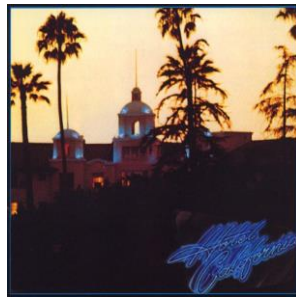


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English 1102M

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The Poetic Meaning Behind “Hotel California”

On the evening of January 12, 1998, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame initiated seven new members: Don Henley, Glenn Frey, Don Felder, Bernie Leadon, Randy Meisner, Timothy B. Schmit, and Joe Walsh. Collectively, these men form the legendary band the Eagles (The Eagles). The band, throughout their three decade career, has sold millions of records and became the first band in history to have an album certified as platinum (The Eagles). Their best-selling album to date contains their most popular single of the same name, “Hotel California” (The Eagles). Thirty years after its initial release, the song remains controversial due to its ambiguous meaning. Despite its success, the Eagles refuse to reveal the true meaning of song, and as a result, many theories have evolved concerning its meaning, such as devil worshiping and drug use (“Hotel California (song)”). In addition to the ambiguity of the lyrics, the song contains many contradictions and bizarre images. As a result, shifts in tone and deviations aid in delivering the progression of “Hotel California” from festive to frightful.

At first, the song conveys a sense of exhilaration but quickly shifts to a sense of urgency to escape with changing tones. For example, the chorus begins with:

Welcome to the Hotel California

Such a lovely place (Such a lovely place)

Such a lovely face

Plenty of room at the Hotel California

Any time of year (Any time of year)

You can find it here (lines 13-18)

Repetition of “such a lovely place” creates emphasis of that particular, positive aspect of the hotel, making the hotel seem warm and inviting (line 14). The same concept applies to “any time of year” since that line repeats as well (line 17). Also, the speaker finds “plenty of room at the Hotel California,” implying that anyone can join in the festivities (line 16). In addition to the chorus, the second verse contains the same celebratory tone. The second half of the second verse states, “So I called up the Captain, / 'Please bring me my wine' / He said, 'We haven't had that spirit here since nineteen sixty-nine’” (lines 23-25). The “spirit” that the captain refers to implies that the guests at the hotel had looked for a carefree attitude before the speaker arrived, especially with the mention of wine. However, when the speaker speaks with a woman at the hotel, she says, “We are all just prisoners here, of our own device’” (line 37). The word “prisoners” implies that the guests at the hotel are trapped, and the sense of freedom experienced earlier faded rather quickly. The speaker then sees the guests gather for a feast “in the master's chambers” (line 38). The previous reference to “prisoners” suggests that “chambers” could take on another meaning besides “bedroom.” “Chambers” in this sense could possibly refer to torture chambers. The chambers could be either physical or theoretical, making the image the complete opposite of the “lovely place...with pretty, pretty boys” (lines 14, 20). The speaker observes “[the guests] [stabbing] it with their steely knives / but they just can't kill the beast” (lines 40-41). The

“it,” regardless of the representative object, receives the violent action, contrary to nonviolent action of dancing earlier. The speaker goes on to say,

Last thing I remember, I was
Running for the door
I had to find the passage back
To the place I was before
'Relax,' said the night man,
'We are programmed to receive.
You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!' (lines 42-49)

Favorable circumstances would not cause the speaker to leave; however, a negative change in circumstances would cause the speaker to reconsider. The hotel now symbolizes two contrasting ideas as shown by the shifting tones.

With shifting tones, binaries contribute to showing contrasting ideas represented by different objects. For example, when the speaker first arrives at the hotel, he says, “This could be Heaven or this could be Hell” (line 9). The first half of the song relates to Heaven as the guests “dance in the courtyard” and have valued possessions such as a “Mercedes-Benz” or “pretty, pretty boys,” as pleasant images or actions relate to Heaven (lines 21, 18, 19). The second half of the song relates to Hell as “[the guests] stab [their feast] with their steely knives / But they just can't kill the beast” (lines 40-41). Beasts and violence relate to Hell, which contrasts with the images of Heaven. Another example of a binary shows the guests dancing while “some dance to remember, some dance to forget” (line 22). One dance means different things to different people just as the hotel represents different ideas to the speaker. Yet another

binary rests with the voices that the speaker hears when he first arrives to the hotel. At first, the voices “were...down the corridor / [he] thought [he] heard them say...” (lines 11-12). The uncertainty of the voices in the first verse differs from the voices mentioned in the second verse where “[they] are calling from far away / [and] wake you up in the middle of the night” (lines 26-27). The voices mentioned here are definite and stronger than before. Together, the binaries mirror the progression of the song as it shifts tones, which aids the movement of the song from celebratory to disturbing.

In addition to shifts in tone and binaries, deviations play a role in the advancement of the song. The first verse describes the speaker's journey to the hotel by using imagery to create flow and rhythm. It begins with:

On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light
My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim
I had to stop for the night (lines 1-5)

However, the second verse deviates slightly by changing the use of diction, giving the verse a choppy rhythm, but the festive tone of the second verse remains consistent with the tone of the first verse. It begins with:

Her mind is Tiffany-twisted, she got the Mercedes Benz
She got a lot of pretty, pretty boys she calls friends
How they dance in the courtyard, sweet summer sweat
Some dance to remember, some dance to forget (lines 19-22)

The choppy rhythm mirrors the frightfulness in the verses following the second chorus. Also, the second verse splits into two sections, another deviation in structure. The second half of the second verse follows the same idea as the first half of the second verse, as celebration with the wine correlates with the dancing. However, the following verses along with the first verse contain separate ideas that do not link directly to one another. The first verse has the speaker arriving at the hotel, the third verse has the speaker observing the mental insanity of the guests, and the final verse has him “running for the door” (line 43). Another deviation lies within the second verse as the speaker goes from “we haven't had that spirit here since nineteen sixty-nine” to “and still those voices are calling from far away” (lines 25-26). The distraught voices replace the lively spirit just as the haunted hotel replaces the lively hotel. Another deviation lies in the second appearance of the chorus. The first chorus ends with, “Plenty of room at the Hotel California / Any time of year (any time of year) / You can find it here” while the second chorus ends with “They livin' it up at the Hotel California / What a nice surprise (what a nice surprise) / Bring your alibis” (lines 16-18, 32-34). The deviation here, especially with the addition of “bring your alibis,” serves as a transition to the other half of the song where the tone shifts.

The great singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen once said, “If I knew where good songs [came] from, I'd go there more often” (Cohen qtd. in Williamson 223). Songwriters, regardless of their respective genres, “[work] at bringing words and music together. [...] A songwriter is someone who believes that, through writing, he or she will be *heard* and therefore transformed in some way” (Williamson 248). According to songwriter Jimmy Webb, “Song ideas are the most intense longings of the soul and its deepest regrets” (3). Any song that stands the test of time has a special meaning hidden within it and passes on from generation to generation. “Hotel California” remains relevant because of its mysterious meaning, thirty years after its initial

release. The reason for its staying power is the meaning of the lyrics on the surface. While critics and fans alike have debated the true meaning of the song for years, the song ultimately serves as a metaphor for life. People all come to a point in their lives where everything goes their way; then, some dramatic event occurs where they look at things differently. Everything pleasant suddenly turns sour, and the things people once loved get reevaluated. The hotel symbolizes that turn in life, for better or for worse.

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“Hotel California”

On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance, I saw shimmering light

My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim
I had to stop for the night
There she stood in the doorway;
I heard the mission bell
And I was thinking to myself,
'This could be Heaven or this could be Hell'
Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way
There were voices down the corridor,
I thought I heard them say...

Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place (Such a lovely place)
Such a lovely face
Plenty of room at the Hotel California
Any time of year (Any time of year)
You can find it here

Her mind is Tiffany-twisted, she got the Mercedes Benz
She got a lot of pretty, pretty boys she calls friends
How they dance in the courtyard, sweet summer sweat.
Some dance to remember, some dance to forget

So I called up the Captain,
'Please bring me my wine'
He said, 'We haven't had that spirit here since nineteen sixty nine'
And still those voices are calling from far away,
Wake you up in the middle of the night
Just to hear them say...

Welcome to the Hotel California
Such a lovely place (Such a lovely place)
Such a lovely face
They livin' it up at the Hotel California
What a nice surprise (what a nice surprise)
Bring your alibis

Mirrors on the ceiling,
The pink champagne on ice
And she said 'We are all just prisoners here, of our own device'
And in the master's chambers,
They gathered for the feast
They stab it with their steely knives,
But they just can't kill the beast

Last thing I remember, I was

Running for the door
I had to find the passage back
To the place I was before
'Relax,' said the night man,
'We are programmed to receive.
You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!'