

A Descent into Darkness: The Black Experience in America Explored through the Album “Unreal Uneath”

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Research Paper



Bibliography



Background

Racism has infected the most intrinsic areas of human life since the beginning of time. Whether it's the mistreatment of Native Americans during the New World explorations to the Jim Crow laws, hatred has been taught and normalized for centuries. Confusing emotions that spiral from different experiences regarding hardships of racism or other oppressions of life are expressed through creative outlets like paintings, books, or even songs. One artist who has completely transcended people groups and uses his lyrics to unify during hard times is Hozier. Using the inspiration of different spiritual groups, historical movements, and even personal stories, Hozier creates a beautiful narrative of what it's truly like to be human. With the album Unreal Uneath by Andrew Hozier Byrne, the lyrics depicting human conflicts with inspiration from The Inferno of Dante will be uniquely analyzed and interpreted from the perspective of the African American experience in America.



Abstract

Interpretations of everyday pieces of art can disclose different perspectives and meanings. The album “Unreal, Uneath” by Andrew Byrne Hozier that was written and inspired by “Inferno” has themes of complicated human emotions and even discusses the nine circles of hell. However, this poster offers a unique interpretation of connecting stories of Dante to the experiences of African Americans in the United States. The analysis of selected songs uncovers a unique symbolism with impactful moments in Black history, as well as everyday life. The racism discussed and visualized in the poster will range from the horrific events of police brutality to the internalized racism black individuals face within relationships. The poster provides a creative and analytical perspective of the album analysis.

Historical Events

The White Lion
(1619)



Emmitt Till
(1955)



Black Lives
Matter



01

De Selby (Part 1 & 2)
The Descent



02

First Time
Circle One

03

Francesca
Circle Two

04

Eat Your Young
Circle Three



“My senses—and so I fell, as though seized by sleep.” (Pinsky, 1994, p. 31)



When reading this canto, the words allowed the interpretation of the story through the eyes of the African American experience. The main character Dante is represented as African American and shows how many are trying to reach this peaceful state of equality in life, yet there are conflicts that block their path from achieving this goal. Hozier wrote the first two songs of the “Unreal Uneath” album, “De Selby (Part 1)” and “De Selby (Part 2)”. These songs discuss the initial descent into the first circle of hell that Dante went through. The descent is going to symbolize the first instances of African American racism in the United States (Slavery). “You rake in the blackness of air, the likes of a darkness so deep. And sit unseen with only. Your reflection can't offer a word” (Hozier, 2023). Slaves who were subjected to decades of torture were only breathing in pollution and air that seemed to suffocate them.

As seen in Hozier's song, “First Time” the lyrics are “...an anthem of rebirth where love acts as the catalyst for an awakening” (Songfacts, 2020). The first circle of hell will be represented by the hardships found in Black love. Hozier created the song, “First Time”, to share the emotional rollercoaster of falling for someone and trying to hold onto every moment until there are no more moments left to have. Dante finally goes through the first circle of hell which is the limbo layer. People are in this purgatory, awaiting for a chance to retreat back to the light and stray from the darkness. We will be viewing how racism has infected the love lives of Black people. When it comes to Black marriages, African Americans are more likely to experience racism and then project it onto their significant other. As stated by Marital Therapist Paula M. Smith, “Black marriage is in a crisis” (2023). The rates for Black marriages are declining due to external and internal factors like “...daily experiences of racial oppression, microaggressions within workspaces, negative racial stereotypes, financial inequality, and the historical myths that say Black people are inferior” (Smith, 2023). “Remember once I told you 'bout, how before I heard it from your mouth. My name would always hit my ears as such an awful sound” (Hozier, 2023)

Virgil leads Dante into a place of darkness where no light can penetrate, unlike the previous purgatory. The first circle passes as he reaches a narrower second circle. This is known as the circle for the lustful. “...in sad crescendo beginning to reach my ear, now I am where the noise of lamentation comes at me in blasts of sorrow” (Pinsky, 1994, p. 47). The second circle will be interpreted as the violent desires of black hatred and the loss suffered by African Americans at the hands of it. One sad case of this hatred manifesting is the Emmitt Till case of 1955. This horrific story is about a young African American boy who was falsely accused of harassing an older white woman. He was hanged by two white men. Till's mother would lead the charge of bringing awareness of this tragedy. In the song “Francesca”, Hozier creates lyrics that show the emotions of loving someone and going through the pain again and again just to feel their embrace for one last time. Even if it's not on this earth, getting justice for the hurtful events would allow that person to find closure and be at rest knowing people living on earth would not stop until justice prevailed. “Though I know my heart would break. I'd tell them to put me back in it. I would do it again, If I could hold you for a minute. I'd go through it again” (Hozier, 2023).

This layer of the racism deep dive will be about the seemingly unavoidable correlation between African Americans and destructive behavior like drugs, violence, and even gangs. Hozier's song “Eat Your Young” tells the story of how we as humans love to act upon addictive behaviors and make it a part of our lifestyles. “... It delves into themes of greed and overindulgence, casting an unforgiving spotlight on our society's unquenchable thirst for more” (Harris, 2023). Anyone who has a single taste of either drugs or violence will more than likely do anything they can to fulfill their quick fixes and desires. “I'm starving, darling. Let me put my lips to something, let me wrap my teeth around the world” (Hozier, 2023)

Research Statistics:
2.8% percent of African Americans used illicit drugs in the last 30 days compared to the rest of the nation standing at 3.2% (Close, 2024). These numbers sadly reveal how Black people are more susceptible to fall into this way of life and hardly seem to escape.