

A Cognitive Stylistic: Irony and Sarcasm in The Lyrics of Lana Del Rey'S "Norman F***Ing Rockwell!" Using Schema Theory

Dinillah Arifah^{*1}, Anggi Yolanda Sigalingging², Rahmadsyah Rangkuti³

^{1,2,3}English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, University of North Sumatera, Indonesia

Email: ¹dinillaharifah@students.usu.ac.id, ²anggiyolanda1110@gmail.com, ³rangkuti@usu.ac.id

Abstract

This study explore how figure of speech in Norman Fucking Rockwell! by Lana Del Rey is construct meaning through cognitive stylistic lens with focus on schema theory, approached by cognitive stylistics, specifically, the use of schema theory. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study investigates key lyrical expression that evoke disillusionment and critique idealized romantic narratives. It examines the use of irony, sarcasm, metaphor and repetition, interact with listener's cognitive frameworks to decipher the implications of its message of normative schema of love and masculinity. Sarcastic lines like "Godd**n, man-child" and ironic contrasts such as "Why wait for the best when I could have you?" disrupt conventional expectations and prompt interpretive reevaluation. The findings show that these figures of speech are not merely rhetorical devices but central mechanisms in activating and subverting audience schemata, thereby deepening the emotional complexity and critical stance of the song. This study contributes to a clearer understanding of how cognitive stylistic features especially irony and sarcasm shape listener interpretation and reveal layered meaning in lyric based narratives.

Keyword: *Cognitive Stylistics, Irony, Sarcasm, Schema Theory, Song Lyrics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary and linguistic studies have increasingly turned towards exploring the connection between language, cognition, and music in recent times. Rather than interpreting song lyrics as isolated linguistic elements, cognitive stylistics approaches meaning-making as a dynamic interaction between text and listener. Within this framework, listeners construct meaning by drawing on personal experiences, mental schemas, and cultural knowledge.

Cognitive poetics, or cognitive stylistics, is concerned with the influence of linguistic choices on perception, memory, and inference. This approach involves a critical aspect of schema theory, which examines how language alters or destabilizes prior mental frameworks in texts, leading to altered interpretation. It is especially useful for examining figurative language, such as irony and sarcasm in music, which frequently function by defying conventional beliefs.

Despite the use of cognitive stylistic approaches in song lyrics analysis, most studies have concentrated on metaphor and emotion (Sirait et al., 2024; Simanjuntak et al., 2023), Irony and sarcasm are rarely studied for their potential to disrupt schema especially around disillusionment themes or gender representation.

Lana Del Rey's *Norman F***cking Rockwell!* provides a compelling case for such analysis. The song combines melancholic instrumentation with biting lyrical content, often using irony and sarcasm to critique romanticized masculinity. Lines such as "G-damn, man-child" and "Why wait for the best when I could have you?" challenge the idealized image of romantic partners and highlight emotional detachment. This clash between expectation and reality makes the song rich ground for cognitive analysis.

In this study, the song Norman Fucking Rockwell! by Lana Del Ray was used as the data for cognitive stylistics analysis. The theory applied in this study is cognitive stylistic that focused on figure of speech and schema theory. Despite the presence of layered irony and intertextual complexity in Del Rey's lyrics, there is a lack of research on how speech figures function cognitively to activate and subvert audience schemas. Thus, this study aims to explore how irony and sarcasm in the lyrics of Norman Fucking Rockwell! activate cognitive schemas that subvert romantic and gender based expectations.

Several studies have examined the cognitive stylistics of songs. Sirait et al. (2024), provide a cognitive stylistic analysis of the song "Time" produced by Pink Floyd on the album *The Dark Side of the Moon*. It investigates the role of lyrics in weaving together elements of time, memory, and the human condition to map a new graph of aesthetic content that speaks to ways in which language and cognition intermingle to generate profound artistic meaning in music. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, they examined the lyrics using schema theory, metaphor theory, and figures of speech. It was trained on a dataset from the song "Time," by Pink Floyd. The analysis showed the song uses seam functions such as metaphor, personification, and paradox to articulate the complexities of time, aging, remorse, and the human experience. And in addition, the song employs schema theory to bring to listeners the "Time that has passed" schema which fosters consideration of the importance of time and seizing important instances.

Simanjuntak et al. (2023), conducted cognitive stylistics analysis of the song of Lewis Capaldi "Someone You Loved". The study aimed at seeking out the cognitive processes and features of the lyrics of the song, and how the artists put emotions together. By using a descriptive qualitative method, the study analyzed the lyrics with a situation of schema theory and conceptual metaphor theory. It also mentions coherence in figures of speech like metaphor, personification and hyperbole by using data from the lyrics of "Someone You Loved." The exhibition of these stylistic devices lead to complex figurative imagery which has a profound effect in evoking profound emotional undercurrents that abound themes of loss, vulnerability and introspection. This study highlights the role that cognition-enabling process interacts with stylistic choices to influence emotional connection with a song.

Putra et al. (2024), an analysis of figurative language in selected song lyrics by Niki Zefanya, focusing on the songs "Autumn," "Lowkey," and "Too Many Good Things." This study also began to map our general hypotheses about the relationship between lyrics and song meanings and the specific ways different types of figurative language might contribute to lyric meaning in these songs. Data were collected through observation techniques according to Abrams' (2018) theory of figurative language using a qualitative method. The authors analysed the lyrics and found it contained nine distinct types of figurative language, including metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification, synecdoche, symbolism, metonymy, irony and allusion. Hyperbole was the most widely used device in the songs, according to the findings, adding emotional intensity and vibrant imagery. In conclusion, the study shows Niki Zefanya's use of figurative language is a major part of her storytelling and adds depth to the experience of her music for the listener.

Arditami (2017), An Analysis of Figurative Language Found in Katy Perry's Song Entitled "Firework." Peeking the word meanings used in Fireworks Song This article uses a descriptive qualitative method. The research material is the lyrics of the song "Firework" by Katy Perry. The researcher find there are six types of descriptive language that appeared in the lyrics of the song "Fire" by Katy Perry. They are hyperbole, metaphor, symbol, simile, personification, and paradox. The meaning of such figurative language is also described by the researcher.

Zephanda et al. (2024), A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis of Taylor Swift's "I Can Do It With A Broken Heart" to Investigate Her Themes of Resilience and Emotional Turmoil. This line of understanding reinforces state of the art music education practices but neglects the unfolding of deliberate mechanisms behind complex emotional states expressed through contemporary music. Using qualitative text analysis, the research studies the song's interpersonal dynamics, framing and metaphors. This data was scraped from the lyrics of Taylor Swift's "I Can Do It With A Broken Heart." Results indicate a contrast between the archetypal persona of the character and inner struggles, emphasized by potent figurative language and imagery evoking survival through challenges. Also, the study describes social impact of these themes found into the song.

Based on the existing literature, there is a clear gap regarding the cognitive stylistic analysis of Lana Del Rey's "Norman F***ing Rockwell!"-specifically, studies that focus on schema theory and the figures of irony and sarcasm. Previous research in cognitive stylistics has primarily examined metaphor, personification, and emotional narrative in the works of artists such as Pink Floyd, Lewis Capaldi, and Ariana Grande, but has not explored how the interplay of irony and sarcasm in Del Rey's lyrics shapes listeners' cognitive frameworks, particularly in relation to themes of disillusionment and the critique of

romantic ideals. Thus, this study aims to explore how irony and sarcasm in the lyrics of "Norman F***ing Rockwell!" activate cognitive schemas that subvert romantic and gender-based expectations in contemporary music.

2. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative descriptive method as explained by Bogdan and Taylor is an approach used in social research to comprehend and explain human experiences and social phenomena. In other words, this approach highlights the use of "rich", qualitative data that captures the participants' subjective view. In exploring irony and sarcasm in the lyrics of *Norman F***cking Rockwell*, this study employs a qualitative stylistic analysis. It specifically identifies and interprets moments in the lyrics where the meaning contradicts the literal expression, focusing on the ironic or sarcastic effects these contradictions create.

To explore irony and sarcasm in the lyrics of Norman Fucking Rockwell! In this study, a qualitative stylistic analysis is employed. It specifically looks for and interprets moments in the lyrics that carry a meaning opposed to their literal utterances and the ironic or sarcastic effects that produces. Textual analysis is primarily focused on the lyrics, where they are used to detect both sarcastic and ironic expressions. The examination of lyric compositions is not restricted to their linguistic structure but also encompasses their interdependence with the overall plot. It investigates the use of irony and sarcasm to criticize or mock certain ideas. By categorizing the lyrics by irony or sarcasm and target of criticism, a framework is used to gain broader insight into the stylistic choices in each song.

Furthermore, the analysis evaluates the role of irony and sarcasm in the song's meaning through a contextual reading. This step involves examining how contradictions between expectations and reality generate irony, and how elements like exaggeration, contradiction, or rhetorical questioning contribute to the sarcastic tone. The study provides a close interpretive analysis, focusing on how irony and sarcasm function in the lyrics, rather than relying on quantitative measures.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. A General Overview

"*Norman F***ing Rockwell!*" by Lana Del Rey, which appeared on her sixth studio album in 2019 and became an instant touchstone in her discography. Disillusionment, nostalgia and the throw and pull of love loom large in the lyrics, delivered in Lana Del Rey's usual cinematic style. So here, on this track, she meditates on the fragility of relationships and the bittersweet nature of longing; The use of rich and descriptive imagery, as well as poignant lyrics that resonate with the listeners, ensures that she delivers a great performance. Fighting the emotional hurricane that her experiences have given birth to, metaphorically wading through the paradox of romance and despair. In conversations about the song, she has referred to it as feeling vulnerable and reflective, confronting how the expectations of the outside world influence intimate connections. *Norman F***ing Rockwell!* invites listeners to reflect on their own heartbreak which makes it a relatable anthem for anyone staring into a void of losing something you have never truly had. The song's blend of irony and sincerity serves to highlight the contradictions inherent in modern love, ultimately leaving a lasting impact on its audience.

3.1.2. Figure of Speech in *Norman F***ing Rockwell!* Lyrics

The Lyrics of "*Norman F***ing Rockwell!*" by Lana Del Rey are multilayered with figurative language, playing a critical role in refracting an ironic and sarcastic tone throughout the song. Through lyrics that juxtapose romantic notions with disillusionment, Lana Del Rey imbues her music with a complexity that demands deep engagement from listeners. Rather than telling a straight narrative, her lyrics act as a gentle critique of romanticized love and contemporary masculinity, twisting beauty into disillusionment.

As Simpson (2014) mentions, irony and sarcasm require listeners to engage in cognitive processing because they need to infer the meaning which goes beyond the literal interpretation. This is in line with Lana Del Rey's use of figurative language, in which metaphor, irony, sarcasm and repetition coalesce into a larger narrative of romantic disillusionment. As noted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor guides the way people think, and it is precisely this that we see Lana Del Rey doing to construct a particular type of imagery that diverges from the cliché concepts of love. Additionally, Burgers et al. (2012) point out that sarcasm in lyrics often serves to critique society, which can be (at least) one theme of the song in question, particularly in this song's commentary on gender dynamics and emotional detachment.

Using metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and repetition, Lana Del Rey builds a picture of a relationship that is equal parts intoxicating and tiresome, revealing the mismatch between how the world thinks relationships in reality are supposed to go versus how they often do. It's a figurative device that gives the song a kind of poetic quality, but they also serve linguistic double duty, flags for irony, sarcasm and emotional dissociation. This section classifies and interprets the most central rhetorical devices used in the song and demonstrates its role in developing the broader themes of romantic disillusionment, emotional coercion, and social disillusionment.

a. *Metaphor*

A metaphor is a figure of speech that directly compares two unrelated things by stating that one is the other. In this song, metaphors convey deeper emotional states and emphasize the impact of the subject's actions.

b. *Your head in your hands as you color me blue*

The metaphor "color someone blue" associates sadness with the color blue, implying the actions of the subject directly inflicts emotional pain. In this way, the metaphor deepens the expression of sadness and disillusionment, giving the emotional impact a more vivid quality.

c. *Irony*

Irony is a figure of speech in which the literal meaning of the words is opposite to the intended meaning. It's often a play off the contrast between what one thinks will happen versus what actually occurs. In this song irony subverts the listener's expectations when seemingly romantic or complimentary statements express disagreement or critique.

d. *Why wait for the best when I could have you?*

This ironic statement highlights settling for less, contrasting the romantic commitment schema with the reality of compromise. The irony here emphasizes the disillusionment with love and mocks the idea of an "ideal" relationship.

e. *Sarcasm*

A sarcastic statement is a forceful verbal irony in which a speaker says the opposite of what they mean, to mock or ridicule. Either through irony or criticism, the sarcasm in this section points to the subject's childlike mentality and demonstrates their unwillingness to grow up or take on responsibility.

f. *"Goddamn, man-child"*

This phrase uses sarcastic humor to mock an adult whose childish behavior suggests otherwise, blending maturity with immaturity. The song uses sarcasm to emphasize the disconnect between the expectations of masculinity maintaining stoicism no matter what pain and the actual reality, we are all emotionally incompetent half the time.

g. *Repetition*

Repetition is the repeated use of words or phrases for emphasis or rhythmic effect. In the song, repetition reinforces the idea of resigned acceptance of the subject's flaws.

h. *You're just a man, It's just what you do*

The repetition highlights this idea that bad behaviors are almost part-and-parcel of being men. This gesture shows the speaker's acceptance of repeating disappointment, which emphasizes the poem's theme of disillusionment.

3.1.3. Schema Theory

Lana Del Rey's *Norman F***ing Rockwell!* through the perspective of schema theory, it is clear that the song triggers different mental frameworks associated with love, disillusionment, and societal norms. The lyrics activate the reasoning for the "Idealized Love" schema as the romanticized story meets the bitter reality of romantic relationships. Lines like "Godd**n, man-child" and "You f***ed me so good that I almost said, 'I love you'" emerge with an ironic zing, putting passionate affection up against a critique of immaturity and emotional availability. This dynamic leads the audience to think about their own relationships with love and the contradictions that occur when loftily held images of love collide with tangible heartbreak.

In fact, the sarcasm is another one of the very devices through which the song targets the very theme. "Your poetry's bad and you blame the news" is not just a stab at the faults of this partner but also a testament to the larger tendency in society to abdicate responsibility. By priming schemas associated with vulnerability and emotional turmoil, Lana Del Rey invites her audience to reckon with their own fears of intimacy and abandonment. Weller's repeated injunction that "You're just a man," highlights the irony between romantic expectations and reality, reinforcing the idea that regardless of moments of connection, inherent flaws in partners can lead to feelings of sadness and disillusionment. *Norman F***ing Rockwell!* also becomes a poignant critique on today's associations of love, using heavy irony and sarcasm to challenge listeners to truly ponder on love and loss.

Schema Theory Interpretation Based on The Figure of Speech Analysis

a. Metaphor

Your head in your hands as you color me blue

In our cognitive schema, "blue" is something that usually resonates sadness or melancholy. Here, the metaphor activates the emotion schema of being blue being down or hurt. The "head in your hands" picture activates a schema of regret or frustration. As a metaphor, together they create a vivid picture of emotional distress by implying that this person's actions are the reason for the speaker's sadness.

b. Irony

Why wait for the best when I could have you?

Here, the typical romantic schema is to pursue the best or ideal partner. This line's intrusions reject that schema by implying the subject is not the best choice, even though it's the one selected. This ironic turn compels listeners to rechannel their perception of romantic selection, such that they now interpret the statement as ironic, rather than sincere.

c. Sarcasm

*Godd**n, man-child*

This sarcastic expression even pokes fun at the subject for being childish in behaviour despite being an adult and, in turn, mixing adult with childishness. The adult schema and child schema generally stand for mature versus immature. The song this provokes a cognitive clash between these schemas by referring to a grown man as a man-child. This sarcastic line crashes the romance or idealized partner schema immediately, and sets up the subject as someone immature and unworthy. This mockery of this sentence compares the subject as childish and it's often used to compare the subject as a child or an adult that acts like a child.

d. Repetition

You're just a man, It's just what you do

However, it further solidifies the schema of gender stereotypes suggesting that some antagonism is simply men defining men. Such actions, their repeated nature reinforcing how they are common and hence, expected, becomes a source of cognitive acceptance.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Figure of Speech Realization of Irony and Sarcasm in “Norman F***ing Rockwell” through Schema Activation

The figure of speech in Lana Del Rey's body of work *Norman F***ing Rockwell!* creates a tangled dynamic of these products of sarcasm, irony, and the readings of the mind. When analysing the lyrics as per the Schema Theory (Eysenck & Keane, 2015), it is evident that the song employs these literary devices not just stylistically but as purposeful means to challenge and subvert traditional masculinity and love schemas.

3.2.1.1. Irony and Schema Disruption

The lyrics of Lana Del Rey's "*Norman F***ing Rockwell!*" are rich in irony, frequently subverting the audience's expectations about romance and masculinity. For instance, the line "Why wait for the best when I could have you?" exemplifies verbal irony: the surface compliment is undercut by its context, signaling dissatisfaction rather than praise. This aligns with the Standard Pragmatic View (Grice, 1975; Searle, 1979), which posits that irony arises when the literal meaning is incongruent with contextual cues, prompting the listener to reinterpret the utterance at a deeper level. Here, the lyric activates and then disrupts the listener's schema of idealized love, forcing a reevaluation of romantic norms in line with schema theory.

In another example, think about the sentence, "You behave like a child despite the fact that you are six foot two." Height signifies physical maturity, a contrast to the immature nature of behavior. By likening emotional ineptitude to physical good looks, it subverts the grown-up framework and underlines the paradox. This irony forces listeners to realize the incongruence between the attributes found in the inside and on the outside of an object (Giora, 1995).

3.2.1.2. Sarcasm and Gender Schema

A salient example of sarcasm appears in the lyric "Godd**n, man-child." The phrase is not only a personal jab but also a critique of gendered immaturity. Interpreted through the lens of gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), this lyric exposes and mocks the stereotypical expectations of masculinity—specifically, the notion of the emotionally stunted male partner. The sarcastic tone signals both frustration and a rejection of these ingrained gender roles, inviting listeners to question the validity of such schemas.

Similarly, the sarcastic "You're fun and you're wild, but you don't know half the s**t that you put me through." criticizes the subject's apparent ignorance of the emotional pain that was inflicted, even as it simultaneously seems to admire his adventurous approach to life. But this ironic tone emphasizes the gap between impact and ostensible charm (Attardo, 2000).

3.2.1.3. Repetition and Metaphor as Reinforcement

Del Rey's use of repetition and metaphor further intensifies the song's ironic and sarcastic undertones. Phrases and images recur to reinforce the sense of emotional exhaustion and disillusionment, echoing Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) assertion that metaphor structures thought and shapes how listeners perceive relational dynamics.

3.2.1.4. Integrating Irony and Sarcasm through Schema Theory

The song challenges the audience's preconceptions about relationships and masculinity by using a figure of speech that contrasts romantic idealism with pragmatic truth. Lana Del Rey's songs force listeners to negotiate the cognitive dissonance between anticipation and reality by first activating familiar schemas and then purposefully upsetting them (Semino & Culpeper, 2002). This method strengthens the song's identification as a critique of love disillusionment while also enhancing its lyrical

richness. As a result, the irony and sarcasm in the song are not just artistic decisions; they are crucial to encapsulating its moving and provocative story.

3.2.2. Theoretical Implications and Cognitive Effects

3.2.2.1. Schema Theory and Audience Reception

By deploying irony and sarcasm, Del Rey's lyrics activate pre-existing audience schemas-such as the "ideal partner" or "romantic hero"-only to subvert them. This process, central to schema theory, results in cognitive dissonance and encourages critical reflection on the part of the listener. The cognitive stylistic approach thus reveals that these rhetorical devices are not merely decorative but serve as catalysts for deeper interpretive processing.

3.2.2.2. Cognitive and Emotional Outcomes

Research shows that ironically enjoyed music, while sometimes less effective for mood management, offers unique self-regulatory and humorous functions. The cognitive demand of processing irony and sarcasm may enhance listeners' appreciation for the complexity of the song, even as it challenges their expectations and prompts emotional introspection. This aligns with findings that irony in lyrics can both amuse and provoke, leading to a richer, more nuanced listening experience

3.2.2.3. Cognitive Impact of Irony and sarcasm

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The findings of this study resonate with those of Simanjuntak et al. (2023) and Sirait et al. (2024), who identified that figurative language-especially metaphor and irony-plays a crucial role in shaping emotional resonance and thematic complexity in song lyrics. Similarly, Zephanda et al. (2024) found that figurative devices in Taylor Swift's lyrics create a dynamic interplay between persona and vulnerability, paralleling Del Rey's use of irony and sarcasm to expose the gap between societal ideals and personal reality. However, while previous studies have largely focused on metaphor and emotional narrative, this analysis foregrounds irony and sarcasm as mechanisms for schema disruption, particularly around gender and romantic expectations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study finds that irony and sarcasm in Lana Del Rey's "Norman Fucking Rockwell!" play a central role in activating and challenging listeners' cognitive schemas about romance and gender, using figurative language to prompt critical reflection on cultural expectations. Theoretically, these results reinforce the significance of schema theory in cognitive stylistics by demonstrating how nonliteral language can disrupt established frameworks and deepen interpretive engagement. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for lyricists, music researchers, and educators seeking to understand or teach the impact of stylistic devices in popular music. These findings suggest that irony and sarcasm serve as powerful stylistic tools that challenge normative cultural schemas in popular music. Future studies may examine how cross-cultural audiences perceive these stylistic cues, expanding the application of cognitive stylistics in diverse socio-linguistic settings.

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