance in Queen's Bohemian rhapsody

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RHETORICAL AND MUSICAL SYNTHESIS AND THE STRATEGIES FOR INTER-
GENERATIONAL RESONANCE IN QUEEN'S *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY*

A Thesis Presented To
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Science in Communication

By
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Spring 2020

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ABSTRACT

RHETORICAL AND MUSICAL SYNTHESIS AND THE STRATEGIES FOR
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This study critically examines the popular rock anthem *Bohemian Rhapsody* to understand why the song has remained a lasting and eminently compelling standard for the progressive rock genre and why it has appealed through an inter-generational scope. Through the use of Close Textual Analysis (CTA), with an emphasis on metaphoric criticism, combined with Music Analysis of the score using popular song analysis tools, this study deconstructs the song and uncovered rhetorical strategies of the music and the lyrics as they function separately. In the conclusion, the two methodological approaches are synthesized to reveal the intertextual interanimation of the music and lyrics together, resulting in a complete musical experience that allows listeners from all generations and on all continents to enter the interpretive space of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Musicology, Bohemian Rhapsody

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper would not have been possible without the love and support of my committee members and especially my close and personal confidant, friend, and thesis advisor Patricia Chantrill who stayed up long hours in the night on multiple occasions to pour over my drafts. Your brilliance in the world of rhetorical criticism inspires me and your kindness and understanding are what got me through this paper. Thank you for answering every panicked phone call and late-night text message to calm my nerves and reassure me through this process and thank you for believing in me even when I doubted myself time and time again.

I would like to offer a special thanks Emily Vickers who served as a second on my committee and became an invaluable addition to the team. Without your knowledge and expertise on research methods and musicology, I would have been lost on my interdisciplinary journey. Thank you for pulling a dozen books off of the shelves at the library so that I could learn more about the study of popular music. Thank you for the invaluable reference to Allan Moore's book that helped me conduct such a thorough and meaningful analysis of my favorite song. Thank you for your hard work and time taken to edit my monster draft.

Thank you to my third committee member Javier Ochoa-Reparaz for agreeing to be a part of this process, I hope you enjoyed reading through this paper as much as I enjoyed writing it. Finally, a thank you to my boyfriend Austin Davis, who is a talented and kindhearted friend and musician. Without your help I would have been lost. Thank you for letting me get frustrated and sticking by my side anyway as you taught me how to understand the music on a more academic level, I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my journey towards scholarship, I frequently ask myself the question, “What do I want to become the master of?” The answer was broad at first. I wanted to explore the deeper meaning of words. Words inspired me to become a communications scholar in the first place. When I first set foot on this collegiate journey, at a community college here in Spokane, I enrolled with no idea what I wanted to do, no direction, and a vague passion for reading and writing. I did well in English and so that led me to enroll in a few entry-level communication courses. This, in turn, led me to my first ethics class and from there I was hooked. We read Plato and Aristotle and discussed virtue and morality and I was immersed in the questions about the nature of human beings and the power of rhetoric. Since then I have strived to become a master of my craft, carefully constructing messages and becoming more aware of the communicative world around me. As I moved forward in my studies, graduating with my 4-year degree and ascending to the Master of Science in Communications (MSC) program at EWU, I practiced more critical thinking, questioning the structure of everything and never settling for what might appear to be concrete at any given moment. I credit this inquisition to philosophers like Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall and the many professors who introduced me to critical theory. So, after much reflection I finally experienced my “ah ha” moment and sought to combine my knowledge of critical thinking and discourse analysis with my other love of music and take a more thorough look into something that spoke to my interdisciplinary passions.

My most beloved pastime has always been music. My mother told me that when I was a child, I would sing along to the popular music that played on the radio. TLC's *No Scrubs* was a particular favorite of mine. I was five years old and it was 1999, so naturally R&B was one of the first genres that I was exposed to. My mother was impressed by my ability to memorize and recite lyrics that I'd heard only a few times. I've often referred to myself as a "human jukebox" because I am particularly keen on memorizing lyrics and songs. Whether it be the chorus, a popular verse or simply a melody I can hum along to, a thousand tunes float around in my head at all times. Music fuels my heart with the blood that it takes to pump. When I was growing up, I would hang around while my mom deep cleaned the house to one-or-a-few albums from eclectic genres. I recall that her favorites included Bob Marley's *Greatest Hits* 2-disc set and a compilation of Whitney Houston's *Greatest Hits*. She would listen to Andrea Bocelli's modern Italian opera albums and for a time the industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails' 1989 album titled *Pretty Hate Machine* would breach the queue. I was introduced to an array of musical tastes and loved them all.

By the time I was in elementary school, I would discover on my own the works of Elton John. I spent most of my time throughout the 5th and 6th grade with a friend named Amanda who had three sisters and a brother. As an only child, I craved to be involved in the bustling family household. This family also loved music and Amanda's father happened to be a tribute artist to Elton John and played shows in Las Vegas at the time. So, I quickly learned more about the very eclectic and dynamic popular rock genre. I was enamored with the emotional power of this music. At about the age of 11 in 2005, Amanda and I discovered Queen's *Bohemian*

Rhapsody. I was obsessed with the song. It was playful and nonsensical and, at the same time, beautiful and deeply sad. Fifteen years later, this same song would become the inspiration for this thesis. At the time I selected the artifact for study, I didn't know that I was just one of millions who cherished the preposterous musical relic. So, it is altogether fitting and proper that I should examine with a scholarly lens one of my favorite songs and explore what makes the artifact so rhetorically powerful.

It is easy to enjoy our music, uncritically and emotively. But there comes a time when we must wrestle with it critically and rationally in order to understand its rhetorical power and the strategies used to move us. So much of our lives are music-derived and driven. Music is a universal experience with lasting influences on history, politics, culture, our everyday lives, and our public discourse.

This study strives to answer the following research questions:

(RQ1) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody's* lyrics rhetorical?

(RQ2) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody's* musical elements rhetorical? and

(RQ3) How do musical components and verbal lyrics synthesize to make *Bohemian Rhapsody* an intergenerational and international favorite nearly half a century since it was released?

To answer these questions, the study begins by taking a step back so that the researcher can start from more generalized questions to guide the Literature Review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This Literature Review is divided into three parts, each part designed to prepare answers to the three research questions. While it is up to me to apply what I learn to answer the specific questions about *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the three research questions can be generalized to study how others have done this kind of work on other examples of popular music. Thus, the questions are generalized to the following:

(RQ1) How are lyrics rhetorical?

(RQ2) How are the musical elements rhetorical?

(RQ3) How do musical components and verbal lyrics synthesize to make a song compelling across generational and national boundaries?

In the analysis portion of this study I will apply what I have learned in the Literature Review to the specific case of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Rhetorical Lyrics

In this section, I will explore studies that apply rhetorical approaches to the lyrics of popular music in order to uncover the underlying patterns, themes and social implications of lyrical messages. Rhetorical analyses of popular lyrics are plentiful in the bounty of research that is available. Lyrics play an important role in creating the discursive reality in which we all live, where ideologies and identities are manifested through the freedoms and nuances of musical artistry. [The current study is not a Cultural Studies approach to understanding the role lyrics play in

creating manifested identities. It will focus instead on the universal appeal of a particular song across a multitude of listener identities.]

Barnett (2017) contributed research on rhetorical lyricism in an analysis of hit songs by the heavy metal band Black Sabbath. By deconstructing the patterns, themes, and narrative elements of the lyrics, the author concludes that many of the band's songs seem to borrow from Greek tragedy, involving "stories of extreme human suffering, often under extraordinary circumstances" with "the ability to elicit emotional responses from audiences" (p. 81). Listeners are invited to identify with the hero and immerse themselves in the narrative in order to purge negative emotions. Therefore, the songs function as a cathartic experience for the audience and become rhetorically powerful (p.81). Through Barnett's research we can see the way that lyrics can encourage an audience to be self-reflexive and participate in the story of the hero or the protagonist through symbolic action.

Bell's (2000) rhetorical analysis of American pop icon Bob Dylan's lyrics, titled "Double Dylan," discovered similar recurring patterns and personas in the singer-songwriter's work and claimed that "Dylan's lyrics are frequently self-reflexive" (p. 114); additionally, the lyrics illuminated multiple selves or different, sometimes competing facets of his own persona in the process. The study examined dozens of Dylan's songs and stanzas to synthesize the larger narratives, citing implied heroism as a common theme and poetry as the overarching compositional structure.

Craig (2016) explored similar themes by looking at the various characteristics and ideologies expressed by rappers within their song lyrics. The

study uses a psychological theoretical background in the analysis and interpretation of “observed actions” and “principles” found in the lyrics. Rap music has gained immense popularity in contemporary popular culture and its reach has expanded from the traditionally low-income urban community roots towards a more global platform. The study is designed to look at the way the genre “depicts the rappers’ regard toward and relationships with women they know intimately,” (p. 25) paying particular attention to the “thug” identity that is heavily involved in the perception of women through rap lyrics. The core of the research uncovered themes of Black male masculinity and intimate relationships (p.25). Studies like those mentioned above offer indications of the way that music and lyrics can appeal to audiences through the manifestation of certain identities and ideologies.

Matula (2000) contextualized musical rhetoric in his study of the song “Rock Music” by the Pixies’ requiring more attention to contextual and intertextual factors that influence the effectiveness of music as a rhetorical artifact. He argued that context shapes the listening experience and becomes the “symbolic veil of culture and value through which listeners frame their response to music” (p. 218). The author defined context as a “symbolic event” usually musical or music-related, or as one author Richards (1991) put it “a cluster of events that recur together” or a “set of entities...related in a certain way” (as cited in Matula, 2000, pg. 221). After context is explained, the analysis began by referencing the contextual factors behind the song *Rock Music* beginning with the socio-cultural influence of “punk.” Alluding to several more “symbolic events,” the author was able to trace the meaning of the lyrics to the intersection of multiple contexts “rather than through analytical

explication of musical symbols” (p. 224). This research is one example of the symbolic power of music on its listeners.

Phelps-Ward, Allen and Howard (2017) contributed research on the rhetoric of Beyonce’s performance of *Freedom* at the 2016 BET Awards. This analysis was supplemented by the consideration of several rhetorical texts including, lyrics, venue and performance (visual style). The authors argued that the combination of each symbolized “...feelings of unity, frustration, resistance, resilience, struggle and disposability embodied in the experiences of Black women enrolled at colleges and universities” (p. 50). The research incorporated contextual factors in the analysis by extrapolating and exploring key words used by fans on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. [The current study is not reliant on external or contextual factors for analysis of the lyrics and music, though it provides background on the singer and the song’s popularity in the analysis.] Lyrics to the song “Freedom” were found to be reoccurring on both platforms, where fans actively responded to the performance by posting quotes of the lyrics alongside the hashtag #beyonceFreedom. Specifically, the research sought to critically analyze the interrelated texts to understand what the song and the performance symbolized about Black womanhood and the experiences of Black women at predominately white institutions (p.53).

In one quantitative study out of Lawrence Technological University, Atlanta (2019) data scientists explored the change in popular music lyrics over seven decades from the 1950s to 2016 and found that expressions of anger and sadness in music had increased gradually over time and that expressions of joy had

subsequently decreased over time (p.1). The data program analyzed the lyrics of over 6000 songs from Billboards Top 100 in each year in order to obtain these findings. Some interesting findings included that songs in the 1950s were the least angry and that the angriest tone among popular music peaked in 2015. At a period from 1982-1984 there was a trend in happier lyrics, comparable to that of the 1950s. Then, in the 1990s, songs became much angrier compared to earlier eras. From this type of content analysis, we can trace the patterns and themes of the lyrics in popular music over time. Based on this data, one can understand the overall sentiment of specific demographics who are contributing to music culture during each decade using a thorough analysis of frequent words in popular songs.

Looking critically at the lyrics in popular music offers scholars the opportunity to see the underlying values, traditions and trends within popular culture and expose the social issues and inequalities that are imbedded in the lyrics of popular songs. Lyrics are a powerful vehicle for public address and advocacy as well as identity and catharsis. Rhetorical analyses of popular song lyrics have become the baseline for critically exploring music as a form of argument. In the next section we will explore some of the research that is available on the rhetorical effects of nonverbal characteristics in music.

Musical Rhetoric

In this section, I will explore the literature on music-as-argumentation and develop expertise in understanding musical components in a given song as an audio text designed to persuade. Winter (2013) became fascinated with those elements in musical composition that are designed to move and foster an emotional response in

an audience. He wanted to explore the reasons why non-verbal characteristics of music had the ability to persuade an audience towards feelings of deep emotion and empathy. In the first section of the paper Winter described his own experience with just a few bars of “Mozart’s Wind Serenade K 364” (p. 105). The author noted that he “had found the passage so extraordinarily moving” (p. 105) that afterwards he could not comprehend his ambiguous response. Winter quotes another interdisciplinary researcher, Roger Scruton (1996), who claimed that musical composition or notation is explained as an “other-worldly voice that speaks to us in tones/” Scruton believed that “music fulfills itself by reaching into the realm of pure abstraction and reconstituting there the movements of the human soul” (p. 105). According to these two academics, those nonverbal, compositional elements do have the ability to persuade and provoke emotional responses on their own. This particular research posited that melody and instrumentation can have impressive rhetorical effects on the listener, especially in classical works that employ powerful harmonic combinations (p. 106).

Tagg (2006) contributed research dedicated to exploring the unique relationship between human beings and sound. The article titled, “Subjectivity and Soundscape, Motorbikes and Music,” is introduced by an illustration of an infant’s shrill and powerful cry. The author noted that babies have “inordinate lung power and vocal cords of steel” (as cited in; *The Popular Music Studies Reader* by Bennet, Shank and Toynebee 2006, p.45) designed to provoke an immediate response from adults. The sound thus cuts through the background noise and achieves a specific goal. Tagg used this analogy, among others, to compare the way that some are

interpellated or “hailed” by the sound of heavy metal music. Tagg believed that heavy metal accompaniment is reminiscent of the “...ambient noise of postwar traffic, electric motors, ventilation...” (p.46-47) and argued that those who grew up on noisy industrial streets are likely to identify with the turbulent sounds in the music. In this way, heavy metal music is a direct response by those living in chaos. Near the end of the paper, Tagg discussed the context that the heavy metal genre was born from and the social and political implications that lead to the rise of heavy metal in the 80s during two tumultuous decades of post-war politics and an era of “Reaganomics” (p.49). The heavy metal sound has been manifested as an artistic response to the woes of a particular demographic in the post-war era; therefore, the sound itself has become a rhetorical strategy.

Middleton (2006) dedicated his own research to the phenomena of repetition in musical form. By focusing on the musical components of songs alone, repetition is recognized as one of the most widely applicable aspects in musical syntaxes, which considers the arrangement and form of musical scores (Popular Music Studies Reader, Bennet, Shank & Toynbee 2006, p. 15). The author sought to understand why repetition is so prevalent in popular music research and what are the effects of this popular trope by looking into a number of popular songs. The analysis lauded the techniques of blues and rock ‘n’ roll genres and considered the way that repetition is used in various capacities like that of riffs, harmonies, and chords. Middleton noted the way, the legendary rock band Led Zeppelin incorporated this repetitive riff style throughout the entire framework of their song “Whole Lotta Love.” The Rolling Stones had also been known to showcase these patterns through

repetition of harmonic chords in a number of their songs, such as the notorious and upbeat rhythms in “Paint it Black” and the familiar slow rock melody in “Wild Horses” (p.19). Repetitive rhythms “...emerge as a distinct layer in jazz and rhythm and blues, notably through the use of syntactic units by drummers” in the “back-beat and eight-to-the-bar patterns” (p. 19) of the drums. Through this form of repetition, the foundation of the song is solidified and maintained. Middleton concluded that repetition is often associated with the idea of transcendence; it is often hypnotic and can captivate an audience through the use of rhythm alone. This study is one example of the rhetorical effect of repetition; the current study will look at the way the *Bohemian Rhapsody* employs the use of repetition through the lyrics and musical patterns with the potential to have the same rhetorical effect.

Research on the nonverbal aspects of music as a form of argument provide unique insight into the persuasive elements that are present within the style, structure, notation and instrumentation of music. Lyrics and music function differently, separately and also synchronically, though both encourage emotional responses from the audience.

Matula (2000) posited that it is important to consider “...a fuller understanding of music’s rhetorical nature” paying mind “...both to lyrical and musical components of song” (p. 219). Language and lyrics have symbolic power and so too do the nonverbal elements of the musical experience. Many scholars explore how the two work together in unique ways. In the next section, this paper will explore a sample of research that seeks to understand the dynamic relationship of music and lyrics working together to persuade.

How music and lyrics work together rhetorically

In recent decades, researchers have sought to deconstruct the dynamic elements of the nonverbal melody and the intricate lyricism in popular songs, exploring deeper meanings behind the two as they work together. In the structure, tempo, timbre and intention of the melody, there is a symbiotic relationship with the linguistic message. In one study done by Dewberry and Millen (2014), the authors explored the ways in which the music and the lyrics, used in several noteworthy presidential campaigns, work both in favor of and against the intended message. Even though the lyrics in popular rock songs had particularly patriotic symbolism, when coupled with the music, the message was contradictory. Specifically, they argued that “[S]ongs’ meanings are constructed by both their discursive and nondiscursive constitutive elements” (p. 82). They believed that it is necessary to analyze the words and lyrics alongside the music in order to truly understand the meaning. They sought to expand the goals of speech and oratorical criticism to include traditional verbal approaches as well as music, new media “and everything in between” (p. 82).

Postmodernism has given rise to an exploration into the rhetoric of not only speech, but any and all artifacts that serve a persuasive purpose. In the advent of technology, we see how “non vocal sounds have been added to symbols, thereby enhancing, challenging, or obfuscating meanings of those symbols” (p. 82). Much of the research on rhetoric and music incorporates and analyzes all elements that make the song work persuasively, considering the score and the notation especially.

In the beat of a drum and the strum of a guitar, another dimension is added to the argument. The music contributes something to the meaning of the lyrics. It can align with the lyrics or intentionally oppose them. We can see this in the way that a D minor chord elicits a more woeful sound compared to that of a D Major chord (p.81). This conclusion is made entirely based on our experience in hearing the note play out; listeners have learned to associate certain notes with certain emotions, though that association is not natural or necessary to the music. It is something, for example, Western listeners relate to by culturally established conventions. Aristotle would call this the “pathos” of rhetorical appeals. The emotional appeal of music has the power to cause change and often encourages the audience to act, or to experience an emotional response. Music is therefore a vital area of study for those who are interested in deep seeded social issues. Songs can illuminate social inequalities and bring the conversation to its listeners.

In her book *Oh boy!: masculinities and popular music*, author Freya Jarmen-Ivens (2007) studied the intricacies in the role of masculinity in popular music. The very first chapter of the text pays homage to *Bohemian Rhapsody*. It began with analysis of how the lyrics and music work together to create meaning, which was why I included this analysis here (as the only example of extended analysis of the song’s lyrics and music I found in scholarly works). Jarmen-Ivens’ short analysis privileged a focus on the synthesis of lyrics and musical notes working together to address issues of masculinity in the song. For example, the author argued that a sense of uncertainty “is heightened by the harmonic change from “B \flat 6 to C7 in bars 1 and 2” (p.24).

In “A rhetorical analysis of Cher: Toward understanding the interactive role among lyrics, music, and persona in conveying messages about sexuality, beauty, and empowerment,” (Brown ,2007), the author explored the singer’s mediated persona as revealed in her songs. The study is a doctoral dissertation and goes in depth to examine Cher’s persona as reflected in her song lyrics, concert performances, album art, song singles, and a variety of images. This study highlights the importance of looking at the performer themselves as an element in the production of meaning.

As another example of rhetorical and other analyses of a particular singer’s works, Hubbs (2007) focused on Gloria Gaynor and her disco anthem, *I Will Survive* exploring the “rich interplay of musical and verbal discourses of difference” (p. 233). The author argued that “musical expressivity is relocated in the high-production instrumentals, where troping [sic] of learned vernacular...sacred and profane timbres and idioms defines a euphoric space of difference and transcendence” (p. 231) and helps to illuminate the “queer subcultural space” (p. 233), that both disco and Gloria Gaynor’s music helped to create. In one section titled “Transcendence in A-minor: the musical rhetoric of difference in ‘Survive’,” Hubbs explored numerous musical signifiers that serve to reinforce “telegraph” and “embroider upon” the song’s textual themes of marginalization and transcendence (p. 233). Later in the paper, the author analyzed the lyrics and found themes of marginalization and difference in the language of the anthem as well, concluding that the lyrics “...foreground emotional ambiguity, juxtaposed tragedy and flippancy...all of which resonate simultaneously with gay camp and African-American Signifyin(g)” (p. 237).

This analysis is just one example of how music keenly addresses social inequalities through symbolic meanings. But, it also serves as a model from which to synthesize meaning in the lyrics and in the music toward an understanding of what makes a song compelling to its listeners.

Sorums (2015) wrote an article that investigates how the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s used musical components of lyrics and sound to “manipulate the marketed images of girlhood” (p. 159). In an analysis of music from the band Bikini Kill, Sorums explored the way that the punk rock girl band, implemented their own ‘sound-collage’ of musical elements that made the artifact rhetorical in its response to the movement. The author considered a ‘sound-collage’ to be “at its basic level, a process of juxtaposing unrelated designs (lyrically) with imperfect and seemingly incompatible musical tones – often out of sync – yet all collated to be heard and understood together on a collage-like soundscape” (p. 163). The paper explored these out of sync patterns and unique lyricism in combination with one another to make an argument about how the riot grrrl movement was championed through songs by bands like Bikini Kill. This disruption from the expectations within the genre and unexpected patterns in musical composition is similar to the unique and unexpected form in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, therefore this study offers direction on how to approach an analysis of a song that strays from a more common form.

Sellnow (1996) explores a collection of songs by rock n’ roll legend Bruce Springsteen to “determine the impact of rhetorical strategies of continuity and change on musical artists’ appeal over time” (p. 46). The analysis is grounded in an

“illusion of life” rhetorical perspective. This framework recognizes the importance of analyzing music as rhetorical form by “examining the interactive relationship between music and lyrics” and enhancing “our ability to understand how music functions rhetorically to communicate emotion” (p.46). The framework was developed several years earlier by Sellnow and is designed to illuminate the interdependency of music and lyrics that communicate messages “comprised of both thought and feeling” (p.47). In application, this framework suggests that lyrical messages, set in a “tragic rhythm” (which is more pessimistic), accompanied and reinforced by a musical score that uses “intensity patterns” employed by “full instrumentation” and “crescendos” work to supplement the mood and the message of the song. The study suggests that “music and lyrics must be considered equally strong if rhetorical conclusions are to be drawn” (p.59). The framework was applied to Springsteen’s music over the course two decades and the implications suggested that the rock star was able to appeal to many generations through the adaptation of his musical and lyrical style in response to the tastes of each new and diverse audience. This study is the most relevant towards the specific goal of this research which will be to understand the lasting power and resonance of a popular song.

Conclusion

In the literature review above, several themes, methodologies and frameworks are considered to set the stage for applying best practices to this case study of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. I now have a solid overview of how others have approached the analysis of popular music, examining lyrics as rhetorical artifacts, detailing how musical components can have their own persuasive properties, and

working to synthesize the lyrics and the music as a collaborative argument, I am now set to examine *Bohemian Rhapsody* using these models as a guide.

But, I am humbled first. I have taken a graduate class in Rhetorical Theory & Criticism as part of my preparation for this study. However, I have no such background in analyzing the musical components of popular songs. Because the degree I am pursuing and my own intellectual interests are interdisciplinary, I recognized this deficit early on and sought out Professor Emily Vickers for resources on learning a new vocabulary and a precise method for analyzing the musical components of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. As far as I can tell, this multi-modal type of analysis has never been done on the song, though there are countless fan-based critics online who have speculated on the meaning of the lyrics. So that my work will not rely on speculation, and with the help of Professor Vickers, this study will align with a framework even a musical novice can use to analyze the musical components of the song. This framework was developed by Allan F. Moore in his 2012 book titled, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Songs*. While the author applies his framework to a number of songs from a variety of popular genres, he has not included *Bohemian Rhapsody* in his repertoire. Thus, in the music analysis portion of Chapter IV (Results and Discussion), I will rely solely on the application of Moore's complex framework to learn what those in the Literature Review who study "beyond the lyrics" seem to have already figured out. The rhetorical method to be applied to the lyrics and more on Moore's method of analysis is detailed in the next chapter on Methodology.

METHODOLOGY

The following research questions from the Literature Review have been revised and returned to their original form to reflect the particular focus on Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*:

(RQ1) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s lyrics rhetorical?

(RQ2) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s musical elements rhetorical?

(RQ3) How do musical components and verbal lyrics synthesize to make *Bohemian Rhapsody* an intergenerational and international favorite nearly half a century since it was released?

In order to answer these research questions, this study employ two methods of analysis: Close Textual Analysis and Music Analysis. Each of these methods will be described and justified below.

Close Textual Analysis

In 1994, Edwin Black wrote a rhetorical analysis of Abraham Lincoln's famous presidential address titled, *Gettysburg and Silence*. Lincoln's speech was deconstructed using Close Textual Analysis (CTA), a tool in rhetorical criticism that can "reveal and explicate the precise, often hidden, mechanisms that give a particular text artistic unity and rhetorical effects" (Burghardt, 2010, p.199). CTA is a "close reading" that considers all the working parts that make a text persuasive. This method is used to investigate the nuances in writing that are often overlooked.

Black's close reading of the *Gettysburg Address* examined the speech through a prismatic lens and offered unique interpretations not limited by traditional rhetorical tools. Until the 1970s, traditional frameworks in rhetorical criticism were

focused on “structure” and “abstract methods” in speech composition. Scholars such as Michael Leff and G. P. Mohrmann argued that more attention should be paid to the “actual conduct of discourse” (as cited in Burghardt, 2010, p. 199), considering the functions of symbolic language as persuasive argument.

Black’s use of CTA has proven to be an effective rhetorical tool. In his 1994 essay, the critic analyzed Lincoln’s discourse in multifaceted ways beginning with the president’s careful consideration of the audience. In the very first paragraph Black noted that the language in Lincoln’s passage “addressed the ages” (p.222). The phrasing did not always imply a particular audience; rather, in addition to those present in Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln’s language transcended time and space to reach an American audience not born yet. Black claimed that Lincoln’s language patterns revealed a deductive process, allowing those who heard and now read the Address to participate in the arguments as co-creators of meaning (p.222).

CTA invites the critic to look for patterns that serve a unique purpose in enhancing the persuasive message. Black posed an argument about the underlying meanings in the *Gettysburg Address*, focusing on the frequency and purpose of specific words. By highlighting the repetition of words, the critic can draw conclusions about the central ideas of the larger work. For example, Black examined the function of the frequent “here” in Lincoln’s speech. He discovered that “here” functioned in at least 2 ways, alluding to the infinite “here” as a “particular moment during eternity,” (p.223) and as a homonym for “hear” or a “recurrent command issued to the audience to attend” (p.223). The author examined the way the speech employed words like “Nation,” “battle-field” and “resting place” to invoke an

“expansionary movement” through time and space. Black considered the “scope” of the speech in its entirety, and he expounded upon the “cycles and archetypes” prevalent throughout the narrative. He also considered context and the frame of negativity as an effective rhetorical tool. In the freedoms that CTA offers, critics can analyze a text based on their own assumptions of what makes the language “work” rhetorically.

Under the broad umbrella of Close Textual Analysis, this study will also bring some clarity to the use of metaphor as a rhetorical strategy, much as Black did in his analysis of the *Gettysburg Address*. In classical rhetorical criticism, metaphor is considered to be one of the five canons of style, though rhetorical critics in the postmodern era argue that the figurative language trope is more than just “artificial ornamentation;” it is an effective means by which an argument is expressed (Burgchardt, 2010, p. 347). Rhetorical scholar Michael Osborn also identified the significance of the archetypal metaphor, or metaphors that have salience across cultures and are powerful-yet-subtle images that resonate across time. The author argued that metaphor is “at the base of rhetorical invention” and that “metaphors are routinely elaborated into motivating perspectives” (p. 361).

Through the use of CTA and a sampling of metaphoric criticism, language and symbolic meaning become the center of attention for rhetorical analysis of lyrics. In light of the many foundational examples above and with an additional emphasis on metaphoric criticism, CTA surfaces as the most appropriate rhetorical tool to analyze the lyrics of Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Because the freedoms of CTA do not formally extend to the rhetoric of the musical arguments, which are of

equal importance in exploring the persuasive components of a song, a second method is warranted.

Music Analysis

Western music analysis is a practice that has developed over centuries and includes many frameworks developed by scholars, analysts and musicologists in pursuit of their unique analytical goals. There is no uniform method for conducting analysis today, as it is a highly subjective process. In the 2012 book *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Songs*, author Allan F. Moore constructed his own framework for analyzing the meaning of popular songs. Moore offers a loose formal analysis for understanding the meaning of songs asking questions like “*how they mean*” and “*the means by which they mean*” (p.1). The framework is designed to “lay bare the means by which popular songs are constructed” from the analyst’s point of view (p.1). Focusing on the “how” is something that any listener is capable of and Moore believes that all ‘listeners’ “participate fundamentally in the meanings that songs have” (p.1). The goal of the text is to provide the means to develop those tools that are required to understand the subjective meaning of a song for any one unique analyst. The methodology is primarily concerned with the aural, psychological, and bodily experience that listeners have when attending to popular songs. Moore argues that “in order to discuss how a musical experience was, we need to communicate its changing effect on us” (p. 5). The problem with the available methodology is that academics interested in the “popular” or “non-conceptual” components of music tend to have

little access to the precise language needed to achieve their goals. That is what this book is designed to remedy. Analyzing popular songs is a highly interpretative process and too often in the literature, “interpretations are made without adequate anchorage in the details of an actual aural experience of a song” (p. 5-6). Each chapter outlines, in the necessary order (according to Moore), the tools needed to analyze popular songs. Moore’s framework includes analysis of the shape, form, delivery, style, friction, persona, reference and belonging. Each chapter poses questions to analysts to help them develop the vocabulary and analytical frameworks needed to make an argument about *how* popular songs achieve their meaning within the music itself. Moore’s framework is ideal for the novice musical analyst. It offers a practical and feasible complementary approach to understanding music as argument in addition to analyzing the rhetorical strategies within the lyrics. It is also justified by how it will provide insight into understanding the listener’s experience relative to Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

The next chapter is the Results and Discussion portion of this study, followed by a concluding chapter. Before applying the two methods outlined above, Chapter IV will first provide background on the song as a prerequisite for rhetorical analysis of the lyrics. Placing the “text in context” is a common strategy for rhetorical critics, allowing them to understand the lyrics as arising out of some temporal and personal space that influences the linguistic choices. After reviewing background information on the song and the songwriter, Queen’s Freddie Mercury, the analysis of the lyrics begins and is followed by an analysis of the musical components using Allan Moore’s framework.

These context and analytical components are substantial, clearly the heart of this study's focus. It has also turned out to be a much more ambitious study than originally envisioned. So as not to confuse the reader, the synthesis across the two methods of analysis will be suspended until Chapter V when the study moves to a conclusion. This will make the conclusion somewhat longer than is standard for a thesis, but it is my hope the adaptation will keep the next chapter from becoming too unwieldy for the reader.

This is a good time to mention, too, that while I have been referring to myself in the first-person singular form throughout the first three chapters, I was compelled to bring the reader along in the analysis sections as a "shared journey." We will now be using first-person plural references to document the rest of the work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section places the text of *Bohemian Rhapsody* in context and provides background information on the songwriter and the composition and release of the song. The second section includes a rhetorical critique of the song's lyrics by applying Close Textual and Metaphoric methods of analysis (as explained in Chapter 3). The third section will, in similar format to the second, comprise the Musical Analysis of the song (also explained in Chapter 3). Following this chapter with its three sections is the Conclusion. This final chapter is designed to synthesize what is learned about the lyrical and musical influences that work together to resonate across cultures and time.

Section 1: Text in Context

Any serious study of *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a rhetorical artifact should begin by "situating" the text in context using Lloyd Bitzer's (1984) three criteria for analysis and evaluation of the Rhetorical Situation: exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is "the imperfection marked by an urgency," or something waiting to be done that can be modified by discourse (p. 6). In other words, a situation must be able to be changed by discourse in order to be rhetorical. The exigence for *Bohemian Rhapsody* would include the "imperfect" historical context that made both writing the song and releasing it to the public in 1975 an urgent endeavor on the part of the songwriter, Freddie Mercury. Similarly, Bitzer's understanding of the Rhetorical Audience can be distinguished from a body of

listeners to the song or readers of the lyrics who have no rhetorical relevance to the appeal. The rhetorical audience includes only those who are capable of being influenced by and possess the means to do what the discourse is asking of them. Finally, Bitzer defines “Rhetorical Constraints” as “...persons, events, objects and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the obstacle” (p. 8). Constraints include more than what a rhetor can’t say; they also comprise what a rhetor (including a songwriter) must say and inform how they say it in response to the exigence.

These three constituents provide a framework to examine the rhetorical artifact as a text in context. It offers a “broad brush” approach to understanding the motivating factors that called *Bohemian Rhapsody* into being in such a way so that the rhetorical artifact continues to resonate across generations and international boundaries 45 years after the “imperfection marked by an urgency” called the song into being. In order to understand the song’s exigence and the influences on the composition, recording, and release of the song to the public, much of this section relies upon Lesley-Ann Jones’ definitive *Mercury: An Intimate Biography of Freddie Mercury* (2012). The book is based on over 100 interviews with key figures in Mercury’s life. Jones is cited specifically when direct quotes are used; the rest is paraphrased by the researcher of this study.

Exigence, Audience, and Constraints

Freddie Mercury was born September 5, 1946 as Farrokh Bulsara in Zanzibar, a British Protectorate at the time. This made the child a British subject. His

parents were from India and identified as Parsis, an ethnoreligious group that practiced the Zoroastrian faith. For most of his childhood, his parents sent young Farrokh to a series of English schools in India where he lived with relatives, learned to play the piano, and started his own school band styled after Western music. It was in India at this time that Farrokh's boarding-school teachers and classmates gave him the nickname "Freddie," which his parents also adopted. (He would not legally change his name to Freddie Mercury until 1970, when he also changed his band's name from Smile to Queen). He returned to Zanzibar in 1963 and to the confines of his family's Zoroastrian faith. The Zoroastrian religion condemns homosexuality and is likely to have influenced Mercury's effort to repress his sexuality for most of his adult life (Jones, 2012). In an attempt to flee the violent revolution of 1964, Mercury's family left Zanzibar for Middlesex, England in northern London. Mercury would then find his inspiration and theatrical style in rock n' roll legend Jimi Hendrix and in nearby Kensington Market's artisan collective.

Kensington was filled with jobless artists, writers and other creatives who made a living selling their works. It was, in a word, a very *bohemian* place in that it welcomed people who were both artistic and struggling against traditions and social norms they found oppressive. Mercury was beginning to become more comfortable with himself and his art, flaunting and perfecting his campy and flamboyant on-stage charisma in a place that encouraged and accepted his individualism. No one who knew Mercury in these early years would have guessed that he was struggling to repress his sexual identity (Jones, 2012). During this time, Mercury had had a few

short-term girlfriends and showed interest in the gay community, but he is alleged to have been ashamed and self-conscious of this part of himself to the extent that he would completely retreat from society on occasion (Jones, 2012). A kind, well-mannered and quiet man, despite the musical performance side of himself, Mercury was a social provider, always manifesting a fun and loving environment for those around him. Then, he met Mary Austin, the woman who would later inspire Queen's song *Love of My Life*.

Austin met Mercury in 1969. She had an inner strength that Mercury is said to have admired in contrast to his own feelings about himself and the “great pretender” that he had always been (Jones, 2012, pg. 88). Over the six years of their relationship, Austin is said to have offered Mercury a form of maternal stability and security. Mercury ultimately admitted to Austin that he was attracted to men, but their bond continued, and she remained an integral part of his life, including the day of his death in November 1991. The relationship was complicated and difficult at times, especially as Mercury engaged with men more often and tried to remain with Austin still, in his way (Jones, 2012). This relationship was as integral to Mercury's life as was his work with Queen. Freddie Mercury was a complex of identities and tensions between his childhood roots and those he developed leading into adulthood. A shy and reserved young man who was also known for a flamboyant stage persona only partially explains the tensions that ruled him. Religion, shame, homosexuality, platonic love, the cultural ties to northeast Africa, India, and London, the musical training along with a nearly five-octave vocal range, all of these tensions

can help to reveal the symbols and themes that together find a voice in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

By 1975 Queen was making a name for themselves. After the success of *Killer Queen*, the band set out to write a new album and sustain their momentum. *Bohemian Rhapsody* was born in a quirky rental home in Hertfordshire over a months-long process. It was there that the lyrics were written solely by Mercury. In Jones (2012), Brian May (a Queen bandmate) is quoted as recalling the genesis of *Bohemian Rhapsody* as something that Freddie “seemed to have it all made up in his head” (p. 133).

And yet, Mercury repeatedly denied any particular inspiration leading up to the inception of the progressive rock ballad (Kot, 2015, para. 11). In this case, the inspiration for a song can be understood as analogous to what Bitzer called “the rhetorical situation” or “the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse” (pg. 1). For Bitzer, as noted earlier, rhetoric serves as a response to some pressing issue that calls the rhetoric into being and makes it particularly salient to its audiences. Having explored some of the relevant details in Mercury’s life leading to his writing of the song, we can now frame the artifact as a response to an exigence the songwriter urgently needed to address through the “discourse” he knew best: progressive rock music. It is worth noting that, at the time, Queen experienced great success from the release of the hit record *Killer Queen*, and the band was prompted to produce a new studio album to continue in that momentum. For these reasons, *Bohemian Rhapsody* became a response to those exigencies. The rhetorical situation

in 1975 constrained how the lyrics could be written and received by the progressive rock audience of the era. The rhetorical audience for the song includes those who were and continue to be able and willing to do what the song asks of them. Namely, given the thesis of this research, it will be argued that *Bohemian Rhapsody's* rhetorical audience is being asked to interpret the song in ways that are meaningful to them. We will return to this theme of the song's compelling and resonant properties throughout the analysis and synthesis segments of this study. But first, in order to firmly situate this text in context, we will explore some of the details surrounding the song's release.

Bohemian Rhapsody dropped on October 31st in 1975, propelled by the actions of one radio DJ, Kenny Everett (also a friend of Mercury's). The tune leaked after Queen's own record label (EMI) responded apprehensively about releasing the single first due to the song's extraordinary length (5 minutes, 54 seconds) and eclectic mix of musical genres. So, Mercury sent it over to Everett for a second opinion and left strict instructions "not" to air the single (Verhoeven, 2018). Without hesitation, Everett's London-based radio show aired the song over 14 times in the first two days. It was a *smash* hit in London. Fans enthusiastically responded to the peculiar rock melody and the band Queen would catapult to the top of the progressive rock realm soon after its release. Initially, radio and the music industry were hesitant to give the song a running chance and questioned what they could do with the nearly six-minute suite (Verhoeven, 2018). The long novelty number—composed into one, semi-ballad operatic-hard rock mashup of fantasy words that appeared to mean nothing—was at odds with current fare on mainstream radio.

Even megastar Elton John vastly underestimated the song's appeal. Before its release in 1975, Queen's manager John Reid played Elton John a test pressing, and he famously admonished, "Are you mad? You'll never get that on the radio" (p.102). Forty-five years later, the song is still a beloved classic with lyrics that are particularly transcendent and resonant to music lovers across the globe. If even Elton John couldn't have predicted the song's appeal, it stands to reason that this study should examine why the song still has such staying power in the dynamic and often short-lived realm of global, popular music.

When *Bohemian Rhapsody* was released, it topped the UK singles chart for nine weeks, sold a million copies in the first year (Hodkinson, 2004), and reached a solid fan base in the U.S, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Ireland and New Zealand upon its first release. It is one of the most successful selling rock singles of all time with nearly six million copies sold worldwide (RIAA, 2019). In 2018, it became the most streamed song in the 21st century and the most streamed rock n' roll song of *all* classic rock music, reaching over 1.5 billion streams worldwide (Hassan, 2018; data from Wall Street Journal, Universal Music Group). It reached number one again for five weeks following Mercury's death in 1991 (Dadds, 2007). In 1992, film cult classic *Wayne's World* introduced a new generation to the tune when it topped at number two on US Billboard charts once again (Dadds, 2007). The feature length biopic, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), inspired even more listeners, propelling the song back on the charts for the third time in 2018 (US Billboard Hot 100, 2019). It is one of the few songs to top the US Billboard Hot 100 list on three different occasions throughout the last four decades.

The famous Muppet's parody that aired in 2009 further extended the song's reach to children and their families. In the last two decades, *Bohemian Rhapsody* has taken on many forms across the internet. YouTube alone hosts covers and parodies, sung by generations young and old. Facebook moms film their toddler's singing verses from the back seat of the family car, and it's not uncommon to find a group of strangers belting the anthem in crowded bars, like old friends do.

With this context in mind, the third research question driving this study becomes even more essential to answer: How do musical components and verbal lyrics synthesize to make *Bohemian Rhapsody* an inter-generational and international favorite nearly half a century since it was released? The next two sections of this chapter, a rhetorical analysis of the lyrics (to answer research question 1), followed by the musical analysis (to answer research question 2), will attempt to bring us closer to an answer to that third research question by means of synthesizing across the methods of analysis in the study's conclusion.

Section 2: Close Textual Analysis of *Bohemian Rhapsody* as Rhetorical Artifact

In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (nd), editor

Mike Allen defines a rhetorical artifact “in the simplest of terms”:

[A] rhetorical artifact is a collection of symbols that is meaningful in a culture. An artifact is rhetorical to the extent that the symbols it incorporates convey a persuasive message to some audience. Because what is considered a symbol varies widely, what is considered an artifact does too. Symbols and, therefore, rhetorical artifacts always imply the creative work of humans. For instance, a natural landscape is not a rhetorical artifact, but a travel website that describes the landscape could be considered one. (par. 1)

This section of the chapter offers an examination of *Bohemian Rhapsody's* lyrics as a text-based rhetorical artifact. Using the related methods of close textual analysis [CTA] and metaphoric criticism, we will work to discover within the lyrics the “collection of symbols” and the rhetorical strategies that serve to convey a persuasive message to the song’s audiences across cultures, generations, and time. Ultimately, we hope to discover the reasons for why the song remains a compelling standard of progressive rock.

The “text” of the song for this section includes the lyrics only (an analysis of the musical features and the song’s eclectic mix of genres follows in Section 3 of this Results and Discussion chapter.) We already suspect that the lyrics contain connective properties that help to bring people together across generations. To discover those connective properties, we turn first to CTA to discover the patterns and themes within the lyrics, followed by a focus on the metaphors and other rhetorical strategies illuminated through close reading.

Close Textual Analysis

As explained in the Methodology chapter, this method of discourse analysis is a good fit for the goals of this study. Carl Burgchardt, author of *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism* (2010), notes that “Close textual analysis studies the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and its historical context in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively” (p. 199). Unlike traditional methods of rhetorical analysis, CTA requires a close reading of the text within context in order to better understand how and why the text persuades and “aims to reveal and explicate the precise, often hidden, mechanisms that give a particular text artistic unity and rhetorical effect” (p. 199). In other words, this approach to understanding the rhetorical strategies within the lyrics assists the critic in locating artistic patterns and nuances that are important to understanding the song’s appeal; these same artistic patterns and nuances might be easily missed when applying more traditional rhetorical tools that explore the text for effects on the audience alone.

This analysis is conducted in stages, starting with a line-by-line reading of the lyrics as they appear within seven distinct movements in the music. CTA will then turn to examine the larger structural components using a word cloud to identify the common themes and rhetorical strategies within the text. By analyzing the larger structures, the study can then propose an argument about the efficacy of the song’s rhetorical appeal.

Line-by-Line Analysis: The song is comprised of 376 words in a seven-part suite: order: [Intro], [Verse 1], [Verse 2], [Guitar solo], [Verse 3], [Verse 4], [Outro].

Some song analysts divide the song into six parts corresponding with the different genres, including ballad, guitar solo, opera, and hard rock between an intro and an outro. (See APPENDIX B for Infographic creator Kayla Reininger’s data visualization and the division of the song into *six* parts which Reininger claims is “an unusual technique in rock music.”) For our purposes, we will analyze the song lyrics as they are organized in the album liner notes (see Appendix A) with an Intro, four verses, and an Outro, leaving an analysis of the guitar solo to the musical section of this chapter. We will also refer to Verse 1 and Verse 2 as belonging to the Ballad genre, Verse 3 as belonging to the Opera genre, and Verse 4 as belonging to the Hard Rock genre. To examine the lyrics line-by-line, we will start with an image of the entire set of lyrics (transcribed from the liner notes and the official lyrics video--see Appendix A) to establish the “text” we will be working with.

Figure 1 is an image of the entire lyrics. Immediately following the image, the Intro, Verse 1, Verse 2, Verse 3, Verse 4, and Outro will be examined chronologically. Only the guitar solo, between Verses 2 and 3, is excluded in the line-by-line analysis of lyrics. Additionally, as with Figure 1 below, this analysis will follow the lines from the album liner notes, including their punctuation, with one exception. Where the liner notes do not include a line or partial line obviously sung in the song and noted in the video of the lyrics, those missing lines will be added for

analysis. The number of lines corresponds with the version of the lyrics included in Appendix A.

Figure 1.

Intro

1. Is this the real life --
2. Is this just fantasy --
3. Caught in a landslide --
4. No escape from reality --
5. Open your eyes
6. Look up to the skies and see --
7. I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy --
8. Because I'm easy come, easy go,
9. A little high, little low,
10. Any way the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me,
--to me--

Verse 1

1. Mama, just killed a man,
2. Put a gun against his head,
3. Pulled my trigger, now he's dead.
4. Mama, life had just begun,
5. But now I've gone and thrown it all away --
6. Mama, ooo,
7. Didn't mean to make you cry --
8. If I'm not back again this time tomorrow --
9. Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters --

Verse 2

1. Too late, my time has come,
2. Sends shivers down my spine --
3. Body's aching all the time,
4. Goodbye everybody -- I've got to go --
5. Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth --
6. Mama, ooo -- [(any way the wind blows) parenthetical
sung by others, this one not in liner notes]
7. I don't want to die,
8. I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all --

[Guitar Solo]

Verse 3

1. I see a little silhouetto of a man
2. Scaramouche, Scaramouche -- will you do the Fandango --
3. Thunderbolt and lightning -- Very, very frightening me --
4. (Galileo) Galileo,
5. (Galileo) Galileo,
6. Galileo figaro -- Magnifico --
7. I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me --
8. He's just a poor boy from a poor family --
9. Spare him his life from this monstrosity --
10. Easy come, easy go -- will you let me go --
11. Bismillah! No -- we will not let you go -- (let him go)
12. Bismillah! We will not let you go -- (let him go)
13. Bismillah! We will not let you go -- (let him go)
14. Will not let you go -- let me go
15. [Never, never, never, never let me go (not in liner notes)]
16. No, no, no, no, no, no, no --
17. Mama mia, mama mia, mama mia let me go --
18. Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me --
for me --

Verse 4 (follows shorter guitar solo)

1. So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye --
2. So you think you can love me and leave me to die --
3. Oh baby -- Can't do this to me baby --
4. Just gotta get out -- just gotta get right outta here --

Outro

1. [(Ooooh, ooo yeah, ooo yeah) Not in liner notes]
2. Nothing really matters,
3. Anyone can see,
4. Nothing really matters -- nothing really matters to me,
5. Any way the wind blows...

There are many “unofficial” sites claiming to list the lyrics that include errors and instances of significantly different punctuation, different spellings of words, different delineation of the song parts, even words that do not appear in the liner notes. In order to maintain consistency, the version of the lyrics to be analyzed will correspond with the transcribed version found in Appendix A. References to lines

within verses are the researcher's own interpretation but reasonably correspond with the liner notes. Additionally, parentheses are used to denote voices other than the protagonist's (where it is possible to distinguish them). We begin with CTA of *Bohemian Rhapsody's* Intro.

Intro

1. Is this the real life --
2. Is this just fantasy --
3. Caught in a landslide --
4. No escape from reality --
5. Open your eyes
6. Look up to the skies and see --
7. I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy --
8. Because I'm easy come, easy go,
9. A little high, little low,
10. Any way the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me,
--to me--

To begin the line-by-line analysis of the Intro and focus on word frequency as a starting point, we first need to set aside repeated instances of English "common words" or everyday words that function mechanically in a sentence or line and tend to have higher frequencies than less common words. The "set aside" words in the intro include repeated occurrences of the words "this," "the," "to," "is," "no," "I'm," "me," and "a." With the concluding line's repetition of "to me," only three "non common" words out of the total of 58 words in the verse occur twice each: "easy," "just," and "little." Both instances of "easy" and "little" occur in adjacent lines 8 and 9 and are in oppositional pairs (easy come/easy go, little high/little low). Only the repeated word "just" occurs in two distant lines, 2 and 7, suggesting the word and its role in modifying "fantasy" and "poor boy" has rhetorical significance beyond the

oppositional pairings of “easy” and “little.” In these intro instances of the word “just,” the meaning is synonymous with “only.”

Additionally, the first two lines of dreamlike “questions” (sans question marks in the liner notes) about real life or fantasy appears to be answered in lines 3 and 4 when we learn the protagonist is in an unstable (“landslide”) state with real consequences. Lines 5 and 6, “Open your eyes/Look up to the skies and see,” are intriguing for a number of reasons, including that these are the only lines in this verse framed in the second person tense. They also take form of a directive speech act (asking the listener to do something) rather than a reflective assertion from the protagonist. Because these are the only lines of this verse that imply the second person, it’s not clear whether the protagonist is directing someone else to “open your eyes” and “look up,” or if this is the protagonist in a singular attempt to rouse himself emotionally to take control in an unstable or even threatening situation.

The last four lines of the Intro appear to be an attempt to dismiss the importance of the protagonist’s situation, for he is “just” a poor boy in no need of sympathy or consideration, especially because he claims not to care what happens. There is a sense of confusion and despair that marks the Intro with the lone exception of what may be an emotional rally in lines 5 and 6. In line 10, the repetition of “to me” in succession, while falling under the “common words” set-aside category, still suggests listeners should pause at a literal translation of the protagonist’s claim that “nothing really matters.” Perhaps it should matter to everyone else, especially since the protagonist has already stated that he is in no

need of sympathy and may not be a good judge of what really matters in his unstable, ground-shifting state. He seems to be calling attention to his stated desire to be dismissed, an ironic if not authentic appeal.

Verse 1

1. Mama, just killed a man,
2. Put a gun against his head,
3. Pulled my trigger, now he's dead.
4. Mama, life had just begun,
5. But now I've gone and thrown it all away --
6. Mama, ooo,
7. Didn't mean to make you cry --
8. If I'm not back again this time tomorrow --
9. Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters --

Again, we will set aside the repeated common words first; only one common word, the article “a,” occurs twice in this verse. We also have our first instance of a non-common word repeated three times in this 56-word verse in the name, “Mama.” Additionally, the phrase “carry on” occurs twice in the last line; normally, the word “on” would be considered a common word for setting aside, but the phrase “carry on” seems a significant repetition in this verse. Like in the Intro, the word “just” is repeated twice in Verse 1, though the usage in this verse is different. Instead of being synonymous with “only,” both instances of “just” in this verse are synonymous with “recently.” Finally, the word “now” also occurs twice and could be mistaken for a common word if not for the use of “just” as another indication of present time. In the phrases, “now he’s dead” and “now I’ve gone and thrown it all way,” these

instances of “now” call attention to the unspoken and opposing “then,” referring to a time that has passed and implying an abrupt change that has taken place in the “now.”

Notably, the first line in this verse, “Mama, just killed a man,” may have been written years before the rest of the song. It was, for a time, a lyric looking for a song. Mercury is said to have referred to the work in progress as “The Cowboy Song” because of “the Old West feel” to the line. ([Kovalchik 2015](#), para. 2). Line 1 does set up an expectation that the song will be a mournful recitation of regret even as it serves as the protagonist’s confession to “Mama” of the deadly act; this, at least initially, “sounds” like it could be a song in in the Country Music genre. Line 1 also invokes “Mama” for the first time, seemingly in a one-sided conversation with the protagonist. We also must confront with “Mama” the protagonist’s confession that he “just killed a man.” The second and third lines of the verse describes in little detail and with little emotional content the two action steps the protagonist took to swiftly take the man’s life. The word “dead” at the end of line 3 is then juxtaposed to line 4’s lament that “Mama, life had just begun.” It is in this second reference to “Mama,” in combination with the tension between life and death, that we begin to sense that the protagonist may not be referring to a literal beginning of “life” (as with a newborn child)—and perhaps not a literal killing or death. Note that the protagonist had enough agency to have “killed a man,” but he also seems to be expressing regret and, perhaps, a loss of agency now that the deed is done. We should also question if “Mama” is a reference to his mother, as we might reflexively suspect in the Country Music genre. The rock genre includes multiple references to

“Mama” as a term of endearment for a young woman, much like “baby” or “babe,” though these last two can be used interchangeably for males or females. We only know that the protagonist admits to killing a man, so whatever life had “just begun,” the phrase is not referring to biological life and may have figurative meaning. It’s not clear whose “life” had just begun before the man was “killed,” and that ambiguity—as well as the uncertainty about “Mama’s” identity and the lack of information about the dead “man”—may be intentional. The sense of regret pervades this verse and by line 5, regret culminates in the words, “But now I’ve gone and thrown it all away.”

Line 6 invokes the third and final instance of the word “Mama” and begins a sequence of statements meant for her: that he didn’t mean to make her cry, that he may not be back “this time tomorrow,” and, in the final line, that “Mama” is to “carry on” if he doesn’t return, “as if nothing really matters.” In these last lines we see the clearest directive by the protagonist since the intro, this time directing “Mama” and telling her how to behave should he not return. We are not sure who is the object of the Intro’s sole directive, “Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see,” but this Verse 1 directive is clearly meant for “Mama.”

Verse 1 echoes some of the themes in the intro, including the use of the word “just” and the “nothing really matters” sentiment. And yet, the meaning of “just” in the Intro, synonymous with “only,” has now shifted in the first verse to take on a meaning synonymous with “recently.” Similarly, when the phrase “nothing really matters” appears in the Intro, the protagonist is owning that sentiment and marries that phrase with the words, “to me.” In Verse 1, however, it is “Mama” who is being instructed to “carry on” *as if nothing really matters* to her. She is to behave

dispassionately; this contrasts with the protagonist's assertion in the Intro that nothing really matters *to him*. Perhaps the protagonist is offering "Mama" an avenue out of her grief by sharing what works for him. This is also the first indication that the protagonist may be going away, leaving "Mama" behind.

Verse 2

1. Too late, my time has come,
2. Sends shivers down my spine --
3. Body's aching all the time,
4. Goodbye everybody -- I've got to go --
5. Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth --
6. Mama, ooo – [(any way the wind blows) parenthetical
sung by others, this one **not in liner notes**]
7. I don't want to die,
8. I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all –

Verse 2 is the second verse of the Ballad section of the song. After setting aside the thrice-repeated common word "the," we are left with the three occurrences of "all" and two occurrences each of "I," "my" and "time." Because of the relative frequency of what might normally be considered common words, we cannot automatically set these words aside. Just at the outset, the most frequently repeated words in Verse 2 are first person references to the protagonist, four in total. The three instances of "all" in "all the time," "all behind," and "born at all" each suggest universality and totality while simultaneously invoking their opposites in the unspoken concepts of "never," "none," and "partially."

In line 1, we again encounter time constraints like those in Verse 1 with "just" used synonymously with "recently" and the repeated use of the word "now." The first words of Verse 2 tell us it is "too late" and suggesting increasing urgency in the

moment even as the ballad moves on at a slow and steady pace. The phrase “my time has come” includes the first of two instances of the word “time” in this verse, though a focus on “my time” contrasts starkly with the more generalized “all the time.” Line 2 and 3’s imagery is less ambiguous with references to “sending shivers down my spine” and “body aching.” The first suggests anticipation while the second can be multiply interpreted. Body aches could be both a source of pain or illness and yet also a metaphor for longing. Combined with anticipatory shivers down his spine, the sense of longing might be more likely and echoes the “landslide” reference in the Intro to mean an unstable, even untenable state.

It is in line 4 of this verse that the protagonist makes clear he is leaving and that more than “Mama” has joined his audience. He speaks to “everybody” and declares he will “leave you all behind” as he embarks on a journey alone to “face the truth.” In this last verse of the Ballad section of the song, there is no “if” he might return tomorrow or “as if” nothing really mattered. There is only the firm commitment to the totality of leaving invoked by three “all” references, leaving them all behind, privileging “my time” instead of the body aches of “all the time,” and setting off on a journey to “face the truth,” the ultimate quest for a “truth” we are not yet comprehending. It is not the truth of killing a man, as he has already confessed that in the first line of the Verse 1. And yet, the word “face,” while it means “to confront,” resonates with two other references to the protagonist’s physical self in “spine” (a symbol for courage) and “body” (a symbol for physicality). “Face,” it seems, could recall a confrontation with truth and works as a symbol for identity and character, as in “face saving.” Combined with the four references to first person

pronouns in this verse, listeners can interpret this verse as framing the protagonist at the center of the narrative.

The last three lines of Verse 2 are riveting. Line 6 begins by invoking “Mama” one last time in the most plaintive appeal yet. Again, we hear the phrase “any way this wind blows,” this time as a parenthetical offering sung by other voices and not included in the liner notes (but clearly heard in the music). This phrase first appeared in the last line of the Intro and was paired with the claim, “nothing really matters to me.” The stark juxtaposition between his mournful address to “Mama,” singling her out even as other voices parenthetically reference back to a phrase associated with nothing really mattering to the protagonist. This parenthetical might be symbolic of the protagonist’s inner thoughts as he struggles with conflicting impulses. He will miss “Mama,” but nothing really matters (except for facing the truth). This conflict is reminiscent of the lines in Verse 1 where he tells “Mama” he doesn’t mean to make her cry even as he’s telling her to “carry on” if he doesn’t return. It’s also notable that the protagonist seems to be coming to terms with what is ahead of him, suggesting (using “if”) he *could* return tomorrow, or he could not, depending on what moves him tomorrow. When the protagonist returns to focus on himself in lines 7 and 8, the conflict is clarified: he doesn’t want to die, but there are times when he wishes he had never been born. This may be self-loathing; it could also be regret that he is in this unstable position and must hurt others to get out of it. These lines also signal the second time in the song when themes of birth and death are in juxtaposition.

It is at this point in the song that a guitar solo takes over the ballad. The guitar solo can symbolize the protagonist beginning his journey to face the truth, something done without words and invoked by the heavy guitar arpeggio. But the guitar solo can also symbolize the calm before the storm in Verse 3, the mock-operatic section of the song. It is possible Verse 3, with its “Thunderbolt and lightning -- Very, very frightening me” line, serves as the “stormy” confrontation with truth. The verse begins briskly at the end of the slower rhythm of the guitar solo.

Verse 3

1. I see a little silhouetto of a man
2. Scaramouche, Scaramouche -- will you do the Fandango --
3. Thunderbolt and lightning -- Very, very frightening me --
4. (Galileo) Galileo. [parenthesis added]
5. (Galileo) Galileo, [parenthesis added]
6. Galileo figaro -- Magnifico --
7. I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me --
8. He's just a poor boy from a poor family --
9. Spare him his life from this monstrosity --
10. Easy come, easy go -- will you let me go --
11. Bismillah! No -- we will not let you go -- (let him go)
12. Bismillah! We will not let you go -- (let him go)
13. Bismillah! We will not let you go -- (let him go)
14. Will not let you go -- let me go
15. [(Never, never, never, never let me go) **not in liner notes**]
16. No, no, no, no, no, no, no --
17. Mama mia, mama mia, mama mia let me go --
18. Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me --
for me --

The 18 lines of Verse 3 mark it as the longest portion of the song. As the “operatic” or “mock-opera” section of the song, Verse 3 is comprised of 144 total words, many of them repeated. It is dominated by repetitions of single syllable words interspersed with multiple repetitions of polysyllabic names like “Galileo,” (5 iterations) “Bismillah,” (3 iterations) “Scaramouche (2 iterations),” and as well as

singular instances of “silhouetto,” “Fandango,” “Magnifico,” “figaro,” and then “Beelzebub” in the last line.

Interestingly, the common words that are multiply repeated in this verse suggest the possibility that the words are being used less commonly. A word count reveals six instances of “a” that we could reasonably set aside. But the highest repetition comes from the word “go” at 13 total iterations, serving to alert the analyst that this “common word” may have uncommon significance in this verse. There are also 12 iterations of “Let/let,” 10 of “me,” eight each of “Will/will,” and “No/no,” (seven of which occur in line 16), seven of “you,” five iterations each of “not” and “will,” four of “Never/never” (all in line 15, not included in liner notes), three of “poor,” two of “boy” and two of the ever-present “just” (synonymous with “only” in this verse). Multiple repetitions by the protagonist of words that are then repeated by sympathetic voices or contested by some other collective voices in “we” suggest a struggle is underway.

What is not clear when this verse begins is whether the protagonist is on his journey to face truth (as the guitar solo might symbolize), or if he is being prevented from leaving. The lyrics in Verse 3 suggest the latter in the oft-repeated phrase, “let me/him go.” The guitar solo may serve as a tense but calm interlude between the mournful Ballad and the “stormy” confrontation with those who “will not let him go.”

In the first line, we do get a clue as to part of the lyrical strategy in Verse 3. In “I see a little silhouetto of a man,” the word “silhouetto” stands out as unusual. The

word works to suggest a silhouette or a dark shape against a bright background, so we might be tempted to think the word “silhouette” was merely adapted with an “o” on the end to make the word sound more Italian. After all, this is the operatic section of the song, and the verse contains many Italian names (e.g., Galileo and Figaro) to suggest that classical genre. And yet, though the word “silhouette” is of French origin; the Italian word for it is *exactly the same*. Even in Spanish, the word becomes “silueta,” using the feminine ending instead of the “o.” It is likely “silhouetto” was invented both to approximate an Italian-sounding, o-ending, polysyllabic word *and* to give the invention another syllable so that the words “see a little” and the invented “silhouetto” bounce off each other with alliterative properties that match the cadence of the operatic score. Ending the invention with the Spanish “a” would have achieved the right number of syllables desired, but not the right Italian sound desired. Leaving the word in its original French would have lost a syllable and the potential within the alliterative interanimation between “see a little” and “silhouetto.” Each of the syllables in this verse are pronounced with a crispness that reflects the quick pace and rhythm of the operatic-sounding score. And there, of course, is the difference: this is a “mock-opera.” It approximates or emulates opera, making syllabic adjustments here and there and augmenting the polysyllabic and Italian-sounding names and words with a host of single-syllable words that serve to keep up the quick, high-drama pace.

Verse 3 is unique for its mock-opera lyrical adjustments and for its extraordinary repetition of words; it also stands out for its negativity (repeated iterations of “no” and “never” and “not”) and the bouncing back and forth between

lyrics voiced by the protagonist and others either in defense of or wrestling with the protagonist. This latter distinction is marked in the lyrics by repeated second- and third-person references to the protagonist through the words, “you” and “he” and “him” in contrast to the fewer instances of the protagonist’s self reference in the words “I’m” and “me.” Further, it is not clear who is there to defend or struggle with the protagonist; the first line’s use of “I see,” for example, is not necessarily a self-reference by the protagonist. It is a puzzlingly ambiguous verse.

Of the 18 lines in this verse, only 7 (lines 3, 7, 10, 14, 15, 17, and 18) can be reasonably identified as first-person self-references (“me” and “I’m”) voiced by the protagonist. The rest belong to voices in constant repetition of words, including Italian and other names. For example, line two’s “Scaramouche” refers to

[A] stock character of the Italian theatrical form known as the *commedia dell’arte*; an unscrupulous and unreliable servant. His affinity for intrigue often landed him in difficult situations, yet he always managed to extricate himself, usually leaving an innocent bystander as his victim ([Britannica](#)).

The repetition of “Scaramouche” would seem to provide an “Italianesque sound” to the mock-opera portion of the song, even for those listeners unfamiliar with the reference. Coming on the heels of the adapted “silhouetto” mentioned above, the twice-repeated “Scaramouche” is pronounced true to the Italian enunciation.

Line two also introduces the single instance of “Fandango,” which contemporary movie-goers might recognize as the name for a ticket-selling platform. When the song was released in 1975, however, the meaning would have been understood as either “a lively Spanish dance for two people, typically

accompanied by castanets or tambourine” (or the music for such a dance) or ““Tom Foolery,” a foolish or useless act or thing ([Fandango](#)). Given that “Scaramouche” refers to a comic character, the meaning of “Fandango” in this line seems to align best with the “foolish or useless act” definition. However, because the word invokes both the Latin-sounding vocabulary and is capitalized in the liner notes (as the dance might be), “Fandango” can be understood by most listeners as a dance or act the protagonist is being asked to do by others.

The names or words introduced in line 4, both “Galileo” and “figaro,” might be more recognizable to progressive rock listeners. “Galileo,” while being a fun Italian word to repeat out loud, refers most likely to Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer from Pisa. According to [Songfacts](#), the appearance of “Galileo” could be a nod to lead guitarist Brian May’s keen interest in Astronomy; May earned a PhD in Astrophysics in 2007(nd., para. 6). Additionally, because “Galileo” is an alliteratively-pleasing sound to repeat, this could be one of the words that offers rhyme potential without having specific symbolism; additionally, “Galileo” could also be part of the “nonsense” Freddie Mercury claimed to have included in the song:

‘It’s one of those songs which has such a fantasy feel about it. I think people should just listen to it, think about it, and then make up their own minds as to what it says to them.’ [Mercury] also claimed that the lyrics were nothing more than ‘Random rhyming nonsense’ when asked about it by his friend Kenny Everett, who was a London DJ (para. 6).

It is true that the word “Galileo” invokes an “Italianesque” sound, much like “Scaramouche” does, especially in the context of the mock-opera portion of the song.

But, the repeated invocation of the astronomer's name may have additional meaning when we recall the dramatic historic narrative that underscores the scientist's conflict with the Catholic Church in the first decades of the 17th century. Richard Pearson's recent book, *The History of Astronomy*, (2020) includes references that clarify Galileo's given name as an Italian version of the Latin *Galilæus*, meaning "of Galilee" and used "to refer to Christ and his followers" or "like Jesus or Christian" (p. 171). This adds especial irony to the story about Galileo's conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, when the devout Catholic was ordered by the Church to denounce his theory of heliocentrism and "speak the truth" as the Church understood it at the time.

The repeated chant of "Galileo" in *Bohemian Rhapsody* may be simply an example of "random rhyming nonsense" to conjure up an "Italianesque" sound in the mock-opera segment of the lyrics. It also serves to invoke a famous controversy between science and religion, resulting in a charge of "heresy" against Galileo and the rest of his life spent in house arrest. However, the Church turned out to be at odds with the ultimate truth of the matter. For the protagonist in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, who has already committed to "leave you all behind and face the truth," the repeated invocations of "Galileo" in Verse 3 seems like a meaningful reference beyond its "Italianesque" rhyming and alliterative value. Listeners to the song across the globe, including children who are introduced to the scientist's life and works, would hear the "Galileo" chant and recognize the richly symbolic connotations in any search for truth.

The word “figaro,” might be recognizable for opera fans as the barber in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s 1786 comic Italian opera, *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*). Mozart composed his comic opera based on Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais’ 1784 play by the same name; Beaumarchais is credited with creating the name “Figaro” and also using it for the central character in two other of his famous plays, one before and one after Mozart’s opera: *The Barber of Seville* (1775) and *The Guilty Mother* (1792). The name “Figaro” may be an invention derived from the playwright’s re-working of his own name:

Beaumarchais may have based the character's name on the French phrase *fil* *Caron* meaning ‘son of Caron,’ which was his own nickname and would have been pronounced in a similar way. In modern French the word figaro has acquired the meaning ‘barber,’ reflecting the character's profession ([Behind the name](#)).

Bohemian Rhapsody listeners may not be immediately familiar with Mozart, Beaumarchais, or even Gioachino Rossini’s 1816 comic opera *The Barber of Seville* (also adapted from Beaumarchais’ play and where the repeated “Figaro! Figaro! Figaro!” begins the aria sung at Figaro’s first entrance in the opera.) But “figaro” may be most familiar to *Bohemian Rhapsody* listeners from an unusual source, as author Dorothy Wise writes in a 2016 article titled, “The Barber of Seville—A cartoon classic” for the Santa Cruz, California Symphony site:

If you were to walk up to someone on the street and ask them to sing an opera tune, they would very likely start off chanting ‘Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, Fi-i-i-igaro-o-o-o!’ The repeated Figaros are one of the most familiar parts of operatic singing in popular culture (Wise, 2016, para. 1).

Why is this particular aria so familiar? It has been used in at least eleven cartoons. The earliest using the aria Largo al Factotum was Woody

Woodpecker's tenth cartoon, *The Barber of Seville*, produced by Walter Lantz Productions in 1944 and using the voice talents of Mel Blanc (para. 3).

Wise provides details on many of the eleven cartoon renditions of the Figaro aria, ending with a description of the 1964 *Tom and Jerry* use of the aria in "The Cat Above and the Mouse Below." She concludes with the claim that, "Over the years, animation studios have introduced generations of children to opera in general and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* in particular" (para. 9). She also notes that portions of the aria are played by Bugs Bunny on piano in a 1946 short animated film titled, of all things, "Rhapsody Rabbit."

Ultimately, the singular instance of "figaro" after the last "Galileo" and before the capitalized "Magnifico" in line 6, all sung in operatic style and volume, would be familiar as an invocation of Italian opera to consumers of high *and* popular culture, both before the song was recorded and in today's era of instantly streaming and easily accessed cartoons re-runs. The liner notes do not capitalize "figaro," though, so the word's three syllables may merely serve to sound "Italianesque" and offset the four syllables of both "Galileo" and "Magnifico." The word "figaro" is the only non-capitalized proper noun and contrasts with the capitalization of "Magnifico," which might otherwise be interpreted as an Italian-sounding version of "magnificent." The capitalization suggests an older meaning to the word; it is of late 16th century Italian origin "used as a title for a Venetian magnate" and refers to an "eminent, powerful, or illustrious person" ([Magnifico](#)). While "figaro" refers to a mere barber in Modern French, "Magnifico" references someone of high stature. Line 6 might otherwise be dismissed as a series of Italian words, but the unusual punctuation of the liner notes indicating the high to low to high references actually

reflects the way the words are sung in the line: starting high with “Galileo,” lowest at the end of “figaro,” then triumphantly higher again with “Magnifico.” Perhaps this is truly “random rhyming nonsense” that serves to preserve the operatic pretext. At least, those who might not know the origins of the three references in line 6 would still be able to sing along with *Bohemian Rhapsody* and find the combination of all three names in line 6 as essentially “opera-like” and familiar.

Line 11 introduces listeners to the name “Bismillah” for the first of three times in three successive lines (11, 12, and 13). This word comes from Arabic and means “in the name of Allah.” “Bismillah” is the first word in the Quran—and begins of every chapter. It is an invocation “used by Muslims at the beginning of an undertaking” to grant God’s guidance and ensure a successful ending ([Quora](#)). Interestingly, after the 2018 movie *Bohemian Rhapsody* was released, it seemed many non-Muslims were unfamiliar with what “Bismallah” meant in the song and the movie. [Learn Arabic with Maha](#) is a YouTube channel where the host, Maha, after hearing multiple requests for the phrase’s meaning from viewers of the film, explained in December of 2018 the usage of “Bismillah” and its meaning in Muslim culture. That non-Muslim fans were unfamiliar with the phrase in the 2018 film suggests the song’s usage would have been unfamiliar to many non-Muslim pop-culture listeners as well.

Given it’s meaning in Arabic, to invoke God’s guidance at the beginning of an undertaking, we might be tempted to infer that the protagonist is using it before he embarks upon his journey, but that is not where the phrase occurs in the song.

Instead of chanting “Bismallah” in the verses where the protagonist announces his need to leave to confront truth, it is repeated three times in Verse 3, the mock-opera segment of the song. Additionally, the phrase appears in lines like, “Bismillah! No, we will not let you go” as an exclamatory response to the protagonist’s plea to “let me go.” Even when the protagonist’s allies (shown as parenthetical voices in lines 10 and 11) plead for the protagonist’s freedom, as in “(let him go) Bismillah! We will not let you go,” the phrase is invoked as an exclamation by those who would deny the protagonist his freedom. The authority would seem to be of a religious nature, much in the way the Catholic Church put Galileo under house arrest for the eight remaining years of his life. “Bismallah” is not the protagonist’s exclamation but, rather, it belongs to those who, “in the name of God,” refuse to let him go.

In the last two lines of Verse 3, two additional names are invoked in the lyrics: “Mama/mama mia” and “Beelzebub.” The first invokes, like “figaro,” a phrase non-Italians associate with Italian singing. Interestingly, the song *Mamma Mia* by the Swedish pop group ABBA also came out in 1975, just a month before Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody* was released surreptitiously to the UK market by Capital Radio DJ Kenny Everett. It is unclear if there were any “cross-pollination” opportunities between Queen and ABBA on the use of “Mamma Mia,” a phrase which translates from literal Italian to mean, “my mother.” Notably, ABBA’s song uses the words as interjection, equivalent to the English phrase “my my” that follows the line after “Mamma mia, here I go again/My my, how can I resist you?” This usage denotes surprise or excitement. In contrast, there’s reason to believe Queen’s use of the phrase corresponds with the earlier Verse 2 and Verse 3 appearances of “Mama,”

the person the protagonist was leaving and didn't mean to make cry. While some renderings of the lyrics include the extra "m" that ABBA used in "mamma mia," the liner notes for *Bohemian Rhapsody* make no such distinction. Here, the protagonist pleads with "mama mia" to let him go, though the lines pleading for release that preceded line 17 were responded to collectively: "We will not let you go." In this we learn that "mama mia" may be part of the "Bismillah"-invoking collective who will not allow the protagonist to leave and "face the truth."

The last line's invocation of "Beelzebub" may reference the fallen angel in Milton's *Paradise Lost* who enjoyed a rank next to Satan himself. However, it's also true that Beelzebub is often used as a synonym for the devil ([Beelzebub](#)). The line "Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me, for me!" suggests that the Milton allusion may be more likely. This line underscores the idea that the protagonist's journey has taken him through a version of hell, at least in a metaphorical sense as it relates to prolonged inner turmoil, mental anguish or torment. The mock-opera section ends with this line and its thrice-repeated "for me" before turning to a brief, secondary guitar solo (neither guitar solos are indicated in the liner notes) and on to the driving beats of the more triumphant, defiant, and resolute sounding Hard Rock section in the much shorter Verse 4.

Verse 4

1. So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye --
2. So you think you can love me and leave me to die --
3. Oh baby -- Can't do this to me baby --
4. Just gotta get out -- just gotta get right outta here --

This verse contains a total of 42 words, driven in the first and second lines by a string of single syllable words. In fact, if we translate “gotta” and “outta” into their less colloquial “got to” and “out of,” only the two iterations of “baby” (a standard term of affection in the Hard Rock genre for one’s significant other, even more common than “mama”) deviate from the single-syllable norm. Like all musical genres, hard rock comes with a climate of expectations, including that the listener would not hear the word “baby” and not expect it to have anything to do with a literal infant. Just as in the verses where “Mama” is invoked, listeners are not told who “baby” refers to, but the first three lines in this verse appear to be directed to that person, consistent with the hard rock dialect.

Most of these single-syllable words might get lost as “common words” if not for their repetition, though we can set aside the two repetitions each of “and,” “too,” and “can” as unlikely to have meaning beyond their standard usage. The words repeated most often are “you” and “me,” each with four iterations a piece; this you versus me construction suggests a confrontation wherein the protagonist is asserting his agency in the dynamic. The remaining twice-repeated words include “So,” “baby,” “get,” “gotta,” and “think.”

The first and second lines of verse four begin with the same phrase in, “So you think you can...” and take on an accusatory tone. Line 1 appears to accuse “baby” of “stoning” the protagonist and spitting in his eye. Line 2 appears to accuse “baby” of leaving him to die after loving him. Line 3 is either pleading or merely asserting that “baby” cannot do this to the protagonist before he proclaims in line 4 that he’s “just gotta get right outta here.” The colloquial use of the condensed words

“gotta” and “outta” reflect the expected hard rock dialect, just as “baby” does.

Notably, the colloquial “Gotta” appears only once before earlier in the song. In Verse 2, after line 4’s “Goodbye everybody -- I’ve got to go --” which uses the standard “got to” in the ballad portion of the song. And yet, there’s a quickening suggested in the next line that clips “got to” in “Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth.” The Hard Rock lyrics in Verse 4 suggest that the two colloquial constructions of “gotta” and the lone “outta” corresponds with the urgency and agency of Verse 4’s Hard Rock ethos. Also notable in this short verse is the last line with a final instance of the word “just.” This instance is adverbial, as were the others when used as synonyms for “recently” and “only.” However, this use of “just” is employed more as emphasis much like the word “really” might be used in “I *really* gotta get out of here.”

While Verse 4 begins with two accusatory statements, it ends in the last two lines with resolute firmness about what the protagonist will not allow and what he needs to do. The protagonist’s agency is on full display in these final two lines of Verse 4, especially as his defiance contrasts with his earlier despondence. Line 4’s “Just gotta get out -- just gotta get right outta here --” stand in contrast to Verse 2’s lines 4 and 5: “Goodbye everybody -- I’ve got to go -- / Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth --.” In the earlier verse, there was a sense of reluctance, a sorrowful but necessary leaving announced. In Verse 4, having struggled with “everybody” throughout Verse 3, the protagonist becomes defiant against those who refused his gentler announcement and invoked the name of God to keep him where they wanted him.

Ultimately, the Hard Rock section reveals the solution for the protagonist (if not answers to his accusatory queries in lines 1 and 2). He's no longer meekly announcing to others that he's "got to go." He's done with the struggle and proclaims to himself that he's "just gotta get right outta here." His realization that he must choose a life of agency and empowerment occurs just as the Hard Rock section gives way to the gentler Outro.

Outro

1. [(Oooo, ooo yeah, ooo yeah) **Not in liner notes**]
2. Nothing really matters,
3. Anyone can see,
4. Nothing really matters -- nothing really matters to me,
5. Any way the wind blows...

The Outro or "coda" (which means "tail" in Italian) serves to bring *Bohemian Rhapsody* to a close. Typically, the Outro is the inverse of an Intro section and is designed to wrap the song up and ease the listener toward the song's final lines—just as the Intro invited the listener to attend to the opening lines. The Outro, both by its slower pace and lighter tone, brings the listener out of the hard rock section and closes with a repetition of lines we've heard before. If we count the "Oohs and "yeahs" as words comprising the first line, even though they are not included in the liner notes, the entire Outro is a total of 24 words. Lines 2 and 4 include three repetitions of the "nothing really matters" phrase first heard in the Intro and repeated as a directive for "Mama's" benefit in Verse 1. Line 3 adds "Anyone can see" between two "nothing really matters" phrases in lines 2 and 4. Line 4 adds another "nothing really matters" phrase with "to me" at the end. Effectively, line 3 sets up the rhyme in "see" that follows the repeated phrase that we encounter in line 4 with the

addition of “to me.” Overall, the listener is left with the same sense we first witnessed in the Intro: a passive protagonist resigned to his fate. This sense is further confirmed in the very last line: “Any way the wind blows...”

The listener is reminded that this line has occurred before: in the last line of the Intro combined with “doesn’t really matter to me” and in the middle of Verse 2 (perhaps to indicate the protagonist’s internal thoughts). Now, in the Outro, it wraps up the song as the concluding thought the listener leaves with. This passive resignation, reminiscent of the Spanish phrase *que sera sera* (what will be will be), may be most familiar to younger listeners as comparable to the more recent phrase, “It is what it is.”

Before turning to metaphoric constructions in the lyrics, we should note something intriguing about the punctuation in the liner notes of the song. *Bohemian Rhapsody* begins in the Intro with an interrogative about whether the protagonist is experiencing “real life” or “fantasy.” Not until Verse 3 is the interrogative used again, this time with the lines “will you do the Fandango” and “will you let me go.” While the Intro phrasing suggests confusion, these Verse 3’s interrogatives suggest uncertainty. By the time we get to the two accusatory questions in Verse 4, they serve to set up the answer. “So you think you can” turns on a firm and resolute (if inferred) sense of “no, you can’t.”

And yet, all of the interrogative-sounding statements do not end in question marks. Only dashes separating lines into sections and the occasional comma are used in the liner notes. Even the final line of the song, “Any way the wind blows...” concludes with three ellipses rather than the usual period. It’s as if the protagonist is

still waiting for answers to his unmarked questions. There are more than 30 of these dashes used in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Additionally, a scan of the liner notes for the entire album, *A Night at the Opera*, reveals that only one other song, also on Side Two, makes use of these uncharacteristic dashes: *Love of My Life* uses six dashes compared to the 30+ dashes of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. *Love of My Life*, as noted in the images in Appendix A, is also the only other song on either side of the album that closes with ellipses and could be understood as a companion piece or even a “mirror” to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, at least insofar as lyrics like “can’t you see” and “don’t leave me” and “You’ve taken my life, you now desert me” resonate with the lyrics in this song under study.

Our protagonist at the end of *Bohemian Rhapsody* may, in a more nuanced view, have reached acceptance after an epic struggle marked by torment and grief. And, according to psychological theories of grieving, acceptance is often listed as the last of five to seven phases. For the protagonist in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, this does not mean he’s satisfied or at peace about what he lost when he “threw it all away.” The loss remains. Rather, by accepting the loss, answering his own questions, and facing the fact that the new reality cannot be undone or reversed, the protagonist is ready to take stock of how the new reality will impact his life, newly free of those who would not answer his questions beyond refusing to let him go. Accepting loss keeps his feet firmly on the ground, and that ground may also be less unstable than it was in his introductory “landslide” phase.

Metaphors and Meanings

To summarize the findings of the close textual analysis, it is useful to remember that the 376 words of the song are arranged into a seven-part suite: an Intro, Verse 1, Verse 2, the guitar solo, Verse 3, Verse 4, and the Outro. The musical analysis will include the guitar solo in its exploration of all seven parts.

One verbal feature of the song that may serve to help interpret it still remains for analysis: just what does *“Bohemian Rhapsody”* mean? The word “Bohemian” refers to “a person who is interested in artistic and unusual things, for example art, music, or literature, and lives in an informal way that ignores the usually accepted ways of behaving” ([Bohemian](#)). A “Rhapsody,” on the other hand, refers to how a song, poem or narrative is organized. It is characterized by “an effusively enthusiastic or ecstatic expression of feeling” in literature and “a free instrumental composition in one extended movement, typically one that is emotional or exuberant in character” when defined in music ([Rhapsody 1](#)). The ancient Greeks applied the word to both epic poems and musical works. More recently, the term was first used for piano compositions in 1810:

[Rhapsody] may be defined as a free fantasia of national, epic, or heroic character. The title came into general use in music of the mid-19th century, notably with the Hungarian rhapsodies of Liszt. It implies a work free in form and inspiration, often an expression of national temperament, as in the Slavonic rhapsodies of Dvorak ([Rhapsody 2](#)).

Even in the title of the song, the tensions are striking. Between old and new, between the length restrictions and the exuberant expressions, and between the “Bohemian” mock-operatic style and the adaptation from classical and operatic to rock instrumentation, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a musical study in contrasts of improvisational-sounding yet strategically staged and highly-integrated-yet-

to values of repetition, we can see the level of importance or emphasis placed on certain words and phrases within the overall text and seek evidence to support arguments about what significance they might have. Surprisingly, the most frequent words here are simple words, which, without the clarity offered by a word cloud, might seem unimportant or arbitrary. In the spirit of CTA, let us try and understand the relevance in the frequency of small and simple words like “let” and “just.”

Repetition is often recognized as an effective device within rhetorical texts; a word that appears repeatedly is more likely to stick in the mind. It is also more likely to carry “beyond common” significance in a song. Here, the word “let” has primacy of some kind; it is repeated in the lyrics 12 times within lines 10-17 of Verse 3 (See Appendix A), all within the second half of the mock-opera section. “Let/let” is, by almost double, the most frequent word to appear in the count. It is used in the form of a transitive verb and comes in the phrase of a singular plea: “let me go.” “Let” can be defined several ways, including “to cause or to make,” or “to give opportunity to, or fail to prevent.” It can be used in the imperative “to introduce a request or proposal” (as in *let us pray*). It means “to free from,” or “to permit entrance, passing or leaving.” Any of these definitions allow for the interpretation that the song’s protagonist is appealing to someone with the agency to set him free. More importantly, because we are not told what the protagonist needs to be freed from, the phrase “let me go” is ripe for interpretation by a variety of listeners. It opens up a space for listeners to write themselves into the narrative.

The next most frequent word is “just;” unlike “let’s” concentration in Verse 3, “just” appears seven times throughout the song. We have already discovered the versatility of this word as it used in the song to mean at least three concepts: “only,” “recently,” and “really.” Interestingly, the “only” uses of “just” occur in the early sections of the song where the protagonist is signaling despair and loss of agency. The “recently” uses of “just” occur when the song becomes more urgent, on the eve of the protagonist’s journey to face truth. The “really” uses of “just,” used as emphasis in “just gotta get out, just gotta get right outta here” occur at the moment the protagonist realizes his own agency and ability to free himself, perhaps from the inadequacy and urgency of the moments in the song where “just” was used to mean “only” and “recently.”

In order to understand how a body of text works persuasively, the interpretation of *Bohemian Rhapsody’s* lyrics is part of the communication process of decoding messages and assigning meanings (Hall, 1980). The complex meanings gathered from common words like “let” and “just” can help manifest a unique interpretation and encourage listeners to identify with the protagonist’s journey.

If even frequently used common words can attract fans to empathetic listening, metaphors can also serve to make the lyrics more vivid and create arguments about things to be compared. Several metaphors used in the lyrics support the argument of the protagonist’s journey. Metaphor allows the audience to compare two different ideas for the purpose of locating the sometimes-obscure similarities between them. Metaphors “are more than superficial ornamentation:

they are the means by which arguments are expressed.... [and can] provide insight into a speaker's motives or an audience's social reality" (Burgchardt, 2010, pg. 347).

In the song, the protagonist first reveals himself to be in a situation comparable to being "caught in a landslide" where there is "no escape from reality." This metaphor compares the protagonist's state to a natural disaster, "a landslide." The situation is framed in this metaphor as threatening, fraught with unstable and uncertain dangers where the protagonist can be or is already "caught." The metaphor would appeal to all listeners confronted with hardship and uncertainty, even a situation they might have created themselves by denying the truth about their circumstances. Again, it is widely open for interpretation.

In lines 5 and 6 of the Intro, the protagonist pleads with someone to "Open your eyes / Look up to the skies and see." Here, to "see" serves as metaphor for understanding. If we do not understand, we cannot begin to address the hardships and uncertainties that paralyze us from action. We cannot pursue truth if we don't see it.

In lines 8 and 9 of the Intro, "I'm easy come, easy go, / A little high, little low" also have metaphoric potential. The listener will recognize these colloquial phrases, combined with "any way the wind blows, doesn't really matter," as the poles between despair and agency, between surrendering to hardships and rallying to save ourselves from succumbing to hardship. When we are not mere creatures subject to the blowing of the wind, when we can "look up" from our despair and

confront our truths, we can make our way to a more stable place where it really doesn't matter if or how the wind blows. We can handle it.

It would seem, as mentioned in the CTA of the lyrics, that “just killed a man” in Verse 2 has metaphoric potential as well. This is not an outlaw cowboy protagonist confessing to killing a man in cold blood by putting his gun “against his head” and executing him with a single bullet. The lyrics do suggest regret, but only for making “Mama” cry. In the man-killing part of the lyrics, we find the protagonist caught on unstable ground and telling “Mama” in too-frank terms that a man is dead. The cold finality of the protagonist’s confession is hard to reconcile with his early tenderness toward “Mama.” Listeners may get the sense that the man that was “killed” was someone the protagonist needed to eliminate before he could “leave you all behind and face the truth.”

There is certainly much speculation available as to the “proper interpretation” of the song’s lyrics, metaphorical or otherwise. At this point, though, if the meanings are not supported by evidence in the lyrics, this study could devolve into merely adding to the speculation with little more to go on than interpretation of the metaphoric potential of specific references. For Mercury’s part, he insisted the song was “about relationships,” period. Anyone on the planet, of any age, could relate to a song about relationships. Additionally, according to bandmate Brian May, all members of Queen “were always keen to let listeners interpret their music in a personal way to them, rather than impose their own meaning on songs” ([Songfacts](#), para. 5).

Perhaps this open-ended, interpretations welcome approach helps to explain why the song retains its popularity 45 years on: the lyrics are multiply interpretable. While there are clearly clues to suggest Mercury was drawing on his own trials when he wrote the song, one of the main reasons the lyrics remain compelling across generations, in time and space, has to be because any opaque references to the specific case of Mercury's life still allows for individualized and generalized interpretation. The driving metaphor of the song's lyrics, and another reason the song continues to resonate, may be realized in a comparison to the literary genre called *bildungsroman*:

Bildungsroman is the combination of two German words: Bildung, meaning "education," and Roman, meaning "novel." Fittingly, a "bildungsroman" is a novel that deals with the formative years of the main character - in particular, his or her psychological development and moral education. The bildungsroman usually ends on a positive note with the hero's foolish mistakes and painful disappointments over and a life of usefulness ahead. Goethe's late 18th-century work *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship) is often cited as the classic example of this type of novel. Though the term is primarily applied to novels, in recent years, some English speakers have begun to apply the term to films that deal with a youthful character's coming-of-age ([Bildungsroman](#)).

In many ways, *Bohemian Rhapsody* tells a familiar "coming of age" story. The protagonist must rally his own agency to confront the truth and seek authenticity, having turned his back on an unstable identity (even if he hurts people who wanted him to retain that old identity). If we also acknowledge that 20th century examples of *bildungsroman* didn't always end "on a positive note," Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) being the most well-known example, then *Bohemian Rhapsody* can be viewed as an epic song comparable to *bildungsroman*

with its ambiguous, ellipses-rich ending—if only in song form. While Salinger’s work was originally intended for adults, adolescents also identify with the torment and isolation Holden confronts. They also believe Holden’s critique on the superficiality of post-war society rings true. Torment, isolation, angst and alienation certainly figure in the lyrics of *Bohemian Rhapsody* as well. The protagonist in the song featured in this study may end up no better off than Holden Caulfield, and yet there is something resonant and ultimately redeeming in the musical score and the agency it harnesses to suggest a hopeful ending is possible.

Section 3: Musical Analysis of *Bohemian Rhapsody*

As noted in the Methodology chapter, this part of the analysis will undergo a thorough consideration of the tools outlined in Allan F. Moore’s 2012 *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Songs* by reviewing each chapter in the book and applying the concepts toward the analysis of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The goal is to identify key aspects that contribute to the unique experience of listening to the song.

For the reader, a few formatting qualifiers are in order. This analysis will refer to time stamps throughout the song recording when necessary, so that the reader can follow along with the analysis (see reference list for link to the recording). Additionally, we will examine the order of musical events chronologically, as with the analysis of lyrics. This section will also refer to place in the music as indicated by the seven “parts” of the song, organized in the following order: [Intro], [Verse 1], [Verse 2], [Guitar solo], [Verse 3], [Verse 4], [Outro]. Finally,

this analysis will merely feature lyrics as a point of reference to help guide the reader. Throughout this second analysis we will consider eight different “lenses” identified by Moore to analyze a popular song as a listener. Each section will elaborate on the most relevant features of these eight criteria: texture, form, delivery, style, friction, persona, reference and belonging.

Texture, or the analytical “lens” concerned with the relationship between the sounds in music, prompts the first sense of recognition by the listener (p.19). It is in this layering of instruments and vocals that we first experience the mood of the music. The main questions guiding this chapter on texture concentrate on “what the instruments sound like,” “how they work together,” and “where they appear to be situated within the recording” (p.19). We apply the features of texture to *Bohemian Rhapsody* relative to the four textural layers outlined by Moore: Explicit Beat Layer, Functional Base Layer, Melodic Layer, and Harmonic Filler Layer (p. 20-22). Each of the textural layers are described below. Next, we will explore the “soundbox,” a term used by Moore to describe the texture of the aural experience through a digital medium. Finally, this section on texture will move to discuss the timbre or the articulation of the musical sounds.

Four Textural Layers

The four textural layers work in conjunction with one another to create unique sounds. The first layer is the explicit beat layer, which is most often the function of the drums (though not always achieved this way). This layer articulates an “explicit pattern of beats,” maintaining the overall “groove” (p.20) of the song. The functional bass layer directs the song’s harmonic progression and is a beat that

follows along with the melody, typically carried out by the bass guitar in rock music. The melodic layer is usually sung by the lead vocals and is recognized as that beat one can hum along to (p.20). The harmonic filler layer can be achieved through a variety of instruments but is often the function of lead guitar in rock music. This layer gives the song depth and adds emphasis to certain moments (p.21). Notably, not every song will feature all four layers; additionally, the order of layers is apt to change periodically throughout the song as some instruments take on more than one functional layer at a time (p.20). We begin by examining the way instruments are layered throughout each section of *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Each of the five instruments in the song (vocals, piano, guitar, drum and bass) takes on the role of different layers at different times to create textures. The first two layers that the listener can hear are the melodic and harmonic filler layers. These layers are carried out by the vocals throughout the [Intro]. Notably, in the first two lines of the intro, Mercury's voice is augmented by a synthesizer, shortened to "synth" in musicology literature. A synthesizer is an electronic keyboard that can generate or copy virtually any kind of sound of a traditional instrument; in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the synth adds a unique texture to these dominant layers.

The synth functions as the harmonic filler layer throughout the first half of the intro, accompanying the melody. It is the solo voice that champions the melodic layer throughout the rest of the intro and the first two verses. At "open your eyes," the piano is introduced as a functional bass layer. This layer is carried out by piano in the sections where the bass guitar is absent. Throughout the [Intro] and [Verse 1], the piano moves through an ascending "arpeggio" following the harmonic

progression of the song; arpeggio is a term that describes either ascending or descending notes played in succession. These first three layers establish the mournful sound that the song portrays early on. It is in these first three layers that listeners sense the texture of the instruments. The vocals and the piano work together in synthesis to create drama. In featuring just a few layers, there is a focus on the relationship between certain instruments. The piano and vocals together offer a sorrowful and tragic introduction to *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The functional bass layer is then taken over by the bass guitar at the end of the [Intro], following the final “to me.” In [Verse 1], the vocals continue to carry the melody and the piano now functions as the harmonic filler layer. The drums have yet to be introduced.

At [1:20], the drum kit (which includes drums and other percussion instruments like cymbals), enters at the end of the first repeated phrase “thrown it all away,” in the middle of [Verse 1]. The cymbals crash at this point, creating a heavy mix of sounds at the end of the phrase and signaling to the listener to take notice. Drums then continue to sustain the explicit beat layer throughout most of the song. On occasion, however, the drums act as the harmonic filler layer in those moments when the sounds embellish the melody and also when the guitar is absent. By now the vocals, piano, drum and bass are all working together to create texture. The layering of instruments throughout the [Intro] and [Verse 1] adds suspense. When the drums do finally come in at the end of the repeated phrase, listeners are invited to a cathartic release from the tension created by the tonal instruments. It is the percussion that adds a substantial impact to the texture.

When the guitar finally enters in [Verse 2], it sounds with a low distorted strum that reverberates just on top of the lyrics “face the truth.” In the middle of both verses in the Ballad section, the piano and vocals crescendo to a greater volume to match the intensity created by cymbal and guitar. By now we have all four textural layers working together to create dynamic effects. It is also worth mentioning that each time the guitar is added to the layering, it signals a change in texture.

In the [guitar solo], the strings take on the lead role, still functioning as the harmonic filler layer, but moving to the forefront of the listener’s aural focus. Vocals are on hold and the piano, drum kit and bass guitar play along, occupying the other three layers for a textural collaboration celebrating the guitar. The guitar works triumphantly as a leading layer, creating a feeling very different from the pessimism that the piano earlier implied. The guitar feels heroic here. The [guitar solo] is motivational and carries a resolve that seems to directly address the issues that were introduced by the initial layers where vocals, piano, drum and bass played together in a more harrowing combination. Even though guitar is playing more triumphantly than the other instruments the feeling it produces is still very tragic and sad, following along with the mood and the narrative presented in the lyrics.

The piano takes back the role of functional bass layer for several moments in [Verse 3] when it functions alongside the vocals during certain phrases. These are the same layers that were implemented in [Verse 1] (featuring piano, vocals, drum and bass); this time, though, the texture is achieved with very different effects. When the attention is re-focused on the piano and vocal layers, the texture is light

and giddy matching the tone created in the delivery of “I see a little silhouetto of a man” and “I’m just a poor boy, nobody loves me.” The explicit beat layer and familiar synth vocals are reintroduced strategically during [Verse 3] to emphasize the call and response that is prevalent throughout the lyrics.

Then, the melodic, harmonic filler and explicit beat layers come in to support moments like, “Thunderbolt and lightening.” Harmonized synth vocals relay in response to lead vocals in “he’s just a poor boy from a poor family” and “we will not let you go,” giving the texture of the vocal instrument a depth that replicates many voices. When the piano and choral vocals are featured alone, they create lighter textures, then the percussion instruments and synthesizer are introduced to give weight to the more dramatic moments. The bass plays steadily and subtly to support the melodic layer as usual, though the guitar is completely removed from this verse and does not come back in until the start of [Verse 4], signaling another change in texture.

At the start of [Verse 4], guitar functions as the harmonic filler layer and the piano, bass and drums take on their regular roles once again. Vocals join in at [4:15], “So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye,” contributing to the melodic layer. The texture here feels very saturated. For the first time all four layers are designed to produce that familiar rock and roll sound. It is celebratory and satisfying to have all instruments playing in their familiar roles, creating the expected rich texture for fans of the hard rock genre.

At the end of [Verse 4], the second instrumental solo ensues. Guitar leads as harmonic filler layer and signals another change to come. Piano, bass and drum

follow along. The [Outro] is then stripped of one layer a time beginning with guitar, then drum and bass, leaving only piano and vocals to carry out the melodic and functional bass layers. These last two layers work together in that familiar pattern that facilitated the initial feelings of melancholy in the beginning of the song, bringing the song to a close.

This featuring of separate instruments and intricate layering can elicit feelings of despair in one moment and then the arrangement produces feelings of joy, resolve, determination and even defiance in the next. These different textures tease the listener with a few instruments at a time, building suspense. This suspense lets the listener know that something significant is about to happen, that the mood has shifted. This is often recognizable by the introduction of guitar at various points throughout the piece. Ultimately, the layering of instruments can foster different emotions throughout the musical narrative. While this section focused primarily on the way that texture can be organized structurally, the next section will talk about texture in terms of the way that it can be heard.

Soundbox

In the interest of analyzing texture through the listening experience, Moore developed a term that refers to that metaphysical space in which music can be heard, called the “soundbox” (p. 28). The soundbox can exist through a stereo or any medium that plays music (p.28). This aural “space” houses the means by which the song is “articulated” (p.29). Texture is “heard” through the relationships between sounds in the soundbox. For this analysis, our soundbox will be realized through headphones. This way, it will be easier to differentiate where the sounds are

“situated” (p.19), (left-side, center, right-side, foreground, background, etc.).

Bohemian Rhapsody includes unique flourishes of aural texture through the use of recording technology to create many of the effects.

In the intro, the soundbox is utilized to emphasize lyrical phrases and make for a particularly dizzying experience. The first sound that dominates that space is the synthesized acapella harmony in the first two lines of the [Intro]. The augmented harmony seems to be isolated in the center of the sound box, floating in the middle of that space and projecting other-worldly sounds. The synthesized voices can be heard moving from the background to the foreground, texturizing the melody as they accompany Mercury’s lead vocals throughout the [Intro] and [Verse 1]. At [0:35-0:38], the augmented voices bounce from the right ear to the left, reverberating “A little high, little low” on opposite sides of the sound box, drawing the listener’s attention in alternate directions. The melody, for the most part, remains at the forefront of the soundbox; the other instruments are layered in at different volumes and capacities behind the voice, except in the instance in which they become more united. The piano is the next most prominent sound in the space for much of the song.

When the guitar is featured, it moves in front of the piano and becomes more prominent. Similarly, during the [guitar solo], the strings take the foreground once again. As the song transitions to [Verse 3], piano and voice are a central focus yet again and the lyrics are manipulated through that sound space once more. For example, at [3:02-3:08], “I see a little silhouette” of a man is heard on the right side and “Scaramouche, Scaramouche” plays on the left. The lyrics continue to bounce

back and forth in the soundbox. It is heard in the call and response of “Galileo,” and throughout the remainder of the [guitar solo] and [Verse 3], providing a whimsical experience for the listener in that imagined temporal space. These are just a few examples on how the sound box is designed to highlight certain sound features to add depth to the aural space and emphasize the textural layers.

Timbre

The final textural consideration is the timbre. Timbre refers to the sound quality of a musical note, sound or tone; it is the sonic personality of the song. For Moore, timbre is one of the ways sounds are “articulated.” I have already mentioned certain features related to timbre throughout the analysis; this section, though, describes the timbre of each instrument in more detail, starting with Mercury’s voice and working through each instrument from beginning to end subsequently. At the start of “Mama just killed a man,” Mercury sings with a lot of breath, the timbre is shaky and hesitant. It resonates as sad, longing and desperate throughout most of the [Intro]/[Verse 1]/[Verse 2]. In contrast, [Verse 3] shows that the timbre of Mercury’s voice is later more playful. For example, when singing the phrase, “will you do the Fandango,” the tone is light and bouncy. “Galileo, Galileo, Galileo figaro” is sung with energy and excitement. The final phrase in [Verse 3] ends with a falsetto that rings brightly on the repeated line, “for me.” The background vocals resonate behind the lead vocals with a well-rounded and harmonious combination of choral voices that help to carry out the informal and unusual arrangement in this long verse. From these observations, it is apparent that there is an array of tonalities in Mercury’s voice throughout the song.

The instruments take the leading role during the [guitar solo]. When the vocals come back in after the solo, the timbre changes again. This time Mercury executes phrases like, "So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye" and "So you think you can love and leave me to die" with fleeting precision. At the end of each phrase, Mercury holds each note on the words "eye" and "die," exaggerating the tone of the phrase and slightly varying in pitch to stress that final phrase. "Oh baby - - Can't do this to me baby" is sung with an exacting tone, addressing those obstacles detailed in the lyrics. The majority of this section is sung with zeal and a sense of defiant resilience.

During the [outro] Mercury's voice resonates clearly, but it also sounds detached in agreement with the tone of the second to last final phrase "nothing really matters to me." The tone of the [outro] echoes the tone of the first few verses. Overall, the timbre seems to take on new and different tonalities in each major section, helping to portray the different moods. Next, we will analyze the timbre of the piano.

The piano comes in softly at first, then takes on a more rounded feel at "Mama, just killed a man." The sounds punch with intensity at the top of every phrase, working to emphasize the melody. As mentioned above, the piano moves through a delicate ascending arpeggio that acts as an ellipsis, portending something ominous to follow. The piano and the lyrics are working dynamically here. Each note is isolated and clear as the key is hit. Piano moves to the background during the [guitar solo] and plays more subtly for a time, but it comes back in with a crisp and light tenacity to accompany the operatic bounce of "little silhouetto of a man" and

“Scaramouche.” The timbre of piano becomes increasingly blunt and forceful as it plays under “Thunderbolt and lightning.” Just before “Easy come, easy go,” the piano rings whimsically for a moment, then switches to a darker tone at the start of “Bismillah.” In [Verse 4] the piano is more subtle until returning near the end to bring the song to a close at the [outro]. The timbre of the piano feels transitional and temporal as it functions as a bridge between sections. Finally, the piano carries the tune to its end with the same punch that was responsible for carrying the mood along at the beginning. The last few notes are light and fleeting as they ring their final reverberations. In the next section we will discuss the timbre of guitar, bass and drums.

The guitar comes in in the middle of [Verse 2] on the last phrase, “face the truth.” The strum is low and powerful, even a bit distorted. This tone continues throughout the [guitar solo] sounding regretful reminiscent of whining or wailing. The drum and bass come in to fulfill their collective role at the same moment. Drums often carry the rhythm and do not operate as a tonal instrument. But, when the cymbals crash at those key moments throughout the song, the timbre of that sound is resonant and full. The bass is subtle and functions behind the scenes most of the time. Though, during the second guitar solo following [Verse 3] the timbre of the bass is contradictory to the bold and victorious timbre of the guitar. In the final instrumental feature just before the [outro], guitar is the most despondent thus far, the timbre is borderline tragic as it proceeds to accompany the [outro]. This relationship between the instruments is a collaboration of all the competing facets within the musical narrative. The instruments serve unique purposes that

supplement the emotion conveyed in the lyrics, but they also function on their own to convey the emotion when the lyrics are absent. Next, we will discuss the arrangement of the song.

Form

Form can be conceptualized as the way the music is structured based on musical components like the rhythm, harmony, melody, meter, and arrangement. In this section we will discuss *Bohemian Rhapsody* in terms of its arrangement as a musical “rhapsody.” To recall, in the CTA section we examined the name of the song and discovered that the latter half of the infamous title refers directly to the arrangement of the song as a rhapsody. Therefore, it is by name the most relevant notion to address here. Rhapsodies as a genre in 19th century piano music are recognized for having a relatively free, improvisational sounding form comprised of several episodic sections that have different characters or moods. Each movement in *Bohemian Rhapsody* is distinctly different from the other, which is what constitutes its contribution to the rhapsody genre, (while at the same time remaining true to the progressive rock genre.) This will be discussed further in the “style” section. Here, we will discuss each of those movements in more detail below.

Mercury’s rhapsody is framed by an intro and outro that are designed to carry the listener in and out of the musical narrative. The arrangement behaves similarly to a literary rhapsody in that it includes a definitive introduction in the beginning that is mirrored and called-upon by an outro at the closing of the piece. Just as in a literary narrative, the introduction is riddled with unanswered questions and uncertainty. The first and second verses are involved in the initial movement of

the piece following the ominous introduction. It is in these sections where the Ballad is conceived and carries the somber and tragic mood of the protagonist at the start of his journey.

The guitar solo that follows verses 1 and 2 represents a new movement. The guitar here is reminiscent of a vocal instrument and carries an emotional and symbolic role. It is in this episodic moment that the Ballad is transformed into a metaphorical and instrumental journey for the protagonist. In [Verse 3] the mood and character of the song change abruptly yet again.

In this fairly odd and unexpected movement, the song is emulating a sort of theatric experience, reminiscent of a musical or an opera. It supplements the drama within the narrative in that it emulates a climax situation in which all previous movements have led up to.

[Verse 4] is considered to be the “hard rock” section, a movement that is reminiscent of what is expected in the popular rock genre. It is one of the shortest movements throughout the rhapsody and serves as a brief moment of resolution in the narrative and also pays homage to the progressive rock genre from which the band was born from. The final movement in the song is achieved through the outro, which is the only moment within the song that is repeated. It serves as an ambiguous and highly interpretative ending. The tone or the mood of this episode is familiar to that of the introduction. It brings the narrative to a close and remains soft and somber as it was in the introduction.

The unique arrangement of *Bohemian Rhapsody* is one of the reasons that the song becomes rhetorically powerful. In the following sections regarding “style” and

“friction,” we will discuss the ways that the arrangement breaks away from a more common form in rock music and how this is also a persuasive feature of the music itself.

Delivery/Four Positional Aspects

Chapter four in Moore deals with the delivery and more specifically, the articulation of the singer in a popular song. Moore believes that in order to interpret the singer’s meaning, it is important to consider the “means of the melody” (p.91) through which the lyrics and the harmony are articulated. Moore suggests a closer look at the melodic structure of the notation, the lyrics, and also the distinctive features of the voice. He quotes another music analyst, Simon Firth, to convey the notion that “the tone of the voice is more important...than the actual articulation of particular lyrics” (p. 102). This section focuses on one area in particular, vocal “tone,” because of its relevance to the song under study and to Freddie Mercury’s much celebrated and rare vocal talent. Tone in this section will look differently than it did under the umbrella of timbre. This section will focus on the register, range, cavity and “attitudes” of the tonal execution.

Freddie Mercury was gifted with a near 5 octave range, with the ability to jump from one octave to another with effortless execution. One critic reported that this range was anywhere from a bass F2 to a soprano F6 that only improved with time (Bifani, 2018, para. 2). This section will look closer at the tone of Mercury’s voice in the singular case of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Tone will be analyzed based on the “four positional aspects” (1987, p.103) developed by Moore. Furthermore, this

section will explore and elaborate on the diversity of Mercury's tone of voice throughout the song.

According to Moore, four positional aspects of a singer's voice contribute to quality and tone. The first is, the "register" which may be read as low (adding "gravity" or "sexiness"), comfortable (more or less normal), or high (reading as "virtuosic" or "lighthearted") (p. 102). Mercury's voice ranges from low to high in effortless delivery throughout the duration of *Bohemian Rhapsody*; that range can communicate an array of moods from moment to moment.

Most of the song is sung at a higher register, reaching into the falsetto range on occasion (a frequency range just above the "modal voice register," or the natural disposition or manner of action of the vocal cords). The first seven measures introduced by the lyrics "is this the real life," are sung in that higher range, but dip down into the lower register on certain words. For example, "no escape," moves from a low to high register progressively, reaching the lowest point at the word "no." The words "I'm just a poor boy" and "Any way the wind blows" are sung in a higher register. In the low register, there is an audible gravity in Mercury's voice at the end of phrases like "doesn't really matter to me" and "thrown it all away." These are the more somber moments in the song conveyed through the lower register. Listeners will sense the emotion conveyed through the higher register in moments like when "life had just begun" is sung.

In [Verse 3], the lyrics are sung in a higher range, rising to falsetto in "Thunderbolt and lightning -- Very, very frightening me --" and in the higher iterations of "Galileo." Mercury retorts with his own "Galileo, Galileo figaro," as he

moves toward the lower range. A sense of urgency is conveyed with the high-pitched tone in the final, exquisitely high rendering of “to me.”

[Verse 4] employs that higher register again, near the tail end of phrases like “So you think you can love me and leave me to die.” The lyrics crescendo on “die” and “Oh baby” to bring it to the height of that tonal message. Towards the end of the song, “Nothing really matters” moves from that higher register to the lower register at the end of the phrase. These are just some of the obvious examples where Mercury’s tone contributes to the song’s meaning. Next, we will consider the enunciation of the singer’s voice.

The second positional aspect of delivery asks the question, “In what ‘cavity’ of the body does the singer sing?” For Mercury, the sound is projected through the “chest voice,” a space that “connotes greater care,” “presence,” and “power” (p. 102). There is a certain presence in Mercury’s voice throughout the entirety of the song that never falters. His singing voice is projected at a volume that can only be achieved through a full-bodied chest voice, and he rarely strays from that cavity. Even during intimate moments with piano, the delivery is careful yet somehow still executed through a clear and dominating chest voice, a feature of Mercury’s vocal gifts.

The third positional aspect is the singer’s “attitude towards the rhythm.” Moore is concerned here with whether the singer is singing ahead of the beat, behind it, or exactly on it (p.103). In this case, Mercury sings on time with the beat throughout most of the song. There is very little deviation from this pattern. It is as if Mercury wants to follow the intention of the melody with great care. There is

purpose in following the rhythm of the song; for Moore it is this relationship between the singer and the rhythm that can determine whether the singer is personally involved with the narrative or if they are rather aloof, or contradictory in some way towards that rhythm (p.103). Mercury remains precise in his participation with the rhythm, alluding to the deep relationship between the singer and the lyrics he wrote. This participation with the rhythm is interrupted throughout the hard rock section in [Verse 4]. The rhythm of the music remains in a standard 4 beats per measure, while Mercury sings in triplets, giving the illusion that he is singing a bit ahead of the beat or not exactly on the beat. According to Moore's characterization of this change, it appears Mercury's attitude towards the rhythm has changed.

The fourth and final positional aspect of tone is the singer's "attitude towards pitch" which determines the degree to which the singer is singing "in tune" (p.103). A singer might sing flat or sharp or slightly off key. For Moore, these are all intentional decisions that are made by the performer (p.103). Freddie Mercury sings in tune most of the time. This is consistent with the relationship between the singer and the rhythm, as discussed earlier. There are a few points in the song where Mercury sings off key to emphasize or challenge the messages brought forth by the lyrics. The first instance is at the end of "Mama just killed a man" (where "man" is slightly sharp) and then again at the end of "Pulled my trigger, now he's dead" (where "dead" is slightly flat). These instances typically occur at the end of a four-bar phrase to emphasize the emotion conveyed by the lyrics. The end of "But now I've gone and thrown it all away," is also a little off key, and so is the final utterance

of, "nothing really matters." Most of these embellishments tend to be more flat than sharp. It is also worth mentioning that the guitar plays flat at the end of face the truth," to enunciate this emotion even further.

These observations (specifically, the latter two) can determine whether or not the singer is conforming to the apparent meaning of the lyrics by looking at the way that they are delivered (p.103). It is through each of the four positional aspects that we can explore the intentional articulation of sounds by a singer. Register, cavity, and the relationship with rhythm and pitch all contribute to the tonal quality of a singer's voice. It is through the details of delivery that much of the meaning is conveyed in a popular song. Next, we will move on to discuss the relationship between *Bohemian Rhapsody* and its overarching genre of progressive rock through the elements of style.

Style

Moore understands style as the means for "providing the primary condition for musical production and reception" (p.119). Moore compares the analysis of style to star gazing and posits that style is like a "constellation" in which everyone views the same stars, but how they map them will depend on their perspective (p.120). Similarly, people will listen to the same songs, but have individual expectations as to how the song contributes to its perceived genre. A style or genre can be a road map for the listener or the analyst. How closely the song adheres to or ignores those expectations influences the production of meaning. Therefore, the style becomes another mode by which the musical message can be understood (p.120). Moore

argues that people will “pay more-or-less close attention to music” (p.121), in accordance with what that style would lead them to expect. In this section we will consider the contributions of *Bohemian Rhapsody* to the progressive rock style, in terms of its idiolect.

An idiolect can be understood as the artist’s “mark on the style” (p.121). When a popular style becomes a distinguishable feature of a musical group, it is common for that group to “move away from its basic paradigms” (p.120) and begin developing their own idiolect. First, we recognize that *Bohemian Rhapsody* is generally assigned into the genre of progressive rock, but dually functions as a rhapsody as discussed earlier. The progressive rock era was highly influential in the UK and the US in the 1970s. By then, popular songs had become more than just the “three-minute self-contained love song(s)” and had evolved into a “new means of expression” (p.145). Psychedelia in the 1960s, largely “paved the way” for progressive rock music, where the technological sophistication of sounds was a key aspect on the production of popular rock music (p.143). Distorted sounds and technological manipulation were a prevalent feature of progressive rock music throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Moore suggests that a “number of factors” contributed to the acquisition of the progressive rock label (p.145). Those factors included a poetic approach to lyricism, the use of technological innovation born from psychedelia “that suggested alternate realities” (p.145), and music that has moved “out of the reach of amateur performers” (p.145). Based on these assumptions, the following section will explore how closely *Bohemian Rhapsody* aligns with its genre.

From my listening experience, *Bohemian Rhapsody* does align with the criteria that define the progressive rock style. The poetic approach to the lyrics and the use of synth and recording technology conform to the free form style of progressive rock. The distortion in the beginning of the song fosters the feeling of other-worldliness that Moore mentions as a pattern within the genre. Moore argued that “studio sophistication and the apparent audience demand for ‘radicalism’ inherent in the protest movement allowed musicians a space to develop an ideology of artistic freedom and self-expression” (p.145).

As a listener, 45 years after the release of the song, I have the same reaction towards the studio effects. Not only is the song consistent with the style, but it soars above those expectations, operating within Queen’s own idiolect. The listener might expect to hear a chorus and a few verses, but the song does not adhere to those norms and expectations. It is a progressive rock rhapsody. It walks that fine line between progressive rock and something uniquely different. Queen’s idiolect is quirky and unexpected, but still exists within the realm of that popular style. Therefore, *Bohemian Rhapsody* contributes to the progressive rock genre even as it exists slightly outside of that space, challenging the expectations and fostering intrigue in the form of an artistic rhapsody.

These first few sections follow the formalist approach toward music analysis; the following sections will be more concerned with processes “that develop out of an encounter with the music by which a track’s meaning can be addressed” (p.163). The analysis will become more focused on the “enlivening” of listener experience and focus on those “musical details” (p.163) that serve to enliven. The remaining

sections emphasize those elements that contribute to the deep and thoughtful process of “making sense” of a song (p. 163). Moore argues that the meaning that is created between the listener and their experience with the song is typically developed from “meanings already understood” (p.164). Hearing music is an “intersubjective” rather than an objective process and will be highly interpretive. In the next section, we introduce the concept of friction and discuss the moments when the song creates tension.

Friction

Friction is described as that area of tension “that can operate between the expectations listeners may bring to a track, on the basis of normative assumptions, and a track’s frequent refusal to conform to those assumptions” (p.163). This can happen through the arrangement, instrumentation, soundbox, textural domain, or even moment to moment (p.170). If the relationship between the instruments is “sundered” (p.168), even for a moment, it is noticeable to the listener.

Friction first occurs in the introduction of *Bohemian Rhapsody* when the piano continues to carry the mood for an extraordinary length of time. The listener expects to hear the band come together after the first 16 bars in the introduction. Instead, the listener is forced to wait for guitar, drum and bass to come in several measures later.

Tension is also manifested through the soundbox in those instances when sounds play in call and response on opposite sides of the sound space. As mentioned earlier in this analysis, the soundbox highlights textures. In this case, it also creates friction. The listener does not expect the melody to be heard on opposite sides of the

soundbox. This is an oddity that causes the listener to perk their ear and notice that tension once more.

The irregular arrangement of *Bohemian Rhapsody* builds tension from moment to moment throughout the song. In the beginning, the tone is set by a soft, somber ballad, then proceeds to move through several distinctly different musical experiences. Friction occurs between each section due to the seemingly arbitrary arrangement of the piece. There is little correlation between each section. Every moment generates a new effect. In the beginning, harmonized choral voices sing without the accompaniment of instruments. This is a novel occurrence in popular rock music; progressive rock songs don't typically begin with a cappella harmonies more reminiscent of gospel music or a barbershop quartet.

The mood of the song is set at the start of "Mama, just killed a man." As mentioned in the rhetorical analysis of the lyrics, this line inspired the band's "Cowboy Song" nickname for the song before it had a proper title. While it might have started off as an unusual beginning for a song by Queen, it did set the expectation that the soft melodic ballad would carry listeners through the rest of the tune. After the guitar solo satisfies the progressive rock expectations, the mood of the song alters abruptly at the start of [Verse 3]. Friction occurs at the beginning of the "mock-operatic" section, causing confusion and holding the attention of the audience. The shift to this movement is completely unexpected; the choral sounds of the operatic section are distinctly different from the homophonic (block chords) vocals experienced in the intro. Friction occurs wherever the song defies the generic expectations—or expectations set up within the song itself. It is also at this point

that first-time listeners realize that this musical experience will be something very different from the norm. These are just a few examples of the concept of friction operating in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Persona

Moore argues that identifying the persona is the “central aspect of the interpretative process” (p.179). To recall, Brown, (2007) highlighted the importance of understanding the meaning of popular songs through the embodied persona or personality of the performer. How we interact with a music track is typically a consequence of our relationship with the identity embodied by the singer, known as the “persona.” If we choose to engage with the music rather than just passively listen, it is usually that persona that we engage with the most. Moore believes that it is useful to recognize that we are listening to a persona that is “projected” by a singer rather than a “real” person (p.180), and that this persona may or may not be “identical with the person(ality) of the singer” (p.180). The chapter is primarily concerned with how this persona endures within a song (p.180).

There are three levels in which the identity of the singer exists that include the performer, the persona, and the protagonist. Moore argues that these levels are always identifiable, though the relationship between them is not as self-evident (p.181). The performer embodies the real person, the persona is that projected identity, and the protagonist takes on the lead character within the narrative of the song. I will discuss *Bohemian Rhapsody* in terms of all three of these identities.

The performer of the song is Freddie Mercury; this is the primary identity embodied on stage as the lead singer of Queen. And yet, Mercury takes on different personalities in every song that he performs. In *Bohemian Rhapsody*, there are several different personas that are adopted by our performer in this one song alone. The first example of persona is portrayed through the performance of the a cappella section in the first few measures of the introduction. In fact, the performer may take on the persona of multiple selves right from the very beginning. There is a layering of Mercury's voice, along with the lyrics, that suggest multiple personalities are portrayed by the performer. This persona seems skeptical of life itself.

Then there is the persona of the "torch singer," who sings the somber ballad throughout the remainder of the intro. This persona is woeful and troubled. The persona then shifts again in the operatic section. Here the persona is deranged and puzzled by the activity that surrounds him. There is a cacophony of voices that respond to this persona, giving the illusion of a battle amongst multiple selves. The next is the familiar rock-star persona that comes alive in [Verse 4]. This persona is determined and forthright; a uniquely different persona from what has been introduced thus far. Finally, the last persona that resurfaces during the [outro] embodies the same identity that was introduced at the beginning of the song, the sad and melancholy fellow. This time, however, the persona is appearing after gaining his agency back. He is not jubilant, but he is not without the ability to respond to whatever comes in the future.

Multiple personas are embodied by the singular performer throughout *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Not only are there different personas in each section, but there

are sometimes competing personalities within one singular persona. This is apparent in the harmonized a cappella of the intro and in the call and response of the operatic section. Throughout every major break within the song, the persona changes. Next I will talk about the role of the protagonist, a separate identity aligned with the particular song's narrative.

The protagonist within the song is more ambiguous. It isn't necessarily the same person as our performer nor the many personas, but a character within the narrative of the song. For this reason, the protagonist can be embodied by anyone. The persona becomes available to all listeners. Mercury serves as both a performer of, and a narrator for the protagonist. In the story of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, there is a poor boy that has experienced a trauma. He confesses he has killed a man. The narrative continues with the protagonist dealing with this trauma and attempting to move on. The boy everyone he knows and departs on a journey to "face the truth." Then, there is a pivotal moment at the start of the operatic section. The protagonist is introduced with a new dilemma. He is scorned over the fact that he is still "just a poor boy from a poor family." The religious reference of "Bismillah" (a call to the name of God in the Islamic faith), within the lyrics leads the auditor to believe that the protagonist is seeking some sort of repentance from this sorrow and self-doubt. There is a moment of resolve for our main character after he has experienced a revelation. This climax begins when the protagonist challenges those who have ridiculed him. This is apparent in the tone of the lyrics, "So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye." The protagonist fights on. Though, at the end of the story,

nothing truly gets resolved. Our protagonist lets the fight go and settles back into old sentiments about not being concerned with “any way the wind blows.”

Reference

In this chapter of Moore’s *Song Means*, the goal is to discover those moments within a song that “matter” (p.217) and, more importantly, explain why they matter. This “search for significance” is often found through reference or what the song stands for. In looking at what the music refers to outside of itself, deeper meanings can be discovered. The theory that guides the observations made in the chapter deals with semiotics, the study of signs and signification (in reference to Ferdinand de Saussure). In light of this theoretical application towards a popular song, Moore argues that “music refers in three fundamentally different ways: within itself; to itself; outside of itself” (p.218).

When music refers “within itself,” one part of the track refers to another (p.218). This happens when the lyrics or even the timbre of instruments are repeated or “transformed” (p.218), as the song progresses. For example, “the opening of a second verse will always refer to the opening of the first verse; that is, it will enable/suggest/require the calling-to-mind of its previous occurrence” (p.218).

When the music refers “to itself,” it makes reference to a separate instance of music. For example, when the “vocal identity of a particular singer will refer to other examples of that singer’s work” (p.218), or when the timbre of guitar

references other examples of that timbre in another song. Finally, the realm of “covers” is a third occasion when music refers to itself.

When music refers “outside of itself,” it acts as a sign for something that is not music. For example, the distorted sound of guitar can sound ugly (p.220), referring to something completely outside of the content within the music. By observing the way that music employs reference, arguments can be made surrounding the meaning of the song, depending on its relationship with reference. In this section we will discuss *Bohemian Rhapsody* in terms of those three categories mentioned above.

There are several occasions when the song refers “within itself” in the form of repetition and transformation. We will discuss these observations in terms of the guitar and the lyrics, as they are the most prominent feature to display this form of reference. The first lyrical phrase that refers to itself happens when Mercury sings about “Mama.” “Mama” is repeated on several occasions throughout the song. In the first two instances, the lyrics are featured in, “Mama just killed a man” and “Mama, life had just begun.” On the third occasion, the reference to “Mama” is transformed by the rise in pitch (from a “D” to a “G”). The final reference to “Mama” is transformed in the operatic section, where mama becomes “Mama mia.” Even though these are likely two separate entities in the song, the appearance of “Mama mia” invokes the early “Mama.” This is related to the rhetorical device of antithesis, where an idea is recalled by its opposite. Multiple examples of referencing effectively conveys the importance of the lyrics; it signals that it is something to pay attention to. The transformation of the repeated lyrics tells the listener that each

lyric will build upon another throughout the musical narrative, even if it is only to offer contrast to the original referent.

This type of reference is also significant in the myriad of ways that Mercury sings “nothing really matters.” The first phrase is featured in the beginning of the song, at the end of section one [Verse 1] in “Any way the wind blows doesn’t really matter to me.” The lyrical phrase alters slightly at the end of section two [Verse 1] in, “Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters --.” Finally, the phrase is repeated three times more, at the end of section seven [outro]: “Nothing really matters (Any one can see), nothing really matters -- nothing really matters to me,” followed by another iteration of “Any way the wind blows.” In each reference there is a transformation, designed to signal the importance of the message within that phrase and alert the listener that there are multiple meanings inherent in the phrase. These internal references highlight important phrases throughout the song and help to support the changing narrative.

The guitar is referenced from “within” the song on several occasions. Earlier in the study, we discussed the song in terms of its texture. The guitar was a significant contributor in signaling the change of texture during pivotal moments within the song. Guitar works similarly here regarding reference. The guitar is an apt instrument for signifying transformation. To recall, the guitar is featured as a solo twice in the song and at the end of certain phrases to emphasize a lyrical message and signal a change in mood. The guitar is a reference point in which those changes are highlighted. At some points it sounds very melodic and vocal at other points it sounds rougher. Each time the guitar plays throughout the song, matching

the mood of the music. For example, in [Verse 4] guitar becomes much more harsh and intense matching the tenacity of the lyrics. Though, in the last few riffs of guitar that precede the somber outro become more solemn to accompany the tone of the last few lines. These are just two examples of reference in the song.

With regard to the way the music refers “to itself,” we should first discuss the song in terms of the popular “cover.” A cover can be understood as the tribute of a popular song by another artist (or even a YouTuber). A Wikipedia search for “Bohemian Rhapsody covers” revealed that over 60 artists have covered the song since 1987, including Elton John, Kanye West, Pink, Panic! At the Disco, Pentatonix, The Muppets, and The Braids. With a search of the same tagline on Google, there are 774,000 video results. This brief content analysis shows the significance of the song in the current climate. This form of reference by “covering” shows how relevant the song remains in popular music culture.

The song also refers to itself through the familiar guitar talents of Brian May and the iconic sound of Mercury’s singing voice. *Bohemian Rhapsody* highlights Mercury’s impressive vocal range, a feature on most Queen tracks. The guitar solo is transformed, but familiar to that signature sound of the guitar in a number of hits like: *Killer Queen*, *Keep Yourself Alive*, *Stone Cold Crazy* and *It’s a Hard Life*. An article by Paul Sexton in 2019 (Udiscovermusic.com), listed the “Top Ten Classic Brian May Guitar Solos,” and argues that Brian May’s solo in *Bohemian Rhapsody* is “not only a remarkable, timeless solo but some of the most brilliant guitar textures to augment the rest of the band, particularly Freddie Mercury’s lead vocals.” These two types of reference contribute to the bands “sound,” “style,” or “idiolect.” For the

listener, this type of reference builds credibility and contributes to the band's signature sound ([Udiscovermusic](#)).

With regard to the way the music refers outside of itself, the song is animated by metaphors. There is metaphorical reference in the sounds of the instruments, the synthesizer and the lyrics. We've already covered one example in the timbre of guitar. The various moods that are projected from the sound of the guitar can refer to feelings of despair, triumph or even defiance. These feelings are references "outside" of the music. Similarly, we discovered that the synthesizer produced feelings of "other-worldliness," referring the listener to thoughts about floating above our physical selves (a metaphor). The "crash" of the symbol acts as the signification of chaos, as do the call and response in the operatic section. There are also two moments within the song, when "non-musical sounds" (p.218), are used within the music. This occurs at the point in which the synthesizer mimics the sounds of wind blowing; though this could be a different form of studio sophistication, it sounds similar to a thin metal sheet being waved around vigorously to refer the audience to the sounds of the wind. Similarly, wind chimes are implemented into the background of the phrase "send shivers down my spine" to create the illusion of shivering or even the wind once more. There are many more points at which the song refers outside of itself, creating meaning through metaphor within the lyrics and texture in the instruments. This section has concentrated on points of reference within a song that contribute to its overall significance to the listener. It is grounded in the theory of semiotics and works similarly to the familiar

rhetorical trope, repetition. The final section observes the song in terms of its “authenticity.”

Belonging

This chapter deals primarily with authenticity and the relationship that is built between the musicians and the sounds they make (i.e. voices, instruments, or electric boxes) (p.259). Moore asks two questions that are at the forefront of the chapter, (1) To what extent does the sound the musician makes belong to that musician? and (2) Can this be determined from within the text itself? (p.259). Because the previous method of analysis (CTA) focused on the “text,” it is Moore’s first question that requires more elaboration here.

For Moore, there is no one standard agreement for what makes a performer authentic. Though, the relationship between the performer and the persona does have some effect. Authenticity is a highly subjective interpretation by the listener. In the most contemporary understanding of the term, authenticity involves feelings of ‘centeredness,’ a term originally used by Allen (1986) to explain a ‘place of belonging’ (p. 271) in music that is experienced by the listener in relation to the performance. This centeredness “implies an active lifting of oneself from an unstable experimental ground and depositing oneself within an experience to be trusted, an experience that centers the listener” (p.271). Even the invocation of “unstable ground” here suggests this is something *Bohemian Rhapsody* listeners will find familiar.

By elaborating on the relationship between the performer and the song, we can discover those elements that make the experience authentic. For example, in the delivery section, Mercury displays a special relationship between the singer and the song through the execution of his “tone of voice.” The singer’s “attitude towards the pitch” and “attitude towards the rhythm” was thought to be consistent throughout the song except at those points where patterns altered to add emphasis on certain lyrics. For Moore, these efforts on behalf of delivery can illuminate how meaningful the relationship between the singer and the song might be. Timbre also contributed to the dynamic relationship between Mercury and *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Each verse was sung with a uniquely different timbre that helped to communicate the intention of the lyrical message. Mercury was greatly involved with the performance, adopting several personas that exist within the musical narrative. He remains an enthusiastic narrator for the protagonist that he created. These are just some of the tools that Mercury has utilized in his performance to create an authentic feeling. The song was written by Mercury alone; in a sense it completely belongs to him—and, to all of us at the same time.

When I experienced this song for the first time as a child in 2005, thirty years after it was first released, I was intrigued and fascinated by the musical “relic,” though I did not know why. In the last six months, I have listened to the song hundreds of (maybe a thousand) times. The emotions that I felt throughout this experience have varied but remain strong and present through every playback. It is not only the lyrics that provide feelings of centeredness, but the highly calculated and complimentary musical components too. The relationship between Mercury and

the guitar influenced the emotion and authenticity in the song. Perhaps, when Moore talks of a “sense of belonging” or “centeredness,” he is alluding to the song’s capacity to invite diverse listeners in and make of it what they will. We are, like Edwin Black said of listeners to and readers of Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, invited to “participate in the arguments as co-creators of meaning.” Authenticity may be nothing more (or less) than giving every listener the impression that the song was written and performed “for me.”

CONCLUSION

Synthesis/Discussion

This final chapter will serve as a synthesis and discussion of the discoveries made throughout this research. It is designed to answer the revised research questions that were adapted after a review of the literature. Those research questions included: (RQ1) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody's* lyrics rhetorical?, (RQ2) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody's* musical elements rhetorical?, (RQ3) How do musical components and verbal lyrics synthesize to make *Bohemian Rhapsody* an inter-generational and international favorite nearly half a century since it was released? For the reader's sake, this will be accomplished by drawing parallels between the various musical "arguments" alongside the lyrics as they happen in chronological order (Verses 1-6). The guitar solo in section three will be treated with special consideration in between verses 2 and 3. After satisfying all three research questions, I will discuss the importance of doing musical and rhetorical research and suggest further implications.

Intro

The introduction of *Bohemian Rhapsody* functions persuasively through both the lyrics and the various musical components in several ways. Through a close reading of the text in the introduction, it remains unclear who the protagonist is by name and also who the reference to the second person in "open your eyes," belongs to. I believe that this has been done intentionally. This ambiguity is prevalent throughout the song at many points. It serves as a place where the audience can insert themselves (and others) into the story and functions as a persuasive tool by

the lyrics, giving the audience potential involvement in the narrative. This is similar to findings by Jarmen-Ivens (2006) in her own research on the musical and lyrical arguments in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Throughout the brief analysis the author repeatedly reinforces various moods and interpretations of the lyrics alongside the composition. For example, she notes that the unique array of harmonic vocals in the intro along with the questioning nature of the text created “an underlying ambiguity” (p. 24) where one is forced to wonder “who is speaking, who is the promised epic hero?” (p.24).

The repetition also serves as a rhetorical function in that it directs the audience to pay attention to the more important words within the verse, such as the instance of repeated phrase “to me, to me.” At this point we know that the protagonist is in an existential crisis, questioning the fabric of life itself through the use of figurative language. We know from Osborn (1967, as cited in Burghardt, 2010), that metaphor also functions as an effective rhetorical trope.

There is no instrumentation in the first few lines of the intro as of yet, but there are a myriad of rhetorical effects by the music through the “persona,” synthesizer, soundbox, style and form. From what we have learned from the function of Moore’s “persona,” we know that a variety of identities operate interchangeably throughout the musical experience. It is the relationship between these identities that give the performance credibility. In the analysis it was posited that the persona in the introduction was embodied by “multiple selves.” This persona is realized through the ambiguous first- and second-person tense and also with the help of the synthesizer and soundbox.

In the “soundbox” we heard synthesized voices isolated in the center of the sound space during the introduction. Through the use of advanced recording technology and in close alignment with the progressive rock “style,” the lyrics not only operate in line with the expectations for this particular genre, but they are dually heightened by the augmentation in the soundbox. To recall, the manipulation of sounds in music can invoke feelings of “other-worldliness.” From the assumptions made within the discourse, paired with the implementation of recording technology, it appears that the introduction is designed to foster feelings of uncertainty and alienation by our protagonist. The introduction also functions persuasively in that it aligns with expectations within the genre.

Through the use of the “landslide” metaphor, we learn that the protagonist is unstable. If we couple this notion by the lyrics with their relationship to the soundbox, it becomes apparent that that the protagonist is feeling both isolated and uncertain. This manifestation of an “alternate reality” is introduced by lyrics that question whether the setting is the “real life” or “just a fantasy,” and the message within that metaphor is solidified by the augmented space in the soundbox.

Through CTA, we were unable to comprehend who the protagonist refers to in the second person, but in understanding the function of the synthesizer, we know that the multiple singing voices belong to the singular performer. Therefore, it can be argued that the protagonist is undergoing a self-reflexive process, questioning life itself and directing themselves to open their own eyes. This is further evident by fact that the protagonist calls attention for their desire to be dismissed by all others in the final line of the introduction. Because of this, it makes more sense that the

protagonist is referring to themselves throughout the introduction. At this point the song uses multiple appeals using both language tools, recording technology, and genre to produce a persuasive argument about the very human feelings of uncertainty surrounding identity and place in life.

Verse 1

Verse 1 provides our first introduction to “Mama,” who appears three times within the lyrics. In both the lyrical and musical analyses, the repetition of “Mama” is substantial. Given that we don’t know who “Mama” is, the interpretation is up to the audience once more. “Mama” could be anyone who cares about the protagonist. To recall, Moore calls this form of repetition “reference” in popular song analysis. The phrase “Mama just killed a man” sets up the expectation that the song will be a mournful Ballad, laden with regret. The textural layers within the music set up the same expectation.

As mentioned in the analysis, the piano, bass and vocal instruments are introduced at the start of the first line, beginning with “Mama,” creating a sorrowful and tragic textural accompaniment of lines 1-3. The drums come in as the final textural layer in [Verse 1], enunciating the phrase “thrown it all away.” The percussion works here to direct the listener to a sudden change or event (implied by the tense of the previous “just”). It also functions rhetorically as an unexpected embellishment in the somber Ballad. The textural layers have been implemented to supplement “happenings” within the lyrics. When any one instrument is featured at the fore front of the soundbox it is meant to emphasize a certain emotional appeal in the lyrics. For example, the piano and vocals at the forefront of soundbox echo the

sorrowful mood in the lyrics and the guitar moves in front of all instruments to accompany the lead singer in [Verse 4] (hardrock section) to supplement the “heroic” mood there.

There is a significant dynamic between the piano and the performer in this section that is realized through the soundbox. These two layers have a special relationship to the lyrics. When the lyrics are tragic and regretful as they are in the phrase “Mama just killed a man,” the timbre of the piano and the vocals are designed to make that message more salient. Piano moves softly, delicately, and Freddie’s voice is raspy and with an emotional timbre in the sounds of the lead vocals. In combination, they work together as an appeal to the audience’s emotions.

The singer’s attitude towards the pitch here also functions rhetorically. At the end of most lyrical phrases, the performer sings off key (often flat). This imperfection of the voice is symbolic of sadness and despair, helping to further solidify the multifaceted emotional appeals through lyrics and musical components in sync.

There are various tensions created by the lyrics and the music in [Verse 1]. In lines 2 and 3 that tension is manifested in the lyrics through the reference to life and death. That tension is also sustained by the music in the elongated persistence of tonal instruments. It is the percussion that finally relieves that tension on the phrase “thrown it all away.” The same lyrical phrase is dually relieving as it implies an action taken before the series of events occurring in lines 1-3. The combination of cymbals alongside the action statement signal a pivotal moment within the narrative.

The second half of the verse invokes the next most repeated phrase, “carry on, carry on.” This time the action is directed at “Mama.” In the intro, the protagonist is working themselves up to “carry on.” In this verse however they have directed “mama” to “carry on.” It seems that our protagonist has matured in the time between the intro and the first verse and also in each subsequent mention of “mama” throughout [Verse 1]. They are beginning to come to terms with the decision to move on. This is indicated in line 6 when the protagonist admits to going away for the first time. This is implied by the phrase “if I’m not back again this time tomorrow.”

From the first mention of “Mama” there was regret and tragedy when the protagonist claimed that they had “just killed a man.” The next mention of “Mama” suggests a potential movement in time when coupled with the past tense indication of “just” in “life had just begun.” The final mention is directed towards “mama” as an explanation for the protagonist’s actions in “didn’t mean to make you cry.” This transformative movement through the narrative is a form of Moore’s musical reference. Not only do the lyrics repeat to call attention to “Mama,” but they are transformed to assist in the temporal movement of the narrative. Therefore, reference becomes a rhetorical trope and a navigational tool.

At this point, we know that “Mama” is a new character in the narrative, but we don’t know who she is. She could be the literal interpretation of a mother figure, which would make sense in the instance that the protagonist is “leaving the nest.” Or “Mama” could represent someone that the protagonist outgrew for some reason. “Mama” represents a lover, a best friend or a loved one that must be left behind at

that point in which the protagonists must take that leap of faith to find themselves. The “Mama” metaphor has rhetorical effect in the song as it becomes applicable to all listeners. Every person, from all walks of life has the desire to move forward and search for their own identity. This often involves the tragic event of leaving people that are loved behind and may be why the ambiguous “Mama” becomes so rhetorically powerful throughout the narrative.

We recall there was an instability and uncertainty by the protagonist in the introduction. In [Verse 1], that instability is still present. This is apparent through the timbre in the performer’s voice. Throughout [Verse 1] the timbre is shaky and full of breath, insinuating despair or deep sadness. Instability is also recognizable in the “singer’s attitude toward the pitch.” The performer sings a bit off key at the end of every phrase to communicate that their attitude towards the lyrics are hesitant or untrustworthy. The shaky timbre in combination with the “pitchiness” sustain the feelings of uncertainty and remorse by the protagonist at this pivotal moment, still. This is yet another instance when the lyrics become more convincing through the manipulation of timbre, pitch, textural layers, and soundbox.

Verse 2

In Verse 2, “all” is the most frequent word to appear, it is another repeated phrase that also aligns with the function of Moore’s reference. In this case, each instance of “all” occurs in the first person and serve as proclamations by the protagonist. Each “all” is also transformed. At first there is a realization by the protagonist that “my time has come;” then, we get a glimpse into the physical or emotional (if metaphorical) condition of our protagonist whose “body’s aching all

the time,” Lastly, the protagonist claims that they wish they’d “never been born at all.” These series of events implied by all three occasions of “all” are the first indication of how the protagonist feels in their current state of being, following the instability and tragedy in the introduction and [Verse 1]. There is also a form of reference in the “non-musical” sounds of the wind chime, designed to play alongside the lyrical “shivers.”

Shivers here in combination with the sound of the chimes, creates the illusion of anticipation. The windchimes can refer to feelings of fragility and momentary stillness, in that windchimes are usually associated with a quiet place, only disturbed by the breeze on occasion. It is here that the lyrics and the musical components work as a metaphor for transitioning. This also aligns with the repetition of “any way the wind blows.” It’s as if the protagonist expects the wind to carry him along on this uncertain journey; in his fragile state, he would be easily swept away. The metaphor here helps the audience to better understand these feelings of anticipation and hesitancy within the mind of the protagonist. These feelings are easily transferable and relatable to a diverse audience and exists within the realm of common human experience.

Another reference to “Mama” appears in [Verse 2]. It is paired with the parenthetical (“any way the wind blows”). Here, it seems that this is a passing thought in our protagonist’s mind. He has moved on from the previous engagements with “Mama,” but still reminisces from time to time. This shows that he has not yet overcome his regret and longing for “Mama.” Longing is a very relatable response to

loss. Here this notion is communicated symbolically through lyrical repetition and musical reference.

Tension is created by the lyrics and the music once more in [Verse 2]. The phrase “too late” implies that there is an urgency, that something has gone to pass. However, the music and delivery remain at a slow and steady standard 4/4 beat, creating a friction between the urgency in the lyrics and the meter of the music. This indicates that the protagonist might be hesitant for the journey ahead. The first sign of a possible journey is implied by the statement “my time has come.” The delivery is also very intentional throughout verses 1 and 2. We will elaborate on some of those details here, as they function similarly in the previous verse. To recall, depending on the tone or register of the singer’s voice, different meanings can be implied.

Throughout Verse 2, the performer delivers the lyrics through a range of registers. In the phrase “too late,” the notes are sung at a lower register, conveying the remorse behind the statement. Similarly, “Goodbye, everybody” is executed in the same low and woeful register. This is also the first time the protagonist has addressed more than one person at a time; they refer to everyone. At this point it seems that the protagonist must move on from some other heavy burden that weighs on him. This time the feelings are not necessarily directed at “mama.”

The next phrase to follow, “I’ve got to go” is raised in pitch and sung with a higher register. This conveys the certainty in the protagonist’s decision to leave. Similarly, the last two lines are sung in the more definitive higher range. “Face the truth” is at the lowest tone sung by our performer so far. It communicates the despair and at the same time, the determination to find this proverbial truth. It is

through the use of “face” and the other references to the body, that the concept of identity is introduced. It is obvious now that the protagonist is struggling with his own identity and the trauma that ensued with “Mama.” That trauma has also remained ambiguous (in the sense of being multiply interpreted) throughout the song. Another window in which the audience can insert themselves into the story.

The guitar is introduced for the first time at the end of “face the truth.” Suspense has been carried by all other instruments up until this point. Now, guitar becomes a part of the textural layers. The timbre of the guitar is distorted and low, matching the “pitchiness” and lower register of the vocals on the same phrase. The guitar is a unique element in the music of *Bohemian Rhapsody*; it is persuasive and functions symbolically alongside the performer in various ways. The sounds of the guitar often make an emotional appeal that is similar to the many appeals made through the lyrics. This is often communicated through the timbre of the instrument. It also sometimes functions as its own character in the narrative, perhaps even in support of the protagonist when action or agency is required.

Another instance of the life and death poles operate in succession in [Verse 2], “I don’t wanna die” and “I sometimes wish I’d never been born at all.” It is apparent that our protagonist is experiencing a conflict within himself about himself. Throughout this verse, the pitch is averted intentionally. The performer sings off key to communicate desperation. The guitar here, as it accompanies the last 3 lines in [Verse 3], is deeply emotional. Each strum and reverberation of the chords are sad and tragic (and slightly distorted) as they accompany the lyrics about life

and death. That texture and timbre continues into the guitar solo following [Verse 2]. It is here that we fully realize the persuasive qualities of the instrument.

Guitar solo

The guitar solo functions as a metaphor for the sorrowful act of leaving and embarking on a journey. Through all the suspense and emotion conveyed in the textural layers until this point, and based on the discoveries that we have made through discourse analysis thus far, it is apparent that the guitar evokes a departure for our protagonist even as it signals a departure from the ballad to the other genres of the song. We don't know how long the journey lasts, and that is intentional. Without the use of language, what happens here is entirely up to the audience's interpretation through the experience of music. Through, the rough timbre and distortion of the guitar solo, we hear the leaving as a painful interlude.

The guitar solo provides a moment at which each listener can enter the narrative. The music functions like a syllogism in a sense. As mentioned in the reference section of the music analysis, the guitar is the most intelligent and intentional accompaniment of the lead singer and the lyrical message. It often functions as a harmonic filler layer that accompanies the melody. The pure instrumentation washes away tensions that were created in the first few verses. Though, ironically (based on observations made in Moore), there is friction that occurs directly at the beginning of the guitar solo (where a chorus element is expected based on the generic features of popular rock songs). Even though the timbre of the guitar has alleviated some tensions through its highly anticipated introduction, it is still an unexpected movement within the song and behaves in

accordance with the constant push-pull dynamic that is prevalent in the protagonist's struggle.

Verse 3- soundbox/delivery/style

[Verse 3] is the longest movement within the song, and it features an extraordinary amount of repeated words. From what we have mentioned as a pattern already, we can see that repetition and reference are at work here again. We know repetition will have persuasive effect due to the frequency of words. Those repeated words will also function as a form of reference to "draw attention to" or transform the repeated phrase for the sake of the narrative. For the "mock-opera" section, we will focus on other various musical and rhetorical elements that work together to produce meaning in this unique arrangement.

In this unusual mock-opera arrangement, the rhythm is a noteworthy feature. In this case, the rhythm has been manipulated to match the frequency of single syllable words throughout this section. For example, the word silhouette has been altered with an extra syllable consistent with the cadence in the delivery and the rhythm of the beat. This may be merely a feature of style, but it also allows the song to appeal to the listener with an unexpected cadence. The pace and the mood of the song has changed entirely at this point. The "style" of this section is also unexpected in the progressive rock genre. The audience is forced to notice the performer's obvious break with progressive rock genre in this moment. At this point, friction directs the listener to pay close attention to yet another persuasive formal component of the music. The music has also changed in timbre and texture. The texture, soundbox and synthesizer are working closely alongside the lyrics in a

dynamic relationship throughout the section, highlighting big moments and emphasizing the chaos invoked by the nightmarish lyrics.

In 6 lines of the 17-line verse, there are references to the first person. Within the rest of the 11 lines, the second and third person are invoked. From this we know that the protagonist is in some sort of “verbal exchange” with multiple others. The synthesizer has been employed again to grant the illusion of multiple voices featured in those lines that are written in the second and third person. The familiar voice of the performer is also a poignant feature in the synthesized and layered vocals. From here, we first notice that the protagonist is surrounded by multiple others. The synthesizer works as a persuasive tool to help create the illusion of multiple selves and communicate meaning here.

Since many words operate figuratively in this verse, it is possible to interpret the verbal exchange is going on in the mind of the protagonist. The sound box helps to enunciate the feelings of chaos by bouncing the call and response between the protagonist and the voices of others. The sounds move back-and-forth and all around that space. That these voices are symbolic of inner demons can be inferred with the final line’s reference to Beelzebub.

Much of the discourse in this section is framed in the negative through the use of “no,” “never,” and “not.” The protagonist resists and insists he must be “let go.” His resistance is supplemented by the textural layers of the music. The piano keys are struck vigorously behind the negative words, and the cymbal often crashes at the end of a phrase for emphasis. The timbre of the vocals are more theatrical and dramatic in this section, helping to create the illusion that this is imaginary or the

inner workings of a mind in turmoil. It is also worth mentioning that the register of the lead singer's voice executed at a much higher pitch on the reference to names like "Galileo" and "Magnifico," and then much lower on references to the more "low brow" mention of "figaro." Through the underlying meanings behind the Italian-opera names coupled with the execution of the delivery, these assumptions are plausible. It can be argued that the protagonist is battling between the "good" and the "bad" parts of their own self-image. At times, the protagonist might be feeling as noteworthy as "Galileo", but then quickly that sentiment changes to feelings of doubt embodied by the less-than or low-brow version of himself as "figaro."

The operatic section serves as a metaphor for the inner turmoil that goes on inside the protagonist's mind. The music functions rhetorically here as it helps to manifest the illusion of the metaphorical hell-space.

Verse 4

[Verse 4] introduces a new character in the form of "baby" and "you" and "me" are the most frequent words to occur at 4 times a piece. From the discourse we can assume that there is an interaction between the protagonist and "baby" during [Verse 4]. We don't know who "baby" is, though the word is another example inviting interpretation by the listener. In this verse, the singer's attitude towards the rhythm produces meaning. To recall the meter is in a standard 4/4 beat throughout this short section, though the performer sings in triplets which has the tendency to sound "off beat." For Moore this means that the singer's attitude towards the lyrics is changed in some way. The performer does not necessarily care to remain on the beat and follow the course of things. Rather they are resistant. This resistance aligns

with the lyrical message, “So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye.” The phrase here is framed as accusatory and defensive. The music works to emphasize this notion.

The timbre of the singer’s voice has also changed as do the instruments that accompany him. To recall in the analysis, we observed that the singer’s tone in this hard rock section was executed with a “fleeting precision.” The singer’s attitude toward the pitch here is also hesitant. The singer intentionally sings off key and exaggerates the final notes in each phrase to let the listener know that the protagonist will not be left to “die” or let anyone “spit in his eye.” This is the first time that our protagonist has experienced something other than uncertainty, agony, turmoil and despair. In this section the timbre is determined and forthright, aligning with the determination voiced in the lyrics.

It is worth mentioning here that the guitar has come back as a part of the four textural layers. In the previous section, the guitar was absent from the music entirely. This is likely because the guitar is a champion for the protagonist and only plays in those sections where he takes some sort of action. Each time the instrument is featured in the song, it signals a pivotal moment for the protagonist and often plays in the same timbre/tone as that of the performer at any given time.

As this verse comes to a close, another appearance of the word “just” resurfaces, this time with a meaning synonymous with “really” as emphasis. It is coupled with the phrase “gotta get out.” Here, the reference to “just” as an emphatic underscoring of the urgency of the moment, signals another change. The guitar also solos to carry this verse into the final outro.

Outro

The same pattern that was produced in the arrangement of the music in the introduction is employed in the final outro. Each instrument is stripped away one at a time until it is only the piano and the lead singer left to carry out the tune. This works as a metaphor for our protagonist “stripping down” to his most vulnerable self. The tone of the piece is melancholy and somber once more, as indicated by the soft piano and the timbre of the singer’s vocals. What has changed here from the beginning is that the timbre of the performer’s voice is no longer “shaky” or breathy. It is rather clear and captivating, emulating the resolve that the protagonist feels at this moment, helping to communicate the mood of the protagonist. The performer sings through a chest voice here that communicates “presence” and “power.” One familiar phrase is thrice-repeated in the last lines: “nothing really matters.” While the protagonist may not have resolved anything, the lyrics and the musical components suggest he is finally at peace with his own identity, clear of any competing voices, after the long and tumultuous journey.

Summary

There are a few other aspects worthy of our consideration. The first is within the realm of authenticity. Moore argued in the final chapter of his book that authenticity is a feeling of listener “belonging” when they have experienced an authentic performance. It is the raw experience and relationship between the listener and the performer that makes it authentic; it is the most interpretive process thus far. It has become apparent through a close relationship to the words in this song and with the learned experience of music analysis that this has been the

most authentic process that I have experienced with one song. To touch on one more aspect of Moore's complete analysis that did not get covered in as much detail, is in the reference of music "to itself" in the form of a cover. In the analysis we learned that *Bohemian Rhapsody* has been covered by multiple dozens of artists and the search for covers of the song on Google reaches into the 700 thousands. This shows that the song remains a popular song choice by people from all across the internet and across all genres. People want to cover this song and realize the full experience of life's most common journey inside the mind through the musical juggernaut that is *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

To recall the quote by lead guitar artist, Brian May, we are told that Queen preferred to leave the interpretation of their songs up to the fans. Of course, there are some parallels to be drawn to the lives of the band members at any point in which musical analyses are done. Though Queen's music has always been particularly unusual and appealing, maybe that is because the listeners are given so much autonomy in their experience with listening.

To summarize, we turn again to the research questions that drove this analysis, followed by implications for further research. To recall the first question was, (RQ1) How are *Bohemian Rhapsody's* lyrics rhetorical? In sum, the extraordinary amount of repetition throughout the song becomes a highly persuasive rhetorical tool. It is repetitive, therefore calls attention to itself and becomes more memorable. There is a heavy influence of metaphor throughout the piece that serves as both a rhetorical device and as a producer of meaning. It is through the use of metaphor that many of the interpretive arguments are made.

(RQ2) asks, How are *Bohemian Rhapsody's* musical elements rhetorical?

From the analysis and synthesis we have learned that music can function to emphasize or detract from certain lyrical messages, therefore enhancing the rhetorical effect of those lyrics in some way. It is also now evident that musical instruments can serve as a rhetorical argument on their own. In particular, the emotional experience embodied in the guitar solo suggests that instrumentation can persuade, if only to feel something powerful. When there are no lyrics present, the music can serve as the most powerful rhetorical tool in that it leaves the interpretation completely up to the listener. The words no longer constrain interpretation.

The final research question asks, (RQ3) How do musical components and verbal lyrics synthesize to make *Bohemian Rhapsody* an intergenerational and international favorite nearly half a century since it was released?

In the synthesis we discovered many points at which the music was designed to accompany the lyrics in calculated and intentional ways to emphasize or create meaning through the use of musical components like texture, timbre, soundbox, tone etc. The music and the lyrics remain open to interpretation and offer the listener an opportunity to participate in a dynamic relationship to co-create meaning. This, according to Queen, is exactly what they preferred.

Given the ambiguity of the protagonist in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and the strategic use of "as many musical means as possible," there is rhetorical salience in the song. The message and the experience rem

ains open to all as the protagonist, like the many personalities of the song's personae, is also someone we recognize. It is also worth stating here that, in the lyrics, the protagonist is ungendered. This is unusual in music, especially in the popular rock genre. There are typically references to women and men in a story about heartbreak or even tragedy. In *Bohemian Rhapsody* the protagonist has no gender and the (antagonist/other characters) are referenced in near gender-neutral terms like "baby" or the ambiguous and metaphorical "mama." While this analysis opted to align the protagonist's gender with that of the songwriter (given the many uses of the first person pronoun in Mercury's lyrics), it may have been more revelatory to have gone with the gender neutral option in describing the protagonist. This is one of the ways that the song allows for anyone to become the protagonist within the narrative. Future research should consider "ungendering" song analyses to offer an interpretation that works for all people. Communications scholars should also consider conducting more interdisciplinary work with music analyses to undergo this invaluable experience of uncovering the rhetorical properties in the music that we love.

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APPENDIX A

Song Lyrics and Liner Notes

(Lyrics transcribed from the "[Official Lyrics Video](#)" and [album liner notes](#))

Intro

1. Is this the real life --
2. Is this just fantasy --
3. Caught in a landslide --
4. No escape from reality --
5. Open your eyes
6. Look up to the skies and see --
7. I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy --
8. Because I'm easy come, easy go,
9. A little high, little low,
10. Any way the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me,
--to me--

Verse 1

1. Mama, just killed a man,
2. Put a gun against his head,
3. Pulled my trigger, now he's dead.
4. Mama, life had just begun,
5. But now I've gone and thrown it all away --
6. Mama, ooo,
7. Didn't mean to make you cry --
8. If I'm not back again this time tomorrow --
9. Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters --

Verse 2

1. Too late, my time has come,
2. Sends shivers down my spine --
3. Body's aching all the time,
4. Goodbye everybody -- I've got to go --
5. Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth --
6. Mama, ooo – [(any way the wind blows) parenthetical
sung by others, this one not in liner notes]
7. I don't want to die,
8. I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all --

[Guitar Solo]

Verse 3

1. I see a little silhouetto of a man
2. Scaramouche, Scaramouche -- will you do the Fandango --
3. Thunderbolt and lightning -- Very, very frightening me --
4. (Galileo) Galileo. [parenthesis added]
5. (Galileo) Galileo, [parenthesis added]
6. Galileo figaro -- Magnifico --
7. I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me --
8. He's just a poor boy from a poor family --
9. Spare him his life from this monstrosity --
10. Easy come, easy go -- will you let me go --
11. Bismillah! No -- we will not let you go -- (let him go)
12. Bismillah! We will not let you go -- (let him go)
13. Bismillah! We will not let you go -- (let him go)
14. Will not let you go -- let me go
15. [(Never, never, never, never let me go) not in liner notes]
16. No, no, no, no, no, no, no --
17. Mama mia, mama mia, mama mia let me go --
18. Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me --
for me --

Verse 4 (follows shorter guitar solo)

1. So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye --
2. So you think you can love me and leave me to die --
3. Oh baby -- Can't do this to me baby --
4. Just gotta get out -- just gotta get right outta here --

Outro

1. [(Ooooh, ooo yeah, ooo yeah) Not in liner notes]
2. Nothing really matters,
3. Anyone can see,
4. Nothing really matters -- nothing really matters to me,
5. Any way the wind blows...

Album Liner Notes of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (enlarged)

Is this the real life –
 Is this just fantasy –
 Caught in a landslide –
 No escape from reality –
 Open your eyes
 Look up to the skies and see –
 I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy –
 Because I'm easy come, easy go,
 A little high, little low,
 Anyway the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me,
 – to me –

Mama, just killed a man,
 Put a gun against his head,
 Pulled my trigger, now he's dead,
 Mama, life had just begun,
 But now I've gone and thrown it all away –
 Mama, ooo,
 Didn't mean to make you cry –
 If I'm not back again this time tomorrow –
 Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters –

Too late, my time has come,
 Sends shivers down my spine –
 Body's aching all the time,
 Goodbye everybody – I've got to go –
 Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth –
 Mama, ooo –
 I don't want to die,
 I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all –

I see a little silhouette of a man
 Scaramouche, Scaramouche – will you do the Fandango –
 Thunderbolt and lightning – very very frightening me –
 Galileo, Galileo,
 Galileo, Galileo,
 Galileo figaro – Magnifico –
 I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me –
 He's just a poor boy from a poor family –
 Spare him his life from this monstrosity –
 Easy come easy go – will you let me go –
 Bismillah! No – we will not let you go – let him go –
 Bismillah! We will not let you go – let him go
 Bismillah! We will not let you go – let him go
 Will not let you go – let me go

APPENDIX B

Kayla Reininger [Infographic](#) on *Bohemian Rhapsody*



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