

Abstract

The lyrics of Gabriel-era Genesis music are rich with imagery and detailed characters and a compelling sense of story telling that contains direct narrative, theatrical libretto, pun and wordplay and even surrealism.

In this paper I will show that there are four distinct lyrical themes running through the early work of Genesis, the themes being Sex, Greek Mythology, English Culture and History and Topical Issues.

By no means is this a thorough and complete analysis of all the works of Genesis from 1969 to 1975.

My intention is to show these reoccurring themes are present and to perhaps gain some insight into the mindset of the artists that created them.

The Musical Box

(sex, English history/culture)

“Play me Old King Cole...”

“And now, we'd like to take you to a peaceful English game of croquet, where at this precise point in time little Henry is approaching his first shot but little Cynthia is behind little Henry...(crouches down, sneaks up on little Henry...stands abruptly, swings arms downward and screams “THOOOO!” “PPHHTTT!”...mimes both the removal of Henry's head and it's spinning airborne arc.) Henry. Dead. But, he grows his little wings, flys all the way upwards, then all the way downwards because he's been rejected up there (and) told to come back as an old man at the opening of his old musical box.”

-Peter Gabriel's introduction to “The Musical Box”, Shepperton Studios, 1973.

“While Henry Hamilton Smythe minor (8) was playing croquet with Cynthia Jane De Blaise – William (9), sweet smiling Cynthia raised her mallet high and gracefully removed Henry's head. Two weeks later, in Henry's nursery, she discovered his treasured musical box. Eagerly she opened it and as “Old King Cole” began to play a small spirit figure appeared. Henry had returned – but not for long, for as he stood in the room his body began ageing rapidly leaving a child's mind inside. A lifetime's desires surged

through him. Unfortunately the attempt to persuade Cynthia Jane to fulfill his romantic desire led his nurse to the nursery to investigate the noise. Instinctively Nanny hurled the musical box at the bearded child, destroying both.”

*- Original liner notes for “The Musical Box” from the album “Nursery Cryme”
(Charisma, CAS 1052, 1971)*

The game of croquet is thought to have been introduced to England around 1852, based on a game played in Ireland called “crooky”. The game was marketed to the growing British middle class in many ways, including croquet sets being manufactured and displayed at The Great Exhibition Of 1841.

The game became popular very quickly, and one of the main reasons for this was because it was a game men and women could play together. In Victorian England “...much of the attraction of the game lay in the opportunities it afforded for flirting between the sexes in an otherwise strait-laced society.”¹

The game was taken rather lightly, with rules being loosely applied. Players could arrange the wickets however they pleased and would go in any order they chose at any given moment. It seems this flexibility made it more of a “game” than a sport, and much more social than competitive.

“Croquet blossomed because Victorians decided that women might play it privately around men, and might even play it with men. As perhaps the first mixed-sex sport, it evidenced both restrictions and experiments. English men and women tended to play it behind houses, on private property, not in public parks.

But even in private surroundings, teenagers pushed all sorts of social boundaries. Girls and women routinely cheated. Long skirts masked the subtle kick that directed an opponent's ball away from a wicket or stick. Advice books counseled male players to ignore such behaviour. Just playing a lawn game with women should delight them, and judging female morality according to sporting codes meant philosophical disaster. Flirtation drove croquet rules. Knocking an opponent's ball into the shrubbery meant a chance to follow the opponent into the undergrowth to help him or her find the ball. Young Victorians loved the game.”²

Now as for “Old King Cole”...

There is quite a bit of debate on who King Cole was, or whether he even existed. The most probable possibility is that he was a Roman military commander named Coel Hen who became king after the Romans left Britain. He would have ruled from the Welsh to the Scottish borders in around 410 A.D, after which he was defeated by the Picts.

Another version of the story, one much more fanciful, is that of “Old Thomas Cole”, or Thomas-of-Reading, a wealthy clothier in the early 1100's. The story goes that “...while traveling from his home in Reading to meetings with buyers and clients in London, Cole would habitually stop off at a pub en route called The Ostrich - the landlord and landlady of which were serial murderers. They had rigged a trapdoor in one of their rooms that would drop their wealthiest guests through the floor, and into an enormous

vat of boiling water in the kitchens below. According to Deloney's tale, Cole stayed in The Ostrich's rigged bedroom a total of five times, but each time some unexpected circumstance—an argument among card players downstairs, a fire in a nearby town, the arrival of the mail from London—intervened, and prevented him from being killed. In the end, Cole dies peacefully in his bed at The Ostrich, the landlords' plot is uncovered, the couple are hanged, and King Henry himself appears and demands the pub be burned to the ground.”³

However unlikely, this version speaks to the English love of a good horror story, which is very much like the lyrics for “The Musical Box”.

Speaking of horror stories, Peter Gabriel has said that one of the biggest influences on the lyrics of “The Musical Box” is the novella “The Turn Of The Screw” by Henry James published in 1898, a terrifying story of child murder and ghosts.

Said Gabriel, “...I think my head at the time also was in this Victoriana world which I pictured around the house my Dad had grown up in...and...so this sort of controlled, English mental landscape, under which festered violence and sex, was the sort of flavor that I was trying to bring in to the lyrics and vocals.”⁴

“The Musical Box” is an incredibly dark piece of music. The lyrical theme consists of children killing children, an apparently ambivalent and arbitrary God that would refuse the spirit of a murdered child entry into Heaven and damn it to return as an ancient pedophile, all told in the guise of a ghost story.

It could be that subverting the pleasantries of British culture was not the only thing going on in the mind of Gabriel. As a child and an attendee of Charterhouse, his upbringing and scholastic life was influenced greatly by the constant presence of the Church Of England. It was the practice in his days at Chaterhouse that students be required to take theology classes and attend church services on Sunday. The lyric “and the nurse will tell you lies of a kingdom beyond the skies” and the idea that an innocent murdered child would be rejected entrance into heaven and sent back to earth in some form of grotesquely sexual abomination seems blasphemous. It's not too much of a stretch to think these lyrics may be an act of rebellion against his COE upbringing.

The Fountain Of Salmacis

(greek mythology, sex)

“...Forever to be joined as one...”

The Fountain Of Salmacis is from the Roman poet Ovid's “Metamorphoses Book IV” and, especially when viewed through the Genesis lens, is another dark and horrifying tale of lust, death and a strange “rebirth”.

It's really quite a straight retelling of the original story of a Nymph (Salmacis) who falls in love with Hermaphroditus (son of Hermes and Aphrodite). After refuting her advances and thinking he is alone, the youth (15) decides to bathe in the waters of her pool. She then attacks him, holding him down in the pool as she kisses, fondles and

otherwise molests him. At one point she screams “You'll not escape! Ye Gods ordain no day shall ever dawn to part us twain!”

Apparently the Gods approved of this idea and merged the two beings together into one body, creating the first Hermaphrodite.

As the grim theme of sex and violence appear lyrically in many Genesis songs, from “The Musical Box” to “Mama”, this one is interesting in the sense that it is not an original story but is straight out of Greek mythology. Songs like “The Cinema Show” and “The Lamia” would reference Greek myths but not directly tell the story with musical accompaniment. Many of the early progressive rock bands would use Greek mythology, so perhaps this was just a product of the mindset of those bands at that time. However, it is true that the study of Greek mythology was a part of the Charterhouse Public School curriculum, so this would have been taught to Banks, Gabriel and Rutherford. Also, the dark sexual turn is one of the distinctive qualities of Genesis lyrics.

The song was written by all five members, but Hackett and Collins were not contributing much original material at the time of creating the album “Nursery Cryme”, with the exception of their playing in the band's jam sessions which would produce the instrumental ideas, and the song “For Absent Friends”.

Dancing With The Moonlit Knight

(English history/culture, topical)

“...Selling england by the pound...”

“Old Father Thames advanced his reverend head;

His tresses dropp'd with dews, and o'er the stream

His shining horns diffused a golden gleam:

Grav'd on his arm appear'd the moon that guides

His swelling waters and alternate tides:

The figur'd streams in waves of silver roll'd,

And on her banks Augusta rose in gold.”*

- “Windsor Forest”, Alexander Pope, 1713

(* an ancient name for London)

“...I was trying to get a folk reference, and, sort of, if you like, protect and preserve some of the englishness, so it was, um, in the opening part particularly, trying to capture something that...had more references to Henry the Eighth than it did to American soul music...and then with the lyric, it was in a sense about...the commercialization of english culture.”⁵ - Peter Gabriel on writing the lyrics for “Dancing With The Moonlit Knight”.

The lead off track from “Selling England By The Pound” is a veritable tapestry of English history and topical points. The song is about taking a hard, sober look at being British and struggling with the release of a romantic notion of England, and dealing with the commercialisation of British culture.

The British economy was in a terrible state by the 1970's. The British pound had been devalued in 1967 from US\$2.80 to US\$2.40. Deindustrialization, low wages, what jobs that did exist requiring high skills that workers didn't have, and the importation of low cost Asian manufacturing all took a tremendous toll. The coal mining industry was collapsing. Railways were dying. Textile mills were closing faster than new ones could open, and the steel and auto industries were in complete disarray. Economic subsidies were being given to industrially obsolete communities since 1964. Broadly, there was a divide in public opinion; keep producing and buying British product (the past: staying true to the British tradition of self reliance) or seek help from the European Union (the present: acknowledge the realities of the modern economic world and work with them).

The references to British history and the “new” England are spun with Gabriel's penchant for pun and wordplay.

The song begins with Peter singing the phrase “Can you tell me where my country lies...” a capella. This is reminiscent of a very old Celtic/Anglo Saxon style called “plainsong”, in which a singer sings a story unaccompanied. Many of these ancient songs begin with a phrase like “Can you tell me...” or “Let me tell you...”. Right from the start we are taken back in time by way of the structure of the song.

The second line is “...said the unifaun to his true love's eyes...”, “unifaun” being a combination of uniform (the military) and a faun, a half human-half goat creature from Roman mythology that represents peace and fertility. Rome occupied most of England from AD 43 to AD 410, and both the uniform and the faun of Romano - British culture symbolize British history and the military, suggesting that the character is an ancient patriot. The next line contains a reference to the “Queen Of Maybe”, a pun on the May Queen, a very recognizable British character.

The expression “Paper late!”, heard in the fifth line, is a twist on what the newspaper sellers on the streets would yell, offering the late edition. Later there is a reference to “Old Father Thames”, England's ancient river-god, leaving a signed note before “drowning” and “selling England by the pound”. If we see Father Thames as a reference to British pride and the “never surrender” attitude and the signed note as a suicide note, then we can see that the allegory is that the proud Brit would rather drown by suicide in a world where he was once a god than to see all that he once stood for be cheapened and demeaned.

The lyric “...chewing through your Wimpey dreams, they eat without a sound, digesting England by the pound” contains a double reference to the state of the British economy. Inexpensive government subsidized housing constructed by the Wimpey Company had housed many low income Brits since the 1920's. These cheaply built and rather ugly buildings had become a symbol of urban blight and decay. Also, there were “Wimpy” fast food restaurants in Britain going back to the 1950's.

Cheap food, cheap housing, and a sense of glory lost.

Further still we have the lyrics “Join the dance! Follow on! Till the grail sun sets in the mould”. This is a rallying cry to celebrate Englishness.

In the days of King Arthur and his quest for the Holy Grail, Christianity and paganism were joined in an odd synthesis.

In this case the Holy Grail is represented by the sun, and the command is that we continue our celebrations into the night. If the “Moonlit Knight” is a symbolic pagan deity then “Knights of the green sheild stamp and shout” would *seem* to be a call to celebration; however, Green Shield Stamps were a British sales promotion scheme going back to the 1950's. Arthurian legend is combined with British capitalism in a twist of phrase.

More references to British consumerism are made in the reprise of “Dancing With The Moonlit Knight” at the end of “Selling England By The Pound” in the track “Aisle Of Plenty.” Twists of phrase turn the lyrics “Tess co-operates” and “safe way home” into references to the Tesco and Safeway grocery store chains. Finally in the fade out of the track Gabriel (and possibly others?) are heard chanting “English ribs of beef cut down to 47p lb, peek Frean's family assorted from 17 1/2 to 12, fairy liquid giant - slashed from 20p to 17 1/2, table jelly's at 4p each, anchor butter down to 11p for a 1/2, birds eye dairy cream sponge on offer this week. It's scrambled eggs.”

The Cinema Show

(sex, Greek mythology)

“...take a little trip back with Father Tiresias...”

In Genesis's hands, a simple, pretty song about a date night between a modern day Romeo and Juliet (Juliet clearing “her morning meal”, Romeo locking “his basement flat”) segues into the Greek mythological story of Tiresias, the blind prophet of Apollo who was transformed into a woman for seven years.

It seems the Greek gods were in debate about who enjoyed sex more, men or women, and so Tiresias was sent to live life as a man, then a woman, and then a man again. Upon returning he told the gods that women enjoyed sex more, for which he was struck blind. He was also stricken with the power of prognostication that was unfortunately coupled with an inability to convince anyone of his visions.

In T.S. Elliot's "The Waste Land Part 3 – The Fire Sermon", Tiresias, introducing himself as "throbbing between two lives, old man with wrinkled female breasts", describes the scene of an awkward sexual encounter between a typist and clerk that ends in her indifferently giving in to his selfish, aggressive sexual advances, which Tiresias describes as an assault.

Afterward, "She turns and looks a moment in the glass, hardly aware of her departed lover; Her brain allows one half formed thought to pass; "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over."

So once again we have a hermaphrodite and Greek mythology. The dark and violent sex in Elliot's poem are not found in Genesis's lyrics here, but it's important to note that they are in the text that was the biggest inspiration for them.

The Battle Of Epping Forest

(Topical)

“...Yes, they disagree on a gangland boundary...”

“Taken from a news story concerning two rival gangs fighting over East-End Protection rights” - Original liner notes for “The Battle Of Epping Forest” from the album “Selling England By The Pound”, Charisma, CAS 1074, 1973

“The Battle Of Epping Forest” is filled with Gabriel's penchant for puns, wordplay and sense of humor, including describing a gangland boundary war in a way similar to a sportscaster calling a soccer game and a bit about a “Reverend” who becomes indebted to one of the gangs and subsequently becomes a “karmachanic” who sells “Love, Peace & Truth Incorporated for all who seek”. In this battle accountants keep score and there is a “thumpire”.

The story of Ronnie and Reggie Kray, the London east end gangsters who ruled the criminal underworld through extreme violence and intimidation throughout the 1960's has been well documented, as has that of their chief rivals the Richardson Family. In spite of the fact that the Krays were arrested and convicted in 1969, modern English culture still sees the Krays as the embodiment of British criminality.

The only reference found in “Battle” of the Krays can *potentially* be seen when the “Bethnal Green Butcher” comes “in with a left hook”. The Krays were from Bethnal Green (an area that never gave up their love for the boys, who claimed that they saw themselves as protectors and providers for the underclass in that area of London) and were both quite good boxers in their younger days, before the assault of a police officer put an end to that career.

The songs lyrics could have been inspired by any one of many gangs from the '60's or '70's. Crime was thriving in the 1970's in England as the country was in deep economic turmoil.

The concept of taking a hard look at englishness and the commercialization of english culture are only loose ideas found on “Selling England By The Pound”, found in “Dancing With The Moonlit Knight”, it's subsequent reprise in “Aisle Of Plenty”, the title of the album (which is taken from “Dancing”) and “The Battle Of Epping Forest”.

Even “Battle” is a bit of a stretch. It really only works in that context when viewed with the idea that the British pride that had guided England throughout the war years and the rebuilding of England afterward had been eroded and that popular tastes at that time preferred media that would turn gangsters into celebrities, which is what happened when British tabloids ran pictures of the Krays in tailor made suits and expensive cars. They were also photographed hobnobbing with none other than Lord Boothby, a conservative politician that the Sunday Mirror insinuated was having an affair with Ronnie. At a time when homosexuality was a criminal offence, no less.

The Lamia

(Greek mythology, sex)

“...struck by beauty, gripped in fright...”

The mythological story of Lamia, daughter of Poseidon and the beautiful Queen of Libya, is that she was a lover of Zeus who was driven mad when his jealous wife Hera learned of their affair and took her children by either murdering them or forcing Lamia to kill them herself. She was also turned into a snake-like sea monster by Zeus.

Driven by rage, Lamia swears revenge against all other child-bearing women by stealing and eating their children.

The story of Lamia has been used throughout the years to scare children into obedience, like a mythological boogeyman. Versions of the character also show up in other stories, most often as a seductive succubus (she did after all seduce Zeus), as in Bram Stoker's “Dracula”. In continuous retellings of the story the idea of the Lamia has developed into being more of a type of seductive, blood sucking monster as opposed to a singular entity.

In the story of *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*, the *Lamiae* (there being three of them) attempt to seduce the virginal Rael and eat him. Rael, who is “The Lamb”, certainly a reference to Christ, and who would eventually give his life to save his brother who had betrayed him (although the brother is revealed to be the other half of his split personality), is too pure for the *Lamiae*. After receiving the first few drops of his blood they are destroyed and Rael turns the tables by devouring them.

Get 'Em Out By Friday

(topical)

“...In the interest of humanity we've found a better place for you to go....”

The late nineteenth century saw the industrialization of Britain, which meant a great surge of people flocking to the cities to find work. Housing was provided by private owners and builders who mostly built unplanned and inexpensive houses and rented them for profit. These are the houses for which the word “slum”, thought to be East End London slang for “back alley” or “poor area”, became commonly used. Overcrowding and poor housing conditions quickly became commonplace, particularly in London, Glasgow, Liverpool and Newcastle.

It wasn't until 1919, when the Housing And Town Planning Act came into effect, that councils became the primary providers of affordable housing. The councils would apply for subsidies and would further share the cost with the tenants and local rate payers.

This however did not mean the end of slum areas, and of course not of private interest businesses who still bought cheap housing for the purpose of renting.

The people who comprise these businesses are often referred to as slum lords, and if we are speaking of British slum lords, there is one who set the bar so low that his name is used as the basis of a synonym for the exploitation of tenants found in the Oxford dictionary. The word is “Rachmanism”, and his name was Perec “Peter” Rachman.

Police investigations and reports from former tenants paint a horrible picture of a man who would think nothing of threatening unwanted tenants with extreme violence, though never uttering an intimidating word himself. If Rachman wanted a tenant moved from a rent controlled building he owned, an extremely threatening thug or group of thugs with dogs would pay a visit. Neighboring houses would be bought up and used to hold extremely loud parties everynight.

When the unwanted tenants would leave the house that had been designed to house one family would be divided into as many as four apartments and rented to recent immigrants that had nowhere else to go. The conditions of the apartments were unbearably squalid.

Rachman was involved in the well publicised Profumo affair, and was prosecuted twice on charges of prostitution but never convicted. While it is understood that by no means was he the only unscrupulous landlord to use such practices, he was the most notorious.

Gabriel's lyrics are done in the style of a fantasy play, with different characters having different personalities that are portrayed in the vocal delivery. The lyrics that were printed on the sleeve of the album "Foxtrot" are done in the style of a program that tell the listener who is speaking.

John Pebble, of Styx Enterprises, begins the song with a diatribe to his underlings that they must "Get 'em out by Friday! You don't get paid 'till the last one's away!"

Gabriel sings this character in a full throated aggressive manner, portraying a man very much in charge of the real estate agency.

Mark Hall, an agent with the firm who is in charge of moving the tenants from place to place, is sung in a cockney accent. This vile creature veritably oozes disingenuousness as he uses expressions like "In the interest of humanity" to thinly veil that "we've found a better place for you to go". This creepy little man makes one think of a moralless cretin who will stop at nothing to achieve "success".

Mrs. Barrow, a tenant, is sung in a quiet, frail voice. The singing takes on a mournful, plaintive sound when she sings the words "seeing as how they'd take more money."

The song progresses in this fashion, each character taking a turn. Memorable lines that define the characters are, for example, Pebble screaming “And if it isn't easy you can squeeze a little grease and our troubles will soon run away!” (a Rachman-esque threat), Hall uttering “Sadly since last time we spoke, we've found we've had to raise the rent again just a bit” and Mrs Barlow saying “I think we're going to find it hard.”

Gabriel's lyrics and vocal performance make it very easy to understand each character and develop feelings towards them. There is no question as to where his sympathies lie; Pebble, Hall and Styx Enterprises, representing slumlords dressed as respectable property investors, are a gallery of cretinous villains and Mrs. Barlow, representing the poorer classes, are helpless victims.

The song takes an interesting turn at the end, when the element of fantasy is brought in.

There is a leap in the timeline to the year 2012, when an announcement from “Genetic Control” states that there will be a “four foot restriction on Humanoid height.” This is followed by an extraction of a conversation with “Joe Ordinary” in the local “Puborama” who says that Genetic Control have been buying all the properties and will be able to fit twice as many in a building site because of the new height restrictions.

The final lines are from Satan (a play on words for “Satan”) Peter (Satan Peter?) from Rock Development Ltd., which are ““With land in your hand, you'll be happy on earth then invest in the Church for your heaven.” Perhaps this is a comment on the business side of religion, portraying money grubbing religious institutions as spirtual slumlords acting on behalf of Religion Inc. Another jab at the Church Of England.