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Are We Evolving Straight into Zombies?

A Rhetorical Analysis of "Zombie" by The Cranberries

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Music is sound in succession organized in a rhythmic and temporal format. The continuous clicking of a pen is music just as is the wedding favorite, Pachelbel's Canon in D. Music can be monotonous and tedious, dissonant and harsh, but it can also be melodic and light, convey beauty and express emotion. In 1993, the Irish rock band, The Cranberries, were sweeping nations with triple platinum records and world tours. Concurrently, blood stained the war-torn streets of Northern Ireland as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) demanded the British leave Northern Ireland to form a united nation. This multi-decade conflict became known as "The Troubles". The guerilla war killed and maimed with no end in sight for either side. On the 20th of March, 1993, two bombs planted by the IRA killed three-year old Johnathan Ball and twelve-year old Tim Parry. This brought the focus and aim of the war into question by the public all around the world. In response to the Warrington Bomb Attacks, The Cranberries released their number one hit, "Zombie", in their triple platinum album, *No Need to Argue*, in 1994. The song was written by Dolores O'Riordan as a protest against the continuous violence brought upon by the war which was fought by "some idiots living in the past," (Vox, 1994). In "Zombie", the use of apocalyptic, demonizing diction and imagery of the collateral damage of war assisted The Cranberries in swaying the emotions of their enormous and diverse audience. The allusion to The Troubles in "Zombie" shed light onto the inhumane and illogical war being fought by the IRA and Britain.

What makes music a three-dimensional platform is its ability to complement the mood of lyrics using different auditory aspects. O'Riordan wrote "Zombie" in a minor key. Opposed to a major key, songs written in minor mode have an intrinsic eerie and sad quality. A tune like "Canon in D" which is often played at weddings and graduations is in a major key which emanates sweet and sustained notes. On the other hand, "Zombie" is written in 'E'-minor which amplifies the atmosphere of melancholy and resistance brought on by mourning of the manslaughter of Ball and Parry. *The Rough Guide to Rock* described the record as having an "angry grunge" and "aggressive lyrics" (Buckley, 2003, pg. 241). Backed up by a steady quarter note beat, the minor key and punk rock feel of the record support its sad and angry lyrics. The "angry grunge" feel of "Zombie" emanates from the throaty vocals driven by a steady electric guitar. This concoction enhances the effect of the song on a listener as they are able to feel the sad tones and "cries" from The Cranberries.

Just as how music can express emotion and convey beauty through instrumentals, songs can tell a story. As stated by O'Riordan, "Zombie" tells the story of the decades old conflict in Northern Ireland and two of the many innocent lives lost in the crossfire. The first line of the song, "Another head hangs lowly, child is slowly taken", establishes the context of the allusion towards the deaths of the two children in the Warrington bombings. Basing the song on the history of the guerilla war, The Troubles, The Cranberries deliver their protest in a form of media which is easily digested by an audience of many cultures and languages. The song goes further to establish the context of The Troubles in the line "It's the same old theme since nineteen sixteen" which refers to the Easter Rising in 1916, one of the earliest confrontations between the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the British Red Coats. The historical references in "Zombie" give credibility to other statements in the song which further describe the loss of life and questions the purpose of a decades long war. In the second verse, the song goes, "But you see, it's not me, it's not my family," where O'Riordan expresses the ambivalence

of the Irish people towards The Troubles. Initially the IRA had the support of the Republic of Ireland as they all wanted to unite the island. With increasingly brutal and unethical attacks, doubt started to surround the intentions of the IRA. With these two statements, O’Riordan and The Cranberries are playing with the guilt of any civilians still supporting the war. The Cranberries wanted to bring awareness to the fact that the ideals of the IRA didn’t define the Irish people.

The most influential and important choice of diction used by O’Riordan when writing this record was the title. A song with inexplicably long and complex words can’t be sung along to in the car, shower, or club like “Zombie” was and still is. Traditionally, zombies are the propagators of war. They are killing machines symbolic of the apocalypse. O’Riordan personifies the soldiers as zombies, mindless creatures with a hunger for human flesh. The transition of a human to a zombie includes the loss of one’s soul; the source of compassion, empathy, and morality. The association of an IRA soldier with a zombie changes the perspective of the war from that of a fight for unity to a means of senseless murder. Changing this viewpoint in the audience of The Cranberries, especially the fanbase in Ireland and Britain, caused people to question the ethics of a war with so many civilian casualties. “Zombie” also contains the recurring line “With their tanks, and their bombs, and their bombs, and their guns.” The repetition of words relating to war makes it easy for the audience – who in the 1990s were primarily counter culturalists – to protest the violence in The Troubles.

The imagery created by Dolores O’Riordan in “Zombie” connects to the audience’s emotions most powerfully. The first line begins, “Another head hangs lowly, child is slowly taken,” referring to the two children killed in the Warrington bombings. Though the conflict in Northern Ireland had been taking innocent lives for over half a century, the death of Ball and Parry in March, 1993, inspired The Cranberries to use the massive audience of the band at the time to protest such thuggery. When listening to “Zombie” one can’t help but visualize the lifeless bodies of children once full of innocence and growth. The first line of the song hooks the unintended audience: the people who weren’t Irish or British or who didn’t care to be informed about the war. The guilt and empathy for the families of the two boys killed in the bombings would have made any mother or father think about how such a war would affect them, being thankful for the wholeness of their family. Another verse starts with “Another mother’s breakin’ heart is takin’ over” which further brings up imagery of the aftermath of the death of Ball and Parry and the sinking, sulking heads of the families of the boys. Whereas the first line addressed the actual death of the two boys, this lyric focuses on the effect the death has among one’s loved ones. It was very possible that someone in The Cranberries audience had a friend, daughter, son, brother, sister, mother, or father who has passed away. Reminding those people of the pain they felt and turning it into sadness and hatred of The Troubles is what made such a strong emotional connection between “Zombie” and the audience, Irish or not. As The Cranberries had and still have an audience in countries in almost every continent, appealing to the empathy of all age groups and people who might or might not have cared about The Troubles helped make “Zombie” a number one hit.

Music has become more than the livelihood of classical composers. Music is a way for artists to convey controversial topics to a diverse and worldly audience; emotion can be conveyed through music where CNN articles simply fail. “Zombie” contains graphic diction and

imagery to connect to the empathy of the audience of The Cranberries. O’Riordan stated that their record, “Zombie” is a “cry against man’s inhumanity to man; and man’s inhumanity to child,” (Vox 1994). What delivered this message so successfully is the ability of The Cranberries to use the three dimensional form of music coupled with powerful allusions and imagery to create a performance with an environment of vulnerability and emotion. Their performance of “Zombie” on *Saturday Night Live* in 1995 was described by author, Dave Thompson, as “one of the most powerful performances that the show has ever seen”. The use of simple yet complex diction and metaphor such as the personification of IRA soldiers as zombies, and the emotional imagery caused by lyrics describing children dying and mothers crying helped achieve the powerful sway of “Zombie” when performed. It can be argued that this record written twenty-four years ago is more relevant to the current state of our world than any other released song. In 2018 there have been 26 kids killed in American school shootings, a figure which expands to 250 students and teachers dead in this millennium (Bump 2018). In an era where the amount of students killed in shootings almost tops the amount of service members killed in the military, it is important to yield to O’Riordan’s plea to the safety of youth; parents aren’t meant to outlive their children. Punk rock band, Bad Wolves, released a cover of “Zombie” in early 2018 as a tribute to Dolores O’Riordan. In their cover, Bad Wolves mention weapons under scrutiny now such as drones. The lyrics in some verses of their cover were changed to match the era of 2018 but the message of “Zombie” stayed the same: in an ever increasing world of autonomy and privilege, we must not turn into unethical and mindless creatures without purpose.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hChm0s8JJk>

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