

# meiea<sup>®</sup>

MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY  
EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION

Journal of the  
Music & Entertainment Industry  
Educators Association

Volume 13, Number 1  
(2013)

Bruce Ronkin, Editor  
Northeastern University

Published with Support  
from



MIKE CURB COLLEGE of  
ENTERTAINMENT and MUSIC BUSINESS

**BELMONT**  
UNIVERSITY

# So What Does “Set Fire To The Rain” *Really* Mean? A Typology for Analyzing Pop Song Lyrics Using Narrative Theory and Semiotics

Quint Randle

*Brigham Young University*

Keith Evans

*Student, Brigham Young University*

## Abstract

Lyrics that tell a story have always been a defining characteristic of American popular music, yet the narrativity of pop music is underrepresented in academic literature. This paper utilizes a combination of semiotics and narrative theory to present a systematic method that can be used to analyze and codify the lyrics of virtually any pop song into one of four major categories based on whether it has an open or closed reading and a defined or undefined narrative. It is hoped that this typology can be used both to better understand how pop music plays a role in cultural storytelling and to aid teachers and students in the development and understanding of songwriting pedagogy.

Keywords: lyrics, semiotics, narrative theory, songwriting, popular music

## Introduction

Lyrics that tell a story have always been a defining characteristic of American popular music. Musical adaptations of nineteenth-century folklore (*The Ballad of John Henry*), teenage heartbreak songs of the early 1960s (*Tell Laura I Love Her*), and compositions by singer-songwriters of the 1970s (e.g., Harry Chapin, Jim Croce) all demonstrate Americans' appetites for listening to, becoming immersed in, and interpreting story. While some music genres, such as country, tend to emphasize linear narratives, many major pop hits leave listeners reading between the lines for some semblance of a story (Adele's *Set Fire To The Rain*). Even “meaningless” dance hits oftentimes offer some obvious or underlying narrative (LMFAO's *Party Rock Anthem*). Despite advances in technology and digital music tools, storytelling is still at the core of many of our culture's

mass-mediated musical expressions. In sum, story is song and song is story.

A quick Google search for “story songs” returns numerous sites offering best-of lists and commentaries: “26 Songs That Are Just as Good as Short Stories,” “Ten Story Songs and the Stories behind Them,” and many more. A follow-up search at a music community site (e.g., [songmeanings.net](http://songmeanings.net)) will reveal almost as many interpretations among listeners as there are songs to sing. The opinions offered up by visitors are oftentimes based on listeners’ views of the song’s story or on the message the songwriter was trying to convey. In many ways, both the art of conveying an explicit or implicit narrative and the listener identifying with that narrative are the essence or magic of pop music. Excuse the manufactured pop culture reference, but after all the makeup and dance moves, perhaps storytelling *is* the “X-Factor.”

While there have been many analyses of song lyrics in a general or cultural sense (Tagg 1982, DeWall 2011) as well as studies on the effects of song lyrics on adolescents (American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Communications and Media 2009, Peterson, Safer, and Jobes 2008, Greenfield 1987), little has been written on the construction of narrative or the structure of narrative in pop music (Neal 2007, Nicholls 2007). Even most basic how-to books on songwriting give the subject little direct attention, approaching narrative merely in passing as an approach, often comprised of just a section on archetypical story songs that have a very linear beginning, middle, and end (Brahemy 2006, Pattison 2009). With story being such an integral part of song, it is somewhat surprising that narrative theory has not been used more to parse out the elements or structure of story in song, explicit or implicit. Unlike narrative theory, however, semiotics has been used in several studies. For example, Machin (2010) outlines a variety of ways semiotics can be used to explicate the “meaning” of song lyrics at a micro or macro level.

This paper utilizes a combination of semiotics (Barthes 1974) and narrative theory (Bal 1997) to present a systematic method that can be used to analyze and codify the lyrics of virtually any pop song into one of four major categories. It is hoped that this typology can be used both to better understand how pop music plays a role in cultural storytelling and to aid teachers and students in the development and understanding of songwriting pedagogy.

## Background

The topic of analyzing song narrativity must include a discussion of lyrical narrative origins. The narrativity of song is a rich area of study, as the origins of American popular music are rooted deep in storytelling. American pop traces its beginnings to Anglo-American folk music, which, in turn, is derived from European mythic and epic storytelling (Cooke 2000). Wandering minstrels and troubadours in Medieval and Renaissance Europe who performed in small hamlets cemented the oral transmission and regionally distinct nature of folk narratives, establishing that their music was for commoners (Tick and Beaudoin 2008). Historically, the simple subject matter and repetition of folk music were more of a practical choice rather than an artistic one: the orally transmitted nature of folk music dictated that it must be easily understood and easily memorized. The tendency for a simple form utilizing repeated phrases and lyrics carried over into modern pop music (Abrahams and Foss 1968).

The development of the broadside in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries helped commercialize music and diminished the oral nature of folk songs. “Broadside[s] were lyrics printed on large sheets of paper and sold at the marketplace...[often with] an instruction to sing the lyrics to the tune of a well-established song” (Cooke 2000, 123). With the printing of song lyrics and tune names on broadsides, songs became tangible merchandise that could be held and collected, bought and sold. While early broadsides are often hard to distinguish from British ballads, these later fused with local “American” folk songs such as *The Ballad of Davy Crockett* or *Old John Brown* (both echoes of the European epic poem themselves). The broadside signaled the ending of the oral nature of American folk music and turned songs into commodities rather than just cultural or artistic expressions.

Around this same time, African spiritual music began to have an influence on the American pop song that cannot be overstated. Early Anglo-American folk ballads were usually written in the third-person perspective, and even when written in first person, these ballads almost universally were told from the perspective of some established character that is clearly not the narrator (Bronson and Child 1959). The general shift to a first-person narrative that came about in nineteenth-century American pop can be attributed, at least in part, to the influence of African-American spirituals: Whereas troubadour songs in Medieval and Renaissance Europe were either Biblical or epic in nature, the slaves’ songs were often in the first

person. African-American slaves sang religious songs as a kind of metaphorical liberation, and the lyrics could apply directly to them (*Nobody Knows the Trouble I See, In that Great Gettin'-up Morning, Steal Away*; Moore 2000). Similarly, African-American spiritual music was more likely to feature the singer's own experiences than the exploits of a long-dead hero or saint. This first-person narrativity only became more prominent after the Civil War. Largely because of their exposure in minstrel shows and their baser, more prosaic topics, the so-called "negro" songs began to grow in popularity, becoming the pop music of the day (Tick and Beau-doin 2008).

Commercially viable songs with such prosaic subject matter found an incubator in Tin Pan Alley, a veritable factory of popular songs in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Charosh 1997). "Hack" writers produced formulaic sentimental ballads and other ditties for mass consumption (Pessen 1985). These writers often drew upon personal experience for a song's narrative, as shown by Charles Harris with his 1891 hit, *After the Ball*, which sold five million copies that decade (History Matters 2012). Song-writer Irving Berlin hinted at the trends of homogenization that would become staples in American pop, saying, "It's the love-element that sells the song. It comes before everything else in popular music" (1916, 695). And so it would for the rest of the century.

The history of twentieth-century pop music is somewhat more transparent (and, obviously, immediate): blues and ragtime, two African-American styles, mingled with European dance songs to create jazz (Gridley and Rave 1984). This genre, in turn, comingled with folk music from the rural South, creating bluegrass (Rosenberg 2012). This volatile combination would eventually develop into the rock and roll of the 1950s, which largely defined popular music through the rest of the century.

The library of rock music from the 1950s and 1960s is full of both explicit and ambiguous story songs: Elvis Presley's *Jailhouse Rock* and *In the Ghetto*, Chuck Berry's *Johnny B. Goode*, and The Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby* and *Norwegian Wood*. The 1970s saw a return of folk grassroots to the rock music scene, inspiring the quintessential story-songwriters like Bobbie Gentry (*Ode to Billie Joe*), Harry Chapin (*Cat's in the Cradle*), and Don McLean (*American Pie*). The pieces produced by these musicians are some of the most archetypal examples of the modern-day story song. These highly narrative works prove that the storytelling nature of American pop music was still alive and well in the latter half of the twentieth

century.

While, perhaps, the more explicit narrativity that developed in pop music in the 1970s has decreased in recent decades, story songs are still clearly visible in the contemporary music scene across all genres. Country music, still heavily influenced by American folk and the didactic Appalachian ballads of the nineteenth century (Neal 2012), is a particularly rich genre in which to study story songs. At the other end of the music spectrum, even rap music commonly features linear, first-person narratives, told from the perspective of the songwriter to elicit street credibility or listener empathy. With this background in mind, it is valuable to ask whether (and to what extent) pop music is still story-driven and what types of stories are being told?

## Review of Literature

Scholars have used diverse approaches to lyrical analysis for an array of research purposes. One of the more common approaches is content or narrative analysis, which examines the various materials and subjects addressed within lyrics to better understand the kinds of messages and cultural themes being portrayed in pop music. For example, content analyses have been performed to examine the amount and kinds of sexual content in pop songs (Dukes et al. 2003, Martino et al. 2006, Primack, Gold et al. 2008). In these studies, the distinction between degrading and non-degrading sexual references plays a key role in defining the nature of pop songs' sexual content. Other research has focused on content analyses for substance abuse (Herd 2005, Primack, Dalton, et al. 2008, Markert 2001) and violence (Armstrong 2001).

Taking such studies a step further, an impressive body of work began in the 1980s that concerns the effects of various lyrics on social behaviors, particularly among youth (Leming 1987, Rosenbaum and Prinsky 1987, Ballard and Coates 1995, American Academy of Pediatrics 1996, Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown 2005). Studies such as these often conclude with varying degrees of certainty that the amount of sexual, violent, or otherwise negative content in pop song lyrics is growing, leading to increasingly negative effects on its young listeners. Such studies often employ communication theories such as social cognition (Bandura 2004, Martino et al. 2005) or social imitation (Miller and Dollard 1941) to explain why lyrics that highlight particular behaviors may have such an effect on listeners' attitudes and actions. Tempering the surge of negativity toward pop

music is Tobias Greitemeyer, who has studied extensively the effects of positive lyrics in songs like Michael Jackson's *Man in the Mirror* on pro-social behaviors (Greitemeyer 2009, 2011).

Compared to these and many other analyses of song lyrics for content and social effects, the use of narratology in lyrical analysis is a sparse if not empty field. Neal (2007) has given country music a thorough examination through the lens of what she terms the "time-shift narrative." In this study, Neal points out the multiple layers of meaning that can be found in a host of country song lyrics and provides an impressive list of songs that invoke this model. However, the model of time-shift narrative is quite particular, and as Neal concentrates on country music, the scope of this work is not sufficiently broad to use in a discussion of pop music, which generally comprises a higher level of ambiguity.

Another valuable contribution to this relatively unfurrowed field is Nicholls's (2007) study of pop music under the microscope of narrative theory. Therein, Nicholls comes closer to creating a usable typology for categorizing the narrativity and symbolism of songs by the likes of The Beatles and Genesis: a 1-to-5 scale increasing in the depth of a song's symbolic content and narrative structure. However, Nicholls's selection of older songs from the 1970s and 1980s implicitly calls for a reexamination using more current examples. Further, the title of Nicholls's piece ("Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts") is somewhat misleading since the study concerns not just the lyrical texts of pop songs but the music itself as well. In terms of lyrical content, however, this one-dimensional approach lacks precision and power.

This study focuses on only the lyrics of pop songs from all pop genres. By limiting its scope to lyrics alone, this study aims to provide a two-dimensional typology that is sufficiently confined in scope but that is also universal enough to be useable across any genre of song that contains lyrics. One now turns to the bodies of work concerning both narrative analysis and semiology in order to more clearly understand the tools of "story" measurement.

## Theoretical Approach

The modern idea of using narrative to analyze discourse in general and texts in particular has been manifested across the last century in many forms. The school of Russian formalism from the early 1900s provides a good theoretical starting point. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1994)

famously laid forth his thirty-one narrative functions that constitute the fundamental elements of almost all narratives; Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Tomashevsky discussed the chronological facet of storytelling, developing, and popularizing the dichotomy of *fabula* and *sujet* to be able to separate the components of a story from the order in which those components are shared (Shklovsky 1990). The father of modern anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, argues that conflict is the most essential component of all effective cultural narratives (1955). Sonja Foss's (1989) extensive work on rhetorical criticism devotes a substantial portion to the evaluation of both the form and substance of narrative as a persuasive tool.

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, a number of scholars have sought to articulate more precise tools for identifying and clarifying components that constitute narrative, such as Jonnes (1990), Barthes and Duisit (1975), and Kindt and Müller (2003). From the role of the narrator to the chronological sequence of events, the recipe for what makes up a narrative is constantly being adjusted and reiterated. From Fisher's broad assertion that people are essentially storytelling animals and that all human communication is narrative based (1984), the operational definitions of narrative have become increasingly refined. And it seems only logical, since songs serve as one of humanity's oldest forms of storytelling, that lyrics would serve as fertile ground for an application of narrative analysis.

Unfortunately, while academia has addressed the narrativity of music, the examples are few and far between. Spicer and Covach (2010) have compiled analytical essays that utilize a broad range of approaches beyond musicology, including biography, ethnography, psychology, and narratology. Their compilation includes a chapter by Lori Burns that offers an examination of the insights to be gained by studying song lyrics and the power of lyrics to engage the listener authoritatively. However, Burns' study is ultimately concerned with the songwriters themselves and the autobiographical elements of their works. Focusing on analyzing the narrator/listener relationship within pop/rock songs by female artists, Burns gives us a zoomed-in view of one way to analyze song lyrics for narrativity.

Based on these useful but sparse offerings, it becomes clear that old concepts must be applied in new ways. One particularly indispensable piece of narratology scholarship is Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997). Though not concerned with music



or lyrics, Bal's exhaustive work breaks down what precisely constitutes a narrative; in other words, what components must be present for a body of text to qualify as a "story"? To clearly define the presence or absence of narrativity within song lyrics, we use a scaled-down version of Mieke Bal's definition of *fabula*, or what Cobley (2010) calls the "raw material of a story." Bal defines "fabula" as consisting of four components: event, actor, time, and setting. While every song contains some element of character, the presence of the other factors—especially event—indicates an increasingly concrete *fabula* and thus a stronger narrative: a greater sense of story, *per se*.

As important as narratology scholarship is to our understanding of lyrical analysis, other disciplines are also useful in analyzing works that are poetic and potentially enigmatic, such as song lyrics. The field of semiotics—the study of symbolism and sign processes—provides another dimension from which to approach lyrical analysis, and, if anything, the body of semiological scholarship is even more diverse than narrativity. Interestingly, the Russian formalists were key in developing the modern field of semiotics as well. Viktor Shklovsky wrote extensively on the nature of symbols within text and the need to imbue discourse with deeper meaning and complexity than mere face value. Said Shklovsky:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object. (Shklovsky 1988, 12)

These writers paved the way for future semiotics work by scholars such as Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and a continuing stream of more contemporary scholars. Deely (1990) has dissected the messages encoded in both linguistic and literary works while Gaines (2010) has analyzed the use of symbols in the media generally and has discussed how to think critically about deciphering intended messages embedded within media.

Within the field of music, Tarasti (2002) has undertaken a thorough examination of symbolic implications found within music, detailing the capacity of various motifs and musical phrases to convey specific mean-

ings. Gorbman (1980) has also written on the subject, arguing that while a stand-alone classical piece would not qualify as narrative, film music does. Maus (1991) stated that when listeners can vaguely construe a sense of character, plot, and event, music takes on narrative qualities. Yet this area of study ignores those genres of music with lyrics. While Machin (2010) examines this approach for lyrics, we have been unable to identify a significant body of work exclusively detailing the analysis of song lyrics using semiotic measures. In his extensive list of literary genres that lend themselves to semiotic analysis, Barthes (1982) includes such obscure art forms as mime and stained glass but fails to mention music or song. It seems as if the entire genre of popular music has been overlooked by a field of scholarship too involved in literature, social commentary, and philosophy to even notice.

Despite his failure to include song lyrics as a venue for applying semiology, the value of Barthes's work for the development of semiotics is incalculable. In the seminal *S/Z*, Barthes (1974) outlines five "codes of meaning," or constructs for identifying different uses of symbols or implied meanings within texts. Barthes's five codes (hermeneutic, proairectic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural) serve as a roadmap for any serious student of semiotics to understand the variety of messages and meanings to be found within a text, including overlapping, codependent ones—a "braiding" of meanings, as he calls it (Barthes, 160).

For the purposes of articulating and analyzing the narrative of pop song lyrics in our study, we derived a typology based on four of Barthes's five codes that identify the components of a text that create multiple meanings. The hermeneutic and proairectic codes provide a general gauge of whether the song proposes questions to the listener either through the narrator's statements or by the tension-producing actions of the characters in the song. These raised questions can either be resolved or left open and unexplained to the reader (or, in our case, the listener). The semantic and symbolic codes also come from the same family, identifying connotations or symbolic meanings within the lyrics. The presence of these codes indicates that sufficient subtext exists to justify multiple meanings. Barthes's fifth code, the cultural code, is not actively included in this study because of its geo-cultural limits (namely the United States); thus cultural codes are assumed to be already embedded and understood by most listeners.

## Construction of Typology

Analyzing pop song lyrics using narratology and semiotics is useful as cultural or sociological typology and also as pedagogy in beginning and intermediate songwriting classes. Relying upon Bal's and Barthes's delineations, we offer a matrix that maps the narrativity and symbolism of popular songs; this general categorization should allow for greater ease in identifying patterns and similarities among pop songs in various settings.

The typology we suggest is a two-dimensional grid with an *x*-axis and a *y*-axis, roughly charting both a song's narrativity and its inherent potential for symbolic meaning, or multiple readings, in order to gauge to what degree that song tells a story. The *x*-axis of our typology concerns the narrativity of the song, indicating an increasingly concrete narrative from left to right. By "defined narrative," we mean a song with a sequence of interrelated events (actual or implied), with specific characters who experience these events (and whose circumstances or character is altered thereby), and with a specific time and setting (goes beyond merely describing a static environment, such as a day at the beach wherein nothing but "beach" activity happens). Conversely, we use "undefined-narrative" to describe a song wherein there is not a distinguishable series of interrelated events, wherein the actors in the song do not undertake actions that cause a change or transformation in either the circumstances or the characters, and where a specific setting or time is not indicated.

For this narrative axis, elements of fabula include four components: event, actor, time, and setting. Events consist of sequential, interrelated actions that the actors (not necessarily people) undertake or experience. For example, in Taylor Swift's *Love Story*, the actor is described in the first verse as a young, love-struck girl with an overprotective father ("We were both young when I first saw you," "my daddy said, 'Stay away from Juliet'"). These actors experience the various events of the story ("I sneak out to the garden to see you," "He knelt to the ground and pulled out a ring"). Time and setting serve to solidify the narrativity of the events by placing them in a chronological and spatial context and relation to one another. In *Love Story*, the setting and time are also clearly defined by the lyrics ("I'm standing there on a balcony in summer air").

On the *y*-axis, we measure the openness of a song's narrative, as based on Barthes's narrative codes of meaning. By "open narrative," we mean a possibility of multiple meanings or readings derived from the lyrics of the song. By "closed narrative," we mean a more direct or literal

interpretation of the song's lyrics, one that cannot reasonably be interpolated to mean anything other than the presented material indicates. In these cases, Barthes's narrative codes are largely or entirely absent, resulting in a "face-value" lyric that means precisely and only what it tells.

Of Barthes's five codes of meaning, the first four were combined into pairs. Specifically, the hermeneutic and proairetic codes are combined to identify the questions and symbolic uncertainty of the song lyrics. The semantic and symbolic codes are also roughly grouped together to identify meanings beyond the surface level and connotations within the lyrics of the song.

Mapping pop songs onto this bi-axial grid results in four broad categories:

1. Closed reading/Undefined narrative
2. Open reading/Undefined narrative
3. Open reading/Defined narrative
4. Closed reading/Defined narrative

## Analysis

With our typology outlined, we now employ it to map several recent hit songs for narrativity and semiotic openness as well as to suggest others, thus demonstrating its utility and generalizability. While we believe that the definition and identification of these four broad types is sufficiently useful, there is ample room for analysis within each of the four categories as well. However, we do not deem or offer this approach as quantitative at this point.

### Closed reading/Undefined narrative—LMFAO's *Party Rock Anthem*

Representative of this category, *Party Rock Anthem* by LMFAO presents a relatively closed reading combined with a somewhat undefined narrative. This represents a great deal of pop music today across a variety of genres. In terms of narrative, the setting of the song is vaguely sketched out with the lines "in the club" and "in the house." It is clear that the singers are participating in a party of some kind, but where and when are not specified beyond "the club," "the house," and the equally vague "tonight." We are given a watery sense of actor from a few lines spoken

by the narrators about themselves: “Half black, half white, domino, “ “I got that devilish flow, rock ’n’ roll, no halo.” This does help establish the characters somewhat but not in a dynamic or concrete way. The only other sense of actor comes from the frequent use of the pronouns “us” and “we.” The listener understands that many people are partying somewhere, but no events occur to drive a narrative forward and the characters undergo no defined change.

Meanwhile, the song is relatively closed in its reading because of the literalness of the lyrics. Clearly, the party is not meant to signify or allude to something else. Barthes’s narrative codes are not utilized in the song since nothing could potentially surprise or challenge the listener and nothing requires later explication. The details are concrete and leave no unanswered questions about events or circumstances at the party.

Other current or well-known songs that represent relatively closed readings and undefined narratives might include:

- *Tongue Tied* by Grouplove
- *Pound the Alarm* by Nicki Minaj
- *I Hope You Dance* by Lee Ann Womack
- *As Long as You Love Me* by Justin Bieber featuring Big Sean
- *Bad Romance* by Lady Gaga
- *Fireflies* by Owl City

In sum, songs in this quadrant tend to have less room for multiple readings as well as non-existent or ambiguous narrative elements. (At first glance, one might think that *I Hope You Dance* might not belong in this category because “dance” is a metaphor for living life to its fullest. But while there is a reading, the reading is pretty much a given—relatively closed.)

### Open reading/Undefined narrative—Mumford & Sons’ *The Cave*

Mumford & Sons’ *The Cave*, which peaked at No. 27 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and No. 2 on Billboard’s Rock Song List, offers an open reading and undefined narrative. Similar to *Party Rock Anthem*, there is no specific narrative or story to speak of. The only moments that might be considered events (“walk away from all the fears and faults you’ve left

behind,” “tie me to a post and block my ears,” “come out of your cave walking on your hands”) are highly figurative. Because they do not carry a clear sequential order and do not seem interrelated, these do not constitute events contributing to a fabula by Bal’s definition.

Furthermore, no cues exist as to the time or sequencing of events or to a specific setting. “The sun, it rises slowly” should be considered metaphorical and not literal, and the references to a valley and a cave, taken in context, are clearly not meant to be taken at face value. In other words, because of the lack of specific time, setting, and event, there is not a significant or defined narrative being conveyed in this song. As with *Party Rock Anthem*, a sense of actor is present but faintly; the listener is made aware of two characters, the narrator and his friend or lover. It is implied in the first stanza that the latter has made some progression (“The sun, it rises slowly as you walk away from all the fears and the faults you’ve left behind”). But beyond this, we know nothing distinguishable about these two.

However, unlike *Party Rock Anthem*, this song is brimming with hermeneutic code. Questions arise at nearly every line: What faults are the second character walking away from? What is meant by the “harvest” mentioned? What does the noose around the neck symbolize? On a broader level (and later in the song), we might ask why the narrator seems to be shunning his friend now (“Sing all you want; I will not hear what you have to say”). These questions are left unanswered for the listener, an example of what Barthes calls snares (deliberately avoiding the truth) or equivocations (incomplete answers).

This song is thoroughly open in its reading. Besides some imagery that seems to be specifically referring to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* (the song’s title, as well as the lyrics “The sun, it rises slowly as you walk away from all the fears,” “tie me to a post and block my ears”), most of the other lines in the song serve to raise more questions than they answer and bear the potential for many individual interpretations of meaning.

Other songs that may fit in the category of open reading/undefined narrative might be:

- *Some Nights* by fun.
- *Beautiful Day* by U2
- *Uprising* by Muse
- *Paradise* by Coldplay
- *Set Fire To The Rain* by Adele

In sum, the songs in this quadrant offer a nondescript or ambiguous narrative containing a lot for the listener to interpret “between the lines.”

### Open reading/Defined narrative—Ben Folds Five’s *Brick*

*Brick* by Ben Folds Five is a good example of a relatively defined narrative with more open readings. A specific sequence of events is put forward, and actions both implied and evident are presented. What’s more, these actions play a role in changing the circumstances and nature of the characters, who are painted dynamically by their emotions (“I’m feeling more alone than I ever have before”) and their choices (“She broke down, and I broke down ’cause I was tired of lying”). Specific settings, locations, and times are given, serving to further establish the fabula and concretize the narrative (“Six a.m., day after Christmas” and “up the stairs to the apartment”).

However, the reading is open because the narrator never states why he and the girl do not wish for her parents to “find [them] out.” The listener wonders what they are hiding and where they are driving. Also, in the second verse, the narrator suddenly speaks in the second person, leaving the listener trying to piece together to whom the narrator is talking. Finally, in the last verse, the narrator fails to indicate specifically what he and the girl lied about. The lack of specific details provides an open reading for the listener wherein multiple meanings may be derived from the song. Herein is one of the basic elements of pop music: Each listener can make the song his or her own through multiple readings. (It should be noted that though the “deeper meaning” of this song is commonly known to music aficionados—the narrative deals with the circumstances and emotions of having an abortion—this information is not found within the song inherently and is only relatively common knowledge because of Ben Folds’s willingness to speak on the subject of the song in press interviews.)

Beyond the open questions concerning the overall narrative, two themes flood the song. The first is the concept of being “alone.” It is used several times to connote emotional distance and guilt rather than physical proximity (the same goes for “I am numb”; though in context it seems to be referencing the cold weather, the listener quickly learns that is not the case). The second major connotation is from the chorus: “She’s a brick and I’m drowning slowly.” Though the verses seem to convey a concrete, closed-ended narrative, the chorus is open-ended and interpretive enough to carry multiple possible meanings.

Other songs that feature relatively concrete narratives with open readings are as follows:

- *Ode to Billie Joe* by Bobbie Gentry
- *Atlantic City* by Bruce Springsteen
- *How to Save a Life* by The Fray
- *American Pie* by Don McLean
- *Need You Now* by Lady Antebellum
- *Somewhere Only We Know* by Keane

### Closed reading/Defined narrative—Lee Brice’s *Love Like Crazy*

A good example of a closed concrete narrative is Lee Brice’s *Love Like Crazy*. Like *Brick*, the song conveys a specific story. The actors in the song are clearly presented as an old couple who married at a young age and who relate their history and advice to some unseen party (and, by extension, to the listener). The events of the song are given in flashback and are roughly chronological. From their young marriage to the home they moved into, from the family they raised to the husband’s business exploits, the actors tell their story, complete with descriptions of time (“they’ve been together fifty-eight years now”) and setting (“a little two-bedroom house on Maple Street”).

Yet unlike *Brick*, where the presented story serves as a launching point for discovering deeper meanings, this is where the lyric interpretation ends for *Love Like Crazy*. Despite a few literary devices such as personification (“don’t let your prayin’ knees get lazy”) and simple symbolism (“sweat” being used to signify hard work), the meaning or reading of the song is relatively fixed. The computers mentioned in the second verse really are computers; the “sixty-seven bucks a week” are just that; and when listeners hear the line about “six more mouths to feed,” they know exactly what the narrator means: he is talking about children and nothing else. The reading is closed, and there are no elements in the lyrics that invite an open interpretation or have hidden meanings.

Other songs that could be classified with relatively closed readings and defined narratives are as follows:



- *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together* by Taylor Swift
- *Nothing* by The Script
- *Jesus, Take the Wheel* by Carrie Underwood
- *Party in the U.S.A.* by Miley Cyrus
- *Drive By* by Train
- *Call Me Maybe* by Carly Rae Jepsen

## Conclusion and Discussion

This paper describes and operationalizes a typology for analyzing and placing pop song lyrics into four major categories. We argue that virtually any pop song with lyrics can be categorized using this typology. The implications of the development and its use are manifold. First, the method works conceptually. Two theoretical approaches were identified—narrativity and semiotics—and applied in a new way across an underappreciated cultural artifact. The results showed that semiotic and narrative theory were useful in analyzing and typing song lyrics, thus extending the usefulness of these theories. Combining the theoretical approaches also yielded results that are more contemporary and precise than some previous analyses of pop music lyrics.

One application of the typology might be a longitudinal study that identifies storytelling trends in popular music. But a similar study might quantify how the lyrics in various genres of pop music have evolved—with some styles becoming more denotative and others becoming more connotative, mirroring parts of society in general. For example, one might hypothesize that while popular culture in the United States has become more post-modern in recent decades, typical pop songs have moved from being more explicit and denotative to being more implied and connotative. From a commercial standpoint, it might be valuable to see what genres and kinds of story songs generate greater attention and success than others.

One of the most useful benefits of this study is in songwriting pedagogy. This typology gives songwriters and teachers a frame through which they can analyze the characteristics of model pop songs. But these categories or approaches can also serve as baselines for idea generation and self-editing as student songwriters seek to hone their skills. In a general sense, novice and intermediate songwriters can better identify the type of song they are writing from a song's lyrical inception. They can also better understand what lyric types tend to be successful in particular genres.

One activity a teacher might assign would be for students to first analyze several songs using these characteristics, then, assign students to write four first verses on the same general topic, with each verse using one of the four different types. We have presented this typology and approach at songwriting classes and workshops over the past several years and have received numerous positive comments from novice and intermediate songwriters as to how their eyes have been opened to better songwriting and self-critique through these exercises.

The initial construction of this typology was qualitative and exploratory. Additional refinements can be made as future research is developed. One next step might be to create scales to quantify the levels of both narrativity and openness to interpretation of the lyrics. The results could then be physically plotted at various points within the four quadrants or categories. The relative open or closed nature of a lyric would probably be more difficult to quantify compared to the lyric's level of narrativity, but the increased precision makes this methodology even more useful. However, even without this level of precision, we feel that the initial typology as it stands makes a meaningful contribution to the theoretical literature in the analysis of pop music and at the same time provides a useful tool for teaching the art of songwriting.

## References

---

- Abrahams, Roger D. and George Foss. *Anglo-American Folksong Style*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Communications. "Impact of music lyrics and music videos on children and youth." *Pediatrics* 98, no. 6 (1996): 1219-21.
- American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Communications and Media. "From the American Academy of Pediatrics: Impact of Music, Music Lyrics, and Music Videos on Children and Youth." *Pediatrics* 124, no. 5 (2009): 1488-94. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-2145
- Armstrong, Edward G. "Gangsta Misogyny: A Content Analysis of the Portrayals of Violence Against Women in Rap Music, 1987–1993." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (2001): 96-126.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Ballard, Mary E., and Steven Coates. "The Immediate Effects of Homicidal, Suicidal and Nonviolent Heavy Metal and Rap Songs on the Moods of College Students." *Youth and Society* 27 (1995): 148-69.
- Bandura, Albert. 2004. "Social Cognitive Theory for Personal and Social Change by Enabling Media." *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*. (2004): 75-96.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- . *A Barthes Reader*. Edited by Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Berlin, Irving and Justus Dickinson. "'Love-Interest' as a Commodity: It Makes the Music World Go Round." *The Green Book Magazine* 15, no. 4 (April 1916): 695.
- Braheny, John. *The Craft and Business of Songwriting*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest, 2006.
- Bronson, Bertrand Harris and Francis James Child. *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads with Their Texts, According to the Extant Records of Great Britain and America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- Burns, Lori. "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock

- Artists, 1993-95." In *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, edited by Mark Stuart Spicer and John Rudolph Covach, 154-92. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Charosh, Paul. "Studying Nineteenth-Century Popular Song." *American Music* 15, no. 4 (1997): 459-492.
- Cobley, Paul. *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Cooke, Douglas. "Folk Music." In *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, edited by Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, 123. Detroit, Mich.: St. James Press, 2000.
- Deely, John N. *Basics of Semiotics*: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- DeWall, C. Nathan, Richard S. Pond Jr., W. Keith Campbell and Jean M. Twenge. "Tuning in to Psychological Change: Linguistic Markers of Psychological Traits and Emotions Over Time in Popular U.S. Song Lyrics." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 5, no. 3 (2011): 200-207.
- Dukes, Richard L., Tara M. Bisel, Karoline N. Borega, Eligio A. Lobato and Matthew D. Owens. "Expressions of Love, Sex, and Hurt in Popular Songs: A Content Analysis of All-Time Greatest Hits." *Social Science Journal (Focus on U.S.-Mexico Border Issues)* 40, no. 4 (2003): 643-50. doi:10.1016/S0362-3319(03)00075-2.
- Fisher, Walter R. "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument." *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1-22.
- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1989.
- Gaines, Elliot. *Media Literacy and Semiotics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Gorbman, Claudia. "Narrative Film Music." *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 183-203.
- Greenfield, Patricia M., Lisa Bruzzone, Krisit Koyamatsu, Wendy Satuloff, Karey Nixon, Mollyann Brodie and David Kingsdale. "What Is Rock Music Doing to the Minds of Our Youth? A First Experimental Look at the Effects of Rock Music Lyrics and Music Videos." *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 7, no. 3 (1987): 315-29.
- Greitemeyer, Tobias. "Effects of Songs with Prosocial Lyrics on Prosocial Thoughts, Affect, and Behavior." *Journal of Experimen-*

- tal Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (2009): 186-90. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2008.08.003.
- . “Exposure to Music with Prosocial Lyrics Reduces Aggression: First Evidence and Test of the Underlying Mechanism.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, no. 1 (2011): 28-36. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2010.08.005.
- Gridley, Mark C., and Wallace Rave. “Towards Identification of African Traits in Early Jazz.” *The Black Perspective in Music* 12, no. 1 (1984): 44.
- Herd, Denise. “Changes in the Prevalence of Alcohol Use in Rap Song Lyrics, 1979-97.” *Addiction* 100, no. 9 (2005): 1258-69. doi:10.1111/j.1360-0443.2005.01192.x.
- History Matters. “After the Ball”: Lyrics from the Biggest Hit of the 1890s.” American Social History Productions. Accessed December 5, 2012. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5761/>
- Jonnes, Denis. *The Matrix of Narrative: Family Systems and the Semiotics of Story*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990.
- Kindt, Tom and Hans-Harald Müller. *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2003.
- Leming, James S. “Rock Music and the Socialization of Moral Values in Early Adolescence.” *Youth and Society* 18, no. 4 (1987): 363-83.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. “The Structural Study of Myth.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428-444.
- Machin, David. *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound, Text*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2010.
- Markert, John. “Sing a Song of Drug Use-Abuse: Four Decades of Drug Lyrics in Popular Music—From the Sixties through the Nineties.” *Sociological Inquiry* 71, no. 2 (2001): 194-220.
- Martino, Steven C., Rebecca L. Collins, Marc N. Elliott, Amy Strachman, David E. Kanouse, and Sandra H. Berry. “Exposure to Degrading Versus Nondegrading Music Lyrics and Sexual Behavior Among Youth.” *Pediatrics* 118, no. 2 (2006): 430-41.
- Martino, Steven C., Rebecca L. Collins, David E. Kanouse, Marc Elliott, and Sandra H. Berry. “Social Cognitive Processes Mediating the Relationship between Exposure to Television’s Sexual Content and Adolescents’ Sexual Behavior.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 6 (2005): 914-24. doi:10.1037/0022-

3514.89.6.914.

- Maus, Fred Everett. "Music As Narrative." *Indiana University Graduate Theory Association* 12, no. 1 (1991): 1-34.
- Miller, Neal E. and John Dollard. *Social Learning and Imitation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941.
- Moore, Leonard N. "Gospel Music." In *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, edited by Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, 274. Detroit: St. James Press, 2000.
- Neal, Jocelyn R. "Country Music" *Oxford Music Online*. Accessed December 6, 2012. [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2224075?q=country+music&search=quick&pos=1&\\_start=1-firsthit](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2224075?q=country+music&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1-firsthit).
- Neal, Jocelyn R. "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music." *Music Theory Spectrum* 29, no. 1 (2007): 41-72.
- Nicholls, David. "Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts." *Music and Letters* 88, no. 2 (2007): 297.
- Pardun, Carol J., Kelly Ladin L'Engle and Jane D. Brown. "Linking Exposure to Outcomes: Early Adolescents' Consumption of Sexual Content in Six Media." *Mass Communication & Society* 8, no. 2 (2005): 75-91.
- Pattison, Pat. *Writing Better Lyrics: The Essential Guide to Powerful Songwriting*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2009.
- Pessen, Edward. "The Great Songwriters of Tin Pan Alley's Golden Age: A Social, Occupational, and Aesthetic Inquiry." *American Music* 3, no. 2 (1985): 180.
- Peterson, Rebecca J., Martin A. Safer and David A. Jobes. "The Impact of Suicidal Rock Music Lyrics on Youth: An Investigation of Individual Differences." *Archives of Suicide Research* 12, no. 2 (2008): 161-69. doi:10.1080/13811110701857533.
- Primack, Brian A., Madeline A. Dalton, Mary V. Carroll, Aaron A. Agarwal and Michael J. Fine. "Content Analysis of Tobacco, Alcohol, and Other Drugs in Popular Music." *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 162, no. 2 (2008): 169-75.
- Primack, Brian A., Melanie A. Gold, Eleanor B. Schwarz and Madeline A. Dalton. "Degrading and Non-Degrading Sex in Popular Music: A Content Analysis." *Public Health Reports* 123, no. 5 (2008): 593-600.

- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) revised and edited by Louis A. Wagner, with a new introduction by Alan Dundes. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.
- Roland, Barthes and Lionel Duisit. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 237-272.
- Rosenbaum, Jill and Lorraine Prinsky. "Sex, Violence, and Rock 'n' Roll: Youth's Perceptions of Popular Music." *Popular Music and Society* 11 (1987): 79-89.
- Rosenberg, Neil. V. "Bluegrass Music" *Oxford Music Online*. Accessed December 6, 2012. [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03309?q=bluegrass&search=quick&pos=2&\\_start=1-firsthit](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03309?q=bluegrass&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1-firsthit).
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." In *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge, 16-30. London: Longmans, 1988.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. *Theory of Prose*. Translated by Benjamin Sher. Elmwood Park, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.
- Songmeanings.net. "Discussion boards." Accessed December 12, 2012. <http://www.songmeanings.net>.
- Spicer, Mark Stuart and John Rudolph Covach, eds. *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- "Story Songs." Google internet search. Accessed December 4, 2012. Available from <http://www.google.com>.
- Tagg, Philip. "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice." *Popular Music* 2 (1982):37-67. doi:10.2307/852975.
- Tarasti, Eero. *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002.
- Tick, Judith and Paul Beaudoin. *Music in the USA: A Documentary Companion*. Edited by Judith Tick and Paul Beaudoin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

**QUINT RANDLE** is an associate professor in the Department of Communications at Brigham Young University where he teaches writing and new media. He is co-founder of the Pear-Award-winning band Joshua Creek. He has written two No. 1 Christian Country songs, along with others published by Los Angeles- and Nashville-based publishers. He is the co-author of the book *Making Money Making Music* and co-founder of Drums On Demand, a leading loop maker. In 1986 he founded *Gig Magazine*. Quint holds a Ph.D. in mass media from Michigan State University and an M.A. from Pepperdine.



**KEITH EVANS** is pursuing his Masters Degree in Mass Communications at Brigham Young University, after having received a B.A. in American History. His professional and pedagogical experience has focused on music education and performing, including national television and performances/workshops throughout the Western United States.

