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Juvenalian Satire In (Selected) Songs Lyric of System of A Downs Band

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Abstract

This study examines the use of Juvenalian satire in three songs by System of a Down, namely B.Y.O.B., Chop Suey!, and Toxicity. The research applies Susanna Morton Braund's theory of Juvenalian satire and Emilio Betti's hermeneutic approach to uncover the social, political, and moral criticism embedded in the lyrics. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzes diction, symbolism, irony, sarcasm, and confrontational expressions found in the selected songs. The findings reveal that the songs consistently employ the major characteristics of Juvenalian satire: contemptuous tone, sharp criticism, irony and sarcasm, and provocative confrontation. B.Y.O.B. criticizes war, class inequality, and political hypocrisy; Chop Suey! questions social judgment and moral dogmatism; and Toxicity condemns the destructive effects of modern urban civilization and ideological domination. Through aggressive language and symbolic imagery, System of a Down transforms music into a medium of resistance against injustice and abuse of power. The study concludes that Juvenalian satire remains relevant in contemporary music because it provides a powerful framework for expressing dissent and encouraging critical reflection on social realities.

Keywords: Juvenalian satire, System of a Down, hermeneutics, song lyrics, social criticism, Emilio Betti

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INTRODUCTION

Music has long functioned as more than entertainment. Song lyrics frequently serve as vehicles for cultural expression, political resistance, and social commentary. In contemporary music, artists often employ literary devices to communicate criticism toward dominant institutions and societal conditions. Among these devices, satire occupies a significant position because it enables musicians to criticize injustice while simultaneously engaging listeners through creative expression.

Satire is commonly understood as a literary mode that exposes human weakness, corruption, hypocrisy, and social dysfunction. Traditionally, satire is divided into Horatian satire and Juvenalian satire. Horatian satire is mild, humorous, and corrective, whereas Juvenalian satire is harsh, morally indignant, and confrontational. Juvenalian satire condemns corruption and abuse of power through bitter irony, ridicule, and direct criticism. Its purpose is not merely to entertain but to provoke awareness and challenge dominant structures.

One contemporary band frequently associated with political and social criticism is System of a Down. Formed in California by musicians of Armenian descent, the band gained international recognition through its distinctive blend of alternative metal, progressive rock, and socially conscious lyrics. Their songs address war, consumerism, inequality, environmental degradation, media manipulation, and institutional hypocrisy. These themes make their work particularly suitable for analysis through the framework of Juvenalian satire.

This study focuses on three songs: B.Y.O.B., Chop Suey!, and Toxicity. These songs are among the band's most influential works and contain strong social and political messages. B.Y.O.B. critiques militarism and class exploitation, Chop Suey! explores judgment and moral contradiction, and Toxicity addresses urban alienation and systemic disorder. Although previous studies have explored figurative language and symbolism in System of a Down's lyrics, fewer studies have specifically examined the presence of Juvenalian satire and its deeper meanings through a hermeneutic perspective.

To address this gap, the present study applies Susanna Morton Braund's theory of Juvenalian satire together with Emilio Betti's hermeneutic theory. The combination of these approaches enables a detailed interpretation of lyrical meanings while remaining attentive to authorial intention and sociohistorical context. The objective is to identify how Juvenalian satire operates within the selected songs and to explain the social criticism conveyed through the lyrics.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. The primary data consist of lyrics from three songs by System of a Down: B.Y.O.B. (2005), Chop Suey! (2001), and Toxicity (2001). These songs were selected because they contain strong political, social, and cultural themes that align with the characteristics of Juvenalian satire.

The analysis is guided by Susanna Morton Braund's framework, which identifies four major characteristics of Juvenalian satire: contemptuous tone, sharp criticism, irony and sarcasm, and provocative confrontation. To interpret the deeper meanings of the lyrics, the study uses Emilio Betti's hermeneutic theory. Betti argues that interpretation should reconstruct the author's intended meaning by examining linguistic structures, historical context, and cultural circumstances while maintaining interpretive objectivity.

The analytical procedure involved several stages. First, the lyrics were read repeatedly to identify significant expressions, metaphors, rhetorical questions, and symbolic language. Second, these expressions were contextualized within the social and political realities surrounding the songs' production. Third, the researcher interpreted the lyrics through Betti's hermeneutic

principles to reconstruct the intended messages. Finally, the findings were categorized according to the characteristics of Juvenalian satire and discussed in relation to broader issues of power, inequality, morality, and social criticism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that all three songs contain significant elements of Juvenalian satire. The findings reveal how System of a Down employs aggressive language, irony, symbolism, and rhetorical confrontation to criticize social and political realities.

B.Y.O.B. represents the clearest example of Juvenalian satire. The recurring question “Why do they always send the poor?” expresses anger toward systems that place the burden of war on disadvantaged populations while political leaders remain protected. The line functions as a condemnation of class inequality and militaristic policies. Through the metaphor of a party occurring amid destruction, the song exposes the absurdity of war as entertainment and political spectacle. The contrast between celebration and violence intensifies the satirical effect and reveals moral outrage toward institutions that normalize conflict.

The song also demonstrates a strong contemptuous tone. Expressions referring to hypocrisy, manipulation, and blind obedience portray modern society as morally compromised. The criticism extends beyond individual leaders to encompass broader structures of power. From a hermeneutic perspective, the song reflects widespread dissatisfaction with military interventions and the political rhetoric used to justify them. The aggressive musical style reinforces the seriousness of the criticism and amplifies the emotional impact of the lyrics.

Chop Suey! presents Juvenalian satire through a more symbolic and introspective approach. Rather than focusing directly on political institutions, the song critiques social judgment and moral rigidity. Lines such as “I cry when angels deserve to die” challenge conventional assumptions about innocence, guilt, and righteousness. The paradoxical imagery highlights contradictions within systems that claim moral authority while perpetuating exclusion and condemnation.

The song’s satirical force emerges from its exposure of hypocrisy in social and religious judgment. Individuals who suffer are often blamed for their circumstances, while the complexity of human experience is ignored. Through abrupt shifts in tone and emotional intensity, the lyrics dramatize the conflict between personal reality and external expectations. Hermeneutically, the song can be interpreted as a critique of societies that prioritize rigid moral frameworks over empathy and understanding.

Toxicity expands the scope of criticism to modern civilization itself. The song depicts the city as a space characterized by alienation, disorder, and ideological contamination. The phrase

“The toxicity of our city” transforms urban life into a metaphor for systemic dysfunction. Rather than celebrating technological and economic progress, the song questions the human cost of such developments.

The lyrics employ irony and symbolic imagery to challenge assumptions about order, ownership, and progress. Questions concerning ownership of the world expose the ideological foundations of domination and control. The imagery of technological conversion and mechanical perception suggests the dehumanizing effects of contemporary systems. Through these devices, the song condemns social arrangements that reduce human experience to efficiency, consumption, and control.

Across the three songs, the characteristic of sharp criticism is consistently present. System of a Down targets war, institutional hypocrisy, social inequality, moral dogmatism, and urban alienation. These criticisms are not subtle. Instead, they are expressed through confrontational language designed to provoke discomfort and reflection.

The use of irony and sarcasm is equally significant. In B.Y.O.B., war is represented as a party; in Chop Suey!, innocence is paradoxically condemned; and in Toxicity, progress becomes a source of destruction. These ironic inversions expose contradictions within dominant narratives and encourage listeners to question accepted assumptions.

Provocation constitutes another defining element of the songs. Juvenalian satire seeks to disturb rather than comfort, and the selected lyrics consistently challenge audiences with uncomfortable truths. By confronting listeners with injustice, hypocrisy, and moral failure, the songs transform music into a platform for critical engagement.

The findings support Braund’s argument that Juvenalian satire functions as a mode of moral outrage. The songs are not merely artistic expressions but acts of resistance against systems perceived as corrupt or oppressive. Through Betti’s hermeneutic framework, the deeper meanings of these criticisms become visible, revealing a coherent critique of modern social and political realities.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the presence of Juvenalian satire in three songs by System of a Down: B.Y.O.B., Chop Suey!, and Toxicity. Using Susanna Morton Braund’s theory and Emilio Betti’s hermeneutic approach, the research identified four major characteristics of Juvenalian satire throughout the lyrics: contemptuous tone, sharp criticism, irony and sarcasm, and provocative confrontation.

The findings indicate that B.Y.O.B. condemns war and social inequality, Chop Suey! critiques judgmental social and moral systems, and Toxicity challenges the destructive consequences of modern civilization. Collectively, the songs reveal a consistent commitment to exposing hypocrisy, corruption, and systemic injustice. Through symbolic language, rhetorical questions, and aggressive expression, System of a Down employs music as a powerful form of social criticism.

The study demonstrates that Juvenalian satire remains highly relevant in contemporary cultural production. Its capacity to express moral outrage and challenge dominant structures enables artists to address pressing social and political concerns. Furthermore, the application of hermeneutics provides a deeper understanding of how satirical meanings are constructed and communicated through song lyrics. Future research may expand the analysis to other artists, genres, or cultural contexts to explore the continuing role of satire in contemporary music and literature.

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