



DIALEKTIKA

Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya

ISSN: 2338-2635; e-ISSN: 2798-1371

Vol. 12 No. 2 (2025): Desember

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33541/dia.v12i2.7773>

REPRESENTATION OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS OF A BROKEN-HEARTED WOMAN: A CASE STUDY OF OLIVIA RODRIGO'S ALBUM SOUR (2021)

Anggi Saidah Rahim Purnama Putri¹, Todo Sibuea²

Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Bisnis dan Ilmu Sosial, Universitas Dian Nusantara^{1,2}

311212012@mahasiswa.undira.ac.id¹, todo.sibuea@undira.ac.id²

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi emosi bawah sadar dan mekanisme pertahanan diri dalam lirik lagu pada album SOUR (2021) karya Olivia Rodrigo dengan menggunakan teori semiotika Michael Riffaterre dan hierarki mekanisme pertahanan diri George Vaillant. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan menganalisis seluruh lirik dari sebelas lagu dalam album melalui pembacaan heuristik dan hermeneutik untuk mengungkap makna literal dan simbolik yang lebih dalam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa berbagai bentuk bahasa figuratif seperti hiperbola, *imagery*, simbolisme, metafora, dan ironi berfungsi sebagai tanda semiotik yang merepresentasikan pengalaman emosional seperti patah hati, kecemburuan, rasa tidak aman, rasa bersalah, dan kerinduan. Selain itu, lirik-lirik tersebut memperlihatkan penggunaan berbagai mekanisme pertahanan diri, terutama mekanisme *immature* dan *neurotic*, seperti proyeksi, represi, *displacement*, dan *denial*, serta mekanisme *mature*, seperti sublimasi dan supresi yang menunjukkan proses *coping* psikologis dan perkembangan emosional. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa bahasa figuratif dan mekanisme pertahanan diri bekerja sebagai satu sistem yang saling berkaitan, sehingga album SOUR dapat dipahami sebagai narasi emosional dan psikologis yang utuh mengenai proses menghadapi patah hati, penyesuaian diri, dan pertumbuhan personal dalam lirik lagu kontemporer.

Kata kunci: semiotika, mekanisme pertahanan, kajian lirik lagu

Abstract

This research examines the representation of unconscious emotions and defence mechanisms in the song lyrics of Olivia Rodrigo's SOUR album (2021) using Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory and George Vaillant's hierarchy of defence mechanisms. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method, analysing the complete lyrics of the eleven songs in the album through heuristic and hermeneutic readings to uncover both literal and symbolic meanings. The findings reveal that various forms of figurative language, including hyperbole, imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and irony, function as semiotic signs that express emotional experiences such as heartbreak, jealousy, insecurity, guilt, and longing. Furthermore, the lyrics demonstrate the use of multiple defence mechanisms, particularly immature and neurotic defences such as projection, repression, displacement, and denial, as well as mature defences like sublimation and suppression, indicating processes of psychological coping and emotional development. The study demonstrates that figurative language and defence mechanisms function collectively as an integrated system, positioning SOUR as a cohesive emotional and

psychological narrative that reflects the dynamics of heartbreak, coping, and personal growth in contemporary song lyrics.

Keywords: defense mechanism, semiotics, song lyric studies

1. Introduction

Music is a universal form of artistic expression that plays a significant role in human emotional, cultural, and social life. Through melody, rhythm, and harmony, music enables individuals to articulate feelings and experiences that are often difficult to convey through ordinary language. As a cultural product, music not only entertains but also reflects personal identity, emotional struggles, and social realities. Popular music, in particular, has become a powerful medium through which artists narrate intimate emotional experiences that resonate with a wide audience.

Within music, song lyrics function as the primary linguistic element that conveys meaning. Lyrics transform musical sound into narrative and emotional discourse, allowing listeners to engage with the artist's inner world. Often resembling poetic texts, song lyrics employ figurative language, imagery, and symbolic expressions to represent emotional states such as love, loss, insecurity, and identity conflict. Scholars such as Frith (1996) and Moore (2012) argue that lyrics can be analyzed as literary texts because they rely on structured language and aesthetic devices similar to poetry. As such, song lyrics provide rich material for examining how emotions are encoded, represented, and interpreted through language.

To uncover deeper meanings embedded in lyrics, semiotic studies offer a valuable analytical framework. Semiotics examines how signs and symbols produce meaning beyond literal expression. Riffaterre's (1978) semiotic theory, with its heuristic and hermeneutic stages of reading, is particularly useful for interpreting poetic and lyrical texts. While heuristic reading focuses on surface-level meaning, hermeneutic reading reveals symbolic patterns and emotional subtexts constructed through displacement, distortion, and textual matrices. Through this approach, song lyrics can be understood as symbolic structures that express unconscious emotions rather than mere personal narratives.

In addition to semiotics, psychoanalytic theory contributes insight into how emotional experiences are psychologically managed. Defense mechanisms, as conceptualized by Freud and later systematized by Anna Freud and George Vaillant, refer to unconscious strategies employed to protect the ego from emotional distress. Vaillant's (1992) hierarchical model classifies defense mechanisms into psychotic, immature, neurotic, and mature levels, allowing researchers to identify patterns of emotional coping and psychological development. When applied to song lyrics, defense mechanisms can be observed through recurring emotional

responses, figurative expressions, and narrative patterns that reflect how the lyrical persona manages conflict, anxiety, and vulnerability.

Despite the growing number of studies on music and emotion, limited research has integrated Riffaterre's semiotic framework with Vaillant's hierarchy of defense mechanisms in the analysis of a contemporary music album. Therefore, this study examines Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* (2021) album to explore how unconscious emotions are symbolically expressed through figurative language and how these emotions are regulated through psychological defense mechanisms. Accordingly, the research addresses the following questions: (1) How are unconscious emotions represented in the lyrics from Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* album? (2) How does the singer in the lyrics deal with unconscious emotions through psychological defense mechanisms?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Song Lyrics as Literary Texts

A song is a medium through which artists express emotions, experiences, and ideas by combining musical elements such as melody and rhythm with language. As one of the most accessible forms of art, songs can transcend cultural, linguistic, and generational boundaries (Bayona, 2025). Beyond entertainment, songs function as tools for emotional expression, cultural preservation, and personal storytelling, enabling listeners to connect their own feelings with those conveyed by the artist.

Lyrics play a central role in shaping the meaning of a song. Often compared to short poems, song lyrics are rich in emotion, imagery, metaphor, and figurative language. Frith (1996) emphasizes that lyrics contribute significantly to a song's identity and meaning. Through language, artists can articulate psychological and social experiences that may be difficult to express directly. Consequently, lyrics become creative responses shaped by personal, cultural, and linguistic influences.

In literary studies, song lyrics are frequently treated as literary texts, particularly when they contain complex themes and emotional depth. Moore (2012) argues that lyrics can be analyzed similarly to poetry because they employ structured language and literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, hyperbole, and personification. Studying lyrics, therefore, allows deeper insight into emotional struggles, identity formation, and coping processes. In this research, the lyrics of Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* album are examined as literary texts through close textual analysis.

2.2. Semiotics Theory

Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning-making processes. Derived from the Greek word *sēmeion* (sign), semiotics explores how meaning is produced through symbols and representations (Sebeok, 2001). The discipline was shaped by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in the early twentieth century. Saussure conceptualized language as a system of signs consisting of the signifier (form) and the signified (concept). Meaning, according to Saussure (1993), emerges from relationships between signs within a structured system rather than from individual words. In contrast, Peirce introduced a triadic model involving the representamen, object, and interpretant, emphasizing the dynamic and interpretive nature of meaning through a process known as semiosis (Peirce, 1985).

Semiotics later expanded into cultural and literary studies through scholars such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Barthes (1985) demonstrated that cultural products, including music, function as systems of signs that convey ideological meanings. Eco (1981) further explained that texts guide interpretation through shared cultural codes between authors and readers.

Building on these traditions, Michael Riffaterre (1978) developed a semiotic approach specifically for literary texts. He argued that meaning in literature is not located in isolated words but in the overall structure of the text. Riffaterre proposed two stages of reading: heuristic reading, which focuses on literal meaning, and hermeneutic reading, which seeks deeper symbolic and emotional significance. Meaning is produced through mechanisms such as displacing meaning, distorting meaning, and identifying the matrix, or core semantic theme. This framework is particularly effective for analyzing song lyrics that are emotionally charged and metaphorical, such as those in *SOUR*, as it reveals symbolic expressions of inner psychological states.

2.3. Figurative Language, Theme, Imagery, and Symbolism

Figurative language refers to expressions that go beyond literal meaning to create imagery, emotion, and symbolic depth. Common forms include metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and symbolism (Gibbs & Colston, 2006). In song lyrics, figurative language allows artists to communicate complex emotions concisely and creatively. Metaphors and symbols are especially effective in expressing vulnerability, emotional conflict, and identity struggles (Aras et al. 2024).

Themes represent the central ideas of a text, often reflecting universal human experiences such as heartbreak, betrayal, loss, and self-discovery. Imagery uses sensory

language to make abstract emotions more tangible, while symbolism allows concrete objects or situations to represent deeper psychological meanings. Together, these elements enable lyrics to communicate emotional experiences subtly yet powerfully (Hasan, 2024). In this study, figurative language functions as a bridge between linguistic signs and psychological processes, which the singer exploits to discuss her psychological problems and the journey that she undertakes to overcome her problems.

2.4. Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms originate from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Freud (1923) proposed that the ego unconsciously employs defense mechanisms to reduce anxiety arising from internal conflict. Anna Freud (1936) expanded this concept, emphasizing that defense mechanisms are normal and adaptive aspects of psychological functioning rather than purely pathological responses. As time progresses, technology develops, and civilizations evolve, Freud's defense mechanisms theories from 1923 and 1936 are no longer sufficient to analyze the complexity of humans' psychological problems in modern times.

Based on his past studies, George Vaillant further develops Freud's defense mechanism theories by categorizing defense mechanisms into four hierarchical levels: psychotic, immature, neurotic, and mature defenses (Vaillant, 2011). Psychotic defenses involve severe distortion of reality, while immature defenses externalize emotional conflict. Neurotic defenses manage anxiety with partial awareness, and mature defenses enable healthy emotional regulation through strategies such as sublimation, humor, and suppression. The updated defense mechanism theory is considered important in order to keep up with the dynamics of modern life in the 2000s. This classification provides a useful framework for interpreting emotional expression in literary texts and song lyrics.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze unconscious emotions and defense mechanisms in two song lyrics from Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* (2021) album. The songs are selected because they represent contrasting yet interconnected emotional experiences, particularly insecurity, identity conflict, betrayal, and emotional loss, which provide rich material for semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretation. Qualitative research is appropriate because the data consist of textual materials that require in-depth interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement (Creswell, 2014). The data to be analyzed are the

words and phrases selected for their dominant emotional themes, and they contain unconscious emotions and psychological defense mechanisms.

Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques, including lyric compilation and identification of figurative language, symbols, and emotional cues. The analysis integrates Riffaterre's semiotic theory and Vaillant's defense mechanism model. Through heuristic and hermeneutic readings, the study identifies symbolic meanings and emotional matrices within the lyrics, which are then interpreted as psychological coping strategies. This integrated approach highlights how song lyrics function simultaneously as artistic expressions and mechanisms of emotional regulation.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings from the analysis of two selected songs from Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* album, namely "Brutal" and "Traitor." The selection of these songs was made on the basis of their strong representation of contrasting yet interconnected emotional experiences, including insecurity, identity conflict, betrayal, and emotional loss. The analysis integrates Michael Riffaterre's (1978) semiotic framework and George Vaillant's (1992) hierarchy of defense mechanisms to examine how unconscious emotions are symbolically expressed and psychologically managed through the lyrics. Utilizing heuristic and hermeneutic readings, the discussion examines the figurative language, imagery, and thematic patterns that are found in the song lyrics to reveal their profound emotional and psychological meanings. This approach reveals how the lyrical persona in both songs negotiates emotional conflict, thereby highlighting the role of song lyrics as complex literary and psychological texts rather than merely personal narratives.

4.1. Semiotic Construction of Emotional Meaning in Brutal and Traitor

To reveal how unconscious emotions are conveyed through figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and thematic structures, this study deploys Riffaterre's semiotic framework (1978). Initially, through the lens of heuristic reading, the lyrics appear as direct narratives of emotional experience. However, through hermeneutic reading, deeper symbolic patterns related to identity conflict, betrayal, and emotional disillusionment are discovered. This study finds that semiotic mechanisms function in the song lyrics to transform personal experiences into layered symbolic meanings by focusing on these two songs. It will also highlight the role of song lyrics as literary texts that encode complex emotional realities.

4.1.1. Brutal's Song Lyric

Stanza 1 (Line 2): Hyperbolic Expression of Insecurity and Fear of Maturity

The lyric "*I'm so insecure, I think that I'll die before I drink*" illustrates the singer's tendency to exaggerate feelings of insecurity by suggesting an extreme consequence before engaging in a common social activity. On a heuristic level, the line functions as a hyperbolic expression of fear and hesitation. Through hermeneutic reading, however, the lyric symbolically represents intense self-doubt and existential anxiety associated with growing up and confronting adult responsibilities.

Stanza 1 (Lines 3–4): Social Comparison and Validation Anxiety

The lyric "*And I'm so caught up in the news of who likes me and who hates you*" reflects the singer's excessive concern with others' opinions and social dynamics. On a heuristic level, the line describes preoccupation with social approval and rejection. Hermeneutically, it represents social comparison and an identity crisis commonly experienced during adolescence.

Stanza 1 (Lines 5–6): Exploitation and Identity Conflict

The lyric "*And they'd all be so disappointed, 'cause who am I if not exploited?*" literally conveys the singer's belief that others expect her to succeed while simultaneously taking advantage of her. At a deeper symbolic level, the line represents societal pressure and feelings of exploitation, indicating a conflict between personal identity and external expectations.

Stanza 2 (Line 8): Disillusionment with the Adolescent Ideal

The expression "*Where's my fucking teenage dream?*" refers on the surface to the cultural ideal of adolescence as a joyful and carefree period. Through hermeneutic reading, however, the lyric challenges this ideal by exposing disillusionment and unmet expectations.

Stanza 3 / Chorus (Line 15): Emotional Exhaustion and Self-Blame

The lyric "*All I did was try my best, this the kinda thanks I get?*" is understood heuristically as the singer questioning the fairness of her situation after making sincere efforts. Symbolically, this rhetorical question reflects emotional exhaustion and unmet expectations, suggesting internalized guilt and self-blame.

Stanza 3 / Chorus (Line 17): Alienation and Desire for Psychological Escape

In “*They say these are the golden years, but I wish I could disappear,*” society’s romanticization of youth is contrasted with the singer’s personal suffering. While the literal meaning juxtaposes optimism and despair, the hermeneutic reading reveals a sharp contradiction between social ideals and lived emotional pain.

Stanza 3 / Chorus (Line 19): Emotional Overwhelm and Ego Collapse

Finally, the lyric “*Ego crush is so severe, God, it’s brutal out here*” conveys intense emotional pain resulting from personal experiences. On a symbolic level, the phrase “*brutal world*” represents the harsh psychological reality of growing up under constant judgment and self-criticism.

4.1.2. Traitor’s Song Lyric

Stanza 1 (Line 1): Metaphorical Representation of Deceit and Emotional Betrayal

The lyric “*Brown guilty eyes and little white lies*” presents a metaphorical depiction of deception within an intimate relationship. On a heuristic level, the singer describes her partner’s physical features and minor dishonesty. Hermeneutically, however, “brown guilty eyes” symbolize concealed guilt, while “little white lies” represent emotional betrayal disguised as harmless behavior.

Stanza 1 (Line 2): Irony as a Marker of Denial and Emotional Repression

In “*Yeah, I played dumb but I always knew,*” the singer acknowledges her pretense of ignorance. Literally, the line conveys an act of deliberate unawareness. Symbolically, it represents denial as an unconscious refusal to confront betrayal to preserve emotional attachment.

Stanza 2 (Line 4): Irony and Shock of Emotional Replacement

The lyric “*And ain’t it funny how you ran to her the second that we called it quits?*” describes the partner’s immediate involvement with another person after the breakup. While the heuristic reading presents a factual sequence of events, the hermeneutic reading exposes emotional shock and disbelief at rapid emotional replacement.

Stanza 3 (Line 7): Metaphor of Emotional Infidelity

In “*Guess you didn’t cheat, but you’re still a traitor,*” the singer differentiates between physical infidelity and emotional betrayal. Literally, the partner did not engage in explicit

cheating. Symbolically, the term “*traitor*” functions as a metaphor for emotional infidelity, indicating a breach of trust and loyalty.

Stanza 4 (Line 10): Symbolism of Objectification and Comparative Jealousy

The lyric “*Show her off like she’s a new trophy*” portrays the partner flaunting a new relationship. On a symbolic level, the “trophy” represents objectification and validation of self-worth through conquest.

Stanza 5 (Line 13): Irony and Gaslighting in Emotional Manipulation

In “*Remember I brought her up and you told me I was paranoid,*” the singer recalls a moment when her suspicions were dismissed. Literally, the line recounts a disagreement. Hermeneutically, it reflects gaslighting and emotional manipulation, where the singer’s perception was invalidated.

Stanza 6 (Line 16): Hyperbolic Lament and Repressed Emotional Anger

The lyric “*God, I wish that you had thought this through before I went and fell in love with you*” expresses regret and sorrow. While the heuristic meaning conveys personal disappointment, the hermeneutic reading reveals internalized pain and longing for emotional justice.

Stanza 7 (Line 18): Imagery of Broken Intimacy and Displaced Emotional Trauma

In “*When she’s sleeping in the bed we made,*” the singer visualizes her former shared space now occupied by another person. Literally, the image describes a physical act; symbolically, the shared bed represents broken intimacy and emotional displacement.

Stanza 8 (Line 22): Symbolism of Broken Promise and Moral Betrayal

Finally, the lyric “*You gave me your word, but that didn’t matter*” reflects the partner’s failure to honor the commitment. On a symbolic level, the “word” represents trust and moral integrity. Its dismissal signifies the shattering of emotional loyalty, intensifying unconscious emotions of betrayal and suppressed anger.

Through Michael Riffaterre’s semiotic framework, *Brutal* and *Traitor* function as poetic texts in which meaning is constructed beyond literal narration through symbolic patterns and figurative language. Heuristically, *Brutal* appears as an expression of adolescent frustration and insecurity, while *Traitor* presents a narrative of romantic betrayal. However, hermeneutic reading reveals deeper symbolic matrices in both songs: *Brutal*

encodes an identity crisis and emotional disorientation through hyperbole, irony, and contrast, whereas *Traitor* constructs a symbolic representation of emotional infidelity and broken trust through metaphor, symbolism, imagery, and irony. These figurative deviations operate as ungrammaticalities that compel interpretive reading, allowing unconscious emotions to surface indirectly. Taken together, the two songs demonstrate how Riffaterre's semiotic mechanisms enable popular song lyrics to function as complex literary texts that symbolically articulate psychological experiences rather than merely recount personal events.

4.2. Defense Mechanisms and Emotional Regulation in *Brutal* and *Traitor*

This analysis provides the results of the investigation of the psychological defense mechanisms employed in *Brutal* and *Traitor*. Drawing on George Vaillant's (1992) hierarchical model of defense mechanisms, the study provides explanation of how unconscious emotions such as insecurity, heartbreak, betrayal, and emotional distress are managed through various psychological strategies. The findings reveal a pattern in which the lyrical persona moves from immature and neurotic defenses toward more mature forms of emotional regulation, suggesting a trajectory of psychological adaptation. Through the classification of defense mechanisms across psychotic, immature, neurotic, and mature levels, the analysis demonstrates how the lyrics symbolically represent emotional coping in response to internal conflict and relational trauma.

4.2.1. Defense Mechanism in *Brutal*'s Lyric

Stanza 1 (Lines 3–4): Projection and Externalization of Social Anxiety

In "*And I'm so caught up in the news of who likes me and who hates you,*" the singer displays anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy rooted in social comparison. This lyric reflects projection and externalization, whereby internal self-doubt is unconsciously attributed to others' opinions. Classified as an immature defense, this mechanism allows the singer to avoid confronting her own emotional instability by focusing on external validation and perceived social judgment.

Stanza 1 (Lines 5–6): Passive Aggression and Projected Resentment

The lyric "*And they'd all be so disappointed, 'cause who am I if not exploited?*" reveals unconscious emotions of shame and resentment. Psychologically, the singer employs projection combined with passive aggression, an immature defense mechanism. By

blaming vague external forces (“they”) for her unhappiness, the singer redirects anger outward, thereby reducing self-blame and temporarily alleviating internal conflict.

Stanza 2 (Line 8): Displacement of Frustration onto Cultural Ideals

In “*Where’s my fucking teenage dream?*” the singer expresses disappointment and frustration. This lyric demonstrates displacement, a neurotic defense mechanism, in which anger and dissatisfaction with personal circumstances are redirected toward an abstract cultural concept. By targeting the ideal of the “teenage dream,” the singer avoids directly confronting feelings of personal failure or unmet expectations.

Stanza 3 / Chorus (Line 15): Rationalization of Hurt and Rejection

The lyric “*All I did was try my best, this the kinda thanks I get?*” conveys feelings of hurt and rejection. Psychologically, the singer utilizes rationalization, categorized as a neurotic defense mechanism. By emphasizing that she “did her best,” the singer unconsciously intellectualizes her emotional pain, defending against guilt and shame through logical self-justification rather than emotional confrontation.

Stanza 3 / Chorus (Line 17): Withdrawal and Avoidance as Escape from Emotional Pain

In “*They say these are the golden years, but I wish I could disappear,*” the singer expresses sadness and alienation. This lyric reflects withdrawal and avoidance, identified as an immature defense mechanism. The desire to “disappear” symbolizes an unconscious retreat from emotional pain and societal pressure, serving as a protective response against perceived rejection and failure.

Stanza 3 / Chorus (Line 19): Humor as a Mature Form of Emotional Regulation

The lyric “*Ego crush is so severe, God, it’s brutal out here*” conveys low self-esteem and despair. Despite the emotional pain, the singer employs humor through an ironic tone, which Vaillant classifies as a mature defense mechanism. Humor enables the singer to express distress in a socially acceptable and creative manner, transforming psychological suffering into artistic expression and signaling adaptive emotional regulation.

Stanza 6 / Outro (Line 36): Undoing and the Difficulty of Emotional Closure

Finally, the lyric “*Every door is hard to close*” represents difficulty in letting go of unresolved emotional experiences. This line reflects the use of undoing, categorized as a neurotic defense mechanism, in which the singer unconsciously attempts to reverse or

symbolically repair emotional pain. The metaphor of closing doors suggests an ongoing psychological struggle to achieve emotional closure and acceptance.

4.2.2. Defense Mechanism in Traitor's Lyric

Stanza 1 (Line 1): Intellectualization as an Initial Defense against Betrayal

The lyric "*Brown guilty eyes and little white lies*" reflects unconscious emotions of heartbreak and distrust. Psychologically, the singer employs intellectualization, a neurotic defense mechanism, by observing and labeling signs of deception rather than fully engaging with the emotional pain they cause. By framing betrayal through descriptive language, the singer creates emotional distance, allowing her to process the experience cognitively while postponing confrontation with grief.

Stanza 1 (Line 2): Denial and Repression in Emotional Awareness

In "*Yeah, I played dumb but I always knew,*" the singer reveals a tension between awareness and avoidance. This line demonstrates denial, categorized as an immature defense mechanism, accompanied by repression at a neurotic level. Although the singer unconsciously recognizes the betrayal, she suppresses this knowledge to maintain relational stability, indicating fear of emotional loss and dependency.

Stanza 2 (Line 4): Projection of Abandonment Anxiety

The lyric "*And ain't it funny how you ran to her the second that we called it quits?*" conveys jealousy and a sense of abandonment. Psychologically, the singer utilizes projection, an immature defense mechanism, by attributing her feelings of replaceability and insecurity entirely to the partner's actions. This externalization helps the ego manage emotional shock by directing distress outward rather than inward.

Stanza 3 (Line 7): Displacement of Anger through Moral Judgment

In "*Guess you didn't cheat, but you're still a traitor,*" the singer redirects unresolved anger toward moral labeling. This lyric reflects displacement, a neurotic defense mechanism, in which emotional pain is transferred from personal vulnerability to ethical condemnation. By focusing on betrayal as a moral failure, the singer avoids confronting deeper feelings of emotional dependency and loss.

Stanza 4 (Line 10): Regression and Jealousy in Response to Objectification

The lyric "*Show her off like she's a new trophy*" reveals intense jealousy and feelings of inadequacy. Psychologically, this response aligns with regression, an immature defense

mechanism, as the singer returns to comparative and self-devaluing thought patterns. The focus on competition reflects a retreat to earlier emotional coping strategies when confronted with rejection.

Stanza 5 (Line 13): Introjection and Internalized Self-Doubt

In “*Remember I brought her up and you told me I was paranoid,*” the singer recalls emotional invalidation. This lyric demonstrates introjection, a neurotic defense mechanism, as the singer internalizes the partner’s dismissal of her concerns. By accepting blame for emotional conflict, she unconsciously protects the relationship at the expense of her own self-trust, reinforcing confusion and self-doubt.

Stanza 6 (Line 16): Suppression as a Controlled Emotional Response

The lyric “*God, I wish that you had thought this through before I went and fell in love with you*” reflects heartbreak and regret. Psychologically, the singer employs suppression, categorized as a mature defense mechanism, by consciously restraining overt anger and expressing pain in a reflective, controlled manner. This indicates a shift toward emotional regulation rather than impulsive reaction.

Stanza 7 (Line 18): Withdrawal in Response to Intimate Loss

In “*When she’s sleeping in the bed we made,*” the singer confronts the collapse of shared intimacy. The emotional response reflects withdrawal, an immature defense mechanism, as the imagery suggests emotional retreat from an unbearable reality. The singer distances herself psychologically from the loss to protect her ego from overwhelming grief.

Stanza 8 (Line 22): Moralization and Emerging Emotional Integration

Finally, the lyric “*You gave me your word, but that didn’t matter*” represents unresolved anger and betrayal. This line reflects moralization, a neurotic defense mechanism, in which emotional pain is structured through ethical judgment. However, the clarity of moral stance also signals movement toward emotional integration, marking a transitional phase toward acceptance and psychological resolution.

Through George Vaillant’s hierarchical model of defense mechanisms, *Brutal* and *Traitor* illustrate the lyrical persona’s psychological strategies for managing unconscious emotional distress. In *Brutal*, the persona predominantly employs immature and neurotic defenses such as denial, projection, avoidance, displacement, and rationalization,

reflecting emotional turbulence associated with insecurity, social comparison, and identity confusion. These defenses gradually give way to mature mechanisms, particularly humor and sublimation, indicating an emerging capacity for emotional regulation. In contrast, *Traitor* foregrounds defenses related to relational trauma, including denial, projection, regression, intellectualization, and displacement, which reflect shock, jealousy, and betrayal. However, moments of suppression and moral clarity suggest movement toward adaptive emotional processing. Taken together, the two songs reveal a developmental trajectory within *SOUR*, in which the lyrical persona progresses from maladaptive and defensive emotional responses toward greater psychological awareness and resilience, demonstrating how popular song lyrics can function as expressive sites of unconscious coping and emotional regulation.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Olivia Rodrigo's *SOUR* lyrics represent unconscious emotions through an integrated interaction between figurative language and psychological defense mechanisms. The findings show that the lyrics do not merely narrate emotional experiences but symbolically construct them, revealing patterns of insecurity, heartbreak, identity conflict, and emotional dependency. Through this interaction, figurative language becomes a medium for expressing hidden emotional tensions, while defense mechanisms illustrate how the lyrical persona psychologically manages distress and moves toward emotional awareness.

The study also highlights a developmental pattern in which emotional responses shift from vulnerability and self-blame toward greater psychological regulation and resilience. This indicates that the album can be understood not only as artistic expression but also as a psychological narrative of coping and self-reconstruction.

Theoretically, this research contributes to literary and cultural studies by integrating Riffaterre's semiotic framework and Vaillant's hierarchy of defense mechanisms to analyze contemporary song lyrics. It shows that popular music can function as a complex literary text that encodes symbolic meaning and psychological processes. Future research may expand this approach by analyzing complete albums, different musical genres, or cross-cultural lyrical expressions to explore further how figurative language and defense mechanisms operate in modern artistic discourse.

References

- Aras, R., Bozkurt, M., & Önen, S. (2024). *Art and emotional literacy in popular music*.
- Barthes, R. (1985). Rhetoric of the Image. *Semiotics: An introductory anthology*, 192-205.
- Boada Bayona, L. (2025). *The Place of Music in Human Development and Experience. Multidisciplinary Explorations* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- De Saussure, F. (1993). Third course of lectures on general linguistics. *Online: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm> (May 4th, 2007)*.
- Eco, U. (1981). The Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader. *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 14(1), 35-45.
- Freud, A. (1936). *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1923). *The Ego and the Id*.
- Frith, S. (1996). *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Harvard University Press.
- Gibbs Jr, R. W., & Colston, H. L. (2006). Figurative language. In *Handbook of psycholinguistics* (pp. 835-861). Academic Press.
- Hasan, F. (2024). *Voices in Verses: Women's Poetry and Cultural Memory in Nineteenth Century India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, A. F. (2012). *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Routledge.
- Peirce, C. S. (1985). Logic as semiotic: The theory of signs. *Semiotics: An introductory anthology*, 344(4).
- Riffaterre, M. (1978). *Semiotics of poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Sebeok, T. (2001). *Signs: An introduction to semiotics*. University of Toronto Press.
- Vaillant, G. E. (1992). *Ego Mechanisms of Defense: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Vaillant, G. E. (2011). *Involuntary coping mechanisms: A psychodynamic perspective*. American Psychiatric Publishing.