



Understanding Trauma Bonding through Saussurian Semiotics in Hozier's *Cherry Wine*

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the representation of trauma bonding in Hozier's song "Cherry Wine" using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach. Trauma bonding refers to the emotional attachment that develops between a victim and their abuser in an abusive relationship. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the lyrics of the song reflect the complexities of such relationships, focusing on the dynamic of love and violence that traps victims emotionally. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, with data collected through an in-depth analysis of the song lyrics. The lyrics serve as the signifier, while the emotional experiences depicted represent the signified. The research findings reveal that Hozier portrays the victim's conflicting emotions—simultaneous love and pain—through contrasting imagery, such as warmth and coldness, highlighting the unpredictable nature of abuse. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how popular music can be used to raise awareness about social issues, particularly domestic violence. In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that "Cherry Wine" effectively conveys the emotional complexities of trauma bonding, providing listeners with insight into the experiences of victims.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a structured system of signs used by humans to express ideas, emotions, and concepts, enabling communication and understanding among individuals (De Saussure, 1959). Saussure, a pioneer in structural linguistics, explained that language comprises two main components: the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the physical form of a sign, such as spoken sounds, written words, or visual symbols, while the signified represents the concept, meaning, or idea associated with that signifier. Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning that the connection between the two is not inherent but rather established through social conventions and shared cultural understanding. This arbitrary nature of language allows it to be highly versatile and adaptable,

enabling people to express complex thoughts and a wide range of emotions. Beyond its primary role as a communication tool, language also functions as a powerful medium for conveying deeper meanings and addressing broader social issues (Hasan, 2024). One notable example of this is music, which combines sound and lyrics to create a multifaceted form of expression. Through carefully chosen words and melodies, music can communicate profound social messages, raise awareness about critical issues, and evoke emotional responses, making it a unique and impactful way to explore and express human experiences (Izen et al., 2023; Bautista et al., 2024; Grant & Low-Choy, 2021).

Music is a form of art that uses sound to communicate. Music is a way of delivering messages or communicating through sound that can be perceived differently by people (North et al., 2004). Music can function as a communication medium that employs elements such as vocals, harmonization, tempo, melody, and rhythm to convey emotions (Serhaniuk et al., 2021; Oh, 2024; Bavarava & Sudarshan, 2024). As part of a work of art, music also serves as a platform for individuals to interact with others, both through personal experiences and reflections on social conditions. Through music, musicians seek to convey messages, explain, and entertain listeners. Song lyrics become an essential element in music as a means for songwriters to express their feelings and ideas. The lyrics contain messages in the form of words or sentences that create specific imagery or convey emotional conditions for listeners (Datul & Agung, 2023). In addition to serving as a source of entertainment, song lyrics can also raise awareness of social issues occurring in society. Music often becomes a platform for musicians to voice their concerns about various social problems, such as discrimination, injustice, and domestic violence.

One musician who actively addresses social issues through his music is Hozier, an Irish singer-songwriter celebrated for weaving powerful messages into his work. Known for tackling diverse topics such as support for the LGBTQ community, sexual assault awareness, and political justice, Hozier uses his music not just as a form of entertainment but as a medium for meaningful social commentary. His songs often reflect the complexities of contemporary social realities, highlighting both personal and collective struggles (Baker, 2016). Among these impactful works is the song “Cherry Wine”, a heartfelt piece that brings attention to the issue of domestic violence. Through this song, Hozier offers an empathetic portrayal of the experiences faced by victims of abuse, shedding light on the deep psychological scars and emotional struggles that such violence creates. By narrating the story from an insider's perspective, the song captures the painful reality of how love and violence can become intertwined, leading to the formation of emotional attachments that are difficult to break—a phenomenon known as trauma bonding. Through “Cherry Wine,” Hozier not only raises awareness about the hidden dynamics of abusive relationships but also calls for greater empathy and understanding for those affected.

Trauma bonding is an emotional attachment that forms between the abuser and the victim, often occurring in relationships characterized by physical, emotional, or psychological violence (Effiong et al.,

2022). In cases of domestic violence, victims may feel an emotional dependency on their abuser, even while aware that the relationship is harmful and dangerous. This bond forms due to a cycle of violence accompanied by moments of intimacy or affection that reinforce the emotional attachment. The abuser often makes the victim feel guilty or afraid of losing them, which compels the victim to remain in the relationship. Trauma bonding makes it challenging for victims to escape dangerous situations because they feel emotionally tied and often believe they cannot live without the abuser (Carnes, 2019). In "Cherry Wine," Hozier successfully conveys the complexity of the feelings experienced by domestic violence victims through his deeply symbolic lyrics, depicting the struggle victims face in separating love from the suffering they endure.

This research aims to analyze how trauma bonding is represented in the lyrics of "Cherry Wine" using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach. The results of this study are expected to provide a deeper understanding of how language and music can be used as media to raise awareness of social problems, particularly domestic violence, and how violent relationships can impact the psychological state of the victims

METHODS

The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, which is particularly suitable for exploring the deeper meanings embedded in textual data and their cultural or emotional contexts. According to (Creswell & Poth, 2016), qualitative research provides the tools for understanding the nuanced and complex meanings within a text, as well as the broader cultural or social framework in which the text exists. This method is ideal for examining representations of sensitive and layered topics such as trauma bonding in domestic abuse narratives. Ibrahim (2015) also emphasizes that qualitative research is appropriate for investigating phenomena in situational and contextual settings, allowing researchers to adapt to the dynamics of the research subject and environment.

The representation of trauma bonding in the song lyrics of "Cherry Wine" by Hozier is analyzed using the semiotic framework of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's theory of semiotics, which focuses on the relationship between signifiers (forms, such as words or phrases) and signified (meanings or concepts associated with the forms), serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. This approach allows for a systematic exploration of how the lyrics of "Cherry Wine" represent the emotional and psychological complexities of trauma bonding within the context of domestic abuse.

The research draws on data collected through document analysis and observations. The primary source of data is the song lyrics of "Cherry Wine," which are meticulously examined for their symbolic and thematic content. Words, phrases, and literary devices such as metaphors, similes, and personifications are treated as signifiers, while their implied meanings or associations in the context of trauma bonding are identified as

signifieds. To ensure a thorough analysis, the lyrics are carefully coded and categorized to uncover patterns, recurring symbols, and thematic connections.

The analysis focuses on how language in the song conveys the duality of emotional attachment and suffering characteristic of trauma bonding. Specific attention is paid to the representation of conflicting emotions—love, dependency, and pain—that are often central to abusive relationships. By interpreting these elements within the semiotic framework, the study aims to reveal how Hozier captures the intricacies of trauma bonding through poetic and symbolic language. In addition to analyzing the lyrics, the research considers the tone and mood of the song as supplementary data to understand the emotional resonance of the text. This integrated approach enables the researcher to connect the linguistic elements of the song to the lived experiences of individuals trapped in abusive relationships. Ultimately, the findings are presented descriptively, showcasing how the interplay between language and symbolism reflects the dynamics of trauma bonding in "Cherry Wine."

The study highlights the power of poetic language in portraying the complex and often hidden realities of domestic abuse, offering insights into the role of art and music in raising awareness and fostering empathy for victims.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Saussure stated that the signifier can take various forms, including signs, sounds, or symbols. In this research, the song lyrics function as the signifier, while the meanings and interpretations derived from those lyrics represent the signified. This study will look closely at the lyrics, part by part, to find the meanings or messages in each section. By using Saussure's idea of how signs work, how the words and images in the lyrics connect to the ideas or emotions they create will be explored. The goal is to understand what the song is really saying and how these meanings affect how listeners understand and feel about the song (Salam & Sakinah, 2024).

[Verse 1]

*Her eyes and words are so icy
Oh, but she burns like rum on a fire
Hot and fast and angry as she can be
I walk my days on a wire*

In the first line of the first verse, Hozier employs both personification and simile. The words "eyes" and "icy" depict the cold demeanor of the abuser. The term "icy," according to the Cambridge Dictionary,

means unfriendly and showing no emotion (Online Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In other words, when describing a person or their behavior as icy, it implies that they are neither affectionate nor friendly, expressing their dislike or anger in a restrained manner. Thus, in this line, Hozier conveys that the victim is with a woman who is cold and intimidates him (Chiangprom, 2022).

However, he quickly contrasts this by defending her warmth and passion, likening her to a strong flame. Notably, he describes her warmth as “rum on a fire,” suggesting that it resembles an uncontrollable flame rather than a gentle warmth. The stark contrast between “icy” and “burns” reflects the unpredictable nature of the abuser, who oscillates between cruelty and affection—this is a key characteristic of trauma bonding. Such a volatile dynamic ensnares the victim emotionally. In the following line, the idiom “I walk my days on a wire” illustrates that despite his partner's drastic shifts from love to harshness, he chooses to comply with her expectations instead of leaving. This metaphor signifies the continuous anxiety and instability the victim faces in the relationship, never knowing what will happen next, which is typical of trauma bonding (Kövecses, 2014). This juxtaposition from the outset indicates his inner conflict in the relationship, as his partner's actions simultaneously repel and attract him.

[Pre-Chorus]

It looks ugly, but it's clean

Oh mama, don't fuss over me

After the first stanza, in the pre-chorus, Hozier uses the phrase “It looks ugly, but it’s clean” to express a complicated feeling. He is saying that even though, from the outside, their relationship might look bad or wrong to others, to him, it feels right and comforting. It’s like he is trying to say that the relationship, despite its flaws, is still good for him. While it may seem like he's explaining this to other people, the way he sings it suggests that he is really trying to convince himself of this. He is trying to make himself believe that the relationship isn’t as harmful as it seems, even though deep down he might know that it's hurting him. This phrase shows how he tries to make the abuse feel normal or okay in his mind. He doesn’t want to admit to himself or others just how serious the situation really is. In the next line, this idea continues as it hints that he is reluctant to seek help or face the truth about what is happening. He feels trapped, which is a common effect of trauma bonding (Kozlowski, 2020), where victims find it hard to leave harmful relationships because of the emotional attachment, confusion, and manipulation they experience (Dutton & Painter, 1993). This makes it even more difficult for him to escape the abuse, even if he knows it’s unhealthy.

[Chorus]

The way she tells me I'm hers and she is mine

Open hand or closed fist, oh, would be fine
The blood is rare and sweet as cherry wine

In the chorus, the line "*The way she tells me I'm hers and she is mine*" emphasizes the unhealthy possessiveness in the relationship, where the abuser claims ownership over the victim and vice versa, suggesting a strong controlling dynamic. These words signify how both the abuser and victim are entangled in a violent emotional bond. The phrase "*Open hand or closed fist, oh, would be fine*" reflects how the victim has become accustomed to receiving both affection and physical violence from the abuser. The signified is that the victim has fallen so deeply into the trauma bond that they no longer differentiate between violence and warmth from the abuser (Christensen, 2022). "*The blood is rare and sweet as cherry wine*" contains powerful symbolism, where blood (signified), representing wounds and violence, is viewed as something "sweet" and "rare" (signifier). This indicates how the victim has begun associating violence with love or passion, a distortion of perception resulting from trauma bonding.

[Verse 2]

Calls of guilty thrown at me, all while she stains
The sheets of some other
Thrown at me so powerfully, just like she throws
With the arm of her brother

The line "*Calls of guilty thrown at me, all while she stains*" shows how the abuser keeps blaming the victim, even though the abuser is the one doing wrong. This kind of behavior is a form of psychological manipulation that often happens in abusive relationships. The abuser makes the victim feel guilty for things they didn't do, which makes the victim question themselves and feel like they're the one at fault. This creates confusion and makes it even harder for the victim to break free from the abusive cycle because they start to believe the lies and manipulation. "*The sheets of some other*" suggests that the abuser may be cheating or betraying the victim in some way, which adds another layer of emotional pain and complexity to the relationship (Maxwell, 2001). The victim might feel even more hurt and confused, and they might even feel guilty or responsible for things that aren't their fault, like the abuser's cheating. This shows how twisted the relationship has become, where the victim is punished or blamed for things they didn't do, while the abuser continues to act cruelly. The line, "Thrown at me so powerfully, just like she throws with the arm of her brother" reveals that the abuser doesn't just use words to hurt the victim but also uses physical violence. This comparison to the "arm of her brother" suggests that the abuser is strong and forceful, making the violence even more frightening. The physical and emotional harm work together to keep the victim trapped,

reinforcing the cycle of abuse. The victim faces both verbal attacks and physical harm, which makes it nearly impossible to escape the toxic relationship. The emotional manipulation, combined with the violence, creates a situation where the victim feels powerless and unable to leave.

[Pre-Chorus]

But I want it, it's a crime

That she's not around most of the time

The lyric “But I want it, it’s a crime” reveals the deep inner conflict and ambivalence experienced by the victim in the relationship. On one hand, the victim recognizes that the abuse they endure is wrong and unacceptable, as suggested by the word “crime” (signified). On the other hand, the victim feels a strong emotional desire to remain connected to their abuser, as expressed by the phrase “I want it” (signifier). This line captures the core of trauma bonding, a psychological phenomenon where victims develop emotional dependency on their abuser despite being aware of the harm caused. The conflicting emotions of knowing the relationship is toxic yet feeling compelled to stay demonstrate the powerful hold that trauma bonding can have on a person (Engel, 2023). Similarly, the lyric “That she’s not around most of the time” underscores the abuser's frequent absence, which paradoxically intensifies the victim’s longing for them. This absence fosters a sense of yearning in the victim, further illustrating how trauma bonding creates a cycle of emotional dependency and attachment, even in the face of abuse. Together, these lyrics reflect the complex and painful emotional dynamics that often define abusive relationships, highlighting the intricate interplay between love, pain, and psychological entrapment (Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2007; Orzeck, Rokach & Chin, 2010; Finley, 2024).

[Chorus]

The way she shows me I'm hers and she is mine

Open hand or closed fist, oh, would be fine

The blood is rare and sweet as cherry wine

The repetition of the chorus here makes us truly realize how helpless and dependent he feels in the relationship. The reason he compares their love to “cherry wine” is because of how intoxicated he is by her and how addicted he is to the toxicity in the relationship. This repetition makes us truly feel what he feels and understand the back-and-forth of this situation.

[Verse 3]

*Her fight and fury's fiery
 Oh, but she loves like sleep to the freezing
 Sweet and right and merciful, I'm all but washed
 In the tide of her breathing*

In the third verse of "Cherry Wine," Hozier captures the complex and conflicting emotions present in an abusive relationship by describing the duality of his partner's behavior with the lyrics: "Her fight and fury's fiery / Oh, but she loves like sleep to the freezing." This juxtaposition illustrates two contrasting aspects of the abuser's personality—the fiery intensity of her anger and the comforting warmth of her love. The word "fiery" conveys the power and destructiveness of her anger, emphasizing its overwhelming and consuming nature. At the same time, the comparison of her love to "sleep to the freezing" evokes a longing for solace and reprieve from emotional or physical hardship, symbolizing how her affection acts as a temporary refuge for the victim. This imagery suggests that, despite the harm inflicted by her anger, her moments of tenderness feel life-saving, much like sleep might feel to someone suffering in the cold. By describing the abuser's love as a form of relief, Hozier illustrates how victims can become trapped in a cycle of hope and harm, clinging to the positive moments as a justification to endure the negative ones. The interplay of anger and love in these lyrics paints a vivid picture of the emotional turmoil experienced in abusive relationships, where the promise of comfort and security often becomes a powerful tool for control (de Shauma Andres, 2024). Through this verse, Hozier sheds light on the emotional complexities and contradictions that define trauma bonding, offering listeners a poignant insight into the psychological struggles faced by victims of abuse.

[Pre-Chorus]

*And it's worth it, it's divine
 I have this some of the time*

In the pre-chorus, Hozier sings, "And it's worth it, it's divine, I have this some of the time" capturing the paradoxical nature of love within abusive relationships. The singer elevates the fleeting moments of affection and tenderness, describing them as "divine," which suggests a near-reverent attachment to the highs of the relationship, making the painful lows seem bearable. This reflects the psychological entrapment common in trauma bonding, where victims rationalize or justify the abuse by clinging to the rare instances of kindness. The inconsistency is highlighted in the line "some of the time," which subtly acknowledges that these positive moments are few and far between, yet they hold enough emotional weight to keep the victim

tethered to the relationship. By portraying this emotional dynamic, Hozier illustrates how the rare highs of an abusive relationship can overshadow the constant harm, perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

[Chorus]

The way she shows me I'm hers and she is mine

Open hand or closed fist, oh, would be fine

The blood is rare and as sweet as cherry wine

He ends the piece by returning to the chorus, and this repetition emphasizes the emotional exhaustion he must be experiencing. By revisiting the same refrain, it suggests that he is trapped in a painful cycle, continuously reliving the same confusion and suffering without finding an escape. The weariness conveyed through this repetition hints at his deep mental and emotional fatigue, as he is worn down by the constant push and pull of the relationship—where brief moments of affection are punctuated by cruelty and abuse. Furthermore, the shift in lyrics from "the way she tells me I'm hers" in the first chorus to "the way she shows me I'm hers" reflects a more sinister progression in the abuser's behavior. What begins as verbal control (tells) evolves into physical acts (shows), which can be interpreted as escalating violence, perhaps even physical abuse (Englander, 2017; Tordjman, 2022).

Naturally, going through such harm is not something he wants or enjoys. From the viewpoint of outsiders—friends, family, or anyone who sees what's happening—it seems clear that he should leave the toxic relationship (Yuliasari et al., 2025). They would likely encourage him to get away from this harmful situation. However, from his perspective, it is much more complicated. Trauma bonding makes it hard for him to see the relationship as unhealthy. His feelings of love, attachment, and hope, combined with his partner's manipulation and control, create a mental fog that makes leaving seem very hard, if not impossible. This return to the chorus shows the repeated pattern of abuse and how difficult it is to break free, even when the right choice seems obvious.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Hozier's song "Cherry Wine" powerfully illustrates the complex dynamics of trauma bonding and domestic violence through its evocative lyrics and rich symbolism. By employing literary devices such as personification, simile, and metaphor, Hozier captures the conflicting emotions experienced by victims of abuse—where love and pain coexist in a volatile relationship. The analysis of the lyrics, particularly through Saussure's semiotic theory, highlights the intricate relationship between the signifier—the lyrics and the signified—the meanings and emotions they convey (Ramdani & Sakinah, 2023). Ultimately, the song serves not only as a poignant reflection on the struggles faced by those in abusive relationships but also as a call for greater awareness and understanding of the psychological complexities involved. Through "Cherry Wine," Hozier effectively communicates the need for empathy and support for individuals trapped in cycles of trauma, underscoring the importance of addressing these critical social issues.

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