

INTERTEXTUALITY IN LANA DEL REY'S SONGS LYRICS AND POEMS

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The paper critically examines the extensive intertextuality and cultural references embedded in the music lyrics and poetry of Lana Del Rey. Del Rey's works are marked by an intricate network of religious, mythological, and literary allusions, which contribute to a multi-layered narrative. It was found that she recurrently engages with Christian imagery and biblical references, which serve to enrich her poetic imagery, exploring themes of redemption, sin, love, and longing for spiritual salvation. The study focuses on Del Rey's allusions to such prominent literary figures as Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, and T.S. Eliot, among others. An in-depth analysis was conducted on selected songs lyrics, including "Body Electric," "Religion", and "hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have," which include references to the works of these poets, drawing thematic connections from them. Thus, themes of struggles of women in societal contexts, personal identity and artistic anguish in *The Bell Jar* are reflected in "hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have"; Del Rey's "Religion" is closely interconnected with "Burnt Norton" by T. S. Eliot, following the imagery of the paradise and themes of time, love and salvation. This study shows Del Rey's ability to recontextualize literary and cultural traditions, demonstrates her adeptness at transforming renown texts into modern works of art, which points at her significant place in contemporary poetry. By synthesizing diverse intertextual elements (such as allusion, quotation, reference) Lana Del Rey contributes to the ongoing intertextual dialogue between past and present literary expressions, providing new interpretations that reflect both personal and cultural resonances.

ІНТЕРТЕКСТУАЛЬНІСТЬ У ПІСНЯХ І ВІРШАХ ЛАНИ ДЕЛЬ РЕЙ

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Ключові слова: *інтертекстуальність, алюзія, цитата, Лана Дель Рей, С. Плат, Т. С. Еліот, В. Вітмен, біблійна тематика.*

В статті розглянута широка інтертекстуальність в текстах пісень і віршах Лани Дель Рей. У творах Дель Рей перехрещуються релігійні, міфологічні й літературні алюзії, які створюють багатошаровий наратив. Було виявлено, що авторка пісень системно звертається до християнських образів і біблійних сюжетів, які збагачують її поезію; зокрема, розкриває теми спокути, гріха та божественної любові, а також прагнення до духовного спасіння. У фокусі дослідження літературні алюзії Дель Рей на Волта Вітмена, Сильвію Плат і Т.С. Еліота, серед інших. Здійснено аналіз текстів окремих пісень, зокрема «Body Electric», «Religion» і «hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have», які містять референції на твори цих поетів і їх наслідують, розкриваючи подібну тематику. Таким чином, теми боротьби жінок у суспільному контексті, особистої ідентичності та мистецьких страждань, запозичені з "Під скляним ковпаком", відображені

в «hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have»; «Religion» Дель Рей тісно переплетена з «Бернт Нортон» Т. С. Еліота у змалюванні образу райського саду та розкритті тем часу, любові та спасіння. Це дослідження демонструє здатність Лани Дель Рей реконтекстуалізувати літературні та культурні традиції у творах сучасного мистецтва, що відводить їй значне місце в сучасній американській поезії. Синтезуючи різноманітні інтертекстуальні елементи (такі як алюзії, цитати, референції), Лана Дель Рей бере участь у постійному інтертекстуальному діалозі між минулими та сучасними літературними текстами, заново інтерпретує старі тексти в особистому та культурному контексті.

Introduction. Lana Del Rey is a critically acclaimed singer-songwriter, who rose to fame in 2012 with her song “Video Games”. Renowned for her lyricism and melancholic aesthetic, she has extended her creative output beyond music into the realm of poetry, whose significance lies not only in its literary merit but also in its cultural resonance. As a pop icon who merges the worlds of high and low art, Del Rey’s poetic endeavors provoke discourse on the intersections of popular culture, authenticity, and artistic expression (Rae, 2020). This paper seeks to examine intertextual dimensions of her poetry, considering its relationship to broader literary traditions.

Intertextuality, a concept introduced by poststructuralist theorists Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, describes how individual texts emerge from and derive meaning within the vast network of discourses and languages that constitute culture. According to this perspective, no text exists in isolation; its meaning is shaped by its relationship to an expansive field of preceding texts and significations. This understanding of textuality stems from 20th-century insights into the nature of language and communication (Allen, 2019; Шаповал, 2007; 2008). As noted by Barthes, “the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture” (Barthes, 1977). Texts are not impermeable but are constructed as a weave, where each thread is drawn from a single universe that contains the texts of myths, history, philosophy, and culture (Шаповал, 2007). Intertextual approach has hence become an important tool in literary analysis. Bloom states: “In ways that need not be doctrinal, strong poems are always omen of resurrection. The dead may or may not return, but their voice comes alive, paradoxically never by mere imitation, but in agonistic misprision performed upon powerful forerunners by only the most gifted of their successors” (Bloom, 1997: xxiv). As we shall see, Lana does endeavour to reinvent the works of her renowned predecessors.

Materials and methods. To our knowledge, there is no – or not much – academic research into intertextuality in Lana Del Rey’s works. Nonetheless, we believe it deserves literary study. It is not uncommon

for songwriters to be recognized as poets; e.g., in 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to the American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, and Lana seems to be a rising contemporary American poet herself, which can be proven by the vast intertextual relations in her poetry, as we will try to show in this article on the material of her lyrics and poems, with the main focus on three of her songs: “Body Electric”, “Religion”, and “hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have”, employing intertextual analysis and comparative study of her texts and the texts she references.

Results and discussion. Lana Del Rey’s poetry is rich in cultural and literary references. She vastly employs religious and mythological imagery, as can be seen in the examples in (1) and (2), taken from both her songs and her poetry book “Violet Bent Backwards over the Grass”. For example, time and again she uses the image of the mythical phoenix bird, either by directly naming it, as in (1b) or referring to its properties as a metaphor in (1c). But more importantly, she systematically turns to Christian motifs: in her songs, poems, and music videos. In (2), there are some examples of her references to Christianity: she either mentions Biblical figures, as in (2a)-(2c), or quotes the Bible (Genesis 1:3), as in (2d), or addresses the God, as in (2e). Lana incorporates biblical motifs to enrich her poetic imagery, drawing on the themes of redemption, sin, and divine love. Such a layered narrative, wherein she puts together the sacred and the sensual, fills her work with a sense of yearning for salvation and a deep connection through love.

(1) (a) A thing perfect, and ready to become a part of the texture of the fabric of something more ethereal

Like **Mount Olympus**, where **Zeus** sent **Athena** and the rest of the immortals to play (Del Rey, 2020).

(b) Match to the sun that’s slowly sinking
At the height of the afternoon
In the heat of the summer evening
Like a **phoenix**, like a chem trail, like a wave-length no one’s claiming (Del Rey, 2020)

(c) Anyone can start again
Not through love but through revenge
Through the fire, we’re born again (Del Rey, 2015).

(2) (a) **"Mary** prays the rosary for my broken mind" (Del Rey, 2012).

(b) **"Jesus** is my bestest friend" (Del Rey, 2012).

(c) I think about the curse bestowed upon **Eve**, that fateful eve,

She took that bite of fruit from that fruitful tree

And this summer night, you in front of me,

Makes me contemplate **the origins of good and evil** (Del Rey, 2020).

(d) **So let there be light** (Del Rey, 2015).

(e) **Dear Lord, when I get to Heaven**

Please let me bring my man

When he comes, tell me that you'll let him in

Father, tell me if you can (Del Rey, 2013).

There are also numerous literary references in her works, some of which can be seen in (4), like Beat poets, Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein", Shakespeare's "Hamlet", Robert Frost, to name only a few. E.g. in (4d) there are lyrics from her song "Music to Watch Boys To", in which she indirectly refers to the poem by American poet Robert Frost, first repeating the line from his poem "Nothing gold can stay" (Frost, 1923), and then, in a similar manner to the original poem, talks about the passing of time and the change of seasons:

(4) (a) I'm churning out novels like

Beat poetry on amphetamines (Del Rey, 2015).

(b) I know they think that it took thousands of people

To put me together again like an experiment

Some big man behind the scenes

Sewing **Frankenstein** black dreams into my songs

But they're wrong (Del Rey, 2023).

(c) Not you as the savior

not me as **Ophelia**

not us putting our faith in the public's dark art (Del Rey, 2020).

(d) **Nothing gold can stay**

Like love or lemonade

Or sun or summer days

It's all a game to me anyway (Del Rey, 2015).

For further analysis we shall focus now on three of her songs, which build upon other literary works, closely intervening with them on many levels, both through direct and direct references.

First such song is "Body Electric", in which Lana quotes the line from the poem "I sing the body electric" by Walt Whitman; this line, which is also the name of the poem, makes the chorus of the song. Whitman himself is mentioned in the second verse: "Whitman is my daddy", implying his literary influence on Lana's work.

Walt Whitman's poem «I Sing the Body Electric» is part of his collection *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855. This poem is a profound celebration of the human body, its sacredness, and its connection to the spirit. Whitman expresses a deep fascination with

human anatomy, viewing it not only as an object of scientific study but also as a source of artistic inspiration. Through vivid and detailed descriptions, he honors every aspect of the body, finding beauty and significance in its form and function. He also celebrates human sexuality and the act of procreation as natural, vital, and beautiful components of life (Kummings, 2006).

Lana in her song, inspired by Whitman's poem, does not list the body parts or talk about the body except that chorus line. However, she intervenes the same themes in other ways throughout the poem. First and foremost, that is the theme of procreation and descendancy; they both talk about parenthood and birth, but while Whitman does so mainly in the physical sense, Lana brings up cultural descendancy, her most important literary and popular culture influences. Compare *"This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns // Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries"* (Whitman, 1882) in Whitman and *"Elvis is my daddy, Marilyn's my mother"* (Referencing Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe) or *"Whitman is my daddy"* (Del Rey, 2012) in Del Rey's song. Also, Whiman writes *"The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them, // They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them"*, so Lana appears to pick up on this idea: how she needs to respond to her cultural predecessors, to continue their work. Another theme in Whitman's poem is procreation; throughout the poem he writes about children and birth, e.g. *"After the child is born of woman, man is born of woman, // This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and the outlet again"* (Whitman, 1882). Lana mentions birth too, but in a rather metaphorical and more tragic way: *"Heaven is my baby, suicide's her father"* (Del Rey, 2012). There are also other similarities, e.g. compare *"I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough"* (Whitman, 1882) and *"We don't need nobody, 'cause we got each other"* (Del Rey, 2012). All in all, both Whitman's poem and Del Rey's song are hymns to a sensual human body, both are about lineage, either literal one, or within literary and wider cultural tradition, with Lana focusing also on love and body in love, electrified by love.

The second song under analysis is "Religion", which can be seen as intertextually resonant with T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton". On her album *Honey-moon*, between "Art Deco" and "Religion", Lana recites an excerpt from T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" as an interlude. "Burnt Norton" is the first of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a series of four interlinked poems, first published in 1936. The title refers to Burnt Norton, an actual manor house in Gloucestershire, England, which Eliot visited. The poem draws inspiration from this setting and explores philosophical and

metaphysical themes, such as the nature of time, “time and the timeless” (Pinion, 1986: 220). The opening lines of the poem, also recited on *Honeymoon*, read: “Time present and time past // Are both perhaps present in time future, // And time future contained in time past” (Gardner, 1978). Time is the leitmotif of “Burnt Norton”, and it is mentioned in “Religion” too:

(5) No one’s out of time, no (Del Rey, 2012)

Burnt Norton was inspired by Eliot’s visit to the manor and its garden. The garden, with its tranquility, beauty, and mysterious detachment from the world, evoked deep memories in Eliot, weaving together diverse experiences and literary echoes (Gardner, 1978: 38). Like Milton’s paradise, the garden of Burnt Norton is a place set apart from the rest of the world (Gardner, 1978: 37). And so the garden in Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” is depicted as a paradise, place of stillness, beauty, and spiritual transcendence. The garden becomes a symbolic space that bridges the temporal and eternal, offering an ideal, uncorrupted reality, as we can see, for example, in (6a). In (6b) we see how Lana in both verses of “Religion” creates an image of the same place and human condition, relieved of all suffering.

(6) (a) The inner freedom from the practical desire,

The release from action and suffering, release from the inner

And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded

By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving (Gardner, 1978).

(b) Everything is fine now

Let’s sleeping dogs lay

All our minds made up now

All our beds are made

No one’s out of time, no

Chips fall where they may

Leave it all behind, let the ocean wash away

[...]

Everything is bright now

No more cloudy days, even when

The storms come, in the eye we’ll stay

No need to survive now

All we do is play, all I hear is

Music like: Lay Lady Lay (Del Rey, 2015).

In the last line of (6b) we can see another allusion – to the song by Bob Dylan. Also the phrase “all I hear is music” resonates with “Burnt Norton”, where there is music in the garden, which must be singing of birds: “And the bird called, in response to // The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery” (Gardner, 1978). All of this adds to the image of a paradise with subtle music in both poems, also the soft tune of Lana Del Rey’s song itself, which can be regarded not only as intertextuality, but also intermediality.

We can also compare how both poems tell us to forget about past problems, not to stir them, leave them behind: “Let’s sleeping dog’s lay[...] Leave

it all behind, let the ocean wash away” (Del Rey, 2015) and in “Burnt Norton”: “My words echo Thus, in your mind. But to what purpose // Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves // I do not know” (Gardner, 1978).

Another key theme in “Burnt Norton” is that of love. As noted by Moody, among the themes interwoven in the poem, love undoubtedly stands as one of the most significant (Moody 1994: 153). In “Eliot’s poem, the pint from which the light radiates is God, the Love which never moves but is the source of all movement; through love we embrace time and the timeless” (Pinion, 1986: 222). Not desire, but specifically love:

(7) Desire itself is movement

Not in itself desirable;

Love is itself unmoving,

Only the cause and end of movement,

Timeless, and undesiring

Except in the aspect of time

Caught in the form of limitation

Between un-being and being (Gardner, 1978).

Similarly, as shown in (8), in the chorus of “Religion” Lana Del Rey refers to love; her lover is free of desires, except the desire for love; his God is love, and her lover is her religion:

(8) It never was about the money or the drugs

For you there’s only love

For you there’s only love

It never was about the party or the clubs

For you there’s only love

‘Cause you’re my religion

You’re how I’m living (Del Rey, 2015).

In contrast with the scene of the heavenly garden, part 3 of “Burnt Norton” presents the vision of infernal London and London underground (Moody, 1994: 146). This appears to be used as a reference to “Art Deco”, the song which on the album precedes the interlude. Thus we can see how “Art Deco”, the “Burnt Norton” interlude and “Religion” together form a unified composition, which tells the story of hectic, impure human life and redemption through love, with the interlude giving the key to intertextual reading of the story. There are some lines and key words which give a glimpse of Lana’s referencing Eliot in this song as well, though the general tone is not as similar as that in “Religion”. For example, in part three of “Burnt Norton”, describing the underground: “while the world moves In appetency, on its *metalled* ways” (Gardner, 1978), and in “Art Deco”: “Shining like gun *metal*, cold and unsure” (Del Rey, 2015). Then, while Eliot in his poem develops the idea how we need to get free of desire and movement, as in (9a) and (9b), also (7), in “Art Deco” Lana tells about the party world, world of indulgence and desire, as illustrated in (10), which creates contrast with the peace and quiet world

of love in “Religion”, e.g. the juxtaposition between “Club queen” and “A little party never hurt no one” in “Art Deco” and “It never was about the party or the clubs” in Religion.

(9) (a) Neither movement from nor towards,

Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance (Gardner, 1978)

(b) Desire itself is movement

Not in itself desirable; (Gardner, 1978)

(10) Club queen on the downtown scene

Prowling around at night

[...]

A little party never hurt no one

[...]

You’re so Art Deco, out on the floor

[...]

‘Cause you want more (why?)

You want more (why?) (Del Rey, 2015).

Thus, in her songs “Religion”, and to a lesser extent “Art Deco” Lana makes both a direct reference to “Burnt Norton”, using it as an interlude, and indirectly weaves in its themes and motifs in the imagery of her own poetry.

Another song in which Lana makes a powerful allusion is “hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have”, in which she references Sylvia Plath as a way to evoke the poet’s deeply personal and creative struggles.

In (11) we can see the lines from Lana’s song, in which she compares herself to Sylvia Plath. There are words which resemble a similar scene in “The Bell Jar”, provided here in (12). Both describe a scene in which a writer is struggling to write, the tormenting creation process; how they want to and need to write, but how it affects them emotionally. The reference to the nightgown, which adds to showing how messy and out of control this process is, also hints at where Lana drew her inspiration from. The excerpt from “The Bell Jar” goes on to describe how Esther, the heroine, questions her writing abilities, her life path, and career choices; she doubts herself, how she could write without any real life experiences. Del Rey emphasizes on the challenges of writing by using phrases “tearing around” and “writing in blood”.

(11) I’ve been tearing around in my * nightgown
24/7 Sylvia Plath

Writing in blood on the walls (Del Rey, 2019).

(12) My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine [...] *Elaine sat on the breezeway in an old yellow nightgown of her mother’s, waiting for something to happen. It was a sweltering morning in July, and drops of sweat crawled down her back, one by one, like slow insects*

I leaned back and read what I had written [...] I sat like that for about an hour, trying to think what

would come next, and in my mind, the barefoot doll in her mother’s old yellow nightgown sat and stared into space as well. ‘Why honey, don’t you want to get dressed?’ ‘I’m writing a novel,’ I said. ‘I haven’t got time to change out of this and change into that’ (Plath, 1963).

Moreover, “The Bell Jar” addresses the question of socially acceptable identity. It examines Esther’s quest to forge her identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be (Perloff, 1972). Lana opens her song with the same theme (also making another reference – to Slim Aarons, an American photographer, famous for his portrayal of high society), as can be seen in (13).

(13) I was reading Slim Aarons and I got to thinking that I thought

Maybe I’d get less stressed if I was tested less like
All of these debutantes

Smiling for miles in pink dresses and high heels
on white yachts

But I’m not (Del Rey, 2019).

“Hope is a dangerous thing...” is not the only time Lana references Plath. For example, she also does so in her poem “Bare Feet on Linoleum”: “*Stay on your path Sylvia Plath // Don’t fall away like all the others*” (Del Rey, 2020).

By mentioning Plath, Lana draws a parallel between her own feelings of isolation, struggle and artistic expression as a woman and as a poet with those of Plath. The reference underscores themes of despair and hope coming from a woman trying to find a place within society outside traditional roles, e.g. “*There’s a new revolution, a loud evolution that I saw [...] A modern day woman with a weak constitution, ‘cause I’ve got // Monsters still under my bed that I could never fight off*” (Del Rey, 2019). This allusion adds depth to the song, situating Lana within a lineage of complex women artists.

Conclusions. In this paper we have explored how Del Rey’s work contributes to contemporary understanding of poetry as a medium of personal and cultural expression. When Lana references another author or literary work, she engages with the texts on a deep level, incorporating the themes and motifs of those in her own poetry. Among the biggest influences on her work are Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, T.S. Eliot and many others, to a greater or smaller extent. Religious, Christian in particular, themes and imagery also play a significant role in her poetic world. As noted by Bloom, “Figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves” (Bloom, 1997: 5), and the intertextual analysis of Lana Del Rey’s lyrics and poems demonstrates that she is a poet capable of incorporating the elements of cultural and literary heritage into her own writing, reinventing the familiar texts in modern ways and context. The body of her works presents a vast material for intertextual study.

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