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A Life on the Run: The Ballad of Cleopatra Analysis

Imagine being compared to the almighty, Egyptian Ruler Cleopatra. While it might seem far fetched (who could relate to such a person?) The Lumineers dared to make that comparison in their single “Cleopatra”. They do this in a way which pays homage to the late Cleopatra’s life while bringing in a modern element that makes it relatable to the people of today. Shortly after the release of their hit single “Cleopatra”, The Lumineers would go on to release their full album *Cleopatra* on April 8th, 2016. Once released, fans began to notice that multiple song on their new album fit together remarkably well and delve deeper into the story of this modern-day Cleopatra. A little over a year after *Cleopatra* was released The Lumineers released *The Ballad of Cleopatra*. This 24 minute video encompasses five music videos from The Lumineers released shortly after their album *Cleopatra*. Many fans speculate that the storyline of these videos went together however it wasn’t until *The Ballad of Cleopatra* was released that listeners everywhere got a chance to see The Lumineers’ vision/ inspiration for the song come to life. Each video contributes to the story of “Cleopatra” (we don’t know the woman’s true name): a women who lives with regret due to her not following the man of her dreams and leaving town right after her father died. The Lumineers’ *The Ballad of Cleopatra* is a prime example of the Act:Agent ratio while giving a clear and concise narrative and metaphor combo by using the storyline of the real-life ruler Cleopatra and comparing her to a modern-day love story. Today we

will be discussing the narrative of the Lumineers' Cleopatra throughout all four music videos, the underlying metaphor of *The Ballad of Cleopatra* as a whole, and finally how dramatism, or more specifically the Act:Agent ratio affects every video in the medley.

Context: The Lumineers are an alternative rock trio based out of Denver, Colorado. The band consists of three members: Wesley Schultz, Jeremiah Fraites, and Neyla Pekarek--Pakarek parted ways with the band in October of 2018. Schultz is known for playing guitar as well as being lead vocals for the band. Fraites is percussion as well as drums and Pekarek is a cellist and vocalist. The founding members began writing and recording in New Jersey in 2005. The band released their debut self-titled album: *The Lumineers* on April 3rd, 2012. The album went on to become triple platinum and receive two Grammy nominations, as well as produce two hit singles, "Ho Hey" and "Stubborn Love" (thelumineers.com). Four years later on April 8th, 2016 the band released their second album *Cleopatra*. This album also went Platinum and included the gold-titled track "Ophelia". They've toured all over the world and have opened up for musical greats and their heroes such as Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers and U2. Their Cleopatra tour featured two sold-out Madison Square Garden shows as well as a sold-out show at The Hollywood Bowl. The Lumineers have a distinct sound that some could describe as folk-rock mixed with electric. Schultz and Fraites are known for writing their own songs and credit real life experiences as well as raw emotion as the foundation for their lyrics (Sculley). Included on the *Cleopatra* album are five songs: "Ophelia", "Cleopatra", "Sleep on the Floor", "Angela", and "My Eyes" that held a special purpose. It was later discovered that these five songs--when played together told the story of a woman's life through certain stages. The music videos for these songs were released at different dates and were "out of order" to the storyline. It wasn't until almost a

year later, that the director of each music video as well as The Lumineers got together to release, “The Ballad of Cleopatra”. This 24 minute video put these five videos in order and strung them together to tell the full story (McCafferty).

Method: In order to analyze this piece, it is best to look at it through the lenses of narrative and metaphor. A narrative is something that is told --in most times a story--in vivid detail that follow a linear sequence. According to Foss, we use narratives to “organize the stimuli of our experiences so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives.” Foss believes that a story must be particular, shareable, and personable in order to be considered a narrative. A narrative must contain particular details and descriptions in order to give as much information to the listener as possible. A narrative must be shareable in which both the narrator and the listener are both of the same page. The narrator should be able to tell a story that the listener can understand and interpret. And finally, a narrative must be personable by in that the story is personal to the narrative in some way and therefore can relate to it better--making it easier for the listener to understand.

Another technique that will be used in analyzing this piece is Dramatism--or more specifically, the dramatistic pentad. The dramatistic pentad--created by Kenneth Burke is used to discover the motivation behind someone’s actions. There are five key components to Burke’s pentad and those are: act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose. Act explains the action itself and what happened. Agent is who “committed” the act/the main protagonist involved. Agency is taking a look at the tools used to commit the act. Scene describes where the act was committed. And lastly, purpose answers the question, “What does the agent want to accomplish by committing this act”. By using all five of these elements you can break down the story and study how each

component affects one another. After creating the pentad, Burke also discovered that these five elements tend to overlap in most cases and can have a direct effect on one another. Burke uses the term ratio to describe the relationship between two of the elements.

Analysis:

The Ballad of Cleopatra opens with the song “Ophelia”. This song is different from the other four videos because it has nothing to do with story of Cleopatra. Also it is important to note that this is the only video which solely features the band--or more specifically the lead singer Wesley Schultz. The Lumineers included this song and video in *The Ballad of Cleopatra* as a way of introducing themselves and discuss the effects of fame and their journey of rising to the top. It is one of their favorite songs on the album and could be considered the perfect introduction to what is considered their greatest piece of work.

The song “Ophelia” ends with Schultz getting into a taxi with a woman driving. The viewer soon realizes that this woman is Cleopatra--the main protagonist-- and thus *The Ballad of Cleopatra* truly begins. This is an excellent use of a transition as well as a great example of blending the storylines together. “Cleopatra” is an especially important song and video because it sets the storyline for the whole ballad. Looking at the lyrics themselves the song begins,

“I was Cleopatra, I was young and an actress

When you knelt by my mattress, and asked for my hand

But I was sad you asked it, as I laid in a black dress

With my father in a casket, I had no plans, yeah” (“Cleopatra”)

By analyzing the text we learn that Cleopatra is a woman whose lover asked her to run away with him shortly after her father’s death. These lyrics are a direct parallel with what we are currently seeing in the music video. The music video chooses to focus on how Cleopatra has

aged and is now a taxi driver. The video shows her driving around, picking up various passengers (of these passengers are versions of her younger self) and reminiscing on old times. It is evident that she is regretful of some decisions of her life. There is evidence to back up this assumption by looking at the chorus of the song. The Lumineers sing,

“But I was late for this, late for that, late for the love of my life

And when I die alone, when I die alone, when I die I'll be on time”

This shows that Cleopatra believes she was always “late” for opportunities in her life and therefore missed out. But, when she dies, that’s when she will truly be “on time” or ready.

Once the song “Cleopatra” ends, the ballad transitions to the song “Sleep on the Floor”.

This song begins by showing a much younger version of Cleopatra at what can be assumed is her father’s funeral. Therefore it is clear that the viewers have jumped back in time and are seeing where Cleopatra made a decision that would impact the rest of her life. The video then shows her lover whispering into her ear, “If you don’t leave now, you might never make it out.” These are specific lyrics from the song itself. Then the video shows what it would have been like if Cleopatra chose differently and instead of staying left with her lover. Taking a moment to analyze the lyrics of Sleep on the Floor, it appears that they are in the perspective of the lover. The Lumineers start the song with,

“Pack yourself a toothbrush dear

Pack yourself a favorite blouse

Take a withdrawal slip

Take all of your savings out

‘Cause if we don’t leave this town

We might never make it out

I was not born to drown

Baby come on.”

This demonstrates how the lover has a desire to leave their town and is trying to convince Cleopatra to come with him or she will never get out. The video continues to show them taking a road trip, exploring new sights, meeting new people, getting in little arguments, and ultimately falling even more in love. The climax of the video is reached with Cleopatra and her lover get married surrounded by new friends in an old house. They dance through the night and end up making a makeshift bed on the floor. The video ends and the viewer is sadly reminded that those events did not happen and Cleopatra never left town. The video ends with a still young Cleopatra driving around, clearly deep in thought, and transitions to an older Cleopatra--the protagonist of the “Angela” music video.

The beginning of the “Angela” music video shows a slightly older Cleopatra from what was just seen in “Sleep on the Floor”. This Cleopatra is around 30 or so and very pregnant. The music video does an excellent job of showing another major milestone that affected her life: choosing to leave her current husband. The music video begins with Cleopatra in bed with her husband. It is clear that she is restless and unable to be still. This could be said of her physical

state and mental state as well. Cleopatra leaves her home and decides to go on a drive. This correlates specifically with the lyrics of the song. In the chorus of the song, The Lumineers sing,

“Strangers in this town,
They raise you up just to cut you down
Oh Angela it’s a long time coming
Oh Angela spent your whole life running away.”

These lyrics represent how Cleopatra is always running away both physically and mentally. Cleopatra in the car in the “Cleopatra” music video, the “Sleep on the Floor” music video and now this one as well. And thus Cleopatra can never sit still/ never be truly content with her present. The video ends with her checking into a motel and going to sleep. From the moment Cleopatra parks in the motel parking lot it is clear that a huge weight has been lifted off her should--after a long time Cleopatra is, for once, content. Looking back at the lyrics of “Cleopatra” The Lumineers sing,

“And the only gifts from my Lord were a birth and a divorce.”

Therefore using context clues the viewer can assume that this is a new start for Cleopatra as she is going to divorce her husband and have a baby.

The ballad ends with the near-end of Cleopatra’s life. She is older now--much older than she was in the “Cleopatra” music video and in a nursing home. This video is one of the only videos that was not released on its own and instead was introduced at the end of *The Ballad of Cleopatra*. The video begins with the younger, taxi driver Cleopatra dropping off the older Cleopatra at her nursing home. Once again the taxi itself has acted as a “vehicle” to move the

story along. The video goes on to show her telling stories to nurses and getting ready for what she knows is the end. There is a moment where they show each version of Cleopatra driving. This is great at symbolising that all her life she has been using the act of driving as a means of escaping mentally and that she has always been moving. This video shows Cleopatra reflecting on her past and ultimately ends with her walking down a long hallway towards a door that leads outside--symbolizing that this is the end of the life of Cleopatra.

The Ballad of Cleopatra does an excellent job at piecing together the narrative of Cleopatra. First introduced as an older taxi driver, we go through the story of Cleopatra. We see the moment she decided to stay instead of running off with her lover, the moment she decided to leave her husband, and ultimately the moment she decided to leave earth. The Ballad of Cleopatra gave it's audience the perfect narrative tied up with a bow and ribbon. We see her transition from a young woman to an old, wise veteran of life. By the end, it is clear that Cleopatra has experienced a lot within her life and that journey has left her weathered and wise.

But taking a deeper look, what's even more important than the narrative itself is perhaps the underlying metaphor of the whole ballad. Cleopatra is often seen driving--or more specifically driving away from things. It is clear that she is unhappy with certain outcomes in her life and the best way to solve it mentally, in her eyes, is to physically run away--even for a brief moment. A great example of this is Cleopatra growing up and becoming a taxi driver in order to distract herself from the true reality of how her life turned out. The car itself could be described as the metaphorical "vehicle" that moves Cleopatra's life forward. With each decision that Cleopatra makes, she is driving forward down her own life path.

Taking a look at this ballad through Burke's dramatism lens, it is clear that the Act:Agent ratio is prominent throughout the entire ballad and it can be seen in the beginning lyrics of "Cleopatra. Looking back, the lyrics discuss how Cleopatra's lover asked her to marry him at her father's funeral. We later see this first hand in the "Sleep on the Floor" music video. It is clear that Cleopatra refuses his offer and ends up staying in her town for what can be assumed as the rest of her life. It is at this exact moment that Cleopatra seals her fate and thus the rest of her life is impacted forever. Because Cleopatra chooses to not go with her lover she is ultimately setting herself up for a life of regret. Therefore it can be said that the act: her not running away with her lover, affects the agent: her future self. She was never the same after that moment and ultimately her life could have been very different (maybe happier?) if she decided to be with someone who she truly loved AND got out of a town that some could consider her too big for.

The Lumineers truly took a story and made a beautiful collection of songs and videos into art. This 24-minute video encapsulates who Cleopatra was and why she is the way that she is. *The Ballad of Cleopatra* gives the narrative a woman who goes through life always trying to run away. We see her from a young woman all the way up until her last few seasons of life. The metaphorical aspect of it as well as her physically driving through life gives the viewer the perfect example that you can run away and never find what you are truly looking for.

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