

CONCEPTS OF RELIGION IN MODERN AMERICAN RAP LYRICS

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The article studies verbalization mean of religious concepts in Kendrick Lamar's songs of his 2017 album DAMN. After introducing the inventory of lexemes representing themes of religion, the authors argue for correlations with basic concepts and explain the structure of the thematic field, representing religion in all fourteen songs of the album. The album structure and each song of it include over a hundred tokens referring to various religious concepts — mainly GOD, SIN, and PRAY, each of them being verbalized by a group of lexemes, fifteen total, which share certain semantic components. The micro-contexts with biblical quotes will be regarded as convergence points of the album's text and analyzed individually for their stylistic value, but in general contributing to the general view of the album as a spiritual challenge. Through each next song a new aspect of religious concepts adds to the existing inventory, certain repetitions and cross-contextual allusions confirm and support them, adding coherence and continuity to the album's structure. Out of fourteen songs of the album seven directly verbalize basic religious concepts through the notions of God, pride, humility, lust, love, loyalty, fear. This explicit structural feature together with the ambiguous title offer a series of logical steps in evaluating the sinful vs virtuous choices. This contrast is identified and sustained through such stylistic devices as repetitions, allusions, rhetorical questions and others.

Key words: religious concept, song lyrics, verbalization, American rap, coherence, stylistic value.

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Релігійні концепти в ліриці сучасного американського репу

Стаття присвячена вивченню специфіки вербалізації релігійних концептів у пісенній ліриці сучасного американського репера Кендріка Ламара. Завдяки лексемам, що вербалізують певний концепт, вдалося окреслити три основних релігійних концепти альбому «DAMN.», які відповідно до частоти вживання вербалізаторів представлені так: БОГ — 57 вживань семи лексем, ГРІХ — 30 вживань шести різних лексем та МОЛИТВА — 27 вживань двох лексем.

Ключові слова: релігійний концепт, пісенна лірика, вербалізація, американський реп, зв'язність, стилістичне значення.

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Религиозные концепты в лирике современного американского рэпа

Статья посвящена изучению специфики вербализации религиозных концептов песенной лирики современного американского рэпера Кендрика Ламара. Проведя учет лексем, которые вербализуют разные религиозные понятия, удалось установить три основных религиозных концепта в альбоме «DAMN.», которые относительно частоты употребления вербализаторов представлены следующим образом: БОГ — 57 употреблений семи лексем, ГРЕХ — 30 употреблений шести разных лексем и МОЛИТВА — 27 употреблений двух лексем.

Ключевые слова: религиозный концепт, песенная лирика, вербализация, американский рэп, связность, стилистическое значение.

Introduction

Song lyrics of most modern musical genre contain few examples of classical poetic forms, with stable rhyme and rhythms, which can be recited aloud and preserve their poetic qualities. The tendencies of contemporary pop-music clearly deviate more and more from the form to accommodate the content, thus emphasizing the importance of images, depth of implications and individual messages over the outer material expression. Rap takes this tendency to the extreme and represents a unique blend of rhythm and sense, and in its shape is closer to a monologue rather than a song. Yet, it offers a vast textual space created from ordinary and simplified lines interrupted by regular repetitions, acting as refrains and chorus in the background, thus taking the shape of a song. In view of this specific quality of rap songs they become objects for studies from very different perspective. This article presents a case for religious concepts in Kendrick Lamar's album and will view the album as a textual space, each song being an independent text but all of them forming a holistic narration.

Kendrick Lamar, being not only a rap performer, but also a songwriter, communicates through his lyrics with a vast audience of his fans. Instrumental aspect serves as an accompaniment and a background, which may support the rhythmical structure of lyrics or create a certain effect such as highlighting certain lines, or create a general tone of a song [1]. Analyzing K. Lamar's lyrics we will take the author's perspective on all ideas to avoid any confusion in perception of images, except for those abstracts where the context indicates the presence of a character.

Kendrick Lamar's 2017 album *Damn* (stylized as *DAMN.*) [11] won a Pulitzer Prize the year after release [14], so its literary and artistic merit calls for more scrutiny of the author's messages in it.

The aim of the paper is to define the semantic core of religious concepts in Lamar's lyrics and identify their structure, role and implications. To achieve the given goal we focus on the following **tasks**: identify all lexemes relating to religion; establish correlations between similar semantic components; focus of the concepts, representing religion; argue for the implications and connotations of religious images in the album.

The material of the study is Kendrick Lamar's studio album *DAMN.* released in 2017, which includes 14 tracks (*BLOOD., DNA., YAH., ELEMENT., FEEL., LOYALTY., PRIDE., HUMBLE., LUST., LOVE., XXX., FEAR., GOD., DUCKWORTH.*) [11].

Theoretical Background

Kendrick Lamar is well known for referencing religious matters: Lamar's 2012 major label debut *good kid, m.A.A.d city* quoted the Sinner's Prayer [12, 1]; his 2015 studio album *To Pimp A Butterfly* contains images of God and Lucifer, implying their

images as figures representing good and evil and the eternal fight between them [13]; 2017 album *DAMN.* is recognized as the author's most religiously inspired body of work as it is filled with numerous references to the Bible, Judaism and Christianity [11]. The album's title itself carries religious implication — the word 'damn' is a short form of the word 'damnation', the meaning of which is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary as "the act of sending someone to hell or the state of being in hell" [8]. The shortened version is a separate word with a clear derogative meaning, often used as an exclamation in the meaning of 'a curse', whereas the full word refers directly to religious rituals.

With the album title's ambiguity, Kendrick Lamar starts a series of contemplations about different spiritual issues, which can be recognized in each next song's title, seven of fourteen being directly and explicitly about religious notions of loyalty, pride, humility, lust, love, fear and God. Most of these titles represent a sin or a virtue, so the challenge to contrast them is obvious from the textual structure. Even though spiritual issues are accompanied by other typical rap themes — race, wealth, crime — this album immediately stands out for its religious content and pleas to spirit due to the meta textual structural indicators.

As Kendrick Lamar said in one of the interviews, the album can be listened both ways — from track 1 to track 14 and vice versa, so the storyline of *DAMN.* and the order of references is flexible [9]. To specify each instance of verbalized religious concepts we take each next text under scrutiny and focus on the semantic indicators related to them.

Results and Discussion

The intro track *BLOOD.* is a skit opening the album. It starts with following phrases:

"Is it *wickedness*?

Is it *weakness*?

You decide /Are we gonna live or die?" [11, 1]

This abstract concerns one of *DAMN.*'s main issues — God's punishment and people's pay for their sins. Here Lamar uses two words which appear later in the album twice: *wickedness* and *weakness* — they relate to the concept of SIN, as *wickedness* stands for *evil* and *weakness* stands for people's lack of willpower to fight evil within themselves.

The album's introduction comes from a sinner's perspective talking to God, wondering about the origin of sin — "*wickedness* or *weakness*?" The concept of GOD is represented by relying on God's decision to let people live on or to punish the mankind for its wickedness. Later Lamar uses these two words in *FEAR.*:

"I'm talkin' fear, fear that it's *wickedness* or *weakness*

Fear, whatever it is, both is distinctive" [11, 12].

In *BLOOD*. Kendrick Lamar describes a scene of himself approaching an old blind woman with whom Lamar starts a conversation and who eventually kills him as the sound of a gunshot comes after the blind woman says “*You’ve lost... your life*” [11, 1]. After the gunshot sound the song repeats the phrase “Is it wickedness?” repeating the track’s opening line, which serves a stylistic purpose of empowering the intro’s message.

In the next track *DNA*. Lamar raps:

“*I was born like this, since one like this, immaculate conception*

I transform like this, perform like this, was new weapon” [11, 2].

Here the author compares his birth to Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary, later stating that he was *Yeshua new weapon*. By the reference to the image of Virgin Mary K.Lamar puts himself in the place of Jesus. *Yeshua*, which is Hebrew for Jesus, known as the son of God, is used here as an image of a savior and a prophet, who Lamar claims to be himself. *Yeshua new weapon* here is a metaphor that targets at Lamar being a tool in God’s hands. At the end of the first verse in *DNA*. Kendrick Lamar says:

“*And Nazareth gonna plead his case
The reason my power’s here on earth
Salute the truth, when the prophet say.”* [11, 2]

In the reference to Nazareth, birthplace of a biblical prophet [5, 10–11] Lamar compares himself to a prophet who tells the truth.

The song *YAH*. also carries some religious references in the following fragment:

“*I’m not a politician, I’m not ‘bout a religion
I’m a Israelite, don’t call me Black no mo’
That word is only a color, it ain’t facts no mo’
My cousin called, my cousin Carl Duckworth
Said know my worth
And Deuteronomy say that we all been cursed.*” [11, 3]

In one verse the author goes from personal negation of any *religion* to quoting *The Book of Deuteronomy* from a character’s perspective. Another use of the word ‘*religion*’ comes later in *PRIDE*.: “*I’ll take all the religions and put ‘em all in one service*” [11, 7], so connecting both micro-contexts Lamar means he doesn’t really preach for a particular one, he stands for all good that any religion carries.

“*I’m a Israelite, don’t call me Black no mo’*” contains a metaphor: Israelites are true children of God, so personal identity is not race but faith, and being of African descent does not mean that one cannot follow God. As for the mentioned *Deuteronomy*, longer and more substantial quote will follow in the track *FEAR*. later on the album.

Two more songs, *ELEMENT*. and *FEEL*. contain repetitions and slight variation of one line: “*Ain’t nobody prayin’ for me*” and two quotes: “*Put the Bible*

down and go eye for an eye” and “*what happens on Earth stay on Earth*” [11, 4].

These particular lines are exclamations which greatly set the tone of the record as these repetitions, *ain’t nobody prayin’ for me* are repeated later in the album more than once — even the first verse of the same song immediately repeats the first one:

“*Bitch, all my grandmas dead
So ain’t nobody prayin’ for me.
I’m on your head.*” [11, 4]

The following track *FEEL*. starts with the same phrase *ain’t nobody prayin’ for me* [11, 5] repeated 8 times in a row and the hook of the song also consists of the phrase repetition. In this case the whole *ain’t nobody prayin’ for me* reflect struggle with loneliness or spiritual isolation and absence of love and care in his life, because praying for someone may be considered to be a sign of deep caring and wishing well to those who are prayed for.

Two biblical quotes form the Old Testament in *FEEL*. emphasize Lamar’s instinct to revenge and appeal to the image of afterlife. Kendrick Lamar’s initial album title was “*What Happens on Earth stay on Earth*”, but was later he changed it to *DAMN*. [7]. The phrase is also used in the album’s final track *DUCKWORTH*.:

“*It was always me vs the world
Until I found it’s me vs me
Why, why, why, why?
Why, why, why, why?
Just remember, what happens on Earth stays on Earth!
We gon’ put it in reverse.*”

The phrase itself comes from the Bible, Timothy 6:7, verse 1: “*For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out*” [6].

Five tracks in succession *LOYALTY*. *PRIDE*. *HUMBLE*. *LUST*. and *LOVE*. give only three references to God and four instances for ‘*faith*’ and ‘*religion*’; but *LUST*. contains a quote from James 4:4: “*Friend of the world is enemy of the Lord*” to emphasize the contrast of worldly temptations and spiritual values. Two cases of “*God bless America*” *XXX*. are a passing remark of a cliché. These tracks are followed by a massive bulk of allusions in *FEAR*. back to all the occasional religious micro-contexts from all previous songs.

In *FEAR*. the full monologue of Lamar’s cousin is presented:

“*But you have to understand this, man, that we are a cursed people
Deuteronomy 28:28 says, “The Lord shall smite thee with madness
And blindness, and astonishment of heart.”* [11, 12]

So, in this song the author is unveiling his dialogue with a preacher character, revisiting all ideas for a final summary, as can be seen from the on-going details from the cousin:

“*He’s gonna punish us for our iniquities, for our disobedience*

*Because we chose to follow other gods
That man chastens his son, so the Lord, thy God,
chasten thee
So, just like you chasten your own son, He's gonna
chastise you
Because He loves you, so that's why we get chastised"*
and finishes with

*"And do what the Lord says, these curses is gonna
be upon us
We gonna be at a lower state in this life that we live
Here, in today, in the United States of America
I love you, family, and I pray for you
God bless you
Shalom."* [11, 12]

The whole monologue is a reference to the *Book of Deuteronomy* and Carl Duckworth is retelling its contents in which Moses proclaims the curses for breaking God's laws — this also brings us to the album's title and God's punishment [4]. The message is addressed to Kendrick Lamar, yet the narration of the biblical story is in itself a reference to one of the common practices — ceremony and prayers. So, the concepts K. Lamar initially gave from a personal perspective became items for external evaluation and even judgment.

Also later in this skit Carl Duckworth says:

*"We gonna feel this way, we gonna be under this
curse*

*Because He said He's gonna punish us
The so-called Blacks, Hispanics, and Native
American Indians*

*Are the true children of Israel
We are the Israelites, according to the Bible
The children of Israel."* [11, 12]

and it connects back with Lamar's statement in *YAH.*, but at the same time contradicts the possible idea of ethnicities' unimportance expressed there. Due to all these allusions and repetitions, *FEAR.* is a song with a summary of all religious input of the album, playing the role of a confession before the final prayer in *GOD.*

Also *FEAR.* opens with lines at its beginning:

*"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?
Every stone thrown at you restin' at my feet
Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Earth is no more, won't you burn this muh'fucka?
I don't think I could find a way to make it on this
earth."* [11, 12]

These lines come from the sinner's perspective as an appeal to God. The song elaborates on the topic of fear and its possible embodiments. A similar kind of addressing God may be found later in the song *GOD.*:

*"Don't judge me!
Now my home got a Valley peak
Don't judge me, if I press your line you a freak
Don't judge me, won't you tell a friend? Y'all gon'
see."* [11, 13]

The phrase "*don't judge me*" is being repeated 7 times throughout the second verse. Here Lamar's appeal to God asking him not to judge and not to punish him for his actions sounds as a final prayer.

To sum up all the instances of verbalization and to balance the content of each religious concept we may look at the calculations of the frequency for each lexeme in the album, as presented in the following table.

Concept	Lexeme	Frequency	Lexical Variations
GOD	God	36	God — 27 Goddamn / God damn — 13 Godfather — 1
	Lord	8	
	He	8	Jesus —1, Yeshua —1
	Israel	4	
	Nazareth	1	
SIN	Damn	21	sin — 1, hell — 1
	spirit	3	
	religion	6	faith — 3
PRAY	pray	25	
	Deuteronomy	2	

The four columns indicate the three concepts of religious nature — *GOD*, *PRAY* and *SIN*.

The lines contain the lexemes and the number each one was repeated, and data from the lexical

variations in included in the frequency indicator. Each concept was verbalized 57 (for *GOD*), 30 (for *SIN*) and 27 (for *PRAY*) times.

For the total of 8700 words verbalization of religious concepts occurred 114 times, which is very representative of the album.

Concept *GOD* is represented in 57 instances by 10 lexemes, with variations of *Goddamn* and *Godfather*. The phrase “*This is what God feel like*” occurred 9 times in a row, the phrase “*Why, God*” — 6 times in a row, “*God damn*” — 13 times in a row. Other references to *God* were spotted for *Jesus*, *Yeshua*, *He/Him*, *Israel* and *Nazareth*.

The next concept *SIN* is represented 30 times by lexemes “*damn*”, “*spirit*”, “*religion*”, “*faith*” and “*hell*”, with the album title being most frequent, and the word “*sin*” used just once. Contextually, all these lexemes occurred in the critical instances, when a violation of some ethical principle was imminent or actually happening.

The third concept *PRAY*, verbalized mostly through the corresponding lexeme “*pray*”, shows

27 instances in different micro-contexts, mainly in two tracks, while the phrase “*Praying for me*” was repeated 19 times. *Deuteronomy* was mentioned twice, contextually to emphasize the appeal to specific quotes.

Conclusions

In this paper we have outlined and described three major concepts of religious nature present in Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics in studio album *DAMN*. The instances of their verbalization were orientation tools for our search. Although we followed up 15 different lexemes to identify the religious concepts, the context and the message of certain songs, verses or skits would allow for additional occasional references to ethical challenges. The general idea of the album is built around punishment or damnation from God which explains the author’s choice for the album’s title as well as regular references to the Bible (Matthew 21, 1 Timothy 6, The Book of Deuteronomy) and occurring images of Jesus (as in *DNA*. and *YAH*.) throughout the album’s lyrics.

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