



**A CRITICISM ON MATERIALISM TOWARDS AMERICAN
POPULAR CULTURE IN LORDE'S "ROYALS"**

A FINAL PROJECT

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement
For S-1 Degree in American Cultural Studies
In English Department, Faculty of Humanities
Diponegoro University

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SEMARANG
2015**

PRONOUNCEMENT

I states truthfully that this project is compiled by me without taking the results from other research in any university, in S-1, S-2, and S-3 degree and diploma. In addition, I ascertain that I do not take the material from other publications or someone's work except for the references mentioned in the bibliography.

Semarang, 4 April 2015

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MOTTO AND DEDICATION

Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning (Albert Einstein).

Our potential for positive and negative emotions is the same, but intelligence is our special quality. Use it well; be successful and happy (Dalai Lama).

It always seems impossible until it's done(Nelson Mandela).

This final project is dedicated to my beloved parents.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Praise be to Allah, who has given strenght and spirit to this final project on “Criticism on Materialism Towards American Popular Culture in Lorde’s “Royals” came to a completion. On this occasion, the writer would like to thank all those people who have contributed to the completion of this extended essay.

The deepest gratitude and aappreciation is extended to Drs. Siswo Harsono, M. Hum as the writer’s advisor who has given his continuous guidance, helpful correction, moral support, advice and suggestion without which it is doubtful that this final project came into completion.

The writer’s deepest thank also goes to the following:

1. Dr. Redyanto Noor, M. Hum as the Dean of Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University.
2. Sukarni Suryaningsih, S. S, M. Hum as the chairman of English Department, Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University.
2. All of the distinguished lecturers in the English Department, Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University who have shared their precious knowledge and experiences.
3. The writer’s beloved parents. Thank you for the endless love, pray, and support.
4. The writer’s beloved sister. Thank you for the love and support.
5. The writer’s beloved bestfriends in Sixo. Thank you for the precious and incredible friendship.

6. To all of the writer's family, friends, and acquaintances. Each of them has given her something to be learned.

The witer realizes that this final project is still far from perfect. The writer, therefore, will be glad to receive any constructive criticism and recommendation to make this final project better.

Finally, the writer expect that this final project will be useful to the reader who wishes to learn something about materialism, especially in American popular culture.

Semarang, 28April 2015

Gita Permatasari

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ABSTRACT

“Royals” is a song that sung by a singer, Lorde. The lyrics tell about popular culture in America which usually portrayed as something luxurious and glamorous. The purpose of this study is to know the content of the song by analyzing the lyrics and music video of the song. The study uses intrinsic and extrinsic theories to analyze the data and library research to compile the data. Library research is used to get literary and materialism theories. The finding of this study is an understanding of materialism in American popular culture which reflected through the symbols and expression in the song “Royals”.

Keywords: song, materialism, popular culture, royals, music video.

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1. Introduction

Songs are considered as reflections of the society and culture in which they were produced. Song lyrics are often used to help understanding the culture and the nature of the society. They often express judgements about lifestyle, values, and events. They also serve to unify groups of people and move them to an action or help them express emotions. One of the singers who expresses her emotions through a song is Lorde. She wrote the song “Royals” to express her feeling towards the glamorous world that is portrayed in the pop culture. The song is seen as a controversial song because its deep lyrics that criticize the society especially the pop culture that has become too materialistic.

The writer chooses “Royals” because the song lyrics and music video are very interesting to analyze. The lyrics has deep meaning and the music video visualizes it perfectly. The lyrics and music video of “Royals” are the object of this study since they are parts of the song that can represent the social issues, culture, or lifestyle in a particular area. In “Royals” lyrics and music video, there are some words and scenes that indicate the existence of materialism in American pop culture.

This essay aims to show the readers the concept of materialism and materialism in the American pop culture as reflected in the song “Royals”. In reference to this matter, the writer executes a study with the title of “Criticism on Materialism Towards American Popular Culture in Lorde’ “Royals”.

2. Singer and Songs

Lorde whose real name is Ella O'Connor was born on 7 November 1996 in New Zealand. In her early teens, she signed with "Universal Music Group" and was later paired with the songwriter and producer Joel Little, who co-wrote and produced most of Lorde's works. Her first major release, "The Love Club EP", was commercially released in March 2013.

In mid-2013, Lorde released her debut single "Royals" which became an international hit. The song was written and produced by Lorde and Little. It was peaking at the top of the US Billboard Hot 100 and eventually made Lorde the youngest solo artist to achieve a US number-one single since 1987. Later that year, she released her debut studio album, "Pure Heroine". The album charted at number three on the US Billboard 200. Its following singles include "Tennis Court", "Team", "No Better" and "Glory and Gore". In 2014, Lorde released "Yellow Flicker Beat" as a single from the soundtrack for the movie "The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1"

Lorde's music consists of the genres of electronica, pop and rock, including dream pop and indie-electro. In 2013, she was named among *Time*'s most influential teenagers in the world. Consequently, Lorde became the youngest solo artist to achieve a number-one single in the US with "Royals", "Royals" eventually won the 2013 APRA Silver Scroll Award, and two Grammy Awards for Best Pop Solo Performance and Song of the Year at the 2014 Grammy Awards.

The lyrical content of her two first major releases, *The Love Club EP* and *Pure Heroine*, criticize mainstream popular culture. Lorde expresses her indifference towards modern culture. Lorde chose her stage name because she was fascinated with "royals and aristocracy". Her music is noted for the manner in which its view of pop culture is contrasted with that of her contemporaries, such as Miley Cyrus and Rihanna.

3. Object

The object of this study is the song "Royals" including its lyrics and music video and will be analyzed in its intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. The intrinsic aspect will discuss the diction and cinematographic element of the music video, while the extrinsic aspect will discuss the materialism in American Popular Culture as reflected on the song.

3. 1. Song Lyrics

"Royals"

*I've never seen a diamond in the flesh
I cut my teeth on wedding rings in the movies
And I'm not proud of my address,
In a torn-up town, no postcode envy*

*But every song's like gold teeth, grey goose, trippin' in the bathroom
Blood stains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room,
We don't care, we're driving Cadillacs in our dreams.
But everybody's like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece.
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash.
We don't care, we aren't caught up in your love affair.*

*And we'll never be royals (royals).
It don't run in our blood,
That kind of luxe just ain't for us.*

*We crave a different kind of buzz.
Let me be your ruler (ruler),
You can call me queen Bee
And baby I'll rule, I'll rule, I'll rule, I'll rule.
Let me live that fantasy.*

*My friends and I—we've cracked the code.
We count our dollars on the train to the party.
And everyone who knows us knows that we're fine with this,
We didn't come from money.*

*Ooh ooh oh
We're bigger than we ever dreamed,
And I'm in love with being queen.
Ooh ooh oh
Life is great without a care
We aren't caught up in your love affair.*

3. 2. Paraphrase Lyrics

The song tells about Lorde's feelings towards the glamorous world portrayed by pop culture. The title "Royals" here refers to the aristocracy. The first verse of the song tells about her humbleness since she grows up in a small town in the suburbs. Nobody has envy of where she lives as it is not a rich area.

She lists some material things that signify wealth and describes how the aim of society today is to become as rich as they can. She mentions that the song nowadays is all about materialistic things and how pop stars are bragging about luxurious and expensive things they have. She also mentions the gap between fantasy of those luxurious things and the fact that she and her friends do not come from wealthy family.

The last verses of the song tell that eventhough she and her friends do not live the wealthy life, they are fine with it because they can just fantasize it in their dreams. They realize that they will never be royals because they do not come from aristocratic family. They do not want any luxurious things they see on tv, but they want to do different things that make them happy.

4. Theory and Method

In this study, the song “Royals is analyzed in its intrinsic and cinematography elements, and extrinsic element which is materialism in American pop culture. The analysis of intrinsic and cinematography elements lead to the analysis of materialism in American pop culture in the song “Royals”.

4. 1. Theory

In this study, the writer uses theory of intrinsic aspect, which builds the literary works and theory of extrinsic aspect, which comes from outside the literary works.

4. 1. 1. Intrinsic Aspect

The intrinsic elements are the elements that build the literary works, such as theme, diction, figure of speech, and imagery.

4. 1. 1. 1. Diction and Imagery

According to Holman in *A Handbook to Literature*, poetic diction is words chosen for a supposedly inherent poetic quality (1960: 361). Diction can be divided into two types: denotation and connotation. Denotation is the specific, exact meaning of a word, independent of its emotional colorations or associations (1960: 134). Meanwhile, connotation is the cluster of implications that words or phrases may carry with them, as distinguished from their denotative meanings (1960: 105). For example, the denotative meaning of the word “tree” is a tall plant with a wooden trunk and branches. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning of “tree” can be interpreted as the symbol of life and growth. Imagery is described as a term used widely in contemporary criticism, *imagery* has a great variety of meanings (1960: 233).

4. 1. 1. 2. Figurative Language

Figurative language is not the literal meaning of a word or phrase. It can be used by giving a word a specific meaning or comparing two things by using words that have unusual constructions or sounds. Holman describes that,

Figurative language intentional departure from the normal order, construction, or meaning of words in order to gain strength and freshness of expression, to create a pictorial effect, to describe by analogy, or to discover and illustrate similarities in otherwise dissimilar things (1960: 202).

There are some figurative language in the song “Royals”, they are:

1. Antithesis is a figure of speech characterized by strongly contrasting word, clauses, sentences, or ideas (1960: 28).

2. Metaphor is an implied analogy which imaginatively identifies one object with another and ascribes to the first one or more of the qualities of the second (1960: 281).
3. Symbolism is the use of one object to represent or suggest another (1960: 479).

4. 1. 1. 3. Elements of Cinematography

In this study, the writer only uses the camera distances to analyze the music video of the song. Pratista in *Memahami Film* describes distances as the dimension of distance between the camera and the object of the frame (2008: 104). There are seven kinds of shot in camera distance:

1. Extreme long shot shows the long distance between the camera and the object that the physical appearance of the object is small (2008: 105).
2. Long shot is when the physical appearance of the object can be seen clearly but the background is still dominant (2008: 105).
3. Medium long shot is when the body of the object only appear from the knee to head (2008: 105).
4. Medium shot shows the object from the waist to head so the expression of the face starting to show (2008: 105).
5. Medium close-up shot shows the object from the chest to the head. It is usually used for shooting normal dialogue scenes (2008: 105).
6. Close up shows a part of the object, such as face, hand, foot, or other parts to show expression in a more detailed way (2008: 105).

7. Extreme close up is the closest shot that shows the detail parts of an object, for example, part of face, such as ears, eyes, and nose (2008: 105).

4. 1. 2. Extrinsic Aspect

Extrinsic elements are indirectly related to the literary works. Extrinsic elements include the background, history, and biography of the author including his/her attitude, belief, and views that affect his/her works.

4. 1. 2. 1. Theory of Materialism

According to Macionis in *Sociology*, all societies are composed of social institutions, defined as the major spheres of social life, or societal subsystems, organized to meet human needs (2000: 98). In his analysis of society, Karl Marx argued that the economy institution dominates all the others and defines the character of society because it provides the basic needs of human. Doctrine of materialismsays that how humans produce material goods shapes their experiences. Marx believes that the political system, family, religion, and education are generally operate to support a society's economy. These institutions apply economic principles to other areas of life. People in the United States especially find it easy to think that affluent people have earned their wealth and those who are poor or out of work lack skills or motivation. In addition, Macionis states that,

Certain values dominate a society in the first place. Many conflict theories, especially Marxists, argue that culture is shaped by a society's system of economic production. Social-conflict theory, then, is rooted in the philosophical doctrine of *materialism*, which holds

that a society's system of material production (such as our own capitalist economy) has a powerful effect on the rest of a culture. This materialist approach contrasts with the idealist leanings of structural-functionalism. Social-conflict analysis ties the competitive values of the United States to the capitalist economy, which serves the interests of the nation's wealthy elite (2005: 98).

Marx develops the dialectical materialism, the core beliefs of Marxism. For Marx, the base of economic means of production within a society. It controls all human institutions and ideologies. These ideologies and institutions develop as a direct result of the economic means of production, not the other way around (Bressler, 1994: 163).

4. 2. Method of the Study

Method helps the writer to design the method of collecting the data related to the topic. To get clear explanations on the topic, the writer uses two methods in collecting the data, namely method of research and method of approach.

4. 2. 1. Method of Research

The writer uses library research to look for some information related to the topic. Library research is often used for those who choose not get direct information through survey and interview. The information on library research can be found from books, articles, and journals.

4. 2. 2. Method of Approach

Method of approach refers to the method in analyzing the object. To analyze the data related to the topic, the writer uses the objective and sociological

approaches. The objective approach is reflected through close reading method to get a deeper understanding of the lyrics, close listening to get a deeper understanding of the music, and close viewing to analyze the visual in the music video. These method used restrict the writer to analyze only the literary work, without linking it to the song writer's background and condition. The writer also uses cinematography elements in supporting the objective and sociological parts. The cinematography elements include the camera angle, camera distance, and camera position.

Furthermore, sociological approach is used to analyze the extrinsic aspect of the song. The approach defines the relationship of a literary work and the society. Due to the subject matter, the study emphasizes on the social content of the lyrics and music video and they are considered as a portrayal of social problem, namely materialism in popular culture in a multicultural country, the United States of America.

5. Discussion

In "Royals" lyrics and music video, there are some dictions and scenes that symbolize something. Every word in the lyrics and scene in the music video has its own interpretation for the reader.

5. 1. Textual Analysis

The music video opened with a shot that shows an empty street with two different sides which are symmetrical.



Picture 1. The houses in the music video

The camera shows the scene from a long and landscape shot of the street. The one side of the street is so bright, contrasts with the other side of the street which is darker. This shows the contradiction of two sides of the society, the ordinary or working class of society who live their lives happily and the higher class or the materialists who do not live a happy life because they only focused on material things .

Lorde uses imagery in this song to convey her message. The first line of the song, “I’ve never seen a diamond in the flesh” gives us the image of a person who has never seen diamond in real life. “I cut my teeth on wedding ring” makes us imagine a person who cuts her teeth on wedding ring. Through the line “We count our dollars on the train to the party”, we experience images of people who count their dollars on the train to the party. This also emphasizes the idea of their poverty.



Picture 2. Close-up shot of Lorde

The shot above shows Lorde through a close-up shot. She is looking straight at the camera and making interaction with the audience. The pale pink background blends well with the white top she is wearing. She looks so simple here, contrasts with what we usually see pop stars such as Madonna and Lady Gaga who dress up very glamorously. In this verse, there is a line that says “I’ve never seen a diamond in the flesh”. The word “flesh” has two meanings. The denotative meaning of “flesh” is the soft substance of a human or animal body, while the connotative meaning of it is “in person”. It means that she has never seen a real fancy diamonds like the ones we see on television. There is also another line that says “I cut my teeth on wedding rings in the movies”. “To cut your teeth” is a metaphor. To cut your teeth on something means to learn about something. It means that she learns about it in the movies, not in real life.

There are also some other metaphors that we can find in this song, such as gold teeth which is used as a metaphor for teeth that are commonly used by pop stars, grey goose for alcohol, blood stains refer to being reckless, ball gowns is a reference for partying, and trashin’ the hotel room means the

reckless party behavior by musician. A gold leash is a reference to excessive wealth. In this song, there is also a line that says “It don’t run in our blood”. It means that they did not come from aristocratic family. “Cracked the code” in the song means to figure out the answer or to realize something.



Picture 3. A medium shot of a boy in a sports hall

The picture above show a medium shot of an empty hall except for the one boy in the centre. The emptiness of the hall suggests that he feels empty and alone inside, or maybe that there is nothing ahead of his future as he looks ahead. In this verse, she mentions “Cadillac, Cristal, Maybach, and diamonds”. Those luxurious and expensive things symbolize the wealth.



Picture 4. A scene of two boys fighting

This long shot in landscape has a very little color in the room, suggesting the little happiness they have. There is also a sense of emptiness in the room as we can only see a plant, television, and chair. The two boys fighting with

each other can be implied that it is something that royals and materialists do, always compete with each other to be the best. The lyrics say “That kind of luxe just ain’t for us, we crave a different kind of buzz”, means that Lorde and her friends do not want any luxurious things they see on tv, but they want to do different things that make them happy.



Picture 5. A boy lying beside the train track

The focus on this shot is the boy lying beside the train track. The background and the surrounding are blurred out. The fact that he is lying beside the train track shows rebelliousness and carelessness. It is quite opposite to something that a “royal” would do.



Picture 6. A scene of four young men

In this shot we see four young men who have been featured throughout the music video. The camera shows them from behind at a mid-shot angle. It appears that they are waiting at the bus stop. We can assume that they are leaving their place in order to succeed. The verse above means that they will never be like the rich people they see on television.

5. 2. Contextual Analysis

“Royals” is about Lorde’s conflicting feelings towards the glamorous world portrayed by pop culture. The first verse of “Royals” tells about Lorde’s humbleness since she grows up in a small town in the suburbs. Nobody has envy of where she lives as it is not a rich area.

In the chorus, Lorde mentions gold teeth, *Cadillac*, *Cristal*, *Maybachs*, diamonds, jet planes, islands, and gold leash. Those are the general symbols of excessive wealth. Upon reading the lines in the chorus, we can think of many different things, from rich kids on social media who like to brag about things they own, mainstream rich family and musicians, such as the Kardashians, Kesha, Lady Gaga, and many more. Gold teeth, Cristal, and Maybach symbolize wealth and American cultural exports. Blood stains and ball gowns make people can be associated with celebrity socialities. *Cadillacs* is a luxury car brand which mostly driven by rich old people. And “trashin hotel rooms” refers to the lifestyle of pop stars. It is true that “gold teeth” makes people think immediately of mainstream pop culture, especially hip hop. She lists

some material things that signify wealth and describes how the aim of society today is to become as rich as they can. This is in accordance with what Karl Marx said that material production has a powerful effect on a culture. Nowadays, people are getting obsessed with materialistic things because they think that those things make them happier and cooler. People are starting to define their worth from what they possess.



Picture 7. *Cristal* wines

She mentions on material items that are extremely expensive. The pictures above are examples of the expensive wine *Cristal* that costs \$200 per bottle. It is a wine from South America which has been known for its smooth and sweet taste.



Picture 8. *Maybach* products

The pictures above are examples of a luxurious brand item which she also mentions in the song, *Maybach*. The brand produces a lot of luxurious items such as accessories, eyewear, leather goods, etc that could cost to \$350 to over a million dollars. The costs of jet planes and private islands which she also mentions in the song are similarly bloated. She indirectly criticizes the society who glorifies this kind of lifestyle.



Picture 9. Cadillac cars and interior

The pictures above are *Cadillac* cars and its interior. It is a luxury American car brand which mostly driven by rich people. The “Cadillacs in our dreams” in the song makes it sound like that eventhough Lorde and her friends do not live the wealthy life, they are fine with it because they can fantasize about it in their dreams. In the last verse of the song, she seems to say that she’d rather wants something else in her life that the royal or high class status. She uses “we” here to imply that she is with a group with the same mind as her. It means that they will never like those rich folks that they see on tv. They have to work hard in order to succeed.

In the second chorus, she mentions her fantasy about ruling and being a queen. Queen is the symbol of supreme power. It can be implied that she will realize that fantasy through pop culture because she is a singer. In the last line of the song, she implies that she does not care about the life of the royals and materialists. She and her friends also do not care about the love affair of the royals and materialists.

6. Conclusion

“Royals” which was released in 2013 is a very interesting song. It has deep meaning in the lyrics and music video. Based on the analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the song, the writer found some findings. “Royals” is about a conflicting feeling towards the glamorous world portrayed by popular culture.

From the song, it is clear that Lorde rejects the overly materialistic values in popular culture because they are not part of her reality. She and her friends are happy by just living the ordinary life. They realize that they will never be royals because they do not come from aristocratic family. They also do not need to actually have money and expensive things to feel the same happiness that come from luxurious things. Look at America today, there are many people who are obsessed with unnecessary luxurious products. There is no end to the products that people want, such as the latest expensive cars, branded stuffs, and many luxury goods. Popular songs, movies, advertisements, and TV shows are bombarding people and telling how a certain brand of stuff will make them happier, cooler, and more fulfilled. People are starting to define their worth from what they possess. While more people are getting obsessed with materialistic things because they can make them feel royals, Lorde can just live in her own ordinary world because it makes her feel special.

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