

FaR 2021**International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”****THE REFLECTION OF AMERICAN VALUES IN SONG
DISCOURSE**

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g.sun.lunn@yandex.ru**Abstract**

The article analyzes various definitions of the notion ‘values’. Values are defined as general ideas and views on the world that a particular nation has which it considers to be right or wrong. It is noted that the establishment of the key American values is closely connected with the historical background of the country. It is important to point out that it is impossible to single out the correct set of American values, as different studies suggest different classifications. In the present article such values as ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘hard work’ are analyzed. The emphasis is placed on the reflection of the previously mentioned values in popular culture, namely, song discourse. Special attention is paid to how social developments that occur in American society influence song discourse. The conducted analysis makes it possible to conclude that the above-mentioned values are prevalent in modern American music. Music is one of the key instruments in promoting the values of society. It should be noted that music gives a platform to people in the fight for social justice and human rights. Moreover, addressing traditional American values through song lyrics helps to spread awareness about the issues of importance. The widespread appeal to traditional values preserves them relevant and important for American society.

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Keywords: American values, popular culture, song discourse

1. Introduction

Values have been in the center of research of different fields of studies for decades. Depending on a field of study, the notion of the word ‘value’ is defined differently. Generally speaking, values are “the principles that help you to decide what is right and wrong, and how to act in various situations” (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, 2009, p.1).

In linguistics value studies became the object of interest only in the twentieth century with the emergence of axiological linguistics. According to Usacheva (2002), values are “historically developed, generalized ideas of people about the types of their behaviour that have occurred as a result of an evaluative-active attitude to the world, forming an axiological worldview, ingrained in the minds of a separate ethnic group and fixed in the language of this ethnic group” (p. 26). Sternin (1996) suggests a less detailed definition. He identifies values as “social, psychosocial ideas and views that are shared by a nation and inherited by next generations” (p. 108). Sternin (1996) underlines that ethnic communities always perceive their values as something ‘good’ and ‘right’.

The linguistic analysis of the value system of a particular community enhances the understanding of its ethnocultural consciousness. As noted by Ivanova (2010), being a cultural phenomenon, language records and reflects not only the modern state of culture, but also its timeless values. Moreover, language helps to shape and develop the mentality of a nation by being in constant contact with culture (Ter-Minasova, 2000).

Evidently, the historical development of the U.S. contributed to the establishment of key American values. Being a country of immigrants, the United States is notable for its cultural diversity. Despite the fact that the people who came to the New World had different backgrounds and life experiences, they all pursued similar goals – they wanted to start a brand new life in the New World.

The problem of defining the core values of American society has been the central research point of many Western and Russian scholars and researchers (Batalov, 1995; Huntington, 2004; Kohls, 1984; Osipov, 2011; Steele & Redding, 1962; Williams, 1970; Yakovleva, 2009). It is worth pointing out that there is no sole set of values that all researchers agree upon – different researchers single out various values that they consider to be essential for American society. However, the analysis of the above-mentioned works made it possible to single out the values found in the majority of papers. The present study focuses on the following values and defines them as the core ones:

- freedom;
- equality;
- hard work.

The fundamental nature of such values as ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ is reflected in the Declaration of Independence – “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” (U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776, par. 2). For Americans, freedom and equality are legal rights that everyone should have.

At the same time, they understand that not everyone has these rights from birth; that is why Americans believe that freedom and equality are the things a person should fight for. Thus, their fight does

not end when they obtain their rights, Americans continue the fight for freedom and equality for all because they are convinced that equality cannot exist if not everyone is in a just and fair position. For American society, 'change' equals 'progress', and progress means movement towards improvement. Obviously, change cannot happen if society does not do anything. Thus, one should be persistent and work hard for the change to come. Yakovleva (2009) points out that a deep-seated faith in success for all helps Americans preserve their 'can-do spirit' and not be afraid of starting all over again in case of failure. Hence, there is a common belief that any American citizen can become the president.

2. Problem Statement

Society and its culture cannot exist in isolation from communication processes as they need to find some information medium for them to be able to survive. It should be pointed out that the role of popular culture in the shaping of society and its views should not be underestimated. According to Browne (2005), in the United States, popular culture takes on the role of the 'voice of democracy' that highlights the key developments of American society and its life. Popular culture helps to transmit particular ideas to the world and form the general public's opinion on changes that occur in the community. On top of that, through popular culture people from different social classes received an opportunity for self-fulfilment.

It is necessary to stress that in the U.S., pop culture is just as important as other spheres of human life. Furthermore, quite often these spheres may intertwine (e.g. politics and pop culture). At the same time, despite being an essential part of American society, some layers of popular culture are still not fully researched. For instance, modern American popular music offers a fascinating field for research, taken in conjunction with society's core values.

The present paper focuses its attention on the problem of social issues' influence on modern music and how the key American values express people's attitude towards the problems of the country through the language.

3. Research Questions

It is a matter of common knowledge that Americans care much about and believe in such core values as freedom, equality, and hard work. Thus, it is assumed that these values may play a key role in expressing a social agenda of the U.S. through music.

Despite being a part of the entertainment industry, music still takes part in covering relevant social issues. That is why the degree of directness and explicitness in giving social commentary and addressing American values is of importance as well.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the present research is to trace the expression of traditional American values in the modern American culture, specifically, in the lyrics of the popular American songs. To reach the stated goal, the following objectives are set:

- 1) to determine the key American values;
- 2) to identify the importance of the context in which music tends to address American values;

3) to characterize the linguistic means that are used to reflect the values.

5. Research Methods

The lyrics of the popular American songs are used as the research material for the present study. For this research, the songs of the past 20 years were analyzed. Various research methods were applied in the present study: from methods of observation, comparison and generalization up to the continuous sampling method, the method of contextual analysis, method of correlation of lingual units with cultural phenomena.

6. Findings

The conducted research shows that nowadays the problem of American values has become even more acute due to different social and political events that took place in the past few years. The struggles and fights of modern Americans are reflected not only in mass media but in popular music as well. Popular music becomes an effective tool for transmitting the message to the mass audience.

The value of freedom is one of the prevailing topics used by modern musicians:

(1) Raise a glass to freedom

Something they can never take away

(2) The stones you throw can make me bleed

But I won't stop until we're free

(3) Freedom! Freedom! I can't move

Freedom, cut me loose! Yeah

Freedom! Freedom! Where are you?

'Cause I need freedom, too!

I break chains all by myself

Won't let my freedom rot in hell

The value of 'equality is closely connected with the fight for human rights – even today Americans are convinced that they are the only ones who can change the situation they find unjust. That is why the value of equality is often expressed through the lexical unit “fight”:

(4) I fight because I have to

I fight for us to know the truth

(5) Can we go back? This is the moment

Tonight is the night, we'll fight 'til it's over

(6) Starting a war, screaming "Peace" at the same time

All the corruption, injustice, the same crimes

Always a problem if we do or don't fight

And we die, we don't have the same right

(7) When everyone else is more comfortable remaining voiceless

Rather than fighting for humans that have had their rights stolen

I might not be the same, but that's not important

No freedom 'til we're equal, damn right I support it

(8) If we all agree that we're equal as people

Then why can't we see what is evil?

The examples presented above are all devoted to relevant for modern American social issues, such as vindication of the rights of women, fight for racial equality, and rights of different minority groups. The repetitive usage of the personal pronoun 'I' shows us that Americans are used to being active members of society. They take the situation into their own hands and try to solve problems by themselves not only when the issue involves them ("we die, we don't have the same right" – by means of a pronoun 'we' the storyteller underlines that the problem affects them as well by including themselves into narration) but when they are considered to be the privileged ones as well (...fighting for humans that have had their rights stolen / I might not be the same, but that's not important / No freedom 'til we're equal – at first, the narrator separates themselves from the group he speaks about – 'their rights', 'I might not be the same' but then points out the importance of them having the same rights by including themselves into the narrative 'til we're equal').

The following examples show us that Americans are not used to giving up and they are ready to do what it worth to succeed:

(9) I feel like I wrote my way up out of a burnin' building

To earning millions in this world of soldiers and civilians

I burn the oil every night as I return to brilliance

(10) Hey! I'ma keep running

Cause a winner don't quit on themselves

(11) "I wrote my way out", out of the poorhouse

Accomplished my goals somehow, I never sold out

(12) Hey look ma, I made it

Hey look ma, I made it

Everything's comin' up aces, aces

If it's a dream, don't wake me, don't wake me

I said, "Hey look ma, I made it"

(13) No, I'm not afraid of hard work

I get everything I want

(14) I'm the new Sinatra, and since I made it here

I can make it anywhere, yeah, they love me everywhere

'Hard work' as a value is closely connected with such notions as 'change' (progress), and 'success'. They are expressed through idioms (e.g. 'burn the (midnight) oil', 'make it (big)', 'write one's way out of smth'), contextual opposition related to the contrast between 'poverty vs. wealth' (e.g. '...out of a burnin' building to earning millions', '...out of the poorhouse accomplished my goals'). Moreover, despite the fact that the United States is a prosperous country, the context of the lyrics shows that in order to become wealthy and successful, people still have to be industrious, as nothing comes on a silver platter.

The value of 'hard work' has historic significance as well. First settlers came to the American continent in pursuit of something new, something different. Although they were aware of the fact that starting a new life in the unknown world posed huge risks, the willingness to change their lives convinced

them that that change would be for the better. Weaver (2001) writes, “the willingness of the individual to take risks is a basic aspect of the American culture even today” (p. 5).

Thuswise, we can see that the belief that hard work will eventually pay off and lead to a prosperous life is as strong as it used to be centuries ago.

It is crucial to point out that in every example we can see a first-person narrative that underlines the individualistic structure of American society. Being the main character, an individualist enables the audience to understand that they take responsibility for their actions and life in general, without imposing a burden on anyone else.

7. Conclusion

Summing up what has been said, it is possible to conclude that music is one of the key means of transmitting a social message to a mass audience. With the help of music, Americans disclose relevant issues, highlight acute problems and express their point of view to any given situation. Popular music plays an essential role in supporting and promoting American values. The conducted research shows that such values as ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘hard work’ lie at the core of modern popular music. For instance, the key position of the first two values stems from the fact that nowadays such problems as gender equality and racial equality have taken on even more enormous significance than before. Recent mass disruptions of public order have prompted Americans to find more peaceful yet effective ways of alerting members of the general public to the alarming rise of inequality in the country. The analysis demonstrates that Americans actively use song discourse when talking about tumultuous events happening in society. The explicitness and directness of expression of resentment and dissatisfaction due to social injustices shows that Americans feel the need to exercise their rights and talk about serious issues even in the sphere of entertainment. Moreover, American society tries to draw people’s attention to these problems through the means of communication that can reach great masses of the population.

The prevalence of communicative means that reflect the value of ‘hard work’ focuses attention on the fact that change does not come easily and for the United States to become a better place, everyone should do their part.

Thus, it can be said that traditional American values do not lose their relevance in society. The extensive attention given to the key values helps Americans preserve the positive image of the traditional values of society. Furthermore, the U.S. not only takes pride in its traditions but also finds new ways of adapting its values in compliance with the challenges of this century.

To conclude, it is important to point out that the set of values, as well as the linguistic means expressing these values, are not exhaustive; therefore, the study of American values and their reflection in modern popular culture has a great potential for further research and analysis.

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