



Tears in Heaven: A Formalistic Analysis of Eric Clapton's Song Lyrics

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Abstract

Song lyrics are like great poems as they both express emotions and ideas through symbolic elements. Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* is widely recognized for its emotional and sentimental lyrics, intimately tied to the songwriter's biography. Thus, this qualitative study applies a text-oriented analysis of the song through the lens of Formalist theory to highlight how meaning is constructed independently of external context. Formalism emphasizes the intrinsic elements of a literary work rather than extrinsic features such as biographical or historical context. Accordingly, this study examines the inherent literary devices and structural elements and their contribution to its central themes and narrative flow of the song. The findings revealed the literary devices used in the song, such as parallelism, enjambment, paradox, rhetorical questions, imagery, hyperbole, personification, symbolism, and first-person point of view, with repetition emerging as the most dominant device. In contrast to the dominance of metaphor in contemporary pop music, *Tears in Heaven* demonstrates a notable absence of metaphor that presents grief as incomparable but cyclical, while its Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Chorus structure illustrates a progressive shift in emotional expression. These inherent literary and structural elements of the song substantially contribute to its powerful and emotional narrative, shaping themes of grief and the enduring hope for peace. These findings affirm the continuing relevance of Russian Formalism in contemporary media, highlight the pedagogical value of song lyrics as accessible bridges for teaching literary concepts, and establish a foundation for future multimodal studies exploring how musical and performative elements reinforce or complicate textual structures.

1. Introduction

In the book, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, sentimental lyrics can serve as effective texts like great poems as they both express emotions and ideas through symbolic forms (Langer, 1953). Similar to poetry, song lyrics are written in verses, which typically include devices like rhymes, metaphors, and imagery (BaileyShea, 2021, as cited in Colby, 2022). One of the greatest song hits of all time is *Tears in Heaven* written by Eric Clapton, the first British artist to win six awards in the only peer-recognized music award, GRAMMY, during the 35th GRAMMY awards show in 1993. He won awards from his album entitled "Unplugged," receiving the "Album Of The Year," "Best Male Rock Vocal Performance," and "Best Rock Song." His most renowned song, *Tears in Heaven*, was also awarded as "Record of the Year," "Song of the Year," and "Best Male Pop Vocal Performance" for his performance of this song. Though it is evident that Clapton's song, *Tears in Heaven*, is prominently famous, it has not been analyzed through the lens of Formalist theory.

The Formalism Theory, developed by Roman Jakobson, Grigory Vinokur, and Petr Bogatyrev, has been employed to both poetry and prose with diverse techniques. In poetry, the

formal qualities of literature such as rhythm, rhyme, and sound events are the focal focus because for the Formalists, poetry is written with words, not ideas. It was also mentioned that literary work should be analyzed as text-oriented, which involves examining the language of the work in terms of its intrinsic literary elements rather than extrinsic ones (Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022). In addition, according to Samee and Arslan (2024), applying Formalism approach in literature offers an objective analysis for examining how form influences meaning. This approach puts greater emphasis on how the work itself conveys meaning than it does on significant extrinsic elements such as the intention of the author or the historical context. Each element, from tone and diction to the structure of the story, is believed to influence the overall visual impression of a literary work. For instance, rhyme systems, meter, and line breaks in poetry are examined to recognize how these elements form atmosphere, build suspense, or highlight themes. By analyzing the use of language and literary devices of the author, it enriches the literary work's overall meaning and effect.

Through the years, several studies have analyzed and explored different songs and their literary devices using Formalism Theory. For instance, Felisilda (2015) in her study, "Rural Life Imagery Representations In Selected Folk Songs," found out that sensory experiences and representations of rural life in four Southern Leyte folk songs were presented through visual, auditory, tactile, thermal, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic imagery. On the other hand, Malik (2019) conducted a study, "Rap God: Russian Formalism Analysis," where he identified 46 metaphors, 9 similes, 6 chiming's, and 86 rhymes in Eminem's "Rap God," exhibiting its literariness through these formal devices. Finally, in the study "Unraveling Taylor Swift's Love Story: A Formalistic Analysis" of Dunlao and Chua (2024), the use of literary devices such as flashback, anaphora, metaphor, foreshadowing, allusion, colloquialism, situational irony, and various types of imagery was identified in the song "Love Story" by Taylor Swift.

Although there is a comparative study on Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* by Akun (2014), there is a lack of formalistic analysis for this classic song despite its popularity. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to the existing Formalist studies by analyzing Eric Clapton's classic song, *Tears in Heaven*, focusing on its inherent literary devices and structural elements that shape its central themes through the lens of Formalism. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the literary devices used in Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* that contribute to its overall theme?
2. How does the overall structure of *Tears in Heaven* shape its narrative flow and emotional impact?

2. Methods

This qualitative study employed textual analysis through a formalistic approach. As a method focused on textual analysis, "Formalism is known to be focusing on form rather than content in literary work" (Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022, p. 453). The song, *Tears in Heaven*, was selected for formalistic analysis due to its rich textual elements and artistic complexity. Since this song is widely interpreted as a tribute to Eric Clapton's four-year-old son, Conor, who tragically died in the same year it was written and recorded (Miller, 2023), formalism offers an objective analysis, as it excludes these external factors and focuses on how the song stands on its own as a piece of art. Using this theory, inherent features of the song were examined in the song lyrics of Clapton's *Tears in Heaven*. The analysis was solely conducted using the principles of Formalism. First, the lyrics of the song were extracted from the official YouTube channel of Eric Clapton to ensure accuracy and credibility. Then, each line of the song lyrics was formally analyzed by looking at the structure, organization, and overall form of the song. Thirdly, intrinsic elements evident in the song lyrics, such as literary devices, symbolisms, and ambiguity were identified, while external factors such as the biography and intention of the songwriter were excluded. Finally, the analysis findings were carefully examined to offer a thorough understanding of the themes, figurative language, ambiguity, and symbolism of the

song. Therefore, this formalistic analysis allows a more meaningful exploration of the theme through a detailed examination of its lyrics and artistic composition. However, this study mainly focuses on the song's lyrics as text rather than evaluating the complete, integrated musical work. While musical elements like rhythm, melody, and instrumentation are integral to a song's overall formal structure, this analysis deliberately confines itself to the language of the lyrics to enrich the textual understanding of the song's themes.

3. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the results of the formalistic analysis of the song lyrics of *Tears in Heaven*. The analysis focuses on the “text in itself,” excluding the author’s personal intention, beliefs, history, and song’s release date. Employing this text-oriented analysis, this study explores the literary devices used in the song and its overall structure to understand how these elements contribute to the meaning and overall theme of the song.

Research Question 1: What are the literary devices used in Eric Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven” that contribute to its overall theme?

The term “literary devices” refers to “verbal form,” such as syntactic and rhetorical devices. These include but are not limited to parallelism, asyndeton, rhyme, rhythm, and imagery (Robinson, 2003, pp. 212- 213). As cited in Yeung (2021), Feagin (1996) referred literary devices as “verbal features,” which comprise “diction, narrative voice, style, sentence structure—in short, anything about the way language is used in the work” (p. 26-27). Every literary device has a specific purpose that enhances the reader’s overall experience with the text. These literary techniques help writers in creating vivid images in reader's mind, evoking feelings, or transforming abstract concepts into concrete form (Paramalingam, 2023). In the song *Tears in Heaven*, the use of literary devices was evident. These literary devices are presented and discussed as follows:

Table 1

Lines	Literary Devices	Functions
“Tears in Heaven” (title, Chorus 3, line 4)	Paradox	The song title, which also appeared in the chorus, functions as a paradox as it juxtaposes the symbol of tears for sorrow and pain, with heaven typically associated with a paradise of peace and happiness. The use of paradox reveals the sorrow and pain of having someone in the afterlife.
“If I saw you in Heaven” (Verse 1 to 3, second and last line)	Repetition	The use of repetition in this line signifies anxious state, as “if” introduces a conditional possibility. It suggests a hypothetical scenario that highlights yearning and the imagination of a reunion that may or may not happen.
“Here in Heaven” (Chorus 1, 2, and 4, line 4)	Repetition	The repetition of this line forms an imaginative scenario of being present in heaven. The word “here” indicates the

		presence of someone for a loved one in the afterlife. This visualizes a peaceful reunion with a loved one.
"Would you know my name" (verse 1, line 1; verse 3, line 1)	Rhetorical Question and Repetition	This rhetorical question was repeated twice in the song. This question creates a feeling of separation, while repeating this line emphasizes the fear of being forgotten by a loved one.
"begging please" (Bridge, line 4 and 5)	Repetition	This repeated line in the bridge shows a desperate act of pleading. The word "please" is often associated with a polite request, but being paired with "begging" intensifies the sense of desperation and need.
"Would you hold my hand" (verse 2, line 1)	Rhetorical Questions	These rhetorical questions demonstrate a troubled mind. Denotatively, 'Hold' means to support with one's hand, synonymous to the word 'help' which is defined as serving someone. The interplay of these words represents the emotional connection between the writer and the addressee that he fears may have been lost due to separation.
"Would you help me stand" (verse 2, line 3)		
"Would it be the same" (verse 1, line 3)	Rhetorical Question and Repetition	Both lines are rhetorical questions, which describe a sense of doubt and reflection. In addition, repeating the phrase, "be the same" in the lines signifies fear of the possibility of change about a person ("you") or a circumstance ("it").
"Would you be the same" (verse 3, line 3)		
"Beyond the door There's peace, I'm sure" (Chorus 3, lines 1 to 2)	Visual Imagery and Symbolism	The phrase "Beyond the door" creates a vivid image of a portal going from the current state to a place of peace. The use of imagery conveys the idea of changing from a feeling of sorrow to peace.

“Time can bring you down” (Bridge, line 1)	Anaphora and Personification	The repetition of "Time can" highlights the relentless impact of time by personifying it as a force capable of causing harm and change. These repetition and personification underscore the inevitable power of time in someone's life.
“Time can bend your knees” (Bridge, line 2)		
“Time can break your heart” (Bridge, line 3)		
“Heaven” (lines 2 and 4 of Verse 1, 2, and 3; line 4 of Chorus 1, 2, and 4)	Symbolism and Repetition	The repeated word "Heaven" functions as a complex symbol. It typically signifies the place of God, and of the good after death. In this song, it does not only symbolize the afterlife but also hope to be in a place of peace where suffering can cease. This word has been repeated throughout the song which represents hope and yearning for peace.
“I'll find my way Through night and day”	Hyperbole	The use of hyperbole emphasizes unwavering determination and resilience to achieve peaceful reunion with the loved one.

These literary devices present more literary techniques. These includes as parallelism, enjambment, and first-person point of view evident in the song *Tears in Heaven*. The use of repetition shows parallelism, which creates a sense of rhythm and continuity that makes the lyrics clearer and impactful. This continuity can also be seen as enjambment, “a poetic term for the continuation of a sentence or phrase from one line of poetry to the next” (Oregon State University, 2019, para. 1). For instance, the questions in the verses flow from one line to the next, which reflects constant longing and questioning in times of grief. In the chorus, enjambment further highlights the speaker's continuous struggle and his determination to move forward despite the pain. In addition, the use of personal pronoun, “I,” and “my” in the song makes a personal and reflective tone. Using this first-person point of view expresses the rawness and openness of emotions, which makes the lyrics sentimental and heartfelt. In conclusion, the literary devices present in Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* are parallelism, enjambment, first-person point of view, paradox, repetition, rhetorical questions, imagery, hyperbole, personification, and symbolism. Among these literary devices identified, repetition emerges as the most dominant. Its recurring use across verses, choruses, and the bridge underscores the song's central themes of grief, longing, and the persistent hope for reunion. This dominance of repetition reflects the cyclical nature of sorrow, where questions and pleas resurface continuously.

While Metaphor is frequently cited as the most dominant form of figurative language in contemporary pop music. For instance, Amalia (2024) found that metaphors account for 38% of the figurative language in Taylor Swift's selected songs, encapsulating complex emotions through vivid imagery. Similarly, Azhari et al. (2025) identified metaphor as the most frequent device across Bruno Mars' discography, particularly in Unorthodox Jukebox, where it created deep emotional resonance and layered interpretations. Malik (2019) likewise documented 46 instances of metaphor in Eminem's "Rap God," underscoring its centrality in shaping meaning. In contrast, the analysis of Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* reveals a notable absence of metaphor. This absence itself functions as a stylistic choice, presenting grief as a raw emotion that resists figurative substitution and instead recurs cyclically through questions, pleas, and symbolic imagery. Ultimately, these literary devices evidently contribute to conveying the song lyrics' themes of finding hope amidst grief and sorrow.

Research Question 2: How does the overall structure of "Tears in Heaven" shape its narrative flow and emotional impact?

The song, *Tears in Heaven*, written by Eric Clapton, is awarded as the "Song of the Year" in the only peer-recognized music award, GRAMMY, in 1993 (Recording Academy, n.d.). According to the PMT Education (2022), the poet employs structure to highlight the key points and convey messages that they want to impart through their writing. Understanding how a text is organized helps it easier to understand the intent and meaning of the author (Reading Rockets, n.d.). The structure evident in the song follows a Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Chorus progression, underscoring its emotional trajectory and artistic resonance.

According to Raboy and Taparugssanagorn (2024), segmenting songs into Verse 1, Chorus, and Verse 2 yields higher accuracy in emotion recognition, whereas a holistic formalistic analysis of *Tears in Heaven* reveals how its fuller Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Chorus structure mirrors the evolving emotional state of the songwriter. Their findings confirm that verses establish narrative context and choruses reinforce emotion, which corresponds with the observation that the verses convey uncertainty through questioning and the choruses shift toward assertive declarations of hope. The inclusion of the bridge in the structural analysis underscores an additional layer of emotional intensity, presenting the harsh realities of time and deepening the cyclical nature of grief. Thus, while segmentation enhances predictive accuracy in computational models, formalistic analysis demonstrates how structural complexity enriches the emotional trajectory, affirming that songs function both as data for recognition and as nuanced texts of artistic meaning.

In summary, the structure of *Tears in Heaven* evidently presents a progression from questioning verses that signify uncertainty, to declarative choruses suggesting hope, and finally to the bridge, which intensifies emotions through temporal realities. This progression reflects the songwriter's movement from sorrow and doubt toward resilience and hope, with recurring questions underscoring the cyclical nature of grief and longing.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the song lyrics of Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" demonstrates a literary technique that effectively communicates the profound complexities of grief, resilience, and hope. Through a formalistic lens, the text reveals the anxious, conditional questioning of the initial verses, shifting toward the assertive, declarative resolve of the choruses, and culminating in the stark, heavy realities of time presented in the bridge. This structural form directly mirrors the speaker's emotional progress. Furthermore, the interplay of internal devices, including the structural parallelism of enjambment, the intimacy of the first-person perspective, and the juxtaposition of paradox and symbolism works cohesively to deepen the textual resonance of the work, allowing it to stand independently as a robust piece of literary art. Among these devices, repetition emerges as the most dominant, intensifying the cyclical nature of grief and

longing. In contrast, the song demonstrates a notable absence of metaphor, which implies a stylistic choice that presents grief as incomparable but cyclical, conveyed through recurring questions, pleas, and symbolic imagery rather than figurative substitution.

Beyond the immediate textual analysis of this creative work, the findings of this study carry several implications for literary theory, pedagogy, and discourse analysis. First, the analysis underscores the enduring versatility of Russian Formalism, demonstrating that its text-oriented principles remain effective when applied to contemporary popular media. By setting aside the dominant influence of biographical context, the study affirms that popular culture possesses intrinsic artistic merit and structural complexity that withstand rigorous literary scrutiny.

Second, for educators in secondary and tertiary literature courses, these findings highlight the pedagogical utility of stylized lyrics. Because songs are highly accessible, their intrinsic elements can serve as engaging bridges for students to grasp abstract formalist concepts before approaching canonical poetry.

Finally, while this study deliberately confined its scope to the lyrics as text, it foregrounds a crucial tension in multimodal analysis. Isolating linguistic features establishes a baseline for understanding how textual structures alone construct emotional trajectories. This foundation opens clear avenues for future research, inviting scholars to explore how musical and performative elements reinforce or complicate the literary structures identified in the present study.

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