

Childhood Trauma and Nostalgia: A Thematic Exploration of Sufjan Stevens' Selected Songs

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Abstract

This analysis explores the narrative arc and thematic depth of Sufjan Stevens' songs "Death with Dignity," "Should have known Better," and "Fourth of July" from the album Carrie & Lowell. These tracks collectively encapsulate Stevens' journey through grief, regret, and acceptance following the death of his mother. The analysis delves into how each song represents different stages of mourning, reflecting the complexities of childhood trauma and parental relationships. "Death with Dignity" introduces themes of introspection and acceptance, while "Should have known Better" conveys profound regret and the struggle for emotional expression. Finally, "Fourth of July" captures an intimate farewell, intertwining celebration and sorrow, underscoring the transient nature of life. Through rich imagery and metaphor, Stevens invites listeners to confront their own experiences of loss, ultimately offering a poignant reflection on the impact of familial bonds on personal identity and emotional well-being. This exploration highlights the therapeutic power of art in navigating the complexities of grief and fostering understanding and healing.

Keywords: Sufjan Stevens Carrie & Lowell Narrative Art Music Analysis

Introduction

Music has always been linked to the expression of emotions and the process of healing. It is claimed to be a fundamental need for both mental and spiritual nourishment and is thus universally cherished. Music has been attributed to both reflection and escapism. This feature of

music varies among artists. Some write lyrics that evoke images of love, harmony and blissful existence, offering a temporary comfort or relief for the listeners and themselves. On the contrary, it also acts as a platform to share personal experiences, thoughts, and inner conflicts.

Additionally, music is also used to spread awareness. It serves as a strong medium to publicise the different facets of life, which may range from depression and drug abuse to rejection and forgiveness. It is not uncommon to encounter songs addressing themes of poverty, illness or social problems. Music taps on words, making them more engaging, exciting and heartening. A very good example of this can be the advertisements and jingles that one witnesses every day. First started in the year 1926, this practice of using music as a medium of promoting products and services has never gone out of style. They serve as evidence of music's influence on decision-making. One may find oneself subconsciously gravitating towards specific products when the memorable tunes from advertisements linger in their mind.

In contemporary culture, the Indie music genre has experienced a significant resurgence, emerging as one of the most popular musical styles. What distinguishes Indie music is not only its sound but also its lyrics. Indie, which means 'independent', is a type of music that is not affiliated with a larger production house. This was mainly done to reduce the expenses of the budding or rookie artists. It is often considered as a rather intimate way of making and recording music. Many lyricists use their songs for personal expression and connection, seeking to come to terms with their own emotions and experiences while assuring others that they are not alone in their struggles, and this rawness was what impressed many worldwide.

The deliberate emphasis on specific words, strategic pauses, and rhythmic patterns enrich the song's meaning, allowing listeners to grasp both its literal and metaphorical depths. Today's youth gravitate towards Indie music, finding relevance and self-discovery in its introspective themes. Numerous lyricists draw from their past traumas and present conflicts, channelling their emotions into lyrics. Scientific research supports the therapeutic advantages of writing to express emotions, thus reinforcing the value of music as a means of promoting mental well-being and facilitating emotional expression.

Artists such as the 1975, The Strokes, Death Cab for Cutie, The Walters, Radiohead, etc. have garnered widespread acclaim for their evocative lyrics. One such artist is Sufjan Stevens, whose lyrics serve as a strong reflection of introspection, emotional conflict and trauma.

In this context, this paper endeavours to do a thematic exploration of his songs "Death with Dignity," "Should have known Better," and "Fourth of July" from the album *Carrie & Lowell*, exploring the utilisation of stylistic devices to highlight the effects of childhood trauma on

personal identity and growth to further emphasise the importance of a healthy parent-child relationship.

Literature Review

An intense search for existing research on Sufjan Stevens reveals that only limited research has been carried out. Natalie Farrell in “Through Sounding the “Spirit of My Silence”: Sufjan Stevens’ Carrie and Lowell and the Affect of Nothingness, relates to the readers about the ‘silent listening party’ that was organised by Stevens before the release of the album. She uses the methodology of autoethnography to look at the ‘silence’ in Carrie & Lowell, in relation to Robert Barthes’ theory of Studium and Punctum.

“A Conceptualization of Sufjan Stevens’s Bereavement Process as Seen in his Album, Carrie and Lowell Through Several Contemporary Mechanisms for Grief and Bereavement” is a thesis by Jake Picker, where he examines the album’s thematic content, lyrical motifs, musical compositions and overall narrative to conceptualise the stages of grief and bereavement in Steven’s Carrie & Lowell.

Robin Gow in “Sufjan Stevens and How I taught Myself to Cry”, talks about how Stevens’ music in the album Illinois helped him to come to terms with his journey of being a trans male, the lyrics giving him the reflection of his own life and support when he needed it. Cora S. Palfy in “Formal Reminiscence Space and Memory in Sufjan Stevens’s Storytelling” articulates the use of mnemonic themes and reminiscence space in his songs, which helps the overall storytelling quality, and at the same time creates an intimate relationship between the singer and his audience.

This paper aims to show Stevens’ use of stylistic devices and points out the central recurring themes and subjects of Carrie & Lowell. These themes include grief, abandonment, loss, death, childhood trauma, nostalgia, forgiveness, and acceptance. While limited research has been done on Stevens’ artistic storytelling and the process of grief, there hasn’t been any research done on the use of stylistic devices by Stevens to emphasise the themes of the album.

Sufjan Stevens - The Artist

Sufjan Stevens is a versatile American singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist, captivating audiences worldwide with his multi-fold talents. Stevens is one of six siblings born to Carrie and Rasjid Stevens in Detroit, Michigan. Carrie left her family when Sufjan was one-year-old. After his mother left, Sufjan spent most of his early life living in Michigan with his father and stepmother, Pat. He only occasionally visited his mother Carrie, who had moved to Oregon and had married Lowell Brams, with whom Stevens enjoys a strong friendship till date.

Stevens found his record album, *Asthmatic Kitty* alongside his stepfather Lowell Brams and has worked on over three hundred songs. His debut album, *A Sun Came*, was released in the year 2000. His 2005 album *Illinois* topped the Billboard Top Heatseekers chart, especially for his single “Chicago”. But what won people's hearts was his song “Mystery of Love” featured in the 2017 film, *Call Me by Your Name*, directed by Luca Guadagnino. His other well-known albums are *Michigan* (2003), *Seven Swans* (2004), *The Age of Adz* (2010), *Carrie & Lowell* (2015), and *A Beginner’s Mind* (2021). His most recent album, *Javelin*, dedicated to his late partner, was released in October 2023.

Spanning an array of different genres from indie folk to alternative rock, Stevens' artistic vision has no bounds. While his journey as a writer initially moved towards the world of short stories and aspirations of novel writing, it inevitably circled back to songwriting. Stevens' music specifically explores the themes of love, grief, outer space, bereavement and spirituality. Known especially for the banjo, his equal mastery of several other instruments like guitar, piano, drums, woodwinds, gaitalin, and percussion, makes Stevens' music diverse and captivating. His signature folk-inspired style of music evokes a deep sense of nostalgia and at the same time dissociation, infusing his compositions with sentiments that cannot be named.

Carrie & Lowell

Sufjan Stevens' album *Carrie & Lowell* dwells deeply into themes of death, loss, grief, and ultimately, acceptance, casting a light on the overall and inevitable human experiences. The album's first single, "No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross," debuted in February 2015, before the full album release, which was on March 31st of the same year.

Carrie and Lowell are the two most influential figures in Sufjan Stevens' life. Carrie, his late mother, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and suffered from substance dependency throughout most of her life. When Stevens was one-year-old, she left her family, detecting her inability to cope with her mental and physical problems. Stevens likes to believe that Carrie did what she did because she knew that she was not the right person to look after all of them. When Stevens was five years old, Carrie married Lowell Brams, who willingly and immediately took to Stevens. They spent some summers together in Eugene (which is also the title of a song in the album), Oregon. However, her presence in her children's lives became transitory until she died in the year 2012.

Stevens expressed his disappointment, anger, and longing towards his mother through his song “Romulus” from the album *Michigan* (2003). He sings, “She came to Romulus for a day/ Her Chevrolet broke down/ we prayed it'd never be fixed or be found”. He has ensouled these words

with the feeling of loneliness, and yearning for closeness with his mother. That despite everything, he still wanted her to be there with him, for him. At the same time, he repeats the line, “I was ashamed/ I was ashamed of her” over and over again, which denotes Stevens’ embarrassment and anger. His relationship with his mother was rocky. However, Sufjan now acknowledges that whatever his mother had done, it was all for their good, that Carrie probably couldn’t trust herself and so she left them for the better.

As the title suggests, the album *Carrie & Lowell* is dedicated to his late mother, Carrie and also to his stepfather, Lowell. Characterised by multiple but mellow instrumentation with the essence of indie folk inspiration, the album especially serves as an elegy to his late mother Carrie. Through *Carrie & Lowell*, Stevens sails across the complexities of his relationship with his mother with raw honesty and emotional intensity and creates a deeply personal yet universally felt narrative of loss and longing, at the same time inviting listeners to connect with their own experiences of grief and healing.

It is interesting to note that *Carrie & Lowell* received positive feedback and recognition from several reputable music publications. *Stereogum*, *Consequence of Sound*, and *Pitchfork* all publicly appreciated and applauded the album, recognizing its impact on the contemporary musical landscape.

Stylistics: An Introduction

Stylistics is a branch of linguistics that studies and interprets the distinctive characteristic styles found in a particular genre of literature or a writer. Stylistic devices are tools that aid in providing writers with additional armaments for writing their literary work. They serve as the backbone of lyrical expression containing layers of deep meaning and emotion. They transform mere and mundane words into poetry, enhancing the overall listening experience, worthwhile leaving a lasting impression on the audience.

Stylistic devices help in addressing complex emotions in a more comprehensible and easy way, transforming abstract concepts into perceivable images, thereby enriching the storytelling aspect of the lyrics, and making them more engaging, imaginative and encouraging. Catchy phrases and memorable lines are often achieved through the strategic use of stylistic devices. They contribute to the rhythmic flow and quality of lyrics, making them easier to remember, recall and sing along to. Recurring motifs, thematic imagery, metaphors, and underlying symbolism— these devices contribute to the overall coherence of the composition, blanketing a variety of themes and moods within a single piece of music.

Stevens artistically makes use of stylistic devices as his tool to convey his story and words to his audience. Stevens excels in his use of different kinds of repetitions like framing (“Grieve what I happen to grieve”), anaphora (“While it is rife/ While it is light”), anadiplosis (“When I was three, three maybe four”), and other kinds of repetitions like epiphora, thematic repetition and synonymous repetition. The lines - “Oh be my rest, be my fantasy/ Oh be my rest, be my fantasy” or “What is that song you sing for the dead/ What is that song you sing for the dead”, stress what he craves for the most and may even hint at what he wants to perceive and what he wants others to perceive. It may mean him trying to convince himself of something or even suggesting his disbelief or denial over something.

His use of alliteration (“I see the signal searchlight strike me”), gives more ring to the lyrics, and stays in the listener’s psyche for a longer time. Metaphor and symbolism, being his speciality, Stevens does not hold back on drawing vivid, yet dream-like nostalgic images in his songs.

The Three Selected Songs as a Narrative

The songs “Death with Dignity”, “Should have known Better” and “Fourth of July” can be ordered consecutively, as the three songs knit a narrative of Steven’s struggles and beliefs. “Death with Dignity” deals with the singer’s grief, introspection, helplessness and finally a tinge of acceptance. While “Should have known Better” talks about his regret of not making use of the limited time that he had with his mother. Finally, “Fourth of July” is a discourse between the singer and his mother. It lets us have a glance at a very personal and intimate conversation between the two, while the latter lay on her deathbed. All three songs are intertwined with each other and carry traces of the stages of grief namely shock, denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. Above all, they contain the central recurring theme of death, childhood trauma, nostalgia, grief and acceptance. Let us now analyse the three songs individually.

“Death with Dignity”

With its title, the song's central theme becomes apparent-the passing of his mother. The term "Death with Dignity" is originally a reference to the Death with Dignity Act, which was passed in Oregon in the year 1994. It legalizes terminally ill patients to choose medically-aided death. However, whether Stevens’ mother Carrie had chosen this option remains uncertain as the information remains confidential.

In the opening line, Stevens blends the words ‘spirit’ and ‘silence’ together- “Spirit of my silence I can hear you”, indicating himself reaching out to his inner thoughts or consciousness, or perhaps addressing the emotions he's kept hidden and fears to confront. His struggle to articulate his feelings is reflected in the line, “No I don’t know where to begin”, revealing uncertainty and

perhaps an inability to express him fully. The repetition of the line echoes his self-doubt and inner turmoil. There is vivid imagery throughout the song, such as "Somewhere in the desert there's a forest," "Amethyst and flowers on the table," and "In the willows and five red hens." Stevens paradoxically pens the two antonyms 'forest' and 'desert' together, showing the possible in the impossible; hope in hopelessness and hopelessness in hope. The word 'Amethyst' in Greek means "without intoxication". It is also a healing crystal that symbolises peace and sobriety. Stevens talks about amethyst and flowers, which were probably given to Carrie as gifts from friends and family for her recovery.

The singer repeatedly finds it difficult to come to terms with the present. He thus sings, "Is it real or a fable?" showcasing his snapping in and out of reality using the two contrasting words 'real' and 'fable'. "Tired old mare / With the wind in your hair" and "Chimney swift that finds me be my keeper/ Silhouette of the cedar" are the metaphorical language used to describe the singer's emotions. The chimney swift is a bird that symbolises freedom and happiness. For Stevens, it could symbolise a guiding presence or light, representing the writer's search for comfort and perhaps someone to lean on to in times of despair. Spiritually, cedarwood symbolises protection and strength. These lines reveal the singer's plea for comfort and shelter. "I see the signal searchlight strike me" could represent moments of revelation or clarity or can even mean an insight into reality, symbolising Stevens' understanding or acceptance of his circumstances. But he ultimately says that even if he understands and accepts the reality, it doesn't help his situation. He accepts the truth, though despairingly, since he can no longer prove himself because the person to whom he wants to prove something is his mother. This tells the listeners about his longing for communication with his mother which remains impossible after her death.

At last, Stevens sings about forgiveness, "I forgive you mother and I can hear you/ And I long to be near you", sketching his unsteady journey towards healing and letting go of past grievances. The haunting image of the apparition symbolises the lingering presence of memories or loved ones who have passed away, highlighting their lasting impression on their loved ones.

"Should have known Better"

In the second song "Should Have Known Better", Stevens deeply channels his regret and conveys his remorse and sorrow over not reaching out to his mother sooner, recognizing that despite his current desire to do so, it is now entirely futile. Essentially, a 'shroud' is a specific kind of cloth used for covering the deceased during funerals. Metaphorically in the lyrics, Stevens hints that keeping his feelings to himself as a coping mechanism to protect himself acted as a black shroud to him. Because though it seemed to be protecting him from the outside world

and its judgements, it also wore him down and stifled his mind. The act of contemplating writing a letter signifies a longing for communication and emotional expression, but at the same time, he grapples with self-doubt and trust issues. Stevens yearned for closeness with his mother but was scared of what would come out of it. He doubted himself, and at the same time didn't trust his mother enough. Ultimately, he kept waiting for an elusive "right time", which in his case, never came.

Through the lines "When I was three, and free to explore/ I saw her face on the back of the door" and "She left us at that video store", Stevens transports his audience back to his childhood, painting a metaphorical imagery of a moment from when the speaker was merely three or four years old. This evokes a sense of nostalgia, representing his longing for innocence and freedom unencumbered by emotional burdens. It suggests a sentimental reflection on childhood innocence and curiosity. The image of seeing Carrie's face on the back of a door could symbolize a memory or moment of realisation that his mother was eventually going to leave him. The repetition of his pleas for 'rest' and 'fantasy' and "Don't back down" signify a yearning to escape the complexities of reality and the weight of adult life and creates emphasis and reinforces the central themes of seeking solace and resilience. His use of similes like "light as a feather" and "bright as the Oregon breeze" juxtapose against the heaviness evoked by the black shroud, illustrating a deep yearning for lightness, ease, and relief. Stevens candidly acknowledges his struggles with coping, confessing, "I'm not a go-getter." The mention of a "demon's spell" serves as a metaphor for the inner struggles or personal limitations hindering the speaker's quest for peace and fulfilment. It can even symbolise the inner voices of doubt and chaos that an individual is bound to encounter during times of misery.

Towards the end, the song continues to remain melancholic, yet timidly hopeful. The birth of the speaker's niece symbolises the beauty and light that new life brings into the world. It serves as a metaphor for hope and renewal, offering a source of illumination in dark times. It can also mean that Stevens sees his mother in his niece. We can sense his inner conflict taking root as he constantly contradicts himself through the lines, "Don't back down, there is nothing left / The breakers in the bar, no reason to live". It reflects his feelings of despair and hopelessness, where the speaker is overwhelmed by emotions. The "breakers in the bar" symbolise obstacles that seem unconquerable, leading the speaker to question the meaning of life itself. He calls himself a "fool in the fetter". This subtle metaphor suggests entrapment or confinement, where the speaker feels trapped by his own helplessness. It symbolises being constrained or restricted, and the inability to break free from one's self-imposed limitations. He makes a biblical allusion to the

"rose of Aaron's beard", which symbolises beauty and pleasantness— a place of refuge or solace. It serves as a symbolic sanctuary amidst turmoil or uncertainty. The "cantilever bridge" symbolises stability and support, while the "drunken sailor" contrastingly represents chaos or instability.

The juxtaposition of the song reflects the duality of life, where moments of strength and structure coexist with moments of unpredictability and disorder. The metaphorical elements like “Black Shroud”, “Video Store”, “Demon’s Spell”, “Bridge to Nowhere”, “Rose of Aaron's Beard”, and “Cantilever Bridge, the Drunken Sailor” contribute more deeply to themes of nostalgia, reality and illusion, suppression of emotions and longing for relief and happiness in life. They provide layers of interpretation and symbolism for listeners to explore and reflect upon, and at the same time arouse empathy towards the writer.

“Fourth of July”

This song is perhaps the saddest in the album as it was essentially an intimate conversation between Stevens and his mother before she passed away. It serves as a compelling rumination on life, death, and the passage of time and dwells into the complexities of human existence and the inescapable truth of morality. Stevens tenderly refers to his mother as his "firefly," evoking the fleeting and occasionally occurring nature of her presence in his life, which was sometimes bright and sometimes dim, and which ultimately fades and disappears.

The sky on the Fourth of July is often associated with fireworks and celebrations. It is known as America’s Independence Day and symbolises freedom and independence. But Stevens may have brought in another perspective of the Fourth of July, that celebration in life is transitory, and everything eventually turns to dust. As a response, his mother calls him a ‘hawk’ which symbolises freedom, strength and clarity, encouraging him to not give up or lose hope. She refers to the Tillamook Burn, which was a series of forest fires in Oregon. It symbolises destruction, transformation, or the inevitability of change, that nothing lasts long and it is the nature of life. Additionally, the use of metaphors like ‘dove’, ‘dragonfly’ and ‘loon’ has also been used. Carrie calls her son “my little dove”. ‘Dove’ representing ‘peace’ tells us how Carrie might have found peace in loving her son, though she did not show it often. She also calls him “my little loon”, meaning that to her, her son served as her tranquillity and stability— an anchor.

From these words, we understand that Carrie is trying to tell her son that despite their differences, he is loved. She says, “And I'm sorry I left but it was for the best/ Though it never felt right/ My little Versailles”. Here, she means that deciding to leave was the hardest thing for her, but it was her small treaty of Versailles— a peace pact with herself. There are instances of

irony in the song. Fourth of July festivities with the sombre reflections on death add depth to the lyrics and invite the listener to contemplate the contrasts in life. Stevens metaphorically portrays his desire to have his mother as a guiding angel, as one often wishes, through the lines, "The hospital asked should the body be cast / Before I say goodbye, my star in the sky".

Stevens, being well-known for using multiple instruments and a rich orchestra, makes the music of this particular song very soft and mellow, dominated by vocals sung in semi-whispers. This has been done to emphasise the main subject of the song, that is, the inevitability of death. It creates a sense of urgency, as well as acceptance. There are instances of irony in the song. Fourth of July festivities with the sombre reflections on death add depth to the lyrics and invite the listener to contemplate the contrasts in life. "The hospital asked should the body be cast / Before I say goodbye, my star in the sky" metaphorically portrays the deceased as a guiding light in the speaker's life.

The song ends on a hopeful note with Carrie asking her son to make the most of his life. However, Stevens only responds to her saying "We're all gonna die". The repetition of the phrase "We're all gonna die" is how Stevens concludes the song. This line is repeated several times, indicating his efforts to accept the truth of reality and the world. It is melancholic, yet it provides a kind of consolation about the harsh ways of life.

Conclusion

The exploration of Sufjan Stevens' album "Carrie & Lowell" and its thematic analysis through the songs "Death with Dignity," "Should have known Better," and "Fourth of July" provides a profound insight into the impact of childhood trauma and the dynamics of parental relationships on personal identity and growth.

Through these songs, Stevens narrates his own experiences, expressing his grief, regret, longing, and ultimately, acceptance. Childhood trauma can have profound and lasting effects on an adult's mental, emotional, and physical well-being, impacting the overall quality of life. The abandonment that he had experienced in his childhood contributed heavily to his inability to comprehend complex situations, and also to his habit of suppressing his emotions, thereby instilling the inability to trust and also to love as one should.

Mostly, the singer seems to be in a state of confusion when it comes to matters of the heart. Through Stevens' melancholic and conflicting, yet hopeful storytelling in Carrie & Lowell, one can comprehend that grief can take a huge toll on one's mental health, leading to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and existential questioning. His very personal lyrics invite empathy and introspection, prompting listeners to reflect on their own experiences of loss and healing.

Ultimately, Carrie & Lowell serves as a voice of human experience, offering solace and understanding to those grappling with similar struggles. Stevens' raw honesty and vulnerability in his music serve as a reminder of the power of art to illuminate the darkest corners of the human psyche, and also to heal, inviting listeners to confront their traumas, embrace their vulnerabilities, and find meaning and hope in the face of adversity. It provides an unwavering message of the importance of a healthy parent-child relationship which is crucial for the emotional, social, cognitive and psychological growth of an individual.

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