Within the Interpretation of Dreams:
A Freudian Reading of Nick Hornby’s High Fidelity
Abstract:

“To be, or not to be” surely constitutes a strange walk on the tight rope between delusion and reality, and apparently, Robert Fleming is a man with immense problems. Who is Ziggy Stardust, and who is Stephen Dedalus? Is it relevant to claim that there is more of David Bowie’s true personality inside Ziggy than of, for instance Charles Dickens’ great expectations within Pip? By examining Nick Hornby’s novel *High Fidelity* and it’s main character from a Freudian perspective using Freud’s theories and ideas of the oedipal concept, this is basically a plain attempt in search for a better psychological knowledge and understanding of the musical world of illusion, which finally ends up in a serious effort to interpret the true and inner meanings of Rob’s dreams and personality.
Introduction................................................................................................................... 4
Repression, Repetition and Returns ................................................................. 6
Music, Dreams and Reality.............................................................. 14
Music and Identity................................................................. 18
Conclusion ................................................................................................. 23
Introduction

A couple of weeks ago I went out and bought myself a brand new CD at a local record shop in town. I am a person with a fairly large record collection and a great love and sincere passion for almost all kinds of music and therefore this was not anything unusual for me. The interesting thing about this incident was that when I was about to pay for the record, the man behind the counter sprang out in joy and told me that finally there was somebody out there with the tremendous taste and will to buy this excellent record. The man then went on and on about this favourite record of his, and told me almost everything about it. As a matter of fact, I had just happened to be introduced to it through a TV-show the very same morning and therefore simply decided to buy it just to find out if the rest of the album was as good as the song they performed on the show.

As I talked to the man behind the counter and then as I was walking out of the store, I felt a strong sense of satisfaction due to the fact that someone had flattered me on my music taste, but on my way home my feelings were mixed up and I started to think about Rob, Barry and Dick, the three characters who run a record shop in Nick Hornby’s novel *High Fidelity*. The fact that the man in the shop gave me credit for my excellent music taste could of course simply be seen as proof of my good taste, but it could also indicate that I am as strange and entrapped as some of Hornby’s characters.

The main purpose with this paper is therefore to examine the main character in *High Fidelity* in order to find out why he behaves in the way he does. Why is Rob so afraid of commitment and responsibility, and what marks does this leave on his personality? In his struggle for an adult identity, Rob is constantly fighting his frustration over broken relationships and his fear of obligations, new initiatives and hard decisions. Out of his music he has created a world of his own where he is able to blast out almost all these sources of worry, but also a world that prevents him from getting anywhere. In this world of fantasy,
Rob has developed a special conversation technique in which he constantly keeps referring to various songs, lyrics and albums, but also a love for trying to judge the immeasurable. *Got To Get You Off My Mind* by Solomon Burke is one of Rob’s all-time favourite songs but what is it that Rob so desperately wants to get off his mind?

The novel is split up into two sections; in the first part, labelled “Then” Rob is giving Laura, although she will probably never know it, his detailed story of his most memorable split-ups, and in the second part, labelled “Now,” Rob is narrating his present ordinary everyday life. At Championship Vinyl Rob is accompanied by his two employees and friends Dick and Barry, both in their early thirties. Dick is a silent, withdrawn and quite repressed man while Barry is a real bully terrorising especially Dick all the time. Rob is not as antisocial as the others and he is also the only one who seems to have some form of an existing life outside the shop. *High Fidelity* is therefore simply a book about a somewhat confused man in his mid-thirties who owns and runs a small, well-stocked second-hand record shop somewhere in London. This image of a middle-aged man striving to become an adult is a topic Hornby initially brought up in his first novel, *Fever Pitch* from 1992 which deals with a fanatic Arsenal fan named Paul who arranges everything in his life around the club, in many ways similar to Rob’s arrangements around music. In *31 Songs*, a more recent book by Hornby, not only the author’s own great personal passion for football and Arsenal becomes obvious, but also his extreme love and obsession for music and its characters. Considering the fact that both Rob and Paul are fictive characters, the main character in *31 Songs* is thus no one else than Hornby himself. In *Repetition, Repression, and Return: The Plotting of Great Expectations*, Peter Brooks asks how significant plots can be found for our lives, and how we make life narratable. In both *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity* Hornby has created fictive characters to generate plots around, but in *31 Songs* he himself has to return to the scene in order to continue and finishing off his stories in a strictly autobiographical form.

As the novel begins, Rob is listing his five all-time most memorable split-ups addressing Laura. She is his latest girlfriend from whom he is just about to separate and by listing his worst split-ups without including her, he is trying to convince himself that this is not the end of the world. Nevertheless, the rest of the story centres to a great extent on Rob’s quest for getting her back. The climax of the novel is when Laura’s father dies. Rob is then invited to attend the funeral, and after that Rob and Laura become a couple again. She moves back to live with him and she even arranges for him in secrecy to pick up his old and much desired job as a DJ at a dance club named Groucho where he used to work a couple of years ago. Everything ends happily and Rob believes that he has become a different man, but is he
really all that changed? To be able to study Rob’s personality in great detail his behaviour and personality will be analysed from a psychological point of view. For this purpose I will refer to the theories developed by Sigmund Freud.

One sees how conveniently the dream can arrange things: since its only objective is wish-fulfilment it can be completely egoistical.

Sigmund Freud – The Interpretation of Dreams (99)

**Repression, Repetition and Returns**

“Is it possible to maintain a relationship and a large record collection simultaneously?” (123). In Rob’s case that is a really good question. His record collection is just not an ordinary one; to him, it is his life. He could basically relive his whole life through his records and he even says that by rearranging them in a chronological order based upon the date he bought them, he could actually write his autobiography without even picking up a pen. In addition, arranging his records in this way makes it absolutely impossible for anyone else to find a specific record, and that is exactly the way he likes it because it means that he is the only one in control of it. Controlling his record collection means controlling his life and then he is the only one in command, or at least that is what he wants to believe. Reliving old and unpleasant memories through his record collection could in this case work as a method of controlling feelings of horror and fear and mastering the situation.

According to Rob, he and his mother switched places when he was about nine years old. Rob thinks that he took his mother’s role and that she took his but exactly what he means by that statement is vague. Rob’s mother seems to be a typical, traditional mother, quite troubled by her son’s problems but as long as he tells her that he is okay, she does not worry that much. Rob seems to be an only child or at least he does not mention any siblings. He grew up in a London suburb close to Watford, and according to himself, it is a suburb just like any other in England and he seems to have had a happy childhood. Nevertheless, he is very glad to have moved to London where he starts a new life and leaves the little boy back in the suburbs. He says that he left everything behind, which is particularly important when it comes to his relationship with girls as he does not want them to know that he has a past. “In Bruce Springsteen songs, you can either stay and rot, or you can escape and burn” (105-6), but the way he sees it himself, Rob did both.
At first he seems to have a relatively normal relationship with his parents, but if you look more closely, it appears that Rob is rather uncomfortable with his father in some ways. He is not a person Rob looks up to and there are not many qualities within his father’s personality that he really appreciates or even likes. “My dad is a bit dim but something of a know-all, which is a pretty fatal combination; you can tell from his silly, fussy beard that he’s going to be the sort who doesn’t talk much sense and won’t listen to any reason. My mum is just a mum” (106). This statement could of course be passed off as irrelevant but in this case it is presumably strictly honest. Another similar and perhaps even better example to illustrate this kind of father and son-relationship could be found in the movie Rebel Without a Cause, in which a young and rebellious James Dean plainly describes his family situation. “They eat [Dad] alive… they make mush out of him, just mush, if he had the guts to knock Mum cold once, then she’d be happy and stop picking on him” (qtd in The Sex Revolt: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock’n’Roll 6). Even if this comparison between Rob and Jim Stark, alias James Dean, may seem farfetched, it is meant to illustrate that Rob’s father is a relatively weak character and that Rob’s mother is the dominating party in his parent’s relationship and therefore also the one who has had, and still has the greatest impact on Rob.

The protagonist Pip, narrator in Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations, is a young man who could be seen as someone going through roughly the same experience as Rob. Pip is an orphan raised by his dominant and abusive older sister Mrs. Joe, and her weak and oppressed husband Joe Gargery, who also functions as his closest father figure. Pip’s life is dominated by a great struggle to make something really good and respectable out of himself, as well as by an internal fight between Estella and Biddy, the two women in his life. Biddy is a simple, kind-hearted country girl belonging to Pip’s own social class, while Estella on the other hand, is a cold, cruel and beautiful upper-class girl who represents an unattainable dream to him throughout the novel. Just like Pip, Rob is dissatisfied with what he has, and even if it is more than enough for him, he constantly and desperately strives for the extreme and unattainable without thinking too much of his conditions and the consequences of his actions. Just as in Rob’s case, a slight taste of dislike against taking responsibility could be found in Pip’s personality but also a strong tendency to blame others as well as ingredients of self-pity and victimization that, from a psychoanalytic point of view, suggests elements of male narcissism (Hilary Schor, “‘If He Should Turn to and Beat Her’: Violence, Desire, and the Woman’s story in Great Expectations” 548). “What could I become with these surroundings? How could my character fail to be influenced by them? Is it to be wondered at if my thoughts were
dazed, as my eyes were, when I came out into the natural light from the misty yellow rooms?” (Great Expectations 90).

Like Pip, Rob frequently has to return to specific events and persons in the plot to straiten things out in order to move on with his life. This is perhaps most evident when Rob decides to contact his former girlfriends from his top-five list. “Wouldn’t that be great? If I saw all of them in turn and there were no hard feelings left, just soft, squidy feelings, Brie rather than old hard Parmesan, I’d feel clean, and calm, and ready to start again” (122). This brilliant idea is of course not his own, but inspired by his world of music where Springsteen does it all the time.

Well, I’d like my life to be like a Bruce Springsteen song. Just once. I know I’m not born to run, I know that Seven Sisters Road is nothing like Thunder Road, but feelings can’t be so different, can they? I’d like to phone all those people up and say good luck, and goodbye, and then they’d feel good and I’d feel good. We’d all feel good. That would be good. Great even. (122)

Texts could be seen as containing energy, and therefore repetitions are used as a binding of energy which is shaped by the images of desire, expectations, doubts, suspense, reversals, revaluations, disappointments, embarrassments, fulfilments and even the incoherences animated by reading. According to Peter Brooks, in “Repetition, Repression, and Return: The Plotting of Great Expectations,” the repetitions in Great Expectations could be used as both returns to and returns of.

For instance, returns to origins and returns of the repressed, moving us forward in Pip’s journey toward elucidation, disillusion, and maturity by taking us back, as if in obsessive reminder that we cannot really move ahead until we have understood that still enigmatic past, yet ever pushing us forward, since revelation, tied to the past, belongs to the future. (488-90)

Brooks states that repetition is a form of recollection that appears when uncomfortable memories have been blocked by repression. Similarly, meeting his former girlfriends, Rob feels that he is able to move on. According to Freud, dreams repeatedly bring the dreamer back into situations of traumatic incidents or a possible accident. People who suffer from traumatic neurosis seldom occupy themselves with memories of their past during their waking lives; instead they are concerned with not thinking of them at all. This condition could lead to
a situation where the traumatic memories develop into dreams of secret wishes and imaginary scenes of pleasure merely to replace and repress painful remembrances of the past. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud gives an example of a little boy who, in the absence of his mother, develops some form of game to compensate for his missing mother. This gives him lust instead of pain (10-14).

Rob’s imaginary world could thus be the result of conscious repression of his past to create feelings of lust and pleasure. Further on, however, Freud states that the primary function of the young boy’s game is not to give him lust but rather to make him master the situation. In his game the boy’s mother has an important role and by playing it over and over again, he exposes impulses of revenge which, in the end, produces great feelings of control (14-15). Similarly, Rob’s decision to meet his former girlfriends could therefore be viewed as an attempt to gain control over his past, or even, to have revenge. In this context it is important to remember that Freud writes about a young child, but, in my opinion, his ideas could just as well be applicable on an adult.

The artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children’s, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convincing proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind. (17)

Actively re-experiencing a specific situation, gives the ego a far more powerful impression of control than just experiencing it passively. “If a joke is heard for a second time it produces almost no effect; a theatrical production never creates so great an impression the second time as the first” (42). Every new repetition seems to improve the desirable feelings of mastery, and the re-experiencing of something identical is clearly, in itself, a great source of pleasure (41-43). Repetition is therefore a form of recollection that is brought into play when conscious mental rememoration has been blocked by repression, and in *Great Expectations* these repetitions are strongly associated with Satis House and Miss Havisham and her clock stopping (Brooks 489).

The literary genre of the Bildungsroman has a narrative structure, which to some extent is well in line with that of *High Fidelity* and most definitely with that of *Great Expectations*, a
novel structured to illustrate the development of the protagonist’s mind and character. This development begins somewhere during the main character’s childhood and continues through varied, mostly deceptive, experiences, through trials and tests into a recognition of the own true self (Brockmeier 184). In the first part of the book, where Rob briefly tells us about his childhood and former girlfriends, we follow him from childhood into becoming a grown-up man with a vision of his own true self. To perceive, describe and understand one’s own self is one thing, but doing something about it is something completely different.

The English Bildungsroman is autobiographical in form. This is not to say that the Bildungsroman is an autobiography, but an autobiographical novel that mixes fact with fiction, which naturally allows the author to include something of his own life into his work. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is therefore not James Joyce’s own autobiography, but Stephen Dedalus’ and likewise, *Jane Eyre* is not, even if it is subtitled “An Autobiography,” Charlotte Brontë’s but Jane’s (Birk, “The English Bildungsroman”). Therefore, if we consider *High Fidelity* as belonging to the genre, it amounts to saying that it is definitely Rob’s autobiography.

Another important characteristic of the English Bildungsroman is the ancestry of the main character who is often presented as an orphan or a child who has suffered the loss of a father and consequently strives to gain an identity of its own. One aspect of the child’s development is a strong desire to leave home in order to become an independent adult. The destination, although it does not always represent something better than home, is often represented by London, which, by its cosmopolitan status is believed to embody the greatest number of opportunities. Because of the protagonist’s chronic returns to his home and childhood quarters, the reader, as well as the character, is able to locate the development that becomes evident when the circle is closed (Birk, “The English Bildungsroman”).

What reasonable environmental explanations may we find that explain Rob’s personality within his actions and different relationships? Is it relevant to believe that traces from his upbringing and childhood play a far more important role than he wants to admit? The concept of the oedipal complex anchors a key aspect in Freud’s theory of how the personality evolves. During early childhood, the child becomes confronted with an acute dilemma growing out of an attraction to the parent of the opposite sex and antagonisms toward the parent of the same sex. This means, if we visualize it from a little boy’s perspective, that he sees his mother as a sex object and his father as a threat standing in his way. In this oedipal confrontation, the father is observed by the boy as his superior competitor, a feeling that leads to a fantasy in which his father will retaliate by castrating him. This anxiety leads the male
child to give up his sexual feelings for his mother and instead of fighting his father, he will strive to adopt his father’s superego values in order to become just like him. The oedipal conflict is not resolved until the boy gives up his mother as an object of choice and identifies with his father (Fisher and Greenberg 173-4).

The resolution of the oedipal conflict is, according to Freud, one of the most arduous tasks of development into becoming an adult male and a period that few emerge from without psychological scars. The effects of an absent father during the oedipal phase is a frequently discussed and debated question within society today. Some scholars argue that a boy in lack of his father during the oedipal period will face great difficulties in resolving his oedipal conflicts while others conclude that a new father figure in the shape of a grandfather, an uncle or even a cousin will simply be adopted by the boy instead (Fisher and Greenberg 196-200).

According to Paul Mussen and Luther Distler, some additional trends suggest that, if the father plays an active role with great responsibility during his children’s childhood, his sons are more likely to develop strong masculine identifications. In line with this hypothesis, a boy will be most strongly motivated to identify with his father, imitate him or take on his role if he has intense interactions with his father and regards him as having a great deal of power. Highly masculine boys are rated higher than boys low in masculinity in measures of conscience development, and they generally tend to be less attention-seeking but also less dependent than boys from an upbringing with an absent father. Boys with a present and active father during their childhood tend to live in relatively permissive, nonpunitive family atmospheres with a more relaxed and happier relationship with their parents. Boys from a background with an absent father more frequently tend to withdraw from their parents and, for this reason, will have fewer opportunities to learn what responses are most appropriate to their sex role. Boys who more strongly identify themselves with their parents are more likely to adopt their parents’ characteristics, and consequently, to develop a stronger confidence. The degree of intimacy in the relationship between the father and his son determines the degree of masculinity in the boy’s behaviour and interests (Fisher and Greenberg 206-11).

As previously discussed, Rob’s contact and relationship with his parents, and especially his father, could have been better. Hornby does not give us any detailed information about Rob’s father’s presence during Rob’s childhood, but in relation to what has been discussed so far, the oedipal theory and the characteristics shown both by Rob and his father, we can assume that his involvement during Rob’s upbringing played a minor part in comparison to that of his mother. On one occasion in the book, Rob imagines a conversation with his father concerning sexual matters and the differences between being a man in the fifties and a man in
the nineties. “Dad, did you ever have to worry about the female orgasm… Do you, in fact, know what the female orgasm is?” (94). A sense of bitterness is revealed in Rob’s thoughts, principally because he thinks that it was easier to be a man in the fifties, but also because no one ever told him about the birds and the bees. In another part of the story, Rob disparages his own father in a derogatory way telling us about the awful movies his father holds as his favourites. “You get the idea, anyway, and you’ll get an even better idea when I tell you that going to the cinema is a waste of money, according to them, because sooner or later the films end up on television” (106). It is, in fact, hard, if not impossible, to find any traces of appreciative comments at all expressed by Rob concerning his father.

To what extent can Freud’s theories be applied to people within the musical industry, and what separates the famous rock’ n’ roll star from the ordinary man? If neurosis is asocial and private, music makes wishes and dreams both for the superstar and the consumer social and public. Rebels come in all forms and dimensions, some to protest against prevalent social, political and environmental orders, others rebel just for the sake of rebelling. “What have you got?” Brando asks by way of answering in The Wild One when he is asked what he is rebelling against (Reynolds and Press 2). According to Reynolds and Press, the causeless rebel is just striving to separate himself from the mother in a restoration of the primal break that constitutes the male ego. In the music and lyrics of, for instance, Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones this leads to a quest for a new home as a rebirth into a mystical and idealised maternal situation. The rebel worships an abstract femininity at the same time as he finds the real flesh and blood women disgusting. In the imaginary world of the rebel, women could figure as both victims and instruments of evil doings but at the same time women represent everything the rebel is not. Domesticity, social norms, passivity and inhibition; the rebel wants to break the rules no matter what they are or stands for (2-3).

In Rob’s case his mother is probably not the biggest problem even if he shows a strong desire to leave England for Australia, just to be rid of her. As has been pointed out above, it is his father who constitutes Rob’s biggest problem as he could be seen as a product of the post-war momism movement. Anti-momists blamed wives and mothers as administrators of enslaving their husbands in the 9 to 5 regime of breadwinning, but also of delinquency and crime because they brought up their sons badly. Women were pointed out as castrators and as being responsible for putting up barriers against the natural male longings for wilderness. In other words, they were said to kill the rebel and everything he stands and strives for (5).

As an example of his new and liberated self, the first thing Rob thinks about after Laura has left him is who will be the first person he will end up in bed with. He starts thinking about
having a Chess Records logo painted on his wall, he smokes indoors and he feels free and truly happy with himself. When the rebel has escaped from the womb, Rob thinks and behaves in a way he knows Laura would not appreciate. This is his own timid, and rather cautious way of rebelling against Laura, the woman he is somewhat reluctantly to separate from.

The ultimate symbol for the rebel is the wide open road that stretches all the way to the horizon through a deserted wasteland and right into a setting sun, a symbol not only used in innumerable lyrics but on various album covers like Jackson Browne’s *Running on Empty* and the Eagles’ *The Best of the Eagles*. But what happens when the end of the road is reached, and the rebel has broken away and asserted his solipsistic majesty? Some rebels make a shift from “I” to “we” and affirm something larger than themselves, others fumble into an inevitable degeneration of self-parody or simply burn out and fade away, lost in drug abuse and insanity or sometimes even death (Reynolds and Press 156).

Eventually the rebel must come home. Home could, as discussed earlier, be signified by death or insanity but there is also another way to define the act of coming home. The born-to-run nomadism and sterility of individualism surrenders to a longing to return to the maternal bosom, a place of safety that could take the form of an idealised woman, or a mystical investment in Mother Nature and the universe. Otto Rank, one of Freud’s disciples, claimed that the birth trauma, as a pre-oedipal separation anxiety plays a far more important role than the castration worries that Freud held as the original cause of personal deprivation. In a number of essays and books Rank develops his interest in the core motifs within cultural myths such as the hero, the double and the theme of incest. In an essay entitled “The Double,” and in *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend*, Rank uses literary examples from Fyodor Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Guy de Maupassant and Edgar Allen Poe to align brief biographical sketches of, for instance, narcissism and projection that served as a reflection of self-love and a rival (Willbern).

Occasionally Rob returns home to his mother, he sometimes thinks and talks about his parents, especially when he is in a bad mood. He talks about being delivered and even about being the one in charge of deliverance. Considering the fact that he is more responsive to soft music and soft characters as soul music and Solomon Burke, than he is to rough heavy metal and characters within that style, Rob must in some ways be seen more as a soft boy than a rebel. Soft boy is a term used by Reynolds and Press to describe a person, primarily a rock musician who, in opposition to the rebel or the rebellious ideals strives to come home (Reynolds and Press 211). Even if Rob likes rough punk groups like the Sex Pistols and the
Clash, he seems to prefer sensitive songs about broken hearts and cracked relationships. These subjects do not exclusively belong to the soft boy genre; it is rather a matter of how the artist chooses to express himself, through his lyrics or his image, that decides where to draw the line between the soft boy and the rebel. This sounds very simple but a person like for instance Jimi Hendrix could, in fact, belong to both categories simultaneously, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that he moved from being the rebel into becoming a soft boy. Jimi Hendrix once said, “If I’m free, it’s cos I’m always running”, and unfortunately in retrospect we now know in what way he decided to come home (Reynolds and Press 211).

If I manage to quench my thirst by dreaming that I am drinking, I shall not need to wake up to satisfy it.
Sigmund Freud – The Interpretation of Dreams (99)

Music, Dreams and Reality

There is no specific situation too serious or too tedious to keep Rob from creating a list, whether it deals with somebody’s death or best-side-one-track-ones of all time. “OK guys, best five pop songs about death. Magic, says Barry. A Laura’s Dad Tribute List. OK, OK” (177). The finishing touch “OK, OK” is really a good example of Dick’s, Rob’s and Barry’s childish excitement as they are getting ready to list some songs. Even if Rob is glad that Laura is not around to hear them, he is probably worried over the fact that she would be angry at him for using the situation for just another list, and he does not show any sincere sympathy at all for Laura and her feelings in this precarious situation.

In the beginning of the book Rob states that everything Barry says comes out in the form of enumerations. If Barry has seen a good movie or read an interesting book, he does not trouble himself with describing the plot or explain the way it made him feel; he simply tells them its exact spot and rank upon his best-of-the-year list. As a consequence, both Dick and Rob have also begun to talk and think in terms of fives and tens. At work most of their time is spent by making all kinds of lists and since they do not have that many customers, these activities take up almost all of their time.

The act of listing everything has had such a great impact on their lives that they find it hard to communicate in other forms. It has all gone so far that when Rob finds himself in a difficult situation, he tries to describe his feelings and problems in musical terms frequently using parts of famous lyrics or song titles to ease up the situation and to make himself more
understandable. If you cannot come up with the right words in the right situation, why not use somebody else’s words to describe what you feel and fancy. There are so many good songs out there describing all kinds of strange and difficult situations, and things have almost gone so far that Rob believes that he is living in a Bruce Springsteen song.

Have you got any soul? a woman asks the next afternoon. That depends, I feel like saying; some days yes, some days no. A few days ago I was right out; now I’ve got loads, too much, more than I can handle. I wish I could spread it a bit more evenly, I want to tell her, get a better balance, but I can’t seem to get it sorted. I can see she wouldn’t be interested in my internal stock control problems though, so I simply point to where I keep the soul I have, right by the exit, just next to the blues. (59)

In the end even Laura adopts Rob’s technique of communication, simply to make it easier for him to stay focused and really understand what she truly means.

In addition to this adopted conversational technique of his, the urge to catalogue certain things into lists could either be used to express feeling that are difficult for Rob to talk about, or simply to pass the time in boring situations. A third reasonable explanation for the making of lists could be a strong desire to escape the real world, and in this case songs and lyrics, as well as great rock and roll stars themselves have come to serve as an escape route from his reality. The world of music has always, or at least since the fifties, been symbolised by a great number of strong and influential characters. It is easy to understand that these characters, mainly male, with dangerously provocative images and rough looks, are irresistible for many confused young people around the world. In many ways these characters or idols provide an opportunity for lost souls to escape reality much more easily than is the case in other fields. Within popular culture, which includes both film and literature, fictive heroes and villains are easy to create and the whole industry has come to develop proportions of mythological magnitude including infinite sources of facts and fantasies. J.R.R. Tolkien created a complete world around his books of Middle Earth, while movies and TV-shows like *Star Wars* and *Start Trek* have also created fantasy worlds for millions and millions of fans worldwide to explore and become absorbed into. Music is, however, to some extent unique due to the fact that the creator himself does not only own the potential of creating imaginary characters in his lyrics; he can also make a fictive character out of himself, adopt a superego like David
Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust and play with all sorts of images and personalities. Not only do these fantasies and adopted identities serve as a potential escape route from a terrifying, dull and problematic reality, it is also possible that an adopted identity can serve as a tool for expressing true, unconscious feelings that represent images, thoughts and wishes too difficult and horrifying to get signed by your own name.

According to Sigmund Freud, a dream works as a vehicle for the expression of unconscious wishes, and it tells us a great deal about the dreamer’s associations and personality structure (Fisher and Greenberg 1-9). “I am in a position to invent my own reality” (93), Rob states and in his case we are not dealing with unconscious wishes in his sleep but rather conscious wishes during his daytime. These wishes should not be seen as isolated incidents but as a large compound and complicated filter that more or less embodies his whole existence. In The Interpretation of Dreams Freud states that “The deeper we go into the analysis of dreams, the more often are we put on the track of childish experiences which play the part of dream-sources in the latent dream-content” (152). A dream or a fantasy often repeats a scene from early childhood several years later, with all the details of the accompanying emotions, but changing it so that the dreamer plays a passive rather than an active role, while characters from the past are normally replaced by contemporaries.

As we have seen, Robert Fleming is so obsessed with music that he lives his life in a fantasy world where everything is based on music. Rob has reached a point where he basically has to choose between living in a wish-frustrating reality or a wish-fulfilling world of imagination, and to him the choice is easy. In Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming Freud claims that “Art is a conventionally accepted reality in which, thanks to artistic illusion, symbols and substitutes are able to provoke real emotions” (Hutcheon). If Freud considered all forms of art, and not just visual art, as a path that links fantasy and reality, this very same path should work just as well for music and literature. Art, or in this case music, is made into an alternative to neurosis where the artist is able to transform his fantasies into artistic creations instead of symptoms. Music is social and public while neurosis is asocial and private. According to Freud, the male artist is oppressed by excessively powerful instinctual needs for honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of a woman but he somehow never achieves satisfaction. Fantasy is therefore the ultimate substitute satisfaction for all people (Hutcheon).

Not only is Rob using his lists as a device for escaping his obligations into a world where he has no responsibility at all, he also constantly accuses others of being responsible for his mistakes and position. In addition to placing former girlfriends as responsible, Rob
does not hesitate to blame certain songs and artists for being directly accountable for all his doings. After Rob and Laura have moved back together again, they have a very interesting discussion about the future where Laura points out his biggest problem.

You’d keep your options open for the rest of your life, if you could. You’ll be lying on your deathbed, dying of some smoking-related disease, and you’ll be thinking, well, at least I’ve kept my options open. At least I never ended up doing something I couldn’t back out of. And all the time you’re keeping your options open, you’re closing them off. (203)

Rob is afraid of making big decisions in his life and he is always concerned that he will make the wrong choices and therefore ends up doing nothing. This probably explains why he needs his list, and why he wants to escape into his dream world where he does not have to make decisions, think about tomorrow or be responsible for all his actions.

Rob is a man who wears his somewhat limited knowledge and not fully fashionable clothing and style with an astonishing pride. “What really matters is what you like, not what you are like” (90) and according to Rob, there is no future within a relationship if your record collections violently disagree. The interesting thing about this is the fact that Rob actually is exactly what he likes. A pair of jeans, a worn-out T-shirt and his leather jacket, apart from the suit he reluctantly wears on Laura’s father’s funeral, is all he possesses and that is exactly the way he likes it. Even if he looks upon both Laura and some of his customers’ clothes with envy, there is still a slight feeling of contempt. He knows that in some respects they have a style which somewhere deep inside he truly wants but all the time keeps denying himself through mockery. Although Rob probably knows that he is exposed to a certain degree of mockery himself, he constantly keeps looking down on others, evaluates them, and denounces them by using his own technique of metaphors and parables from the world of music.
It is the spectator, and not life, the art really mirrors
Oscar Wilde – The Picture of Dorian Gray

Music and Identity

Rob’s vast knowledge within the subject of music serves as a manual giving him the ability to control what is to be considered as good or bad. Every single song, record, group or artist seems easy for him to judge and surprisingly unproblematic and obvious for him to place in a specific category. The difference between Stevie Wonder’s *I Just Called to Say I Love You* and The Sex Pistols’ *God Save the Queen* is obvious, but sometimes it is hard to really understand or find any reasonable explanations for his categorisations into good and bad, cool or repulsive.

Without comparing or making any expert comments on the musical quality, and without grading the hip- or coolness factor within or between Art Garfunkel, Solomon Burke and their songs, it is, however, still fascinating to compare the lyrics of the two songs that Rob is referring to as an impossible pair. “How can you like Art Garfunkel and Solomon Burke? It’s like saying you support the Israelis and the Palestinians” (200) he says, and evidently Rob prefers Burke’s “Got to Get You off of My Mind,” while Laura, on the other hand, prefers Garfunkel’s, according to Rob, sissy faint-hearted and sleazy “Bright Eyes.” Why?

To clear up his predilection for “Got to Get You off of My Mind,” the first thing that becomes quite obvious, considering the fact that both Burke and Garfunkel are males, is that Burke’s song is most certainly told from a masculine perspective while Garfunkle’s words could just as well have been told by a woman. Rob is a male and in his effort to become a “real super-male,” he can not afford to be associated with anything that could be interpreted as feminine, and in this case “Bright Eyes” symbolizes something so frightful and feminine to him that he can barely manage to utter its title in the same sentence as that of Burke’s song, which in the end, evidently makes it impossible for him even to think about including these songs on the same tape.

In addition, we find that Burke’s song simply constitutes an exquisite way of telling his former girlfriend that he has no problems handling this split-up, and that, even if he leaves his door somewhat open, he tells her that she does not matter all that much to him anymore.

Got to get you off of my mind
I know it’s just a matter of time
You've found somebody new
And our romance is through
Yes it is

Gonna throw your picture away
You didn't want my love, any old way
You've found somebody new
And our romance is through
Yes it is

Even if Burke seems quite untouched by the situation, the lyrics still reveal a slight taste of male bitterness and accusations which in the end probably serve as his escape remedy and rehabilitation therapy. Considering this, since we take for granted that it is Laura he is addressing, Rob’s initial listing of his former girlfriends just makes up an expanded version of the song told from Rob’s perspective. The song and his “then-part” addressed to Laura basically come to represent something that the self-idolised rebel-Rob would like to do, but as the situation is, does not have the courage to carry through.

If we take a closer look at the lyrics of “Bright Eyes,” we find that Garfunkel gives us a slightly confused, psychedelic, fragile and, as previously mentioned, fairly androgynous image of an insecure dreamlike world pictured by someone who troubles his or her worried mind with questions of failure and death, irresolution and life.

Is it a kind of dream, floating out on the tide, following the river of death downstream? – Oh, is it a dream? There’s a fog along the horizon, a strange glow in the sky, and nobody seems to know where you go, and what does it mean? – Oh, is it a dream? Is it a kind of shadow, reaching into the night, wandering over the hills unseen? – Or is it a dream? There’s a high wind in the trees, a cold sound in the air, and nobody ever knows when you go, and where do you start! – Oh, into the dark. How can you close and fail? How can the light that burned so brightly suddenly burn so pale?

Garfunkel’s lyrics are stuffed with question marks; they end almost every line, whilst Burke’s song, although not explicitly there, definitely contains loads of exclamation marks. Burke is
straightforward, careless and almost slapdash in his manner where Garfunkel is soft, quite vague and insecure in his approach. The traditionally male attributes are clearly in opposition to the female ones.

Even if it is understandable to a certain extent that Rob prefers the exclamation marks to the question marks, does not the second alternative present an approach that symbolises something that would hurt Rob’s imaginary rebellious personality, but in the end would fit his true personality better? To exemplify this statement even further, we can have a look at the lyrics of another song which also involves Garfunkel although his musical partner Paul Simon is its originator.

I have my books and my poetry to protect me
I am shielded in my armour
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb,
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock, I am an island
And a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.
(“I am a Rock” – Paul Simon)

Even if the title is not mentioned in the novel, these very lines certainly do not contain many features of the mythical, rebellious rock and roll star that Rob strives to personify. Still, they probably\(^1\) tell us more about Rob than all of Solomon Burke’s songs ever will. Simon and Garfunkel’s “books and poetry” simply constitutes a more correct picture of Rob, where he, within his world of dreams truly performs as a brave knight shielded in shiny armour who does not feel any pain and most definitely would never cry.

Obviously, ripping one single line or minor passage out does not do justice to the complete text. Neither do these lines supply us with the song’s contextual meaning. Still, these disconnected fragments are items capable of playing with our minds and feelings since they definitely may create connotations independent of the creator’s intentions. Thus, music and lyrics may be considered to be capable of reawakening old, unpleasant, rejected and oppressed childhood memories; they are decoded by the ear, in the same way as a Madeleine biscuit would be by taste or smell. The true meaning of each single piece of art is therefore always manifested only within the individual observer’s eyes and ears, which evidently makes

\(^1\) Probably as in not certain since I have not heard all of Solomon Burke’s songs.
each stanza unique to its individual receiver and quite independently so from the creator’s original intentions. It is, therefore, possible to discuss whether Rob deliberately chooses to avoid certain songs because of their terrible tendency of awaking feelings and memories Rob so desperately wants to stay away from.

Another famous singer-songwriter Rob creates a ridiculous metaphor around in order to express his disapproval is Cat Stevens. Again, without being explicit about quality judgements, Stevens is placed in a category of textual composers who, although being male, still have to be considered as fairly androgy nous or even feminine in their sentimental and fragile outfit. Many of Stevens’ most famous songs could easily be dismissed by Rob as “sissy” attempts to write cute love stories, but in songs like “Father and Son” and “Lady D'Arbanville” Stevens’ lyrics deal with death and troubled relationships that really terrify Rob. In this case we are not mainly concerned with whether the approach is masculine or feminine but rather with the fact that these songs could awake painful recollections from the past or perhaps even initiate grievous thoughts about castration or death.

“Is it so wrong, wanting to be at home with your record collection? . . . There’s a whole world in here, a nicer, dirtier, more violent, more peaceful, more colourful, sleazier, more dangerous, more loving world than the world I live in” (65). In building his world around his record collection and the entire world of music, it is both funny and sad to observe the contradictions between the words he uses in the descriptions of his life. They must vary from one extreme to its absolute opposite to encompass his whole existence, but unfortunately, Rob uses his music only to amplify the feelings his superego wants to adopt, blocking every attempt that could lead him into misery. In order to successfully block his dejection and despair, there is not a chance in the world that he would ever be able to deal with either Stevens or Garfunkel since their songs and personalities categorically seem to make feelings and frames of mind erupt way beyond his control. It is therefore with some surprise we learn that Rob likes Wham, or at least has done so somewhere in his past and still owns at least one of their records. Is it then really possible to consider Rob reliable in his judgement of good and bad when it comes to dismissing Stevens and Garfunkel?

Even if I initially did not want to make any comparisons between Rob and Hornby himself, it is, however, impossible to leave this discussion without a brief comment. As previously discussed, it is hard to find any evident and crucial changes within Rob’s personality, but 31 Songs, could, and probably should, be read as a code book, a suggested ending or as an account for the grown-up, now truly adult Rob. In 31 Songs Hornby presents a detailed insight into his own life and the way that music has affected his way of life and
personality. Not only is this story compiled as one gigantic best-of-list, but many of the discussions and subjects that Rob wrestles with in *High Fidelity* are here brought up and explained by someone who clearly could be seen as the mature Robert Fleming.

Some of the most significant parallels that could be mentioned in connection to *High Fidelity* and Rob concern the reason why he does not want to enjoy the same songs as his father, his love and creation of compilation tapes, which songs he would like to be played at his funeral, his way of taking out revenge on his past, his love of Solomon Burke, and finally his discussion of Bruce Springsteen and his song “Thunder Road”. In *High Fidelity* Rob says that he would like to live his life like a Springsteen song, in *31 Songs* Hornby states that “Thunder Road” is his life. On some occasions Hornby confesses that parts of his own life and personality have gone into the creation of *High Fidelity* and Rob such as the character of Marie LaSalle, who is directly modelled on an American singer-songwriter named Marce LaCouture whom a bad-tempered and depressed Hornby once went to see performing at a gig somewhere in London. “I suspect that it wasn’t Marce LaCouture I was writing about, but the song she sang” (119), and even if he strictly denies any forms of physical contact between the two of them, Hornby describes the exact setting of the incident and especially the effect it had on both himself and Rob, changing his mood from feeling miserable to great. In another part of the book Hornby talks about a man named Boo who worked in a small independent record shop that he and his friend Derek were acquainted with. Not only does Boo work in a record shop, he also plays in a band and he clearly must be Barry and Derek Dick.

Although at first it seems that *31 Songs* provides us with a more complex picture of a reasonably older and wiser adult man who in some ways has come to terms with himself, the book indicates that Hornby probably still does not know why he is in need of Arsenal and his songs. He knows that music and football affect him in a way that nothing else does and the only thing that, in fact, seems to separate Hornby from his fictive character is actually just a greater and self-ironic distance between himself and his dreams. “My first novel, *High Fidelity*, was about a guy whose devotion to rock ‘n’ roll has, in various ways, blighted and retarded his life, and it is probably fair to say that a lot of very important research for that book (in other words, a lot of blighting and retarding) was done during that first trip, twenty years before I started writing it” (80). The trip Hornby is referring to just happens to be his first visit to the U.S. where his father and his new wife lived, and thus we learn that, even if Rob’s parents at least appear to live happily together, Hornby himself grew up with an absent father. If Rob uses repetition to generate energy in his narration, The narrator of both *High*
Fidelity and 31 Songs uses it as a psychoanalytical device which inevitably allows him to deal with his own life and personality.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps it is just a lack of imagination that keeps a man from suffering, but I would say that it is the other way around. In Rob’s case it is his imagination which, however only temporary, helps him through his everyday life of misery and sufferings. Therefore imagination is a quality given to compensate Rob for what he is not, and a sense of humour to comfort him for what he is.

Rob is a man with immense problems when it comes to making important decisions in his life and in order to shake off these problems, he has more or less unconsciously created the person he actually is or at least wants to be. To run away from his responsibility in situations he is afraid to deal with seems to be an unconscious urge. He lives with the assumption that it is better to leave than to be left behind, keeping all options open and never risk being stuck. A more conscious ingredient in his behaviour, also creating the necessary conditions for his irresponsibility, is his escape into music which provides him with an opportunity to vanish into a world separated from reality where he is able to avoid his obligations when and wherever they appear.

According to Freud, dreams work as a tool for the expression of unconscious wishes, and they tell a great deal about our personality. If this is so, Rob’s dream world actually has two functions. Primarily it constitutes a rather conscious way for him to deliberately escape his obligations, but it may also represent a means for him to sort out his unresolved oedipal conflict and traumatic memories from childhood. This might sound strange, and we would most certainly need more detailed information about Rob’s childhood than is presented in the book in order to find any clear facts to support this statement. Still, with the information we do have concerning the relationship between Rob and his father, Rob uses his music to collect, what in his opinion, are strong and exciting father figures for him to respect and identify with. His father, on the other hand, represents everything that Rob does not want to be or become.

Rob’s love of judging the immeasurable, ranking song and artists, is, along with his fear of making decisions, just a way of escaping his responsibility. Is it really possible to tell whether one song is better than another? Could one seriously state that Solomon Burke is
actually proven to be better than Stevie Wonder? I do not think so; it is all just a matter of
taste and who is to decide or judge who has the superior taste? Even if Rob, Barry and Dick
take their rankings extremely seriously, it is still impossible for them to justify and decide
who is right and who is wrong. Artists and songs are used to construct some kind of defence
work, which makes it impossible to confront the terrifying questions that really matter. By
drawing attention to the quotation where Rob is discussing his internal stock control
problems, I wanted to give an example of his technique of succinctly expressing himself.
Moreover, although this is a clear example of a monologue, it still shows Rob’s way of
reasoning; somewhere deep inside he desperately tries to communicate his true feelings.

Unquestionably, the world of music provides an element which makes it possible for
performers to make all their inner feelings of aggression and agonies erupt, characteristics
that are easy for especially young people to adopt, imitate and connect with. Freud
symbolised art as union of fantasy and reality, a spring-board between a wish-frustrating
reality and a wish-fulfilling imagination. Within the imaginary world the rebel stands as the
ultimate hero; he is easy to recognize and comfortable to use when transferring secret. The
rebel, as well as the hero, is someone who dares to stand up, making his voice heard in
dangerous and difficult situations, someone who will lead and guide us into the wilderness
where nobody has every been before.

The oedipal conflict, whether you believe in it or not, still works as a good and
reasonable explanation to some characteristics of male behaviour. The importance of a
present and active father during a boy’s childhood is a frequent topic for discussions today.
Whether the degree of masculinity within a man is important or not is hard to decide, and by
the way, how do we define masculinity? According to Freud, and some of his disciples, a
high level of masculinity created by a strong and present father during a boy’s upbringing
generally results in a secure, self-confident and responsible grown-up man.

To me, if I adhere to Freud’s theories, the only reasonable explanation for Rob’s
apprehension of taking responsibility lies in his upbringing. Rob’s feelings towards his
father’s personality and his resistance to becoming like him leave him confused and with low
self-confidence. *Got To Get You Off Of My Mind* could for this reason simply represent his
repugnance towards responsibility, but it might also refer to his father and old unpleasant
memories of his past. If we simply stick to the lyrics and my interpretation of its message, the
song could perhaps also be said to symbolize the typical male behaviour Rob truly believes
that he wants to adopt.
If we accept Freud’s theories concerning the creation of male adult personality, and what facts affect the grown-up male’s personality and his self-consciousness it is, out of what is described in *High Fidelity*, hard to distinguish and point out any obvious, demonstrative or conclusive evidence of why Rob finds it so hard to cope and personify with his father in his struggle for this self-created imaginary male personality. The same unwillingness to be associated with his father that is exemplified by Rob in *High Fidelity* is also described by Hornby himself in *31 Songs*, and as regards Hornby’s own upbringing, it is reasonable to believe that the relationship between Rob and his father is actually not only Rob’s, but in fact also Nick’s. In *High Fidelity* Nick’s name is Rob, in *Fever Pitch* it is Paul and in *31 Songs* it is just Nick. Whether Hornby uses Rob and *High Fidelity* as a psychoanalytical tool or remedy to his unconsciously repressed and unresolved childhood memories, if it is all made up as a conscious manoeuvre for the same purpose or if it is just a good fictive story is, however, hard to tell.
Works Cited

Printed sources:


Web sources:

http://www.umd.umich.edu/casl/hum/eng/classes/434/geweb/ENGLBILD.htm

http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/sigmund_freud.html

http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/entries/psychoanalytic_theory_and_criticism-1.html