# EDUCATING ETHICAL VALUE AND VIRTUOUS EMOTION THROUGH POP SONG LYRICS

**By**

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## Abstract

This thesis presents a case for acknowledging the ethical value that pop lyrics hold with philosophical seriousness and educational benefit. I acknowledge this ethical value by considering the aesthetic features of pop lyrics that carry emotion and ethical meaning. In doing so, I argue that pop lyrics engage us emotionally and are suitable tools for exploring themes of emotion and ethics. The thesis forms a conclusion that is educationally focussed with regard to the potential that pop lyrics hold for emotion education and moral education, giving example lesson plans for formal classroom settings, but also encouraging further exploration in non-formal and alternative settings.

I have situated this thesis at the intersection of the fields of philosophical aesthetics, pop studies and virtue and emotion education. This positioning had two intentions – to draw on the scholarly expertise across each discipline and to refocus that expertise onto pop lyrics; arguing for more philosophical consideration of pop as a legitimate form of mass art and literary insight, pursuing insights into pop culture and pop music studies that embrace moral and emotional perspectives and that the ethical value of pop lyrics provide valid tools for structured and meaningful emotional and moral education.

The work of Adam Bradley informed the origins of this thesis; his work on the linkages between rap music and spoken word (2009) and how we can see pop lyrics as poetry worthy of poetic analysis (2017). This work, rooted in the English literature and language discipline, but does not embrace any moral or ethical notions. Where scholars of pop music have considered the emotion contained within songs and its affect on listeners, this is often without wider application of any moral educational dimension and certainly without consideration of how pop lyrics can assist with the development of virtue literacy. Work by leading scholars of pop studies, philosophy and other narrative literature, such as Simon Frith (1988; 1998), Noël Carroll (1998; 2000) and David Carr (2005; 2023) have embraced the emotional affect that pop can have, which has laid fertile ground on which this thesis builds. This thesis builds on existing work, brings these separate disciplines together and situates itself at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics of pop music. It shows how aesthetics and emotions can and do interact in pop and showcases how and where emotional value and ethical value that lyrics can and do hold come together.

I conclude with an educational application; taking example lyrics and putting them into a lesson plan template and demonstrating how they can be used in a classroom setting as part of a formal character education provision.

## Dedication

To my family for your unwavering love and support. ‘Shut up and dance with me’. To Hendrix and Bonnie May, I hope to make you proud and to share my eclectic taste in music with you. To Rebecca, ‘I still remember how you looked that afternoon. There was only you.’

## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to my supervisors and wish to thank Dr Laura D'Olimpio and Professor Kristján Kristjánsson for their advice, support and, most often, patience in helping me complete this thesis. Thanks also to Professor James Arthur for encouraging me to consider a PhD and for beginning the journey with me as my first supervisor. Thank you to my colleagues for their help, time and counsel along the way, including Professor David Carr for helping me in the early stages of my studies and for, largely, disagreeing with my choices of which artists make 'good' pop music.

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# Introduction

## 0.1 Introduction

### *0.1.i 'Narrating your life'*[1]

Pop music is regularly cast as providing the 'soundtrack to our lives' or providing a narrative that articulates the lived experiences that we have as consumers. The 'narrating your life' sub-heading to this introductory chapter to this thesis is a direct quote from BBC Radio 1 DJ Jack Saunders, speaking on his midweek radio show about the artist Olivia Dean. The idea that an artist can write songs that 'narrate' the lives of listeners that they have never met, even before the listener has heard the lyrics is something that may appear strange, but speaks to a shared language and shared experiences, as well as a desire (amongst music listeners) to find relevance and commonalities in the lyrics of the music that they engage with.

Whether listening on our own on commutes to work or during exercise, or surrounded by others in concert halls and arenas, the way we experience music is an individual activity, done by millions of people, sharing experiences whilst experiencing things individually.

This narration is not done by chance; there is a craft to creating the perfect pop lyric. Bradley (2017) has described this craft as 'poetry', which can be uncovered through the techniques of traditional poetic analysis – looking at the construction of metaphor and simile, the way rhyme is deployed and the level of effectiveness in how themes and emotions are conveyed. Pop's success comes through its ability to appeal to mass audiences, by providing specific hooks and cues that people can gravitate towards and latch onto – using lyrics to appeal to their emotions or mirror their life experiences.

Emotions fuel what we do and shape who we are. They guide our principles and values and without development and guidance, without learning from sources of inspiration, can go undeveloped or mismanaged. Literary texts providing readers with moral insight into their own lives is a well-trodden path by philosophers. David Carr, for example, has written extensively on the links between imaginative literature and moral and emotional insights (see Carr, 2005; 2021; 2023). This thesis seeks to build on work done by scholars of philosophy of education, virtue and emotion and aesthetics and positions itself at the intersection of these fields. I look to advocate for a greater seriousness in the consideration of the contribution that pop lyrics can provide to these fields, particularly in relation to the education of virtues and emotions. I break down the structure of the thesis below.

### *0.1.ii Thesis structure*

This thesis is structured around five substantive chapters, bookended by this short introduction and a summary conclusion that brings my arguments together and makes recommendations for future work.

The five chapters seek to answer three overarching research questions:

1) Is there an ethical value to the lyrics of pop songs? (Ch. 1)
2) How do pop lyrics engage us emotionally? (Chs 2, 3 and 4)

[1] Saunders, J. (2024) BBC Radio 1 New Music show, broadcast at 1800 on 26 June 2024.

3) How do we access the educational potential of pop lyrics as tools for emotion education and moral development? (Ch. 5)

The chapters, then, consider each of these questions as follows:

'Chapter One: The purpose of pop music' seeks to establish an argument for the ethical value of pop lyrics by laying out four broad categories of values that we, the consumers, ascribe to pop songs and lyrics; these being commercial value, cultural value, aesthetic value and ethical value. I provide definitions for each value type in Chapter One that go towards answering this research question. To pre-empt an answer to this question, I contend that there is an ethical value to pop lyrics and use Chapter One to demonstrate both how ethical value is separate and distinct from other, more commonly recognised value types, and is deserving of its own category, whilst acknowledging that other value types dominant in different examples of pop lyric.

'Chapter Two: Can song lyrics offer aesthetic and ethical value to listeners?' looks in more detail at aesthetic value and ethical value. We accept that the pop music industry is primarily a commercially driven industry. It is quantified by metrics of sales, streams, downloads and chart positions. Pop music holds huge importance over the lives of young people, and influences their opinions, their beliefs and emotional responses. In terms of values ascribed to pop songs, commercial value will always be apparent, and evidenced through chart and sales metrics.

Not all songs hold cultural value. The examples lyrics quoted in Chapter One show diversity in how cultural value can be ascribed and the different ways in which it can appear – through political association, links to cultural affairs and events (positive and negative), through advertisements and so on. That said, not all pop lyrics impact cultures outside of their immediate chart success. However, they may hold great aesthetic value for their crafted features and tropes, their lyrical structure, complexity of rhyme, simplicity of constriction, etc. Further, lyrics often embrace themes of moral and ethical conflict or dilemma and do so as successful pop songs in their own right without any wider cultural endorsement or value. As such, aesthetic value and ethical value are value types that deserve attention, individually and in combination. The interactions and tensions that exist between aesthetic value and ethical value in art have been discussed in relation to other artforms by philosophers (see for example Carroll, 1996; 1998; Levinson, 1998; 2017; Asher, 2017). These tensions form the basis of philosophical, sociological and educational work that looks at the value of art in an aesthetic and ethical sense. Little work exists on the application of aesthetic value and ethical value to pop lyrics.

This second chapter builds on the definitions of the four value types presented in Chapter One and extends them with regard to aesthetic value and ethical value. I consider how those two particular value types, as well as cultural value, interact and integrate with one another, looking at the overall aesthetic value of a lyric. I consider work from the field of philosophical aesthetics and from education and seek to link them to scholarly insights into pop music – which, I contend, ignore the ethical value of pop.

'Chapter Three: Using pop lyrics to develop and deepen our understanding of virtuous emotions' seeks to extend the idea of the emotional component of the ethical

value of pop, both in terms of content and in terms of emotional affect on consumers. This chapter foregrounds the emotional component of ethical value and consideration of the virtuous emotions of gratitude and anger (one positively valenced, one negatively so). Consideration of each virtuous emotion. Chapter Three seeks to answer the second research question 'How do pop lyrics engage us emotionally?'

'Chapter Four: Virtuous Emotions Gratitude and Anger – case study lyrics. This chapter showcases two case studies that deconstruct and analyse pop lyrics that focus on gratitude and anger. In the case of gratitude, I take two pop lyrics, 'Thank You' by Dido and 'Grateful' by Kelly Clarkson, that present gratitude as a central theme, but with different intentions. I then focus on 'Seventeen Going Under' by Sam Fender as a lyric that positions anger as a central theme. In both cases, I look at how the virtuous emotion in question is presented, the aesthetic techniques employed in the lyrical structure, and how the depiction of the emotion aligns or contrasts with academic understanding of it as virtuous.

'Chapter Five: An Educational Application – using pop song lyrics to improve virtue literacy' is my final substantive chapter that seeks to provide an educational application to the philosophical theorising on the ethical value of pop lyrics. I introduce the term 'virtue literacy', here, as a way of answering the third research question set out above regarding the outcome of positive emotional education and moral development. I argue that existing definitions and explanations of 'virtue literacy' are, at best, inconsistent and, moreover, inadequate for the complex nature of moral development and its explicit education in schools and other settings. As such, I present a new definition for virtue literacy that encompasses existing components, is explicit in its inclusion of an emotional component, and offers opportunity for constructive and meaningful reflection.

The chapter presents a case for using pop lyrics as tools for moral and emotional education, providing examples of programmes that have been successful in developing the notion of virtue literacy. The chapter presents a new and expanded definition of virtue literacy that seeks to bring a consensus with competing definitions in existence, with an introduction of an emotional component and a requirement to undertake meaningful periods of moral reflection as part of the development of virtue literacy. I provide a guide framework lessons plan for how pop lyrics can be used in the school classroom. Chapter Five seeks to answer the third research question 'How do we access the educational potential of pop lyrics as tools for emotion education and moral development?'

## 0.2 Author background

The study comes from my own love of pop music and my professional work researching understandings and applications of character and virtues. My previous personal studies at undergraduate level looked both at how lyrics, specifically the lyrics of John Lennon's 'Imagine', can and should be treated as 'literary' in the ways that we consider other narrative texts as literary. Further, my M-level studies in English Literature considered an analysis of how form and content interact in the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne, a poet who often took ethically challenging themes and content and combined them with aesthetically pleasing verse forms and structures. Regarding Lennon, 'Imagine' is one of the most well-known and biggest selling pop songs of all time. Its lyrics speak of a utopian vision where conflict, borders and faiths collapse for the good of human harmony. The lyrics,

presented as a ballad with three verses and two choruses, on a surface level, plays to the formulaic pop music tropes that are still popular over fifty years after its release.

Swinburne, a poet laureate of his day, was considered somewhat of a pop-poet towards the end of his career, particularly in his development of the roundel form of poetry – an English interpretation of the French rondel. His poetry was popular, and his roundels were written as very tightly fixed verse forms with repeating rhyme schemes, not dissimilar to the formulaic presentation of pop lyrics. For the purposes of this thesis, it is interesting to cite Oscar Wilde's review of Swinburne as writing 'very perfect and very poisonous poetry' (Wilde, 1889). This combination of 'perfection' of verse form and the 'poisonous' themes that he included in his content that distinguished Swinburne from many of his peers. It also makes interesting reference with regard to modern day pop lyrics and the comparisons and contrasts between the formulaic nature of pop lyrics and ethically challenging content contained within it.

Whilst these two previous studies were undertaken for different purposes, with different focuses, they have both been informative to the argument that I make in this thesis. I contend that pop is a legitimate area of study, particularly from an educational and philosophical perspective, and that we should consider pop lyrics as works of mass art, and as a subset of art proper. The use of 'proper' isn't intended to be a slight to pop music, but I follow the definitions of mass art presented by Noël Carroll (1998; 2000) in order to make my case for them to be treated with greater philosophical respect and educational attention. As mass art, pop is manufactured to appeal to a wide audience. As such, there are a multitude of subgenres of pop music that appeal to different demographics of the general public. From dance to country, rap to grime and dub-step to bubblegum, pop covers a wide range of sounds, identities and melodies.

## 0.3 Defining Pop

Scholars from various disciplines have written about the value types that we ascribe to popular music. These include societal, cultural, political, economic, and identity values and cover much of how pop music has embedded itself in the everyday lives of the general public (see, for example, Bradley, 2017; Dolfsma, 1999; 2004; Frith, 1996; 2007; Shuker, 2008). These values are not always referred to as 'values', but described more implicitly as overall positive traits. This may be less helpful than beneficial, here, as it is important to see what falls outside of definitions of 'value' or related terms, as much as what is encompassed within it. In seeing types of value all on a continuum, it would be plausible to argue that all pop songs can be placed somewhere on each of the four value-type continuums. However, as the thesis is based on the notion of pop being popular, and therefore commercially successful, the assumption is that all 'pop' songs have at least some commercial value. Of course, there are songs that will sound like pop songs, but have not become popular; by amateur musicians, recordings by established artists that never see the light of day, or are cut from releases for various reasons.

I have employed an inclusive definition of popular music, akin to that used by Bradley in *The Poetry of Pop* (2017). Bradley's book is an important text for this thesis, as it provides an existing basis on which we can consider pop lyrics in isolation from their music and through

which we can analyse them for poetic expressions and tropes using the techniques of traditional poetic analysis. 'The pop music I'm talking about isn't a narrow genre, but a broad descriptor that encompasses everything from Broadway musicals to country ballads, from obscure soul sides to Billboard Hot 100 hits.' (Bradley, 2017: 4). I have applied this inclusive and expansive definition to the example lyrics that I have included in this thesis. On the whole, I have sought to stick to more Billboard Hot 100 and UK Official Singles Chart lyrics, however, and when there is a case for using such a lyric. For the songs that I discuss in detail via case studies, I have stuck to using songs that have amassed 1million or more sales and/or achieved at least a top 5 place in the Official UK Singles Chart or the US Billboard Hot 100. This is intended to focus on songs in detail that have amassed either immediate popularity (chart position) or long-term popularity (total sales). I have sought to showcase a lyric's commercial value through detailing the sales, chart position and other metrics when I discuss them as examples.

### 0.4 Trajectory of Argument

I do not wish to give too much away in terms of the conclusions that I draw at the end of this thesis, here. However, I will end this introduction with an example of a mass consumed pop lyric that evidences aesthetic value and ethical value through its content – which I will go on to define in Chapter One. Taylor Swift's 'Anti-Hero' (2022) was the lead single from Swift's tenth studio album *Midnights*. It was streamed 17.4 million times in its first 24hours after release on Spotify and debuted at number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and the UK Official Chart. In the UK, it has sold 1.8 million units and has been streamed more than 1.3 billion times globally. It is a song that explores Swift's relationship with her fame, public profile and personal issues. Swift writes from the first-person perspective from a reflective standpoint as she analysis her own flaws which cause her problems in her relationships with others. The chorus acknowledges that Swift is guilty of not perfecting her own flaws 'It's me, 'hi'/ I'm the problem, it's me/ At teatime, everybody agrees'.

The song is a well-known, mass-consumed pop song which follows many of Swift's well-worn tropes of providing autobiographical insight into her feelings. As the biggest pop star of the modern era, I will cite Swift's lyrics and cultural influence multiple times throughout this thesis, but the reason for beginning with 'Anti-Hero' is that the virtues and ethical content evident in the lyrics encompass serious moral reflection; something which I end Chapter Five advocating for as part of an expanded understanding of virtue literacy. 'Anti-Hero' is a song that does that within the lyric, as Swift 'gets older but just never wiser', making the same mistakes in relationships, chronicling these personal flaws for all to see, whilst providing interesting twists and turns that keep the listener guessing as to the outcome of the song.

Swift is a hot philosophical topic at present, with educational courses[2] and symposium[3] being dedicated to unpacking and exploring her music and lyrics, as she completes the biggest-selling global tour in pop history. So, her inclusion here and throughout this thesis is deliberate and timely. However, I use a message of the lyrics of 'Anti-Hero' as a dramatic example of how lyrics can contain serious ethical content for us to unpick and unpack, presented aesthetically in a tight verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, chorus structure that is well-known and well-tried in pop music. The rhyme scheme is wandering, with some hard rhymes ('devices' / 'vices'; 'dreaming' / 'leaving' / 'scheming'; 'dreaming' / 'leaving' / 'meaning') and some half-rhymes or quarter-rhymes ('afternoons' / 'the room'; 'hill / 'killed'; 'will' / 'hell') that move the lyric forward and help convey the important messages contained within.

These aesthetic features help create an attractive and easily consumed pop song, but close interrogation of the lyrics shows some challenging content as the singer lays bare her feelings and emotions. I now begin this thesis with a consideration of the purpose of pop, as per the value types that we ascribe as consumers.

[2] For example, 'Taylor Swift and Literature' is a new course that began in September 2024 at Queen Mary University of London. Available at: https://www.qmul.ac.uk/summer-school/what-can-i-study/modules/taylor-swift-and-literature.html [Accessed 6 August 2024]. 'Taylor Swift and Her World' is taught in the Department of English at Harvard University. Available at: https://english.fas.harvard.edu/english-183ts-taylor-swift-and-her-world [Accessed 6 August 2024]. Ghent University offers 'Literature (Taylor's Version)' as a 5-credit module for its English courses. Available at: https://studiekiezer.ugent.be/studiefiche/en/A005255/2023 [Accessed 6 August 2024].

[3] See Swiftposium 2024 [Online]. Available at: Swiftposium 2024: An academic conference on Taylor Swift [Accessed 29 August 2024].

# Chapter One: The purpose of pop music

## 1.1 Introduction

### *1.1.i Roadmap to Chapter One*

This chapter seeks to establish and offer some consensus on the value types that we, consumers of pop lyrics, regularly ascribe to pop music and its lyrics. These are identified within the four headings of 'commercial value', 'cultural value', aesthetic value' and 'ethical value'. In identifying ethical value as a category of value that is ascribed by the listener to pop songs, I, therefore, also establish that pop lyrics often and regularly hold ethical value. This ethical value is presented, largely, through engagement with the themes present in lyrical content. I define ethical value as *the presence of ethically relevant content within a lyric's subject matter, signposted through the presence of emotional or virtuous language, metaphor and/or the presentation of an ethically challenging scenario.* The clarification of content being 'ethically relevant' provides an important distinction between content that is ethical in the positive sense – so not exclusively content that solely embraces virtuous content, but also that which can challenge us through either the negative presentation of virtuous content, or the presentation of vicious content. I will explore examples of both of these throughout this chapter, as well in the rest of the thesis. In this chapter, I consider so-called Positive Psychology 2.0 (PP2.0) on the value of the negative and as a balanced model of living a good life (e.g., Wong, 2011).

Virtuous and emotional content is, in much of pop music, regularly presented through the use of virtuous language and metaphor, and through depiction of emotionally engaging situations. The purpose of presenting ethically challenging, or emotionally engaging content is to engage the emotions of listening consumers, to present scenarios, dilemmas, or simply to convey emotions that listeners can recognise, empathise with, and recognise in their own lived experiences. This recalls Bradley's definition and scene setting regarding the poetry of pop lyrics, where pop music is consumed by such varied audiences, in different locations, but in equal fervour. For Bradley, this speaks to pop's ability to make specific circumstances and scenarios generic for consumption, whilst also making general feelings and emotions specific through lyrical wordplay, metaphor and imagery (Bradley, 2017). For example, Ed Sheeran's (2017) 'Castle on the Hill' is a lyric that uses the imagery of a castle on a hill, intended to reference Framlingham Castle in Sheeran's hometown of Framlingham. Described as 'a love letter to Suffolk'[4], the lyric tells of specific events that the singer has lived through, beginning 'When I was six years old, I broke my leg / When I was running from my brother and his friends'. Such an introductory lyric describes a situation personal to Sheeran and his family, yet opens up opportunities for listeners to engage, empathise and recall their own childhood memories about places they lived.

Where done successfully, listeners engage with the lyrics, sing them by heart, listen to them again and again and ascribe value to them which goes beyond the commercial value and any aesthetic value. By considering pop lyrics as valuable beyond commercial success and exploring the value types that consumers ascribe to pop, including ethical value, we can see different ways in which such ethical content and emotion is presented and how it impacts on the ways it is valued by listeners.

[4] See 'Ed Sheeran exhibition in Ipswich features college drop-out letter' [Online]. Available at: Ed Sheeran exhibition in Ipswich features college drop-out letter - BBC News [Accessed: 4 June 2024].

I offer definitions and explorations of the four value types listed above in a deliberate and specific order. Firstly, and inescapably, pop's success is defined in commercial terms, in economic terms, through metrics of sales, streams and chart positions. This is often how those with the most vested of interests in pop songs value a song's performance and success. Those stakeholders include artists, songwriters, managers, publicists, record labels, and consumers. Whilst the public listening to a song ascribes different levels of value to a song's commercial performance, it is still an important area to discuss. I define commercial value as *how commercially successful a pop song has been, given in financial terms and unit sales.*

Secondly, pop's impact on culture, local, national and global, can be seen as a way of defining a song's success. I will introduce cultural value in this chapter and give examples of where a song or lyric has achieved greater cultural appreciation and value beyond its commercial metrics. Cultural value is then taken to mean *the extent to which a song has impacted popular culture [here, Western democratic culture], and seen through its appearance in cultural products, situations that are beyond the original intention of the song, so a lyric has taken on greater significance culturally because of its attachment to other events. In short, that a song holds outside of its initial commercial reception and intended purpose*.

Thirdly, pop considered as an aesthetically pleasurable product, as an industry that is rooted not only in commercial gain, but also in providing aesthetically pleasing products to consumers, whilst – historically at least – being marginalised, even demonised, by philosophical aesthetics. Pop's purpose is to please listeners, to provide pleasure to those consuming it, ensuring that they listen repeatedly, and also return to consume more pop song products in the future. Whilst this can be seen through a cynical lens in terms of the pop music industry's attempts to manipulate listeners via trends and styles, which I will discuss later, the aesthetics of pop are an essential component of pop's overall value. I offer concise a concise definition of aesthetic value *as referring to the intrinsic worth/quality of an object, artwork or experience based on its beauty, form or sensory appeal. It involves appreciation and subjective enjoyment of the visual, auditory and other sensory aspects of the object.* Here, the aesthetic value of pop lyrics *lies in their ability to convey emotion(s), tell stories, or capture a culturally significant movement or moment. They are aesthetically valuable for their wordplay and linguistic tropes as well as their relatability to listeners in terms of how well they resonate on a personal or societal level. The appeal of pop lyrics, aesthetically, links to their cultural and ethical value and how they impact on the listener's emotions.* I will unpack this definition considering literature in the field further below and in Chapter Two.

The fourth 'value' that pop lyrics may hold is that of ethical value, as defined on the previous page. I draw attention to the emotional content that is regularly present in pop lyrics, often depicting and evaluating ethically challenging scenarios and situations, presenting metaphors that require us to engage with ethically salient emotions to navigate in asking listeners to answer how much of an emotional response they wish to give in response to hearing the lyrics.

### *1.1.ii Defining pop music*

I use the term 'pop' in this thesis, 'pop' to refer to music that is 'popular', commercially produced, and consumed *en masse* by the public. This includes many music genres, with the only exceptions being those of classical music, traditional folk songs, jazz, and other instrumental music. The premise of the thesis, and the main area of focus, is that the lyric of a song, regardless of genre, holds value that extends beyond commercial, musical, cultural value (covering political or social value), and does, in many cases, hold aesthetic and ethical value. Secondary to this, it is through a re-focussing and re-prioritising of analysis of the lyric, ahead of other modes of communication employed by the 'song', be it the musical accompaniment, the music video, artist profile, social media posts, that is important in documenting and interpreting such ethical value.

The lyric is the foundation on which the other parts of the song often rest, sometimes being led by the music, melody, or rhythm, but often sitting above the music. The lyrics are often what stay with us when we recall songs that are meaningful to us for one reason or another, that connect our thoughts and memories to particular times in our lives. Whilst melodies and riffs can be memorable and haunting, lyrics reflect the actualities of the themes they convey, less trivially than generic discussions of love, lust, and loss. I will cite examples of lyrics from across the broad corpus of pop music, both in terms of the history of pop music as we know it (1940s-present day) and across the sub-genres of pop. As my focus is on the lyrics of songs, there are some narrow sub-genres of instrumental pop music that will be excluded. These are almost all categorised broadly as dance music, which has seen a resurgence in popularity in the past thirty years. Some dance music is lyrical, as I include examples of below. Other music fuses genres, sometimes non-pop genres, for example, William Orbit's interpretation of 'Barber's Adagio for Strings [Ferry Corsten Remix]' (1999) is a song which embraces the classical music canon, which usually resides outside of any definition of pop. It reached number 4 on the UK Singles Chart as an instrumental song, and shows some level of commercial value. It was also later reinterpreted by Tiësto in 2004, but without the same chart success – charting at number 37 on the UK Singles Chart.

Pop music, by definition, is the most popular genre of music, as identified through the metrics of consumption; sales, downloads and streams, which are converted into chart performance. It is widely regarded to be the genre of music that produces most hit songs, sells most copies, and receives most commercial attention, through radio play and advertising, so covers the majority of music that we, the consuming public, have at our immediate disposal, hear in the world around us, and are most familiar with. Structurally, pop music is often simply structured with 2-3 verses broken up by choruses that often repeat at the end of a song. Pop songs are often characterised by their repetitive hooks and riffs, up-tempo beats (although the pop ballad is a hugely popular form). Pop songs also, traditionally, 'borrow' from and fuse together other genres of music, be that lyrics, riffs, tempos or other structural parts, to create more mainstream, accessible and pleasurable songs.

Yet, whilst encompassing the most popular aspects of other genres of music, pop still holds a stigma for being banal and trivial in its content and meaning, and it is the meaning, and how its listeners make it meaning-full, that is of primary concern, here (see, for example

recent court case involving Taylor Swift where the judge described her lyrics as 'banal')[5]. Swift was sued by another party claiming that the lyrics used in her global hit 'Shake It Off' (2014) were taken from their song 'Plays Gon' Play'. However, the judge in the case ruled that the lyrics 'the players gonna play, play, play, play, play / And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate' were too generic and devoid of serious meaning to warrant a copyright lawsuit.

Swift's lyrics hold some ethically pertinent content and value (see Thompson, 2024). The verses speak of Swift's experiences in the spotlight, the media presentation of her, and how Swift 'shakes it off' and continues to pursue her goals. Fans will recognise the phrases that Swift uses about herself, but not necessarily be able to apply such experiences to their own lives. This is where the generic and 'banal' chorus can aide such application, though, as where Swift sings that the 'players gonna play… / and the haters gonna hate', so listeners can think of instances where they have required some level of resilience and determination to overcome a setback or change someone's opinion. 'Shake It Off' is a relentless lyric, that repeats itself so much that one could argue (as the judge in the plagiarism case does) that it becomes meaningless. I argue that this gives the lyrics an internal resilience and strength that mirrors the themes depicted within it. Further, it is this mixing of the specific and the general that I claim pop music does *en masse* to engage listeners and is something that should not be dismissed or trivialised and should be treated with greater philosophical and educational attention.

It is not my claim that all pop music is aesthetically, ethically, emotionally, or educationally valuable. To make such a claim would be inappropriate for a genre of music containing such lyrics as 'pure and simple gonna be there', 'a-wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-wop-bam-boom' and 'la la la'. However, this brings me to a wider point about the value of popular music; that it is valuable in and of its own right, deserving of greater literary and academic attention, as a vehicle for greater exploration of how themes of emotion, virtue and vice are presented in engaging ways on mass scales, to millions of listeners, be they themes of loyalty, lust or the limitations of expression when feeling frustrated.

A review of the literature across popular studies, music, and philosophy of education shows that there still exists a hierarchy within music in which popular music sits lower down, and has been dismissed and derided by academic critics in disciplines of philosophy and education for its perceived banality and triviality almost since its advent in the 1940s (see, for example, Young, 2014; 2016; Rosselson, 1979; Stadlen, 1962). That is in spite of its global appeal, mass consumption, and pop being multi-billion-dollar, globally popular industry.

A broad concept of what constitutes 'pop' is important, for it not only shows the popularity of a range of sub-genres, but also promotes an inclusive and comprehensive definition. Bradley defines pop as 'The pop music I'm talking about isn't a narrow genre, but a broad descriptor that encompasses everything from Broadway musicals to country ballads, from obscure soul sides to Billboard Hot 100 hits.' (Bradley, 2017: 4). Given that I am considering songs based on consumption and commercial value – I am interested in those songs that are

[5] 'US Judge dismisses Taylor Swift "haters" case as too "banal"' [Online]. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-43056814 [Accessed: 10 March 2022].

consumed by the greatest numbers of individuals, both upon initial release, and over a concerted period, and how that popularity translates when offering a close reading of lyrical content for ethical value – Bradley's definition is inclusive rather than exclusive. As such, it is helpful in this present work.

## 1.2 Context and Background

### *1.2.i Pop as art proper*

I contend that pop is a legitimate area of study, particularly from educational and philosophical perspectives, and that we should consider pop lyrics as works of mass art, and as a subsect of art proper. I follow the definitions of mass art presented by Noël Carroll (1998; 2000) to make my case for them to be treated with greater philosophical respect. For clarity, Carroll defines mass art as

> *x* is a mass artwork if and only if 1) x is an artwork; 2) produced and distributed by a mass delivery technology; 3) which is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (e.g. its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect and, perhaps, even in its content) coward those choices which promise accessibility with minimum effort for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences. (Carroll, 1998: 54).

Carroll didn't make his arguments in order to give mass art greater respect or attention; he wanted to account for them within the category of Art *qua* art. 'Art proper' refers to the clarification of the concept of art, rather than a hierarchy – with mass art as a subcategory of art. However, many critics and scholars of Art proper do consider subcategories of art in a hierarchy, often with pop music towards or at the bottom. The reasons for this can be summarised that pop, as a type of mass art, has often been considered to be of low quality, aesthetically and ethically, when compared to other forms of music such as classical and folk music. James O. Young, for example, contends that pop music is inferior to classical music due the the latter's potential for greater 'expressiveness, and, consequently, has more potential for psychological insight and profundity.' (Young, 2016: 523). Young is critical of pop music, but he appreciates that pop music 'employs rhythms not found in classical music' (*ibid*.). Acknowledging this difference is a way of beginning to give greater philosophical consideration of pop. I discuss Young's objection to pop music in more detail below, along with other arguments made against pop for its banality, simplicity and repetitiveness.

The study of pop music is becoming a more serious field of scholarship than previously, albeit more so in the fields of sociology, economics, music and linguistics. Scholars in those fields include Simon Frith (2004), Wilfred Dolfsma (1999) and Adam Bradley (2017). Amongst many others, these leading scholars have written about the cultural impact of pop, its consumption, production and ideology, and its position in and influence on youth culture. Bradley in particular has prioritised the study of the linguistics of pop, as well as earlier work on rap (2009), arguing for the closer study of pop lyrics as akin to pieces of poetry, both deserving of greater poetic analysis, and as a means through which educators can engage young people in the techniques of poetic analysis (2017). This work offers modern insights into the infiltration of pop with culture, society and business. Scholars such as Frith have long established careers, with Frith's work dating back to the 1970s and 80s as both an academic and a rock music critic. Frith's *Sociology of Rock* (1978) argues that rock music - an

oft-used synonym for popular music (see also Carroll, 2000) – is a mass cultural form, and one which derives its meaning from being a mass medium, rather than through individual songs and artists. Whilst not integral to my overall argument, this is an important concept that I consider throughout – how and where the ethical value of pop lyrics can be seen as being attributed to pop as a form of mass art, rather than to each individual lyric.

First, though, by way of a background literature review, it is important to acknowledge that scholarly interest in pop goes back further than this – indeed there has been scholarly interest in pop as long as popular music has existed. We can look back to scholars such as Farwell (1907) and his evaluation of America's struggle to develop a serious music culture, where the public can name authors and artists ahead of musicians; to Toye (1910) and his consideration of the prospects of English music and musicians in the early twentieth century; and Nicol's (1901) article that music 'appeals to our sympathies, quickens our emotions, and sustains us to a pitch of heroism to do and die for the honour of our Countries, and the protection of our homes.' (Nicol, 1901: 74). Of course, none of these scholars were considering pop music as we know it today, given the advancements in mass production, mass media and mass marketisation. However, the scholarly attention paid to popular music – notedly, this was more often to the music than to any lyrics – still existed, and still focused on aspects of popular music that are considered today – sociology, culture and emotion.

Pop scholarship has had to become more serious. This is largely due to the ever-increasing cultural impact that pop music holds. Commercially, unit sales, downloads and streams can be quantified, and the pop charts have ranked songs by popularity on a weekly basis for decades. As such, commercial value is straightforward to quantify. Commercially successful pop songs can generate hundreds of thousands of pounds of revenue, sometimes millions of pounds, as part of a multi-billion-pound industry. In the UK, the Official Singles Chart is compiled by the Official Charts Company on behalf of the British record industry. Commonly presented as the Official UK Top 40, official charting of music singles has existed in the UK since 1969. Before then, the BBC reported chart positions as aggregates of various music publications (e.g., *New Musical Express*, *Melody Maker* and *Record Mirror*). Similarly, today, charts are based on an amalgam of sales figures, downloads and streaming data. This gives a tangible and definite numerical value that can be ascribed to each pop song – be that a chart position, total sales, or an economic value of said consumption. In short, commercial value is relatively straightforward to calculate and to compare with other pop songs but is the main driver behind pop music.

The technological revolution and introduction of downloads and streams to official chart metrics has created more choice of songs to listen to – approximately 1,000 songs are uploaded every hour to the major streaming services. Such a significant change to the availability of pop songs has changed the way listeners consume popular music. Whilst 'singles' are both still relevant and the focus of this project, the idea of what constitutes a 'single' is very different today compared with seventy years ago. Today, every song on an album is instantly available to stream before many get any 'official' release as formal singles. This has created much more of a 'pick 'n' mix' attitude to the ways in which we listen to music, compared to historical consumption trends. By this, I mean that individual songs seem more relevant today than before, but equally, we show a waning attention span

for long play records. Whilst our overall consumption of music is greater today than ever before, our listening habits are very different from previous generations. We connect with musicians and artists through their music in ways never conceived of, let alone experienced. Short-form video, livestreaming, in-game soundtracks on video games are three modern ways in which we consume music which go beyond traditional metrics of commercial value. Whilst these different modes of consumption naturally increase a song's commercial value, I have sought to streamline the criteria by which I have selected songs for extended analysis in this project.

With regard to philosophical engagement, however, there is much less in the literature that dates as far back as some of the references cited above. That said, as pop music has grown as an industry, so philosophers have addressed it in terms of its categorisation as mass art (Carroll 1998; 2000); James O. Young has compared pop with classical music (2016), as well as considering pop music in his investigation of cultural appropriation in the arts (2010); Theodore Adorno has condemned pop music for its formulaic and predictable nature (1998); and Roger Scruton has written on pop music as an art (2018) and on music and morality (2014). Such a small selection of works should not be assumed to be representative of all the philosophical work that has embraced pop music. However, these four names – Carroll, Young, Adorno and Scruton – offer four different and prominent perspectives relevant to this study. They have addressed pop music in their works, even attending in part to the moral and ethical value of it, however, I contend that they do not go far enough, particularly with regard to the educational attention and application of the philosophical arguments that exist. Therefore, more work is needed in this area, not least to elicit the moral educational relevance of studying pop lyrics.

The scholarly debates in pop music move much more slowly than our consumption of pop music, than the establishment of trends and styles in pop that we move through and move on from. Scholarly work cannot be achieved in a typical three-and-a-half-minute period, so it will constantly be backward looking and evaluative, rather than predictive and forward looking. That is the same as much academic work in any discipline but is particularly acute in contrast to pop's rate of consumption. I have sought to include examples and references to lyrics from across the corpus of pop (beginning as I do in the late 1940s and early 1950s), to seek to address any perceived biases to periods of time, sub-genres of pop, and to ensure as much generalisability of my argument as possible.

More recent works, such as those by Alison Stone, do consider the philosophical and aesthetic 'value' of pop music, but there is still much fertile ground yet to plough, I suggest. As I have said, current debates on pop lyrics focus on pop's poetics (for example, Bradley, 2017) and sociological functions (see Frith, 2004) as well as their aesthetics (for example, Stone, 2016) do not offer much by way of educational application. Some arguments in favour of the aesthetics of genres of music do not embrace the popularity of pop, such as Prinz (2014), who considers the aesthetics of punk rock. For Prinz, punk rock can 'shed light on the nature, limits, and value of art' (Prinz, 2014: 583). By this, Prinz refers to punk's anti-establishment, anti-aesthetics features, which go against what is generally considered to be 'artistic', yet find popularity.

As already indicated, I do not consider the political value of pop lyrics as an independent category of overall value. There has been much written and said about the political value of pop lyrics, and this is not to say that pop lyrics do not hold political value – indeed, they do – however, I consider political value to be a sub-category of cultural value within the definitions given in this thesis. I reference John Lennon's 'Imagine', Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power', and lyrics of Bob Dylan at various points throughout this thesis. Each and all these artists and songs have influenced political agendas related to international relations, race and civil rights, and social change. Commercially valuable pop songs such as 'Changes' by 2Pac and Elton John (1.2m sales in UK), 'American Idiot' by Green Day (2.4m sales in UK; 6.2m sales in USA), and 'Born in the USA' by Bruce Springsteen (1.1m sales in the UK; 17m sales in the USA) are examples of songs that have held huge commercial success and hold political value in the subject matter that they consider. Each has contributed to the political agenda in race relations ('Changes'), the Vietnam War ('Born in the USA') and the War on Terror and the presidency of George W. Bush 'American Idiot'). Such songs are important cultural markers in the progression of such political debates and offer entry points through popular music for audiences who may otherwise not engage with such topics. As such, I consider their political value to be more culturally valuable, in the round.

This study sees pop from a Western democratic cultural perspective, and whilst acknowledging the various forms of popular vocal and other music that came before what we would call 'pop', considers the music produced since the figurative explosion of music recordings and productions which began in the forties. It seeks to consider the existing arguments, particularly in terms of the different sorts of 'values' that are attributed to pop and explore their interrelation with ethical value.

### *1.2.ii The value of pop*

Whether or not something holds 'value' can usually be simplified and summarised as whether that thing matters. That is, whether it matters to an individual, community, or wider group such as an industry, group or even a country. How we define 'value' and how we assess what 'matters' is often considered a largely subjective exercise, and such an argument leans heavily on the subjective nature of the term 'value'. However, there are some objective ascriptions of value in art, and in pop music specifically (see Railton 1998; Frith, 1996: 4), as I will explore below. Such is the diverse and varied use of the term 'value' in aesthetics, and in modern society more broadly, that it serves as a helpful starting point for this thesis. This section unpacks what the value of pop lyrics is, indeed, what the multiple value types are, as it works towards identifying four distinct and discrete value types already defined – *commercial, cultural, aesthetic and ethical*.

As I set about supporting this premise, two questions arise. Firstly, how we identify any ethical value that pop lyrics hold – is it only when ethical content is present in the lyrics, or can it be inferred by a listener through their own moral experiences? Secondly, will simply consuming (listening or reading) the lyrics be sufficient to glean any ethical value present? To answer these questions, I propose a concise definition of ethical value (see 1.1.i) that contains it to content present in the lyrics, be that through literal interpretations of the language used and/or via imagery, metaphor, and other poetic techniques. Whilst emotional engagement and ethical value could be inferred depending on the emotional state and experiences of a listener, these would not be known by the songwriter/artist

when penning the lyrics. Using a listener's emotional and ethical experiences by way of assessing how effective a lyric is, in terms of ethical application, is a possible extension to this thesis.

Regarding the second question, I propose that 'mere' consumption of pop does result in engagement with ethical content and emotional reaction, however, offering a deliberate and meaningful framework which teachers can use to engage students offers greater opportunity for structured and planned moral development (see Chapter Five).

## 1.3 Is there an ethical value to the lyrics of pop songs?

### *1.3.i The ethical value of pop*

In seeking to define ethical value in this thesis and identify where it appears in pop lyrics, I wish to emphasise the importance of going beyond mere analysis of the form or superficial consideration of lyrical content. I accept that ethical value may not appear in a discrete and obvious way in every song, but this should not exclude the possibility that every pop lyrics could potentially hold ethical value – in its simplest form through ethical content within lyrics, but also when seen in connection with other value types – particularly cultural value. The identification of ethical content is insufficient by itself for ascribing ethical value, and as I work through answering the three main research questions of this thesis, I seek to reach a conclusion with regard to pop lyrics' educational potential for moral development. Whilst we consume hours of pop music each week, such is the experience of doing so and the range of subject matter that lyrics consider, it would be virtually impossible to not hear some ethically challenging content as we engage via our usual listening habits. I explore below both examples of what such ethical content is – through a neo-Aristotelian lens of virtue ethics and via a close reading of several example lyrics. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has become the preferred school of moral theory in recent years, particularly when applied to moral education (see for example, Kristjánsson, 2015; Curren, 2000; Sherman, 1995). I apply this in educational terms to the concept of 'virtue literacy' – for which I offer a unified and comprehensive definition in Chapter Five.

I justify my choice of approach below, but, in short, a virtue ethical consideration of pop lyrics allows both for a consideration of the content, be that virtuous or vicious, presented simply or in a more complex way, and gives a framework for moral development in terms of habituation and subsequent training of critical faculties, which creates space for pop lyrics to be used as tools for moral education – typically in the traditional classroom setting, as well as in alternative and informal educational spaces; engaging young people not only in the production and processes and creation of pop music and lyrics, but also in the tropes and techniques that songwriters and artists use to engage listeners, convey emotion and evoke emotional responses. Establishing pop's value base allows us to embrace the ethical and emotional content within lyrics and its impact on listeners. This moves pop beyond being valued only for its commercial value, or only because it imparts pleasure to its listeners, but because there is an ethically beneficial reason to value it.

I contend that there is an ethical value to pop lyrics that can be harnessed in taught moral education practices in the classroom. However, this is neither assumed nor achieved simply through reading lyrics and assuming that ethical content exists. There needs to be a close engagement with the lyrics, an understanding of the themes, metaphors, syntax and

structure of each lyric, and what various tropes and devices attempt to achieve, through repetition, rhyme, voice and story. I turn to Adam Bradley (2017) and his *Poetry of Pop* as Bradley advocates for a closer inspection of pop lyrics; arguing that traditional techniques of poetic analysis that are familiar to teachers and students of poetry are effective when deployed to pop lyrics. The benefits of doing so are an increase in our appreciation for pop music, its constructs and tropes and enhanced skills in poetic analysis. Pop can, then, provide an entry point to the analysis of more traditional and canonised poems, which are being less frequently taught in schools[6].

Bradley stops short of considering any moral or ethical benefits to in-depth analysis of pop lyrics. He does reflect that consuming pop music in preparation for writing his book was '…[T]o the detriment of my ears and to the betterment of my being' (Bradley, 2017: 4). Contending that the consumption of pop music over a prolonged period of time has caused physical harm, but human improvement. I say more on this in Chapter Five (see 5.2.vi).

Literary texts, novels, dramas, poems, and films are utilised in education as tools from which we can develop morally and ethically, and yet songs, and specifically lyrics, are often overlooked. Equally, 'good' books, plays, and poems are analysed by scholars for their ethical value and content, and their moral value debated as a philosophical aim of good education (see for example Bohlin, 2005; Carr, 2005; 2023; Davison *et al*., 2016; Carr and Harrison, 2015; Guttesen, 2022; Jónsson *et al*., 2021). Whereas 'good' books, tales, and other literary narratives are used in moral education, song lyrics are often overlooked as something that holds ethical value and can be used to assist our own moral development. Where music has been debated for its moral and ethical, as well as its aesthetic value, the discussions usually focus on art or classical music over popular music, at least until recently (see for example Stadlen, 1962 against the aesthetics of popular music and von Appen, 2007 in support of it).

Pop music is acknowledged in philosophical discussions of aesthetics, aesthetic value and mass art, and with a growing body of work (see for example Robb and Mills, 2025). Whilst pop and rock music have been cited in discussions of aesthetic value (see for example Carroll, 1998; 2000; Stone 2016; Adorno 1998), arguments for the moral and ethical value are limited. Further, any arguments for the educational application of any ethical value of pop are non-existent. There are studies which acknowledge music as an influence on the identity of young people, particularly on their moral identity (see for example, Arthur *et al*., 2017), but such studies have not been centred on pop music or their lyrics, nor on their ethical value and its educational application.

The recent scholarly inclusion of popular music in debates over philosophical value has coincided with a rise in interest in moral development and moral education, particularly those theories of moral education that are informed by the emotions (see Arthur, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2018 amongst others). The revival in interest, particularly in educational circles, not simply philosophical ones, in the moral development of young people in schools is often framed around helping young people develop and acquire a sense of moral purpose

[6] 'Many UK primary schoolchildren 'drastically' missing out on poetry' [Online]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/mar/15/many-uk-primary-schoolchildren-drastically-missing-out-on-poetry [Accessed 27 August 2024].

(see Damon, 2009; Cotton Bronk, 2014). Purpose is a useful term that I will discuss at the end of this chapter. Purpose describes the motivation held by an agent to want to achieve an end goal. With regard to moral development, purpose is the desire to be better, to be the best version of oneself. Therefore, where I concentrate on Bradley's use of 'betterment' as a helpful term to describe the end goal of moral development overall, and the educational application of the ethical value of pop lyrics, specifically, we can use the definitions of purpose in the literature to better understand the processes and motivations that can be developed through moral development (see Damon's definition of purpose in particular, 2009; but also Cotton Bronk, 2014; Arthur *et al*., 2017).

The moral and ethical content of many pop lyrics provides fertile content and didactic value, when considering such lyrics as tools for moral development. To support this claim, though, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of what we mean by 'value', and the different ways in which value types interact with one another. As per the introductory chapter, this theoretical investigation is set in the context of a neo-Aristotelian understanding of ethics, and the educational aim of flourishing. To educate the flourishing individual, there is a history of drawing on different tools from the arts, and narrative art in particular, which has typically not extended to include pop lyrics.

A good deal of pop music is consumed by listeners without any greater attention to a song's place in society, its aesthetic features, or any deeper analysis of its lyrics and meanings. It is consumed for pleasure and pleasurable reasons alone and catalogued only by its commercial success. There is no requirement to have to seek deeper meaning or undertake poetic analysis of each song we hear. My argument is that where we are undertaking educational activities intended to better ourselves and others morally and ethically, then we can utilise pop lyrics as a tool for doing so. This may be restricted to the classroom, but equally, where it is found useful and enjoyable, may inspire listeners to seek opportunities for greater understanding and analysis of lyrics away from the classroom.

We treat commercial success of pop songs as positive in a monetary sense, where singles sell so many units, reach chart positions, and so on. Chart positions and sales are what artists, producers, songwriters and label executives aspire to achieve with music singles, occasionally celebrating a pop song's longevity if it remains atop the charts for more than a week or two. Yet, commercial value is also seen as a negative by many, including fans, critics and journalists. In this regard, artists or songwriters (and others involved in a song's lifecycle), may be criticised for prioritising commercial value at the expense of other value types, or at the expense of perceived 'authenticity' when an artist may be accused of 'selling out'. This is where considering and appreciating the complex interactions that occur between value types is helpful, particularly with commercial and ethical value. First, though, it is important to consider the value types we ascribe to pop in isolation.

### *1.3.ii Questioning the values we ascribe to pop*

It is necessary to consider objections to the ascription of moral and ethical value to mass art, such as pop music, to ensure that the case that I am making is robust and attends to alternative perspectives. Here, I consider Sam Ladkin, Robert McKay and Emile Bojesen (Eds, 2016) objection to the ascription of any value type to works of art, particularly for educational purposes. This objection, I argue, is unfounded. The key objection against value

in the arts is that ascribing value to art creates a culture of 'audit' in which people are forever acknowledging where a particular value, virtue or trait exists in their lives or educational context, where it is absent, and what needs to be done about developing it. My response to this objection is that harnessing the educational potential that pop lyrics can and do hold for moral development does not and should not be reduced to an exercise of box-ticking to contemplate songs that cover ethical themes that match a check-list of value terms. To do so misses the point of why pop lyrics are ethically valuable, as I have defined 'ethical value'. They are valuable as they bring to bear projections and contemplations of ethical themes (virtuous and vicious), both those that are present within the lyrics and, through training, on those that affect our own lives. Such themes that are (usually) presented in pop lyrics the first person, in real-time and as a mode of reflection. In encouraging audiences to engage and reflect on lyrics that contemplate ethical content, so there is greater opportunity to reflect more deeply on matters that permeate popular culture and the lived experience of audiences. Ultimately, to the end of encouraging a mindset that pursues opportunities to flourish, which, of course, is the main aim of an Aristotelian theory of education (see for example, Kristjánsson, 2015; Curren, 2000; Sherman, 1995).

*Against Value in the Arts and Education* is a disruptive collection that argues against ascribing value to any artwork as to do so 'damages that which it seeks to measure' (Ladkin, McKay and Bojesen, 2016: 1). The collection brings together voices of scholars and artists who do not wish to defend theirs or others' art in terms of its value(s) (with the exception of the chapter by Neary). That 'value' is diverse and multi-functioning, but is seen as a hindrance rather than an enabler to accessibility of works of art, particularly when rooted in commercial and economic principles. Ultimately, the success of pop art is its popularity, which is determined by commercial forces (sales, chart positions, views, etc.). However, the artist that produces a work of art that is never seen by anyone outside of their intimate circles will never have their work 'valued' to the same degree as a chart-topping novel, song or blockbuster movie. Such an argument is problematic as it is predicated on the assumption that all artworks can achieve the same levels of commercial success, and that commercial value is a measure of success that rests outside of the control of the artist. The commercial value of a piece of art does not reflect the skill of the artist as an artist. Indeed, ascribing an overall value to an artwork, or even in breaking that overall value down into multiple value types is, again, not a reflection on the effort or competence of the artist. However, as value judgements are, ostensibly, made from subjective and individual perspectives, it is easy to see how critics of value in art will object to their ascription, and even to their value (i.e. that they object to there being any value in placing value on works of art). The main articulation of being 'against value' is that it panders to an 'audit culture' that focuses on productivity over uselessness, quantity over quality. The argument is that being useless is an acceptable disposition. However, this goes fundamentally against a virtue ethics conception both of moral life and of the purpose of education. Rather than encouraging uselessness as a state of being, ascribing value – ethical value – here through deliberate and conscientious analysis of the lyrics that exist in our lives, serve up opportunities to live useful lives, to be useful to ourselves and to others, rather than to exist in a state of angst and ineffectiveness.

It is worth considering, briefly, a pop song that did not initially generate much commercial value but held some cultural value through its use in pop culture, which, then, by the very nature of consumerism, helped the song to become more commercially valuable. The Oasis song 'Half the World Away', which was an un-released album track, which went on to be used as the title music to the very successful sitcom 'The Royale Family'. As a result, the track became far more commercially successful than it otherwise would have done. So, whilst the term 'value' cannot be all-encompassing, for fear that it become meaningless, in the examples of pop lyrics, we can view value to be a range, from nought to a lot, with each value type impacting the others.

*1.3.iii Commercial value: an elaboration*

The pop music industry is driven by commerce and commercialism. The commercial value of a song or lyric derives straight from the monetary figure that is ascribed to the song, in terms of how much its total sales equate to, how much of that amount was achieved in its first week of release, and what position it charted at on the popular music charts. The music industry is valued in terms of its profit, the monetary amount that it is deemed to be worth - $11.1 billion in the US in 2019[7], and £5.2 billion in the UK in 2019[8]. The different metrics used to calculate these figures demonstrate the limitations of speaking comprehensively about this value of pop music, but the figures quoted demonstrate the strengths; the enormous sums reflect the scale of consumption, commerce, and influence that popular music has upon our everyday lives. Simon Frith (2007) talks of the impact on the lives of the consumers of pop in sociological terms. Most people will have songs that we listen to every day, 'a workout mix, a drive-time playlist, the songs we hear in stores, the music we dance to at parties.' (Bradley, 2017: 2). Whilst the listening experience is unique and individual, the collective consumption of pop songs – music and lyric – is a shared encounter; something that reflects the society in which we consume it and simultaneously creates a shared culture. Consuming pop can be seen as a collection of individual experiences of consumption and immersion, where ultimately, the end product is a commercial and consumerist purchase, entwined within a shared culture.

Pop is defined by its economics, its monetary value, and its consumerist nature. Any other value that is prioritised or added to the commercial value fights a hard battle to be considered ahead of or alongside the metrics of consumer success, i.e., number of units sold, ranking in the top 40/Hot 100 charts, or total value of sales. To some extent, where a pop lyric is considered for its cultural value, that value has to come second to the commercial value; it is a song's consumption – sales and streams – that determines its popularity. Of course, it is not always a song's popularity that determines whether a song holds any cultural or societal value. It is possible for a pop lyric to contain cultural value without being popular, just as it is possible for lyrics to be popular without holding any meaningful cultural value – as will be explored and evidenced. Frith talks of the tension between a song's value and its culture; that a pop song's value is falsely evaluated as being

[7] See 'US Recorded Music Revenue Reaches $11.1 Billion in 2019, 79% From Streaming: RIAA' [Online]. Available at: https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8551881/riaa-music-industry-2019-revenue-streaming-vinyl-digital-physical (Accessed: 28th September 2020).

[8] See 'Mu5ic by Num8ers 2019' [Online]. Available at: https://www.ukmusic.org/assets/general/Music_By_Numbers_2019_Report.pdf (Accessed 28th September 2020).

something that takes it above mere 'pop', noting, 'the suggestion is that pop music becomes more valuable the more independent it is of the social forces that organize the pop process in the first place; pop value is dependent on something outside pop, is rooted in the person … the community or the subculture that lies behind it.' (Frith, 2007: 136).

Here, I agree with Frith, as this is a false dichotomy. It is easy to champion 'good' pop songs as being more valuable than 'bad' or even middle-of-the-road pop songs, simply because they operate outside of the traditional norm of pop – the formulaic, processed, sugar-coated norms. Pop as popular requires an understanding of what popularity means, not limited to sales and commerce only. Popularity resides in the populus, the people, and therefore the culture that pop gives to and takes from. This is where, as we agree on definitions, Bradley's definition of pop is so useful. It is a descriptive term that encompasses (almost) every genre of music that is mass produced. It is not simply the songs that hit the top of the charts each week, but songs that engage us emotionally, ethically, and socially. Of course, that is not to ignore the commercial values we have begun with and are required of pop songs.

Dolfsma is one scholar who has written about the commercial and economic values of pop (see Dolfsma, 1999; 2004). Dolfsma, an economist and philosopher, has written about values in pop music and social economics, and argues that the interactions between consumption and production dictate how highly something, such as popular music, is valued in society. Mass production of music in hard copy format allowed music to become readily accessible to the general public in quantities not seen before. This continued to increase throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Whilst consumption in terms of numbers has continued to increase, the advent of new forms of consumption, such as streams and downloads, mean that we no longer consume music physically to the same degree that we did with vinyl, cassettes and CDs, but do so digitally via online music services such as Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Music. The product, in terms of the music, is still the same, but the experience is different. Songs are, today, consumed individually, with artists and record labels able to release individual songs, rather than full Extended or Long Players, with metrics available for each song in terms of its economic and commercial value.

The economics of pop are inescapable. The success of a song is charted for us all to see, and celebrated the longer a song remains popular. Yet, a song's popularity is not only determined by its commercial value. Dolfsma's analysis of the economic values that impact the social structures present a case for pop music holding multiple values simultaneously. For Dolfsma, whose analysis is limited to the consumption of pop music in the Netherlands rather than worldwide, pop's commercial rise and success can be explained through a focus on the social-cultural and identity values that underpin popular culture; in short, that people consume pop music as a way of expressing their identity, to feel a sense of belonging to a particular group, and to share experiences evoked through listening to pop music. However, for Dolfsma, identity through mass consumption is neither unique nor individual, instead it is highly social and communal. Within popular music, such socio-cultural values are regularly institutionalised and objectified. By this, Dolfsma refers to the creation and development of identities by those in the pop music industry. Where this is seen positively, it brings like-minded 'fans' together to engage with particular songs and celebrate their shared love of particular artists. Where this is seen negatively, though, is where the pop music industry

seeks to manipulate the identities of its consumers through the ways in which it writes, records, and markets its products. This can have both positive and negative implications for how our identities are formed and shaped, and explains, in part, why pop music is so attractive to consumers of all types; that it provides a framework for our own identities, senses of belonging, and shared interests for consumers to attach themselves to and root themselves in. However, as Dolfsma sets out, any value of identity is secondary to the commercial value that pop will always hold as a primary value.

As popularity in commercial terms equates to economic performance and consumption, it is difficult to present a meaningful and authentic case for any value of pop music that doesn't acknowledge, up front, the economic and commercial values that have to be present. My case is that the economic and commercial values of pop are only contributing factors to pop's overall value and should only be seen in relation to the other types of values mentioned, here, as well as considering the extent to which the authenticity of other value types, such as cultural, aesthetic and ethical, are affected by the spectre of the economic and commercial values. 'Imagine' by John Lennon is a good example to consider, as a song about both solace and promise; envisioning, as Lennon does, a world of Utopian equality and Dystopian nothingness. Lennon himself described its themes as 'anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalistic, but because it is sugar-coated it is accepted ... Now I understand what you have to do. Put your political message across with a little honey.' (Lennon, in Levy, 2005: 87). The song is widely celebrated as one of the most listened to, most celebrated, and most liked songs in pop music history. It is one of the most commercially successful pop songs of all time. In it, Lennon offers a dream for his listeners to join him in a world of equality, of peace, and he does so by singing a lilting ballad, dressed in a white suit, accompanied by a white piano. The 'image' of 'Imagine' creates its own commercial value, whilst encompassing the values of culture, aesthetics, politics, and even ethics. It presents a message that challenges the listener – to imagine a world very different to that in which they live – and yet has met with almost universal appeal, which has endured over time. 'Imagine' is a song that demonstrates how multi-faceted the notion of 'value' can be, but how essential the notion of commercial value is, for pop music.

Scholars have long linked popular music and cultural value. Shuker, a professor of English, Film, Theatre and Media, speaks of 'how popular music is part of the wider culture.' (2008: 1). Philosopher Roger Scruton describes pop music as the 'most pervasive expression' of popular culture.[9] Frith, a music critic, has written widely about the sociological and cultural impact of pop music; 'A reading of British music magazines reveals that 'good' popular music has always been heard to go beyond or break through commercial routine.' (Frith, 2007: 136). Alison Stone (2016) writes, though, that 'popular music has its defenders. But they have tended to appeal to the same inherited aesthetic criteria, defending some branches of popular music at the expense of others --- valorising its artistic, expressive, innovative, or authentic branches against mere "pop"'. (Stone, 2016: 249). I follow Stone's argument, here, that it is vital that we evaluate the lyrics of pop songs '*as* popular music, [and] not how successfully they rise above the popular condition.' (*Ibid*.). Stone's work is helpful as we seek 'to understand [the] value [of pop] without presupposing that popular culture ranks

[9] See 'Sir Roger Scruton – The Cultural Significance of Pop' [Online]. Available at: https://www.rogerscruton.com/homepage/about/music/understanding-music/175-the-cultural-significance-of-pop (Accessed 29 September 2024).

below art.' (*Ibid*.: 252). Indeed, Stone makes a compelling case for valuing pop songs *because* they are popular, not in spite of their popularity. This helps explain away the objections raised in *Against Value* that art's popularity, and therefore commercial value, serves as a limitation. For Stone, it is essential to assess pop songs by appropriate measures in terms of the 'standards of cultural form to which they belong – not by inappropriate standards that enshrine prejudices against popular music' (*ibid*.: 253), or, by extension, against the ascription of value to pop.

In that regard, it is important to recognise pop's presence and positive impact on society – not just economically, but culturally, politically, socially, and ethically. Such impact extends beyond the song and the lyrics. This is where Stone's account of the aesthetic value of pop is limited. While she positions the aesthetic value that pop holds as part of a wider cultural aesthetic, her focus is exclusively on the music and only the music, rather than the lyrics, or any other part of an artist's 'brand'. In addition to the music, artists and singers create their own brand identities where they endorse products such as perfumes, clothing and trainers; appear in newspapers, magazines, on television; mix in selective social circles to gain maximum press attention; and have social media platforms followed by millions of people.

In short, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to avoid pop music culture, regardless of whether you consume the songs as a listener or not. As a result, consumers of pop music of all ages, in all ways, are exposed to the accompanying and surround pop music culture, be that through an artist or group's back catalogue of albums and singles, artists who are 'similar', or that streaming services 'recommend' one listens to, but also through an artist's additional business interests through products outside of the music industry (e.g., Kanye West and his Yeezy brand), through use of pop lyrics and music in additional contexts (e.g., D:Ream 'Things Can Only Get Better' as the UK Labour Party theme song in 1997), or events that pop artists are involved in away from recording and performing music, such as appearances at cultural events such as sports matches, publicity events for other brands, etc. (e.g., Taylor Swift watching Kansas City Chiefs games or Liam Gallagher and Selena Gomez watching Lionel Messi play for Inter Miami). All of this creates a broader cultural picture that popstars and specific pop lyrics fall into, creating a much richer tapestry within which consideration of the cultural value of pop should fall, as I will explore below.

### *1.3.iv Cultural value: an elaboration*

I defined cultural value earlier as the extent to which a song has impacted Western democratic popular culture, as seen through its appearance in cultural products, situations, and incidents that are beyond the original intention of the song, or where a lyric has taken on greater significance culturally because of its attachment to other events. The engagement of the commercial and social values of pop songs cannot be ignored when pop songs are used to endorse, sell, promote everything. The 'popular' aspect of mass consumption and mass appeal sees pop songs used at political conferences, in shops, on television, almost everywhere. That is in addition to the saturation of pop songs through the radio, online, and on music television. Mere popularity of a lyric does not ensure any deeper cultural engagement or ascription of cultural value. However, some level of popularity is required for a song to be ascribed additional cultural value. For example, where a song may already have achieved some level of commercial popularity, it may take on additional value – culturally – where it is used implicitly or explicitly for purposes beyond its original

intention. This manipulates the more 'natural' popularity of a song, as it then is used to make the product or person be even more popular. Examples of this include adverts on television, the playing of songs at political events and conferences, and the inclusion of songs on movie soundtracks. The 2013 hit song 'Happy' by Pharrell appeared on the movie soundtrack to *Despicable Me 2*. The song was released as a single after the movie was in cinemas, went to number 1 in the UK Top 40 charts (returning to the top spot on two further occasions) and would go on to be the most downloaded song of all time in 2014.[10] The song, uptempo and 'happy' as it is, is a simple, celebratory song about being happy and staying happy – the importance of happiness in living a fulfilling life. The lyrics are, as in 'Imagine', straightforward and unassuming, 'Because I'm happy / clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth'. Even in the second verse when Williams introduces the challenge to the listener, 'Here come bad news, talking this and that', the negatives are brushed off in the way that Jay-Z does in 'Dirt Off Your Shoulder', reflecting some depth to 'Happy' that takes us at least someway beneath the very shallow surface of the chorus happy-clapping. Unlike 'Imagine', there is no great challenge to the listener, other than to give in and clap along with Pharrell, but that does not detract from its aesthetic value. Its aesthetic value, of course, being that it makes you 'happy'. It is a happy song about being happy, that makes you feel happy. Its cultural value may not be present within the content of its lyrics but was cemented in both its appearance in the film, and the degree to which it was consumed, globally. Also, where a song links to the main theme of a movie, TV show, advert, etc. so this can enhance both the cultural value and significance of both the song and of the show/movie. For example, 'This is Me' by The Greatest Showman Cast (2017) is a song about empowerment and self-confidence and self-acceptance. The song and movie were both commercially hugely successful, and the song was a huge hit, as a single and in partnership with the film. Both became culturally significant, and each emphasises the overall theme of both the song and movie. They work in tandem and have gained significant cultural value in doing so.

This historical context is relevant to how we, as consumers, hear the song post 2017, as the song has taken on a new meaning, following these events, which of course were completely unrelated to the song's original composition. The tension that rests within pop music, as with almost any other narrative art form, is between what a songwriter or author intends when they write a text, and what the audience infers. I will discuss the authorial voice later in this thesis, but where we ascribe value to a song, we do so as listeners, as the audience, as consumers, almost regardless of the song's original meaning and intention. The experience of the listener in listening to pop songs is most relevant as it requires engagement with the song. Such engagement can bring about emotional or aesthetic experiences, as I will explore, but we can also ascribe aesthetic and emotional value to songs that we engage with on these areas. However, in addition to our own individual ascription of value, a song builds cultural value through a shared consensus. This is then broadcast and magnified through platforms such as blogs, news feeds, social media, journalist's opinions by way of reviews, and where a song is played, or a lyric repeated, in contexts that are outside of the song's 'usual home'. For example, where it is played at cultural events, parties, festivals, even political campaigns and conferences, where it

[10] See 'Happy (Pharrell Williams Song)' [Online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_(Pharrell_Williams_song) [Accessed 4 October 2024].

appears on adverts, in TV shows and movies, and so on. Sometimes a song is written for a dual purpose – for example where it is released as a song by the recording artist, but it also appears on a movie soundtrack. Where it does hold a dual purpose, so that cultural value we may ascribe may have been more deliberately and intentionally sought by the artist or songwriter, in allowing their song onto a movie soundtrack. However, often the cultural value builds more organically. This point is not intended to pit one form of cultural value above another, merely to evidence the ways in which it can originate.

Pop music sits at the very centre of popular culture. As Shuker (2008) and others have written, the proliferation of pop into everyday society and culture has naturally brought about an increase in both the mass production and consumption of pop songs. The songs and records are valued, commercially, in terms of their consumption, and artists are valued in terms of the brand that is created around them. Whilst the 'brand' of an artist has always been important in commercialising pop – look back to Elvis Presley and The Beatles as examples – in the twenty first century, the 'brand' is as important as the product; with a marketing approach that if you create a strong enough brand, the songs will essentially sell themselves. This consideration of the wider pop culture beyond and around the music is helpfully explored by Shuker (2008), Frith (2004) and Seabrook (2015), showing the extent to which the pop music industry today focuses, on the one hand, on 'hits' (see Seabrook, 2015), where the song is all important, in isolation. The song is crafted, manufactured, created to sell in the present, often with little consideration taken for a singer's career catalogue.

In pop music, the end product – the song – is valued by the listener less as a commercial unit or monetary figure, but as something that is valuable to us for other reasons. It may be that we have connected with the song emotionally, engaged in an aesthetic experience when consuming the song, appreciate the music/lyrics, or for a number of other value-based reasons. The personal, cultural and societal values that pop music holds manifests in different forms.

The link between cultural value – valuable beyond the bounds that something was initially intended to do or created for, or providing a source of value to pop culture beyond a song's immediate initial reception – and ethical value is complex. A song that shows a discrete link between ethical and cultural value is 'One Last Time' by Ariana Grande (2014); a hugely popular, commercially valuable pop song. Grande's 'One Last Time' is a song about desiring one more night of passion with a lover who has moved on to a new relationship. The core message is of longing for a lost love (fairly typical across the pop corpus), but implicitly raises questions of faithfulness, unrequited love and sorrow and despair. The song has sold 1.50 million copies in the UK and spent 53 weeks on the UK Official Chart (peaking at number two).[11] Its cultural value extended beyond its initial reception as a pop song following events that occurred in Manchester in 2017, three years after the song's first release. The Manchester Arena bombing on 22nd May 2017 killed 23 people at an Ariana Grande concert.

[11] See 'One Last Time: Official Charts' [Online]. Available at: https://www.officialcharts.com/search/singles/one-last-time/ (Accessed 2 October 2024).

Following the tragic events, the song was re-released as a charity single to raise money for the families of the bereaved and injured. The chorus lyrics 'So one last time / I need to be the one who takes you home / One more time / I promise after that, I'll let you go' have taken on a new meaning in relation to the victims of the bombing, rather than the former lover they were originally written about. The link, then, between cultural and ethical value relies much more on the understanding of the context in which the song became more popular three years after its release than when it first received airplay. The ethical value, or at least ethical content to consider, is how fitting a song written pining after a former love, the language of 'ownership' in relationships ('mine'), and advocating infidelity is when cherishing the memory of innocent victims of the bombing. That plays to the strengths of pop music, though, as well as providing an example of how lyrics can be interpreted and applied to a given situation, and not only be interpreted for their literal meaning. The cultural value of 'One Last Time' extends beyond one's own interpretation of the lyrics. Following the tragic events of 2017, it became a song of hope, of memory, and provided a constant and reassuring presence for many people around the world who were coming to terms with the tragedy, even if they had not been directly affected. I have used this example to illustrate how cultural value and ethical value can interact, particularly on a societal scale, beyond individual consumption of a lyric. This points towards a civic value to pop lyrics that can bring in virtues of community spirit, charitable giving, social action and service to bear that may not previously have been considered in the original reception of the lyric.

In sum, pop's cultural value is derived from the impact that a song has outside of its commercial value (albeit an increase in cultural value will correlate with an increase commercial value). That is where a song finds relevance and relationship with consumers outside of its initial intended meaning, for example through use in adverts, political campaigns, or link to a poignant event. Whilst this can be ascribed in isolation, it is where cultural and ethical value interact, and what the aesthetic features are that provide value to the lyric, that this thesis considers.

### *1.3.v Aesthetic value: an elaboration*

Ascribing an aesthetic value to art allows us to appreciate the aesthetic features of a piece of art, a film or book, or indeed a song. For aesthetes, this should be the only consideration when judging the value of a piece of art, as art is created and produced for its own sake, and not for any other moral, political, or social reason. Such a school of thought originated in the 19th century in France, and encourages critics and audiences to divorce any consideration of the didactic, ethical, or other features that may be present, or they may wish to ascribe to a piece of art, in favour of assessing only its aesthetic qualities, in terms of its structure, form, shape, colour, etc. The main benefit of only considering the aesthetic value of any piece of art is that there will be aesthetic features present in all pieces of art. Whilst these may not be consistent across every piece of art (how does one evaluate the colour of a pop song? And there is no sense of rhythm in a painting, for example), there will be features present which allow for an aesthetic value to be ascribed to all pieces of art, regardless of form or content.

Noël Carroll (2000) outlines the different perspectives taken, critically, on the value of art. It is useful to explore a summary of his position when exploring the aesthetic value of pop. Carroll advocates for a moderate version of moralism in art (see Carroll, 1996; 1998; 2000),

in that where a piece of art engages with topics of ethics and morals, then it can and should be evaluated for such features, as contributing factors to its aesthetic value. However, where no ethical and moral content is present, then no ethical value can be ascribed to a piece of art. On one level, this is all well and good. To simplify, we wouldn't celebrate a painting's blue features if there were no blue paint visible. Similarly, we cannot engage with themes of gratitude within a lyric if it is a lyric about lust, despair, or some other theme seemingly unrelated to gratitude. That said, where the colour blue is referenced in a lyric, and is done so artfully and with metaphorical intent, then we can appreciate both the presentation of the colour within the lyric as well as interpret the metaphorical meaning, whether it reflect open spaces, freedom and imagination, loyalty and wisdom, or despair and depression.

Some pop songs may begin their lives with one set of ascribed values through a traditional and straightforward process of commercial release and popular consumption, then, because of events outside of anyone's control or initial design, shift in value to something different. Indeed, one reading of Carroll could interpret his perspective as limiting audience impression and consideration. The focus on formal properties and exclusion of others – cognitive and moral, for example – limits the view of what it is to engage with an aesthetic experience. Carroll writes that 'a recurrent theme in the tradition has been that cognitive properties are not aesthetic properties and that the cognitive advantages offered by engaging with artworks are not part of the aesthetic experience proper of the works in question.' – The majority tradition (Carroll, 2012: 172). Carroll also acknowledges that moral insight is also excluded from the aesthetic experience – along with political inspiration and recognition of representational content (*Ibid*.).

The listener's impression is often, with pop, more important than authorial intent of the songwriter, or performance by the artist. Pop seeks to engage its listeners emotionally, however superficial that engagement may end up being. Pop does this through repetitive and unoriginal musical and lyrical tropes, metaphor and rhymes. The songwriter and/or artist will never know the emotional experiences of every listener, nor indeed how many listeners there will be for any song that they write and record. Therefore, and pop does this more so than any other genre of music (see Bradley, 2017), songs are written to engage us by presenting specific details and experiences and making them generally accessible. That, for Bradley, is the 'poetry of pop'. Pop songs utilise formal and technical features that add to a song's overall aesthetic value, such as repetition, rhyme, key, pitch, and other typical features of music and song, but does so in often formulaic ways, such as with the positioning of riffs and choruses, the inclusion of a key change at the end of a song to life a ballad, or repeating features throughout songs. Such formulas are celebrated within pop circles, but sometimes derided by critics (see for example Young, 2014; Rosselson, 1979), for pop is seen as 'low art', beneath more valuable forms of art. Such comparisons are unhelpful as I am charging that pop's lyrics are our source of value and ultimately ethical value. We cannot ascribe value to lyrics where they are not present – such as in instrumental music that Young contends is 'better' than pop. Young accepts that literary fiction can be a source of 'valuable social, emotional and moral insights', accepting that it can be profound (*Ibid*.: 524). Young also classifies popular music as an extension of popular fiction. However, his dismissal of pop music as not being capable of offering psychological insights as it is predicated by its entertainment value (see its commercial value) ahead of its

level of insight is the sort of sweeping generalisation that diminishes the opportunities that pop songs offer, educationally and philosophically, and is an argument I argue against.

I contend that comparing genres of music, particularly dismissing the entirety of the corpus of the most popular genre is unhelpful. Whilst I am considering lyrics in isolation from musical accompaniment, this thesis has highlighted many examples of lyrics that engage our emotions and offer moral insights. Further, it is important not to compare categories that are markedly different. In the case of pop music, Stone writes (2016: 249) that it is important, today, 'to judge how well [pop songs] work *as* popular music, not how successfully they rise above the popular condition.' Frith writes something similar when he says 'popular music is popular not because it reflects something, or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what popularity is.' (Frith, 2007: 137).

Here, it may be helpful to consider 'Shake It Off' by Taylor Swift, again. Her 2014 single that has sold copies, peaked at number 2 on the UK Top 40 Chart, and spent a total of 55 weeks on the chart. It has sold 1.80 million copies in the UK and 10.00 million copies in the US. The song has many aesthetic qualities, such as the many repeating hooks, riffs and lyrics that feature throughout. 'Shake It Off' is an example of a song that is hook-led. It uses repetition as a deliberate device, in the music and lyrics, to attract listeners. On a surface-level, the repetition may seem banal – particularly if considering the lyrics in isolation from the music – as discussed in 1.1.ii. However, the song's relentlessness embodies the song's main theme, that of resilience, whilst also imitating the relentlessness of attack and criticism that Swift claims to be victim of. The resilience that Swift sings of is resilience in the face of one's critics, 'that's what people say'; resilience and courage at treading one's own path making 'the moves up as I go (moves up as I go)', and resilience in the face of lost love

> My ex-man brought his new girlfriend
> She's like "oh my God", but I'm just gonna shake it

The image of 'shaking it off' is a metaphorical representation of moving beyond one's detractors or spectres from the past, brushing oneself down from the knock backs that one receives in life and never missing 'a beat' as one continues to pursue one's goals and aspirations, and fulfils one's life purpose.

It is helpful to consider an alternative definition of 'pop', as presented by John Seabrook in the *The Song Machine* (2015). For Seabrook, 'pop' is less about what is popular – as an all-encompassing, welcoming meta-genre of music, and more about a manipulative, songwriter-led process of writing 'hits', intended to be infectious, appealing, and popular. Seabrook presents a picture where all pop songs are written following tried and tested formulae, which are then tweaked just enough to make it stand out from the crowd. 'Shake It Off' certainly does this, with its repeating refrains, hooks and chorus following a typical verse, bridge, chorus, verse, bridge, chorus formula. What 'Shake It Off' does, though, it both introduce new elements to the formula, with an extended chorus and a break where Swift speaks to her listeners, rather than sings. The direct address from Swift to her audience creates a connection via her use of the second person. The rest of the song is written in the first person, singular. The song is about Swift's resilience, her bouncing back from the adversity of being criticised in the media, about the heartbreak and the fakeness

that surrounds her. This is her superstar life, but she is not so wrapped up in it to forget her fans. It may take her two thirds of the three minutes and thirty-nine seconds to do so, but the break in the song creates space for Swift to speak to her listeners. To engage them, to get them onside with her superficial struggles, and to make them relevant to her listeners' lives, before calling for their support to 'shake it off' together.

> Hey, hey, hey
> Just think while you've been getting down and out about the liars and the dirty, dirty cheats in the world
> You could have been getting down to this sick beat

The song contains plenty of aesthetic features that add to its aesthetic value and if we take aesthetic value to mean the features which – when taken positively – make it worthy of being considered in and of its own sake, then we can appreciate things such as first-person voice, personal interruption of the melody, repetition and in-song reflection as aesthetically valuable.

The structure, driving beat, repeating lyrics are all aesthetically pleasing. On a surface level, it is a pop song that only contains aesthetic and commercial value, with limited initial cultural value other than being globally popular. There is no obvious moral content present in the lyric, therefore, we must consider the use of poetic techniques to unearth the ethical value. I argue that there is ethical value in 'Shake It Off' that goes beyond the metaphorical presentation of a theme of resilience – shaking off one's detractors and enjoying your life. This resilience has a moral tether, as Swift presents it as overcoming a moral injustice – the criticism of one's detractors. Swift feels that this criticism is unjustified, as it comes from a place of ignorance.

This ethical value enhances its aesthetic value. It is a song about resilience, about bouncing back from adversity. Whilst the physical metaphor epitomises the performance of being resilient, there is a depth to Swift's words. She is disclosing her feelings, showing her cards, and calling out to her listeners to join her. Her listeners' resilience is her resilience, and vice versa. There is a sharing of experiences, an opportunity to connect emotionally, which comes as a surprise with such a formulaic, 'banal' pop song (see footnote 5). Its value is not always only in its commercialism and aesthetics, but also in its simplicity, its repetition, and in other seemingly 'banal' facets that, in this case, help elucidate the resilience.

In sum, the aesthetic features of a lyric are those such as the structure and form, rhyme and metaphor that are crafted and developed to create aesthetic value. With pop, more so than other music genres, the structure and form are highly refined; often sticking to strict formulae intended to be pleasing to the ear of the listener. Rhymes are simple, melodies catchy and imagery easily interpreted. This does not, as critics have challenged, detract from the overall aesthetic value of a lyric, I contend. Indeed, I argue that a lot of pop's value is in its simplicity and relevance to a wide audience base, particularly where aesthetic and ethical value types interact.

*1.3.vi Ethical value: an elaboration*

It is a challenge, or even unethical, to consider the ethical value of anything that prioritises its monetary commercial value above all. Pop sells and is created to sell, so if its primary

purpose is to be consumed, there is a question over what genuine ethical value songs can hold. I concede that this is a legitimate concern, but it is not insurmountable. Firstly, it is important not to see commerce and ethics as mutually exclusive categories into which pop lyrics fall. Songs become popular for many different reasons, but largely because a song resonates with an audience – where listeners find pleasure in a song, create an emotional attachment to it, or find some deeper meaning in its lyrics. Such pleasure may arise because the melody is 'catchy', because a song is linked to a particular theme, emotion or cause, or because it is easily accessible, requires no deeper analysis or understanding and can be valued on its objective aesthetic qualities that make it a 'good' pop song for mass consumption. Bradley says that we are called to experiences when we listen to pop songs. The songs themselves are not the experiences of the listeners. They aren't even always the experiences of the writers or artists, but they are written and performed in ways that allow and enable us to remember, to celebrate, to obsess by recalling and remembering our own experiences. As Bradley says 'Sometimes we choose these encounters; at other times they surprise us, commanding thought and feeling. Such songs comprise another soundtrack, a collection of memories accessible only through sound.' (Bradley, 2017: 2). Such experiences and encounters by the listening audience are driven by emotional engagement with the song.

Pop songs are constructed to become popular by appealing to our ears, staying in our heads, and resonating with us emotionally. Bradley (2017) and Seabrook (2015), amongst others, present descriptions of the ways in which pop songs are constructed, applying formulae to create songs of constituent parts, arranged deliberately to try to maximise aesthetic value and listener engagement. Such engagement is an emotional engagement, an attachment to a particular song that has evoked a particular emotion in you, the listener. The lyrics of songs are in and of themselves popular. They are listened to by millions of ears, globally, on repeat, the lyrics are memorised and recited, sung back loudly at concerts, and interpreted, poured over for clues, and applied to one's own life. Lyrics are rarely intended to be didactic, though. Songwriters and artists do not write and record songs with the intention or expectation that they will be used to explore any ethical understanding. That said, they are discussed and debated by fans online, and even in interviews with the artists, where lyrics are poured over and analysed, often for no purpose other than for the sake of it. Art for art's sake may be one way of understanding aesthetic value but try telling that to the millions of One Direction fans on Twitter, or the thousands of posts on online fan forums. Fans engage with pop lyrics by seeking meaning in them – looking for clues to artists' private lives, points of reference to popular culture, and ways to share emotional experiences with the artist, and with one another. As Bradley says, pop lyrics call us to experiences, and these experiences are presented in ways that we can all access and share.

We can clarify our definition of ethical value – both in terms of where a lyric contains ethical content (be that virtuous or vicious) – which is an obvious place to start. Educationally, it makes sense to use examples of lyrics that focus on ethical content as we develop our ability to engage critically, empathetically and intentionally with pop lyrics to discern what ethical implications are for the subjects of the songs and for ourselves. Pop is an escapist medium; it is produced to create pleasure and enjoyment in listeners (as well as to sell lots of copies). But that does not mean that it cannot be used as a tool for ethical and moral ends, in the classroom, so it needs to hold meaning and substance. This can be cultivated through an

empathetic and critical engagement with lyrics, not just with songs that reference content linked to virtue or vice, but by exploring the themes within any pop song and understanding how they have been presented formally, the effectiveness of the structure and form on our understanding of the themes, and what we take away from such a close reading of a lyric in terms of our own moral understanding and knowledge.

'Ethical value' and 'moral value' are used interchangeably in the literature. My choice to use 'ethical value' reflects that – whilst still positive – there can be a focus on vicious content, knowledge and understanding (of vice) as well as of virtue, as defined in section 1.1.i.

The ethical value ascribed is still done so in a positive manner, but – as I will show in later chapters – ethical value can include a focus on vicious content. There is an unstated assumption in some definitions of 'moral value' that the ascription and the content both need to be positive – by which I mean virtuous. This exists in popular criticism of pop music too, that a focus on vicious themes will ultimately corrupt a listener. For example, famously, artists such as The Rolling Stones, Eminem and countless other big-selling, uber-famous music artists have been criticised and challenged for their lyrical content as being 'too vicious', or even had their songs censored completely. Censorship of pop artists' work often plays into the temporal context of pop culture at the time of a song's release. For example, The Rolling Stones were censored on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the United States on 15 January 1967. Their song 'Let's Spend the Night Together' as re-worded in the band's live performance so as not to offend audiences. The word 'night' was bleeped or cut from the television performance, as well as being similarly censored on US radio airplay.[12] The suggestion was that this 'might' upset audiences as it was too sexually suggestive. Similarly, Eminem's seminal album *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) was censored in multiple countries for its challenging, gruesome lyrics that depict in detail scenes of violence, homophobia, misogyny and murder. Such criticism propelled Eminem to the forefront of popular music culture at the time and despite the content and controversy, the album and its singles have been critically acclaimed, received awards and sold millions of copies worldwide. These are two examples of exalted and acclaimed popular music artists that have seen their work censored and criticised for its inclusion of vicious content. In terms of ethical value, I would contend that such lyrics offer fertile ground to contemplate topics of vice in safe educational spaces, and to contemplate in greater depth the presentation of themes, its perceived purpose and intent, and its effectiveness.

Where we subject such lyrics to the sort of analysis that I present below, such lyrics engage their educational potential as tools that can provide greater moral insight into themes of vice in the way that lyrics that engage virtuous content do. However much this may seem straightforward, there is still somewhat of a reluctance to ascribe serious moral value to pop lyrics. The notion of censorship is something I discuss in Chapter Three in more depth in relation to ethical value and songs that include vicious themes. Here, Carroll's work on censorship is important, particularly in relation to his own work on aesthetic and ethical values. Carroll contends (2000: 381) that work that is of immoral content – 'immoral art' – is ultimately used for a purpose that it was never intended to serve. Where art celebrates vice,

[12] 'When The Rolling Stones Got Censored On Ed Sullivan' [Online]. Available at: https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/the-stones-controversial-start-to-1967/ (Accessed 22 January 2022).

then Carroll's argument is that it cannot and should not serve as ethically valuable for the education of positive moral development. I disagree, here, and will use examples in subsequent chapters to support my argument. Carroll's consideration of censorship is more nuanced than I have presented above, but for the purposes of initially introducing immoral works of art, it serves as a helpful opening.

Ethical value comes when ethical content is present in a lyric's subject matter. This is often presented descriptively within the song lyrics but may take the form or be enhanced through poetic devices such as metaphor, rhyme and imagery. As consumers of pop music, we contemplate these ethically challenging or emotional scenario as we listen to lyrics when we go about our day-to-day business. However, practising engaging in greater depth, through close analysis of the lyric, its structure, form and content helps both understand a lyric's meaning in more detail and understand how we may navigate such an ethically challenging scenario ourselves. This focus on content allows us to lead with the aesthetic features of a lyric as guiding us towards the ethical content so that we can analyse the content and evaluate its presentation and effectiveness. In addition, though, I see ethical value as being our understanding of how detailed analysis of a pop lyric can cultivate a mindset for ethical criticism that opens us to considering all pop lyrics for their ethical value, even if the content is not explicitly ethical in nature.

The different emotions that lyrics engage, and the degree to which we emotionally engage with a song depends on several variables. These variables include our preference for a particular song, artist or sub-genre of pop music (i.e., whether we predispose ourselves to choose to listen to a particular song); our level of emotional engagement with a song that we have listened to (i.e., is it a song that we spend time listening to repeatedly, that we take care to hear the lyrics and reflect on their meaning, or is it a song that we may hum along to when we hear it on the radio – for example – but spend no further resource engaging with it, which may result in mis-hearing lyrics, misunderstanding their meaning, or only hearing the melodies). Further variables then include our own individual experiences that we bring to the table when engaging with anything or anyone else (i.e., whether I have experienced feelings of loss, lust, love, betrayal, gratitude and so on). Such experiences will impact how we hear a lyric, or how we interpret and apply it, particularly in terms of our emotional state as we hear a song. It may be a song that reminds us of a time that we were grieving a lost family member, or a song that was played at a wedding, birthday, or other life event. Equally, it may be something that brings new emotions to bear on a situation that we had not previously encountered or considered. This can be summarised as the amount and quality of the aesthetic and ethical values present within the songs.

In sum, then, my discussion of ethical value has been by way of analysis of the concept as used in existing literature. I turn to the important justification of the ethical value of pop lyrics in Chapter Two. This ethical value is not simply content that the artist presents with regard to virtue and vice but also regarding how the listener interact with the content (positively or negatively). This can be through an emotional response, or through appropriating emotions presented in the lyrics, or responding emotionally, as I will show in Chapters Two and Three.

## 1.4 The values of pop lyrics

### *1.4.i Ascribing values to the music we listen to*

In this section, I argue that we ascribe multiple value types to pop songs, which can be, in the main, categorised under commercial, cultural, aesthetic and ethical. I present these, initially, in isolation, but they are far from discrete. I turn to how these value types interact in Chapter Five and consider the place of a developing sense of virtue literacy can assist in how we ascribe value and what it means for our own moral education.

We may not always ascribe value types every time we listen to music, nor consciously categorise the value that we place on a song, but this is part of the process of taking pleasure or displeasure in the music that we listen to. I do not claim that every pop song holds each of these different values in equal measure – far from it. There are more valuable songs and less valuable ones; ones that, as with John Lennon's 'Imagine', make a deliberate attempt to consider cultural and political topics, and others, as with 'One Last Time' generate unforeseen value due to real world events and circumstances. Neither is subjectively more valuable than the other in one way yet will be preferred over the other in terms of individually being valued by audiences. They are, ultimately, pop songs, but they do much more for listeners where they lift our spirits, provide a united sense of consolation and support, and challenge us to think about how we engage with the world around us. Pop is driven by its commercial value, so it follows that that is the 'leading' value by which we consider a lyric's 'success' through its commercial and economic figures. However, to reach an evaluative judgement on its ethical value, we can go through and link a lyric to everyday culture, society and politics, before considering the aesthetic value of the lyric. The aesthetics of pop are often celebrated by critics and scholars alike, and yet used to dismiss pop as banal and inauthentic (see Stone, 2016; Frith, 2007). Where we go, then, is to consider the lyric in more detail, subject it to a rigorous analysis akin to traditional poetic analysis (see Bradley, 2017). There should be a focus on considering any ethical themes and content that may be present or have arisen through the other value types, and do so from an engaged, critical, but empathetic perspective. We should consider what a song may mean to others as well as ourselves, how we may interpret a lyric beyond our own initial reaction, and ultimately offer a judgement on its educational potential.

I claim that pop's true value is not limited to only the commercial, cultural and aesthetic, but where different value types, including ethical value, work in harmony with one another, moving up and down their individual continuums depending on the levels of consumption involved. I will go on to foreground how and where this ethical value can have educational potential for moral development, but first I will explore and explain each of the four value types I have identified in more detail. As Stone attests, historically, pop has been criticised for being simplistic, derivative, trivial, and other words of condemnation, and these criticisms are rooted in perspectives that hold pop as 'low art', or beneath other forms of music, and of art generally. In evaluating the values that pop holds, rather than pitting one sub-genre against another, one value type against another, or presupposing a 'set of criteria that are slanted against the popular field', it is better to find a new framework of evaluation of pop music – one that 'judges how well these pieces work *as* popular music' (Stone, 2016: 249). Therefore, we should consider all value types in the round, not seeing a song's commercial success as limiting or enabling its cultural value and collapsing the spectrum

that sees aesthetic value and ethical value as competing opposites (see D'Olimpio, 2020 for a more recent consideration of this debate).

Such value types are not mutually exclusive, and to treat them as such only furthers historical and outdated perspectives of pop music. They are not all always present in equal measure – indeed some may not be present at all in some songs, but where we focus explicitly on songs that contain ethical value then this value can lead the educational potential of pop songs as tools for moral development. Such a link may be dependent on the strength of the ethical value that is present, or of a reader's initial ability to comprehend and identify the ethical content at hand. Such a premise could be said to be 'virtue literacy', the notion that there is a virtue language that is diverse, but is a required part of moral development, particularly in terms of bringing together one's ability to perceive virtue, understand it, and reason with virtue (see Davison *et al*., 2016). I will explore the notion of virtue literacy in relation to the educational potential of pop songs that hold ethical value in chapters two and three, but it is important to introduce the concept here, as we move to exploring the four identified value types below.

### *1.4.ii Moral knowledge and pop music*

Twenty-first century consideration of moral knowledge and moral theory has moved discussions about the subjectivity of taste to include greater interrogation of reasoning. We seek to know more today about 'why' person A likes song one, when person B does not, and modern-day moral philosophers regularly turn to other disciplines such as psychology, education, and physiology to help flesh out unanswered questions relating to moral and emotional understanding. Asher foregrounds this inter-disciplinarity in his evaluation of literature, ethics and the emotions. Indeed, he seeks to diversify his own tools of engagement in a similarly inter-textual manner, and he congratulates himself for considering other forms of literary text in addition to the novel. For Asher, 'we should regard a good [literary texts] in the hands of an attentive reader as a means to refine moral knowledge in ways that we are unlikely to get from even careful parents or other guiding sources.' (Asher, 2017: 180). Whilst it is somewhat troubling to think that Asher is dismissing a lifetime of loving parenting, or decades of comradeship, beneath an 'attentive' sitting of T.S. Eliot, Dostoyevsky, or the Romantics, it is fair to attempt extend his argument from books to other forms of literature, as he does with poetry and drama, on to other emotion-rich texts such as song lyrics. It is helpful for me in making my argument particular to pop lyrics that other scholars have considered narrative art in the round as a legitimate and effective tool for moral development. Asher advocates for narrative literature generally, and novels specifically, as emotionally and ethically rich sources, and appropriate tools for moral development. He is not alone in doing so, as I have laid out with some examples above.

Whilst traditional aesthetic hierarchies of art have not disappeared from scholarly circles, the writings of the more recent likes of Stone, Bradley, Frith and others that champion pop music in and of its own accord and standing. Explicit rejections of popular music as a valuable source of moral and ethical insight, or a meaningful and robust tool for moral development, remain. Even some of the scholars that I cite would not fully subscribe to the hypothesis that pop lyrics can and do hold sufficient ethical value to provide educational potential for moral instruction and development. David Carr, for example, remains sceptical

– as we have exchanged personal correspondence on this topic[13]. That said, the moral language that exists in pop lyrics, the moral metaphors that are created, and the emotional themes that are sung about are plentiful in example.

That narrative artworks proffer moral insights is both an oft-made claim, and yet a contentious one. Carr, along with many others, is a proponent of the idea that narrative artworks, and 'good art' – heavyweight narratives - stimulates one's moral imagination and offers insights into one's moral development that other 'lightweight' artworks cannot match (see Carr, 2023). This is helpful to us as we consider the highly stylised and refined and precise language of pop songs. Mastery of such a vocabulary and comprehension of the language of virtue is not a fundamental requirement of moral education – it is still possible to gain moral insight and application from a stimulus without knowing the theoretical construction of gratitude, for example. It is possible to feel grateful without necessarily knowing what gratitude is. However, as we analyse and deconstruct the language of pop, holding an understanding of the language of virtue provides a framework for educational purposes that can support the teaching of such emotional and virtuous content.

One critic who disagrees with this is Richard Posner, who argues that we cannot and should not ethically evaluate works of art (Posner, 1997). Posner argues that mere exposure to increased frequency of virtue language is insufficient to argue that one will be more morally attentive or attuned. With regard to emotion, Posner contends that reading narrative art does not and will not necessarily mean that we learn something new; simply that texts will reinforce something we already know or convey a feeling that we have already experienced, which is usually an empathetic or sympathetic response to the action being read. Simply being passively empathetic in response to a narrative does not guarantee positive conduct in their lives. However, a neo-Aristotelian model of moral development suggests that repeated exposure to ethically challenging scenarios will stretch the audience's understanding of the language of virtue, as well as its application in how to navigate ethical dilemmas. This requires an emotional engagement in the narrative and in the outcome of the tale being told.

Kristjánsson (2018) presents the components of virtue as being perception, knowledge and understanding, emotion, identify, motivation, reasoning, and action. They follow a progression, where one understands that they have acted in a virtuous way through first perceiving that a particular situation requires a virtuous response, understanding the language of virtue, and recognising which emotions and virtues are required to act well, feeling the right emotion, in the right way, in response to a situation, identifying oneself as a moral actor and being motivated to act, and continue to act, virtuously, being able to critically reason about virtues, particularly where two or more virtues may be in conflict, and then recognising oneself for doing the right thing for the right reasons. Indeed, in this thesis, I also contend that value types will integrate with one another, not remain in isolation. I discuss this more in Chapter Two.

Whilst this somewhat linear pathway through the components presented may seem simple, it is not without its pitfalls and downsides. Firstly, one is required to do an awful lot to

[13] Personal correspondence via email 2017-2023.

negotiate a particular dilemma, when one may only be given a short amount of time to act. For example, and as an extreme example, on the battlefield, soldiers are given fractions of seconds to make decisions about fight or flight, when to shoot, and when to run. One action may save a life, another may take one. This is not easy, and of course requires a huge amount of training to prepare soldiers, as far as is possible, for the moments when they will be required to make such a decision. The training metaphor is one which can be used to encompass much of the broad concept of moral education. As a principle, formal moral education is intended to train the student in how to act well, whether it is valuable to act well, and become familiar with the benefits of acting well, the language of virtue, and instances of when we may be tested the most. In pop, the metaphor of the 'battlefield' is an oft used one to depict warring parties in a relationship, even escaping domestic abuse.

Jordin Sparks' 'Battlefield' (2009) reached number 10 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and number 11 in the UK Official Singles Chart. It has sold 400,000+ copies in the UK and is a mid-tempo ballad in G Major about failure to compromise in a relationship. The 'love is war' metaphor in pop is far from original – see for example Pat Benatar 'Love is a Battlefield' (1983); Foreigner 'I'll Fight for You' (1991) – yet is one that has endured throughout pop's corpus. In 'Battlefield', Sparks sings in the first verse of 'One word turns into a war / Is it the smallest things that tear us down', reflecting the ease with which conflict can escalate. Yet in 'Battlefield', Sparks can offer reflection in the pre-chorus in singing 'I never meant to start a war / You know I never wanna hurt you / Don't even know what we're fighting for'. In terms of the metaphor, the lyric brings into focus the emotional strain one can feel at times in certain relationships, where one needs to 'go and get your armour', whilst reflecting on the overall goal at stake, 'Cause baby we don't have to fight / And I don't want this love to feel like / A battlefield'. To compare the dilemmas soldiers face in warfare with a metaphorical presentation of a difficult relationship in a pop song is trite. The purpose of referencing 'Battlefield' in relation to moral knowledge and the concept of virtuous emotions that Kristjánsson presents is to show that pop songs address themes of emotional distress and exaggeration, often using language of conflict and excess to engage listeners in familiar situations.

### *1.4.iii Emotion in pop*

As a corpus, pop lyrics discuss every human emotion and do so in ways that engage us emotionally. To date, little has been written on how such emotional content, emotional engagement and moral development intersect – successfully or otherwise. In popular music, as Adam Bradley (2017) attests, emotion is often presented through sound, i.e. the musical accompaniment to the lyric, accessed by listening to the song, rather than reading the lyric. However, as we consider pop lyrics detached from the music, the requirement to engage in an empathetic but critically discerning is essential if we are to make the exercise meaningful and relevant. Before his championing of pop music, Bradley (2009) has celebrated hip-hop and rap as poetry. In his chapter in Pence (2012), he refers to the place in which rappers write their lyrics, the 'book of rhymes'. It is physically and literally 'that the book of rhymes is where rap becomes poetry' (Bradley, 2009: 35). For Bradley, every rap lyric, written in a book of rhymes, is a poem. Even when freestyled, rap has poetic structures that allow it to be deciphered as poetry, line by line, syllable by syllable. This is important where we look more broadly at pop music, which encompasses many rap and hip-hop songs and traits. If we can see hip-hop lyrics and raps as poetry on the page, the same can be said, and indeed

is said by Bradley, of all pop lyrics. Whether we are taking a lyric back to where it was 'born' in a book of rhymes, or we are writing it on the page ourselves as listeners, so we are looking at the language, features, structure and form that it is constructed of. Bradley acknowledges that 'rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such.' (*Ibid*.: 36).

In decoupling lyrics from their musical accompaniment, the educational potential of engaging with texts that pupils today will be more familiar with increases, creating entry points through which one can move on to consider traditional pageborn poetry, practice the skills and techniques of traditional poetic analysis, and engage in debates about aesthetic, emotional and virtuous themes and content. That said, Bradley's argument is one which sees pop very much in its own orbit, worthy of consideration in its own rite, for its own merits, not simply as a modern-day precursor to the great pageborn poetry of yesteryear. Indeed, he constructs an argument that presents the traditional tools of poetic analysis as still being relevant in any analysis of popular music, as well as the craft of writing pop lyrics themselves. However, Bradley's poetry of pop only has purpose for literary analysis, in engaging audiences in the classroom with the skills and techniques of traditional poetic analysis. Analysing the lyrics of popular music can yield further rewards than Bradley lays out, with regard to emotional and virtue education, as pop songs are littered with references to emotions, morality, virtue, and vice. For me, this is the true poetry of pop, which Bradley stops short of exploring.

The pop song is consumed by the listener, its rhythms, rhymes, lyrics, and melodies are absorbed, and either the listener does or doesn't find an attachment to any part of the song. Bradley is not naïve enough to suggest that we immediately connect with every song we hear. Nor does he intimate that first opinions are fixed. One can grow to love a song over time, one can find meaning in a song that one was previously impartial to, and one can grow to detest a song they may once have called their 'favourite'. For Bradley, that is the power of pop. 'Songs, after all, are the art of emotion, which is to say that they are also the art of rhetoric.' (*Ibid*.: 144). The ability of a pop song, and of its writers and performers, to make us feel viscerally is not a negative for Bradley, it is exactly why he is so in favour of the 'poetry of pop'. We, as listeners, readers, consumers of pop, respond emotionally to pop. We respond with different emotions to different songs and lyrics, and occasionally respond with different emotions to the same song over time, for example if a song that previously brought about feelings of elation and love as it reminded us of a previous partner, may inspire feelings of anger, hurt, or grief if that relationship then breaks down, or a person passes away.

This presents an obvious interaction between what we consider as ethical value and emotional value. Without divulging too much of the content of Chapter Five, I contend that to become ethically literate, so there is an emotional component required of individuals to be cognisant of the emotions that we are experiencing and how they affect our actions and behaviours. In relation to pop music, it is as important to consider the emotions that songwriters write about as it is the ethical scenarios they depict, as they are often wrapped up together.

In exploring Kristjánsson's argument for the emotions he identifies as being 'virtuous', it is plausible to consider examples of pop lyrics that approach each of these emotions in an attempt to demonstrate the diversity of emotional topics covered across pop's plethora of themes, as well as to demonstrate that popular forms and pieces of art do hold ethical value and can support our own emotional and ethical development. In providing such examples, it is then possible to conduct a linguistic and poetic analysis of the lyrics to better understand how such themes appear as pop lyrics. Rather than merely 'titillate', my attempt is to demonstrate that lyrics can engage us, ethically, in the same way that it is accepted that the 'great' novels and poems of the Western literary canon do and provide a case for taking the lyrics of popular music more seriously than is often the case, particularly in traditional philosophical circles. Song lyrics, like most narrative art, affect, even manipulate, our emotions through their presentation, structure and content. Seeking to understand how and why we gravitate to lyrics at certain times of our lives, and how such lyrics resonate with our own personal experiences, can assist with our emotional engagement, and our ability to empathise with others. I will consider the subjective notion of personal preference and 'taste' and why I may prefer the lyrics of Taylor Swift to the lyrics of David Bowie, or find solace and support in John Lennon's 'Imagine', where someone else will dismiss it as hypocritical, naïve, and 'a hippie wishing well full of pennyweight dreams for a better world' (Goldman, cited in *The Observer*, 7 January 2001). How can one of the biggest-selling, and most well-remembered lyrics of the twentieth century cause such consternation and division? Yet that is somewhat of the point; that the lyrics of pop songs can engage as much as infuriate, can divide a room and yet create unanimous engagement.

I move on, next, in Chapter Two, to discuss the concept of aesthetic value in greater detail, considering their understanding in existing literature and applying such understandings to pop lyrics. I unpack the definitions of aesthetic and ethical value in more detail and consider example lyrics that showcase moment where aesthetic and ethical values intersect and interact.

## Chapter Two: Can pop song lyrics offer aesthetic and ethical value to readers?

### 2.1 Introduction

#### *2.1.i Recap*

In Chapter One, I sought to establish the categories by which we value pop lyrics. I identified definitions for commercial value, cultural value, aesthetic value and ethical value. This thesis concentrates on ethical value and asks a first research question of 'is there an ethical value to pop lyrics?' I contend in Chapter One that there is, but that it is more than simply the presence of ethically challenging content within lyrics that provides such ethical value. Of course, a pop song's success is gauged by its commercial success – through unit sales, streams and downloads and is measured in monetary terms, as well as by chart positions. However, songs engage our emotions, as well as presenting emotional content that is deserving of analysis with regard to our own moral development.

I contend, in the present chapter, that the aesthetic features of pop lyrics help to convey the ethical content and meaning of lyrics to listeners in affective ways. Rather than in competition with other genres of music – especially classical, but also jazz or folk – I contend that pop is valuable in its own right and need not be looked down upon as scholars of classical music often tend to do (see Young, 2016; Levinson, 2017). Pop as a mass consumed artform, accessed by millions of impressionable listeners globally, has an affective and moral impact on audiences regardless of whether others perceive consumers of pop music to not have 'a good enough musical ear or adequate emotional maturity to be able to benefit from (classical) music.' (Levinson, 2017: 19).

I argue that in acknowledging pop's mass appeal, and the supposed inferiority of consumers of pop to consumers of classical music, that Levinson (and Young) set themselves up to undermine their arguments. In accusing consumers of pop of lacking the 'emotional maturity' to benefit from consuming classical music raises a question of educational equity; that if consumers of pop are a majority, yet are emotionally immature, then accepting that pop music can and does hold ethical value in any amount, wouldn't using the genre of music that young people are engaged with serve an educational purpose as part of a rounded moral education?

#### *2.1.ii Roadmap*

This chapter seeks to build on the answers in Chapter One to the first research question; establishing that there is an ethical value to pop lyrics. It seeks to explore in more depth aesthetic value and ethical value in order to position the main argument to begin to answer the second research question 'do pop lyrics engage us emotionally?'. I argue that this second research question can be answered by looking at the ways in which value types interact and integrate – particularly, but not exclusively, aesthetic and ethical value, with consideration of the ways in which cultural value interacts with aesthetic and ethical value as well.

I will discuss what aesthetic value is, how existing understandings of aesthetic value work with the definitions presented in this thesis and in relation to pop music and its links to ethical value. Conceptions of aesthetic value consider art as beauty, as distinct from emotions and ethics. I contend that, particularly with regard to pop lyrics, this is not always

possible where ethical value is identified within lyrics, such as through the content and themes that the lyrics embrace. However, in pop music, ethical value within lyrical content often engages a listener's emotions, evoking an emotional response. This is important both in the definition of what constitutes ethical value (something beyond mere identification of ethically salient or challenging content) and how effective the aesthetic features of a lyric are in engaging an emotional response from listeners.

In addition to unpacking definitions of aesthetic and ethical value, I will look at how and where value types interact and intersect with one another, particularly regarding aesthetic value and ethical value, but also aesthetic value and cultural value and begin to discuss how ethical value and cultural value interact. The purpose of this is to demonstrate that value types may be easily categorised but work together in an integrative and supportive way. I offer some explanations for how value types support and interact with one another and, particularly in the case of cultural value, there are examples of lyrics that hold little or no ethical value but take on ethical significance through some form of cultural appropriation, and, similarly, there are examples of lyrics that hold strong ethical value, are aesthetically well constructed, and develop cultural value outside of their original purpose and intention. For example, and without greater consideration in this introductory section, 'Things Can Only Get Better' (1993) by D:Ream is a song that promotes positivity at a time of disenfranchisement and demotivation amongst young people. The aesthetically catchy melody and uplifting theme led to some level of commercial success, with the song charting at number 24 on release. The song would be, later, appropriated by the Labour Party, and would become their unofficial anthem under Tony Blair's leadership in the 1997 election campaign, with a message of hope in political change, where it would re-enter the chart in 19$^{th}$ place.

*2.1.iii Pop and aesthetic value*

In this chapter, I engage with philosophical aesthetics, emotion research and popular music studies to explore the intersections and synergies of the theories regarding the value of popular music lyrics. As a form of mass produced and mass consumed art, Noël Carroll provides an obvious starting point with his philosophical theory of what mass art is, how it warrants philosophical attention, and that its artworks can hold value beyond the commercial. However, since Carroll's 1998 *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, many other scholars have sought to build on Carroll's work and showcase the ethical value of art generally, and popular music specifically (see for example Stone, 2016; Bradley, 2017; Asher, 2017; Nannicelli, 2017; 2020). In considering the texts of these scholars, and of others, I seek to prove the hypothesis that for a pop lyric to be completely engaging, and for it, ultimately, to have value beyond the mere commercial, particularly with regard to any virtuous content present in a lyric and any ethical value that a listener may discern there to be, I argue that the lyric needs to hold three qualities. Firstly, the lyric should engage a listener enough for them to feel an emotional connection to it. That connection needs not be defined in any real terms by the listener, as such an emotional connection does not need to be a cognitive reflection, the content of the lyric simply needs to 'move' the listener. I will explore in more detail what feeling 'moved' by a lyric can include, below. It needs not be a cognitive recognition, as that is my second quality of ethical value. Listeners need to recognise the experience or situation being described in the lyric is more than only a pleasurable experience, but one that includes reflection on an ethical matter and that resonates with

them personally. That reason may be an empathetic connection with the lyrical content, or one which rekindles a memory of a similar experience of the situation described in the lyrics. Thirdly, I argue that listeners need to be able to apply the ethical content present in pop lyrics to one's own life. This third quality may or may not happen as part of the consumption process, and it is not necessary for either of the first two qualities to be present or take place.

Such application of ethical content to one's own life may only occur in an educational context where lyrics are used as tools for moral development, or where listeners are trained in how to apply the emotional connections that they develop with lyrics into more meaningful reflections and applications on emotion and virtue. Or it may occur more naturally as part of the consumption process. Either way, it is on these three qualities that I am presenting my case for pop lyrics holding ethical value which exists both separately to aesthetic value, and which contributes to a lyric's overall aesthetic value.

I have already cited several examples of scholars that advocate for literary texts as sources of moral insight and knowledge. Specifically, Asher (2017) calls for narrative literature generally, and novels specifically, as emotionally and ethically rich sources for use in formal and informal moral development. Further examples worth considering in relation to aesthetic value and ethical value include Ted Nannicelli (2017; 2020), who considers the interaction between ethical criticisms of art and interpretation of art; premised on the idea that 'a critic's ethical appraisal of a work necessarily depends upon an interpretation of it.' (Nannicelli, 2017: 401). Nannicelli provides a framework for distinguishing between what a work of art could mean and what it does mean, in terms of interpretation. Nannicelli focuses more on other forms of art than music, and certainly not in reference to popular music, and his work is not directly relevant to the premise of ethical value, however, where it is useful is regarding the concept that 'the interpretation of *actions* and the intentions behind them is central to the ethical criticism of art' (*ibid*.: 412). For Nannicelli, our own ethical criticism of a work of art is predicated not only on what the work of art itself means, but also on what the artist meant when creating it, and what they did to create it. Therefore, the process of creation – where ethical value is inputted into the artwork – is as important as how a work is interpreted.

In terms of ethical value and how I approach ethical value in this thesis, I have already stated that ethical value is the presence of ethically challenging content within a lyric, but it is also determined through the emotional affect that a lyric has on a listener, which is enhanced through meaningful periods of reflection. Authorial intention is not always possible to infer in pop music, particularly with moral and ethically challenging lyrics, outside of their literal interpretation. Often, pop artists are reluctant to appear moralising and avoid making explicit their intentions when writing and recording songs. Indeed, some actively rebel against explaining themselves by writing unintelligible lyrics. 'Let the fuckers work that one out' quipped John Lennon regarding 'I Am the Walrus'; a song described as 'endlessly analyzable, and yet somehow analysis-proof.'[14].

[14] See 'The Delights of Parsing the Beatles' Most Nonsensical Song' [Online]. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/11/i-am-the-walrus-50-years-later/546698/ [Accessed 17 September 2024].

One example that bucks that trend, though, is Bryan Adams. In an interview in *Classic Pop Mag*, in reference to 'Party Friday Night, Party Sunday Morning' (2019), he says

> I was sitting down with my guitar, and the music just came out of me. I like the idea of someone who is morally ethical, but who likes to go out and party. I'm not church – I'm all Friday night most of the time. I'm not Sunday morning at all. If you go to the South in the States, a lot of people are very religious, but they go and get hammered, as if they don't have any moral compass. That idea of, "Let's go out and get wasted, get all sinned up, then head to the church on Sunday to sort myself out!" is great material. (Adams, 2019)

So, in terms of ethical criticism, we cannot embrace Nannicelli completely, as with the examples shown, it is possible to infer and interpret a lyric without knowing a songwriter's original intentions. Further, as value types collide and interact, lyrics can take on new meanings in response to cultural events, e.g., Arianna Grande's 'One More Time' (see 1.3.iv). However, where we can draw some inspiration from Nannicelli in terms of how the four value types that I identify interact and integrate with one another.

For example, with regard to aesthetic, ethical and cultural value, we can use Nannicelli to draw more attention to the integration of value types when analysing pop lyrics in this way. By this I mean that where Nannicelli calls for consideration of the artist, the artwork and the audience interpretation, so we can use aesthetic features that are deliberately used by the pop songwriter to infer songwriter intention, in addition to subject matter linked to artist biography – which many fans of artists do when decoding lyrics anyway. Further, we can integrate this with the ethical value of the lyric with these aesthetic features, along with the level of emotional affect that it has on listeners. Finally, we can include any cultural value that a lyric may hold from its production, or after release, which may be generated by – in Nannicelli's words – what artists '*do*' in creating art and how that positions lyrics culturally.

## 2.2 Aesthetic Value and Ethical Value

### *2.2.i Aesthetic value*

Aesthetic value encompasses the subjective appreciation of features of beauty and the emotional responses that these features may evoke. It is more than the aesthetic appeal of the lyric, through the features of rhyme, metaphor, structure, extending to sensory experiences, including acoustic, physical and conceptual elements of the pop lyric. Rooted in individual perceptions and subjectivity, aesthetic value is a complex interaction of variables often imposed on the listener, such as those from cultural, personal and societal dimensions which shape how we listen to songs and enjoy music more broadly. In the formative years of the typical youth listener to pop music, these can include things such as peer groups, social norms and expectations, the cultural value that a lyric holds (be that on release or how it develops over time), political affiliations, engagements with wider fan bases of artists or groups, as well as the commercial success that a lyric has.

In this regard, the strength of a lyric's aesthetic features are vital to assessing the overall aesthetic value, as per the definition I introduced in 1.1.i. When contemplating aesthetic value of pop songs, it is important to consider the formal aesthetic features of the lyric such as rhyme, structure, metaphor, simile, etc. These can be considered in isolation to the themes and meanings of the lyrical content, and without any wider consideration of the

song's commercial value and any cultural value that it may have acquired. The aesthetic value of the lyric can be considered in terms of its beauty, form or sensory appeal, which involves subjective appreciation and enjoyment as we consume the song or read the lyric.

Aesthetic features such as melody, rhythm and harmony contribute to the listener's overall aesthetic experience of hearing a song or reading a lyric. They facilitate listeners in navigating the lyric in as 'familiar' way as possible – with pop music more than other genres of music utilising aesthetic features create a sense of pleasure for the listener. This in and of itself can lead to the ascription of aesthetic value in isolation from other value types. Such ascription of aesthetic value is in evaluation of the impact of the aesthetic features, as assessed by the listener. With reading a lyric, more so than listening to a song, one is able to focus on the use of rhyme, rhythm and other formal features and reflect on how and why a song may appeal to them.

Some pop songs use simple aesthetic features of rhyme and rhythm in order to create catchy hooks and obvious lyrical connections that aid the listener in finding familiarity in them. That, of course, is the main aim of pop music – to make the specific feel familiar. This isn't achieved by aesthetic features alone, but in the combination of aesthetic presentation of the themes and scenarios depicted in the lyrics that provoke emotional responses in listeners.

*2.2.ii Aesthetic value, ethical content and emotional responses*

In actively contemplating such formal aesthetic qualities, of course, it is then possible to consider the interaction between the aesthetic features and themes on which the lyrics focus. Such themes are wide and diverse across the corpus of pop music, but with frequent concentrations on emotional and ethical themes such as those of love, lust, loss, anger, gratitude, empathy and shame.

In turn, as listeners consider and reflect on lyrical content as it is presented through aesthetically pleasing features and rhymes, so this may trigger emotional responses. These responses may occur on initial listens, or through repeated plays, as we enjoy our favourite songs. However, such responses, or at least some understanding of why we respond emotionally may be enhanced and deepened through close readings and critical analyses that can encourage intellectually reflective responses beyond the levels that a first-time listen, or passing engagement with a lyric may bring. Of course, as listeners, there is no guarantee that any song or lyric will evoke the same response as it does in another. Indeed, pop songs evoke a wide variety of responses from listeners. That is both down to the many ways in which people display their emotions and the wide variety of musical tastes that we hold; what one finds pleasure in, another may not. The way in which one person shows sorrow, another will not.

The pleasure one takes and/or shows from engaging with and consuming mass art, and pop specifically, sits outside of the scope of consideration of this thesis but is an important variable to acknowledge regarding aesthetic value. This recalls Plato and Meskin, who define aesthetic value in terms of an artwork's 'capacity to elicit pleasure (positive value) or displeasure (negative value) when appreciated or experienced aesthetically.' (Plato and Meskin, 2014: 76). So, we could consider aesthetic value as measured by the level of

pleasure that one takes from consuming a song. To some degree, this is what the pop music charts measure. Whilst not explicitly measuring the level of pleasure that consumers feel, where a song reaches the top echelons of the charts, and/or remains there for several weeks, so we can infer that listeners are enjoying the experience of listening to said song. Such pleasure is brought about, and enhanced, through a song's aesthetic features – the way it employs metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, etc. It can be consumed in isolation of any other value type and, indeed, it is entirely acceptable to view Plato and Meskin's aesthetic value separate and distinct from ethical value or any other value type.

So, where taste is subjective, and this is what resonates with listeners as we consume pop in the traditional way. Yet, the value ascribed by the formal features of a lyric can be judged objectively, as per my definition of aesthetic value, and as applied in the lyrical analyses in this thesis, as well as the interaction of formal aesthetic features with other ascribed value types.

In terms of aesthetic properties, it is this interaction and integration with other value types that elevates pop music above its criticisms that hold an ability to attract and hold one's attention to that which Levinson describes as 'invit[ing] and reward[ing] attention to form, style, feeling, atmosphere and overarching theme.' (Levinson, 2017: 18). Levinson argues that the majority of popular art is 'sentimental' and 'basic' (*ibid*.), but opens the door for some popular art to hold and reward attention where consumers can feel ethically elevated, even if they attempt to do so using art that is aesthetically limited. Indeed, for Levinson, it is each person's duty to pursue opportunities to develop oneself morally.

This perceived tension between aesthetically limited artworks and the opportunities for ethical development that they still provide is the intersection at which this thesis situates itself. It is at this intersection between aesthetic value and ethical value where there is limited existing research, specifically regarding pop music. There being limited research by itself does not justify such an interrogation as this thesis seeks to offer. However, the tension between aesthetically formulaic and emotionally and ethically rich content and the educational opportunities for moral development lay underexplored.

Where 'morality primarily concerns how people should act in relation to one another', and pop music is seen, commercially and culturally, as a tool that engages people, so the intersections between value types are worthy of interrogation. Especially given pop music's ability and purpose to share experiences and unite listeners. As Levinson acknowledges, some popular art does 'offer something more' (*ibid*.: 19). So, it is possible for pop lyrics that hold some aesthetic value, through the formal structures that are objectively identified, and hold strong ethical value in the identifiable themes and scenarios within the lyrics can and do bring communities of pop fans together around a shared sense of purpose in supporting a particular theme or idea.

This is helpful as we recall Bradley (2017) as we consider how value types interact and integrate with one another. For Bradley (2017), such an example shows the wider cultural value of pop music, beyond any one single lyric. They succeed where they make a specific interaction or feeling relatable to a mass audience, whilst also making the relatable emotions and values specific to the content of a short, highly crafted lyric. As the pop

industry craves commercial success at levels that consumers contribute to but will never have a full conception of – in terms of the economic value that can be achieved in profit and worth – the effort to make lyrics relatable to as wide an audience as possible has implications for monetary return. This is done not only through the lyrics of the song in question, in modern pop, but through a popstar's 'brand' and 'image', through their endorsements, investments, style and personal values. So, where we see value types both as relevant to particular songs/lyrics and to artists, bands and to sub-genres of pop, and as we analyse them, so the opportunities to integrate value types as part of a wider and more holistic analysis become more abundant.

*2.2.iii Aesthetic value and pop lyrics*

The aesthetic value of pop lyrics can be considered in isolation from other value types. However, to lie at the intersection of art and culture, then this provides a way of accessing the aesthetic value from a number of different directions. As I explore, engaging in a closer look at pop lyrics can reveal a rich tapestry of personal expression of emotions, metaphor and social commentary that connects with our own experiences and draws out our own emotional responses, which contribute to the levels of pleasure/displeasure we evoke.

Pop lyrics address universally understood themes, such as love, heartbreak, grief and empowerment, however, they are understood from individual perspectives. By this, I recall Bradley (2017), who argues that pop lyrics are unique making the specific relatable and the relatable specific to a mass audience. The ability of pop lyrics to capture the essence of shared human experiences adds to their aesthetic value, in that they offer concise soundbites that peak our attention, engage our emotions and hook into our consciousness. For example, 'Fix You' by Coldplay (2005) is a song about providing a sense of hope to a loved one in a time of their grief. 'Lights will guide you home / And ignite your bones / And I will try to fix you' is a simple presentation of a complex theme. One where the singer is trying to offer support to someone they care about, to counsel and console them through a difficult period, whilst not necessarily sharing the grief that the other feels. This is done through a very simplistic, stylised lyric that reached number 4 on the UK chart and has sold over 2.4m copies nationally and more than 4m internationally.

The brevity and accessibility of pop lyrics are, then, integral to their aesthetic appeal, rather than their overall value. In just a few short lines, or in a repeating refrain, a pop lyric can convey complex emotions and tell a compelling story. This succinctness is an art form in itself. Lyricists distil profound ideas into catchy and memorable phrases that are woven together into pop songs. This is something that teams of songwriters spend time perfecting and is embedded in what Seabrook calls *The Song Machine* (Seabrook, 2015). The primary concerns, according to Seabrook, of pop music executives and songwriters is to achieve a perfect integration of aesthetic value and commercial value, with very little regard for authentic ethical value. That is not to say that songwriters and music executives ignore ethical and emotional content. Indeed, it is an oft-used theme throughout the corpus of pop. The challenge of crafting lyrics that are both aesthetically concise and emotionally impactful adds sophistication and layers to the aesthetic value that pop lyrics hold, as well as raising questions over the ways in which lyrics engage the emotions of listeners and the extent to which that engagement is meaningful and deliberate.

Metaphors, wordplay and rhymes that sit on a continuum between simple and complex contribute to their aesthetic appeal. There are a multitude of different lyrics spanning the back catalogue of pop music; lyrics that engage, enrage and those that induce no emotional response at all. That personal response is evoked by the language used in the lyric which paints vivid imagery and emphasises the emotions at play and does so with simple and repetitive rhymes intended to stay in your head. The skill which songwriters convey depth and meaning within the constraints of a three-four-minute song showcases the artistry involved in crafting pop lyrics. I say this to emphasise the importance with which it is needed to treat pop lyrics with regard to their ethical and aesthetic values. I argue for the philosophical and educational seriousness that is required to view them as tools for moral development and education (see Chapter Five). This is because pop lyrics regularly serve as a mirror to societal norms; as a commentary on social issues, political opinion and familiar emotion. In addressing recognisable topics, pop lyrics engage audiences of all ages and demographics.

Yet, it is the diversity within the pop genre that allows for a wide range of lyrical styles and themes. From ballads to anthems, pop lyrics showcase versatility in almost every aspect, which elicit different levels of pleasure and displeasure in audiences.

Within that diversity of genres and sub-genres, one constant is that the relatability of pop lyrics fosters a sense of connection and inclusion, which does not need to form part of their aesthetic value. Through creating a platform by which listeners can engage with shared experiences and emotions, pop songwriters aim to maximise commercial value by writing songs that listeners find solace and comfort in. Such solace is rooted both in finding a connection with the protagonist of the lyric itself (be that the singer, songwriter or character presented), as well as – to some degree - knowing that others have felt similar emotions as they listen to the song at hand. This communal aspect enhances the aesthetic value of pop lyrics by creating a collective emotional experience, which fans encounter at concerts, online through forums and social media. For example, the recent Taylor Swift album ‘The Tortured Poets Department’ broke records for numbers of streams, downloads, purchases, as I referenced in the introduction to this thesis, but also swamped social media platforms with conversations about the lyrical content, aesthetic features and emotional responses. See, for example, ‘But Daddy I Love Him’, where fans from around the world filmed their reactions to hearing the song for the first time and posted them on social media. Fellow fans would share reactions and feelings evoked by the lyrics particularly in response to the lines

> Screamin', "But, Daddy, I love him
> I'm having his baby”
> No, I'm not
> But you should see your faces
> But, oh my God, you should see your faces

Here, Swift is playing with her audience by taking a moment of high emotional intensity regarding her love for another conflicting with her father’s wishes for his daughter and using a fictional escalation regarding having her lover’s baby to exacerbate both the interaction with her father and provoke a reaction from her listeners. Videos captured on social media

platforms showed fans reacting with shock and disbelief, before laughing and smiling when they hear 'No, I'm not / But you should see your faces'.

While some dismiss pop lyrics as formulaic or superficial, this thesis provides a deeper exploration that reveals greater artistic merit and cultural significance than many accept. The ability to distil complex emotions and ethical content into memorable verses, catchy refrains and consumable popularity is a skill. I consider lyrics which address societal issues whilst creating a sense of connection with listeners through lyrical tropes, imagery and content. This all contributes to the enduring aesthetic value of pop lyrics. In essence, pop lyrics reflect the power of succinct storytelling and of capturing the spirit of an era/theme/idea using carefully chosen words and simple rhymes.

In the case of the commercially-driven pop culture that concerns us here, comparing modern pop songs to previous versions of popular music is a trend that music journalists and scholars enjoy. Usually, this is done with the intention of determining whether one is 'better' than the other (see Young, 2014, and any issue of *NME*, *Q*, or other established music periodical that has ever 'ranked' the 'greatest pop songs' of any period of time). Such lists often conflate sub-genres and their fixed definitions in order to incorporate as many commercially successful songs as possible over extended periods of time ('songs of the year', '…the decade', '…ever', etc.).

Where scholars impose restrictive definitions of what art is, which is ratified by communities of artists, scholars and insiders rather than by those consuming the art, or those outside of its circles of influence, there becomes an issue of there being a closed shop that it is difficult to break into or break free from (see Dickie, 2004). This institutionalisation of art is a challenge to this thesis in our conception of pop lyrics as art. Indeed, the pop industry itself can be seen as an institution which protects and restricts which music reaches the public to be consumed, how much airtime songs are given on the radio, which appear in adverts, which are promoted and by how much, etc.

In this thesis, I am interested in those songs that have been 'mass consumed' – that hold great commercial value. I believe that in taking an inclusive definition of 'pop' meaning popular, defined through sales and commercial success, so we can avoid some of the tensions that exist within the 'institution' of the pop music industry, which often confers which sub-genre a song should fall into. Further, I am considering lyrics from songs that hold mass appeal, that cross cultural divides and appeal to a broad age range of consumer.

To help navigate this regarding pop music, Theodore Gracyk (2007) provides a general framework for appreciating popular music, its aesthetic value, cultural value, and links to identity and cognition and other areas. Gracyk advocates for an appreciation of popular music that extends beyond pleasure and preference, and beyond the pop music institution/artworld. For Gracyk, pop's values are determined through particular listening and analysis skills that audiences must learn and are not naturally intuitive. The idea that to fully engage with pop music, one must be taught to do so presents a tension with the way in which we consume pop music in general. However, where Gracyk limits his consideration of pop to only the aesthetic, I advocate for a more engaged reading of pop lyrics which can bring about a greater appreciation of ethical value. This is a recurring feature of much

existing literature into the aesthetic value and aesthetic qualities of pop music. A good deal of scholarship has arisen from the notion that we value popular music for its social qualities (see for example Hirsh, 1971; Frith, 1998; 2000; 2004; von Appen, 2007; Bradley, 2017).

Our pleasure or displeasure in response to hearing a song is rooted in our aesthetic experience as listeners, as well as the aesthetic features of the song. Such an aesthetic experience and such aesthetic features are separate and distinct from any sentimental, cultural, or commercial value, or any other type of value, but they are influenced by them (as discussed). As such, our pleasure or displeasure is rooted in our aesthetic experience, which is the experience that we have when appreciating something for its aesthetic qualities. Dewey (1925; 1935) famously argues that aesthetic experience is an extension of ordinary experience – so we can also experience nature in aesthetic ways, for example, and not triggered by consumption of pieces of art, or other forms. For Dewey, the aesthetic experience is the interaction between organism and environment, and for Dewey, the aesthetic nature of the experience occurs when that interaction creates fulfilment in the organism. In other words, it is the rounding out of the experience that one engages in during a particular activity, particular phases of inception, development and fulfilment. This does not take place every time one engages with, in this case, a piece of art, or listen to a particular song, but Dewey's discussion of aesthetic experience is helpful, here.

Whilst Dewey does not give particular conditions under which one may engage with an aesthetic experience, however, he does say that for the experience to be aesthetic, then is must attain specific qualities. These qualities include it being 'dynamic' as it must take place over a period of time, rather than being instantaneous (Dewey, 1935: 62). This is because an aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is an accumulation over a number of different phases. The aesthetic experience may be initially triggered by the opening of a book, or first sight of a painting or sculpture, it is then sustained through a period of development, before creating a sense of fulfilment in the person as it draws to a culmination. Whilst this experience is, ultimately, short-lived, it is also not immediate. This, for Dewey, is why we must take time to experience works of art (and other things that may trigger an aesthetic experience). It is also why, again for Dewey, an aesthetic experience is both complex and meaningful and of the highest of value over other sorts of experiences.

In terms of listening to pop lyrics, it is important to keep the definition of aesthetic experience relevant to the aesthetic features of a song/lyric. Therefore, pop music, with its short and easily consumable format, is less likely to trigger a Deweyan aesthetic experience in its fullest sense than other, richer forms of art such as paintings, poetry or sculpture. There may well be an initial trigger and building of experience as one first hears a particular song; this may well condense formal and emotional features in an intense way so one feels particular emotions at particular parts of the song, which may or may not resist other experiences overtaking the aesthetic one. The person listening may well be overcome by a sense of rhythm in their experience – more so than simply nodding to the rhythm of the pop drum beat, for example – which gives the experience direction and momentum. Whether or not this leads to a Deweyan sense of fulfilment is somewhat moot. I will explain why.

In listening to pop music, one listens for a multitude of different purposes, at different times, in various forms of distraction – by which I mean often one listens to music when

'doing' something else such as commuting, reading, eating, etc. These ways of consuming pop music are very different to the ways in which Dewey will have envisaged one seeing a painting for the first time, attending an opera or theatre, or visiting a museum, where one is primed to be attentive to the works of art one is surrounded by. This does not need to rule out the possibility of engaging in an aesthetic experience when listening to pop music, or reading its lyrics, but it may well alter the experience from the one that Dewey describes.

Even further, then, in decoupling lyrics from pop music, as I argue for in this thesis, so this may change the aesthetic experience further – or at least limit the conditions under which an aesthetic experience may occur. This is important, so, to narrow the conditions by which we are evaluating, here, the aesthetic features of the lyrics in question and the aesthetic value that we place on a lyric in light of the level of pleasure/displeasure we experience when experienced aesthetically.

Yet, aesthetic experience is a necessary factor by which we evaluate pop music and its lyrics, because the experience gained by listening to pop songs links both to the primary intention of producing pop songs – that they elicit pleasure in their listeners – and because of the abundance of aesthetic features which regularly are used to structure songs (often intentionally to drive a song's commercial value). This is not a necessarily contested position to take, other than to discuss the extent to which (frequency or depth of experience) aesthetic experiences can occur when consuming pop songs – or mass art in other forms. We can, therefore, extend our discussion of aesthetic experience to our overall evaluation of pop lyrics as forms of mass art.

If we bring in Carroll's definition of aesthetic value, we can advance existing thinking. Carroll sees aesthetic value as separate and distinct from its 'market' or commercial value, but that some works of art can be evaluated for their ethical value and that an ethical quality (or defect) may as well be considered as an aesthetic merit (or defect), and vice versa (Carroll, 1996). Where Carroll is helpful is in his definitions of aesthetic value is as much in his explanations of other positions as in his own. Where Plato and Meskin refer to 'pleasure', so I read 'taste' and 'preference', the subjective notions that, with regard to pop music, explain the degrees of popularity that we see with many songs. As we go forward considering an array of examples of pop songs in different contexts, from different sub-genres, and from different eras, the one thing that binds them all is that they are popular, therefore they all elicit some level of pleasure to their listeners, and therefore we can infer that they are all aesthetically valuable – albeit for different reasons and in different amounts. This is not an empirical study, where I have sought to get participants to rate or rank songs depending on how much they like them, or how effective particular aesthetic features are. Our participant base is anyone who has consumed the songs that we consider, which is impossible to identify and define other than 'the public'. Whilst we can see geographical differences in terms of commercial value, without greater exploration of char and sales data, it is impossible to drill down further to any particular level of detail. The reason I say this, here, is that in detailing my definition of aesthetic value, I felt it necessary to convey something which captured the overall consistencies of the debated term in the theoretical literature with the practical application of it to listeners of pop music. Ultimately, pop is a mode of communication, and one which requires some level of engagement with it in order for consumption to take place. For a lyric to hold 'thick' aesthetic value, so it needs to elicit

large amounts of pleasure in the listener, often achieved through typical poetic and musical tropes, via rhyme, voice, style, and the other features that Adam Bradley identifies (2017). I will explore these in practice in Chapter Three. However, for now, it is important to establish my position regarding aesthetic value, even if it is not a term that I am contested in this thesis.

*2.2.iv Ethical value*

The ethical value of art consists in more than just the identification of ethically challenging content. Works of art that are agreed to hold ethical value and is engaged with in a meaningful and deliberative manner by listeners/audiences, I intend to show, may affect an individual's moral principles and development. This is something that I will return to from an educational perspective in Chapter Five. Engaging with ethically valuable art helps shape how we interact not only with the work of art, but also with others; helps us learn how to make ethical decisions; and shapes our moral principles. Of course, at this introductory stage, the opposite is also true; that if a lyric suggests something that goes against what we feel strongly about, we may find it difficult to engage with that lyric in any ethically salient and positive way.

As a reminder, I define ethical value as *the presence of ethically relevant content within a lyric's subject matter, signposted through the presence of emotional or virtuous language, metaphor and/or the presentation of an ethically challenging scenario*. Where ethical content is present, so, we can learn to identify it through deliberative and analytical ways akin to analysing the structures and poetic techniques that enable and enhance poetic content in pageborn poetry. This is something that Bradley advocates for, when he argues for considering the corpus of pop music as containing 'the most widely disseminated poetic expression of our time' (see Bradley, 2017: 1). In considering with greater philosophical seriousness the ways in which poetic tropes and aesthetic features enable emotional and ethical content within a lyric. Of course, as Bradley asserts, it would be perfectly plausible and possible to engage with pop music for pleasure purposes and never consider the aesthetic features and how they support ethical and emotional content, nor what such content may mean to us in our lives. However, even whilst preserving songs for our listening pleasure, it is possible to direct attention to the lyrics, the wordplay, metaphor and rhyme of our favourite songs to gain a greater understanding of them and enhance our overall aesthetic experience.

In doing so, particularly with lyrics that engage emotional and ethically sensitive content, we can move our understanding of ethical value beyond simply being able to identify the cues present in lyrics that signpost ethically valuable content within lyrics and on to how such content may make us feel and how we may respond to lyrics in an emotional manner. I do this in Chapter Three and use Chapter Four to provide case studies of how we can explore and deconstruct lyrics that have virtuous emotions as their central themes. Chapter Five, then, considers more concrete educational practices that can be adopted for the 'teaching' of virtuous emotions in pop lyrics.

At its core, though, we can agree that ethical value is concerned with how the understanding of where, in this case, ethical content exists in pop lyrics can be applied to our own moral development, which is understood as the principles that govern our ethical

conduct. This encompasses a wide range of virtues, which are often reflected in the ethical content present in pop lyrics. These virtues help frame our individual moral compass and, from a neo-Aristotelian perspective adopted here, can assist individuals navigate the complexities of ethical dilemmas.

### *2.2.v Ethical value and pop lyrics*

The ethical value of pop lyrics extends beyond their aesthetic features and contemplates how songwriters express their feelings – of hope and joy, of sorrow and anger – in ways which engage the masses; ways which are immediately accessible, whilst leaving room for nuance and sophistication; of ways which embrace serious topics in less than serious ways and vice versa. It is evidenced, in part, through the impact that pop songs have on society, on culture and on individuals, and creates long-lasting impressions on listeners, where listeners return to songs years after their initial release to evoke memories and emotions, or when a lyric continues to resonate with listeners of different generations, years or decades after its initial release. For example, 'Imagine', as already mentioned above, is a song that is popular with listeners across multiple generations long after it was first released and outside of the context of its initial release – as a call for unity and peace at a time of global conflict and social unrest. The notion of equality is one that is sought by multiple generations in the face of adversity and inequality, regardless of the type of inequality being suffered. As such, it is a song that has become one of the most performed, covered and played pop songs of all time. Its ethical value is evident, then, both in its lyrical content – embracing themes of equality and injustice, faith and prayer – and through its impact on listeners across a significant period of time – it was first released in the USA in 1971, yet remains popular today.

As such, therefore, ethical value can also be evidenced through the commercial success of songs that contain ethical content on challenging or emotional subject matters, particularly over an extended period. This longstanding popularity can be seen when lyrics impact culture for reasons that differ to the song's content, or where it is applied to a mass cultural setting. Referencing 'Imagine' again, it has been utilised to engage audiences since its release in contexts other different to the world in the early 1970s. For example, the song was covered by singer Emeli Sandé for the television coverage of the 2012 London Olympics, resulting in re-entering the UK Top 40 charts.

Pop lyrics, when seen as a form of cultural and societal expression, carry a responsibility for influencing perceptions, shaping values and contributing to the moral and civic aspects of the communities that consume them. To cultivate popularity, pop songs utilise aesthetically pleasing and valuable tropes and techniques to enhance a listener's aesthetic experience when consuming the song. I will explore this in more detail, as well as other combinations of value type in section 2.3 below.

## 2.3 Interacting value types

### *2.3.i Aesthetic value and ethical value of pop lyrics*

I have already shown some examples, above, with how value types within pop can interact to enhance a consumer's overall aesthetic experience. Here, I will foreground another example of how aesthetic value and ethical value can interact and conflict.

Whilst pop music has been marginalised by traditionalists in aesthetics (e.g., Young, 2016), work by Stone (2016), Bradley (2017) and, more recently, Robb and Mills (2025) have argued that pop music holds serious aesthetic value that is deserving of standalone and equivalent status, not simply as an inferior version to the aesthetic value held by other types of art. Indeed, in the case of Robb and Mills, to consider such a world renowned popstar in isolation, as they do with Taylor Swift, shows the degree with which Swift's lyrics connect with philosophical arguments regarding aesthetics and emotions, and the extent of the impact that she has had on popular culture, as a songwriter, performer and the many other roles that she plays. Her lyrics often raise philosophically challenging questions, provide advice to live one's life by and offer solutions to overcoming crippling heartbreak and loss.

This is all done in short, popular and typically structured pop songs, which contain aesthetic features crafted and intentionally placed to elicit pleasure and create attachment with listeners. Swift is an artist who embraces ethical and emotional themes within her music, doing so through an unashamedly pop lens, which is rooted in traditional country music storytelling. She not only tells stories to her audiences, though, she reflects on how her various experiences have transpired and seeks to become better as a result. These messages of empowerment and resilience are often sugar coated in pop tropes. Simple rhymes ('car' / 'bar'; 'locket' / 'pocket'; 'blue' / 'you'), meaningless fills (see 'Monologue Song'), or repetitive refrains (see 'Shake It Off') shape and mould the emotional content so that we engage with it in a positive way. This interaction between aesthetic features and emotional content is key to our exploration of the interaction between the value types we ascribe to pop. Just as we cannot escape the commercial value of pop as a primary value type, so the interaction between other value types is essential to explore if we are to treat pop lyrics with the philosophical seriousness that I suggest – as Robb and Mills do. The aesthetic features of pop songs appear in greater number pop music, and they are often intentionally positioned in songs to gain the greatest impact on listeners, so increasing the commercial value of a song. That said, this need not be seen as a negative aspect of pop music, indeed, the ways in which ethical and emotional content are considered within a repeating rhyme scheme, or a short, two-line chorus, and achieve the desired impact on listeners says much about the skill and craft of lyric writers.

### *2.3.ii Ethical value and cultural value of pop lyrics*

The interaction between value types is essential in our unpackaging of how we understand ethical value and prepare for the educational practices that assist with applying it to our own lives. Firstly, the interactions between ethical value and cultural value are important to highlight. Whilst these are numerous and complex, they are also somewhat straightforward to explain. As per Simon Frith, at the forefront of the understanding of ethical value of pop is a comprehension of the power that pop lyrics hold in shaping societal attitudes and reflecting the culture of the time at which they were written, or in the context in which they were released. Whether done intentionally or not, artists convey messages through their lyrics that can influence how listeners perceive a whole range of topics and issues such as relationships, self-worth, societal norms and cultural impact.

Frith (2000) contends that pop music is a cultural product with cultural value as it reflects and shapes social identities, relationships and experiences. Whilst undoubtedly a commercial endeavour, and where commercial value is its primary value type, Frith argues

that pop music plays an undeniably crucial role in how consumers of pop construct their individual and collective identities. Writing in the 1980s, '90s and early '00s, Frith cites examples of fandom and communities from the popular acts of the time, including counterculture communities of punk and progressive rock in the '80s (as with The Clash), through Britpop and bubblegum pop fads of the '90s (e.g., Oasis vs Blur, boybands and girlbands), and through more blended sounds that crossover from sub-genres and hold greater global appeal in the early '00s (e.g., garage rock, emo and Americana, grime and dubstep influences and country music infiltrating popular charts). These are only a small number of themes within popular music, broken down using temporal containers of decades, but are reflective of Frith's point that pop music (and its lyrics) brings together communities of fans beyond merely listening to pop songs.

The cultural value of pop and the social function that Frith argues that it can serve is facilitated and enabled by its aesthetic features, which embolden songs and can direct or even govern its cultural context. Features such as rhyme, melody and rhythm are embedded within all pop songs, as they are intended to be or become popular. Repetition, catchiness and rhyme are aesthetically as valuable as meaning and content within lyrics, and are often prioritised at the expense of meaningful content, e.g., 'Tutti Frutti' by Little Richard and 'Mmmbop' by Hanson. As such, songs can be aesthetically valuable, without holding any ethical value – through an absence of moral content. Indeed, such aesthetic value, when seen as the aesthetic features that help make a song popular, is often the value type that dominates people's perceptions (positive and negative) of pop music, as it links so directly to the overarching commercial direction of the pop music industry. This is often the main point of criticism of pop music (see Young, 2016), seeing it as a vacuous, shallow and inferior form of music. However, this thesis makes the case that pop music is not only culturally valuable, but that its lyrics hold value that extends beyond the purely commercial and has impacted popular culture throughout the history of pop music. It often does so by presenting ethical or emotional content in aesthetically pleasing and pleasurable ways.

In addition to discrete or explicit ethically challenging or emotionally salient content within lyrics, we can consider ethical value when lyrics consider topics or content that isn't obviously ethical, or when an additional cultural context may enhance our understanding of a lyric. One such example of a lyric where the content is not immediately clear that it is ethically challenging draws from rap and hip-hop and considers the theme of self-doubt – an unusual topic for rap to embrace, a far cry from perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, glorification of the female body, of wealth and of excess (see Bradley, 2009).

For example, 'All Falls Down' (2004) by Kanye West tells a first-person account of West's battle to accept his own imperfections, insecurities and self-doubt. 'All Falls Down' is certified double platinum in the UK and the US, selling a total of over 3.2m copies globally. West uses verse one to rap about female insecurities, such as repeating years at college, rather than dropping out, in case 'her parents'll look at her funny', becoming a single mother (''cause her baby daddy don't really care') and being addicted to shopping ('And she be dealin' with some issues that you can't believe / Single black female addicted to retail').

West then flips verse two to sing of his own insecurities and issues, which he hides by showing off his wealth ('Man, I promise, I'm so self-conscious / That's why you always see

me with at least one of my watches'). Whilst the cause of the self-doubt isn't made explicit, we can infer that West initially speaks of his own self-loathing for doing 'the ugliest things / for the road to riches and diamond rings'. He goes on to extend this beyond himself and speak for all black people 'tryna buy back our 40 acres', in reference to an attempt to buy material things to compensate for the reparations his ancestors never received post-abolition.

In doing so, he draws attention to several issues entangled in his self-doubt. Firstly, that black people struggle disproportionately with educational attainment, second, that rap and hip-hop culture is such that it glorifies commodities – fashion, jewellery, cars and other expensive things – to compensate for a lack of self-worth and sense of purpose. Ultimately, though, for West, this is a world in which he is under the influence of white wealth and has only served to succumb to temptations that are placed in front of him, rather than carve his own path. Ultimately, this all pays a toll on one's self-esteem, sense of self-worth and overall impression. As such, West cannot go on without admitting what he is hiding behind his wealth and fame – that he is struggling with these weights. This very much goes against the grain of 'typical' popular themes in rap, such as the glorification of money and success, and shows a nuance and sophistication to topics that have become ever more prevalent in popular culture. West goes on to reach immense fame and fortune, as well as being an entrepreneur and trailblazer for endeavours outside of music, such as his Yeezy brand and mainstream collaborations with GAP and adidas. Without excusing his contentious outspoken opinions, West has added a layer of cultural value to all of his pop music and lyrics, through his 'brand' development and profile. The topics and content of West's and other hip-hop stars lyrics, as they extend to, or contradict with, their behaviours, opinions and actions, emphasises the need to explore such ethical content through educational practices.

This section has sought to explore how different value types, as per the four identified in this thesis, interact, particularly regarding ethical value, aesthetic value and cultural. Simon Frith and Adam Bradley offer two different accounts of the value that pop music holds, but both acknowledge how value types interact and interest, often advancing and increasing the level of value we may place on a song. Frith provides an argument for distinguishing between commercial value and artistic value (which, for Frith, encompasses what I have parsed out as aesthetic, ethical, cultural and other value types). As I have said already, pop music is a commercially driven industry, and the commercial value that artists, songs and other aspects of pop hold cannot be ignored. However, as Frith says, commercial value and artistic value can co-exist and often enhance the other (see Frith, 1996). Indeed, for Frith, from an academic perspective, it is this artistic value that engages us as consumers and evokes the emotional responses that we feel when we listen to pop and the personal taste that we curate during our lives. This is not something that should be beneath academic critique for it shapes our aesthetic experiences as we consume pop music and related aspects of pop culture.

### *2.3.iii Pop as mass art and its aesthetic value*

'We know virtually nothing about the consequences of consuming art' wrote Noël Carroll (1998, pp. 301-302). In his *Philosophy of Mass Art*, Carroll theorises how mass art can engage our emotions, morality and ideology. Carroll acknowledges that we approach high

art differently and that, in contrast, mass art is immediately understood by almost everyone. He also acknowledges that a lot of mass art might be 'bad', but that it is still art or a sub-category of art *qua* art. I avoid dividing pop lyrics into 'good' and 'bad' classifications in this thesis, only seeking to identify one or more of the four value types in lyrics that I have introduced above.

I have categorised pop music as a subcategory of mass art (see 1.2.i) and sought to establish the philosophical position for considering pop lyrics as pieces of mass art. I regard evaluating lyrics for their ethical and aesthetic value, and how the different types of value that can be applied to the lyrics of pop songs can be described. I concluded Chapter One by saying that pop is primarily a commercial venture, where a song's value is governed by how commercially and economically successful it is, however, that does not need to be a limiting when evaluating other value types, specifically aesthetic and ethical value. I have sought to explore how both ethical and aesthetic value types can be identified in pop lyrics and co-exist, indeed, support one another. As such, where songs hold strong aesthetic and ethical value which exist alongside its commercial value. Where this is the case, the popularity of the song (as evidenced by its commercial value) may even enhance the ethical significance by catapulting songs which have lyrics that contain ethical content to a much wider audience, where they are consumed on a much larger scale, or placing them into different cultural contexts where value types can further evolve.

## 2.4 Conclusion

I have argued above that where a song contemplates ethical content, explicitly or implicitly, is associated culturally with other ethical dilemmas or situations, or where the listener applies their own ethical understanding to a lyric that we should consider the ethical value and aesthetic value as complimentary to one another, particularly regarding their educational potential as tools for moral development. In this regard, this pushes against traditional understandings of aesthetic value that explicitly cut out or ignore emotional and ethical components. I have argued that ethical and aesthetic values can co-exist and, indeed, should be seen as bedfellows. I have positioned this thesis at the intersection of both, both in terms of embracing the valuable ethical content that exists within many pop songs throughout the history of pop and in considering how consumers of pop are affected by songs that we both take pleasure and displeasure in hearing.

Therefore, a song's overall value is never fixed, is impacted and affected by societal events, as well as by the listener's own personal experiences and understandings. When we listen to or read a lyric at one time in our life, we may not apply as much significance to it or engage with it as much as we do later on, after we have experienced different things, just as much as Person A may apply different understandings to it to Person B, depending upon what their lived experiences are.

As we have seen in Chapters One and Two, the values that we can identify in pop lyrics often complement one another. Within and alongside an inescapable commercial value, foregrounding the other value types that pop lyrics hold can aide our overall aesthetic appreciation of the song and enhance the evocation of emotions felt as we engage with songs. What this chapter has sought to show, though, is how ethical value intersects and interacts with other value types. Identifying these points of convergence and conflict can

aide our understanding of ethical value, especially as we apply the meaning of lyrics to our own lives and seek to understand the emotions that songs often evoke in us.

This evocation of emotions is an important factor that sets up the focus of Chapter Three, specifically those that can be considered virtuous emotions. Specifically, I look at the virtuous emotions of gratitude and of anger, and present case studies (Chapter Four) of analysis of pop lyrics that engage with each theme, and how inclusion of virtuous *and* emotional content impacts aesthetic and ethical values. Where we understand aesthetic value to include the potential to elicit pleasure, so we can consider pleasure in terms of the emotional affect that a song has on a listener, or the extent to which it engages a listener about a particular theme. Such pleasure may not always arise through the evocation of 'positive' or 'positively valenced' emotions, but equally through emotions such as loss, sorrow and anger. This may be done by foregrounding the aesthetic qualities of a lyric in terms of how appealing the lyric is structurally, formally, and how narrative and poetic devices are employed. Regarding pop lyrics, these features can be identified and valued through poetic tropes and techniques such as rhyme, metaphor and the level of adherence to the formulaic structures of pop songs that enhance the subject matter.

## Chapter Three: Using pop lyrics to develop and deepen our understanding of virtuous emotions

### 3.1 Introduction

#### *3.1.i Recap*

In Chapter One of this thesis, I explored the different value types that pop music holds, covering it commercial value, cultural value, aesthetic value and ethical value. As I introduced this thesis by saying, I do not deny that the commercial value and commercial context of pop songs and of the pop music industry as a whole are paramount in any consideration of additional value types that pop may hold – pop music is, of course, created and intended to sell. That said, I contend that the ethical themes and content that reside within an abundance of pop songs, across the corpus of pop music, covering every era and sub-genre of pop can offer insights into the emotional experiences of human life. Further, pop music as an affective art form impacts its audiences by engaging listeners' emotions, challenging them to recall their own personal experiences, as they listen to their favourite artists sing of love, lust and loss, and a multitude of other themes.

In Chapter Two, I explored in more detail the aesthetic and ethical values of pop lyrics and how an approach that sits at the intersection and interactions between aesthetic and ethical values is important. The presence of ethically laden content does not necessarily require any specific inclusion in the lyrics of virtue terms, or naming of emotions, but by using simple metaphor and simile, catchy rhymes and melodies, pop lyrics can present scenarios and themes that place demands on listeners to engage with this ethical and emotional content, whilst being popularised for commercial consumption.

In popularising lyrics that contain ethically challenging content, pop music provides a varied and diverse source of materials for audiences to engage with, listen to, and even find solace in, provide emotional support and something that can offer a temporary departure from one's immediate stresses and realities of life. Pop music, as popular, is intended to sell, produced and published with a commercial value that is designed to make as music money as possible. There are occasional exceptions to this, through songs written and recorded independently of any major record label, publishing and distribution houses, or without commercial radio support. However, in considering the content of pop music as determined through the metrics of sales figures and chart positions, the commercial value and commercial intent of pop lyrics cannot be either avoided or ignored.

This need not be seen as a negative, though, nor reason to discount pop lyrics in terms of their ethical value. I celebrate it as a positive, as pop lyrics provide gateways and entry points to narrative art and content that engages us emotionally, challenges us ethically and, educationally, hold potential for greater study and analysis, regarding our own moral development. This meaningful and discrete reflection is something that I will return to in Chapter Five but is important in this chapter as I explore the notion of virtuous emotions in greater depth.

#### *3.1.ii Outline*

In this chapter, I will look at the role of emotions in human life, exploring how emotions are justified as perceptions, before looking at virtuous emotions (as per Kristjánsson, 2018). In particular, I look in more detail at gratitude, in relation to the case studies presented below,

and consider gratitude as a virtuous emotion, considering its triadic structure (benefit, beneficiary, benefactor), and the literature on gratitude, philosophical and empirical, as it has become somewhat of a philosophical 'hot topic' for scholars over the past decade. In terms of outlining the parameters of this chapter, I acknowledge that emotions hold both a cognitive and perceptive component, which are educable. I will explore this premise further, but this chapter stops short of considering the ontology of emotions, which resides outside the scope of this thesis.

In this chapter, I explore the perceptive components of emotions and consider the emotions of gratitude and anger. I look at the literature and scholarly research into both emotions, consider how and why they should be seen as 'virtuous', particularly concerning different conceptions and presentations of anger as a potentially morally justified emotion, and who the beneficiaries of each emotion may be, or indeed whether anger is focussed on personal or abstract beneficiaries. Particularly in relation to pop lyrics, then, I look at examples of 'angry' and 'grateful' lyrics and consider their presentation as well as their affect.

I conclude discussion of each virtuous emotion in Chapter Four with a case study analysis of lyrics on each topic, focussing on gratitude and anger, and looking in detail at the lyrics of 'Thank You' by Dido and 'Grateful' by Kelly Clarkson, two different depictions of gratitude – one through focussing on small actions of another, and the other through gratitude in faith. Then, I consider 'Seventeen Going Under' by Sam Fender; a reflective lyric where Fender contemplates the anger and frustration he felt as a teen, one which uses multiple different poetic techniques, and allows for analysis of whether the examples of anger are morally justifiable or not.

In introducing the emotions, I intend to make the case for both the affective nature of pop lyrics, and that in considering particular emotions as virtuous, so where pop lyrics are affective, they engage listeners with ethical and emotionally challenging content intentionally to evoke emotional responses. This makes them worthy of greater philosophical consideration in relation to moral education, over and above their aesthetic features and value. Much of these features are complimented and supplemented by the musical accompaniments to the lyrics, which should not be ignored, but are outside of the scope of this thesis. Similarly, in introducing the emotional dimension of pop lyrics, so I am contending that emotions are perceptive and educable. This is not a thesis on the ontology of emotions.

## 3.2 The emotions

### *3.2.i Defining terms*

Emotions play a fundamental role in human life. As per Tappolet (2016: 1), there are a 'vast number of competing philosophical theories of emotions.' Whilst this is not unusual, what is unique to the study of the emotions is that they are a topic of interest across disciplines and audiences, including psychologists, neuroscientists, artists and the general public. Indeed, as this thesis seeks to draw together, the interplay between philosophical, educational and public popularity of the emotions as they appear in pop lyrics is unique facet of this thesis. The competing theories of emotions in philosophical and psychological literature foreground their personal and intricate nature. Tappolet distinguishes between emotional 'episodes' and emotional 'dispositions' (*ibid*.). This is important and relevant to our

consideration of emotions and pop lyrics, as the affective nature of pop lyrics is episodic, rather than dispositional, if following Tappolet in that the emotion is experienced in response to something, is affective, and lasts for a particular period of time. As Tappolet clarifies, 'such episodes are always short-lived. Emotions sometimes last for days, months, and maybe even years.' (*Ibid*.). With regard to pop lyrics, I will conclude that whilst the emotional episode of responding to a pop lyric may be particularly short-lived (sometimes only lasting as long as the song itself), it is often something that can be a repeated episode. Where listeners choose to listen to songs repeated times, they do so to experience the pleasure that the song gives them. In addition, where listening to lyrics has previously evoked an emotional response, one may choose to repeat that experience by listening to the same lyric again. Further, where one is experiencing a particular emotion, say sadness, one may choose to listen to lyrics of songs that are sad in themselves, or evoke sadness. I will say more about this, below, as the significance of the popularity of pop music – in that it is widely consumed and listened to repeatedly – is an important consideration.

Emotions, and how we experience them and make sense of them, are important to who we are, how we live our lives, and what we think and do. This link between feeling and doing is fundamental as one seeks to understand the affect their emotions have on who they are. This is something that songwriters and artists explore through the medium of the songs that they write, be that writing from personal experience, or putting themselves in the shoes of others, as they use various poetic and musical techniques to express the emotions of the lyrics. An example of a songwriter who seeks to ensure that the music of a song matches the emotions expressed through the lyrics is Taylor Swift. Speaking about her *1989* album, Swift says that it was important to her that 'these songs sounded exactly the way that the emotions felt' (Swift, 2014). Of course, not all pop songs do this, and not all popstars and songwriters intend for their songs to hold any emotional content. Nor do they always affect the emotions of listeners. However, this quotation from Swift is an important consideration to keep in mind as we look at pop lyrics as emotional expressions, as well as their affective nature on listeners, and ultimately how that relates to their ethical value.

Here, though, it is relevant to define what I mean by an emotion. The literature on emotion theory and on emotion education is extensive, and much of it resides outside the scope of this thesis. However, there is an abundance of literature that embraces the emotional dimension of virtue ethics, and the interrelations between emotions and personal values/virtues. In this light, emotions may be defined, initially, as 'perceptions of a kind on the basis of the important analogies with sensory experience' (Tappolet, 2016: 46). This tells us that emotions are personal perceptions, differing from facts and events, and that are uniquely personal to each individual, whilst they can be shared through discussion and education. We are conscious when we are feeling (sensing) an emotion (or multiple emotions), and we often are able to discern which emotion/s we are feeling, and, generally, we can ascribe terms to describe the emotions that we are experiencing. However, when we use a shared language of emotions to share experiences with others, we must be mindful of how we understand terms may be different to how another understands them (see Deonna and Teroni, 2012: 1). Where I turn to Kristjánsson's 'virtuous emotions', it is important to acknowledge that he sees emotions as having cognitions as their core, although he acknowledges that perceptions do elicit emotions. I do not see this as

problematic in my account. However, if space allowed, a wider discussion regarding the ontology of the emotions is separate to this thesis.

There are debates in the philosophy of emotion with regard to to whether emotions are thoughts, feelings, perceptions or multi-componential experiences (see for example, Greenspan, 1988; Kristjánsson, 2018; and James, 1894). For the purposes of this thesis, I argue that they are perceptions. In defining emotions as perceptions, it is possible to focus on the personal perceptive and affective nature of each different emotion, whilst also seeing them as part of our overall understanding of virtue, and each particular virtue. For example, we may feel gratitude in response to a particular experience, which is directed towards another person for having done something that we perceive has benefitted us. That feeling of gratitude is part of our overall understanding of the virtue of gratitude, which we can seek to habituate and develop through practice, be that by keeping a gratitude journal, acknowledging people we are grateful to at the end of each day, or repaying said gratitude by doing acts that others will be grateful for. There is a difference, then, between the emotion that we felt in response to an act of gratitude for which we benefitted and the virtue of gratitude which we can develop in ourselves and encourage others, through performing acts for the benefit of others and acknowledging when we feel grateful. Two examples of this second element follow in 3.5.vi. This link between emotion and virtue can be cultivated through education, as set out in Chapter Five; specifically, through using such case study examples that many pop lyrics provide.

With regard to virtuous emotions, it is worth clarifying those emotions that are virtues (such as gratitude or anger), the emotions are different (components of) the virtue. Therefore, it is possible to feel the emotion and not be fully virtuous. Indeed, it may not be virtuous at all – one can feel angry for a wide variety of reasons that would not be considered morally justifiable, and one can be grateful for a benefit that may problematise the virtue of gratitude (such as receiving a financial bonus when it is not deserved).

I consider the emotion anger as a counterpoint to gratitude and how it is depicted in a variety of pop lyrics. I evidence multiple scenarios that give rise to an overall feeling of anger, frustration, and other related emotions. Some of these, I contend, are virtuous in their depiction, can be deemed morally justifiable, whereas others are not, and, indeed, should be considered as vicious. I conclude, then, that the emotion of anger in and of itself is not a virtuous emotion, but only when it is applied in a morally justifiable way. This is no new conclusion, as others have already written (see Kristjánsson, 2006), but is an attempt to show the multitude of varieties of emotional content across the corpus of pop music, and even within the same song. Such emotional content is still relevant, as it can be used to help students deliberate and determine when applications of virtuous emotions are virtuous and when they aren't.

### *3.2.ii Emotions and pop music*

As to the two virtuous emotions that I consider in this chapter, gratitude is an easily identifiable emotion that is often understood to be a moral emotion and connected to ethical behaviour. It is linked very clearly in the literature with the virtues and moral development (see for example Kristjánsson, 2018 and Jackson, 2020). In addition, it is a theme that appears frequently and throughout the corpus of pop lyrics, as I will

demonstrate using examples. As a counterpoint to gratitude, I consider the 'negative' virtue of anger. Whilst anger is, on the surface, seen to be a negative emotion, or a vice, linked with rage, destruction and generally felt in response to a negative stimulus, I contend, as Kristjánsson has done (2006; 2018), that it is virtuous and worthy of consideration in terms of application to one's own life and how different presentations of anger (through pop lyrics) show its affective nature.

Having acknowledged the perceptive nature of emotions, it serves to offer a further short prelude to Chapter Five by acknowledging the educational potential that studying pop lyrics hold, when we acknowledge that both emotions and virtues are educable. I demonstrate this in Chapter Four, through the case study deconstruction and analysis of lyrics relating to the virtuous emotions of gratitude and anger. Specifically, with regard to emotions, though, pop lyrics provide us with a rich corpus of emotion language, presented in palatable, catchy and easily consumed forms, which bring into focus how we experience and feel emotions in response to situations. As Deonna and Teroni (2012) state, we feel emotions in response to environments and experiences, and, in the case of pop lyrics, such circumstances are often depicted within lyrics, but we, the listener, are also encouraged to feel the same emotions as the pop artist, or at least to empathise with the emotions that they feel. For example, where an artist sings of love or heartbreak, we are encouraged to recall our own experiences of that emotion and to empathise with the singer with why they are heartbroken or in love, especially if the circumstances described relate to the listener's own experiences.

For example, 'Your Song' (1970) by Elton John embraces themes typical pop themes of love and romance. The lyrics, written by John's songwriting partner Bernie Taupin, narrate a first-person account of the narrator wanting to express their love to another, and do so via the gift of a love song ('My gift is my song, and this one's for you'). The lyrics 'put down in words' the strength of feeling that the narrator feels towards the beneficiary of the love. They begin with John singing about understanding his own emotions as 'It's a little bit funny, this feeling inside', before depicting a series of metaphors to attempt to convey how in love he is with the unnamed other person. The underexplored, sometimes half expressed metaphors are a melodramatic and poetic device that John uses in his performance of the song to emphasise his difficulty in understanding this particular emotion that he is feeling but knowing that expressing it in a song will do justice to the strength of the love he wishes to convey. The first line of verse two is incomplete, 'If I was a sculptor, heh, but then again, no', as if he is thinking aloud, and coming to a realisation that, whilst he knows 'it's not much…it's the best [he] can do' to write a song.

The impact of this melodramatic device is both deliberate and effective, as the audience can relate to the desire to express one's love to another, particularly in early phases of a relationship. It is a lyrical representation of how one can struggle to find the right words, depth of emotion and strength of feeling when speaking to a partner, spouse or significant other, wrapped up as a sugary sweet pop lyric. A lyric that has been expertly crafted and honed to meet its intended purpose. John sings of 'the sweetest eyes I've ever seen', in his only reference to any physical features of the object of the song, even if 'I've forgotten if they're green or they're blue'. This confusing and uncertain assertion conveys a feeling of

love, even if the detail and accuracy is missing – John is so enamoured with the person that he knows their eyes are sweet, even if he cannot remember their exact colour.

On reading the lyrics and listening to the song, one does not become any more knowledgeable about the philosophical arguments on what love is and its theoretical grounding as a virtuous emotion; however, that is not the point. 'Your Song' provides a twist on a traditional pop love ballad, where the lyrics seek to achieve the exact opposite of the way in which they were constructed, whilst still exploring the virtue of love. I do not, of course, claim that one can become 'virtue literate' simply by listening to pop songs, or reading their lyrics and identifying whether ethical content is present. Virtue literacy is developed, over time, and can be enhanced through introducing students to terminology, concepts and situations which demand an ethical response. I will return to virtue literacy in detail in Chapter Five.

Here, though, I repeat a claim that I made in the introduction to this thesis regarding its aims. My aim is to argue that pop lyrics should be taken more seriously, philosophically and educationally, for they are ripe with content that engages our emotions and describe situations of virtue and vice. Considering both the positive and negative, virtuous and vicious, is important, in order avoid portraying any notion that all pop music is positive and covers positive themes and emotions. Further, in terms of application and understanding that we all experience emotions, it is imperative to acknowledge both that they can be applied positively and negatively phenomenologically and morally or arise from positive and negative experiences. By this, I mean that, in relation to anger, feelings of anger can culminate in both positive actions (e.g. civil protest or lobbying for change) and negative actions (e.g. violence or destruction of property). Equally, they can arise from positive experiences (e.g. from a new friendship, but you find out something about the person's past that gives rise to anger), or from negative experiences (such as being the victim of abuse, or a scam of some sort). In all of the above cases, and in infinite other examples, the feelings of anger may cause discomfort, both for the individual feeling them, and for anyone hearing about them. Indeed, it may not even be that the individual experiencing feelings of anger is aware of why they are angry, initially, and it may take some form of concerted reflection to uncover such causes – as in 'Seventeen Going Under' discussed later. Whilst this may be the case for all emotions, it is particularly the case for emotions that make us less comfortable, or that we find less easy – even uneasy – to reflect upon or speak about.

Conceptual and psychological studies of the emotions have sought to understand with greater depth and clarity, and with empirical evidence, how and why we feel certain things at certain times, as well as clarifying what we mean when we use particular terms to describe particular feelings. The body of scholarly work that considers various facets of emotions and emotions education reflect the seriousness in which it is regarded across disciplines. The things that we feel are not always pleasant or positive, and are often disrupting, disturbing and generally create a sense of uneasiness within ourselves. In seeking to understand our emotions, why we experience particular emotions in response to particular experiences, and how we best manage our emotions are questions for education and educationalists, as much as they are for psychologists and philosophers. By this, I mean that schools of thought, such as SEL and positive psychology introduced above, can have real world applications through the classroom or other educational setting, where teachers

seek to engage their students in discussions about emotions, often using tools such as narratives and narrative art to focus discussions and provide content.

In terms of listening to pop music as affecting a listener's mood and evoking different emotions, work by Christenson and Roberts is important. They argue that 'popular music helps kids both to express and to change mood states – to relax, to relieve tension, to escape worries, to seek excitement, or to gain solace when they are sad, lonely, or bored.' (2004: 203). Whilst mood and emotion are not synonymous – there are overlaps. Mood is affected by emotion, and whilst emotion may be summarised as being a more fleeting experience, compared to a mood, which, whilst still time-bound, may last a little longer, the link between listener mood and consumption of pop music is relevant. As researchers have found, pop music animates and arouses listeners, particularly youthful audiences, in ways that can spark a range of emotional responses. Larson and Kubey (1983) have written about how rock and pop can 'delight' teenagers, for example, as well as bring about other emotions, such as anger.

Where we accept that mood is linked to emotion, so it is possible to see pop lyrics – as with other forms of art – as affective tools in manipulating and creating moods, feelings and sensitivities in audiences – particularly where pop music generally targets a younger audience. This manipulation need not always be negative or intrusive. Where it is developed and explored through educational practices and real-life application, can help educate audiences to better understand how mood, feelings and emotions interact, why we feel certain things in response to certain music or lyrics, and what feelings may mean – if we are unable or uncertain to articulate them. In reference to Larson and Kubey, Wells (1990) considers the emotional use of pop music by young people. Wells undertook a largescale survey of college students and found pop music to be a powerful tool for communicating with participant's emotions. Wells also found that female participants in their study were somewhat more likely to use music to manage their moods. This link, in research terms, between pop music and emotions is vital groundwork in establishing that pop music, and its lyrics, do affect listener mood and emotion. This thesis turns its attention to the lyrics, building on and complimenting other studies that look at music, rhythm, mood and the corporeal effect that pop music can have (see also Stone, 2016).

Where Larson and Kubey and (1983) speak of pop music as a mood elevator, and the positive impact that can have – on one's sense of wellbeing and generally life happiness – it is important to consider other outcomes of listening to and consuming pop music and its lyrics. For example, mood elevation does not always need to be taken in the emotionally positive manner in which is first may be interpreted. By this, I mean that as pop music covers such a diverse and comprehensive range of emotions within its subject matter, and the moods and emotions that it raises in listeners, it is important to acknowledge that pop music can depress and exacerbate negative emotional states, too.

At the extreme end of this, there is research on pop music and teen suicides by Litman and Farberow (1994). Whilst not directly relevant to this thesis, their work and the issues that it raises are important when considering the whole corpus of popular music. Heavy metal music, for example, has crossed over into more popular genres, and saw some commercial success in the late 1990's and early 2000's with bands, who may otherwise have been

resigned to the fringes of popular music history, gaining popularity and notoriety through music that was steeped in non-commercial and largely unpopular tropes and themes. For example, themes of suicide ('Last Resort' by Papa Roach), self-harm ('Bleed It Out' by Linkin Park), and drug abuse ('She Talks to Angels' by The Black Crowes) were all present in moderately successful songs by non-pop artists.

Crossovers between heavy metal culture, lyrical content and popular music were prominent during the 'emo' revolution of early 2000's, where bands such as My Chemical Romance gained popularity in spite of singing about emotionally disturbing experiences, various forms of abuse and harm. Their popularity was supplemented when their songs featured on the soundtracks to popular television shows and movies, which also often engaged with similar topics. For example, the *Twilight* saga written by Stephanie Meyer, sold millions of copies worldwide, and its film franchise earned millions of dollars worldwide. In both the books and the films, themes of emotional disturbance, substance abuse and violence are raised and treated with attention and detail, which were part of their popularity with teenage audiences. That crossover of genres, as well as multimodal format of similar themes across different types of narrative art, are interesting to consider in relation to both the value types identified earlier in this thesis, and with regard to virtuous emotions. In short, they are examples of how virtuous emotions need not always be positive, and that can be difficult, challenging and uncomfortable, but still be presented in aesthetically pleasing vehicles.

Such crossovers also provide legitimacy to more established and centrist pop artists to include such themes in their songs. For example, Pink's 'Just Like A Pill' (2001) is a lyric about drug dependence and abuse and the shame she feels, but also her desire to escape (both through drugs and from drugs). For example, the chorus goes 'You keep making me... / Run just as fast as I can / To the middle of nowhere / To the middle of my frustrated fears', suggesting that escapism is as frustrating and scary as remaining 'lyin' here on the floor where you left me'. Such themes and disruptions to pop's safe and kitsch middle ground.

Another example is 'Suicidal Thoughts' (1994) by Notorious B.I.G. Before the 'emo'/heavy metal-inspired 'takeover' of pop in the late 90s and early 2000s, hip-hop and rap music in the early 90s embraced similarly emotional and ethically laden themes of abuse and dependency. This hip-hop track is a challenging account of struggling to deal with fame, fortune, and associated trials and tribulations. The first-person narrative is presented as a phone call to someone else, a call for help, in which 'Biggie' unravels his frustrations, infidelities, and other burdens, whilst the voice on the phone becomes increasingly alarmed and says 'I'm on my way over there, man'. In the lyrics, which are fast, coarse hip-hop rap lyrics, the language is particularly bleak and offensive, although not out of keeping with other rap lyrics. In any case, the personal admissions of considering ending one's own life show, beneath the swearing and unedifying language, a vulnerability that was particularly unusual for rappers of the mid-90s to show. Such admissions were not commonplace amongst themes of wealth, excess and violence towards others, which in itself reflects a level of discomfort that runs parallel to the disruptive and shocking content of the song.

At different points in the history of rap and hip-hop music, it has been popular for rappers and MCs to include different levels of emotion, reflection and interest in their craft – ranging from boasting about being the best rapper alive, to dismissing the effort and

emotion that has been put into crafting rhymes by 'dusting your shoulders off' and acting with a form of disinterest whilst expressing complex, intricate and intelligent lyrics, which often express a range of different emotions, virtues and vices. With regard to rap and hip-hop, much of the reason for this (at least according to Bradley, 2009: 164-5), is that rappers treat the creation process as a business transaction; '…the moment rhyme started to pay…rap opened itself up to commercial interests.'

However, artistry and commercial success need not be mutually exclusive, be that in rap music or any other genre of pop. Bradley quotes Stic.man, half of the group dead prez, '"You must understand that artistic credibility and financial success can, should, and do work together wherever possible."' (*Ibid*.: 165). Where Bradley embraces rap's poetry, particularly in a genre that is obsessed with a tough, impenetrable image, it is a genre that regularly expresses extremes of emotions.

In terms of virtuous emotions, virtue and the education of virtue being disruptive or uncomfortable, we can turn to Philippa Foot, who acknowledges

> a certain discomfort that one may feel when discussing virtues. It is not easy to put one's finger on what is wrong, but it has something to do with a disparity between the moral ideals that may seem to be implied in or talk about the virtues, and the moral judgements that we actually make. (Foot, 1978: 177).

This discomfort or uneasiness that we may experience when we discuss virtue should not be reason to shy away from such topics, just as where lyrics embrace challenging topics and emotions, we should not disregard them on the sole basis that we do not wish to engage with such content as it is 'difficult'. We know that young people in particular, but people of all ages, find talking about their own emotional virtuous development more challenging than, say, talking about current affairs, sports, or reciting facts that we are taught in schools such as capital cities of the world, mathematical sums, or the letters of the alphabet. Therefore, when we link both the emotions with the virtues, such discomfort can appear compounded.

This said, some understandings of virtue and virtue theory have seen the emotions as problematic, or as inhibiting full virtue development, or preventing neutral, impartial reasoning, particularly in public deliberation (see discussion of Rawls in Banerjee and Bercuson, 2014). Emotions and feelings are not completely absent from Rawls, as he does advocate for tolerance and mutual trust as virtues as they are underpinned by feelings which guide co-operation. However, the ways in which Rawls sees such as examples of tolerance and trust as virtues does not directly align with a virtue ethical concept of emotion and virtue, that which I have presented in this thesis. From a virtue ethical perspective, tolerance could be seen as simply 'putting up with things', which is insufficient for it to be considered a virtue in its own right. Tolerating others, could be seen to have no moral application, and indeed be somewhat amoral, or even immoral, if the outcome is tolerance of unethical and vicious practices. For example, an employee could tolerate bullying behaviours from a boss that include sexism, racism, or other derogatory and discriminatory actions, simply because they are not directed at said person. In such circumstances, 'keeping one's head down' and not calling out such actions could be argued

to be tolerating immoral activities. Albeit, the view of tolerance as a virtue, or indeed as a moral virtue, is debated. For example, tolerance is not simply an 'absence of prejudice', but as a positive and deliberate civic and moral duty (see for example Witenberg, 2007).

I do not intend to become side-tracked by justifying the moral aspect of each and every virtue or emotion, but I raise the example of tolerance both because it is a virtue that Rawls explicitly identifies, but one that is contested as to its virtuous, specifically moral, status. With regard to emotions, tolerance is perhaps not so helpful a virtue to consider, as it is one that does not have an obvious emotional component to it. Tolerance, considering Witenberg's argument that it is a moral virtue, could be seen as a respect for a person and a mutual respect between two (or more) people, with respect grounded in empathy and a desire to coexist. Such ideas of tolerance as a moral duty have roots in civil libertarianism, with such scholars as Locke and Mill, where they argue that tolerant people value individualism, independence and freedom of choice. Whilst these can be seen as positive in and of themselves, from a virtuous emotion point of view, and with regard to virtuous emotions, tolerance is not an emotional, or emotion-led, concept.

Modern scholars have asserted that the emotions can cloud judgement, and essentially obstruct moral thinking (see Hand, 2011). Even when modern scholars embrace emotion regulation as a topic of interest, contemporary scholars criticise any focus on negative emotions, such as sadness and anger, as futile, or even harmful to one's moral development (as presented in Kristjánsson, 2018). Further, as Corcoran writes, 'The general tendency has been to associate the emotions with a moral failing, a surrender, or indeed a passionate detour into vice' (Corcoran, 2004: 2). Corcoran cites recent interest in the philosophy and psychology of vice, of 'perversity, moral transgression, hatred, terror and violence', as the ways in which scholars have included the emotions in philosophical studies – indeed that the emotions drag us into misbehaviour and wrongdoing.

Regarding emotions, Kristjánsson and colleagues have identified an 'emotion regulation function' of *phronesis*, the integrative meta-virtue that governs virtuous action. They link this function to levels of empathy and perspective-taking in participants. Citing Glück & Bluck (2013) for emotional regulation and empathy, and Webster (2007; 2019) for emotional regulation and reflectiveness, critical life experiences and openness to experiences, the identification of a discrete emotional component of *phronesis* seeks to foreground the opportunity for individuals to weigh up the 'occurrent emotions' as they determine particular courses of action, in the ultimate pursuit of human excellence (Darnell, Fowers and Kristjánsson, 2022). Kristjánsson and colleagues' argument is that the emotions play a role in how we regulate our decision making and, whilst they can cloud judgement or overly impact one's decision-making, with effective training and habituation, one can reach a 'reasoned approach to affect so that emotional responses do not become disproportionate or misguided.' (*Ibid*.). In short, they advocate for the affective dimension of practical wisdom, which has not always been present in other models and concepts of wisdom and *phronesis*.

This may not appear to be immediately compatible with the use of pop lyrics as ethically and emotionally valuable tools for education, as pop lyrics are filled with emotional language about emotional situations and are intended to create emotional responses in

listeners. As such, lyrics often concentrate on situations and events where emotional responses are indeed disproportionate and misguided (e.g., Eminem's 'Stan'). However, I contend that it is an important concept to address and to show how pop lyrics are suitable tools to engage students in discussions of emotions and virtues, which can help them acquire developing senses of virtue literacy, which, as I acknowledge above, is essential to a developed sense of *phronesis*. Not that *phronesis* is an emotion. It is an intellectual virtue, centred on the discernment of right action. Whilst it may hold some level of motivation, which can be said to shape emotions, 'it does not possess any discrete *emotional component* of its own.' (Kristjánsson, 2018: 26).

It is the central place that virtue ethics provides to the emotions that has been part of its resurgence in scholarly attention in moral philosophy and moral education studies. That said, embracing all emotional experiences under one heading, and considering them all in a similar manner is potentially detrimental to any argument that I wish to make. Emotional experiences are as diverse as the corpus of pop lyrics that I have drawn examples from in this thesis. This is why I have chosen to focus on two particular emotions, gratitude and anger, in particular in this chapter. These two emotions have been selected for their possible virtuous applications, the body of scholarly work that exists as to investigating how we experience them and their theoretical make up, their links to virtues and moral development, and because of the depth and breadth of pop lyrics that embrace both emotions. They are two different emotions in all facets, in terms of how and when we experience them, what makes us grateful and/or angry, one being seen as positive, the other as more inherently negative to experience, and in terms of their structural make up, as I will explore.

I will move on, now, to discuss in more depth both how I am defining virtuous emotions, and the importance that I attach, educationally, for why such topics should be introduced to students, and how narrative art generally, and pop lyrics specifically, can provide content for such teaching.

### 3.3 Virtuous emotions

The links between emotions and virtue development are well established when using virtue ethics as our chosen moral theory. That said, and as Jackson begins with, 'the role of emotions in moral and social life is contested' (2020: 1). Jackson uses the term 'emotional virtue' and justifies her choice in saying that, in schooling in particular, '[i]n everyday practice, many emotions are regarded as moral (or immoral).' (*Ibid*.: 13). Such a term signifies the moral relevance of the emotions, and the role that they play in our moral development. Sometimes, emotions are described as virtues, and others virtues are described as emotions, both in scholarly literature and in general parlance.

Kristjánsson (2018) identifies three conditions for an emotion to be virtuous. Kristjánsson argues that these are sufficient to establish virtuous emotions in the Aristotelian tradition, and include sincerity, whether or not the emotion is expressed for the right moral reasons, in the right amount, at the right time; that the expression of the emotion is morally justifiable, so for example with anger, that it is not expressed for selfish reasons, or at a slight or personal injustice, but against social injustice, for example; and thirdly that virtuous emotions are stable character traits that are experienced, indeed practised and habituated,

over time, rather than fleeting and episodic feelings. I will explore these three criteria in relation to existing work on gratitude, below. However, they offer a useful basis on which to ground our assessment of virtuous emotions.

We can assess emotions under different criteria, usually depending on our intended outcome. Kristjánsson's inclusion of the temporal aspect over how long we experience and express an emotion is important when we consider virtuous emotions. We feel many different emotions in response to life's challenges every day, however, one would not reflect on them always as being virtuous. Many are fleeting, and whilst we may learn to be more reflective and acknowledge the how's and why's we experience particular emotions at particular times, that does not necessarily mean that they are always virtuous. However, where we consider emotions and how we express them in terms of virtuous actions and moral learning, so we can be more confident that the emotions we express are virtuous. For example, Prinz (2007) considers the standards by which we may assess emotions as being 'extra moral', rather than moral (Prinz, 2007: 292). Those standards of consistency, coherence, stability and ease of implementation may overlap in part with the conditions under which we regard emotions as virtuous, but in isolation they need support.

It is possible to hold a virtual ethical view of morality that has an emotional foundation. Yet it is not the only moral theory to embrace the emotions (see SEL and positive psychology), whilst other well-established moral theories do not embrace the emotions (see deontology and consequentialism). Indeed, whilst this is a charge that virtue ethicists have embraced more recently, it has not always been the case. Aristotelian virtue ethics empowers the emotions as they contain moral significance (see Carr, 2009). However, more rational forms of moral theory disagree, as they find it difficult to reconcile one's emotional unpredictability with one's rational recognition of moral reasoning. This is where the Aristotelian notion of 'continence' is helpful, as it explains the human nature for 'strength of will', as there is always the individual battle with desire to negotiate.

Whilst Aristotelian virtue ethicists aspire to 'full virtue', it is not realistic to expect each and every person to make every ethical decision that they are confronted with in a morally salient and full virtuous way that brings our emotions and our virtues into harmony. The concept of 'continence' allows for moral fallibility. Whilst the circumstances of why someone may fall short of full/perfect virtue in any moment will determine how empathetic we are with their plight, it is the development of a person's sense of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that helps us adjudicate what the virtuous course of action should be and, if we fail to pursue it, how we might improve our moral decision making the next time we are confronted with an ethical quandary (see Foot, 1978; Kristjánsson, 2015).

In this regard, I contend that it is impossible to ignore the emotions as a relevant and vital component, not only of human life in broad terms, but also of our pursuit of full virtue. Humans are innately emotional beings, and where we consider emotions as feelings in response to the events around us, a concerted and deliberative attempt to habituate virtue, manage our emotions, and seek to pursue a fully virtuous life should embrace the emotional component of virtue.

I acknowledge that listening to pop music for pleasure and pleasure alone is a completely valid and legitimate reason for consuming pop music, just as it is for buying a particular style of t-shirt, wearing a particular scent of aftershave, or liking strong cheese. However, as humans are uniquely equipped to make moral judgements of ourselves and one another and equipped with a range of emotions which underpin and affect our judgements, the ways in which our moral evaluations are formed and developed deserve greater credit and attention. Where there exists a human ability to affect emotion through narrative, where there is an educational motivation to develop students' moral perspectives, so it tallies that we should, as educators, support students in the processes by which they make moral evaluations. Simply discarding moral judgements as easily as children move on from toy to toy fails to treat ethical development with the seriousness that it requires; indeed, demands. The case that I have set out in this chapter seeks to not only add to the case to take pop lyrics more seriously in philosophical terms, but also to illustrate how paying attention to narrative forms that contain emotional content and affect our own emotions can provide structure to those seeking to develop their understanding of their own emotions.

In relation to narrative art, the emotions are feelings that underpin our actions as humans as we respond to life's experiences; we experience different emotions at different times, in response to different situations. Emotions, where they are understood to be feelings, require some level of 'management' and comprehension in terms of why and when they are felt, how they should be best felt, and how to apply them towards virtuous action. One way in which emotions are often articulated through the human experience is in narrative art (see Carr, 2005; Carr and Harrison, 2015; Nunner-Winkler and Sodian, 1988). Even from a young age (4-8 years), children can attribute negative feelings to a character in a story that has violated a moral rule, and positive feelings to a character that resists temptation. Art, and narrative art in particular, provides a storyline for readers to follow (see Carr and Harrison, 2015). There are many sophisticated approaches to 'good' narrative art, and dates back many centuries where the artist portrays the story to their audience (*ibid*.). They dictate how the narrative arc moves, and how space and time are shaped through the story. The artist constructs the narrative, dictates the language choices, creates the characters, however, this is can only be interpreted successfully by the audience through the structure and clues left for them in the piece of art. Through applying one's own experiences to a narrative in order to effectively empathise (or not) with a character's choice of action, and through confidence in one's ability to read, listen, see and decipher the narrative that is in front of them, the partnership between artist and audience requires the active participation of both at different times.

So, virtuous emotions are those emotions which are components of virtue, whole. In other words, they are virtues which are felt in the right amounts, for the right reasons, at the right times, but also those that contribute towards virtuous action. They can include 'negative' emotions, such as anger, but also others such as shame or grief, as per Kristjánsson (2018). This interpretation of emotions as 'positive' or 'negative' is not particularly relevant in terms of the emotions themselves, where we consider them components of virtue. This is because where we see them as components of virtue, then the emotions should be seen to be building towards virtuous action, with the actions being seen as 'positive' (virtuous) or 'negative' (vicious). Where they do facilitate virtuous action, then the action itself will be

'positive', even if the emotion may not be – for example, where one is angry about an injustice, so experiences the associated feelings of frustration and being wronged, which can be considered as 'negative', but where the anger is righteous, then the ultimate action to overcome the injustice is virtuous.

Similarly, though, positive emotions, such as gratitude, may not always facilitate virtuous action. For example, one may experience feelings of gratitude towards someone who has provided a benefit to them that was through ill-gotten means. Say one is rewarded with a work bonus payment that the manager has intentionally inflated to 'buy' the employee's support for a particular illegal activity. Therefore, where I am the employee, I may be grateful, initially, to be in receipt of the bonus, but this gratitude would not be virtuous when I know what the motivation is behind paying the bonus payment. Such quandaries are often complex and multi-layered, as is attempting to understanding and make sense of our emotions. This is where turning to sources of narrative art can assist us, particularly those that are presented in often simple forms, as they seek to make sense of emotionally complex circumstances, as with pop lyrics.

## 3.4 Virtuous Emotion: Gratitude

### *3.4.i Introduction*

Scholarly research into gratitude has become somewhat of a philosophical and educational hot topic over the past decade. Current and recent work on gratitude that takes a virtue ethical perspective looks to establish it as a virtuous emotion that is multi-faceted and triadic in structure, with gratitude expressed by a benefactor for a benefit bestowed upon them by the beneficiary of the gratitude. For example, in the song 'In My Life' by The Beatles (1965), Lennon and McCartney (the beneficiaries) sing of the benefit (being in love) with an unnamed other (the benefactor). I will explore more examples in more detail, and with reference to the literature, in section 3.5. Work by Kristjánsson (2018) establishes the case for gratitude as a virtuous emotion and explains the recent interest in the emotion as a key cog in moral development, as well as its psychological and philosophical foundations.

Further, and supplementing Kristjánsson's work, work by Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson (2013) and Gulliford and Morgan (2021) have mapped the terrain of work on gratitude across the fields of psychology and philosophy, as well as making links to education, with regard to the educational potential that focussing on gratitude in the classroom has for moral education. Gulliford and Morgan have undertaken their own empirical research to create a multi-component measure of gratitude (Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson, 2017). The empirical work is interesting, but it is their conclusions regarding how gratitude is understood as a virtue that are most relevant here. Initially, they found, with Kristjánsson, that there were a 'confusing array of definitions, based…on different conceptual conditions placed on gratitude' (2021: 201). The updated paper describes more consensus in understanding of gratitude and the conditions which are placed on it in considering it a virtuous emotion.

Where previous psychological presentations and understandings of gratitude linked it to senses of awe and wonder (as addressed by Gulliford and Morgan, 2017), cross-cultural studies and in-depth empirical research have concluded that there are less positive, even negative associations made by lay participants in research. Gulliford and Morgan's own

empirical work has shown that, in Britain, the public conceive of gratitude as not an explicitly positive virtue, by which I mean that they found that it holds negative features such as indebtedness and guilt. Such findings go against the existing and prevailing positive view of gratitude held in psychological literature, and in reference to the general American public. Such diversity of definitions and associations is also prevalent in pop lyrics that centre on gratitude.

In relation to the educational application of the theory of virtue to moral development, Gulliford has published a short series of children's literature that focuses on virtue development. In particular, her book on gratitude aims to help readers understand the meaning of gratitude, recognise when it is an appropriate emotion to experience, and develop one's own abilities to express it (Gulliford, 2018). Such a sequential move through comprehension, application and development and habituation follows existing definitions of virtue literacy introduced in Chapter Two (see for example Jubilee Centre, 2022: 10). Such an approach, I contend, can work for any emotion. Using narratives to explore and explain the definitions of virtues, lyrics, stories and other narrative art can also provide comprehension-based dilemmas to explore through discussion and reflection. It is from such discussions of dilemmas that foreground the virtues that real-life applications can be made to aid our understandings of how and where we might experience and express virtuous emotions. For example, 'Larger Than Life' (1998) by the Backstreet Boys is a song written in gratitude to the band's fans for supporting them and being part of their success. The lyrics provide an insight not only into the feelings of gratitude in their rise to fame, but also acknowledging some of the experienced negatives of becoming 'larger than life' as 'your love's affecting our reality'. The band are conflicted as the fame and fortune are positives, yet also negatives that they sometimes 'run and hide' from.

Tracks such as 'Big Time' by Peter Gabriel, 'Diamonds from Sierra Leone' by Kanye West (the original version before he recorded an updated version following his crisis of conscience about glorifying blood diamonds), and 'Money Trees' by Kendrick Lamar appear as celebrations of indulgence, wealth and excess. All, though, offer the opportunity to discuss, deliberate and reflect upon what it means to be grateful, what we are grateful for and who we are grateful to.

Similarly, songs such as 'Sorry' by Justin Bieber, 'Everybody Hurts' by R.E.M. and 'Shame' by Robbie Williams and Gary Barlow offer opportunities not only to discuss surface-level interpretations of lyrics about forgiveness and vulnerability, but to hold deeper conversations about motivations for requesting forgiveness (self-centred vs benefitting the other), as well as notions of self-hatred and disgust, which frequently appear as themes across popular music. 'Shame' (2010), in particular, considers the idea of regret and how each individual perspective on a narrative does not necessarily equate to the notion of 'truth', 'Well there's three versions of this story mine and yours / And then the truth'. The lyric is an attempt at redemption between two friends and former bandmates, who 'broke up' in the public eye and didn't seek or speak about reconciliation for many years. The literal descriptions of events, framed with references to their friendship and lives in the public eye, present an honest attempt to rediscover the friendship that they previously held, whilst retaining a sense of personal and shared shame that their dispute had been left unresolved for so long.

Gratitude is often regarded as both 'the greatest of the virtues' (Cicero), and a positive emotion to experience as it arises from being in receipt of some form of benefit. It is a topic that has seen a resurgence in interest in more recent years with scholars considering the various facets and tenets of gratitude, and the conditions required for someone to experience or feel a sense of gratitude. Work by Gulliford and Morgan (2021), which updated a 2013 paper, provides a useful and insightful overview of the conditions required to experience gratitude, its valence, moral principles, as well as its structure as a virtue. These themes for understanding gratitude as a virtuous emotion can be mapped directly onto the description and conditions for virtuous emotions that Kristjánsson established (2018) and are explored above. I will explore this section by considering gratitude in terms of each of the following areas: conditions required to experience it, valence, its moral principles and its structure. I will map these against the three conditions that Kristjánsson establishes for virtuous emotions, those of sincerity, that it is morally justifiable, and the balance between it being episodic, as an emotion, and a stable character trait, as a virtue. Simply feeling grateful in a moment is insufficient when considering gratitude the virtue.

Kristjánsson himself begins his study of virtuous emotions with a focus on gratitude, both because it is a philosophical 'hot topic' in terms of recent research into virtue and emotions, and because of the magnitude of it by comparison to other virtuous emotions (see again the quote from Cicero that gratitude is both the 'greatest' virtue and 'the parent of all others'). Gratitude, today, is conceived of in terms of its 'affective nature', rather than an historical conception as a set of 'admirable actions.' (Kristjánsson, 2018: 53). Philosophers contemplating gratitude assume a triadic structure where three variables interact, the beneficiary, the benefit, and the benefactor, however, there are recent differences of opinion (see McAleer, 2012) that present a dyadic structure, namely one that allows for being grateful generally, without the gratitude needing to be directed at a particular benefactor. Putting aside this conceptual difference of opinion, it does not prevent us from understanding gratitude as a virtuous emotion that has generally positive connotations attached to it, urging us to engage in a moral change, to contribute to the benefit of another, and create a culture of reinforcement, where grateful acts are reciprocated and replicated in a culture or society. Whilst the philosophical and psychological literature on gratitude reflects nuances in terms of different 'types' of gratitude where one can be both appreciative, in the positive sense, and indebted, in the negative sense, to a benefactor, or express and experience gratitude with no beneficiary at all. Kristjánsson presents a case for gratitude as an Aristotelian virtuous emotion. Essentially, for gratitude to be considered 'virtuous', then there needs to be a moral justification for the gratitude that has a benefactor, that evokes a positive emotion, albeit possibly associated with notions of guilt or obligation, and must be valuable for a flourishing life (Kristjánsson, 2018: 57).

### *3.4.ii Conditions*

The conditions under which one feels grateful and expresses gratitude are essential to establish. As Gulliford and Morgan (2021) establish, modern conceptions of gratitude as both an emotion and a virtue have moved on from previous thinking that regarded it as being experienced when someone went 'over and above' the expected levels of duty or obligation. A.J. Simmons (1979) calls this supererogation, where the beneficiary gives a 'costly sacrifice' to the benefit of the benefactor of the gratitude (in Gulliford and Morgan,

2021: 202). This is something that Roberts (2004) supported more recently. Extensive empirical and theoretical work (see Arthur *et al*., 2015; Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson, 2013; McConnell, 1993) has shown that young people and adults do not see sacrifice as a necessary condition for gratitude, and that many people are simply grateful to another for performing their duties. This is something that Roberts (2015) has since addressed in his own conception of gratitude.

The next condition of gratitude identified by Gulliford and Morgan is that of 'intentionality' as another condition of gratitude. By this, they define intentionality as 'that the benefactor must have *intended* to bestow the benefit.' (Gulliford and Morgan, 2021: 203). This may sound like a simple and expected condition for a virtuous emotion to have, but it is helpful as it foregrounds Kristjánsson's notion of sincerity. If a virtuous emotion is expressed intentionality, then we can see this as being a sincere experience, meaningful, reflective and other descriptions used in virtue ethics for practising virtue. Gulliford and Morgan (and with Kristjánsson) have sought to focus on intentionality in more detail, exploring notions of intentionality simply intensify the feelings of gratitude, rather than exist as necessary conditions for them to exist in the first place. Further, they seek to clarify differences between 'strong' and 'weak' forms of intentionality; i.e., where the benefit is directed to a '*given* beneficiary', or simply implied to a '*potential* future beneficiary' (*ibid*.). In terms of interrogating gratitude in detail, such a distinction is interesting and necessary as it draws attention to the variety of different experiences under which we consider gratitude (and other virtuous emotions) and is possible to consider in light of example lyrics, below. However, here, it is necessary simply to acknowledge the definitions in the literature.

Regarding Kristjánsson's notion of sincerity, if we intend to express gratitude, then it is, at least to some degree, pre-meditated. This is not pre-meditated in terms of 'knowing' that we will feel grateful before an event or situation is lived, but pre-meditated in the sense that we feel the emotion before we express it. Expressing gratitude may take any number of different forms but is simply expressed verbally in saying 'thank you'. In order to verbalise our emotions, even to write them down in lyric form, we must reflect on the feelings that we feel and acknowledge why, where, and who is involved in eliciting and facilitating such emotional experiences. In a positive sense, then, we can see expressions of gratitude where the benefactor has considered the grateful feelings as sincere. That does not rule out possible manipulation for personal benefit, particularly where they feature as a theme in pop lyrics, that are, as we have established, produced in order to gain commercial success, but I will consider different examples of gratitude in pop below.

On a similar note, Gulliford and Morgan (2016) have shown that public perceptions of gratitude reduce when a situation exists that the benefactor has demonstrated ulterior or malicious motives, or where the benefits appear to be purely selfish, rather than altruistic. Such circumstances shift the natural expectations that we are grateful to a person for doing something that benefits us, whether they go above and beyond what can be reasonably expected of them, and whether we have asked for assistance. Essentially, the exact circumstances of a scenario, dilemma or quandary in which the level of virtue attached to the expressed gratitude may be questioned links with Kristjánsson's notion of moral justifiability. So, for example, the example that Gulliford and Morgan use in their empirical work is that of nominating a colleague for an award in anticipation and expectation of you

assisting them with their workload. This draws into question whether showing gratitude to someone, by nominating them for an award for their work, is genuine, or even morally justifiable, if the intention was to elicit a level of obligation from the colleague that they would then have to assist you with your work, whether that be because the volume of work you have is too large for one person, or because a task that you need to complete is something you are seeking to delegate. In pop music terms, this could be likened to writing a song celebrating a particular individual with the expectation that the object of the song will then assist with something that benefits the songwriter, such as co-writing another song together, or endorsing the song (if they are a public figure, for example). As consumers of pop, we could extend this example and consider artists and songwriters writing songs that celebrate 'fans' of the artist with the intention of boosting reputation and standing with the artist's fanbase. Such celebration may not, then, be seen as either sincere, or morally justifiable, as the primary intention is to benefit the songwriter, rather than to express gratitude in any virtuous way. We can see elements of this scenario in the songs 'From Me to You' (1963) by The Beatles and 'Fans' (2007) by Kings of Leon.

'From Me to You' appeared on The Beatles *Twist and Shout* album (1964) as their third ever single. It reached number 1 on the official UK singles chart, although was not initially a commercial success in the US. It comprises of five verses and two bridges and, like much of the early Beatles singles, is written in the first person singular voice. This has the effect of directly appealing to listeners and engaging them more personally. The song itself is written as an open call to the subject that 'If there is anything that you want / If there is anything that I can do / Just call on me and I'll send it along / With love, from me to you'. The song is intended to be a call to fans to both stay with The Beatles and to thank them for their initial support. The reasons why the lyrics suggest that there is a question of the motives behind the lyrics arise from two areas. Firstly, that the song was written very much at the beginning of The Beatles' musical careers. Whilst there would be no way to predict the rise to fame which they achieved, the point at which they were offering thanks to fans seems somewhat premature, and could be seen as somewhat manipulative of a young and eager fanbase, that they would know they would need to keep onside to achieve the commercial success they craved. Secondly, whilst we know that the song was written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, as well as performed by them, the idea that they are offering 'anything that you want…anything I can do' to fans as a way of expressing their love and gratitude is both farfetched and metaphorical. The Beatles' early songs were full of simple presentations of love and affection, and the meaning behind this song being in appreciation of fans may be missed as another simple, even simplistic, presentation of love to a single person.

### *3.4.iii Valence*

We speak of virtuous emotions in terms of their valence, i.e., the extent to which an emotion is experienced positively or negatively, rather than the level of intensity with which it is felt or expressed (see Citron *et al*., 2014). Gratitude is predominantly seen as a positive emotion, which, overall, is experienced in response to a positive benefit. It is difficult to make a case for gratitude being anything other than a positive virtuous emotion, both in terms of the circumstances in which it is experienced, and the effect of expressing it to others.

This, of course, considers the internal nature of gratitude. This has not always been the focus, though, and it is important to remember that, historically, discussions of gratitude centred on it 'as a set of admirable *actions* (of expressing thanks)' (Kristjánsson, 2018: 53). The rise in interest in virtue ethics, as well as psychological interest in cognitive behaviours, though, has usurped this action-only understanding of gratitude. The focus on affective nature of gratitude still elicits some differences of opinion, though. There is work that sees gratitude as a fleeting emotion, episodic in nature, and lacking in stability (see Fredrickson, 2004). However, work by the likes of Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004), from a positive psychology perspective, sees gratitude as a stable emotional state of good character. For the purposes of defining gratitude as a virtuous emotion, it is important that we see it as a stable trait, as Kristjánsson does (2018: 53). Such an understanding does not exclude the idea that gratitude can be felt as a fleeting episodic emotion – by 'feeling grateful' – but it is important that we consider gratitude as a stable virtuous emotion that is practised, and can be habituated, as well as taught.

The idea of valence, though, is not limited to the affective nature of gratitude, but it is important to consider the positive and negative valenced features of it. Empirically, recent studies have found a number of negatively valenced features that laypeople associate with gratitude, including those of indebtedness and obligation, guilt and awkwardness (Arthur *et al*., 2015). This is in addition to a number of positively valenced features. Studies have looked at cross-cultural comparisons and differences in how people from different countries experience gratitude and the features they associate with it. Whilst there is large concurrence that gratitude is a positively valenced virtuous emotion, some of the cross-cultural differences are interesting regarding pop music. The studies that have shown some cross-cultural comparisons include those by Oishi *et al*., (2019), who worked with Korean and American participants, and Morgan, Gulliford and Waters (2022), who compared UK responses with Australian responses to hypothetical scenarios. Both studies found positively and negatively valenced features of gratitude being endorsed by all participants, but the Oishi *et al*., study found that gratitude writing practices evoked notions of indebtedness in Korean students, but not in American students (although indebtedness and guilt were features of gratitude that both American and Korean students identified in interpersonal gratitude – gratitude expressed towards another) (Oishi *et al*., 2019). Morgan, Gulliford and Waters found that whilst the features of gratitude self-reported by participants were similar with British and Australian participants, it was Australian participants who reported higher levels of gratitude than British participants (Morgan, Gulliford and Waters, 2022).

Such features are important both in terms of educational application, as gratitude is a topic that is growing in popularity in classrooms and on curricula. It is a topic that has permeated pop lyrics for decades. The notion of 'giving thanks' in a song to another is not unique to pop, indeed, it is something that derives from hymns and songs sung in religious practices. Whilst the lyrics of hymns fall outside the scope of this thesis, the notion of being grateful to God is something I will look at in the case study below.

Regarding valence, the idea that cross cultural differences exist is something to bear in mind when considering the content of gratitude-focussed lyrics, as well as how we regard ethical value, in terms of positive/negative valence. This thesis draws primarily from pop lyrics that are written and recorded by US and UK artists but have a global appeal and commercial

value. The features of gratitude that appear will be considered both in terms of how and where the song was written and produced, but more importantly the potential impact on audiences, globally, who may consider gratitude differently, as the above studies have found.

### *3.4.iv Moral Principles*

Overwhelmingly, studies agree that gratitude is a moral emotion, with moral qualities (see not only work by Kristjánsson, Gulliford and Morgan already cited, but also McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons and Larson, 2001; Fredrickson, 2004). However, scholars such as Liz Jackson, have identified it as a virtuous emotion that may conflict with other moral principles, in terms of social injustices. Jackson (2016) considers this in relation to propositional gratitude, where people express gratitude for things that they have access to or can obtain without difficulty as there are others in the world who are 'not so lucky', e.g. clean water, free education, etc. Whilst such things are legitimate benefits to be grateful for, Jackson problematises the notion that people should be grateful for the minimum expectations of good living. She suggests that encouraging such downward social comparisons, particularly in educational settings through the teaching of gratitude, may lead to servility and ignorance, rather than moral outrage (Jackson, 2016: 283). It is important as this chapter progresses, and particularly in Chapter Five, to consider that the educational application of pop lyrics as tools to aid moral development focus on the importance of considering virtuous emotions, of which gratitude is one, rather than the more instrumental benefits of being grateful.

That said, the moral principles of gratitude are worth highlighting, particularly regarding Kristjánsson's notion of virtuous emotions as stable traits of character, rather than episodic, fleeting emotional feelings. So, there is evidence that gratitude is morally and ethically valuable. Ma, Tunney and Ferguson (2017) offer a meta-analysis that considers how gratitude and prosociality are interlinked. Studies have shown how developing and celebrating gratitude can have direct reciprocal impact, through motivating beneficiaries to give to others, beyond and outside of the initial benefactor-beneficiary relationship. Further, indirect reciprocal impact includes reputational gain (of the benefactor), as well as bystander motivation to help the beneficiary, and indeed, by extension, to help others in the future. This link to prosociality helps, when practising gratitude, to embed it as a habit, rather than experiencing it in fleeting episodes, as the extended benefits and outcomes of expressing gratitude can be shown to students in the classroom.

I began this short section by saying that there is general agreement that gratitude is a positive virtuous emotion, however, it is not without critique. Gratitude may be expressed where it is not entirely appropriate to express it, or have been manipulated for antisocial intentions. Ultimately, the prosocial outcomes and impact of expressing gratitude is rooted in the intentions of the benefactor being prosocial in design. This is not assumed and can be critiqued, particularly regarding studying the expressions of gratitude often found in pop lyrics. For example, Jay-Z 'Thank You' is a lyric that suggests that gratitude is tempered by ego, by (low) self-esteem and by some confusion of how to express gratitude, or whether it is the correct emotion to express in relation to the lyrical content of the verses.

### *3.4.v Structure*

I have already introduced the idea that gratitude should be seen in a triadic structure, where a benefit is expressed between a benefactor and beneficiary. This three-pronged structure requires all three to be present for gratitude to be expressed. This means that gratitude is expressed between two actors (usually both people, but not in all cases), and expressed for a benefit, rather than for any non-beneficial reasons. This is widely accepted as a predominant structure of gratitude, but is not the only structural model offered by scholars. Roberts (2004) presented a philosophical case for acknowledging gratitude as a moral emotion in a triadic structure. In expressing gratitude for a benefit to a benefactor ensures that gratitude is an interpersonal emotion, encouraged and developed through relationships, rather than individually. We express our thanks to someone for doing something, which presupposes a requirement for some form of interpersonal interaction between beneficiary and benefactor, typically through a verbal conversation and expression of 'thanks', or possibly via a letter, email, text or tweet, or even via some other form of acknowledgement.

This is sometimes referred to as 'targeted gratitude', but is different both in structure and in expression to dyadic or propositional gratitude. In terms of dyadic gratitude, the structure is reduced to only a beneficiary and a benefit. Ultimately, the main difference is whether or not we accept appreciation as part of gratitude, at least as subset, or whether we treat appreciation as a separate emotion completely. Such appreciation may be expressed towards the benefit ('I appreciate access to clean water'), but does this mean that I am grateful for it? Such an appreciation of life's positive benefits, as with a dyadic structure of gratitude, changes the concept of gratitude from a prosocial, interactive virtuous emotion, as with a triadic structural concept. For the purposes of treating gratitude as a virtuous emotion, from a neo-Aristotelian, virtue ethics perspective, I concur with Kristjánsson by adopting a triadic understanding of gratitude, which 'involves a cognized benefaction by a benefactor.' (Kristjánsson, 2018: 54).

Such a complex and intricate exploration of the structure and conditions of this first virtuous emotion is not one that we might expect to trip off the tongue of an 'attentive' young person studying in school, or listening to a lyric, let alone of a songwriter writing a pop song. That said, it is worth bearing in mind and exploring in greater detail when considering gratitude as a topic which permeates pop music, as in 3.7.i. Whilst often overlooked in place of the more stereotypical pop themes of 'love', 'lust', and 'loss', there are a plethora of popular song lyrics that entertain the theme of gratitude. Not all of these will tackle gratitude with the complexity of detail that Kristjánsson presents, but many are more nuanced than they first appear.

Here, I turn to two popular songs that contemplate gratitude in different ways. I present a literary deconstruction of the two songs in a similar way to that provided by Bradley in *The Poetry of Pop*. I consider the chart performance and other commercial indicators of economic success, as well as looking at the song's structure, formula, rhymes and presentation. As Bradley does, I look at how we read the lyric, the rhymes and meter of it, use of figurative language, voice, style and story created and evaluate how well it stands up to the four value types identified above.

## 3.5 Virtuous Emotion: Anger

### *3.5.i Introduction*

Virtuous emotions are central to a virtue ethical view of 'the good life' and flourishing. In seeking to better understand the emotions that we see as virtuous, or 'as indirectly conducive to virtue' (Kristjánsson, 2018), so, in educational terms, we can feel better prepared to support the emotional and moral development of students in our care. With regard to anger, it is important not to only see 'positive' emotions as virtuous as doing so is helpful in understanding our emotional literacy and moral development.

With anger, for it to be considered a virtuous emotion, there is the question of whether it can (ever) be morally justified. Depictions of anger in pop differ markedly. How anger is justified through the song's lyrics is also something that differs across the corpus of pop, with themes of anger relating to relationship dissatisfaction, political anger, personal turmoil, jealousy and violence, for example. Whilst experiencing feelings of anger is perfectly normal in most people, the levels to which one can control those feelings is important, when considering whether anger can be morally justified, or considered as a virtuous emotion. Uncontrolled anger, extended rage that lead to destruction (mental and physical) are difficult to justify, morally, and when anger clouds our ability to make a reasoned judgement or decision, then one may need support in how to better understand one's emotions.

Anger differs from gratitude, not least because it is seen as arising from negative experiences, where there is little or no received benefit in the way that the benefactor responds to the benefit by thanking the beneficiary of gratitude. So, whilst one can propose a triadic structure to mirror that explored above, there are fundamental differences between anger and gratitude that need us to explore anger as a separate emotion. Work by Bommarito (2017) looks at anger as both virtuous and vicious; virtuous where it is felt in the right amount, for the right reasons, at the right time, but vicious both in terms of its application and in terms of potential harm done to the individual who feels angry – particularly where it is over an extended period of time, or where it ultimately hinders the achievement of a virtuous goal.

Bommarito defines emotions, helpfully, as 'episodic responses involving bodily changes' (Bommarito, 2017) where anger may bring about elevated heart rate, sweaty palms, raised tone of voice, and a flushed face, but is ultimately short-lived and passes within a temporary period. However, it is possible to be angry for an extended period of time, even if one does not feel the emotional response described, here, throughout that extended period. For example, a person may have angered me for something that they did, and the repercussions of that act are more long-lasting. Therefore, I could say that I remain angry with that person for an extended period of, say, years, as I was unable to resolve the matter with them and received no apology or reconciliation. That does not mean that I remained angry for the entirety of that period, but that the anger was evoked each time that I thought about said person, or had to deal with the consequences of their actions, as they affected me. For Bommarito, in such an example, anger ceases to be considered as an emotion and we can treat it as a virtue or a vice.

Regarding virtuous emotions, then, and taking Bommarito's line on virtuous and vicious anger both being predicated by whether or not the experience of anger is short-term or

longer-lived, and the circumstances by which one has become angry, we can begin to challenge whether or not anger is morally justifiable and, then, ahead of the case study lyrics in Chapter Four, and educational application of Chapter Five, allude to whether or not justifiable anger can be taught. This is where Kristjánsson's work is helpful (see Kristjánsson, 2005; 2018). In Aristotelian terms, Kristjánsson speaks of virtuous anger as a mean, where other negative emotions may be either deficiencies or excesses, such as envy (excess), and apathy (deficiency). With anger, Kristjánsson suggests that Aristotle sees virtuous anger as the mean ('mildness'), and that quickness of temper, or rage, is an excess of anger, which is not virtuous. Equally, a deficiency of anger suggests that one cannot defend oneself, and is, ultimately foolish, or unable to think well enough of themselves to notice when they may have been slighted or insulted.

With regard to audience and listener responses to art, so we have already discussed here and in previous chapters that narrative art can engage audiences and evoke particular emotions in them as they respond to the art, be that a film, lyric, story or poem, for example. The emotional responses from individual audience members may differ, and such different responses, and the extent to which audience members feel particular emotions in response to the artwork is reflective of our levels of enjoyment and pleasure – ultimately no two people will enjoy a film, say, in exactly the same way. Individual levels of sensitivity, personal experiences, and levels of emotional regulation mean that the film will affect people differently. Emotional affect is different, of course, to cognitive interpretation of the artwork's content, but they are both part of the overall aesthetic experience, as discussed in Chapter Two. Where the ethicist will argue that there is no ideal level of emotional response required from an audience member, others may disagree (autonomists and formalists, for example). However, as we are, here, considering both the emotional content of a piece of art (pop lyric) and the emotional response of the listener, there must be a standard of judgement that allows for an ethical evaluation to occur, whereby the listener can determine the ethical value of the piece of art, and the extent to which they were emotionally and morally moved by its content. This, I argue, can occur on an initial reading and/or listening to a lyric and through more extensive and reflective analysis, as I aim to show in Chapter Four and discuss in more detail in Chapter Five.

To be considered as a virtuous emotion, anger should not 'flow over into violence', therefore one must exhibit an element of self-control and emotional regulation (see Haydon, 1999: 61). Whilst this may seem a somewhat flimsy, or precarious way of defining virtuous anger, it is helpful in two ways. Firstly, the notion of emotional regulation, restraint, and self-control is an important part of a virtue ethics view of moral development. One must feel the right emotion, for the right reasons, in the right amount in response to a given dilemma or quandary, and then that helps shape one's actions. Indeed, Haydon questions whether the virtuous response would be not to feel angry in the first place, rather than to operate self-control in response to angry feelings. Whilst that may be an ideal, to regulate one's emotions so much that they are not present when making moral decisions and judgements, it is unrealistic. I, therefore, challenge Haydon's aim for education that it should seek to cultivate 'the tendency not to get angry at all', as I believe that emotions are valuable components, when present, in virtue cultivation and decision making (*ibid*.: 62).

Here, it is worth referencing 'Stan' (2000) by Eminem. As well as sampling 'Thank You' by Dido, the lyrics tell a story of a 'fan' called Stan who write fan mail to Eminem, and Eminem reads them. Over the first two verses, he demonstrates that he is obsessive over Eminem, and grows more and more frustrated and angry when he does not receive a reply. The letters are dated several months apart, and he finally (verse three) records a voice note where he is irate, and also drunk and intoxicated with antidepressant drugs. He reveals that he is about to drive a car over a bridge, with his pregnant girlfriend tied up in the boot of the car. This is the climax of the rage, culminating with a murder/suicide, as you hear the car crash into the water below. After a moment of silence, verse four begins with a calm and collected Eminem, speaking some weeks later, dictating his reply to Stan. During the verse, he works out that Stan is the protagonist of the events that he has 'seen on…the news a couple of weeks ago, that made me sick' regarding the car crash.

The anger in the lyrics is conveyed through the character of Stan, and, is not an example of a virtuous emotion, or righteous anger. According to Haydon's understanding of anger, Stan is unable to control his feelings of anger, he is violent towards his girlfriend, admits that he self-harms ('the pain is like a sudden rush to me'), and becomes irrationally angry at what is his perception of why Eminem has not responded to his letters. The song itself was a global success, selling over 7,000,000 units worldwide, and reaching number one on the chart in at least 14 different countries.

*3.5.ii Conditions*

We can view anger under similar conditions to gratitude. Firstly, intentionality – it is possible to be intentionally angry and bestow anger upon another. As anger is generally seen as a negative emotion, using the same triadic terms of benefactor, beneficiary and benefit to describe anger and its main actors sits uneasily. Therefore, I will refer to anger as the emotion, the benefactor as the instigator and the beneficiary as the protagonist. This is, of course, considering examples and conditions where anger is directed at another person.

In 'Stan', Stan would be the protagonist, directing his anger, the emotion, at Eminem, the instigator. Eminem instigates Stan's feelings of anger through inaction, rather than action, as he does not reply to Stan's letters, ignores him and his brother outside a gig, and does not share Stan's warped view of their relationship. In terms of intentionality, Stan certainly intentionally directs his anger at Eminem, but the intentionality of the act is moot, or even non-existent. If 'Stan' were a song about gratitude, then it may be that Stan were writing letters of thanks to Eminem for some act, such as writing an autograph for his brother, or acknowledging his existence. However, this is not a song about gratitude. Stan's feelings of anger are projected onto Eminem as they are rooted in feelings of frustration, inadequacy and self-loathing, borne out as him shouting into an empty void as he scribbles his frustrations in letters.

So, in terms of intentionality, anger differs from gratitude in that there does not need to be an act of any sort to provoke the anger. Indeed, as 'Stan' shows, the provocation can be inaction, which results in a perceived slight or feeling ignored, rather than any act of spite or aggression. This, of course, would not explain anger as a virtuous emotion, but as a negative one that can breed resentment, hatred, or even spiral into violence and retaliation.

Where Kristjánsson identifies sincerity as a required condition of virtuous emotions, the idea of sincere anger is somewhat hypocritical. Where Haydon (1999) has suggested that virtuous anger should be the inhibition of feeling anger at all, and at last the suppression of violent responses, so sincerity in anger doesn't necessarily fit. Kristjánsson (2006) has spoken of justified anger as requiring a moral justification for it to be considered virtuous. Regarding to sincerity, it is possible to consider anger as a virtuous emotion when we consider anger aimed at a moral injustice or slight.

This is where anger and gratitude deviate, though, regarding conditions and structure, as I will move onto. Morally justified anger is difficult to both express and to identify, whilst it may be something that is instinctively felt in response to a situation. For example, 'Blowin' in the Wind' (1963) by Bob Dylan is a song that, in performance and in lyrical content, is a subtle protest song about peace, war and freedom. The topic of the anger is unstated, and critics, journalists and fans have hypothesised whether it is a song about civil rights, anti-war, or some other cause. The answer to that is as 'blowin' in the wind' as the song's title, but the lyrics suggest both an intentionality and a sincerity that we can identify as conditions of anger.

The opening line 'How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?' questions how many times must someone do something mundane and routine before it is legitimised. Later, Dylan asks 'Yes, and how many times must a man look up / Before he can see the sky?' By this verse, Dylan is sounding weary, as if he is singing of being knocked down and looking up and not seeing the sky, but needing to look beyond the immediate views in front of his face and up to the sky, be that to see the danger of nuclear war, or hope in looking up to the sky, or to heaven. Dylan's frustrations are much less overt and explicit than Stan's are, and his use of rhetorical questions throughout the song serves the purpose of questioning multiple outlets, for multiple causes, with widespread dissatisfaction.

*3.5.iii Valence*

Anger is most obviously valenced as a negative emotion and virtue – generally something must have been perceived to have gone 'wrong', or against our expectations, for us to feel angry. On the whole, they need not necessarily be morally grounded feelings, as to experience morally justified anger appears a more sophisticated presentation of anger. Base levels of anger may arise where we perceive another to have wronged us, morally, amorally or immorally, where we have missed out on an opportunity, or where we have disappointed ourselves in some way.

This is an important aspect of anger that differs from gratitude – where we cannot feel gratitude towards ourselves, we can feel angry at ourselves, say, where we do something we know to be wrong, where we show signs of weakness, or where we do something that we later regret. For example, we may feel angry at ourselves for sending a message to a former partner, seeking to interact with them, motivated by feelings of loneliness, lust, or simple intoxication, that we later regret. For example, 'Creep' (1993) by Radiohead sings of self-hatred with the well-known lyrics 'I'm a creep / I'm a weirdo / What the hell am I doin' here? / I don't belong here'. 'Creep' is a song where the anger and motion is expressed towards oneself, in a diadic structure, whilst there is another party referenced in the lyrics.

This party is referenced favourably, as 'an angel… / float[ing] like a feather / in a beautiful world'. Where Thom Yorke sings of himself as what he aspires towards, in terms of wanting 'control', 'a perfect body / I want a perfect soul'. The negatively valenced emotion polarises the positive esteem in which the other party is held. This seems to be a feature of anger, that it is often contrasted with expressions of positivity either towards oneself, where the anger is expressed at another, or towards another, where the anger is expressed at oneself. In terms of valence, this provides balance in that anger is offset by positively valenced emotions, albeit rarely being expressed towards the same person.

Another example of feeling angry towards a former relationship is 'Take a Bow' (2008) by Rhianna. The lyrics are aimed at a former partner who Rhianna contends 'looks so dumb right now' for seeking to rekindle a relationship that they ended through infidelity. Anger at infidelity is a common topic in pop music, as per songs such as 'Cry Me a River' (2002) by Justin Timberlake, 'Caught Out There' (1999) by Kelis and 'Rollin' in the Deep' (2011) by Adele.

*3.5.iv Moral Principles*

The moral principles of anger are worth highlighting, as with gratitude, above, with regard to Kristjánsson's notion of virtuous emotions as stable traits of character, rather than episodic, fleeting emotional feelings. So, there is evidence that anger is morally and ethically valuable. Thomason (2020) considers the moral necessity of anger where it is 'not just rational and reasonable, but also a morally necessary response to wrongdoing.' (Thomason, 2020: 83). In contrast to Haydon, Thomason sees anger a morally necessary and appropriate response to injustice, offense or ill-treatment. Where we have embraced feelings of gratitude, and indeed of other positively valenced emotions, as components of virtues, whole, it seems hypocritical and at odds to divorce feelings of anger from virtue simply because it is more negatively valenced.

Where Thomason claims that feelings of moral anger can be desirable and necessary, this goes against other views, such as Nussbaum, who has argued that anger is irrational, as it is predicated on payback or revenge, which is an attempt to assuage pain, or making good the wrongdoing (Nussbaum, 2016: 24). This, to Nussbaum, is irrational, as one cannot alleviate or substitute pain suffered with an angry response. The two do not cancel one another out, and one is left angrier, more hurt, and less happy as a result. However, where there has been an injustice, then ager is not an irrational response. In this sense, anger is more accusatory than punitive, and seeks to call out wrongdoing, rather than demand retribution. Whilst retribution may satisfy the anger temporarily, the feelings of anger are more likely to be a coping mechanism than a demand for punishment (see Thomason, 2020).

In terms of moral principles, we have seen that anger is more nuanced and complex than gratitude may appear, and that it has been harder to pin down in terms of structure and conditions. That said, anger is, in one sense, simpler to define in terms of valence, as it is almost always, without question, negatively valenced. It is hard to feel happy at being angry, and angry often, as Sam Fender sings 'hurts you when you're down'.

*3.5.v Structure*

Anger is more difficult to pin down in structure than gratitude, as it seems to shift shape more readily than gratitude, where the beneficiary, benefit and benefactor are much more easily identifiable. Where anger is seen as negatively valenced, its effects are often seen in terms of negative valence as well, be it through violence and retaliation, or low self-esteem, self-pity, or civic or societal frustration. The implications of experiencing feelings of anger are, perhaps, potentially more damaging than feelings of gratitude, which are overwhelmingly positive – albeit with some associations of guilt and indebtedness. Therefore, as a point of comparison, it is not easy to consider them as comparable, based in the same structure.

However, where anger is seen as morally justifiable, then we can try and pin its structure down to something akin to gratitude. Here, the person experiencing the morally justified anger can be considered the protagonist, provoked to feel anger for some reason, in response to some circumstance. Often, this may be a wider societal cause such as in 'Blowin' in the Wind', but may also be directed at an instigator, where the anger is channelled in a more local and individual manner, such as against an individually who has morally wronged us in some manner. In pop, as I will expand upon below, infidelity is a popular topic of moral outrage, but topics such as civil protest, getting over anger and its negative connotations, and invisibility in society may also be considered as morally justified anger, too.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to draw attention both to the emotional content and affective nature of pop lyrics, and also make a case for the emotions as a component of virtue, and of virtuous emotions especially. The fields of emotions education and emotions theory are vast and span multiple disciplines, but for the purposes of this thesis, and the virtue ethics perspective that I adopt, it is important both to acknowledge the emotional component to understanding virtues. This is not totally divergent from all other moral theories and educational approaches, as SEL and positive psychology address the emotions, too. Indeed, addressing the emotional component of virtue allows the virtue ethicist to interact with those of an SEL and positive psychology persuasion and draw synergies between the three theories.

In terms of virtuous emotions, I have established that there is a requirement for the emotion to be morally justified. In pop lyrics, exploring the moral justification of an emotion is difficult to infer simply by listening to a lyric. This is where an extended analysis of a lyric can offer greater insight. Certainly, with added context surrounding autobiographical details of the songwriter, uncovering reasons for writing a particular line or lyric and situating a lyric in its cultural context or chronological discography can further aide the lyrical analysis.

I have introduced the idea, above, that a virtuous emotion may not, on its own, be required to be morally justifiable. Indeed, where our emotions make is feel discomfort, then they can still evoke moral discussions. Indeed, such discomfort can highlight the gap between virtue literacy, in terms of knowing the virtuous thing to do, and moral action – actually doing it (see Foot, 1978). This is important with regard to the educational application, and indeed how pop lyrics can provide ample content and opportunity to develop virtue literacy, as I will move onto in Chapter Five. However, I move on now to offer an extended analysis of

three lyrics – two on gratitude and one on anger – to supplement the theoretical analysis provided in this chapter. I have selected these lyrics to show a variety of structures to the lyrics, whilst all three hold a 'pop' core at their centre – in that they are structured with verses and choruses, repeating refrains and simple rhymes. All three are contemporary pop songs, with 'Thank You' released in 1998, 'Grateful' in 2003 and 'Seventeen Going Under' in 2017. The intention in offering extended analyses of lyrics that contemplate ethical content is to demonstrate how such an analysis can link popular lyrics with current academic understandings of virtuous emotions. Further, as I will move onto in Chapter Five, is to show how lyrics can and should be used as tools for emotional and moral education.

## Chapter Four: Virtuous Emotions Gratitude and Anger – case study lyrics

### 4.1 Dido – 'Thank You'

Released in 1998 on the *Sliding Doors* movie soundtrack, 'Thank You' became Dido's biggest selling single from her 1999 album *No Angel*, reaching number 3 in both the UK Top 40 chart and the US *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. It has sold 420,000 copies globally.[15] It's popularity, though, is credited to its use by US rapper Eminem on his 2000 single 'Stan', which reached number one in the UK, and has sold 1.47 million copies in the UK, and been streamed 55.8 million times.[16] The lyrics are included in Appendix 7.1, below.

The song is a ballad in the keys of G# minor and B major, containing three verses and four choruses, ordered as verse one, verse two, chorus one, verse three, chorus two, chorus three, chorus four. The premise of the lyric is one of gratitude for sharing time with another during a bout of depression, with the author presenting in verses one and two her feelings of sadness and depression at the circumstances of her life, but ending with positive emotions of seeing a picture of a loved one (verse one) and receiving a phone call (verse two) reminding her and the reader that things are 'not so bad'. Verse three then follows the same structure, but describes the appearance of the partner handing 'me a towel' to dry off from the rain, with the presence of the loved one enough for the author to escape the turmoil and depression of their lives. Verses one and two are equally presented in seven lines, with the repeating refrain 'it's not so bad, it's not so bad' used to end each verse. Verse three is truncated to five lines and ends with 'because you're near me'. The effect of this shortened line draws attention, in verse three, to the sight of the lover for the first time. The verses present the disparity between the author's general malaise and despair with the positive experience of seeing 'a picture on the wall' and 'then you call me' moving the author from depression to a neutral sense of 'it's not so bad'. Verse three moves the narrative forward to actual contact between the two characters, with an interaction, the receiving of a gift of a towel as an act that one can be grateful for and reciprocate. The literal exclamation of the gratitude, though, is only presented in the 'thank you' contained within the chorus. The chorus is identically presented in all four instances, as a repeating refrain of 'the best day of my life' following a declaration of gratitude in line one, 'And I want to thank you for giving me', and a more general admission that 'Ohh, just to be with you is having' the best day in line three.

On the surface, the lyric is simply presented as a contrast between the despair of the author's life with the cheer of experiencing the very 'best day of my life' in being with one's lover. The acts of gratitude are multiple, and escalate in significance throughout the song; beginning with seeing a picture, to receiving a phone call, to being handed a towel when coming in from the rain and culminating in both seeing the lover and being in their presence. The author is grateful to the other party for being able to transport them from their state of depression into something that is 'not so bad'. The unnamed other party is the benefactor of the gratitude, and the lyric itself is the articulation of it. The gift is being able

[15] See 'Physical Singles' on 'Dido's albums and songs sales' [Online]. Available at: https://chartmasters.org/2019/02/didos-albums-and-songs-sales/ (Accessed 3 June 2020).
[16] See 'Stan' on 'Eminem's biggest songs on the Official Chart' [Online]. Available at: https://www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/eminems-biggest-songs-on-the-official-chart__20973/ (Accessed 3 June 2020).

to brighten someone else's day by your mere presence, particularly if that person is experiencing depression or despair.

The notion of 'authenticity' in art is important, but authenticity does not need to only come from writing lyrics about one's own personal experiences. Whilst this is an obvious starting point from which to draw inspiration – delving into the emotions one felt at particular times in one's life, it is perfectly plausible that songwriters write songs about the experiences of others, their perception of what others feel in times of happiness or hardship, and package them up as catchy pop lyrics. With Dido's 'Thank You', whether or not we know that Dido was writing from personal experience in describing bouts of depression is moot.[17] What endures in the lyric is the notion that however hard one's life gets, it is always possible to lift them and provide them with a little bit of happiness through one's presence, through a phone call, picture, or a memory. The obvious interpretation is that the other person is a partner or a lover, but that is open to interpretation; it could of course be a family member, a friend, or some other meaningful person. The lyric appears simplistic and, perhaps even twee, but its popularity suggests that there is an enduring notion of gratitude that is expressed based on the author's personal experience, but one which the reader can engage with and learn from. We don't all need to have been in the depths of despair to be able to engage with the emotional uplift that a significant other can bring to us on good and bad days.

It is the reflection on that uplift, who is responsible for it, and how it 'saves' the author that creates the lasting meaning. Whilst we might feel a fleeting notion of thanks, a pang of love, or another positive emotion in response to seeing a picture, receiving a phone call, or returning home to see that person, reflecting on that emotion sufficiently to then thank the person for doing nothing more than being there is unusual. Perhaps the polarisation of emotions created in the description of the depression and the resulting uplift that allows space to reflect and acknowledge the cause for the positive change in emotion. Regardless, the gratitude experienced, and the description of that experience, appears to fulfil the requirements of a 'virtuous emotion'. The lyric does no more than describe three instances (seeing the picture, receiving the phone call, and returning home to the person), presumably all experienced on one day, so we know nothing more about the storyline of either character other than that which is given to us. From what we can infer, the author's expression of gratitude is for the 'right' reasons (in aiding their recovery from a depressive state), and at the 'right time' (in response to the act of giving the author their 'best day'). Whether or not we regard it as being in the 'right' amount to make it a virtuous act is perhaps the one contentious point. For readers who cannot engage and empathise with the level of depression experienced by the author, it is plausible to think that the lyric expresses too much gratitude in response to relatively little action, however, such is the polarisation of the negative ('I'm wondering why I got out of bed', 'I might not last the day') and the positive ('best day of my life') creates a balance that works for the author. There is a triadic structure between the beneficiary (the author), the benefactor (the partner) and the benefit (the presence of the benefactor). We must also remember that this is a pop lyric, where repetition of choruses is a musical and poetic feature designed to move the song forwards,

[17] See 'What Went Right' 29 January 2001, *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/jan/29/artsfeatures (Accessed 3 June 2020).

rather than a device to gauge the level of emotional content. It may be useful, at this point, to consider a second song lyric that contemplates the emotion of gratitude from a different perspective.

### 4.2 Kelly Clarkson – 'Thankful'

'Thankful' by Kelly Clarkson is the title track off her 2003 debut studio album. Clarkson receives a song writing credit for the track, with three other writers, Edmonds, Mason, and Thomas. It wasn't released as a single, but the album met with immediate commercial success, selling 297,000 copies in its first week in the US, and debuted at Number One on the *Billboard* Hot 200, and has since sold 2,800,000 copies in the US.[18] For context, Clarkson won the reality television show *American Idol* in 2002, and *Thankful* was her first long player recording, following the release of the 'winner's single' 'Before Your Love / A Moment Like This' in September 2002. The lyrics to the album's title track are included in Appendix 1b below.

The song is structured of two verses and two choruses that alternate, before the second chorus repeats, leading into a bridge, before concluding with two further repetitions of the chorus. There is a repeating refrain used as a backing vocal between the chorus and verse of 'thankful, so thankful', which repeats to close after the final chorus. The song's title summarising its content – an ode to an unnamed 'other' that Clarkson is grateful to. The song alternates between the second-person and first-person voice, depending on whether Clarkson is addressing the benefactor or speaking as the beneficiary. Clarkson generally uses the second-person voice in the verse, with the first-person 'I' used in the chorus, although there is a general shift from second- to first-person voice throughout the song. The first verse begins 'You know my soul', as a direct address to another. On first reading, it can be assumed that this 'other' could be Clarkson's partner, her lover, and someone she is infatuated with; 'You know everything about me there's to know / You know my heart'. If this is the case, then the song becomes a love song, and the benefit of the gratitude is simply the love that exists between two partners in a relationship. 'I love everything about you' and 'I love having you around me' are the penultimate lines of verses one and two, and are the only deviations in the first two verses and choruses from depicting the benefit of the gratitude, to showing that the love she feels from the 'other' is indeed reciprocated. Similar to 'Thank You', the benefit of the gratitude is encompassed by the presence of the benefactor, 'You know my thoughts / Before I open up my mouth and try to speak / You know my dreams / Must be listening when I'm talking in my sleep'.

Like 'Thank You', 'Thankful' changes as we approach the end of the third verse. Where Clarkson reflects on the positive aspects of the love that she feels from the 'other' in verses one and two, she turns to acknowledge the presence of the 'other' during negative times as well, 'From the troubles I've known / For the heartache and pain / Thrown in my way / When I didn't think that I could go on but you made me feel strong'. This subtle change in verse three to encompass less positive language and reflect a resilience of the love that is felt between the author and the object of the lyric brings an added depth to the relationship. The lyric is not simply an adoration of the physical, of the lust, or of the

[18] See 'Kelly Clarkson Discography' [Online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelly_Clarkson_discography (Accessed 16 July 2020).

positive aspects of the relationship, but one that celebrates that it has endured difficult times as well. Whilst the reasons for Clarkson feeling that she 'could [not] go on' are not detailed, the reader can feel some level of appreciation that the relationship is rooted in more than just lust and surface level attraction.

The transitions in and out of both chorus one and two, syntactically, are smooth. When reading the lyric, there is no break between the verse and chorus. The syntax flows and reads like a sentence would, 'Don't you know / That I'm thankful / For the blessings and the lessons'. Such lack of punctuation could be interpreted as an emphasis that the emotion felt by Clarkson is free-flowing, never ending. This changes slightly with the transition from chorus two into the bridge, and from the bridge into chorus four; 'In my life / For the lessons that I've learned'; 'With you I am never alone / That I'm thankful'. This may reflect the change in tone, in acknowledging the difficult times reflected in verse three, in that Clarkson's free flowing positive emotion has been rocked slightly by recalling less positive times. Or it could simply reflect the jump to the bridge of the song, and a key change, rather than moving back into a third verse. In any case, the repetition of 'thankful' throughout the song, sixteen instances in total if including the backing refrain, leaves the reader in no doubt about the theme of the song – repetition, of course, creating emphasis.

As discussed above, the obvious assumption of who the benefactor in the lyric may be, is that of a lover or close partner. However, just as we consider the context in which 'Thank You' was written, as Dido suffered from depression, it is plausible to consider alternative benefactors to the simple assumption of a lover. Clarkson won the 2002 *American Idol* series, and this was the title track from her first studio long player after winning the contest. Therefore, it could be that Clarkson is thanking the show, the producers, and/or the fans that voted for her to win. However, the immersive language that is used throughout the lyric leaves this a little questionable. The use of religious and spiritual language throughout the lyric give rise to the possibility that Clarkson is thanking God, and her faith, and doing so by personifying God throughout the lyric.[19] The use of 'soul' in the opening line immediately suggests a spiritual nature to the lyric, which is compounded when followed by 'know my heart', 'know everything about me', 'For the blessings and the lessons / that I've learned with you by my side', 'know my thoughts', 'When I didn't think that I could go on but you made me feel strong'.

Such a depiction and representation of gratitude in a pop lyric is as valid as in 'Thank You', but reflects both the nature of the virtuous emotion, and what one can feel grateful for and thankful to. Both lyrics follow the triadic structure of gratitude, alluding to a benefit, and indeed to a benefactor, without describing their physical features. Such an approach leaves the door open for interpretation, and for the reader to place their own assumptions and interpretations on what the song is about, or what it means to them. Such an approach is not unique to Kelly Clarkson or Dido and is common across popular music. Indeed, often what makes pop music popular is its universal appeal. It describes the unique and intimate details of a writer's experience but makes it universal and generalisable so that anyone can relate to it. I will explore this value of pop in more detail as I look at the multiple values

[19] Clarkson was raised a Southern Baptist. See 'Kelly Clarkson – Wikipedia' [Online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelly_Clarkson (Accessed 16 July 2024).

attributed to popular music. At this stage, it can be summarised that such close reading of the lyrics presented above certainly allow for greater exploration of gratitude than simply by listening to the songs as consumers. The educational potential of lyrics as tools through which to engage discussions on emotion and virtue are evident.

The conflict, though, is that it is easy to discuss the emotion-rich, even virtue-rich, content of song lyrics that foreground virtues and virtuous emotions in the way that both do. Do such close readings offer sufficient emotional engagement required on behalf of the reader to advance any form of virtue development? It is necessary to demark one from the other, the presence of emotional or virtuous content in a lyric, and depth of emotional engagement in reading the lyric, and I draw a line, here, that separates the two. I am certainly not presuming that simply because there are some emotional cues in a lyric that reading it will engage our emotions and help advance our understanding of them. There is clearly more to do than read the lyrics of 'Jealous Guy' by John Lennon for us to understand the emotion of jealousy and how we act if and when we are consumed by it. Whilst we can be trained to read lyrics for their structure and poetics, as Adam Bradley (2017) makes a strong case for, and which I will return to later, this is only part of the case I wish to present. It is also possible to 'value' a song lyric for its instrumental strengths, no pun intended, or even 'like' a song lyric simply because of its aesthetic qualities. Whilst for many songs, it is possible to apply no emotional or ethical value to the lyrics, in the same way that it is possible to like a poem, a book, or a film for the aesthetic qualities only, D'Olimpio (2020) and others (see for example, Carroll, 2000) would argue that it is impossible to avoid an ethical reading of other literary texts. Pop music, more than any other genre of music, is appealing *because* it is popular, it is aesthetically pleasing, it is easy to listen to, to escape to. In general, one does not require the same level of cerebral engagement as, say, classical music, the Blues, or rap lyrics, to enjoy the lyrics of pop songs. That said, when focussing on the lyrics in isolation from the music, I contend that the emotional and virtuous cues found in pop lyrics deserve greater attention.

### 4.3 Sam Fender – 'Seventeen Going Under'

Similar to 'gratitude', 'anger' is a very popular and prevalent emotion across the corpus of popular music. With roots in both rap music and in rock music, anger is a theme that captures the frustrations of many pop artists and songwriters, be they cultural, societal, political, personal, or stem from dysfunctional relationships, loss, or injustice and protest in a whole variety of forms (for example, 'American Idiot' by Green Day, 'Leave (Get Out)' by JoJo, and 'Fight the Power' by Public Enemy). The examples cited, here, are purely illustrative and do not reflect the variety and breadth of ways in which anger manifests in pop lyrics. However, I have selected two songs for detailed analysis, similar to 'Thank You' and 'Thankful' in the previous chapter, in order to explore some of the notable similarities and differences in how anger is presented, evidenced, and even reflected upon in pop lyrics. The song that I have selected for analysis is 'Seventeen Going Under' by Sam Fender (2021).

The song was written by Fender and appears on his album by the same title (2021). The single peaked at number three on the UK official singles chart, but not until January 2022,

and stayed on the chart for 78 weeks in total.[20] It sold 1.2 million copies in the UK and was the tenth most popular song of 2021.[21] It is described as a 'sleeper hit', due to the delay between its release as a single and its peak chart position, and it won an Ivor Novello Award for 'Best Song Musically and Lyrically' awarded by the British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors, as well as other awards.

The song chronicles Fender's life as a seventeen-year-old, particularly with regard to his mother being afflicted with illness meaning that she was incapable of working as a nurse, after 40 years of service. There are particular depictions of the manifestation of the anger and frustration that Fender has admitted that he felt at the helpless situation that he found himself in, with his mother incapacitated and depressed, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) challenging her status as unable to work. Fender depicts situations where he lashes out at those around him, albeit from a more distant perspective, and one that has had time to reflect on how he felt and why he felt such emotions (by 2021, Fender was 27 years old. Fender has described the song as a letter to his seventeen-year-old self, acknowledging the challenge of being adult in some respects, but still a child in many others, and wanting to support his mother but feeling unable to. He has stated in a letter to his 17-year-old self that '17 is when all the challenges begin: you're not a baby, but you're definitely not an adult, I'm not even sure it'll happen at all for you, but growing up is for fools and the near dead, so stop being so serious all the time.' (Fender, 2021a).

The lyrics, presented as they are as a reflection to a decade previously, offer an insight into the wisdom and reflection that Fender has acquired during that period, and how he is, at 27, better able to understand the feelings that he was experiencing as a seventeen-year-old. The song is constructed atypically, when considering pop song formulae. There is no discernible verse – chorus – verse structure. One can break the song down, in structure, as follows: verse 1, verse 2 (shorter), refrain 1, verse 3, refrain 2, verse 4 (shorter), chorus (refrain 3). Fender has a solo writing credit, and the song was produced by regular collaborator Bramwell Bronte. In terms of considering the song as a 'pop' song, it is atypical not only for its structure, but also as it was not immediately popular and because it is a singer-songwriter's personal reflections, written in the first person. That is not to say such songs have not been popular previously. Of course, the history of popular music is littered with singer-songwriter reflective songs, such as 'The Way I Am' by Eminem, 'You Oughta Know' by Alanis Morissette, 'Look Back in Anger' by David Bowie and 'Masters of War' by Bob Dylan. However, in terms of popularity, this was Fender's fifteenth single release, and first to break into the UK Top 40. Therefore, whilst there had been a favourable reception from the public and from music critics to his first LP *Hypersonic Missiles* (2019), which reached number one in the UK albums chart, 'Seventeen Going Under' [Single] was more of a surprise hit – in terms of popularity. *Seventeen Going Under* [Album] (2021) also reached the top of the UK albums chart, but the single was not an obviously 'pop' hit, at least initially. The single is a good example of the diversity and differences that exist across the corpus of popular music songs, highlighting that not all songs follow typically 'pop' formulaic structures, themes, or even paths to popularity.

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[20] See 'Seventeen Going Under Official Charts' [Online]. Available at: https://www.officialcharts.com/search/singles/seventeen-going-under/ [Accessed: 2 March 2023].
[21] See 'Seventeen Going Under (Song)' [Online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventeen_Going_Under_(song) [Accessed 2 March 2023].

‘Seventeen Going Under’, as I have said, chronicles Fender’s life as a seventeen-year-old, reflecting on it ten years later, not always positively. Indeed, the song is melancholic in its portrayal of young Fender as an angry, frustrated, and wayward teenager, who older Fender has sought to understand over the intervening ten years. Whilst Fender expresses a level of regret to accompany the anger that he depicts from his youth, the regret is not always in response to having expressed anger and frustration. Indeed, at times in the song, the regret is at not having acted on the anger in given situations at the time. For example, Fender bemoans not retaliating to ‘the boy who kicked Tom's head in’ as he was ‘far too scared to hit him’ then but would ‘hit him in a heartbeat now’. This shows how both the initial episode of his friend being beaten up, and the frustration that ‘still bugs me now’ that he didn’t act on it, are causes of his feelings of anger which are focussed on the perpetrator but also directed at himself for being too scared in the moment. Fender’s feelings of anger and frustration, and the admission that he would react violently today if presented with the same scenario, portray a conflicted individual who has not come to terms either with his lack of action to protect his friend previously, nor his desire for retribution so many years later. This is problematic from a moral perspective as whilst the anger at seeing his friend have their head kicked in may be morally justifiable, the desire for delayed aggressive retaliation could not be morally justified.

All this said, via the lyrics and through interview quotes from Fender, he acknowledges that he wrote the song as a means to explain himself and the emotions that he was experiencing as a seventeen-year-old that he did not fully understand or was able to reflect on at the time. Through a more reflective voice, one that has matured to some degree, Fender acknowledges that ‘the thing with anger / It begs to stick around’. Anger can consume you and last significant periods of time if left unresolved. Whilst there is no direct comparison between virtuous emotions in terms of the lengths of time on experiences them for, the inference by Fender, here, is that anger is one emotion that can take hold of you and endure if not reconciled appropriately.

Indeed, Fender mentions at two points in ‘Seventeen’ that anger ‘lingers’ and ‘sticks around’. By this he means that, in his experience, if you cannot ‘let go’ of the anger by coming to terms with the events in some form of reconciliation, then the feelings stay, maybe not being felt and experienced every day, but will resurface at some point in the future and take hold of you. Even in the instance that Fender alludes to in ‘Seventeen’, where his friend has been beaten up in the past, Fender remains angry with the culprit and speaks of retaliating, even in a song that seeks to rationalise and reflect on anger and frustration in a mature manner. For Fender, the memory of his friend being beaten up, and Fender’s own inaction at the time, still bothers him, and, in spite of the period of time in which he has spent reflecting and coming to terms with his youthful frustrations, would still ‘hit him in a heartbeat, now’. This challenge, verging on hypocrisy, that resides within the lyrics – that youthful feelings of anger and frustration can be overcome through mature reflection and experience, but only if one ultimately can let go of the feelings of injustice that cause the anger – is a cause for greater discussion, particularly in terms of anger as a virtuous emotion.

As per Kristjánsson (2006; 2018), for anger to be virtuous, in short, the person experiencing the anger must feel some form of moral injustice for the feelings of anger to be considered 'justified'. Whilst there is evidence of moral injustice that Fender references directly and indirectly within 'Seventeen', the example of his friend being beaten up, Fender not responding at the time, being angry at the event so many years later and, more tellingly, being angry at himself for being 'far too scared to hit him' would not be examples of moral injustice. It is difficult to reconcile one act of physical violence with another, so Fender's resolution that he would 'hit him in a heartbeat, now' is morally unjust. Whilst the moral justification of his anger as a teenager is not something that Fender seeks to explore or advocate for in 'Seventeen', it provides fertile ground to discuss the facets that are required for anger to be considered as a virtuous emotion.

In particular to 'Seventeen', Fender references multiple examples from his youth of occasions in which he felt frustrated and angry, which paint an overall picture of a young person who was struggling to come to terms with their impending adulthood. Whilst these examples are particular to Fender, the song's popularity comes from its accessible and shared feelings that many people feel in response to different personal circumstances. That, as is a common tactic to engage listeners with much of the corpus of pop music, creates a generality and generalisability from the particular, and that generality allows listeners to recall their own particular lived experiences as they engage with the lyrics. In doing so, they may recall occasions in which they too have felt similar feelings of anger and frustration and, even, depression, as well as an empathy towards Fender for the things that he has gone through. This combination, or clustering, of feelings of anger *and* frustration, as are implied in the song's title in terms of 'going under', suggest an overwhelming sensation that uses a metaphor of drowning. In terms of emotions, and the philosophy of understanding them, this overwhelming sensation links to Deonna and Teroni's conceptualisation of the phenomenology of emotions (2012: 1). There, Deonna and Teroni cite everyday phrasings, such as 'in the grip of panic' and 'overcome with joy' as being suggestive not only that our emotions are passive reactions to external events and stimuli, but also to 'feel' one or more emotion, the experience must be immersive and disturbing (*ibid*.). Such disturbances need not always be unpleasant, but should affect our physical physiology in terms of, for example, heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, adrenaline and muscle relaxation/tension. Regarding 'Seventeen', Fender uses the music and his vocal performance more than the actual lyrics to disturb the listener's physiology, with the song utilising tempo changes to slow the middle verse down compared to the first and third verses, as well as repeating lines and changing the emphasis and stresses in each repetition to elicit engagement, empathy and emotional congruence with his listeners. That said, and whilst the music and vocal performances of pop songs are relevant, they fall outside of the scope of this thesis. In the lyrics, Fender does utilise disturbing and overwhelming metaphors as he speaks of his emotional states, and how he tried to mask his true feelings from his friends, family and the outside world. For example, he sings of being 'spent with nowt to offer' – empty of energy – as well as 'spirallin' in silence' and being 'buried in their humour / amongst the white noise' and 'drenched in cheap drink'. All of these are suggestive of an array of overwhelming emotional states that Fender is reflecting on.

Whilst 'Seventeen' covers a range and cluster of different emotions, it is Fender's anger and angst that appears most prominently within the lyrics, reaching a crescendo in verse two

when he sings 'See I spent my teens enraged / Spiralin' in silence'. Fender speaks of his 'teens', suggesting that such anger was not fleeting or episodic in the short sense of the word, but more long term, and complicit in overwhelming him to a point that he has written a song about 'going under'. In a manner that is unlike other emotions, foregrounding the idea that anger can 'linger' emphasises its negative and debilitating consequences. Fender sings that it 'claws you when you're down' and can 'fleece you of your beauty'. 'Seventeen', in its title and throughout its lyrics, is an admission that Fender was struggling during his late-teenage years, not just through the anecdotes that he depicts, but generally with coming to terms with his impending adulthood and associated independence and responsibilities. Fender depicts how the negative emotion of anger consumed him at the time and still remains with him in some capacity so many years later. Emotionally, when negative events occur, Fender's reflection is that they become harder to deal over time in any rational way. This explains the metaphor that anger 'claws' him when he is already in a low mood. He also describes his mother as being 'encumbered' as she 'cries on the floor' following the DWP stopping her benefits and her inability to carry on working. This allows both an insight into Fender's family situation, as well as explicitly referencing an additional personal link for Fender's anger. In terms of justified anger, it is this example that Fender includes in 'Seventeen' that can be seen to be morally justified.

Whilst the full circumstances of Fender's mother's situation are not laid bare in the lyrics, Fender has spoken about them openly via interviews.[22] Whilst, as I have said already in this thesis, such contextual information is not necessary in terms of considering the ethical value of lyrics, but it does help explain some of the metaphors and the extent to which, in 'Seventeen', Fender was feeling emotionally 'spent'. As Deonna and Teroni (2012) establish, emotions are reactions to external factors and events, both in how we experience them and how we speak about those emotional experiences. Here, Fender emphasises through repetition 'the debt, the debt, the debt' that his family are in when his mother is rendered unable to work and without state benefits. This is something that at seventeen one would be aware of, but probably not in its entirety, so it is through Fender's inclusion of his mother's voice ('She said') that another character is brought into the lyric in verse three. Fender moves on to highlight the difference between him seeing his mother as a person, whilst the 'DWP see a number', which, even without any additional context, alludes to his feelings around the circumstances that lead to his mother crying 'on the floor encumbered' and brings about the final lines of the lyrics, as they culminate in the song's title 'I'm seventeen going under'. In terms of moral justification, the listener strongly empathises with Fender's circumstances, that his mother is in a particular predicament, which is affecting Fender to the point where he is considering breaking the law and selling drugs ('I thought about shifting gear'). We are empathetic to Fender's plight and whilst selling drugs would not constitute a morally justifiable outcome, it does evidence Fender's feelings of desperation and helplessness, which are further enhanced through the song's soaring musical culmination and Fender's searing vocal performance.

Fender is inconsistent with the voice that he uses in 'Seventeen', which gives an impression of his muddled state of mind, although it is straightforward to untangle and navigate when

[22] 'Sam Fender Breaks Down New Album *Seventeen Going Under*' [Online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmBwCzsFlB8 [Accessed 19 May 2023].

considering the lyrics in detail. Where Fender formally refers to his mother's voice through 'she said' in verse three, he is less explicit when referring to how other people perceive him at the end of verse two ('Oh God, the kid's a dab hand / Canny chanter, but he looks sad / God, the kid looks so sad'). Here, Fender is the 'kid', and he is referring to how other's see him within three lines of having referenced himself in the first person, 'A mirrored picture of my old man'. Here, and as we move to consider the point raised in verse one about anger and the removal of beauty, we can consider the connotations of Fender using a 'mirror' metaphor. Whilst the voice within the lyrics does shift, the meaning and intention is always clear and reflective of the strength of emotion that Fender is feeling. In referencing the 'mirrored picture', Fender is more nuanced than simply suggesting that he looks like his father physically. The use of 'mirror' is suggestive that he is reflective of his father, rather than exactly alike. Such a metaphor gives room for Fender's personality, both in terms of his appearance to others and through the lyrics of 'Seventeen', by which I mean that the descriptions Fender uses of 'cheap drink and snide fags', 'a dab hand', 'canny chanter, but he looks sad' emphasies both the assumed similarities to his father as well as the differences. Also, in terms of beauty, Fender's descriptions are not typically beautiful.

Fender's linking of 'anger' and (lack of) 'beauty', in that anger dissolves beauty is an interesting point. We can see through Paris's work on moral beauty, for example, that morally unjustified anger may be conceived of as an 'ugly' character trait, but, by extension, morally justified anger may be conceived of as morally beautiful. This, of course, is not Paris's argument (see Paris, 2019), but an application of it to attempt to understand Fender's lyrics and their ethical value.

Anger is an emotion that we feel in response to something, but in holding on to it, we choose to continue living with anger and frustration. This can go in different ways – morally and amorally (or immorally) – as Fender depicts. Morally, anger at the perceived lack of support and injustice that a son is unable to support their mother when they are unable to continue working, but he is conflicted – as many teens experience – for example, at still wanting to act with violence in retaliation to his friend's assaulter. The lyric serves as a strong example of how pop songs can present narratives and scenarios that serve to demonstrate the circumstances and variables that affect how we feel and experience the same emotion at different times, in different ways, for different reasons. Fender writes from his mid-twenties, looking back and reflecting on his own experiences of anger, depression and despair. Calling both the single and his album 'Seventeen Going Under' is both a typical pop tactic of naming the album after the lead single but also reflects the whole album's content as an inward consideration of his childhood and how it shaped who he is. 'Writing was therapy before I got therapy…A lot of things that you pass off as insignificant parts of your life end up becoming significant parts of your character. Therapy gave me the tools to articulate what was going on in my life as a kid and to understand how that has affected me and why I am the way I am in certain situations.' (Fender, 2021b). In foregrounding the importance of reflection (through song writing and therapy), Fender acknowledges its link in practice with character development. The songs are written for consumption, to be heard, and so it would not be a stretch to say that as Fender has found writing the songs therapeutic, so listeners can benefit in terms of their character development if they reflect in a similarly meaningful and deliberative way on the lyrics.

## Chapter Five: An Educational Application – using pop song lyrics to improve virtue literacy

### 5.1 Introduction

#### *5.1.i Aims*

This chapter focuses on the educational potential that I claim pop lyrics hold for moral progress and moral education in the classroom. In it, I will detail and defend the ways in which pop lyrics can be used to help students develop a virtue literacy in thinking about the virtues and virtuous emotions, and their application to their own lives. The chapter sets out how virtue literacy is defined across academic and educational fields and how existing definitions differ, where there is synergy between definitions, and where concepts and components are different. In light of these differences, and an overall lack of clarity across existing concepts, I present my own definition of virtue literacy that seeks to extend and improve the concept from existing definitions.

I define virtue literacy as the *developmentally acquired capacity to understand virtues and their application.* It is distinct from the virtues themselves and does not need emotional affect to inform or guide its application. Indeed, virtue literacy does not require any emotional component to be developed, in terms of affect of the individual, but includes an understanding that virtuous action will evoke one or more emotions. This difference is between virtue literacy, as comprehension and understanding, and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as action. In short, virtue literacy is the concept by which one may develop the vocabulary and comprehension to understand virtue, as well as being able to notice when a situation may require a virtuous response, evoke an emotion and reason through an appropriate virtuous response to a dilemma, but stops short of engaging in an emotional response. This is different to the concept of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, which is the integrative strength of practising virtue wisely, knowing what a virtue-appropriate response is, and enacted decision-making.

This definition of virtue literacy seeks to solidify the plausible aspects of existing definitions and make explicit the acknowledgement of virtue emotion – a component not always included in other definitions of virtue literacy (see work by the Jubilee Centre, which has been inconsistent on whether emotion is a component or not, Jubilee Centre, 2022). I contend that this consideration that is key to virtue literacy in terms of understanding our own emotions and how they guide our actions and behaviours. This emotional component is a neglected or unclear component of current concepts of virtue literacy. Given the arguments that I have made in Chapter Three regarding the connections and synergies between emotions and virtues and how virtue ethics sees the emotions as integral to our ability to reason morally, including an explicit reference to emotions in any definition of virtue literacy seems essential. Then, as pop lyrics (and other narrative art) hold valuable emotional content and emotional affect, they are perfectly suitable for moral education purposes in the classroom and in other educational settings.

Further, I contend that virtue literacy is best developed through a process of meaningful reflection, something which is acknowledged in research on character, but is absent from existing definitions of virtue literacy. This focus on reflection is important in seeing the development of virtue literacy as an ongoing process, which is refined and habituated over time, not acquired through a single lesson or educational programme. Indeed, reflection improves our ability to reason through scenarios and dilemmas – moral or otherwise – learn from examples of others as well as learning from our own efforts. I put forward that where

reflection is already an important educational principle and skill that we encourage students to develop – for example through keeping a journal during any aspect of training – it can and should be linked more explicitly with virtue literacy, to provide a more coherent and holistic understanding.

Through considering the different and sometimes contradictory nature of the conceptions and definitions of virtue literacy that exist already, my principal aim in presenting this new definition is to draw the similarities and synergies of the definitions together, highlight the differences, and show how current definitions link with the ethical value and educational potential for moral development that I have already described of pop lyrics. In doing so, my case is twofold; firstly, to argue the case for utilising pop lyrics in the classroom as tools for increasing virtue literacy levels of pupils, as virtue literacy is conceived here in terms of components of virtue perception, virtue knowledge and understanding and virtue reasoning. I argue that in terms of containing references – implicit and explicit – to virtue language and dilemma scenarios, pop lyrics are well placed to offer insights into moral experiences, expression of emotions and – through poetic techniques of metaphor and rhyme – the presentation of moral content in accessible and catchy ways. Where current and modern definitions of virtue literacy have often been drawn from research trials that have used stories and poetry as tools for moral development in the classroom, so I contend that other forms of narrative art – beginning with pop lyrics – have often been overlooked and should be given more educational attention.

The second dimension I wish to draw attention to is with regard to offering bridges between the differences of opinion on how virtue literacy is conceived. Some conceptions of virtue literacy seek a more applied, practical dimension, with students encouraged to demonstrate virtuous action in their lives. This can be developed as they apply definitions and conceptions of virtue language, and see the benefit in living virtuously, governed by a developing notion of *phronesis*. The examples of virtue practice that are contained in narratives often provide students with examples of how to live virtuously or provide tangible scenarios that students can seek to emulate/avoid, providing them with confidence and feeling better equipped to navigate moral dilemmas and ethical scenarios that they confront day-to-day. Where there are differences of opinion on whether virtue literacy can and should incorporate more applied and practical application – virtue action and practice – my focus, here, is on providing a robust conceptual clarification and possible educational implications for using pop songs to develop virtue literacy.

It is notoriously difficult both to measure and to encourage any notion of practical application of virtue action in an educational context. Studies of virtue literacy have regarded educational interventions which are used inconsistently in the classroom – one to two lessons per week over a four to six-week period – and seek to measure both acquired knowledge and understanding of virtue terms as well as students' abilities to apply virtue concepts in real life immediately after the conclusion of the teaching intervention (see Arthur *et al*., 2014; Pike and Lickona, 2021; Kristjánsson *et al*., 2017). Such programmes have blazed trails both in terms of creating articulate and defined definitions for virtue literacy and for reasserting the character-based benefits that the arts can have in schools. However, such studies were met with challenges, limitations and external variables that influenced the immediate assessment of virtue literacy levels of students. My work seeks to refine and extend existing theoretical frameworks and definitions and advocate for extending the scope of the corpuses of artworks for use in the classroom to include pop

lyrics. I acknowledge the challenges that these three specific projects faced, as a justification for my work.

At its core, I contend that existing theoretical frameworks have, at best, been inconsistent in their inclusion of an emotional component to virtue literacy (in understanding that virtuous action evokes an emotional response), and at worst have ignored this emotional aspect. I have cited work by the Jubilee Centre, above, as one of those that have offered inconsistent accounts. This may be because the Jubilee Centre, as a research centre, has multiple researchers and voices within it, and that no consistent definition could be agreed, or it could be that as new research was undertaken, so the understanding of how the components of virtue interact is still forming. It may have, simply, been easier to ignore any emotional component to virtue literacy (see Davison *et al*., 2016: 16-17; Arthur, Harrison and Davison, 2015).

Beyond this inconsistent consideration of virtue emotion as a component of virtue literacy, further challenges that projects investigating virtue literacy have faced can be summarised in three areas. Firstly, in terms of methodology, studies that have sought to compare any virtue literacy growth via a pre-intervention baseline assessment and a post-intervention assessment are limited to only two census points, taken close together (c.6-weeks apart). Therefore, interpretation of causality is both limited and temporal, as effects may well wane after the intervention has been completed. No follow up work exists to either assess student virtue literacy levels at an additional post-intervention date, nor follow up with the participating schools to determine whether the interventions were continued with outside of the study. As such, where the first challenge with regard to temporality of the intervention, the second challenge can be summarised as generalisability, in that without any follow up with schools or participants, the ingoing growth of student virtue literacy cannot be claimed with any confidence. Thirdly, where studies did seek to triangulate data from students, teachers and parents, which sought to mitigate for some of the previously stated challenges, the 'range' of narrative art used across existing studies is somewhat limited. Largely, existing empirical studies have only sought to use canonised stories, poems and/or drama (plays), biographies of famous 'virtuous' figures from history, or fiction from a specific author. To date, very few contemporary narratives have been used, the impact of modern narrative art, including pop lyrics, on virtue literacy of young people is largely untested. As such, the third challenge can be summarised as relating to limitations of the types of narrative art used to test virtue literacy.

### *5.1.ii Existing educational interventions for virtue literacy*

This does not mean that such examples have all been negative examples of research. Indeed, many have had great success, and indeed offer encouragement for further research to be conducted in the area. The *Knightly Virtues* project (Arthur *et al*., 2014) was a groundbreaking quasi-experimental study, seeking not only to triangulate data collected from key protagonists in a child's character development, but also using a range of data collection methods in the study. Findings from the study allowed authors to put forward concrete definitions and conceptions of virtue literacy and sought to measure it, through utilisation of bespoke instruments, as well as observations of changes in participant behaviours – in other words, seeking to capture virtue action in practice. The *Narnian Virtues* project sought to do something similar, building on the insights provided by *Knightly Virtues*, working with a broader age range of students, focussed on three novels by C.S. Lewis. The project found success in making a strong case for using literature for developing

character and linking this case to C.S. Lewis's critical works. Whilst the focus on three specific novels, all from the same author limits the generalisability of findings to literature more broadly, the focus on Lewis' Narnia stories showcases how particular authors prioritise virtue in language and theme in a similar way to the case studies that I have presented in Chapter Four.

Work by colleagues on *Gratitude and Related Character Virtues* (see Kristjánsson *et al*., 2017) not only examined the inter-relations between gratitude and other virtues in a novel and creative way. Whilst findings were limited from the study, it adds to the broader fields of work focussed on developing effective partnerships between families, schools and communities for positive character development and how handbooks form part of school-based interventions to engage students in character-building activities, inspired by those used in *Knightly Virtues*.

I argue that whilst many educational interventions that seek to develop virtue literacy do so with an ultimate end goal of positively impacting virtue action and practice– often attempted through use of narrative artwork –that virtue action and practice should not be seen as a part of definitions of virtue literacy. This argues against early Jubilee Centre conceptions of virtue literacy, as seen in the *Knightly Virtues* (e.g., Arthur *et al*., 2014; Davison *et al*., 2016). Instead, my proposed definition of virtue literacy foregrounds the need to identify and perceive situations that require an ethical response, acquire a comprehension and understanding of virtue terms that can make our ability to describe both our emotional responses to scenarios and content that resides within artworks and our own emotional and ethical feelings and actions in response. Finally, where using narrative art in the classroom can aid the ultimate development of virtue action and practice is through understanding the notion of 'practice' as rehearsal, utilising the safe space that the classroom provides, the open discussions that can be elicited, and the advice and guidance of teachers and peers (as well as parents and guardians at home). This is in preparation for an ultimate application to real life scenarios and can help set more realistic expectations both of students and of the impact of educational interventions, in making aims seem more achievable in the short term.

Further, it is important not to limit any conception of virtue literacy to only regarding content of narrative artworks, i.e., so only regard content of an ethical value, without considering the emotional and moral affect that artworks have on audiences. Some research trials have attempted to integrate this into measurements of virtue literacy, albeit in limited and somewhat unsuccessful ways (see for example work by Pike and Lickona, 2021 on *Narnian Virtues*). However, where there are conceptions of virtue literacy – empirical and theoretically grounded – that regard an emotional affective dimension, I believe that this is important to maintain in continued work that considers the ethical value of narrative art. See for example Kristjánsson *et al*. (2020), who seek to consider the gap between virtue literacy and virtue reasoning and action. Whilst this project did not utilise narrative artworks, it did develop a four-componential model of *phronesis* that foregrounds moral/virtue emotion as one of the components. This work looking at the components of *phronesis*, as 'an intellectual meta-virtue that guides the moral virtues' (Kristjánsson *et al*.,

2020: 8).[23] Kristjánsson and colleagues, building on Kristjánsson's other works on virtuous emotions and identity, contend that the moral emotions offer one possible bridge between virtue knowledge and virtue action. Whilst I contend that virtue action should reside outside the scope of conceptions and definitions of virtue literacy, it seems logical, then, to include components of moral and virtue emotion (see also Kristjánsson, 2007; 2010; 2018).

I recall a phrase used by Bradley (2017) in the introduction to his *The Poetry of Pop*; that of 'betterment' and argue that it is an apt and helpful term that brings us from 'mere' consumption of popular music for pleasure purposes, to something more deliberate and meaningful by way of educational application and engagement. In neo-Aristotelian moral development, 'betterment' is not a widely used term, however, I contend that it is helpful to enable the definition of virtue literacy that I present, as it encompasses a notion of growth and achievement, as well as one of reflection, to recognise one's moral betterment.

I conclude this chapter by establishing my more comprehensive definition and conception of virtue literacy that seeks to build on what already exists, whilst making explicit some of the limitations and dangers of seeking to incorporate all components of virtue that I have referenced, above. I contend that pop lyrics are both an underused source of ethical value, but also a useful tool for teachers seeking to develop the virtue literacy of students, as I define it. This is where advances can be made in the field, and where I contend that researchers can find more agreement on how best to conceive of virtue literacy, and where pop lyrics can offer educators and scholars a plethora of examples for emotion-rich, ethically valuable content that can aid the development of virtue literacy. In addition, the benefits of using pop lyrics, familiar to all students and teachers.

### *5.1.iii A justification for focussing on virtue literacy*

I have not yet justified why I seek in this chapter to focus on virtue literacy, and virtue literacy with regard to the overall ethical value of pop lyrics. I have introduced this chapter by asserting that definitions and conceptions of virtue literacy that exist are deficient and under-explored. In presenting a new definition, I seek to bring greater clarity and coherence to the term that can benefit future studies into how it is developed. In addition, I seek to engage scholars of moral education in why it is important to consider the emotional component of virtue literacy, given how relevant virtue emotion is to bridging the gap between knowledge and action. Finally, I see it as imperative to clarify how the role of reflection can help provide greater depth to one's virtue literacy levels. This study brings ultimately considers how pop lyrics are ideally suited to investigate all three of these and their educational application.

There are several existing studies – theoretical and empirical – have sought to show how narrative art can develop virtue literacy. David Carr (2005; 2023) has written about the theoretical contribution of literature (poetry) to the educational cultivation of what he refers to as 'moral virtue, feeling and emotion' (Carr, 2005: 137). Such education, for Carr, is a broad cultural 'initiation', rather than a narrow academic training. Such a broad conception of education is morally focussed, and is guided by our emotions, which also

[23] A focus on *phronesis* goes beyond the scope of this thesis, however, it is important to understand the Aristotelian presentation of the virtues as being, in themselves, componential in nature, however they, then, are components of one's overall character, with each virtue guided by the meta-virtue of *phronesis*.

need educating. Carr's theoretical argument refers to works of literature and other art both engage our emotions as readers/listeners and include affective and emotional content which can be used by educators to guide students. Carr, though, sticks to drawing from canonised and classical literature, rather than modern, popularised art. I contend that it is possible to use much of Carr's arguments for using classic literature with pop lyrics. Whilst I am not comparing their literary value, as I argued in Chapter Two, the ethical value that many pop lyrics hold is often overlooked and deserves greater attention.

Carr does not refer to 'virtue literacy', however, he does present an educationally applied argument for the use of narrative art for moral cultivation. Where subsequent studies have introduced virtue literacy more formally, I argue that their conception, definition and measurement of it are deficient. That is not to say that studies such as *Knightly Virtues* and *Narnian Virtues* are not valuable in their own right – for they have broken much new and valuable ground. However, criticisms of some of the 'thin' nature of the narratives used, and of the measurement tools deployed, are explored below.

In taking a term such as virtue literacy, rather than restricting the study to only one that considers individual virtues or virtuous emotions – such as gratitude and anger as presented previously – my intention is to demonstrate the educational potential that emotion and virtue-rich narratives such as pop lyrics can have. In considering the conception and definition of virtue literacy, and in presenting a new definition, I believe that my case for pop lyrics as useful tools for moral development is better evidenced. The array and variety of ethically valuable content that resides within pop lyrics, the variety of expression, form and structure, and the mass popularity of pop as a genre position pop lyrics as unique tools for the development of virtue literacy in students. Pop lyrics encourage reflection, engage our emotions, and cover ethically valuable and often challenging themes, all of which, I argue, are components that virtue literacy covers and educators seek to build.

I contend that this position, as works of narrative art that both present ethical and emotional content and affect listeners emotionally and morally, do so in a range of accessible and easily consumable forms that allow people of all ages to listen, analyse and discuss content and experience of reading and listening to lyrics. I offer examples of lyrics that I argue do so and reflect a more comprehensive conception of virtue literacy that incorporates an emotional dimension.

### *5.1.iv Pop Music and Education*

I have already set out the different value types that pop music holds, of which I charge pop lyrics as often holding ethical value through both the ethical and emotional content that pop lyrics often cover, the dilemmas they discuss, and the theoretical ability to impact our own moral understanding and moral progress. I contend that this moral understanding and moral progress falls under what is called virtue literacy in the wider field of character education. Whilst there is a growing amount of work that seeks to define virtue literacy, there is very little, if any, scholarly work that engages with pop lyrics specifically as tools for moral development. Where pop music is discussed across the fields of philosophy, education and aesthetics, it is largely contained to discussions of the aesthetic value of pop and how the aesthetic and ethical features of pop interact to impact its overall value (see Stone, 2016; Frith, 1996). This thesis has sought to bring together discussions of the value of pop, with consideration of how and where pop lyrics engage virtuous emotions, both in

terms of content and in terms of affect, and to channel those discussions in order to focus on the educational potential of pop lyrics, in terms of moral education and moral progress of students. I contend that this is a unique element of this thesis.

That said, I do not contend that pop lyrics are not already utilised in mainstream schooling, or in other educational settings. Indeed, often in non-mainstream, alternative provision, pop music is used as a means through which to engage disaffected, marginalised and at-risk young people, through a variety of educational programmes, of which I will reference a small number below. For example, here, I cite the 'MAC Makes Music' programme run by the Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) in Birmingham. This programme provides 'innovative music making opportunities for children and young people with limited access to music provision.'[24] The programme claims to be outcome-based, focussed on seven explicit outcomes, those of 'Quality', 'Inclusive Practice', 'Creative Skills', 'Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy', 'Communication and Social Skills', 'Youth Voice' and 'Progression Routes'. Whilst there is no explicit reference to moral development, character, or virtue literacy, as such, reference to such virtue terms as 'empathy', 'reflection', 'social and emotional' learning, as well as more implicit references to virtue literacy through the use of encouragement, peer-support, engagement and expression demonstrates that the programme seeks to go further than instructive teaching of the processes by which ones produces music. I contend that such a programme is both one which sees the implicit educational potential of pop music – and other genres of music – and that using music as a means through which education may engage young people, can assist with their social and moral development.

This particular example, of course, goes beyond the scope of this thesis in that it is an immersive programme in which participants explore all aspects of music production, not just lyric analysis or lyric writing, nor an explicit focus on virtue literacy, but it shows the influence that music has over young people and how it can be used to engage students in other educational disciplines. It is also one example of many educationally beneficial programmes that immerse young people in popular music. As I will cover later in this thesis, the educational programmes and scholarly research that use pop music cover notions of identity, popular and celebrity culture, music education, and many others that lie outside the scope of this thesis. That does not mean that they are not relevant (see for example Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015; Harvey, Mendick and Allen, 2018). Such works focus on pop culture, celebrity and self-identity, and consider notions of aspiration and future-mindedness that can easily be linked to moral development and the societal, political and cultural parameters in which one's virtues can be developed. Similarly, work by Simon Frith (1988) and Charles Hamm (1995) on the sociological impact and roots of pop music aid our wider contextualisation and appreciation for using pop lyrics in the classroom.

### *5.1.v Virtue Literacy*

I will outline below the different definitions of virtue literacy that exist in the scholarly literature, although they are both few and diverse. I begin with the main Jubilee Centre definitions that have been used across educational research with thousands of young people, nationally. These definitions draw from an Aristotelian virtue ethics theory that sees

[24] 'MAC Makes Music – About' [Online]. Available at: https://macbirmingham.co.uk/mac-makes-music/about-1 [Accessed 1 December 2022].

character as comprised of the virtues – which can be categorised across the domains of intellectual, moral, civic and performance – and that each virtue is made up of components, each of which can be developed in part, or through teaching and habituation. The main and recently updated Jubilee Centre (2022) definition is one that articulates this most clearly, identifying 'virtue perception', 'virtue knowledge and understanding' and 'virtue reasoning' as the primary components (Jubilee Centre, 2022: 9). Its first iteration introduced the notion of a virtue-led literacy, in terms of combining a comprehension and application – and that simply understanding virtue terms was insufficient, but that to be virtue literate requires a developing ability to apply such terms to one's own situation and seeing a value in doing so. There have been three iterations of the Jubilee Centre *Framework* in which virtue literacy is defined, with the most updated definition defining it as an amalgam of the three components listed above.

Becoming virtue literate requires some virtue reasoning, which is developed through acquiring wisdom or judgement. 'This emphasis on acquiring judgement must be reflective and so allow for the empowerment of the ethical self through autonomous decision-making.' (Jubilee Centre, 2022: 10). This acknowledgment that reflection is a required part of becoming virtue literate is alluded to in the main definition of virtue literacy that exists, but does not do so with any guidance on how to reflect, or how reflection can improve reasoning and decision-making.

The definition itself does not extend further but is presented as part of a wider case to encourage schools to provide meaningful opportunities for children to 'exercise the virtues in practice as well as encourag[ing] a rich discourse of virtue language, understanding and reasoning.' (*Ibid*.: 11). This offers a helpful baseline from which to build a more comprehensive and nuanced definition of virtue literacy, as I will introduce below.

A more nuanced definition requires a more complex conception of virtue literacy. This is, in chief part, because I contend that existing conceptions are 'narrow' in their conceptions, i.e. that they ignore or omit relevant components that I seek to include, such as emotions and reflection. Further, they are 'narrow' in that the conceptions that they do include are underexplored; they are thin in their presentation of components such as virtue reasoning and virtue action and practice. Definitions presented in the *Knightly Virtues* project (Arthur *et al*., 2014) and the Jubilee Centre (2022: 10) are narrow in how they present the components of virtue perception and virtue action and practice. I state this as a limitation of both definitions, in that they present each component under simple and brief definitions, which can be a strength, but can narrow or limit the extent to which they are applied in practice. It makes sense, and is a strength of existing definitions, that virtue literacy requires students to actively perceive situations that require a virtuous response, rather than solely defining 'literacy' in terms of definitional ability and comprehension of terms. However, such perceptions require context, often acquired through practice, but not always guaranteed at the point of perception. As such, simply stating that virtue perception is a primary component of virtue literacy fails to acknowledge the context in which perceptions are accurately shaped and formed.

Of course, they are best shaped through practice, so it makes sense, at least in principle, that virtue action has been seen as a component of virtue literacy. Yet, I contend that it is better treated as an outcome of virtue literacy, particularly due to the hesitancy surrounding whether it is or isn't a component. It is understandable that scholars have been divided on whether to include virtue action as a necessary component of virtue literacy,

given the identification of the moral 'gap' that exists between a comprehension of the virtues and living them. Recognising instances of how and when the virtues may collide or conflict, whether that be from narratives, or in our own lived experiences, takes time, takes practice, and takes training. As Kristjánsson and colleagues have noted recently, simply knowing what the virtuous thing to do in each dilemma does not necessarily guarantee that one will do it (see Kristjánsson *et al*., 2021; Darnell *et al*., 2019). Therefore, identifying and demanding that to be virtue literate requires one to act virtuously in practice seems to rush over the educational instruction required. As Karen Bohlin writes in the Foreword to the *Knightly Virtues* research, 'Virtue literacy, like numerical literacy, language acquisition, reading and writing literacy, requires context, instruction and practice.' (Bohlin, in Arthur *et al*., 2014: 4).

However, the programme itself sought to 'make positive changes to behaviour', i.e. identifying virtue action as a required component of virtue literacy (*ibid*.: 5). Of course, most well-founded educational programmes seek to have a positive impact on students in a practical and applied sense, but, one must remain realistic how much influence can be had over a limited time period, particularly where meaningful reflection has not been identified as a required component – that is self-reflection over and above the pedagogical techniques of incorporating time for reflection in the classroom, where one is ultimately trained to reflect on the content and meaning of lyrics over extended periods of time, as well as in the moment when listening to them. The definition of virtue literacy that I offer by way of revision to existing definitions incorporates the components of virtue emotion and reflection, whilst omitting virtue action, as I see this as an outcome of becoming virtue literate, rather than being a component of it. In excluding virtue action, it may seem that my definition appears narrower than existing ones (particularly of Jubilee Centre, 2022), however, I am advocating for virtue emotion and critical reflection being incorporated as meaningful components in their own rights, which widens existing definitions, or at least makes them more explicit.

Deciding what to do from a virtue ethical standpoint does not demand a fully developed comprehension of the language of virtue to make an ethical decision. The purpose of virtue literacy is, in educational terms, to help young people better understand the actions that they and others take, to provide a language for describing such actions and to develop an appreciation of why people act virtuously, so to ultimately seek opportunities to do so ourselves. Therefore, virtue literacy is not simply an activity of grasping definitions of virtue terms, but about understanding and then appreciating the value of virtue as both an educationally worthwhile activity in and of itself, and a part of a pursuit of living a flourishing life. That is not to say that virtue literacy and its constituent components should be seen in any narrow sense. Indeed, I seek to explore a broader understanding of virtue reasoning, and indeed of virtue literacy overall, than has been presented in the field to date. Where I broaden the conception of virtue reasoning is through the inclusion of virtue emotion and virtue reflection as part of one's overall virtue literacy. One does not reason in isolation. One feels emotions at times of conflict and other ethically challenging scenarios in the pursuit of right action. Therefore, any conception of virtue literacy (the understanding of what it takes to act virtuously) should, by definition, recognise that one's emotions will affect their decision making. Further, where we can time to reflect both during and after such reasoning and virtuous action, doing so can help school one in the emotions that they feel, when they feel them, and how they shape one's decision making.

### *5.1.vi Virtue literacy and pop*

Following an establishment of the educationally worthwhile nature of developing virtue literacy, the chapter progresses to look at how pop lyrics and virtue literacy interact. I contend that there is a synergy between the ethical value that I have established that pop lyrics hold – especially where lyrics focus on a particular ethical dilemma or other ethical content – and a developing virtue literacy, that can be taught to young people in schools and other educational settings. Indeed, where practitioners do actively engage their students in developing both a comprehension of virtue language and ability to apply terms to their own moral development, so research tells us that young people learn best from using a combination of real-life scenarios and dilemmas combined with stories, exemplars, and other narratives drawn from works of art, literature, biographies, and so on (see for example Guttesen and Kristjánsson, 2022; Davison *et al*., 2016; Kristjánsson *et al*., 2017; Rest *et al*., 1999; Schlaefli, Rest and Thoma, 1985). There are many pop lyrics that reference a notion of living a flourishing life and the benefits of doing so, even if not by using the term. Pop music is overwhelmingly positive in presentation, utilising combinations of uptempo beats, warm and familiar melodies, and positive lyrics that seek to promote positive values, individual wellbeing, and overcoming adversity. Whilst not necessarily made explicit in the narrative of each song, verse or chorus, it is no stretch to extend such lyrics to an end goal that is in the pursuit of living a happy and worthwhile life. That may manifest in a multitude of different focuses, but many pop lyrics celebrate what can be achieved through developing good character, for example appreciating nature's beauty, e.g. 'Good Day Sunshine', The Beatles; or 'Let the Sun Shine', Labrinth, showing resilience and perseverance, e.g. 'I'm Still Standing', Elton John; or treading your own path and being happy doing so, e.g. 'Couldn't Be Better', Kelly Clarkson.

This is not exclusive to all pop lyrics, of course, as I have sought to acknowledge in previous chapters. There are whole sub-genres of popular music that embrace vicious content and themes, glorify vice and celebrate depravity. My case throughout has been that such lyrics can be embraced equally successfully – in terms of both ethical value and for developing virtue literacy – where practitioners use such lyrics as opportunities to discuss the language of vice as well as the language of virtue, consider real life applications and quandaries where the protagonist may be presented with a choice of actions, or where lyrical themes can be analysed and considered in relation to students' own experiences. Indeed, where following a neo-Aristotelian understanding of virtue, as this thesis does, the notion of Aristotle's Golden Mean is helpful in including both virtue and vice, with virtue sitting as the mean point between deficiency and excess. In other words, to be fully virtue literate, one needs to not only be *au fait* with an understanding of a given virtue but also with its excess and deficiency forms. Hip-hop and rap music regularly celebrates excess – of wealth, of success, or consumption – and both genres of music have grown exponentially on popularity over the past forty years. For example, songs such as 'Got Your Money' by ODB and Kelis, or 'Money, Cash, Hoes' by Jaz-Z and DMX, glorify the fortune that is assumed to come with fame, but also reflect the grifter and gangster mentality that permeates the heart of hip-hop music and culture and which puts making money in order to rise above one's sub-standard living conditions ('to get out') as the desired outcome of one's activities. Other areas to explore in such popular hip-hop lyrics are instances of inherent misogyny, derogatory and blasphemous language and whether a pursuit of money at all costs is desirable – all of which

require some understanding and appreciation of virtue and vice, reflection on the benefits of living a virtuous life and desire to seek opportunities to develop one's virtue literacy. I argue that pop lyrics are the best suited genre of narrative art that practitioners can access to engage students across a whole spectrum of themes related to virtue and vice.

It is worth noting two additional songs as examples that hip-hop lyrics are not all about vice, nor only about vice, and can be reflective and consider, here, the downside to fame and wealth, which is 'Mo Money Mo Problems' by the Notorious B.I.G. Again, in an educational context, such a lyric provides a tool for practitioners to engage students on the pitfalls of fame and fortune, and, as the Beatles famously sung, 'Money Can't Buy Me Love'. I will offer suggestions for how teachers may integrate pop lyrics into lessons in section 4.4, and discuss its application, but I am not condemning all hip-hop lyrics as vicious, nor am I prescribing how lyrics should be taught in schools. Indeed, some often provide virtuous insights. Equally, I have referenced the above songs to provide examples of how I see critical moral reflection is a vital component of virtue literacy, as I will expand upon. Both songs, presented completely differently, from different contexts, thirty-three years apart, have similar messages that the pursuit of money will not necessarily bring one happiness. Both lyrics offer reflections on the downsides to fame and fortune and offer insights into the feelings of the artists, how they felt at the time of writing, about their rise to popularity, commercial success, and the change in ways they lived their lives. Such consideration may not be achievable from an initial listening to each song in isolation, and studying them (and others) as part of dedicated focus to guiding critical reflection, or to the deliberative teaching of particular virtues or virtuous behaviours can help build virtue literacy levels in students in similar ways to using other narrative art such as stories and poetry, but also utilising content that is unique to pop.

This understanding of virtue literacy leads me to offer an amended definition of it to that which is stated by the Jubilee Centre, and in *Knightly Virtues*. I have added components of virtue emotion and meaningful reflection and omit virtue action and practice from virtue literacy. This definition is as follows: *virtue literacy is the developmentally acquired capacity to understand virtues and their application. It consists of a combination of inter-related components of virtue, these being virtue perception, virtue knowledge and understanding, virtue reasoning and virtue emotion. They are brought together through deliberative and meaningful critical reflection, which allow us to consciously notice when a virtue is required, holding an ability to express oneself in virtue terms, being able to make reasoned judgements regarding how to apply the virtues practically, and being aware that such reasoning is often supported by a virtue-relevant emotional response.*

### *5.1.vii Tensions between commercial pop music and educational application*

As well as introducing ways in which song lyrics may be utilised in the classroom, I will address potential tensions that exist between the commercial nature of popular music and serious educational application. I will do so by briefly considering recent philosophical work that considers different types of mass and commercial art and seeks to offer educational applications. Television shows often engage us emotionally, and even ethically, but how deeply and effectively they do so is debated. Paris (2023) considers how popular serialised television shows that comprehend vicious as well as virtuous content can provide ethically salient content for consideration. Whilst the characters presented in TV shows often appear

in multiple episodes, even series, that engage us for extended periods and span years of our lives, pop lyrics do almost the exact opposite, engaging us for mere minutes at a time. That does not need to be a negative drawback, though, as it can prove effective, educationally, as comparatively fleeting engagement when we listen to songs can be extended through close readings and extended study of songs in the classroom. Equally, the emotion and ethics-rich content that resides within many pop songs is refined and curated to be memorable, to become popular. Therefore, whilst I do not wish to force a false comparison between pop music and pop TV, there are ways in which the two can work together to present arguments for non-classical narrative art as being ethically beneficial.

I considered 'Seventeen Going Under' by Sam Fender in Chapter Four, as a song which considers notions of anger and injustice but has evoked feelings of empathy and support in listeners. Such feelings of empathy and acts of support for Fender have arisen quite naturally, without any educational study of the song required, however, I argue that a guided and reflective focus on songs such as 'Seventeen Going Under' can assist students in developing a virtue literacy that goes beyond study of individual virtues and emotions, particularly with regard to the more complete and comprehensive definition that I have offered above. Such an approach, I believe, can overcome tensions that exist between the perceived inferior nature of commercial and popularised art in terms of educational affect. This is not 'whataboutery', but if we can take seriously the mass consumed art of television programmes and blockbuster films filled with depictions of vice, blasphemy and sin, and find them useful for our moral development, then there is certainly space for pop lyrics to be treated as educationally beneficial.

Indeed, the depiction of vice and sin is often a useful dimension and aspect of pop music, as it allows teachers, as moral educators, to not only focus on the language of virtue, but to explore the language and depictions of vice, help students navigate dilemmas that may indulge in vice, and ultimately strive for living positive and flourishing lives.

In terms of young people's impressions of music, generally, as being an influence on living a good life, this author has previously found music to be a positive influence (see Arthur *et al*., 2017). This is one of very few research studies that has sought to link the external factors that young people are influenced by with conception of living a good life.

There have been studies that focus on content-related social effects of pop music, with studies using lyrics, music and music videos to investigate correlations between consuming pop music and other outcomes, usually negative. These have included studies that have investigated youth perceptions of how pop influences behaviour, whether pop lyrics specifically have positive or negative influence on young people (Leming, 1987), links between 'hostile' or 'aggressive' pop music and listener levels of hostility (Wanamaker and Reznikoff, 1989) and whether watching music videos containing erotic and/or violent content affected participant mood, arousal and attitudes towards females (Peterson and Pfost, 1989). Such studies have embraced the commercial consumption of pop as a positive, rather than see it as a negative, at least in both educational and research terms. By this, I mean that the fact that pop music holds such high commercial value demands that it is given appropriate scholarly consideration in music education fields, as well as cultural studies fields. Where studies have focussed on the media perception that pop music negatively influences young people (in terms of mood, behaviours and outlook on particular subjects), findings are mixed. From the studies cited above, there is no conclusive evidence that pop music, lyrics or videos do or do not harm young people. Where studies have found

that youth exposure to violent or erotic lyrics and videos negatively impact youth attitudes on a particular area, there are also studies that show that pop music has inconsistent or even no negative impact on such areas (see Christenson and Roberts, 2004: Ch7).

## 5.2 Exploring Definitions of Virtue Literacy

### *5.2.i A lack of unified agreement*

In addition to what I have explored in terms of virtue literacy in 4.1.v, above, it is necessary to dedicate this separate section to exploring the existing definitions of virtue literacy and better understanding of how a lack of a unified agreement on the components of virtue literacy is helpful in terms of considering the educational application of using pop lyrics as tools for moral and ethical development.

The term 'virtue literacy' is not one that holds a settled or consistent definition across the literature, nor even within the research centre where it first originated. It is a term that only came to light in the past decade, even if the academic study of character and virtues, the impact of literature and narrative art on character development, and how a comprehension and understanding of the language of virtue comes from the discrete teaching of character dates back much further – one can track the links between character development and literature to Aristotle's *Poetics*. 'Virtue literacy' was first used as a term in the *Knightly Virtues* research (Arthur *et al*., 2014). The project sought to measure virtue literacy empirically, by exposing participants to classic narratives, re-told through a character and virtues focussed lens. The *Narnian Virtues* project that was inspired by *Knightly Virtues* (undertaken by different researchers at the University of Leeds) sought to build on its foundations through specific use of the works of C.S. Lewis (Pike, Nesfield and Lickona, 2015; Hart, Oliveira and Pike, 2020; Pike and Lickona, 2021).

As a formal and defined term, virtue literacy was first introduced by colleagues in the Jubilee Centre in 2014, through the research project *Knightly Virtues*, where it is defined explicitly as 'knowledge, understanding and satisfactory application of virtue terms, as distinct from the development of virtuous emotions or virtuous behaviours' (Davison *et al*., 2016: 17).[25] *Knightly Virtues* was a project which, in its title, described the work as having 'looked at the role of virtue literacy in the education of character through stories' (Arthur *et al*., 2014: 1). The project worked with 9-11-year olds in UK primary schools, delivering a bespoke teaching intervention focussed on particular virtues, identified in four well-known, classic literary stories, and virtues that had been identified as being 'knightly', honourable and worthwhile both in the context that they are presented in the story, but also for the modern world. The project, a quasi-experimental study that was based on the idea that stories of literacy significance might aid the teaching and development of character, did not begin with any defined notion of what virtue literacy was. I will unpack the notion of 'literacy significance' in relation to an educational application shortly, but in terms of understanding 'virtue literacy', this was something that came out in the analysis of the teaching materials, surveys and interview data collected from participating students, teachers and parents.

[25] Note that the definition presented by Davison and colleagues has since been superseded by the definition presented in the *Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools* presented in the introduction to this chapter (Jubilee Centre, 2022: 10-11).

The Jubilee Centre definition of virtue literacy seeks to bring together three components of virtue, those of perception, knowledge and understanding and reasoning (not full *phronetic* reasoning, but as presented in 5.1.iii. To perceive that something requires an ethical response, and to hold the relevant definitional comprehension and familiarity with virtue language does not necessarily require any element of reflection. Even one's ability to reason through choices of actions and taking deliberative action may not demand any reflection at the time. My argument is that reflection is a vitally important part, if not in initially acquiring virtue literacy, but in sustaining it and elevating it beyond initial levels of comprehension and familiarity with virtue (and vice) terminology. This is over and above incorporating time for reflection on concepts of virtuous emotions and on presentation of ethical content as a pedagogical technique used by teachers in the classroom. I contend that it is a necessary component of virtue literacy, as it is the component that brings the others together. It is a practice that teachers can cultivate in their students, in relation to identifying ethical content present in pop lyrics, exploring the affective nature of virtuous emotions that pop lyrics elicit, improving one's ability to identify and define virtue language, and support one's navigation of moral dilemmas and quandaries.

### *5.2.ii Knightly Virtues*

#### 5.2.ii.a *Knightly Virtues* and virtue literacy

The largest study into the concept, rehearsal and application of virtue literacy that has been undertaken, empirically, in the UK was the *Knightly Virtues* project that took place 2012-2014 by researchers at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham. The study, involving over 5,000 pupils from one hundred schools in England, was the first of its kind to seek to define and to measure virtue literacy using a literary-based intervention. As such, it is salient to discuss its strengths and weaknesses, in terms of its theoretical grounding and practical application, here. *Knightly Virtues* is an educational programme, empirically grounded, that seeks to develop virtue literacy in Key Stage 2 (9-11 year olds) pupils, through engaged reading of virtue-focussed, classic narratives, such as *El Cid*, Arthurian legends, Shakespearean drama and exemplar biographies. It identifies ethical value in these narratives and aims to present this value to pupils through virtue-focussed pedagogy in a similar way to that which I advocate with pop lyrics.

The definition of virtue literacy that is presented in *Knightly Virtues* was a first stab at articulating the conception of virtue literacy as being more than simply comprehension of virtue terms, but something which one then needs to apply to the way they live their life. The term is one that was conceptualised through the research, rather than one that the project held from the outset. It is the first fully defined use of 'virtue literacy' that exists. It has since been built upon by other studies, but it offered the first concrete definition of virtue literacy as consisting 'of three inter-related components: virtue knowledge, virtue reasoning, and virtue practice.' (Arthur *et al*., 2014: 9).

These three components form a sort of chronological pathway form developing virtue literacy, from comprehension of virtue language, to using that language to navigate and reason through dilemmas – present in the narratives studied – before applying what one has learnt in practice. In principle, this makes sense and provides a shorthand for character education and its aims. However, as it has since been superseded based on new and more detailed research, the definition is inadequate for two main reasons. Firstly, that it is too

ambitious in its attempts to cover everything from initial comprehension of virtue language, through to virtuous action in one's own life. In educational terms, to achieve full virtue practice is something that requires time and is misleading to present as something that can be acquired in a few short weeks, through exposure to a narrative-led intervention. Second, it is too vague in its conceptions of the three components, and how reading ethically valuable narratives can inform and advance each component. These are things I seek to correct in my own definition.

The project incorporated the component of virtue practice in its definition, which was a bold claim based on the relative brevity of the teaching intervention and the methods utilised to measure virtue literacy development. Subsequent definitions of virtue literacy have rowed back from extending their conceptions to cover action and practice, albeit still incorporating them as the ideal outcome of moral education. The project acknowledged the complexities of attempting to measure individual levels of virtue literacy. This is further backed up by the relatively unsuccessful ways in which it has been measured to date, as sophisticated, longitudinal studies of virtue literacy do not exist. There are no studies which seek to measure the growth over a prolonged period of an individual's moral development in relation to external stimuli, such as works of narrative art, and there are multiple challenges faced by researchers seeking to measure any form of 'character' or 'virtue' on an individual level. Some of these challenges are summarised by Harrison, Arthur and Burn (2015: 19) as they advocate against measuring individual moral development as something that is difficult, unreliable and often unwanted.

*Knightly Virtues* named a concept that had previously eluded scholars. As a first stated definition of a term, during a period in which character education was becoming more prominent in research, in schools and education policy in the UK, it can serve as a baseline on which to build, undertake further research, and continue to refine and hone the definition.

In *Knightly Virtues*, virtue literacy is explained in a componential way, where one must practice virtuous action in one's own life, having acquired the language of virtue and ability to reason virtuously. This concept of virtue literacy being applied to one's life and extending beyond the pages of the book is an important point. For teachers to demonstrate 'why' virtue is something that is beneficial for students, as well as helping students to seek independent opportunities to develop virtue, needs to begin with an example, an exemplar, or a biography of someone virtuous, performing virtuous acts for the benefit of themselves and others. In terms of an educational intervention seeking to enhance virtue literacy through using narrative art, any educational aims need to be restricted to delivering the intervention in as educationally rich, virtue-focussed way as possible. Teachers should not expect students to become fully virtuous following participation in any intervention, as the habituation of virtue is a lifelong and ongoing process. However, in terms of virtue literacy, there is enormous benefit in exposing students to and engaging them in virtue-rich language, with full definitions, examples and scenarios depicting virtuous action, as the narrative stories selected for the programme do.

As Karen Bohlin writes in the Foreword to the research report, 'Virtue literacy, like numerical literacy, language acquisition, reading and writing literacy, requires context, instruction and practice.' (Arthur *et al*., 2014: 4). This instruction was formally provided through the teaching intervention and opportunities to reflect, and practice were provided through the activities in the interactive journal that accompanied the intervention. This

journal offered opportunities for teachers and parents to engage with the work of pupils as part of a triangulated data collection. The 'context' was provided through the stories that were selected (an initial four of an Arthurian legend *Gareth and Lynette*, *El Cid*, *Don Quixote* and *The Merchant of Venice*). Each story was retold both in an age-appropriate manner for pupils aged 9-11 years and to focus on virtues (*Gareth and Lynette* on courage and humility, *El Cid* on humility and honesty, *Don Quixote* on love and service, and *The Merchant of Venice* on self-discipline, justice and gratitude).

5.2.ii.b Two stages to becoming virtue literate

Regarding virtue literacy, it is described in *Knightly Virtues* as requiring two stages for its development. 'The first is developing a knowledge and understanding of virtue terms. The second is developing the ability to apply virtues to real life contexts. Virtue literacy should be seen as necessary for both character building and societal flourishing.' (*Ibid*.: 7). This two-stage approach incorporates the components of virtue later identified as virtue knowledge and understanding and virtue perception (stage one) and virtue reasoning and virtue action and practice (stage two). The presentation of virtue literacy in *Knightly Virtues* sees virtue perception and virtue knowledge and understanding as being habituated and developed through the initial introduction to virtue language, definitions, and comprehension activities associated with reading the stories. Virtue reasoning and virtue action and practice come second, developed through learning about the characters in the narratives and seeking opportunities to act virtuously in one's own life, and by reasoning through moral dilemmas that one faces, equipped with a language and comprehension that foregrounds virtue and its benefits.

This two-stage process apportions virtue knowledge to the first stage, and virtue practice to the second stage, with virtue reasoning seemingly sitting across the two stages, where one's abilities to reason through morally complex and challenging scenarios may result in virtuous action, but will also help improve one's knowledge and understanding of virtue. Indeed, as the extended definition indicates, 'components relate to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, but are also critically linked to the promotion of virtue practice.' (*Ibid*.).

As well as suggesting that virtue reasoning is the key component that sits between a knowledge of virtue language and being able to express when one acts virtuously, the *Knightly Virtues* definition incorporates an element of meaningful reflection as being a necessary process in developing judgement; 'emphasis on acquiring judgement must be reflective to allow for the empowerment of the ethical self through autonomous decision-making.' (*Ibid*.). Rather than parsing out reflection as a separate component, here, reflection is incorporated as the way in which one develops a sense of reasoning. Reasoning is not only about making decisions, but about reflecting on those decisions, which, the project contends, can support autonomy.

Whilst the above explores both the definition and conception of virtue literacy adopted in *Knightly Virtues*, it is worth pointing out the clear limitations of such a programme, much of which is similarly applicable to any short-term educational intervention. Firstly, measuring participants' levels or ability to practice virtue pre- and post-intervention is something that is not always seen as either possible in research terms, or necessarily desirable. Measuring the ability of participants to practice virtue having received a short teaching intervention is difficult due to the almost unlimited number of variables that may affect any serious

measurement instrument, as well as the intervention being delivered as part of a 'normal' school curriculum. Students' exposure to any number of external variables that may impact (positively or negatively) the teaching intervention will decrease the ability to identify the intervention itself as the variable that shapes virtue literacy. Davison *et al*. (2016) explore in detail how the creation of the assessment tools and the purpose behind seeking to measure virtue literacy changes pre- and post-intervention.

The project, though, has had sustained, tangible impact, particularly at policy level, where policymakers see developing virtue as an educationally beneficial outcome in and of itself. The Department for Education placed an explicit focus on character from 2014, informed by *Knightly Virtues*, and the schools inspectorate Ofsted prioritised character development as an area for schools to demonstrate effectiveness during inspections (see for example Department for Education, 2019; Ofsted, 2019).

### 5.2.ii.c Criticisms

The *Knightly Virtues* programme remains the leading educational intervention that explicitly seeks to develop student levels of virtue literacy through narratives. With regard to this thesis, it, along with *Narnian Virtues*, are the most educationally similar projects that present the moral usefulness of narrative art in relation to developing virtue literacy. Despite both the novelty and success and popularity in schools, *Knightly Virtues* has been criticised by scholars such as Jerome and Kisby (2019; 2022). This criticism is helpful to consider, both in terms of its merits and limitations, in helping clarify both my definition of virtue literacy and how pop lyrics can further the work of existing narrative art-based programmes.

Jerome and Kisby argue that the use of language in *Knightly Virtues* report and intervention materials is 'unclear and redundant', with examples given in the teaching materials of a lack of focus on the virtues and motivations of key protagonists in the stories. The criticism is that this renders their presentation somewhat superficial and misrepresentative. The legitimate criticism that Jerome and Kisby hold can be summarised – somewhat sympathetically – as issues regarding overly 'thin' presentations of character and virtues in retold stories and biographies in comparison to original materials and publications. For example, the story of *The Merchant of Venice* used in the project is a much truncated and abridged version of Shakespeare's original. The intent behind retelling and shortening the stories was not to oversimplify the stories and the moral (and other) valuable content that resides within them. The main aims in retelling stories were twofold. Firstly, researchers retold stories in a way that encouraged teachers to focus on the virtues at hand in a more discrete way. The stories were selected for their virtue-rich, ethically valuable content. As well-regarded, popular and canonised narratives, there is little pushback – from teachers or from scholarly critics – that the stories used do not hold ethical value or moral content. The challenge is in how they have been retold and the manner in which each virtue was foregrounded, which Jerome and Kisby contend has been done in an overly simplified and simplistic manner. However, when combined with the second aim of retelling the stories – rather than using original narratives – one can make more sense of utilising narratives in an altered or amended form.

This second aim was linked to the age of pupil participants in the study. The project worked with Key Stage 2 students in England (aged 9-11-years). This age group was selected for the

formative period which it covers in terms of youth moral development. It is widely accepted that moral formation remains in its formative stages at age 9-11, but that some moral development will have occurred by age 9 (see for example Tomasello, 2019; Hardy and Carlo, 2011; Darnell *et al*., 2019). Further, the development of a level of literary comprehension that would allow for children to be introduced to virtue language which would be challenging without over-stretching pupils. This is something that Bohlin acknowledges in her work that considers poetry as a tool for engaging the 'moral imagination' and developing 'heart knowledge' (see Bohlin, 2005; 2023). In this thesis, we can interpret 'moral imagination' as being linked to, although not a component part of virtue literacy, and 'heart knowledge' as akin to wider moral development.

Therefore, whilst I do not dismiss the challenges offered by Jerome and Kisby, I believe that they can be overcome. I would counter that such simplistic dismissals of attempts to utilise the ethical value contained within such narrative artworks is unhelpful. As Kristjánsson (2021) presents by way of a rebuttal to Jerome and Kisby, if one is intent on pursuing the notion of 'best practice', pedagogically, then one must both acknowledge and seek to overcome the tension that resides in truncating moral narratives without seeking to remove or simplify the moral content and moral value. Jerome and Kisby offer no alternative to using truncated moral narratives.

I concede that Jerome and Kisby are correct, at least on a surface level, when they argue that 'thin' retellings of stories are unhelpful. If not explored in any serious or deliberative way, they can reduce morally rich and valuable works of art to postcard versions of the originals that offer little or no moral insight and hold limited amounts of moral and ethical value. Indeed, such retellings reduce the aesthetic value of the story, in comparison to the original artwork, and generally present weaker imitations of the originals. However, where they are retold, altered, or split into parts for educational purposes, then this can help provide access points to artworks that might otherwise bypass pupils for their obscurity, complexity, or through the general disinterest or lack of knowledge or awareness of pupils. Of course, where we are considering mass consumed, popular artworks such as pop lyrics, then we can take advantage of the popularity aspect of pop as songs that pupils are already familiar with.

Regarding pop lyrics, there are similar challenges that could be made, in terms of their suitability as tools for moral development. As I have acknowledged above, decoupling pop lyrics from pop music can appear limiting and redundant, as one is considering only one part of the whole artwork. This may present a similar 'thin' version of both the narrative and of the ethical content that resides within lyrics that Jerome and Kisby level at the stories used in *Knightly Virtues*. I accept that pop songs are works of art in their total form (music and lyrics, often also linked to additional medium such as music videos, live performances, etc.), and that in isolating parts of the song (i.e., the lyrics), then we cannot and should not assume that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, with regard to any interpretation of 'value' that the song may hold. However, where I say that using retold stories for deliberative and focussed educational purposes helps overcome challenges over-simplifying the moral messages contained within narratives, so isolating the pop lyrics from the overall song for use in the classroom can provide opportunities for greater analysis, focus and deliberation on lyrics than may otherwise occur. I am advocating, here, for a focus on the ethical content contained within the lyrics, plus immersion in the emotional and moral impact that lyrics may have on students. However, I also contend that there are

additional benefits from focussing on pop lyrics in isolation that may occur from close readings and in-depth analyses, as I will mention below.

All in all, the critique offered by Jerome and Kisby of the *Knightly Virtues* stories reminds us of the lesson that 'thin' retellings of classic literary stories can be limiting, reductive and unhelpful if not presented in educationally adept and useful ways. That said, there is still a place for 'thin' presentations of virtue within stories and other narratives (as per Carr, 2021). Contributing to the recent educational turn to character and virtue development in schools and other educational institutions, Carr's recent chapter builds on works that have advocated for the use of literary narratives as sources of inspiration to the moral imagination (see Carr, 2005; Bohlin, 2005). Carr analyses Iris Murdoch's account of the purpose of literature in terms of how it enables insights into the human condition. For Carr, and for Murdoch, the great novelists are those who free their characters to live independently of any ideologies that the author may hold. Carr argues that the corpus of modern fiction provides multiple examples of this freedom, through morally serious narratives, which can engage students of all ages and support their path to flourishing. Whilst Carr advocates for the use of 'good' narratives, I argue that these narratives may not always need to be drawn from classic literature. As short, highly refined and structured forms, pop lyrics could be accused of presenting content in a 'thin' manner, particularly ethical content, however, pop songs remain as emotionally affective forms of narrative art.

### *5.2.iii Virtue Literacy and Virtue Action and Practice*

It is important that we conceive of virtue literacy as developmental rather than a fixed skill that is either acquired or not acquired. It is something that all of us can strive to develop throughout our lives as we seek to habituate virtue and live meaningful, positive and flourishing lives – when following an Aristotelian interpretation of virtue. In educational terms, whilst we can create a dichotomy of 'literacy', where one is either literate or illiterate, this creates a false impression and is an oversimplification of the nuances and complexities of literacy of any form. Work in developmental psychology is useful in considering how psychologists consider the qualities of being and becoming human, which include developing virtues (see, for example, Tomasello, 2019). Tomasello's theory focuses on development, rather than simply seeing positive qualities as being acquired or not. He identifies 'moral identity' as an important component that differentiates humans from primates. He also sees moral identity as a capability that has emerged over the course of human evolution. Children meet the requirements for moral identity at around the age 5-7 years, and develop a sense of moral meaning through making moral judgements in their interactions with others from that age onwards. So, it is essential that programmes see virtue literacy as developmental and not polarised in either being virtue literate or illiterate.

Where someone who cannot read a single letter or word may be deemed to be illiterate, it is not possible nor fair to refer to, for example, everyone who can read only the letters of the alphabet as literate, expect full literacy from reception age children who have begun to grasp different sounds and expressions at the beginning of their literacy journey. Where we speak of virtue literacy, we should not expect only comprehension and understanding of virtue terms and definitions to represent literacy in virtue, as we should not expect to refer to someone as virtue literate who can navigate and reason through a moral quandary, recognise the virtuous response required, without using a single virtue term. Any such

polarisations between literate and illiterate are unhelpful and damaging to the concept. This may not be a full criticism from Jerome and Kisby's challenges to *Knightly Virtues*, but it is not too great of an extension of their argument to see those intent on dismissing the aims of educating character through narratives as viewing virtue literacy with such deliberate scepticism.

Speaking positively, though, I reference additional benefits that using pop lyrics – and indeed other narrative forms of art – may hold when utilised with young people in the classroom. Before I explore such benefits, it is necessary to look more closely at the shifting definitions of virtue literacy that exist in the field. I have intentionally spent a significant section of this chapter considering the definition, rationale and conception of virtue literacy that exists in *Knightly Virtues*, as it was the first reference of the term in the field. However, and somewhat interestingly, where *Knightly Virtues* brings in the notion of virtue action and practice as being required of a full virtue literacy, i.e. living virtuously and practising virtue, this is something that has seemingly been dropped or discarded from later definitions and conceptions of the term. Both within and without of the Jubilee Centre, the notion of virtue practice is not seen as essential when teaching or developing a virtue literacy. This may be down to a number of reasons, not limited to research difficulties in measuring and identifying the 'gap' between 'knowing' virtue and 'being' virtuous (see, for example, work by Kristjánsson *et al*., 2020; Kristjánsson and Pollard, 2021 that looks at the gap between virtue literacy and moral action). More practically, though, for teachers, it may simply be down to reconceiving what is practically achievable in the classroom, given the scarcity of resources, limited time outside of taught curriculum time for character development, and infrequency of time spent with students in the classroom – this is more of a concern at secondary school, where subject teachers may only see students a small number of times each week, than in the primary classroom.

Kristjánsson and colleagues (2020) consider the moral gap between knowing virtue and doing virtue. Their focus on *phronesis*, as a meta-virtue that guides one's reasoning and, ultimately, behaviour and conduct, conceives of virtue reasoning in a much fuller, broader sense than is either presented in existing definitions of virtue literacy, or as I present in relation to the new definition that I offer. The notion of virtue reasoning as both full *phronetic* reasoning and a narrower concept linked more to perception of virtue and acquisition and application of virtue language is important, particularly when distinguishing between the two. I do not contend that reading pop lyrics and discussing ethical content can help establish a full *phronetic* notion of virtue reasoning. I have already said that my understanding of virtue reasoning is narrower than full *phronesis*, albeit wider than the narrow concept presented in previous studies of virtue literacy. Kristjánsson and colleagues' work is useful in understanding virtue reasoning as a continuum, or spectrum, that seeks to work towards a wide understanding as part of full *phronesis*. They introduce virtue emotion as a component of full *phronesis* (along with moral identity, moral adjudication and moral perception). Where 'emotions are our prime motivational anchors…and are in harmony with [one's] rational judgement and virtuous outlook' (Kristjánsson *et al*., 2020: 12). This is helpful in this thesis for finding justification for the emotions as a component of virtue literacy.

Elsewhere, studies that have stopped short of engaging fully with the discrepancies in definitions of virtue literacy includes Watts, Fullard and Peterson (2021). In spite of the text being aimed at practitioners as introducing the ideas, practices and concepts that shape

character education in schools, they have chosen to omit consideration of virtue literacy and its definitions, although they do engage with teaching practices that can build virtue literacy. That omission may well be for good reason, in that the authors wished to avoid undue focus on the different definitions and conceptions that exist. Instead, they can focus more on whole school approaches to developing character that span not only the curriculum, or specific subjects, but incorporate school leadership, atmosphere and ethos and extra curricula work, rather than specifically on virtue literacy. That said, where they do devote pages to 'teaching character through stories', this is presented as a way of developing practice and using resources, rather than as a conceptual critique. The term 'virtue literacy' is absent from the authors' consideration of how and where stories may best be used in the classroom. Where there is an allusion to virtue literacy is in reference to the benefits of using stories to develop character in that they can 'increase children's knowledge and understanding of virtue terms and can develop children's reasoning about moral issues' (Watts, Fullard and Peterson, 2021: 131). Any allusion to the concept of 'virtue action and practice' is only summarised by the authors as being as a 'rehearsal' for encountering similar scenarios and dilemmas to the characters of the texts studied (*ibid*.: 132). This reinterprets the notion of 'virtue practice' somewhat, in that any practising is done in a safe space of the classroom, through roleplay, re-enactment, or reimagining the situations of protagonists in the texts. Students can, positively speaking, be encouraged to practise what they might do in response to a scenario or quandary, and explore how they might justify doing things in the same way or differently to the characters in the book. This removes any notion of jeopardy or consequence, in terms of real-life impact, where practising as a rehearsal. As the authors summarise, 'a skilled teacher can facilitate discussions amongst pupils, helping them to unpick characters' choices, think through potential motivations, as well as suggest alternative courses of action (for characters)' (*ibid*.).

This understanding of virtue literacy, or at least reinterpreting virtue action and practice as imitative and preparative, does two things. Firstly, it can remove any notion of students feeling daunted or weighed down by expectation to act virtuously, simply from having studied a text. Indeed, this can help students see virtue as a lifelong journey, rather than something they need to rush to acquire and habituate alongside their academic development. We have acknowledged the formative stage that students are in during their schooling careers, and the developmental and influential states that pupils often find themselves in. So, where teachers take an active role in seeking to prepare students for life beyond the classroom, in terms of their character development, supporting them with matters that they may otherwise find difficult and challenging. In relation to studying the moral dimension of narratives, this can help students 'especially when story contexts and character features are unfamiliar.' (*Ibid*.).

However, the second way in which interpreting virtue action as preparative places additional responsibilities onto the teacher to take the role of 'character educator'. Many, including Watts, Fullard and Peterson, have written about how teachers take on this role in becoming teachers in the first place, as good education is good character education, and it need not be parsed out as a discrete or separate teaching initiative (see also Jubilee Centre, 2022). However, regarding narratives and stories, there is perhaps a more comfortable union between studying narratives as part of literacy and literature classes, rather than between moral education and other subject lessons. Bohlin (2005) has written about the

role of the English teacher and how they are best placed to teach character through stories, albeit should not be expected to do so on their own. Teachers can create safe spaces and provide instruction and guidance to students as they study narratives, particularly at younger ages where pupils may be at risk of misunderstanding moral messages contained within complex stories (see for example Narvaez *et al*., 1998 and Whitney *et al*., 2005). So, whilst there may be an apparent reluctance to use or define the term virtue literacy, Watts, Fullard and Peterson do offer a consistent conception and presentation of it, albeit with a nuanced difference in how 'virtue practice' is conceived.

Turning back to Kristjánsson, again, where he does define virtue literacy outside of the references already cited, are often where he is writing with co-authors looking to link virtue with other topics, such as sustainability (see Jordan and Kristjánsson, 2017) and medical ethics (Arthur *et al*., 2015). In each case, virtue literacy is simplified from the Jubilee Centre definition to being linked to only one component of virtue, with it being summarised as 'knowledge of the virtues alone' in relation to environmental sustainability (Jordan and Kristjánsson, 2017: 1213). Further, he links to '"literacy" in the language of character and virtue' in reasoning through moral dilemmas when linked to medical ethics (Arthur *et al*., 2015). This is interesting as it would be easy to view the inconsistencies as showing a lack of understanding or that they continually contradict one another. However, I believe that the inconsistencies in definitions across the field, even within the same research centre, stem from a lack of full understanding and exploration of how virtue literacy develops in young people. Kristjánsson (2021) refers to the challenges of both measuring aspects of virtue development in any serious empirical way, as well as the challenges of actively developing it from an educational perspective and suggests that 'virtue literacy is the form of virtue competence that seems easiest to develop' (Kristjánsson, 2021: 1307). So, we can see mixed messages, sometimes from the same researchers, regarding whether or not virtue literacy is limited to knowledge and comprehension of language and terminology, or to one's ability to reason through moral dilemmas effectively (with or without a knowledge of virtue language). Since publication of *Knightly Virtues*, there is a collective reluctance to explicitly include virtue action and practice in the real-world as part of our understanding of what becoming virtue literate is.

Other studies both within the Jubilee Centre and external to it have sought to develop virtue literacy through the use of narrative art in the classroom, including a large study into the works of C.S. Lewis conducted out of the University of Leeds, as I will discuss below.

### *5.2.iv Narnian Virtues*

The *Narnian Virtues* project was developed through inspiration taken from *Knightly Virtues*, as well as an interest and belief that the works of C.S. Lewis held moral lessons that could be elicited through active teaching. The study adopted a lot of the theoretical and methodological structure of *Knightly Virtues*, adapted for a different audience, and sought to draw on more extensive links with previous literature in its conceptualisation of virtue literacy. The study treated virtue literacy as a 'prerequisite of the understanding that underpins attitudinal and behavioural change'. This was particularly when it is activated through the teaching of literature, which as part of a humanities curriculum 'not only lends itself in special ways to personal reflection about what it is to be human but also facilitates

virtue literacy (which) may enable students to understand virtue and inspire them to practice it' (Pike *et al*., 2021: 451).

That said, empirical data collected by the project did not evidence such behaviours in any statistically significant degree. Whilst the project reported positively that participants who undertook the intervention improved their knowledge and understanding of virtue terms (both generally as those specifically identified as being 'Narnian virtues'), the data 'did not show students' (self-reported) practice of virtue increasing to a statistically significant degree' (*ibid*.: 457). This is not to say that the intervention failed in its aims, far from it, as there are a whole host of variables that could (and probably will) have contributed to the mixed findings. That said, as an educational intervention seeking to improve the virtue literacy levels of participants, it is something that – as with *Knightly Virtues* – participating schools welcomed and have sought to embed as part of a core curriculum. As I reference above, the project targeted English teachers and the English curriculum, albeit at secondary level rather than primary. These 'specialists in literacy and literature…[were] primarily concerned [as English teachers] with fostering a love of language and literature.' (*Ibid*.: 458). This link between not only the English curriculum, but English teachers specifically, is both interesting and relevant to how and where virtue literacy can be best developed in schools. A neo-Aristotelian concept of character, applied through an educational institution, would not advocate for a blueprint of 'how' to develop character, and to do so from a whole school approach, fostering an ethos and atmosphere in which character is valued, supplemented by taught curriculum and extra-curricula time, which cultivate opportunities for students to seek their own character development. As Pike and colleagues assert, English teachers are often seen to be best placed to lead character development in schools, with an arts and humanities curriculum being the obvious 'home', or at least starting point, for a taught character focus.

This link between character education and the English curriculum is something that Mark Pike, the *Narnian Virtues* Principal Investigator, has written about previously (see Pike, 2015), as it has been by Karen Bohlin (see Bohlin, 2005; 2023). Bohlin, whilst not explicitly referencing virtue literacy, speaks in similar language to Pike about English teachers cultivating the 'moral imagination' of students. Pike and Bohlin are former English teachers and school leaders and address what Pike calls the 'ethos' of teaching English, albeit from different contexts (Pike in the UK and Bohlin in the USA). Pike evaluates the ethical practice of teaching English and provides practical examples of how to teach for teachers, student teachers, and those interested in the profession. This is useful when considering utilising pop lyrics as the most likely subject lesson in which they could be utilised in school is in English lessons, akin to poetry. If we accept two points – that teaching, and specifically the teaching of English, is a moral profession, where teachers are character educators, and that works of narrative art, including pop lyrics, can be instructional in the moral development of students – then Pike's work is informative and helpful. Whilst Pike uses the language of well-being in his text, rather than the language of character, he links the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of teaching English in the classroom, which I have sought to do in this thesis. Pike does not directly refer to virtue literacy in the ethical teaching of English, but he alludes to it in similar ways to Bohlin's work from a decade previous, as I will introduce below.

### *5.2.v Other definitions and conceptions*

Other studies that have followed and preceded *Knightly Virtues* and *Narnian Virtues* have alluded to and conceived of versions of virtue literacy, even if they do not name it. Most explicitly, a project that I was involved in called *Virtue, Vice and Verse* that mirrored the methodology of *Knightly Virtues*, but used poetry with older students aged 13 years and sought to develop virtue literacy through poetry. The project created a poetry anthology of 'great' (canonised) poems that had all fallen out of copyright, so could be reproduced in the anthology. The poems were not retold, and all but one appeared in their full and original form. The exception was 'Goblin Market' by Christina Rosetti, which was abridged. This project was only undertaken on a small pre-pilot scale, with qualitative data collected from focus groups with students and interviews with teachers (see Carr, Bohlin and Thompson, 2017). The project used the same concept of virtue literacy as *Knightly Virtues*, however, with an application to poetry that David Carr has explored both before and since the project (see Carr, 2005; 2023). In his recent chapter, Carr seeks to answer whether literary, specifically narrative and imaginative art, can help us learn about the human condition and assist our moral learning. Carr takes an historical perspective in arguing that 'creative and imaginative literature generally, but poetry in particular, has significant potential for the development and cultivation of human affect – feelings, sentiment and emotions – to the further purpose of the moral education of virtue and character.' (Carr, 2023: 33). Carr doesn't speak of virtue literacy, but of 'virtuous sentiment', a term that Carr has used in previous works, but generally where Carr treats 'sentiment' as synonymous with 'emotion' and 'feeling'. This is important for virtue literacy as where definitions introduced previously do not embrace virtue emotion, Carr does. Carr has written about virtue literacy explicitly previously in the book that accompanied *Knightly Virtues* (see Carr and Harrison, 2015), but *Knightly Virtues* did not conceive of virtue literacy as incorporating notions of emotion, as we have seen above. Carr, though, has written widely about character, virtue and emotion, particularly with regard to poetry and narrative art. He argues

> that education is a matter of broad cultural initiation rather than narrow academic or vocational training; […] that any education so conceived would have a key concern with the moral dimensions of personal formation; […] that emotional growth is an important part of such moral formation; and […] that literature and other arts have an important part to play in such emotional education. (Carr, 2005: 137).

To summarise, all education, English literature and otherwise, is concerned with the emotional growth of students and literature, specifically poetry, can make a significant contribution to the development of the moral imaginations of students.

The notion of the moral imagination is something that Karen Bohlin has written about (see Bohlin 2005; 2023). As a chapter in the same collection as Carr's recent publication, as well as being developed from *Virtue, Vice and Verse*, Bohlin presents a case for using poetry in the twenty-first century, celebrating poetry as a form of emotional engagement that can awaken one's 'heart knowledge', where students can learn ethically from poets and teachers of poetry. For Bohlin, 'educating the heart' can be defined as 'fostering moral perception, emotional attunement and mature insight essential to human flourishing' (Bohlin, 2023: 140). This is not synonymous with 'virtue literacy', but certainly overlaps and holds obvious synergies. With regard to virtue literacy, and applied to pop lyrics, both Carr and Bohlin offer helpful insights in that their conception of virtue literacy involves an emotional dimension, where students much engage their imaginations and hearts as they

learn from the narrative texts being read to them. As we have discussed in previous chapters, pop lyrics also contain emotional content and engage the emotions of listeners, so it makes sense that if we seek to develop students' levels of virtue literacy through pop lyrics, we should look to incorporate an emotional dimension when educating for virtue literacy

In addition to including a more explicit focus on virtue emotion, there is an additional notion to virtue literacy that we have not considered so far; reflection. An explicit focus on reflection is essential for any levels of virtue literacy to develop in a positive trajectory. I do not believe that reflection has not been part of previous definitions and conceptions of virtue literacy, I believe that it is implicitly assumed, and I am calling for an explicit consideration of it. Guttesen and Kristjánsson (2022: 287) write that the elements of poetry that are conducive to virtue literacy link to its ability to engage our imaginations; foster ethical reflection; providing a tool and basis for recognising one's own emotions; and providing a technique for students to measure their own emotions against concepts of virtue (and vice). This reflection can be fostered through the in-class study of pop lyrics and other narrative texts, where teachers encourage students to sit with texts and consider how their emotions are engaged (or aren't), what the moral content of a lyric is, what it means to them, what they understand by it, and ultimately how it makes them feel. Once the lyric has been deconstructed and closely analysed, so teachers can adopt pedagogical techniques to inculcate students the best ways to reflect in a meaningful and serious manner. I will say more about the practice of reflection in relation to pop lyrics at the end of this chapter.

Before moving on, though, it is worth noting two further simplistic presentations of virtue literacy, with over-simplified and simplistic measurement methods. Firstly, a study by Kristjánsson and colleagues (2017) sought to link the virtue of gratitude with other virtues, such as compassion. This project sought to deploy a five-week teaching intervention that encouraged student participants to consider the interrelation of particular virtues, demanding of them an initial conception of what makes particular virtues unique, then how dilemmas that require participants to show one virtue may affect how they demonstrate another. The study was ground-breaking in its attempts, albeit limited in its measurement. The study utilised pre- and post-intervention surveys to seek to try to measure any recorded changes across an amalgam of five pre-existing validated measures for gratitude, perseverance, subjective happiness, interpersonal reactivity and life satisfaction. Data from the pre-and post-surveys was very limited, and findings were not overly supportive of any hypotheses. That said, accompanying the survey was a request for students to complete 'mind maps', which provided qualitative data regarding individual associations with an initial virtue term – many of which became more expansive at the end of the intervention than they had been at the beginning. This tentative finding gives hope that where formal research data collection methods may either not be conducive to effectively measuring outcomes related to virtue literacy, informal and novel methods may prove more useful. Indeed, students may well feel more comfortable and under less pressure to complete mind maps, seeing them as less restrictive and less onerous than a full research survey. Even where this project defined virtue literacy as simply 'knowledge, understanding and application of virtue language', neglecting any notion of virtue perception, and not expanding on any idea of participant requirements to demonstrate application, there is still cause for optimism. As I say, findings were somewhat unclear, to be charitable, with the empirical data, but the theoretical basis for the project was sound, from a virtue ethics

perspective, for how virtues interact, and whether programmes that focus explicitly on one or other virtue may indirectly improve participant conception of others.

Another project that yielded very little by way of measurable quantitative outcomes was known as the 'Laxdaela project'. This project sought to engage Icelandic teenagers in the *Laxdaela Saga* as a vehicle for positive character development, taught as an educational programme over six weeks. The project drew inspiration from *Knightly Virtues* and sought to measure 'the understanding of moral vocabulary, using instruments that [researchers] considered minimally intrusive and least controversial.' (Jónsson *et al*., 2021: 215). This focus on participant mastery of moral vocabulary was measured via surveys which sought to capture participant understanding and comprehension of virtue terms through asking them to 'fill in the blank' missing virtue or definitional synonym, followed by a comprehension activity related to a short narrative. Such methodological tools were similar to those used in *Knightly Virtues*, albeit, here, used with an older participant cohort, and findings were marginally positive. Whilst there was an 'improvement' in participant comprehension of virtue vocabulary, competence in applying moral concepts and in arguing from a particular moral perspective, findings were not statistically significant. That does not necessarily, by itself, make the study unsatisfactory, however, combined with the other studies referenced, does suggest that there are major limitations in the studies that have sought to empirically measure any notion of development of virtue literacy through narrative art education programmes. Researchers sought to address the lack of statistical significance of findings by collecting qualitative data via interviews.

In relation to this thesis, where I have presented investigations of the virtues and emotions of gratitude and anger in relation to pop lyrics, we could learn from the Kristjánsson *et al*. study and the Laxdaela project. They teach us that in being creative in the classroom, much more can be gleaned in terms of how we understand the development of virtue literacy where we explore student conceptions through exploratory tools such as mind maps, that encourage students to think more freely and more familiar environments than those which extended research survey instruments or interviews allow.

Of course, most of the projects cited in this chapter so far are borne from or influenced by Jubilee Centre work. That is mainly due to the Jubilee Centre being the biggest player in the field of character and virtues, not just in the UK, but certainly in Europe, if not globally. The extent to which the Jubilee Centre has been able to run literacy-based projects, on a large scale, with robust research surrounding them has set them apart from other studies. Further, the desire of practitioners and of researchers to utilise literature in the classroom and use it for moral education is no new fad or trend but is one that has sought greater research validity in recent years, given the separate trend for all education programmes to be underpinned by some form of empirical data collection.

The use of pop lyrics in the classroom for moral development purposes, I have already stated, is a lean field. However, there is an abundance of work on pop music and culture (see for example Frith, 1988; Strangleman, 2015), censorship (see for example Nuzum, 2001) and economic value (see for example Dolfsma, 1999), all of which hold ethical and moral connotations, even if such publications are not directly focussed on moral development.

### *5.2.vi Betterment*

I feel that it is important to return to the term 'betterment' used by Bradley and introduced earlier (Bradley, 2017: 4). This section considers how it relates to the definition of ethical value that I have used in this thesis and its relation to virtue literacy. Bradley's use of betterment only appears in his introductory chapter, as he describes the process by which he has gone about selecting songs for analysis in his work. We can infer that his use of the word is deliberate and means something more than just a greater knowledge of pop songs. Of course, rhetorically, betterment is a positive juxtaposition against the 'damage' that his ears have suffered and describes the dedication that he has put into writing his book. If nothing else, his soul has been positively affected by listening to 'good' music, and this outweighs the physical damage to his hearing. I propose a greater inspection of what this betterment is, and how listening to mass produced pop music can be a valuable experience. Betterment indicates some sort of improvement, advancement and benefit, beyond mere enjoyment and pleasure. Listening to music is generally a joyous activity, but it is not an obvious leap to make for even an avid fan of pop music to feel 'bettered' on listening to pop songs. However, to state as such expresses more than just pleasure. Particularly when we consider the ethical content of the songs that he has listened to.

Bradley's emphasis on bettering his 'being' can take us beyond basic pleasure and to a moral notion of fulfilment, flourishing and moral development. I have argued throughout this thesis that the route to both better understanding and application of 'betterment' to students is through educational teaching, using pop lyrics that engage us emotionally and morally. Betterment expresses a positive outcome from an experience – in this case, the consumption of pop music lyrics. The term holds resonance as we inspect the positive outcome of using pop and seek to understand how closely reading the lyrics of songs can lead to such betterment. In pop music terms, we can advocate for listening to music from across the sub-genres of pop, as I have sought to evidence through the examples I have used. Doing so can better one's being when we reflect on the moral quandaries, themes and content that we engage with throughout pop's corpus, and in a way in which I advocate for in my definition of virtue literacy.

Regarding the language of moral development, betterment is not a term that is oft used or cited – there being very few references to it and moral theory in existing literature, with references ranging from robotics to economic betterment, to physical betterment, and cultural betterment. There is little of relevance to music and moral betterment, although a chapter by Smith and Silverman (2020) did stand out. The chapter, in *Eudaimonia: Flourishing through musical learning*, reflects on the place of what flourishing means in music, with the use of betterment being defined as moral improvement and personal fulfilment. In terms of Aristotelian moral development, it is not a stretch that we consider 'betterment' as either synonymous with, or a precursor to the Aristotelian view of flourishing – living well; becoming the best version of our selves. As we focus on the lyrics of pop songs, and the linguistic choices that have been made in each and every line and rhyme, it is important to reflect on the language of virtue that is used by scholars, too. Bradley does not explore in any detail what he means by 'betterment', and the term is only referenced once, but we can make a sound case for 'betterment' as moral improvement, ethical development and personal fulfilment (as per Smith and Silverman, 2020), as much as we can just see it as a positive term of affirmation and pleasure. I believe that only focussing on the pleasure that listening to pop music brings many is overly simplistic, and where we

construct a framework of value around pop lyrics, so we can take language choices used by others to be more meaningful and ethically grounded than we may otherwise do. The word 'betterment', for Bradley, juxtaposes neatly with the physical damage that listening to so much music has done to his ears.

The physical damage is offset by the personal betterment of listening to hundreds of songs for the purposes of writing his book. But such a juxtaposition serves as a neat metaphor for the ethical value of pop music. Personal betterment may, for Bradley, be undefined, but we can apply our own definition of ethical value and see betterment as the outcome of contemplating the ethically challenging content of lyrics. The word 'betterment', in the highly stylised and precise world of pop song lyrics, is perhaps one that is more palatable to the general public, particularly the classroom student and teacher contemplating lyrics in greater depth than they may have done before. Whilst it is an underused term in the literature, Bradley's use of 'betterment' takes us beyond the titillation that pop artists regularly sing of, and offers an accessible language of ethical fulfilment that many – without teaching and guidance – may otherwise be oblivious to.

Most of us listen to music, turn to our favourite artists, groups, or songs in times of emotional strain, or emotional pleasure. What we recognise in our favourite song lyrics are the ways in which lyrics provide comfort, create ecstasy, and make us feel. Ultimately, whatever the feelings and emotions are that the music and lyrics evoke in us, they help us escape, overcome loss, move past a metaphorical obstacle, and give our lives purpose. As with any form of art, there is the subjective notion of taste that creates debate, particularly when presenting lyrics as offering any form of human 'betterment' – see for example the lyrics of Las Ketchup – 'The Ketchup Song', Mr Blobby – 'Mr Blobby', or Hear'Say – 'Pure and Simple'. All three of these songs went to number one in the UK Top 40 chart; they were 'popular', but one would evaluate both the value that each holds differently to, say, 'Imagine', or 'One More Time'. 'Pure and Simple' was, on release, the fastest selling single of all time in the UK[26], and yet is also widely derided as being highly derivative, imitative, and unimaginative – banal, even.

With regard to virtue literacy, the term can indicate some sort of improvement, growth, or benefit, beyond any joy and pleasure/displeasure that consuming pop music may bring (Bradley, 2017). As we have considered the ethical value of the lyrics, I propose that betterment is more than pleasure, and that where we identify ethical value in pop lyrics, so exists the possibility for personal betterment akin to developing virtue literacy. This betterment has moral dimensions, more than simply through identifying ethical content, but in considering that content in a deliberative and meaningful way and engaging in some form of reflection for how one may act in a given dilemma, or how one may apply any ethical learnings from a song's content to their own life. I concur with Bradley that listening to music is, largely, a positive experience, even if one does not always take pleasure from every song they listen to. As we inspect the ethical value that pop lyrics hold, betterment is a term that requires greater attention, particularly in relation to how I have expanded a definition of virtue literacy to embrace not only virtue perception, virtue knowledge and

[26] See 'Pure and Simple [Song]' [Online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pure_and_Simple_(song)#Critical_reception [Accessed 25 October 2024].

understanding and virtue reasoning, but including virtue emotion and reflection. I call for greater consideration of betterment as a positive outcome of increased virtue literacy.

## 5.3 Virtue Literacy as Educationally Worthwhile

. The new definition of virtue literacy that I present incorporates the components that I contend pop lyrics embrace, both through content and through affect (see section 4.1.1). These are the recognition of virtuous (or vicious) content in lyrics, developing an ability to describe ethical situations with a degree of understanding as to what might be required to navigate it, feeling the right virtue emotion for the scenario at hand and that reflective practice can support our ability to reason and deliberate one's way through the ethical scenario. This definition intentionally stops short of including any notion of 'doing' and acting virtuously, as I contend that virtue literacy is about preparing us for virtuous action, rather than doing it.

In the same way that schooling is about preparing students to progress into jobs, further study and real life beyond the school, I contend that developing one's virtue literacy levels are about equipping us in the best way possible to practice virtue and to act virtuously. That does not mean that one will acquire virtue literacy, be virtue literate, and one's education in the area is complete. As a neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue suggests, it is a lifelong goal to habituate virtue. It is not something that students should expect to achieve in one lesson, after one intervention, or in on school year. Good teachers will find ways to explain to students the 'value of serving morally acceptable ends' in what they do, without either making the study of virtue become instrumental, or too vague and meaningless (Jubilee Centre, 2022: 10). In doing so, students will hopefully see the worthwhileness in developing virtue literacy levels.

As with other existing neo-Aristotelian definitions, this definition of virtue literacy is predicated on two important points. Firstly, that character, and the virtues that make up character, is educable, and, secondly, that it is educationally beneficial and worthwhile to actively develop one's character as an aim of good education, both in and of itself, and as having positive secondary benefits such as helping improve attainment and behaviour.

## 5.4 Using Pop Lyrics to Educate for Virtue Literacy

The interaction between virtue literacy and pop lyrics is borne out most meaningfully in the active use of lyrics in moral education – usually, although not contained to, the mainstream schooling classroom. As with other 'successful' (popular and academically rigorous) programmes, I offer lesson plans for using pop lyrics to teach moral education that are created with some basic structure, but leave sufficient flexibility to allow and encourage teachers to use their professional judgement and passion to adapt to their needs. This was one of the strengths of both the *Knightly Virtues* programme and 'Virtue, Vice and Verse' that I delivered with colleagues David Carr and Karen Bohlin (see Arthur *et al*., 2014; Carr, Bohlin and Thompson, 2017). With the poetry project, the use of short form verses appealed to teachers as ways to engage pupils in one or two lessons, rather than with longer narratives over multiple lessons, where schools are pressed for curriculum time. Further, pupils enjoyed using the techniques of poetic analysis that they were developing to consider themes of virtue and character. Both successes speak to using pop lyrics as

contemporary verses, short in form and rich in virtue content, in addition to being familiar to pupils, which the poetry was not.

I conclude this chapter with an example, of sorts, which teachers may follow, develop, or ignore to their own contention. That example takes example lyrics – each with a different virtue focus – but which, I believe, overlap and demonstrate both the variety of different lyrics that demonstrate ethical value, as well as how lyrics from different sub-genres and from different eras of popular music can be utilised together. The virtues in focus in each of the lyrics selected embrace themes considered in previous chapters on gratitude ('Thank You' by Dido) and anger ('Stan' by Eminem). I contend that these lyrics in particular work well, not only for their lyrical structure and forms, but also their cultural value ('Stan' samples 'Thank You' in its chorus and both have featured in multiple different television shows, adverts and other pop culture references since release). Further, they are excellent examples of virtue- and emotion-laden lyrics that distil complex scenarios and virtue/emotion interactions into simple structures and forms, as 'good' pop songs should do.

Secondly, having analysed their form and content and concentrated on the presentations of gratitude and anger in each, bringing them together into one pedagogical example shows how one need not only concentrate on teaching lyrics on a single virtue or topic, but can bring together lyrics that have different core themes and not diminish the potential for developing virtue literacy. I leave open the ways in which practitioners can include a focus on reflection in lessons. This could be through focus on an additional lyric linked to reflection, or by adopting one of many pedagogical techniques that encourage meaningful reflection. In any case, I believe that actively encouraging students to reflect can assist the development of a fully formed conception of virtue literacy and encouraging students to build habits of reflection as part of a conclusion to lessons. I offer a draft lesson plan for teachers as Appendix One.

Firstly, introducing students to the concept of what virtue literacy is can provide a spotlight and meaning to both teacher and students regarding why they are reading the lyrics of Eminem, Taylor Swift, The Rolling Stones, etc. Teachers can prepare students to adopt a virtue-focus when engaging with the pop lyric at hand. It would be equally appropriate to begin with the lyric, allowing students to read them and engage with them, before asking them to consider the virtue or emotion content, how it is presented and how it affects them. In this case, where I have selected lyrics on different virtues (gratitude and anger) in Chapter Four, it may be worthwhile for teachers to foreground these as areas of study, maybe even encouraging students to think about the things that they are grateful for/people they are grateful to, and the things that make them feel angry. This is where educational interventions need to remain flexible to the professional judgement of the teacher in terms of the way it is delivered. Teachers will know their students and have ideas about the best ways in which to get the most from them.

Secondly, teachers may introduce the lyrics, encourage students to discuss them and their associations, and apply the framework of virtue introduced at the beginning of the lesson to the lyrics in question. As with introducing the theory, above, it is the teacher's prerogative to choose whether this be done first or second. My intention is to foreground the rationale and educational benefits of constructing a lesson (or series of lessons) seeking to bring together the three selected lyrics, and to show how an analysis and focus on 'Thank You' with 'Stan' show how virtues and emotions overlap and combine, or even conflict.

Encouraging students to sit and read the lyrics to themselves is another obvious starting point for any lesson. Students should be given time to think about what the lyrics mean to them, how they make them feel, and what they think of the formal features of the lyrics in terms of identifying verses, choruses, bridges, hooks, etc. Students can then share their thoughts and feelings with a peer, before discussing as a class, or in small groups. This pedagogical approach is one that was adopted in 'Virtue, Vice and Verse', and one of the project researchers, Karen Bohlin, talks of the importance of students feeling involved, heard, and importantly comfortable in expressing personal feelings in front of peers (Bohlin, 2023).

In combining focuses on the formal and structural features of lyrics, with the emotional and ethical content, and the effect they may have on students, teachers can seek to hold in-depth and wide-ranging discussions, whilst not letting students feel daunted or embarrassed at expressing themselves emotionally – particularly if this is an introductory or not well-established classroom habit.

I acknowledge that the songs, whilst written different ways, for different audiences, featuring in different sub-genres of pop, and focussing on different topics, there are elements of anger that infiltrate 'Thank You', and elements of gratitude that can be easily seen in 'Stan'. Firstly, 'Thank You', as we have already seen, is a first-person narrative written in appreciation of another/others for giving the author 'the best day of my life'. That 'best day' is offset and counterbalanced by the negative description of various mundane trivialities. There is little metaphor or simile used, and whilst depression often suggests feelings of sadness and melancholy, it would not be too great of a leap to see the protagonist as angry. This would not extend to the extent of anger portrayed in 'Stan', where Stan becomes increasingly irate, irrational, blasphemous and violent through his perception that Eminem is ignoring his letters, however, the irritants described that Dido's protagonist is experiencing are suggestive or irritation, as well as sadness.

In linking two seemingly different topics between lyrics can act as a bridge between lyrics from different eras, sub-genres, different artists, or prompt discussions on different emotions, virtues, vices and how and when they may conflict or collide. In doing so, students may become more aware of scenarios where virtues do collide, or how we do not ever experience one emotion in singularity, but emotions are often clustered, temporary, and felt in response to external variables. If we look at the notions of gratitude expressed in 'Stan', by way of comparison, we know that Eminem sampled the first verse from 'Thank You', and used it as the chorus to 'Stan'

> My tea's gone cold, I'm wondering why
> I got out of bed at all
> The morning rain clouds up my window
> And I can't see at all
> And even if I could, it'd all be grey
> But your picture on my wall
> It reminds me that it's not so bad
> It's not so bad

Beginning a song that is inherently angry and violent with a sample from a song called 'Thank You' places gratitude as an important theme of the song. The structure of the song is

Eminem reading letters that he has received from a fan of his (Stan), who begins by expressing his gratitude implicitly to Eminem for the songs that he has produced. Of course, Stan's desire for a reply from Eminem, and his obsession with his life, gets out of control in the song, and he gets increasingly angry over a period that he hasn't received a reply. This anger, combined with impatience, lead him to kill himself, as well as killing his partner and unborn child, who bear the brunt of his frustrations. The timescales that the events take place over are truncated, and this structural tactic enables Eminem to make the anger a feature, as it grows and builds with each verse/letter that Stan writes. It culminates in Stan recording his murder-suicide of himself and his partner before being diffused when Eminem writes back to Stan sometime later, realising Stan's fate whilst he dictates his letter of reply. In amongst the anger, as well as in Eminem's response, are isolated moments of gratitude that each express to the other. These fulfil the triadic structure of gratitude referenced in Chapter Two, with a beneficiary, benefactor and benefit (Stan is grateful for Eminem's work, and Eminem is grateful for Stan's support). Whilst they appear as fleeting moments of positivity in an essentially negative lyric, they offer opportunities for teachers to draw contrasts between positive and negative emotions and virtues, to offer insights for students to explore moments of positivity – gratitude - when experiencing feelings of anger, or other negative emotions.

This sort of approach is one way in which practitioners can elicit discussions and conversations amongst students on matters of virtues, which are not always topics of conversation that either students or teachers find easy to engage with. The lyrics of well-known popular songs, then, can act as prompts either to introduce topics that students are not overly confident in articulating or discussing, or as ways of bringing together other discussions of virtue language, and rounding off interrogations of how and where virtue appears in narrative art. Either way, the intended aim is to help build virtue literacy levels amongst students by allowing them to practice discussing ethically challenging and emotional themes prevalent in the given lyrics, and by encouraging students to consider how example lyrics make them feel and how and when they may show the particular virtue or emotion in their lives. In bringing lyrics together that focus on different ethical themes, but still find commonalities, however discreetly they may be presented, it is possible to increase the complexity and nuance of the discussions, which can enrich the overall value of the lesson and impact on students – at least in theory. This also helps to overcome some of the criticisms that have been levelled at previous educational programmes that focussed on virtues in isolation, or in more prescriptive manners.

In addition to the above, I have advocated for a focus on critical reflection as part of building virtue literacy. I suggest that this reflection may be cultivated through a concluding activity to the lesson, where students take time to think back both on the lyrics that they have studied and what their initial reactions to them were, and how those feelings may have changed during the discussions and study. Further, the reflection can become more critical where students seek to apply virtue and emotion concepts to their own lives, at least in practice (rehearsal) or more theoretically in preparation for lived examples later. I have included a draft lesson plan (Appendix 7.2) below, which offers practitioners a model for how they may present two well-known pop lyrics on anger. The lesson plan follows a similar format to other educational interventions in introducing the narratives at hand, engaging students by reading the lyrics in isolation, then as a group, and then committing to discussing in smaller groups, and as a full class (see Guttesen, 2022; Arthur *et al*., 2014). I

have offered a guide timeline for the lesson, based on a 60min discussion. This is not intended to 'get through' all of the required content in one hour but is based on experience on the available time for an English lesson, or other available curriculum time. It may be that practitioners cover only one lyric in this time, or it may be that they encourage students to bring their own examples of lyrics to the class to discuss. The main aim is to embolden students in both discussing the ethical value that resides within such lyrics and to spend meaningful time reflecting on both the content of the lyric and how reading it made them feel as consumers. Extension activities can include encouraging students to pick up micro-themes discussed in class and create their own lyrics, or for students to present other examples from the corpus of popular music that they feel reflect similar or divergent themes.

I contend that in consciously and meaningfully focussing on the ethical content of both lyrics, so pupils are required to foreground the dilemma at play in the lyric, reason through its depiction, and description, acknowledge the emotions being expressed through the first/third person narratives and consider both how effective and affective the lyric is. With regard to virtue literacy, such a lesson structure puts the lyric at the centre of discussion, allowing and encouraging pupils to perceive the virtuous and emotional elements to the song, apply existing knowledge to unpack how and why the main characters act and feel in the ways depicted, and reason through the dilemma in an ethically salient way.

### 5.5 Overcoming Tensions Between Commercial Consumption and Serious Educational Application

I move, now, to consider how we can overcome the obvious tensions that exist between two unusual bedfellows, those of mass commercial consumption and meaningful educational application for moral progress. I established in Chapter One that the primary value of pop is commercial. There is a legitimate concern over whether something which is an overtly commercial activity, that relies on commercial consumption, and is intentionally produced to 'sell' and appear in the music charts, rather than provide educational instruction or insight, can hold any useful educational application; particularly regarding developing moral progress. Such a concern may explain why pop lyrics have not been seriously used as tools more moral education, to date, but does not hold up when other forms of mass produced and mass consumed art, such as blockbuster films and television programmes, have been.

There are serious philosophical arguments for the aesthetic and ethical values that films and tv programmes can hold, such as *The Hunger Games, Twilight* and *Breaking Bad* (see D'Olimpio, 2018; 2023 and Paris, 2023). In her chapter on 'Heroines and Sexy Victims', D'Olimpio presents an argument for expanding the range of types of female protagonists and other lead characters in films – and in this instance, in the books the films are derived from – to portray a wider and more realistic range of personalities and characters that audiences may identify with. The presentation of 'multifaceted, well-rounded and representative female characters' is something that D'Olimpio argues for. This is combined with a serious pedagogical dialogue that encourages the study of narratives in schools, and for teachers to encourage students to engage with texts and to consider how they engage with female protagonists and critically reflect on how and why they respond favourably (or unfavourably) to particular characters (D'Olimpio, Paris and Thompson, 2023: 4).

D'Olimpio focuses on the depiction of characters in narrative art, their moral qualities and how audiences engage with them. It is helpful with regard to seeing pop stars as moral exemplars. D'Olimpio argues that 'narrative artworks…play an important role in representing, perpetuating, and shaping our cultural sentiments and dominant paradigms.' (D'Olimpio, 2023: 66). D'Olimpio's focus is on the depiction and representation of female protagonists in films and television programmes and how this impacts the formation of identity in younger female audiences. This particularity (of visual narrative art, of female protagonists and of female audiences) may exclude elements of generalisation or appropriation, but I contend that D'Olimpio's approach to analysing the depiction of characters in film may be transferrable to considering pop stars, or even to how pop stars portray themselves through their lyrics. We know that young people are influenced, positively, by music artists, and that many see them as morally aspirational figures (see Hammond *et al*., 2024 for example). But we know less about why young people are impressed by the character traits of pop stars, and which character traits in particular.

There are definite crossovers between the philosophical insights that others have presented about different narrative arts, such as television, film, story and poetry, and the case I am making for pop lyrics. D'Olimpio suggests that films with strong female leads, as well as being atypical, can offer insights for young people in terms of developing their identities and seeking exemplars, I contend that pop lyrics do something different. I acknowledge that studying the ethical value of pop lyrics can help develop virtue literacy, particularly where a definition of virtue literacy is extended to include virtue emotion and reflection. As above, this is done by foregrounding ethical content and emotional responses of characters within lyrics, as identified through a close reading of lyrics and analysis of the poetic and aesthetic features that enable and facilitate the content. Pupils are then offered opportunities to debate and discuss the effectiveness of emotional and ethical content and its potential impact on them as consumers in ways that is not done through personal consumption of pop music. This includes consideration of potential emotional affect and how pupils may respond to dilemmas but is rooted in a time bound opportunity to reflect on lyrical content and emotional affect. Using pop lyrics in this way does not place unrealistic demands or expectations on pupils still in formative stages of their lives to act virtuously after listening to pop songs or reading lyrics, but offers a form of sterilised environment in which to develop their own knowledge and understanding of virtue and emotion, how well it is presented in song form and reflect upon how they may act in an equivalent situation.

Additional benefits exist in the use of pop lyrics for moral education, such as considering the pop stars that perform the songs being studied and considering if and how such pop stars could be seen as moral exemplars, or help young people shape their identities. Such extensions beyond the close reading of lyrics with the pedagogical intention of building virtue literacy provide more educational gravitas to using pop lyrics in the classroom. This extends the consideration of ethical value and aesthetic value to include cultural value, where young people can debate the influence that popstars have on their lives, ethically, or otherwise.

Further, as Paris argues in his 2023 chapter from the same volume, the potential for moral insights rests not only with films (and books, as we have seen already), but in television programmes and series as well. Paris argues that television shows that depict both virtuous and vicious acts, dwell upon ethically salient matters, and depict characters who are morally questionable can help us improve our levels of ethical reflection. Paris writes from a

philosophical perspective but makes claims for an educational application. Paris argues that television shows are often characterised by an '*elenctic pattern*: a sustained sequence of affirmation and questioning of both the moral dimension of characters and events, and our own reactions to them.' Paris, 2023: 5).

These examples highlight the continued crossover of interest between educationalists and philosophers in matters related to character and the arts. They also highlight how popular, mass produced, and mass consumed modes of art are starting to be given serious philosophical attention with consideration given to mass and popular art's educational application especially with respect to students' moral development. Similarly, I make the case for pop music. Despite significant differences in structure, form and presentation of ethical content between movies, television shows and pop music, there is also a consistency in advocating for the educational use of all three.

Paris' advocation that television shows, through their structure, visual depiction and 'narrative malleability' can aid and enhance ethical reflection is important. Paris does not incorporate explicit reference to virtue literacy in his chapter, however, his argument that mass art can aid moral reflection is helpful, here. Paris argues that television shows, particularly serialised ones such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* offer prolonged and sophisticated settings for the study of character and virtue. This is achieved through protagonists and other characters who, over time, the audience invests moral and emotional energies in, and script writers and producers respond to public appraisals of characters by either defending them and writing scenes that entrench their moral traits or respond to public calls to change them. Such narrative malleability is, for Paris, why television shows hold such 'potential to contribute to our moral thought and so, ultimately, our character.' (Paris, 2023: 105).

I have argued for the study of pop lyrics in isolation in this thesis, isolated from both their music and from context and other background relevant to the performer, writer, producer, other songs on the album, etc. However, such additional variables have the enormous potential to help extend and deepen our contextual understanding and appreciation of pop lyrics in a similar way to when we consider television shows (such as every season of *Mad Men*, or *The Sopranos*). This would, as Paris argues for television shows, provide greater opportunity to interrogate specific lyrics, question the use of terms and metaphors in new ways, appraise the depiction of themes and scenarios with greater empathy and perhaps even to adjudge pop stars to be moral exemplars with more certainty and understanding. This is neither necessary in one breath, nor possible with all example lyrics in another, however, our levels of empathy towards Dido are certainly increased when we understand that she was suffering a bout of depression when she wrote the lyrics to 'Thank You'. Such context can change the way we, as the audience, view the lyrics, interpret them, and even how we appreciate them. Lyrics can take on greater depth, and if they elicit greater empathy from us, perhaps we appreciate them more so than if we had heard the song once on the radio.

The growing seriousness with which philosophers and educationalists are treating mass art with is suggestive of a shift in thinking which is less dismissive of mass and commercial art than previously. Indeed, as I contend, the pervious views of art sitting in a hierarchy, with mass and pop art towards the bottom, and fine and classical art towards the top is becoming somewhat outdated. That is not to dismiss that such a hierarchical classification of works of art out of hand, however, in terms of educational application, interest to young

people, and accessibility in schools, there are a number of merits to studying popular and commercial art, and pop lyrics in particular.

This has sought to address some of the tensions that lie between commercial consumption and an educational application. The use of pop music in an educational context is not new – there are hundreds of examples of workshops and programmes that utilise pop's commercial appeal to engage students in various aspects of educational learning (I have previously referenced the Mac Makes Music programme, but see also Green, 2006; Lawrence, 2015; Allsopp, 2019). These programmes mostly relate to music theory and music education, though. There is congruence amongst practitioners that introducing pop music can (although it is not guaranteed to) provide a creative strategy to grab the attention of students, as well as providing real life connections and provide 'a method to activate emotions, to ready the class for learning.' (Allsopp, 2019). This can help students improve recall and retention of knowledge, albeit often regarding music theory, rather than virtue literacy.

I addressed some of the tensions that exist in the field of aesthetics regarding the aesthetic value that pop lyrics hold and the commercial value that drives the production of pop and concluded there that is both sufficient aesthetic qualities and ethical value to warrant advocating for greater exploration of pop lyrics as potential tools for moral insight and development. In educational terms, I contend that they are valuable tools for the classroom. There is already student interest in popular music. The lyrics that are selected for use in the classroom are crucial in terms of the ways in which they convey themes and emotions (and how affectively they do so). The corpus of pop is incredibly broad, and continues to grow, that the work teachers can do is to introduce students to the idea of hearing and reading pop lyrics with a critical and virtue-led lens, over and above listening to pop songs for pleasure. Pop lyrics provide a ready-made, familiar and popularised base for teachers to discuss relevant virtue themes would be a good point to add. Given that the students are already engaged with pop songs and their themes (and hold affection for the popstars who sing them), then it makes sense to bring discussions about them into the safe protected space of the classroom. This can encourage virtue literacy to develop; through noticing the ethical content within a lyric and/or the emotional response evoked on hearing the song, analysing the language used in the lyric to discuss how the ethical content is presented, discussing what (if any) emotions are aroused, and encouraging meaningful reflection on the lyrics and on what they mean to us as consumers. This increases our engagement with popular lyrics and provides familiar content on which to reflect on questions of virtue and emotion, as well as perception and understanding, which is how I have defined virtue literacy.

The tensions that exist between commercial consumption, mass art and any meaningful educational application, which I have addressed above, may be overcome because pop is already being enjoyed by teachers and students alike. There is a tension that exists between the celebration of popular culture and pop music's place as a source of inspiration and identity for young people and the perceived negative impact that it may have on behaviours and perceptions. This is a longstanding tension that has been levied at popstars who engage in nefarious behaviours or sing about vicious content (see throughout the history of pop with Elvis Presley, The Beatles, The Sex Pistols, NWA, Eminem and Plan B). Sometimes, this concern is legitimate and responsible teachers and parents may seek to shield younger children from the coarse lyrics of gangster rap, or the controversial acts of Sid Vicious and

Marilyn Manson. However, pop provides a rich and diverse playground of virtue and vice and all types of positive and negative emotions that it is important to navigate these challenges, rather than dismiss pop as banal, nefarious, repetitive, etc.

I provide a positive account for pop as an educationally useful tool which embraces pop's influence on young people, culture and global society. This is done in terms of pop's influence on more positive aspects of youth development and culture, and specifically, regarding virtue literacy and moral development, pop lyrics are an under used resource and an underexplored area of research. As I will conclude below, I believe that this bringing together of commercially valuable and successful popular music and serious philosophical attention and educational application is both novel and can be effective.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, there are only a small number of definitions and conceptions of virtue literacy that exist. Almost all of those are drawn from or applied to educational programmes that use narrative art (exclusively stories and poetry) to raise virtue literacy levels in students. There only a small number of agreed features across these definitions with regard to what virtue literacy is, which can be summarised as

- perceiving that a situation requires a virtue-led response;
- holding knowledge and understanding of both virtue terminology and of how to recognise them (in relation to narratives and in real life); and
- developing the ability to reason with deliberation at how to navigate situations and scenarios that require use of virtues.

In terms of practicing virtue, schools are well placed to support and guide students (through teaching, ethos and intervention) in how to act well in any given situation, how to develop a fluency in their virtue literacy, and a confidence in expressing it. That said, there should be no expectation placed on schools to develop fully virtue literate young people during their time in the classroom. This should be seen as a lifelong journey, where opportunities to act virtuously are celebrated. In this chapter, I have sought to refocus virtue practice in education as rehearsal for real life, as opportunities to perfect and apply one's growing virtue literacy into acts of virtue.

Active and deliberative reflection can aid virtue literacy. I suggest pop lyrics are well-placed tools for reflecting and perfecting understanding and comprehension of virtue and how it informs one's virtuous actions, thus making critical reflection more explicit in the definition of virtue literacy that I present.

This new definition is intended to capture the essence of virtue literacy as an educational aim to help students flourish. Where we see schooling (mainstream and alternative provision) as a formative process, preparing us for the realities of life that exist beyond our initial educational journeys, so we can see virtue practice in school as preparative rehearsals for action in the real world. Therefore, virtue practice could come as a stepping stone between acquiring a virtue literacy, and virtue action. The school environment offers opportunities for students to practice virtue through active engagement with narrative texts in the classroom, through engaged discussions, and through continued deliberation and thought beyond the lessons, engaging additional stakeholders such as parents, friends and family.

Pop music is unashamedly commercialised. The emotional and ethical issues that it embraces through its lyrics, the place in society that it holds position it uniquely amongst other types of mass and narrative art. That unique position is under-researched and under-appreciated both philosophically and educationally. I have turned to examples of both philosophical research and educational programmes that have embraced narrative art as tools for moral development. There are learnings from those studies which we can apply to pop lyrics, without diminishing the unique, short form, easily accessible and vastly popular aspects of pop songs.

I acknowledge the limitations of my theoretical proposal for using pop lyrics to develop virtue literacy. My theoretical argument builds upon both existing philosophical arguments and separate empirical studies. Undertaking empirical work using pop lyrics to develop virtue literacy would address limitations, but such work needs careful consideration in terms of what data would be collected and how researchers may measure any change in levels of virtue literacy of students. Previous studies have used stories, but the limitations of the measurement tools used in those studies act as a warning that measuring virtue literacy levels, and how such levels change due to a short-term educational intervention may not always be accurate, nor beneficial.

In spite of these criticisms and concerns, pop artists and songwriters are prolific, high profile and accessible to young people. They put out content regularly, content which embraces themes of cultural and ethical value, intended to engage us emotionally in relatable ways. I contend that pop lyrics can prompt in-depth discussions in the classroom (on matters of ethics, aesthetics and other topics) primarily because they are so popular and familiar to students. Further, they cover topics that schools may otherwise find difficult to teach or introduce to young people at formative and impressionable times of their lives, such as relationships, vice and cultural events and issues. Further, lyrics can offer a gateway or enhancement to studying poetry as they often embrace topics seen throughout canonised poetry, celebrate the human condition, express grief, anger and other negative emotions, and do so through metaphor, rhyme and other poetic techniques in popularised and endearing forms. It can and should be decoded and analysed in similar ways to that which we analyse pageborn poetry, and doing so can allow students to confront and reflect upon the ethical content that may reside within the lyric, and the emotional and ethical affect that the lyric may have on the student.

As such a popular form of mass art, consumed by millions of people and listened to in vast quantities, I contend that the literary significance of pop is supported by pop's cultural, aesthetic and ethical significance, which add to its educational potential, as I have described above. I conclude this chapter with an example lesson plan (7.2), below, for how pop lyrics can be taught in the classroom to develop virtue literacy.

# Conclusion

## 6.1 Is there an ethical value to the lyrics of pop songs?

I began this thesis by introducing the four categories of value that we ascribe to popular music, those being commercial value, cultural value, aesthetic value and ethical value. This explicit articulation of ethical value considers pop songs that embrace morally and ethically salient themes through content and expression and how the aesthetic properties of pop songs can enhance the ethical content, bringing it to the attention of listeners. Scholarly insights into the philosophy of pop music are timely, given the recent publications by Stone (2016), Bradley (2017), Robb and Mills (2025), amongst others.

Having positioned the four categories of value of pop, I have explored ethical value in greater depth, as well as considering how value categories interact with one another for the overall benefit of the aesthetic value that we ascribe to the lyric.

## 6.2 How do pop lyrics engage us emotionally?

In Chapters Two and Three, I used the definitions of aesthetic and ethical value that I posited in Chapter One to look at how each interacts with the other. I explored aesthetic value in greater detail in terms of how it is considered in the field of aesthetics, and how including an ethical dimension to our understanding of aesthetic value is useful regarding understanding how lyrics engage us ethically and emotionally.

I introduced the notion of virtuous emotions, as understood by Kristjánsson (2018), and looked in detail at the virtuous emotions of gratitude (as a positive emotion) and anger (as a negative emotion), how we understand them as virtuous, and citing examples from pop that convey each emotion in different ways, to different levels of engagement and affect. In Chapter Four, I have used a case study approach to offer close readings of two lyrics that focus on gratitude and one lyric that contemplates anger as precursors to the lesson plan offered as an appendix to Chapter Five, as a way of showing the education application that I propose is possible and, indeed, needed to embrace the interactions between the aesthetic properties and ethical content of pop lyrics.

## 6.3 How do we access the educational potential of pop lyrics as tools for emotion education and moral development?

In Chapter Five, I have considered existing definitions of virtue literacy – where there are few articulated and inconsistency between those that exist. I have proposed a more encompassing definition that explicitly includes virtue emotion as a component, therefore acknowledging the affective nature of narrative literature, particularly pop lyrics. Further, in using pop lyrics in deliberate and meaningful curriculum time devoted to moral development provides opportunity to meaningfully reflect not only on the deep reading of the lyrics, but also the application of ethical value to their own life.

I argue that the commercial value and its prioritisation within pop music need not detract from the ethical value that many pop lyrics hold, and, therefore, the ethical educational potential for using such lyrics in the classroom is not diminished. I have argued that it is the commercial success of pop music, its position in everyday lives of young people, and the

influence that popstars have on the formative identities of young people that warrant greater investigation, especially with regard to moral development of those consuming it.

## 6.4 Recommendations for further research

Here, I propose three ways in which the work of this thesis could be extended or developed to further contribute to related fields of scholarship. Sitting at the intersection of multiple definitions leaves a number of under- and unexplored areas worthy of further investigation. This theoretical thesis has presented definitions for commercial, cultural, aesthetic and ethical value, as well as a revised definition of virtue literacy, as mentioned above. Therefore, the first recommendation for further study is to employ this revised definition as part of an educational intervention that uses pop lyrics in the classroom for young people to engage with, analyse and reflect upon their ethical content emotional affect. An approach to developing an intervention akin to *Knightly Virtues* and *Narnian Virtues* can build upon their successes in the classroom, but offer a more comprehensive, developed conception of virtue literacy, explicitly considering emotion as a component of virtue literacy and providing adequate opportunity for participants to reflect upon the moral impact that considering pop lyrics in detail can have.

Second, the understanding of popstars as figures of moral influence on young people is, at best, underexplored. There is empirical work that shows, via self-reports, that young people admit that popstars are a positive moral influence on their sense of purpose and living a good life, but the reasons for this and the nuances between why some popstars are perceived to be of greater moral influence than others has not been considered in any detail (see Arthur *et al*., 2017; Hammond *et al*., 2024). Where the influence of popstars on the identity of young people has been explored, it often avoids any notion of popstars as moral exemplars, and considers more amoral conceptions of aspiration (see Mendick *et al*., 2018). I propose that an extension of this study would be to look at how young people value lyrics by a particular artist and the interaction between lyrics and popstar identity, particularly with globally popular, multi-billion selling artists that appeal across age ranges, genders and sub-cultures.

Thirdly, I propose that an extension of this study would be to consider the lyrics of popular music in discrete time periods, or from particular artists to look at whether or not ethical value changes over time, or is different at different stages of an artist's career. I argue for this in a similar way to that I presented on the poetry of Swinburne in my MPhil thesis, where I was able to demonstrate Swinburne's changing priorities, politics and cultural influence over his career (Thompson, 2015). It would be worthwhile doing something similar with artists such as Michael Jackson, Madonna or Kanye West, who have had long-term careers, embraced musical creativity and courted controversy, whilst remaining popular. I recommend that studying a popstar's back catalogue, it would be possible to develop rich and in-depth insights into how particular artists retain commercial success whilst embracing different ethical and aesthetic themes.

## 6.5 Conclusion

I began this thesis by quoting BBC Radio 1 DJ Jack Saunders claiming that pop music provides a 'soundtrack to our lives'. In doing this successfully, pop not only needs to be catchy, memorable and interesting, but engage listeners on a deeper, more affective level, through its music, but mainly its lyrics. Pop as a lyrical genre engages us through rhyme, melody, structure and content, and the affect and impact that pop lyrics can have on young people in the formative periods of their lives should not be underestimated.

This engagement is often restricted by the temporal nature of pop, contained as it often is by critics and media by decade and by year, which can limit what each generation of young person listens to. Such is the commercial pursuit of pop executives, artists and other stakeholders to relentlessly go after the 'next big hit', that intergenerational analysis of songs that we did not grow up with is rare. Regarding the educational application that this thesis has sought to argue for, this becomes plausible where educators select songs from the corpus of pop that have held commercial success across decades, produced in different cultural environments, yet retain a gravitas and popularity across generations.

In sum, then, I have argued that pop lyrics do hold ethical value, through the content and themes that they embrace, and enhanced by the emotional affect such content has on us as listeners and consumers. Commercially successful pop songs engage us through the themes and content present within the lyrics and through the aesthetic structures that contain such themes. These structures and aesthetic form are often highly crafted, even if it is simple in appearance. Simple rhymes and formulaic structures house deeply honest and ethically challenging themes. I have sought to draw on examples from across the pop corpus to reflect the longstanding time period with which pop has engaged us, as well as cite examples from as many of the subgenres of pop that exist. I will close with this line, though, that I feel encompasses much of the arguments presented above. It is from a song by Babyshambles, the spin off band from Peter Doherty on leaving The Libertines. The song's title 'F*ck Forever' encompasses the song's main message of resentment at relationships that didn't last, at a society that doesn't value people and at a political landscape where young wannabe voters can see little difference between what political parties stand for. The lyric in question indicates at a tendency to react in the moment out of frustration and value short-termism over longer term outlooks. This is vital in moral development, which should be seen as a lifelong pursuit of wisdom, not a short-term quick fix. 'I'm so clever / But clever ain't wise.'

# Appendices

## 7.1 Appendix One – Case study lyrics

### *7.1.i 'Thank You' – Dido lyrics*

My tea's gone cold, I'm wondering why
I got out of bed at all
The morning rain clouds up my window
And I can't see at all
And even if I could, it'd all be gray
But your picture on my wall
It reminds me that it's not so bad
It's not so bad

I drank too much last night, got bills to pay
My head just feels in pain
I missed the bus and there'll be hell today
I'm late for work again
And even if I'm there, they'll all imply
That I might not last the day
And then you call me
And it's not so bad, it's not so bad

And I want to thank you
For giving me the best day of my life
Oh, just to be with you
Is having the best day of my life

Push the door, I'm home at last
And I'm soaking through and through
Then you handed me a towel
And all I see is you
And even if my house falls down now
I wouldn't have a clue
Because you're near me

And I want to thank you
For giving me the best day of my life
Oh, just to be with you
Is having the best day of my life
And I want to thank you
For giving me the best day of my life
Oh, just to be with you
Is having the best day of my life

### *7.1.ii 'Grateful' – Kelly Clarkson lyrics*

You know my soul
You know everything about me there's to know
You know my heart
How to make me stop and how to make me go
You should know I love everything about you, don't you know?

That I'm thankful
For the blessing
And the lessons that I've learned with you
By my side
That I'm thankful, so thankful for the love
That you keep bringing in my life
In my life
Thankful, so thankful

You know my thoughts
Before I open up my mouth and try to speak
You know my dreams
Must be listening when I'm talking in my sleep
I hope you know
I love havin' you around me, don't you know? Yeah

That I'm thankful
For the blessing
And the lessons that I've learned with you
By my side
That I'm thankful, so thankful for the love
That you keep bringing in my life
In my life

Don't you know that I'm thankful for the moment?
When I'm down, you always know how to make me smile
Thankful for the joy that you're bringing into my life

For the lessons that I've learned
For the trouble I've known
For the heartache and pain thrown in my way
When I didn't think I could go on
But you made me feel strong
With you, I am never alone
Thankful, so thankful

That I'm thankful
For the blessing

And the lessons that I've learned with you
By my side
That I'm thankful, so thankful for the love
That you keep bringing in my life
In my life

When I'm down, you always know how to make me smile
Thankful for the joy that you're bringing into my life, in my life
Thankful, so thankful
Thankful, so thankful

*7.1.iii ‘Seventeen Going Under’ – Sam Fender lyrics*

I remember the sickness was forever
I remember snuff videos
Cold Septembers, the distances we covered
The fist fights on the beach, the bizzies round us up
Do it all again next week
An embryonic love
The first time that it scarred
Embarrass yourself for someone
Crying like a child
And the boy who kicked Tom's head in
Still bugs me now
That's the thing, it lingers
And claws you when you're down

I was far too scared to hit him
But I would hit him in a heartbeat now
That's the thing with anger
It begs to stick around
So it can fleece you of your beauty
And leave you spent with nowt to offer
Makes you hurt the ones who love you

You hurt them like they're nothing
(Oh, oh)
You hurt them like they're nothing
(Oh, oh)
You hurt them like they're nothing
(Oh, oh)

See I spent my teens enraged
Spiralin' in silence
And I armed myself with a grin
'Cause I was always the fuckin' joker

Buried in their humor
Amongst the white noise and boys' boys
Locker-room talkin' lads' lads
Drenched in cheap drink and snide fags
A mirrored picture of my old man
Oh God, the kid's a dab hand
Canny chanter, but he looks sad

God, the kid looks so sad
God, the kid looks so sad

She said the debt, the debt, the debt
So I thought about shifting gear
And how she wept and wept and wept
Well, luck came and died 'round here
I see my mother
The DWP see a number
She cries on the floor encumbered
I'm seventeen going under

I'm seventeen going under
(Oh, oh)
I'm seventeen going under (oh, oh)
(Oh, oh)
I'm seventeen going under (oh, oh)
(Oh, oh)
I'm seventeen going under (oh, oh)
(Oh, oh)
(Oh)

## 7.2 Appendix Two – Example lesson plan

***Guide Lesson Plan for teaching pop lyrics on gratitude and anger***

This lesson plan follows a typical format for a 55-60min lesson, where teachers introduce the core concept at hand (anger), before introducing the stimuli (the pop lyrics), which are read in silence, before being read aloud to the class. Once the readings are complete, students are encouraged to discuss the presentation of the virtuous emotion, before the teacher facilitates a wider discussion on anger in pop, including how students understand the emotion and how the lyrics have (or have not) affected them. Finally, the teacher will bring the discussion together by asking students to conclude on how effective the lyrics discussed are at presenting the virtuous emotion. Extension activities of writing their own lyrics, or identifying other popular songs on the same theme are offered. This lesson plan draws inspiration from and is derivative of and a development from lesson plans in the *Knightly Virtues* research project (see Arthur *et al*., 2014), as well as by Karen Bohlin (2023).

| Teacher: | | |
|---|---|---|
| Class: | Date: | Duration of lesson: 55-60min |
| Aim: For students to read and engage with the lyrics of Sam Fender 'Seventeen Going Under' and Eminem 'Stan' and engage in small group and full class discussions on the presentation of the virtuous emotion anger. | Lesson materials:<br><br>Access to lyrics of 'Seventeen Going Under' and 'Stan', either for individual use, or to be seen by the whole class. | |
| Student Expectations: That students can offer a suitable definition of what anger is, situations which have made them feel angry, and ability to identify language that expresses anger in the lyrics as well as any reflective moments within each lyric that consider the implications of being angry and acting with anger. | Teacher Expectations: To be comfortable in describing different times in which we may feel or show anger. To be comfortable discussing the two lyrics and be able to cite how and where anger and other virtues and emotions may appear within each lyric, should students struggle to identify them. To make a case for anger as a virtuous emotion, rather than only as a negative vice. | |
| Lesson content:<br><br>Time: 10min | a) Introduce the virtuous emotion of anger, and ask students to write a | Follow this up by presenting the following definition of anger: |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | short, one line definition for it. Ask them to do this individually without discussion. Ask them then to write one example of what makes them angry, or a moment when they have experienced being angry. | Anger is an emotion that one feels when you perceive that someone has done something, or something has been done, that intentionally wrongs or disadvantages you. This may results from being threatened or attacked; feeling frustrated or powerless; if we have been invalidated; or if we have not been treated with respect. |
| Time:<br><br>5mins to read, 10mins to discuss | b) Ask students to read the lyrics to Sam Fender 'Seventeen Going Under' in silence. Ask for one student to then read the lyrics allowed to the whole group. | Ask students to discuss in small groups<br>i) How the lyrics made them feel<br>ii) How and where anger is expressed in the lyrics |
| Time:<br><br>5mins to read, 10mins to discuss | c) Ask students to read the lyrics to Eminem 'Stan' in silence. Ask for one student to then read the lyrics allowed to the whole group. | Ask students to discuss in small groups<br>i) How the lyrics made them feel<br>ii) How and where anger is expressed in the lyrics |
| Time:<br><br>13-15min | d) Ask students to comment on any cultural or relevant additional points about each/both lyrics. Were they already familiar with each? Had they considered anger as a theme or each lyric? What do they know about Sam Fender/Eminem that might give additional context as to each lyric? | In addition, extend the discussion on each lyric so that students consider both lyrics. Can they compare/contrast the presentation of anger within each lyric?<br>Are there any other virtue terms or concepts within each lyric? Can they identify them and evidence them with reference to particular phrases? How effective is each lyric in this regard? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Time:<br><br>5-7min | e) In small groups, but brought together at the end of the lesson for a group discussion, ask students to discuss and write down how anger is presented differently between the two lyrics. Is one more effective than the other. | Challenge students to think of different types of anger, and consider whether any/all are 'virtuous' in their presentation.<br><br>Ask students to reflect on how the lyric made them feel and how and when they may show anger outside of the classroom. |
| Extension/Homework | f) Ask students to write their own lyric/poem on the theme of anger. Ask them to consider what makes them angry, and how they feel when writing the lyric. | As an additional extension, ask students to either analyse their own lyrics or, if comfortable doing so, swap with a peer and analyse another's lyric and consider how anger is presented and to what effect. |

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