

Extended Essay
Subject: English B
Category 1: Language

Title:

“Wickedness or Weakness: A Linguistic Analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s *DAMN.*”

Research Question:

"How does Kendrick Lamar use language to convey the theme 'Wickedness or Weakness' in his album DAMN.?"

Word Count: 3586

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Introduction:

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth's fourth studio album, DAMN. (2017) represents a landmark achievement as a musical release that defies genre classification and becomes the first hip-hop album to receive the Pulitzer Prize. The award signifies the album's value as a work of art by confirming the existence of the album's structure and language composition through an in-depth analysis. The album represents a profound investigation into identity, morality, and the existential reality of survival in the United States of America in the twenty-first century. The album's thematic depth necessitates an analysis of the literary devices employed by the artist, an analysis that transcends the scope of conventional rhetorical and sociological criticism. The album's central theme revolves around the explicit duality of the album's themes, as encapsulated by the recurring refrain of the song "FEAR.": "Is it wickedness? Is it weakness?". The philosophical debate presented by the album revolves around this central theme of conflict, necessitating an analysis of whether wickedness or weakness underlies the existence of ethical failings and the existence of human suffering. The album's themes of wickedness and weakness are encapsulated by the concepts of pride, arrogance, and damnation, as opposed to weakness, humility, vulnerability, and grace. The album invites the audience to participate in the personal and disorganized thought process of the protagonist, Kendrick Lamar, as the album represents a demonstration of the internal conflict of the artist himself, as seen in the lyrical composition of the song "DNA.". The album represents a profound observation of the inconsistency of the human spirit, compelling the audience to participate in an analysis of the source of the moral conflict.

The analysis moves through three interconnected structural levels. The first level is concerned with linguistic choices and rhetorical devices, specifically diction and wordplay, in order to grasp the grounds for inherent duality. The second level is the analysis of the flow, syntax, and delivery in order to understand the connection between disruptions in sound and chronological order and chaos in the psychological and moral spheres. Finally, the analysis moves to the level of narrative architecture and intertextuality to grasp how structural sequencing and cultural codes (such as biblical allusion and Signifyin(g)) situate the conflict between morality and wickedness/weakness as an inescapable collective curse. This allows for a comprehension of how Lamar reworks morality as an unsolvable riddle.

Diction as a Tool for the Wickedness vs. Weakness Duality

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Juxtaposition of the Sacred and Sinful

The linguistic choices in DAMN. are intentionally variable between sacred religious allusion and stark, unadorned reality to ground the dialectic between morality and wickedness/weakness. Lamar states in his song "DNA.":

"I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA / I got power, poison, pain, and joy inside my DNA,"

The juxtaposition is essential because it brings two contradictory, destructive concepts ("poison," "pain") and the concepts of royalty and integrity ("royalty," "loyalty") together in a single statement. The construction of the individual's identity has been made inherently contradictory because of the juxtaposition of the concepts. The artist has made a statement of fact about the inherent presence of the dichotomy of "Wickedness or Weakness" in the individual's genetic code. The artist has negated the idea of a simplistic moral direction in the individual by combining the concepts of moral responsibility and human suffering. Therefore, the word choice of the artist, in the case of Lamar, has been made for the purpose of providing a harmonious rhythm only. However, the artist has linguistically joined the concepts of wickedness ("poison," "pain") and weakness ("joy," "loyalty") to prove the point that the theme is not about a choice between two concepts, but about the simultaneous existence of the two concepts.

Symploce in "DNA."

Symploce combines Anaphora (repetition at the beginning of successive clauses) and Epistrophe (repetition at the end).

In "DNA.," the repetition of "I got..." is an example of Anaphora, and the repetition of "...inside my DNA" is an example of Epistrophe, which collectively form the Symploce rhetorical device. Within this Symploce, Lamar presents contrasting aspects of morality, such as "Loyalty, got royalty" and "dark, I got evil, that rot." The rigidity of this Symploce traps these contrasting ideas together and embodies the idea that these contrasting elements cannot be separated from each other.

A turning point in the rhetorical structure is when the focus changes in the Symploce from "my DNA" to "your DNA" and from the self-examination of Lamar to the second-person address that challenges the listener:

"Bitch, your hormones prolly switch inside your DNA / Problem is, all that sucker shit inside your DNA".

This is the structural foundation that weapons the lyrics and challenges the listener to look inward and consider whether their weaknesses are due to wickedness in the world around them or wickedness within their own DNA.

Amplification via Anaphora

Aside from Symploce, the use of Anaphora heightens the theme of conflict by creating a psychological atmosphere that is dominated by obsession and anguish. In songs such as "FEEL." and "FEAR.," phrases such as "I feel like" and "I'll prolly die" are relentlessly repeated. Basic human fears such as fear of dying and child abuse ("I beat yo ass") are compounded by such unrelenting rhythmic repetition. The occurrence of these fears is significant in that it emphasizes the constant struggle to be free from such fears by portraying it as a constant and debilitating mental illness.

Public Condemnation in "BLOOD." and "DNA."

The linguistic analysis of the album "DAMN." is not limited to the artist's own linguistic register. Instead, it is extended to the artist's use of sampled media commentaries. In the album's tracks, "BLOOD." and "DNA.," the artist has sampled audio commentaries from Fox News personality Geraldo Rivera criticizing Lamar's previous performance. The linguistic register used in the commentaries is extremely clinical in nature. Rivera states: "This is why I say that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years." The artist has sampled this media commentary to bring in a contrasting linguistic register in the overall structure of the album. The media commentary has a sterile linguistic register in which the artist is portrayed as a vector of societal degeneration. In this particular context, it is evident that the artist has not used the sampled media commentary merely as a contextual background. Instead, he has used it to personify the label of "Wickedness" imposed upon him by the larger system. The artist has used the sampled media commentary as a voice from an antagonist character. This is because the label of "Wickedness" is not an internal condition. Instead, it is a label imposed from the outside. In this particular context, the artist has used instrumental music in "DNA." to counter the criticism posed in the sampled media commentary.

Syntax and Narrative Structure: Mirroring Internal Conflict

Syntactic Fractures and Ambiguity in Flow

Aside from word choice, the syntax and flow of DAMN. are also used to mirror internal conflict as it transitions from the boldness and brashness of wickedness to the timidity and apprehensiveness of weakness. The use of different syntactic forms to narrate Kendrick Lamar's inner conflicts is a form of portraying his inner turmoil as a form of psychological and moral conflict. In the opening track "BLOOD.", the narration of his tragic encounter with a blind woman who shoots him is delivered in a jarring syntax characterized by short and evocative sentences that are interspersed with media commentary. This form of syntax is jarring and disorienting and positions the listener in a situation of unearned tragedy. This is juxtaposed to "FEAR.", the longest cut in the album that is structured in three parts to reflect his fears as a 7, 17, and as a 27-year-old. The constant failure to attain moral clarity and consistency is linguistically reflected by such inconsistency between chaos and sweeping reflection that is characteristic of "FEAR." and supports the idea that moral conflict is a fluid and unstable condition.

The Back masked Relapse in "FEAR."

One structural element used in the creation of "FEAR." is the use of back masked vocals in the middle of the track. The disruption in the flow of the audio represents the disruption in the flow of time and syntax, symbolizing the regression into childhood fears. The lyrics, when played forward, are a deep lament:

"Why God, why God do I gotta suffer? Pain in my heart carry burdens full of struggle. Why God, why God do I gotta bleed? /Earth is no more, won't you burn this mo'fucker? I don't think I can find a way to make it on this Earth".

This audio disruption is an important counterargument to the possibility of moral redemption. The reality of suffering, the reality of its predestination, is ever-present, despite Lamar's efforts to find grace and improvement, by encasing this painful interaction with the divine within the undercurrent of the track. The audio manipulation itself physically hides the plea for help, implying that the weakness of the plea is continually overridden by the louder, more dominant narrative of wickedness and damnation.

Sequencing: The Determination of the Thematic Outcome

The thematic ambiguity of the album is resolved by the intentional decision to deny the possibility of thematic resolution, instead of offering two potential narratives depending on the sequence of the playback. Lamar has confirmed that the album was intended to be played in reverse, stating: “DAMN. was made to be played backwards. I think it’s a full story and even a better rhythm.” The dual sequence of the album becomes a structural hermeneutic, with the thematic resolution depending on the sequence of the playback.

In this case, the forward playback begins with the words "BLOOD." and ends with the words "DUCKWORTH.", showing the struggle between morality and the intervention of fate, which is averted as the story comes to an end with the words "DUCKWORTH." The opposite playback, beginning with the words "DUCKWORTH." and ending with the words "BLOOD.," re-frames the final track as the tragic fate of a wicked and sinful life, ending in bloody retribution (Wickedness). The very structure of the album compels the listener to be the ultimate decider of the meaning of the album ("You decide"). The capability of Kendrick Lamar to create an artistic creation in which active engagement is in close relation to interpretation can be seen in the very structure of the album, in which the duality is upheld, and the issue of Wickedness or Weakness becomes an intractable philosophical issue.

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Table: Structure of Narrative Duality in “DAMN.”:

Track Sequence	Narrative Arc	Starting point (and its moral condition)	Endpoint (Resolve)	Theme
Forward (Track 1→14)	Moral struggle	Vulnerability (Death as surprise)	Fate averted (Survival)	Weakness
Backwards (Track 14→1)	Determinism and consequence	Fate encountered (Moral decision averted)	Death as consequence of sin (Retribution)	Wickedness

Intertextuality: Framing Wickedness through Cultural Codes

Biblical Intertextuality and Cursed Heritage

Lamar's use of the binary between Wickedness and Weakness can be explained by the presence of ancient spiritual ideas and concepts, as the artist incorporates religious symbolism in the album itself. The title of the track, "YAH.," has a spiritual connotation as it makes a direct reference to the Hebrew name for God. The artist's claim, "I'm an Israelite, don't call me Black no mo'," establishes the connection to Hebrew Israelism and the reclaiming of one's identity by one's ancestry.

While the direct reference to Deuteronomy 28:45 in 'YAH.' locates the protagonist within the framework of collective atonement, where 'wickedness' is the inherent condition of the Israelites, the album also alludes to the framework of the Book of Job.

"The Lord shall smite thee with blindness and madness, and astonishment of heart".

Similarly, to the story of Job, the suffering is not simply the result of divine retribution, but rather the test of 'Weakness' or humility by the divine. In 'FEAR.', the enumeration of his fears is similar to the lamentations of Job. Unlike Job, however, Kendrick Lamar does not dispute the Deuteronomic verdict, embracing 'wickedness' as his inherent condition. This creates a theological conundrum, where is the 'pain in my heart' the fire that purifies to strengthen the spirit, or is it the 'madness and astonishment of heart' promised to the disobedient? Thus, the album becomes the contemporary equivalent of the Book of Wisdom, leaving the listener to decide the nature of divine retribution.

The Critique of Signifyin(g)

The theoretical value of Signifyin(g) is to illuminate the inherent necessity of the linguistic dualism. Kendrick Lamar's negotiation of dualism is within the tradition of Signifyin(g), as outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Gates' theory of Signifyin(g) is the 'double-voiced' discourse where the speaker re-utters the dominant discourse with 'signal difference' to subvert the original. Kendrick Lamar is 'motivated Signifyin(g)' the dominant discourse of the commercial hip-hop protagonist.

When Lamar assumes the attitude of 'Wickedness' by bragging about 'royalty' and 'power' in 'DNA.' He is not simply engaging in braggadocio. He is actually making fun of it to unveil

the 'Weakness' hidden behind. The 'signal difference' here is the juxtaposition of the bragging with the admissions of 'poison' and 'pain'. By playing the stereotype of the aggressive, hyper-masculine rapper and then subverting it with admissions of weakness, Lamar critiques the genre's use of 'Wickedness' as a defense. The text, therefore, becomes a meta-commentary where 'Wickedness' represents the image the culture expects, and 'Weakness' represents the reality the artist portrays.

Final Wordplay and Evaluation:

The Structural Irony of "PRIDE." and "HUMBLE.":

The 'relentless contrasts' discussed earlier finally come together with the structural irony of the two songs 'PRIDE.' and 'HUMBLE.' The title of 'PRIDE.' alone suggests that it will contain the pride and arrogance of 'Wickedness', while 'HUMBLE.' will contain the humility of 'Weakness.' However, Kendrick Lamar challenges this assumption with the linguistic and musical delivery of the two songs. In 'PRIDE.' Lamar sings with a melancholy undertone, altering the pitch of his voice to make it weak and exhausting. He declares:

"I can't fake humble just 'cause your ass is insecure,"

with the theme of pride wrapped around the audio delivery of extreme vulnerability. In 'HUMBLE.' the theme of humility is called upon from the world, but the delivery of the theme by Lamar himself is aggressive, dominating, with a heavy beat. The lyrics are rife with braggadocio, using the theme of humility as a tool for domination. By making the listener experience 'Wickedness' as 'Weakness' and 'Weakness' as 'Wickedness,' Lamar shows that the two are not necessarily binary concepts but are intertwined.

Semantic Ambiguity and Double Entendres in "LOYALTY.":

This intentional blurring of lines is further continued through the 'double entendres found in 'LOYALTY.'. The object of the loyalty that is central to the titular term throughout the song remains fundamentally ambiguous throughout the track. When Lamar asks,

"Tell me who you loyal to / Is it money? Is it weed? Is it drink?"

he is inquiring about the siren call of earthly temptations and wickedness. However, when he asks,

“Is it anybody that you would lie for? / Anybody you would die for?”

the linguistic framework is now centered around profound human connection and spirituality, and fidelity to that spirit and to the weak and the wicked. The 'snowballing effect of Lamar's intricate linguistic framework' ensures that the listener cannot easily classify the nature of his actions

The Political and Personal Contrast in "XXX.":

The philosophical discourse on morality within the album might be seen most prominently within the track "XXX.", which can be seen as a reflection and embodiment for the entirety of the "Wickedness or Weakness" paradox. The thematic contradictions are deeply embedded within the lyrical content of "XXX." The track begins with Kendrick Lamar taking on the role of spiritual and moral conflict as he tries to offer spiritual advice to a friend who has experienced tragedy. However, instead of giving a message of grace and "Weakness" or humility and forgiveness, Kendrick Lamar's diction takes a drastic turn into "Wickedness" or revenge. Kendrick says quite candidly: "If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin' killed." going so far as to claim he would seek revenge even as the perpetrator leaves a community service. The drastic turn from "Weakness"(vulnerability and grief) into "Wickedness"(revenge and murder) speaks to how "Weakness" can quickly turn into "Wickedness" when an individual finds themselves in a desperate situation. The track "XXX." also expands upon this idea of "Weakness" or "Wickedness" as it relates to Kendrick Lamar's revenge instincts and how they compare to the "Wickedness" or hypocrisy of America as a whole. The track "XXX." can be seen as a linguistic commentary on "Wickedness" or hypocrisy as a survival mechanism within a broken society.

Evaluation; The Indivisibility of System and Self:

Ultimately, this basic linguistic blur has a very deep thematic significance as it is intended to point to the impossibility of moral purity in an imperfect world. The contradiction is continued to build as this discussion of these ideas is continued through the use of language, always blurring the line between personal responsibility and consequence. 'Wickedness' of violence, pride, and aggression is no longer a moral failing, but rather a form of armor that the individual must wear in order to make it in a world of others. Conversely, 'Weakness' of vulnerability and grace is now a weakness in an unforgiving world. Lamar's use of contradictory diction, syntax, and irony has successfully ensnared

the reader in the Kendrick's own inner conflict. The thematic conflict will continue to be an intentional and confusing ethical problem long after the initial listening of the album has been completed. This basic linguistic construct has achieved its purpose not through the resolution of the conflict between 'Wickedness or Weakness,' but through the demonstration that in the world of twenty-first century America, these two concepts are interlinked.

Conclusion:

The analysis of DAMN. It demonstrates that Kendrick Lamar uses complex linguistic and structural mechanisms to make the album a complex literary listening experience. The study has confirmed the fact that the thematic paradox of 'Wickedness or Weakness' is presented through formal rhetorical mechanisms.

This analysis of the album confirms that the thematic duality of 'Wickedness or Weakness' is not just the subject matter of the lyrics, but also the logic on which the entire linguistic architecture of the album is built. The research also shows the intentional duality on the Album, where the strict application of symprole in the lyrics of 'DNA.' or the phonetic conflict of plosive and sibilant sounds physically locks the two opposed moral concepts into the same breath, proving the linguistic inseparability of 'Wickedness' (aggressiveness) and 'Weakness' (vulnerability). This duality is then reflected on the macroscopic level, where the non-linear order of the album tracks, along with the narrative loop in the back masked vocals in 'FEAR,' locks the two opposed moral concepts into the same album, just as the syntax of one sentence in 'DNA.' locks 'royalty' and 'poison' into the same sentence, or the syntax of the album locks 'salvation' ('DUCKWORTH.') and 'damnation' ('BLOOD.') into the same album. Thus, the linguistic evidence also shows that Kendrick Lamar does not view these moral concepts as choices to be made, but rather conditions to be endured simultaneously.

Moreover, an exploration of the intertextual context in which the album is presented reveals how Lamar uses ancient theological codes to comment upon contemporary sociopolitical issues. The juxtaposition of the 'Deuteronomic curse' of suffering, and the 'Jobian test' of personal faith raises the level of the narrative beyond its own tropes. The exploration reveals how ambiguity is used for a specific purpose: to protect the protagonist from judgment. If the 'Wickedness' of violence is a result of the 'Weakness' of suffering, as signified in the 'Signifyin(g)' trope of the gangster persona, then the audience is unable to pass judgment upon the protagonist. The exploration reveals that Lamar is using ambiguity as a shield to force the audience to come to terms with the fact that in a system of 'inherited' suffering, it is not only linguistically impossible to discern between sinner and victim, but it is also morally impossible. The level of linguistic sophistication reveals that

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the ambiguity of the themes is not arbitrary; rather, it is a precise literary device to illustrate the complexity of human existence. The paradox is not resolved because it is also a reflection upon the paradox in the American sociopolitical sphere: how to discern between oppression and guilt.

Ultimately, this study confirms the critical consensus that *DAMN.* indeed, signifies a paradigm shift in the literary canonization of hip-hop. Through its application of a level of scrutiny usually reserved for the study of modernist poetry or wisdom literature to an investigation of *DAMN.* itself, this essay confirms that *DAMN.* is indeed worthy of academic investigation on the highest level. The fact that Lamar is able to use syntax in innovative ways, subvert the chronology of narrative itself, and explore the complexities of theological debates in the language of Compton is a sign that the medium of rap is one that "engages with 'the highest levels of philosophical and theological inquiry.'" The album does not propose any answers to the riddle of 'Wickedness or Weakness'; instead, it builds a permanent monument to the search for an answer to that riddle in language. The last sound effect on the album, which is a tape rewinding, is indicative that the search for an understanding of the human condition is not a straight path to a destination but a looping path in which we must start over again, as in any search for understanding of any great work of literature.

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