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Tearing Down The Wall: An analysis of Pink Floyd's 1979 rock opera

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Tearing Down *The Wall*: An Analysis of Pink Floyd's 1979 Rock Opera By Darla Testino

Whether life imitates art or art imitates life has long been debated by philosophers. However, life is often the inspiration for the art, so it must have a great role in the creation of art. This would mean that art, being the product of life's inspiration, is the imitator. One example of this is music. Songwriters often draw from personal experiences or use music as a platform to speak out about society or support social movements. A particularly interesting case study is British progressive rock band Pink Floyd's 1979 concept album, *The Wall*. Careful analysis of the album and contextualizing it will reveal its intricacies. *The Wall* is a reflection of 1970s post-war era in Britain during which it was created as well as songwriter Waters' life experiences that shape the story of the album. This is what makes it so impactful to listeners and is what has given the album such longevity. This success is achieved through the use of references to the current post-war society, themes of grief and isolation, and meaningful lyrics.

Foundations of *The Wall*

Most of the war references in the album stem from WWII and the invention of nuclear weapons. In the 1950s, there was a campaign in Britain against the use of nuclear weapons (Hewison 166). This would have been in the earlier years of the band members' lives, and thus had a large influence in their formative years. Growing up in a climate threatened by military drafts, nuclear weapons, and losing loved ones would greatly impact the fears present in adult life. This is why there are lyrics like "will they put me in the firing line?" and "bring the boys back home" (Pink Floyd. "Mother"; "Bring the Boys Back Home"). These particular types of lyrics reflect the fear of being drafted and a desire for loved ones to return home from the

warfront. Especially since these words are directed at a mother, it further reflects the fear younger children had of the war. There is also a snare drum that resembles the beat of the snare that is associated with the battlefield, which gives an aural reference to the war in the album in addition to the lyrical references. However, by the 1970s, there was a decline in the production of war films in Britain, and in the 1980s, there was an abolition of welfare politics, which drastically changed the lives of citizens (Ackermann 18). *The Wall* being sandwiched right between these two time periods gives it a cultural significance. Although the war is long over, the emotional effects on families are still seen, which is reflected in the album. Simultaneously, people are starting to move on, which is reflected in the decline of war related media and films. The album comes before a shift in the political system, but there is skepticism of the government in the album already. There are lyrics such as “should I trust the government?” and anti-propaganda messages in some songs (Pink Floyd. “Mother”). These references to war are one way the album makes comments on Britain’s post-war society.

The Role of Propaganda

During the war era in Britain, propaganda was often used to manipulate people’s perspectives. An example of how propaganda was used to create a uniformly controlled mindset is the view of socialism and politics in the early 50s. According to *Universities and Left Review*, socialism at the time was seen as barbaric and associated with Stalin’s rule of Russia, and they state that Britain was “a society in which creative, popular, and intellectual initiative was at a low” (Hewison 163). This shows that propaganda was probably used to give people a negative association of socialism with Russia, and also used to make people think that politics and social climate did not concern them, which created the brainwashed society that Waters points at a few

times in *The Wall*. Early on in the album is the single “Another Brick in the Wall Part II” which was the most popular song on the album at the time of release (“The Wall | Full Official Chart History...”). Although it was popular mostly because the lines “we don’t need no education” strongly resonated with angst-filled American teens, the song is actually not anti-education, although it is heavily influenced by Waters’ high school years. Despite the song’s seemingly anti-education lyrics and use of a youth chorus, the song is really anti-propaganda (Myers 276). The word “education” in this song can be thought of as the information the government and media are pushing to the public, rather than the education system. The lines “we don’t need no thought control” can then be understood to mean that citizens do not need to be fed biased information by the government and should be independent thinkers (Pink Floyd. “Another Brick in the Wall Part II”). With this understanding of “education” being propaganda, the true anti-propaganda message in the song becomes more prevalent. This is another example of how political climate and the post-war society influenced the album.

British Society in the 1970s

During the early 70s, Britain was affected by a lot of economic turmoil. The currency system changed in 1971, and then two years later Britain joined the European Economic Community. These drastic changes resulted in a downturn in the country’s economics, and money from the International Monetary Fund was borrowed in 1976 (“History: British History Timeline”). These types of economic changes affect the lifestyles of the citizens, which in turn can create cultural shifts. Despite these drastic changes in the economy, the middle class in Britain saw a rise in their standard of living. In the decades following the war, there was a large increase in leisure time activities. During the 70s, more people watched home videos, but during

the 80s people once again started going to the cinema more often (“Come on Down? ...” 9). This increase in leisure time activities shows that the citizens had enough money and free time to go enjoy themselves. This was part of the culmination of the increased living standard despite an overall downturn for the country. These two conflicting atmospheres come out in the album’s storyline through the narrator’s inner turmoil.

Another aspect of society that is reflected in the album is the political climate. For example, because Britain was involved in a war during the time period around when the album was written, the war culture comes out in a few lyrics on the album. In “Mother” the first lyrics are “Mother, do you think they’ll drop the bomb?” (Pink Floyd. “Mother”). The album’s story also has to do with the loss of a father figure to the war. In “Another Brick in the Wall Part I” the lyrics are “Daddy’s flown across the ocean / Leaving just a memory” which most likely means that the father was sent overseas during WWII to fight and died in battle (Pink Floyd. “Another Brick in the Wall Part I”). This is the first brick in the wall, representing the first event that caused the narrator to recede away from society. In addition to lyrical representations of war, there are aural symbolisms in the album. For example, there are helicopter noises early on in the album and a military-style snare beat later on (Pink Floyd. “Another Brick in the Wall Part I”; “Bring the Boys Back Home”). The narrator in the album can be viewed as the “personification of a Britain which has failed to cope with the traumatic aspects of the war, and which has forsaken the promise of a different society emerging from the war” (Ackermann 17). This is especially apparent in the narrator’s grief and following cynicism towards society.

Towards the end of the album, “Waiting for the Worms” expresses this cynicism towards society. At this point, the wall is extremely high and has become almost indestructible, and the

narrator is completely separated from society by the wall. This untouchability is reflected in the lines “you cannot reach me now / no matter how hard you try” and suicidal thoughts are hinted at with the line “goodbye cruel world, it’s over” (Pink Floyd. “Waiting for the Worms”). However, he thinks this separation is a good thing because of all the bad things happening in society, like political conflicts and the heavy influence of propaganda on the people’s perspectives. He mostly references war or genocide, such as with the phrases “weed out the weaklings” and “final solution.” He makes a clear reference to the Holocaust with the lines “Waiting to turn on the showers / and fire the ovens / Waiting for the queens and the coons / and the Reds and the Jews” (Pink Floyd. “Waiting for the Worms”). In these lines, showers and ovens refer to the gas chambers and crematories that the Nazis used to exterminate the Jews. The repeated phrase of “follow the worms” also seems to be anti-propaganda and points out that propaganda seems to brainwash the general population at times. The “worms” would represent the leaders in society in a negative way, and Waters is stating that the people are waiting to blindly follow some kind of strong figurehead. This anti-propaganda message is similar to “Another Brick in the Wall Part II.” The government has “educated” the people, and now the population is ignorant and has succumbed to the rule of the “worms.”

Isolation, Redemption, and Depression in *The Wall*

In addition to commentary on society, the themes presented in the album add to its success and longevity. The theme of isolation recurs throughout the album. The first use of the metaphor of a wall is in “Another Brick in the Wall Part I”, which is about the loss of a father. The song ends with the lines: “all in all it was just a brick in the wall / all in all it was all just bricks in the wall”. Each brick represents some tragedy that caused further retreat into isolation,

and the wall represents this isolation. The second use of the brick metaphor is in “Another Brick in the Wall Part II”, where the brick represents the school environment songwriter and singer Waters was in during high school. He describes the teachers as being “locked into the idea that young boys needed to be controlled with sarcasm and the exercising of brute force” in order to educate them. However, despite how anti-education the lyrics seem, as was referenced earlier, the song is really anti-tyranny and anti-propaganda (Myers 276). Shortly after Waters’ time in high school, changes to Britain’s education system were made. In 1963, there was a growth of universities and students were able to receive state funding to attend them. Later, in 1965, a comprehensive education system was created, which integrated grammar and secondary schools (“History: British History Timeline”). In “Mother,” which immediately follows “Another Brick in the Wall Part II,” the first verse ends with the question “should I build the wall?” and the song ends with “did it need to be so high?” implying that the wall has become overpowering, and is becoming harmful rather than protective.

The song “Hey You” depicts a desire to be saved, but a reluctance to reach out for help. This type of behavior is the result of self-isolation and denial of needing help. The song opens with the lines “Hey you, out there in the cold / getting lonely, getting old” which can be interpreted as the narrator talking to himself, saying that he has lost his relationships as the time has gone by (Pink Floyd. “Hey You”). The line “can you feel me?” is repeated twice in this verse and is meant to be the hopeful side of his personality communicating to the isolated self. This suppressed positive side is encouraging the lonely side to persevere. In the second verse of the song, the positive side describes the negative side as “waiting for someone to call out” and offers his help, asking “would you touch me?” (Pink Floyd. “Hey You”). This line is repeated twice in

the verse, like the line “can you feel me?” is in the first verse. The last verse is from the isolated side's perspective, which finally asks for help from the hopeful side. He asks, “Hey you, out there beyond the wall/.../ Can you help me?” and the song ends with “together we stand, divided we fall,” which is a statement that the two sides of the personality need to be united in order for the person to find some kind of closure. This is the start of the realization that the isolating wall needs to be torn down, which happens at the end of the album.

Later in the album is “Comfortably Numb” which is quite obviously a statement of the depressive state the narrator is in. Although the narrator is not feeling normal, because the pain is built-up emotional damage, it is hard for him to tell people what is wrong. In the last part of the chorus, he says “I can't explain you would not understand/ This is not how I am.” His decline in mental health is further shown in the first verse in the lyrics “I can ease your pain/.../ Can you show me where it hurts?” which is immediately followed by the first line of the chorus, “There is no pain you are receding” (Pink Floyd. “Comfortably Numb”). This is somebody confirming that he is isolating himself, and that his problems are not physical but mental. To deal with these mental problems, drugs are used in the way that medicine would be used for physical health. In the second verse, the narrator reluctantly says “Okay / just a little pinprick” and someone says to him “That'll keep you going through the show” which would allude to the use of cocaine or another similar drug that is a stimulant. One of the lines in the chorus is “Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying” which also implies that he is high. The choruses end with “I have become comfortably numb” which implies that he has accepted his isolated state and has become accustomed to his emotional state that troubled him for so long (Pink Floyd. “Comfortably Numb”). At this point, he has given up on tearing down the wall that he built. According to data

from a 2014 study, “British people are among the most depressed people in the Western world,” with ten percent of the total population suffering from depression (Salmon). Since this study was only conducted on depression specifically, an even larger percentage of the population suffers from different types of mental health issues. Since the album was written a few decades after the war, a lot of the population was probably still grieving over lost loved ones and while some war veterans were probably suffering from PTSD. Because of this, the 2014 data is probably a similar representation of the population at the time. Since such a large population was suffering from similar issues, the concept of isolation in the album strongly resonated with many people.

The Wall Tour

The symbolism of a wall is carried throughout the album, but was also a part of the stage show when the band went on tour after the album’s release. The band was also innovative in its live effects for the time period. They experimented with live effects previously in their career when they toured for *Dark Side of the Moon*, where they used helium balloon characters and pyrotechnics. For *The Wall* tour, they expanded their effects even further, and pushed live show performances to be even more art inspired. During the first part of the show, a fake brick wall is put up between the band on stage and the audience. According to an interview with Roger Waters, the wall prop was first inspired by an incident when the band was on the *Animals* tour. Some audience members shot off fireworks and attempted to scale the barriers at the front of the stage. Waters states in the interview that “it made me think about my relationship with the audience and the obvious wall between some of them and some of us on stage” (Myers 275). The metaphor of the album being visually incorporated into the live show further emphasizes the themes of isolation that are in the lyrics. This combination of audio and visual further

communicated the emotions of the songs and evoked a stronger empathetic connection from the listeners. According to a study published in 2013, listeners' physiological reactions are strongest at both unexpected and predictable moments in music (Egermann 551). This means that people will reach an excited state when their expectations are either contradicted or satisfied. If this sensory satisfaction is accompanied by synchronized stimuli for another sense, then the physiological response would be even greater, and the respondent would reach an even more excited state. This high amount of stimulation would make the live experience of hearing the album more impactful for concertgoers. As Richard Witts theorizes, all elements of the live performance build tension for the audience, even the amount of time before the artist walks on or a crew member adjusting a microphone stand (Witts 147-148). This pre-show tension followed by the audio and visual stimuli would greatly affect a person and their perception of the content being presented to them. Therefore, the symbolism of the wall and other special effects that enforce the meaning of the lyrics would be more memorable and more influential on those who attended the live experience than those who listened only at home.

The Wall's Reception

The album was well received amongst the public in both the US and UK. In the US, the album stayed in the *Billboard* charts for fifteen weeks, and the single "Another Brick in the Wall Part II" stayed in the number one spot for four weeks (Staff). In the UK, the album peaked at number three and charted for sixty-eight weeks. The single "Another Brick in the Wall" was number one for five weeks and charted for twelve weeks. Although the album was not as wildly successful as the 518-week charting album *The Dark Side of the Moon* that came before it, it still was widely popular ("The Wall | Full Official..."). However, although it sold well to consumers,

the album was heavily critiqued by others in the industry. Ian Penmen wrote in a review for the *New Musical Express* that *The Wall* “is a rock musician’s equivalent of the tired executive’s toy, a gleaming, frivolous gadget that serves to occupy midspace.” *The Wall* is definitely more of an artistic expression than the cookie-cutter rock album, but it is not just a compilation of half-finished ideas thrown together. In fact, the album was highly regarded by most others in the industry and won a GRAMMY Award in 1980 for Best Engineered Recording, Non-Classical (“The Wall – Pink Floyd | Awards”). There is a logical order to the tracking of the songs, and there is a continuous flow between the songs on the album. This continuity of songs adds to the concept of the single story and gives the album more of a rock opera soundtrack vibe than a typical hits collection feel that most artists have on their albums. Emphasis is placed more heavily on the music rather than the lyrics, and the relationship between band and audience is stressed (Ackermann 6). Although its musical structure is basic, which may not be preferable to some rock critics, the artfulness of the concept is what keeps tension throughout the album and keeps the listener engaged. The album relies on the sheer force of the music rather than complexity. It “‘drops’ on the audience like a ‘bomb’” (Ackermann 15). This forcefulness of the music rather than complexity allows for the sheer emotions to cut through more clearly and gives the album a more personal relationship with the listener, making it more accessible than complex albums that require more intellectual deciphering. This was a contributing factor to its popularity amongst consumers, particularly the casual listener.

The Wall by Pink Floyd was a success because it is a piece of art that reflects life. The album’s references to multiple aspects of the society during the time period made it accessible and relevant to listeners, and the personal themes in the album also provide an emotional

connection for listeners. Although during this time period there were improvements to the middle class' quality of life in the United Kingdom, the country as a whole was still suffering from the economic effects of the previous war. The other references to war in the album also are a reflection of the culture at the time. These types of societal references are what make the album accessible to listeners and give them something universal to connect with. On a more personal level, the themes of isolation are another way for listeners to connect with the content of the story on the album. These emotional connections to the listener that are based on life experiences help this influential album resonate with audiences, giving it the success that it has enjoyed and the longevity it continues to have. Through this analysis of the album, any listener can connect to the story and gain an appreciation for it, even years later.

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