

Research Article

Received: 7-12-2019; Accepted: 10-12-2019; Published: 12-12-2019

**Paradox of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in
Guns N' Roses "Civil War"**

Arido Laksono¹

¹Faculty of Humanities-Diponegoro University, Jalan Prof. Soedarto Tembalang, Semarang 50232, Indonesia

arido1975@gmail.com

Abstract

The United States of America has long been known as the pioneer of freedom and democracy. The country promotes the idea of acquiring self-fulfillment without interfering others. Man can have his freedom upon life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness given to him ever since he was born. The long history of the United States of America recorded events and tumults testing the loftiness of American Dream. One of the American rock bands portraying the aforementioned situation is Guns N' Roses. The lyric of "Civil War" clearly describes the paradox of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Protest against war was increasing. Thus, the waves of strike and demonstration occurred as critics toward government policy. At this point, rock bands also have important roles in accommodating people's hopes and wishes. By using several elements of poetry, an argumentative analysis is developed and elaborated in order to reveal the attitude of people regarding government policy on war.

Keywords: Paradox; War; Government policy; Guns N' Roses;

1. Introduction

The discussion over America has always been so interesting. This country has succeeded in expanding its influences in many aspects of life. American products are easily found in countries around the world. Surprisingly, people consume those products. The question of why people buy and consume American products becomes the foundation of further analysis on American people and culture. Considering the complexity of ethnics and ethnicities in America, the achievement of this country to maintain its characteristics as nations of the nation shall be appreciated. This spirit is depicted in social norms, cultural artefacts and American philosophy.

One of the media in disseminating thoughts, criticism and social condition is music. Music delivers not only entertaining nuance but also educational function to advance human awareness. Its elements comprises of pitch, rhythm, duration, structure, dynamics, pulse, texture, tempo, timbre, tonality and harmony which works together to compose enjoyable product ("The Elements of Music," p.1, par. 3).^[1] Those elements can be manifested in a song. Stephanie Pryzbylek states that "A song is a short piece of music. It combines melody and vocals, although some composers have written instrumental pieces, or musical works without words, that mimic the quality of a singing voice" ("What is a Song? –Definition & Examples," p. 1, par.2).^[2] Here, a song is enjoyed and valued through the elements contained. Further, a song may function as social criticism depicting the social condition of certain

era. The lyric of a song holds a strong point since each line requires deep analysis and appropriate devices to reveal its hidden messages.

The messages vary considerably depending on the spirit of the era or the mood of a song writer. A song may tell a love story, a betrayal, family, politics, war and many others. The song "Civil War" written by Axl Rose, Slash and Duff McKagan is one of so many songs containing protest towards a certain era in man's civilization. It was released in 1991 and was popularized by famous rock band Guns N' Roses. The song depicts brutality in war and how power and politics ruin humanity. The fact is contrary to the U.S. Declaration of Independence which holds high the right of every man to live peacefully,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its power in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness ("The Declaration of Independence").^[3]

The facts may be different from the ideal objective of the constitution. War, stereotype and unfair treatment still exist as the result of political decision. The constitution guarantees every man to have equal right in experiencing Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. Thus, deviant policy results in protest and criticism towards authority.

2. Methods

In order to have clear and deep understanding, a song lyric must be analyzed using appropriate approach. The intrinsic approach will apply the figurative devices contained in the lyric. Figurative devices are used "to see the relationship of reference, of grammar, of tone and of systems (related metaphors, symbols, myths, images, allusions, etc)" (Guerin, 1992:66).^[4] Historical approach is also applied to see the background of certain phenomenon. It is "a process to examine and analyze record and relics of the past" (Gottschalk, 1983:32).^[5]

3. The Lyric of "Civil War"

"Civil War"
(<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/gunsroses/civilwar.html>)^[6]

"What we've got here is failure to communicate.
Some men you just can't reach...
So, you get what we had here last week, which is the way he wants it!
Well, he gets it!
N' I don't like it any more than you men."

Look at your young men fighting
Look at your women crying
Look at your young men dying
The way they've always done before

Look at the hate we're breeding

Look at the fear we're feeding
Look at the lives we're leading
The way we've always done before

My hands are tied
The billions shift from side to side
And the wars go on with brainwashed pride
For the love of God and our human rights
And all these things are swept aside
By bloody hands time can't deny
And are washed away by your genocide
And history hides the lies of our civil wars

D'you wear a black armband
When they shot the man
Who said, "Peace could last forever."?
And in my first memories
They shot Kennedy
An' I went numb when I learned to see
So I never fell for Vietnam
We got the wall of D.C. to remind us all
That you can't trust freedom
When it's not in your hands
When everybody's fightin'
For their promised land

And
I don't need your civil war
It feeds the rich while it buries the poor
Your power hungry sellin' soldiers
In a human grocery store
Ain't that fresh
I don't need your civil war

Look at the shoes you're filling
Look at the blood we're spilling
Look at the world we're killing
The way we've always done before
Look in the doubt we've wallowed
Look at the leaders we've followed
Look at the lies we've swallowed
And I don't want to hear no more

My hands are tied
For all I've seen has changed my mind
But still the wars go on as the years go by
With no love of God or human rights
'Cause all these dreams are swept aside
By bloody hands of the hypnotized
Who carry the cross of homicide
And history bears the scars of our civil wars

"We practice selective annihilation of mayors and government officials,
For example, to create a vacuum.
Then we fill that vacuum as popular war advances.
Peace is closer."

I don't need your civil war
It feeds the rich while it buries the poor
Your power hungry sellin' soldiers
In a human grocery store
Ain't that fresh
And I don't need your civil war
I don't need your civil war
I don't need your civil war
Your power hungry sellin' soldiers
In a human grocery store
Ain't that fresh
I don't need your civil war
I don't need one more war

I don't need one more war
What's so civil 'bout war anyway?

4. Discussion

At first glance, the title of the song "Civil War" may refer to the brutal incident in America's history, 1861-1865. It was the time when the abolitionists fought against the slave owners. The Civil War 1861-1865 was still considered as the darkest history in American civilization. However, Guns N' Roses does not merely refer to the Civil War incident in 1861-1865 but to any unfair treatment causing war that eventually obstruct the realization of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in America. It becomes a paradox since the constitution clearly states and guarantees every man to experience those values. The song begins with a short speech of someone stating

"What we've got here is failure to communicate.
Some men you just can't reach...
So, you get what we had here last week, which is the way he wants it!
Well, he gets it!
N' I don't like it any more than you men."

The first line of the speech strongly comment on the failure of the people to have understanding upon certain condition. "What we've got here is a failure to communicate" is a strong statement, a confession of member of society to criticize *status quo*. The metaphor "he" may refer to the authority.

The next verse of the song reveals the perpetual event in human history. The lines in the first verse tell bitter experiences of civilization in which the cruelty of such event took the lives of generation caused by greedy ambition of the superior. "The way they've always done before" describes repeated action of the "they" or the superior who controls others. The results of the action of "they" are quite clear that "young men fighting", "young women crying" and "young men dying".

Look at your young men fighting
Look at your women crying
Look at your young men dying
The way they've always done before

Guns N' Roses gives a strong criticism on the first verse of "Civil War". The impact of forced policy has harmed others. The forced policy leads to hatred and fear among people. Again, it is carried out repeatedly by the authority. The next verse of the song depicts the reaction of the sub-ordinates. They

do not have what the constitution has stated as the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Each forced policy will only harm people and put them in restlessness.

Look at the hate we're breeding
Look at the fear we're feeding
Look at the lives we're leading
The way we've always done before

The two verses above indicate the cause and effect of unfair treatment. "Look at your young men fighting" leads to the first line of the second verse "Look at the hate we're breeding". Hate is the result of the fighting among men. Also "Look at your women crying" results in "Look at the fear we're feeding".

The next verse of the song reminds us of the murder of Kennedy. Guns N' Roses implies that the core of American's value, which is freedom, is not actually practiced properly. There is always a paradox in everything. The line "Who said, "Peace could last forever"?" is a satire of the ideal goal a perfect civilization. Peace can never be proclaimed while at the same time, on behalf of democracy, America sent troops to Vietnam. It refers to the previous line "Look at the young men fighting". The question will circle on the purpose of the action itself.

D'you wear a black armband
When they shot the man
Who said, "Peace could last forever."?
And in my first memories
They shot Kennedy
An' I went numb when I learned to see
So I never fell for Vietnam
We got the wall of D.C. to remind us all
That you can't trust freedom
When it's not in your hands
When everybody's fightin'
For their promised land

On the line "When it's not in your hands", Guns N' Roses criticizes the power of the authority that deprives the right of the people to experience ultimate freedom. Further, the spirit of the pioneer to establish "a city upon a hill" is depicted in the lines "When everybody's fightin'. For their promised land". Hard works is the spirit that bulid the American dream. Yet, it cannot be fulfilled when unfair treatment and forced policy were put on the shoulder of common people.

Here, the paradox of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is clearly depicted in every verse of the song. American dream is truly a dream that cannot be realized. The line "It feeds the rich while it buries the poor" asserts the real condition of common American people. All policies only benefit the rich. The war itself is considered as a way to get more financial profit for the rich. It can be seen on the lines "I don't need your civil war" and "Your power hungry sellin' soldiers."

I don't need your civil war
It feeds the rich while it buries the poor
Your power hungry sellin' soldiers
In a human grocery store
Ain't that fresh

5. Conclusions

Guns N' Roses is a famous American rock band of the 90's. The band has given great influences to the life style of era. From the analysis of "Civil War", it reveals other fact that a rock band also has big concern on the social condition of the country. The criticism written in every line of the song is understood worldwide that it also boosts the spirit of freedom. However, the ideal objective a civil society is frequently different from political and economic interests of the superior. At this point, a paradox occurs in the practices of social lives.

References

- [1] “The Elements of Music”, p.1, par.3, <https://www.musictheoryacademy.com/how-to-read-sheet-music/the-elements-of-music/> [Accessed December 6, 2019]
- [2] S. Pryzbylek, “What is a Song? –Definition & Examples,” p. 1, par.2. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-a-song-definition-examples.html> [Accessed December 1, 2019]
- [3] “The Declaration of Independence”, <https://ushistory.org/declaration/document> [Accessed December 1, 2019]
- [4] W. L. Guerin, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Third Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- [5] L. Gottschlack, *Mengerti Sejarah*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 1981.
- [6] “Civil War”, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/gunsnroses/civilwar.html> [Accessed December 2, 2019]