

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**A MODERN RENAISSANCE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF  
FAN DISCOURSE ON DANTE ALIGHIERI'S *INFERNO* IN  
R/HOZIER  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

The present thesis aims to study the phenomenon of pop culture driving a modern renaissance of classical culture by conducting a thematic analysis of fan discourse on the r/Hozier subreddit, a digital communication hub for fans of the Irish musical artist Hozier. The study aims to reveal how online fan communities contribute to the phenomenon and how analyzing the relevant discourse helps us understand it.

The thesis includes an introduction, a literature review, an empirical study and a conclusion. The introduction provides background information on Hozier and his inspiration for the album *Unreal Unearth* (2023). The literature review introduces the academic literature on Hozier, fandom studies, and the social media platform *Reddit*. The empirical study covers the collection and pre-processing of data, as well as the thematic analysis of 27 posts and related comments in eight thematic subsections. The discussion of the findings and their implications is presented in a separate subsection. The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis and considers possibilities for further research.

Key words: thematic analysis, Hozier, Reddit, fandom studies, Dante Alighieri, the *Inferno*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence, popular music has been a driving force of the masses and has united people to do and act in ways they might not have on their own. One of the most widely known examples of this in the somewhat recent past would be the 1985 benefit concert and fundraising initiative *Live Aid*, which, for the first time at such a large scale, brought the famine in Africa to the world's attention (BBC n.d.). Even though *Live Aid* did not eradicate famine in Africa, the world was still changed that day – not only did it make for a revival of rock and roll, but also it showed the world the power of popular culture, and music as part of it.

Nearly 40 years later, another cultural (re)awakening through music can be noted, this time within the literary scene. In August 2023, Irish musician Hozier released the album *Unreal Unearth*, featuring intertextual references to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. Following the descent into hell and through its nine circles, the album bridges the medieval allegory of Dante and the modern concerns that inspired Hozier to write the album – the grief and loss brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, worries surrounding the state of global climate change, intimacy, and existential longing. The release of *Unreal Unearth* sparked a wave of interest and online discussion, most evidently seen within the fan subreddit r/Hozier, where fans' posts formed a network of analysis of the album's lyrics, mapping them to passages from Dante's *Inferno*, and encouraged each other to carry through with their sudden urge or inspiration to (re)read the *Inferno*. This phenomenon raises the question of the role contemporary art and culture, including popular music, play in reviving classical literature; furthermore, the power held by fan communities' interpretations in shaping the course of said revival.

Andrew Hozier-Byrne (born March 17, 1990), artist name Hozier, is an Irish singer-songwriter. His father was a blues musician and influenced Hozier's music, a blend of blues, gospel, and soul. Hozier's lyricism is also heavily intertextual, often taking inspiration from the

artist's favourite books. His first release, "Take Me to Church", was an instant hit following its release in 2013 and still holds the title of the most listened to of his discography. The eponymous debut album *Hozier* was released in September of 2014, followed by a long break from larger releases until 2019, when he released his second studio album *Wasteland, Baby!*. As mentioned above, 2023 saw the release of Hozier's third studio album, *Unreal Unearth*, which was added thematically expanded by EPs<sup>1</sup> *Unheard* and *Unaired* in 2024 (Genius n.d.).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic affected society in many ways. Performing artist, such as Hozier, were especially affected since their source of income from touring and giving concerts was suddenly ripped away from them. As a songwriter, Hozier himself states that he is "absolutely allergic to writing about the *specific* experiences of [the COVID-19 pandemic]" (Apple Music 2023: 3:55–4:01). Yet, Hozier recounts in an interview for Apple Music (2023) that it would be impossible to ignore what the world collectively went through. To acknowledge our journeys through (potential) loss and trauma, to credit how we have had to adapt ourselves to a different understanding of life, Hozier took inspiration from his pandemic-era reading. He connected our story to that of the narrator of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* – a man who finds himself having to navigate new conditions and circumstances but makes his way through and finds his way back to light. The singer recites a passage from Dante's poem, where above the gates of hell it says, "[t]hrough me, you enter into the population of loss"<sup>2</sup>, which he felt strongly represented the state of the world – a considerable portion of us stood on the verge of this significant loss (Apple Music 2023). Thus, it can be said that Hozier's album *Unreal Unearth* ties together the collective experience of the global pandemic and the 14th-century epic poem

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<sup>1</sup> 'EP' is an abbreviation for extended play, used for music recordings longer than singles and shorter than full-length albums (Merriam-Webster. N.d.(a))

<sup>2</sup> Here, Hozier refers to Robert Pinsky's (1996) verse translation of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*.

by mirroring the two experiences of going through a new, life-altering experience and eventually finding light again.

Hozier's adaptation of the *Inferno* in *Unreal Unearth* is by far not the only instance of popular media repurposing something that already exists, for example, a piece of literature, and giving it a new life. Literary adaptation has also been among the interests of scholars for a very long time, and has seen substantial studies dedicated to it. However, little attention has been paid to how online fan communities engage with the adapted source, in this case, classical high literature, through popular culture, such as pop music. Even less attention, however, has been shown towards the possible contributions of such fan engagement in a modern revival and/or cultural recontextualisation of historical texts. When it comes to *Unreal Unearth* and the *Inferno*, the fan communication suggests a deep knowledge of and engagement with Dante's work and, possibly even more impactfully, a passion for participation in the meaning-making process for a modern-day revival of *Inferno*, drawing and creating connections between the medieval literary classic and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century socio-cultural landscape.

This thesis aims to answer the following questions: What are the central themes in online communication in r/Hozier concerning Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, and what does the discourse reveal about the phenomenon of popular media driving a contemporary revival of classical literature? By answering these questions, the thesis explores how such translational intertextual references in popular culture are not only composed by artists but actively reimagined and brought alive by the fans' power. In analysing the online communication of Hozier's fans, the thesis adds to the academic literature on fan studies and digital humanities, while also offering insight into how classical literature is once again the topic of conversation thanks to contemporary popular culture.

The research is conducted using thematic analysis, which is used to analyse a self-curated dataset of posts and comments from the r/Hozier subreddit. With the help of this

method, the thesis maps the recurring themes of communication that highlight how Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* is understood and recontextualised by fans in an online space catered to peer-to-peer connection.

The body of the thesis is sectioned into a literature review and an empirical study. The literature review covers all three major topics of the thesis: Hozier, fans, and the social media platform *Reddit*. It starts with the data collection methodology, then describes the academic literature on the musical artist Hozier, the academic literature and waves of fandom research, and concludes with the academic use of data from *Reddit*. The empirical section of the study is divided into three larger subsections: methods and materials, data analysis, and the discussion of findings. The methods and materials subsection presents the methodology, covering the steps taken to find, clean, and filter the data that will later be analysed. The data analysis subsection studies the chosen posts and related comments, observing common themes in the fans' communication and describing how each theme is illustrated in the dataset. The subsection on the discussion of findings discusses the probable implications of what the themes mean and how they illustrate and answer the research question of this thesis.

## **2. HOZIER, FANS, AND REDDIT IN ACADEMIA**

The purpose of the following is to give an overview of the topics important for understanding the thesis, and to provide context for the gaps that currently exist in the research. The literature review covers all three larger subtopics of the thesis – firstly, the musical artist Hozier and academic literature on him and his music; secondly, an introduction into the field of fan studies and its history, supported by some recent works connected to fandoms and social media that provide a relevant context to support the research at hand; and lastly, a brief overview

of the social media platform *Reddit*, its structure, how Reddit data can and has been used in studies, and some potential risks that might arise when using it in research.

## **2.1 Sources**

Since the number of suitable academic sources found was not very large, it was neither necessary nor possible to set narrow limits or criteria for my choices. Some sources that were eliminated were, for example, theses that concerned Hozier, but were written in a field of study not applicable to mine or sources written in poor English and with questionable academic weight. The articles were chosen from reputable journals with a mandatory peer-review process whenever possible. When it came to the time frame of the publication of the sources, it was not necessary to establish hard limits. Sources on Hozier could only date back to his first music release in 2013. As fan studies is a relatively new field, the sources found and used, apart from the core texts, are also from relatively recent times. Reddit was created in 2005 (Reddit n.d.), and while studies regarding Reddit have been conducted in earlier years, the numbers have only grown to considerable figures within the last 10 years.

## **2.2 Hozier**

Though Hozier's songwriting is affected mainly by works and world events that also concern the academic sphere, the latter has yet to catch on to Hozier as an object of study. Hozier, with nearly 47 million monthly listeners (Spotify n.d.), is "a successful contemporary popular music artist, but his work lacks academic attention" (Kaan 2021). Credible academic literature on the artist mainly comprises undergraduate and graduate students' theses, which nods towards the age group demographic that makes up Hozier's fan base. The academic works include papers dedicated to Hozier and his music and papers in which Hozier and his music are

used as examples of a larger, overarching topic (e.g. Sapphic rhetoric (Kovalcik 2024); the depiction of human sexuality (Chiangprom 2022)). McLaughlin (2020) and Bencsik (2022) concentrate on the linguistic and phonetic aspects of the singer's music. McLaughlin's work analyses the phonetic substitutions in Hozier's pronunciation in a commonly misheard line from the hit single "Take Me to Church" (2013). Bencsik's thesis (2022) delves deeper into the specifics of Hozier's phonetic style, his use of the General American or African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) versus Irish English accents depending on the genre of the song in question (Bencsik 2022: 2). The latter provides a comparison of the albums *Hozier* (2014) and *Wasteland, Baby!* (2019) based on how apparent Hozier's Americanisation is in pronunciation (Bencsik 2022: 19–21). Hozier's debut album has been studied the most, mainly the hit single "Take Me to Church". Kela's (2021) thesis focuses on the lyrics and music video of this song, taking a qualitative approach to literary analysis and using the framework of queer studies and theory and the ideological background of Christianity. Kela (2021) echoes Hozier's critical viewpoint (Hozier 2014: 0:15–0:50) of organised religion, especially the Catholic Church, and its doctrine.

Since Hozier frequently draws inspiration for his music from literary works of well-known authors, multiple researchers have focused on uncovering and mapping such intertextual references and recurring images. As Muiño (2022) puts it, "allusions and references allow writers to engage readers actively in the communicative process" (2022: 108); that is, using already known narratives allows the (song)writer to establish a connection with the reader/listener. Muiño's (2022: 108) close-reading-based analysis of Hozier's lyrics reveals that the artist's songwriting is influenced, among others, by Irish oral tradition and storytelling of myths and fairy tales. In his earlier music, Hozier's most significant influence and source of intertext in lyricism, however, as Muiño (2022: 108) states, is James Joyce and his novels *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). References to

cornerstones of English literature include T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which inspired Hozier's "Arsonist's Lullaby" (2014) and which is reflected in the name of his second album, *Wasteland, Baby!* (2019), and John Milton's 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which served as inspiration for the song "From Eden" (2014). Cox (2023) agrees with Muiño in Hozier's ample use of literary intertext and furthers it by saying, "Hozier is able to weave together literary references together on a deep level while ensuring that a listener can still understand the theme of each song, even if they might not pick up on all of these allusions" (Cox 2023: 17).

The covered academic literature shows that though some scholars have studied Hozier's music, it has only been in recent years and is still at a very low rate. Most of the attention has been centred around the lyrics and videos of older songs, the way they have been presented and what they have been intertextually based on or inspired by. It reveals a gap in the academic literature concerning Hozier's phenomenon, the fans' reception of the artist's music, and the further actions it motivates them to take. This gap is one that this thesis aims to fill.

## 2.3 Fan Studies

In the discussions surrounding fans, I rely on the definitions of Henry Jenkins, who is widely seen as the founder of the fan studies field. Jenkins (2012) defines fans as "individuals who maintain a passionate connection to popular media, assert their identity through their engagement with and mastery over its contents, and experience social affiliation around shared tastes and preferences." Based on this, Jenkins (2012) also defines fan cultures (used synonymously with fandoms) as "the social and cultural infrastructures that support fan activities and interests."

According to Jenkins (2012), "fan studies is a field of scholarly research focused on media fans and fan cultures". It is a relatively new field of research, its first wave dating to the late 1980s and early 1990s. The field is incredibly interdisciplinary, adopting and adapting ideas

from many different disciplines from which its core texts originate. The bulk of core texts was published in the short period of 1991–92, including Jenkins' influential work *Textual Poachers* (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1991), the essay collection *The Adoring Audience* (1992) by Lisa Lewis, and the essay "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture" by Constance Penley (1991). Although fandoms and, thus, fan studies have changed tremendously with the advent of the Internet, and even more widely Web 2.0, much of the core remains relevant and applicable even today.

Gray et al (2017: 1) note in their anthology that "most people are fans of something", meaning that to a lesser or greater extent, we are all surrounded by or belong to fandoms. Since the advent of fandoms in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, their perception has gone through a vast change. In their fandom research, Gray et al (2017) have noted three distinct waves of fan studies that can be differentiated from one another by their main concerns and approaches, as opposed to a clear timeline distinction of the three. In what is recognised as the first wave of fan studies (Gray et al 2017: 2–3), the main questions were tied to power and representation of disempowered fans against the media producers and industries. Fandom work (i.e. the actions of the fans) was seen as a subversion and a tactic of cultural appropriation against the powers controlling mass media, forming a negative connotation of fans and fandoms. Fan studies, therefore, were a political act and served as activism, defending the groups ridiculed in mainstream society and academic discourse. The second wave of fan studies (Gray et al 2017: 5–6) recognised the way fandoms replicated and mirrored current societal hierarchies, demonstrating how they fit into everyday life and do not exist in a vacuum separate from it. The third and final wave of fan studies (Gray et al 2017: 6–7) is concerned with the intertwining of fandoms and everyday life through the use of new communication technologies and moving into cyberspaces, noting that "it is precisely *because* fan consumption has grown into a taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption that it warrants critical analysis

and investigation” (Gray et al 2017: 7). This final wave reconnects us with the notion of many of us being surrounded by and tied to fandoms in some matter as it helps us understand how we engage with media on a day-to-day basis and how we use it in relating to ourselves and each other.

Today, many studies have focused on fans of non-Western media forms that are gaining substantial worldwide attention. With Korean pop music (K-pop) amassing massive fan bases, much recent research on fandoms has focused on the non-Western-based fan communities. One such study by Gahler and Choi (2024) examines and compares the cross-cultural fanbases of K-pop in America and South Korea. The findings show that South Korean fans had a growingly negative attitude towards American fans. In contrast, American fans were spotted having a decrease in their negative attitudes towards their South Korean fan peers. The social exclusion of fans, primarily seen in society during the emergence of fan culture and the first wave of fan studies, is still evident today.

As for the following waves of fandom research, Perkins’ study (2012), based on fans of the rock band Metallica, explores and observes the different levels of fan identification, noting the distinctions of “casual, loyal, die-hard and dysfunctional fans” based on fan engagement, which highlights a hierarchical spectrum of ‘fan-ness’ among the communities. This finding echoes the second wave’s theory of fandoms mirroring the society in which they exist. Bennett (2013) provides an example of a study she led on musical celebrities and their activism on social media. She looked at Lady Gaga’s posts on Twitter (now X) and how Lady Gaga uses the platform to connect with her fanbase, highlighting how this interaction “seemed to encourage /.../ strong feelings of inclusion and value” (Bennett 2013: 132) which stands as proof of the relationships fans form with the objects of their fandom. Here, a connection is drawn to the third wave of fan studies, where we see that fans’ relationships with their fan objects (i.e. the things they are fans of) are an integral piece of their own identity outside of just being a fan.

Continuing with the third wave of fan studies and the notion of fandoms being a seamless part of everyday life, the role of social media and online communication is an important topic of study. As Smutradontri and Gadavani (2020: 2) put it, “understanding fans and their fandom has become the bridge to understanding contemporary life and society driven by the power of online technology”. In her article on the effect of social media on fandoms, Bennett (2012) demonstrates how the spread of mobile Internet and social media has allowed fans to push the boundaries of live music events by sharing posts of their concert experiences and setlists on online forums in real-time. Bennett (2012: 551) mentions how this rapid communication has become a way of exchanging and displaying fan cultural capital, helping to distinguish and present who is a fan and who is not. Both studies by Smutradontri and Gadavani (2020) and Bennett (2012) highlight the necessity of researching online fandom activities in the present day, where more and more time is spent in online spaces, especially by younger generations who drive new standards for fan practices.

The overview of fan studies research shows that the field has grown and developed along with the development of fandoms. Though the three waves of fan studies came due to different research needs, they are not restricted in their application to a specific period. Due to this, all three waves can and have been applied in research in the last few decades. Similarly to Bennet’s study (2013), this thesis will apply the viewpoint of the third wave of fan studies and review how the fans’ connection to their fan objects affects and shapes them as people.

## **2.4 Reddit as a Data Source**

Reddit is a social media platform that acts as a collection of communities called ‘subreddits’ (referred to as *r/subreddit name*), each catering to its own topic. Subreddits can be created by anyone and function as forums or bulletin boards. Any user can create a post and then receive upvotes or downvotes on their post based on others’ reception. Users can also

comment on posts, which can also be up- and downvoted, and start ‘threads’ of communication. Subreddits can be subscribed to and feature their own community rules. Posts and comments on Reddit are public (unless the subreddit is private) and can be viewed without an account. (Anderson 2015; Reddit n.d.) As of September 2024, there are over 97 million daily active users, over 365 million weekly active users, over 100 thousand active communities, and over 16 billion posts and comments (Reddit n.d.).

The high number of Reddit users (aka ‘Redditors’) and the high number of posts and comments make Reddit a data source. The complex nature of social interactions, especially regarding subreddits of more controversial topics like politics, makes studying Reddit posts and whole subreddits a viable and necessary field of study, for example, in communication studies (Hintz and Betts 2022). Reddit’s high allowance of anonymity also makes it a great source of data for other human studies, for example, analysing posts on very controversial topics made by one-time-use (aka ‘throwaway’) accounts and how this anonymity correlates to the freedom in use of language (e.g. Leavitt 2015; Mann and Carter 2021; Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas 2021).

The most systematic overview of studies using Reddit as a data source comes from Proferes et al (2021), who analysed 727 such manuscripts published between 2010 and 2020. While analysing the years of publication, they found a constant yearly increase in the number of works published that used Reddit for their data. The count had gone from 2 works in 2010 to 4 works in 2011, from 20 works in 2014 to 48 works in 2015, and reached 230 published works in 2019 (Proferes et al 2021: 5). The analysed works provided 832 unique subreddits as sources of data, among which was a prominence for subreddits focused on politics and news, followed by subreddits focused on mental health and drugs. The different research projects also used Reddit for different types of data. Studies used original posts, comments and comment threads under posts, as well as metadata for all of the above. They also used subreddit

information itself (rules and community member counts). The most different way Reddit was employed as a data source was using it to conduct surveys and interviews with Redditors and moderators. The overview also highlights some potential issues that arise when using Reddit data as a basis for research. Deriving from Reddit's structure, in which posts and comments with the most upvotes are presented first, the conversational patterns of Reddit posts and comments do not mimic their natural counterparts or those on social media platforms with different structures. In addition to top posts gathering the most attention, it is also vital to remember the demographic making said posts. Since the average Redditor is a young, white male (Proferes et al 2021: 10), it cannot be taken as a generalisation that the posts and comments made on Reddit represent society at large.

Amaya et al (2021) also point out some potential negative sides of working with Reddit data, alongside some potential solutions to the problems. When researchers who are mainly used to other sources of data first decide to use social media as a source, they may be met with problems they could not have predicted. Most social scientists are used to working with generic file formats, such as ASCII, that can be opened and viewed in Microsoft Excel. However, social media files are often formatted in JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) or other formats that require programming in different languages, mostly Python or R, for analysis (Amaya et al 2021: 944). In addition to the files being stored differently, they usually also contain heaps of metadata and, therefore, take up much more space, leading to longer processing times and even the inability to do it all on a single machine.

The potential issues mentioned by Proferes et al (2021) and Amaya et al (2021) cannot be ignored and should be considered when working with Reddit data. In this study, the issues are avoided by taking the following precautions. Post score (sum of upvotes and downvotes) is not considered when selecting the posts or filtering them, meaning that the score has no effect on which posts are included in the analysed database. The demographic of Hozier fans on

r/Hozier is not assumed to be representative of the whole fandom. Therefore, conclusions made in this thesis are notably based only on the behaviour of fans active on the subreddit. Furthermore, although Reddit data can be studied in ways and formats that differ significantly from standard norms, that is not the case for this thesis. Though initially obtained in an unusual file format, the database was converted into standard CSV (comma-separated values) format and analysed using Microsoft Excel software. As the data was analysed manually and no analytical software was used besides basic filtering in Excel, it did not prove too lengthy or vast to require any overly technical programming to be used.

In conclusion, this literature review has highlighted the lack of academic attention Hozier and his works have received, the three waves of fan studies, and the boom of using Reddit as a data source for academic studies. By synthesising existing research, the review has emphasised the gaps in the current academic understanding of Hozier's fanbase and their interactions regarding *Unreal Unearth* and its connections to the *Inferno*. This review lays the groundwork for further exploration into fandom and social media dynamics and underscores the academic value of analysing these interactions. Ultimately, the findings serve as a foundation for my thesis, contributing to a deeper understanding of how fans interpret works inspired by other works and communicate their thoughts on the original in a digital setting.

### **3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE ON R/HOZIER**

The empirical part of this thesis consists of three larger sections. First, the methods used to gather the data and pre-process it for analysis are described, highlighting how the data was filtered and the final selections made to create the dataset. Second, the data is studied in a two-phase process using thematic analysis strategies. The posts are divided under thematic groups in the first phase, and then their contents are examined and explained in the later phase. Lastly,

analysis findings are discussed to underline how Hozier’s fans exemplify how hand-in-hand popular media and fan activity can bring about a modern renaissance of classical literature.

### 3.1 Methods and Materials

In analysing the themes of discourse in Hozier’s online fanbase and how they have made Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* topical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the primary source of information is the posts and submissions on the subreddit r/Hozier. Due to Reddit’s policy change in 2023 regarding API (application programming interface) usage (Huffman 2023), it was impossible to scrape<sup>3</sup> the data myself. Instead, I relied on an academic torrent that compiled data from Pushshift dumps from June 2005 to December 2024 (Watchful1 n.d.). The dataset included posts and submissions from the top 40,000 subreddits, from which I could obtain the two files — posts and comments separately — that included the data for r/Hozier. The files came in zstandard compressed file format (.zst), which was converted into comma-separated values (.csv) using Python. The files were then loaded as data into Microsoft Excel, where the data filtering would occur.

After loading the data into Excel, the database of posts comprised 21,570 posts. Each row contains the following information about a post:

- author (u/username),
- title,
- score (sum of upvotes (+1) and downvotes (-1)),
- created (timestamp),
- link (unique post URL),
- text (post content, including emojis and linked media),
- URL (online address of linked media; post URL if the former is missing).

The comments’ database was similarly loaded into Excel and comprised 233,904 comments. Each row of the database contains the following information about a comment:

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<sup>3</sup> “Data scraping, or web scraping, is a process of importing data from websites into files or spreadsheets” (Imperva n.d.)

- author,
- score,
- created (same formats as in posts),
- link (unique comment URL, traceable to parent post),
- body (comment content, including emojis and linked media).

From the vast database of Reddit posts, I found the ones applicable to my study through a series of filters. First by date, from where I filtered to only include posts since May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023, as it is the day Hozier announced *Unreal Unearth* by posting about it on Twitter (now X)(Hozier-Byrne 2023). No prior official teasers indicated an album inspired by *Inferno*; therefore, it was deemed unnecessary to include posts preceding the given date. In order to find the posts concerning the specific topic of the analysis, I chose to look at the post titles. Using the built-in filtering options provided by Microsoft Excel, posts containing the following keywords were found: *Dante*, *Inferno*, *Divine Comedy*, *hell*, *book*, and *circle*. The focus of keyword searches on post titles was deemed suitable as titles best represent the main topic of a post. Searching the full contents of posts would have included many irrelevant results where keywords are only mentioned but are not the primary concern of a post. The matches from each keyword search were copied to a separate sheet, manually reviewed and verified as relevant to the study. Some posts were removed since the keywords were not exclusive to discussions of the *Inferno*. For example, the keyword *book* was found in ‘booklet’ and ‘Facebook’. In total, 27 posts were selected for further analysis.

After finalising the choice of posts, filtering out the corresponding comments was necessary. Thanks to the nested formula used in structuring the online addresses of the comments, the process was relatively simple. I copied the link of every individual post separately and then filtered the *link* column in the comments database to find matches that contain the given link. For each group of comments, I copied them to a separate sheet to put together a filtered database of comments that would be used in the analysis. The constructed database of comments consisted of 254 comments.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method of qualitative data analysis that aims to provide structure to our understanding of texts and make it more conscious (Alejandro & Zhao 2023: 463-464). TA is used to systematically identify, organize and offer insight into “patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke 2012: 57). The TA method is applied to code the text, map out recurring themes and patterns, and ultimately make sense of the found commonalities (Braun & Clarke 2012: 57).

After the data processing described in the methods and materials subsection, it was possible to approach the thematic analysis of the online discourse found in the selected posts and comments. First, multiple readings of the post contents in full were performed to get a sense of the discourse and what the fans were keen on discussing. In the readings, thematic categories for each post emerged organically. The recurring patterns and concerns in the posts highlighted the natural division of eight thematic groups, which are as follows:

- collaboration,
- (re)interpretation,
- intertext,
- knowledge on Dante and/or *Inferno*,
- reading motivation,
- reading recommendations,
- spreading of information, and
- translation.

The most popular theme in the discourse was fans’ *(re)interpretation*, which was found in ten out of 27 posts. It was closely followed by *reading recommendations* and *motivation*, found in nine and seven posts out of 27, respectively.

Once the thematic categories had been stated and the posts divided between them, it was possible to go ahead with the analysis of each thematic group. The following eight sections explain further what was deemed as the deciding factors of content in dividing the posts into

the given categories. After clarifying of the theme's meaning in the given context, posts and comments illustrate and explain how each theme is conveyed in the dataset. Following the analysis of the discourse in each thematic group, the last section of this study discusses the findings and answers the question set in the beginning of the thesis – what does the fan discourse reveal about the phenomenon of popular media driving a contemporary revival of classical literature?

### 3.2.1 Collaboration

*Collaboration* emerged as a theme in four out of 27 posts. In this study, the theme was identified in posts where fans shared ideas and theories and asked for others' opinions and help in their learning journey or discussion.

Soon after *Unreal Unearth* was announced, fans already started discussions on the subreddit and invited others to join. One fan started the discussion just three days after:

I adore the story of Francesca and Paolo. I heard that the new album could be based on Dante's work about the nine circles (or layers) of hell. Does anyone have any suggestions for learning about the topic? (Movies, documentaries, books... etc). (PsychedelicSnowflake 2023)

Responses included the original work itself, for example YummySalad's (2023) comment "I mean, the obvious would be reading Dante's Inferno! I'd start there, but Im sure theres also some really good videos on it!", and also more accessible methods to learn about the topic, such as nocturnalspolly (2023), who recommended the Spark Notes breakdown for those who are not up for reading the whole original book.

One devoted fan, Familiar-Spread8606, shared their contribution to the academic writing on Hozier by posting about their senior thesis and invited others into a discussion of *Unreal Unearth* and how each track corresponds to a circle of hell:

Here's a Spotify Playlist /.../ with all of the Unreal Unearth (& Unheard, Unaired) songs in an order that corresponds to Dante's 9 Circles of Hell, which is what Unreal is inspired by.

I'm writing my senior thesis on this, actually. HMU<sup>4</sup> if anyone wants to chat about it or wants an in-depth explanation of how the two are linked. (Familiar-Spread8606 2024)

The formed thread proved an excellent example of the collaborative nature of the subreddit. Since the original poster mentioned that their thesis is about *Unreal Unearth*, fans approached Familiar-Spread8606 as an expert on the topic, making this thread one of the most productive in the dataset. Familiar-Spread8606 had posted a table that mapped out the songs on the album and, additionally, the EPs from the same thematic universe following the circles of hell that they thematically correspond to. The addition of EPs piqued fans' interests since official channels had yet to do so. SublimeArch693 (2024) commented, asking whether the change in track order from the album had a specific meaning and delved into a lengthy conversation with the original poster, noting their happiness over finding a peer to converse with on the topic. Familiar-Spread8606 was not only the provider of information but also gained from this collaboration for their thesis. ProfessionalFlan9442 (2024) gave pointers to Familiar-Spread8606 by mentioning an article the latter had yet to find for their research materials.

Posts and comments in the theme of *collaboration* highlight the importance of intellectual exchange in r/Hozier. The process of shared learning and collective effort among the fans shows that the fandom is a tight-knit community that values circulating knowledge and helping others through a collective interpretation of *Unreal Unearth* in the context of the *Inferno*.

### 3.2.2 (Re)Interpretation

*(Re)Interpretation* was identified as a theme in ten posts and as a key theme in six out of said ten posts. In the context of this study, (re)interpretation was assigned as a theme to those posts that discuss how songs on *Unreal Unearth* and EPs *Unheard* and *Unaired* could be

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<sup>4</sup> 'hmu' is an abbreviation for *hit me up*, used in social media posts to request someone to contact you (Merriam-Webster n.d.(b))

interpreted by fans based on how they are assigned in official sources and interviews Hozier has given. Fans also showed an understanding of the music and its intertextual basis in the *Inferno* by giving their own reinterpretations, mostly assigning new circles of hell to songs in one of two ways, either by taking the official source info as base value and reinterpreting it after researching the *Inferno* or knowing the contents of the *Inferno* beforehand and reinterpreting a different song of Hozier's to match a circle of hell. Seeing as how most circles of hell are matched up with multiple songs, the latter method of reinterpretation is rather loose and, at times, later contradicted by Hozier himself.

Prior to the album's release, fans were quick to interpret symbols seen in official teasers and speculate on the album. User shrimpebbles (2023) posted, just a day after the initial announcement, what they interpret the teaser imagery to mean and correspond to, based on the knowledge that the album would be influenced by the *Inferno*. The user's interpretation of the symbols,

“The Snake is anger/wrath. The Sunglasses perhaps are Fraud. The Coin is greed. The Condom Wrapper is Lust. The Bullets are violence. The Broken Mirror is perhaps treachery. maybe the Clock is Hersey. The Knife and Fork are Gluttony. And the Bible is limbo.” (shrimpebbles 2023),

shows not only an interest in and understanding of the *Inferno*, knowing what the circles are and what they symbolise, but also a wider understanding of the world and Hozier's prior discography. Another fan commented, “I figured the clock was limbo and I agree the Bible is Heresy (good ol Andy taking another jab at the Catholic Church by calling them heretics lmao<sup>5</sup>).” (whiskeyandthewolf 2023), alluding to Hozier's single “Take Me to Church” which heavily criticised organised religion and the doctrines preached by the Catholic Church. Here, Hozier's fans show a keen interest in gaining a deep understanding of the songwriter's lyricism and placing it in a bigger context of not only Hozier's discography but society as a whole.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Lmao’ is an abbreviation for *laughing my ass off*, used in social media and text messages to imply humour (Cambridge University Press n.d.)

In their discussion of the album and its ties to the *Inferno*, the fans display a great deal of creativity and interactivity with the materials. User thecolinconaty found themselves inspired by *Unreal Unearth* to read Dante's *Inferno*. After doing so, they felt that the song "I, Carrion" better fits the dynamic of Paublo and Francesca than "Francesca", the song named after one half of the doomed lovers duo (thecolinconaty 2023). It is a clear example of how Hozier, through his songwriting, has influenced people to read the *Inferno* and in addition to simply reading it, think about it in depth and analyse its contents in context of the album, giving rise to a contemporary renaissance of discussions surrounding Dante's masterpiece from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Posts and comments of *(re)interpretation* showcase the fans' deep understanding of and interaction with the album *Unreal Unearth*. Instead of simply reacting to the music, fans on r/Hozier actively shape the conversation surrounding the music and its inspirations. Mentioned examples from this group exemplify the fans' ability to interact with the music analytically and connect it to the broader framework of the *Inferno* and Hozier's discography as a whole.

### 3.2.3 Intertext

*Intertext* as a theme was identified in two posts and found as the central theme of one post. Despite its limited frequency, it was still deemed an important theme in the context of Hozier's music and thus included in this analysis. Furthermore, simply because this dataset did not include more posts on intertext, it does not signify a lack of discourse on intertext in other posts on r/Hozier. In this study, intertext as a theme represents the posts that discuss the sources of intertext that Hozier has used in his songwriting.

In discovering that *Unreal Unearth* is/would be inspired by *Inferno*, some fans began to wonder what Hozier has been inspired by for his earlier songs. Brief-Ad3117 posted, asking:

.../ I was wondering if anyone knows if he has mentioned any specific references to his songs (besides Dante's Inferno). The way he writes is so old fashioned and it mentions many mythical characters, it is otherworldly. I need to know where this man gets his inspiration from .../. (Brief-Ad3117 2024)

Fans suggested finding information straight from the source himself, as Hozier has many interviews where he shares ‘behind the song’ information on the songs’ inspirations and writing processes (ScallopedTomatoes 2024). Diligent fans even mentioned specific lines from songs and what they were inspired by – “And Thomas Hardy because you can’t get to ‘why were you digging, what did you bury’ without passing through ‘Are you digging on my grave, my loved one, planting rue’” (Spoonbreadwitch 2024). With their comments, such as “Just a few from the top of my head: James Joyce specifically Portrait of an Artist as a young man, Oscar Wilde, Ovid, Seamus Heaney, JD Salinger, Lots of poets” (dogwd 2024), Hozier’s fans showcased their knowledge in knowing the artist’s songs and furthermore what their intertextual inspirations are.

Having previously identified Hozier as an artist whose music is heavily intertextual in its lyrics and Hozier’s fans as people keen on educating themselves, it comes as no surprise that the fans have an interest in researching the intertext behind Hozier’s lyrics. The provided examples also refer back to the themes of *collaboration* and *interpretation*, as knowing and understanding the intertext behind songs requires interpreting the lyrics and, as we have seen in the provided examples, benefits from collaborative efforts and knowledge.

### 3.2.4 Knowledge of Dante and/or *Inferno*

*Knowledge of Dante* and/or the *Inferno* was identified as a theme in five posts and as the key theme in two posts. This thematic group encompasses posts that reflect a detailed knowledge of the *Inferno* and other works by Dante, as well as how the former influenced *Unreal Unearth*.

Knowing Dante and his writing, some fans on r/Hozier are especially detail-oriented in their analysis and discussion of the album. One fan posted:

Anyone else kind of tear up a little every time they listen to First Light and can't help but recall the ending of *Inferno* when he finally gets to see the stars again after he missed the sky and the light so much and oh my gosh it's just so beautiful and the song just so perfectly encapsulates that ending and the feeling of finally being free and I'm not crying you are (Kkat0303 2023)

Such a specific interpretation and comparison between the lyrics and the source of intertext show how deeply Hozier's fans interact with his lyrics and his inspirations. The post shows a strong emotional understanding of both the *Inferno* and the song lyrics, where the prior knowledge of Dante's work has enabled an intertwined connection with *Unreal Unearth*. Comments under this post agree with the incredibly emotional response this song ignited in them. One user said:

'Could this be how every day begins' made me sob the first time I listened to it. It perfectly captures the wonder I felt -and continue to feel- the very first time I saw the sun rise after four years of unrelenting depression. Utterly perfect. (ghafar\_ 2023),

which reinforces the depth of fan connection to both the music and the source text. Furthermore, Hozier drawing inspiration from Dante means that fans of the musician can come into contact with new narratives thanks to Hozier's intermediary role.

Being fans of the *Unreal Unearth* album and knowing Dante's writing also made some people wonder if Hozier would carry on with the *Divine Comedy* trilogy. AceyGem asked about possible follow-up albums to *Unreal Unearth* in their post – “/.../ Will Hozier do one on Purgatorio (7 sins) and on Paradiso too, like a follow up to Unreal Unearth? Who knows lol<sup>6</sup>” (AceyGem 2023) – showing that they not only are aware of the direct sources of inspiration that Hozier used but that they also do research on their own and look into the authors' other works that could appeal to themselves and Hozier. Not all fans are quite as fond of the

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<sup>6</sup> 'lol' is an abbreviation for *laughing out loud*, used on social media and in text messages to imply something is funny (Cambridge University Press n.d.(b))

influences that Hozier has chosen to name, though. Logical-Librarian766 responded to AceyGem by saying the following:

I doubt it. I personally dont think this album actually falls that much into Inferno tbh<sup>7</sup>. Its a break up album, through and through with a few bits of Inferno sprinkled in. It leans way too heavily on Inferno and it would have been better served if he didnt use it as a reference at all IMO<sup>8</sup>. And i think Andrew regrets mentioning it and saying it was inspired by Inferno because some people took it really literally. (Logical-Librarian766 2023a)

Though the comment reads paradoxical at times – saying that the album does not fall into the *Inferno* and then following up with the notion that it leans on the book too much – this opinion is backed by knowledge of the *Inferno* and an analytical view of the *Unreal Unearth* album in connection to it. This interaction with the album and between the fans tells us that they are deeply engaged with the music that they consume and the artist’s intentions behind creating it.

The discourse shows that Hozier’s fans are interpreting lyrics through an informed analysis of Dante’s 13<sup>th</sup>-century work. Even in their differing perspectives and opinions, fans remain grounded in analytical engagement with the source text and are capable of interpreting the detailed intertext of the *Inferno* in *Unreal Unearth*’s lyrics.

### 3.2.5 Reading Motivation

*Reading motivation* as a theme was identified in seven posts, from which it was the key theme of four posts in the dataset. In the context of this study, reading motivation was assigned as the theme of posts that discussed users reading or revisiting Dante’s *Inferno* and their progress in doing so.

Even before the album’s release on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023, fans were already preparing for it by making themselves knowledgeable about the *Inferno* as its intertext. Just weeks after the album announcement, bbirdcn (2023) raised the idea of starting a book club to read the *Inferno*

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<sup>7</sup> ‘tbh’ is an abbreviation for *to be honest*, used on social media and in text messages when giving one’s honest opinion on something (Cambridge University Press n.d.(c))

<sup>8</sup> ‘imo’ is an abbreviation for *in my opinion*, used when expressing one’s opinion (Cambridge University Press n.d.(d))

together. Comments under the post ranged from those saying they would not be reading the book since it seemed like the album did not reference the book *per se* (Logical-Librarian766 2023b) to those saying that they have already purchased the book and plan on reading it soon (e.g. anna\_kristinj 2023; telepath365 2023). This thread in particular was very productive and saw plenty of discussion on whether or not the album is loosely inspired by *Inferno* or features more direct references to it. A fan who had already commented on their plan of not reading *Inferno* also commented:

I think its easy to see references when you know exactly what to look for in terms of content. But if the average person listened to these 6 songs [that had been released as singles] theyd have zero idea that it was inspired by Dante. We only know because he said it. Its not really explicit. (Logical-Librarian766 2023c)

Though Logical-Librarian776 did not intend to read the book themselves, they did not discourage anyone else from reading it either. Through a well-justified reasoning for why they thought it was not necessary to read it, we can tell that this choice was not made haphazardly and instead was a conscientious and mindful choice that Logical-Librarian776 landed on after they had educated themselves on the topic.

Many users also gave good suggestions on where to read or educate oneself on the *Inferno*, options that would be a good entryway into learning about the topic for those who want to learn but are not quite ready to read the whole book. Nuveraardich (2023a) commented, “I recently started reading the version that is available via project gutenber<sup>9</sup>”, providing fans with a more accessible source to read the *Inferno*. AlwaysBetterOnVinyl (2023) mentioned that “[it] might be better to just read some critical synopses or even Cliffnotes” for those who want to have an overview of the plot of the *Inferno* but do not want to do any lengthy reading themselves. As we can see here, Hozier’s fans are dedicated to sharing their knowledge with

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<sup>9</sup> Project Gutenberg is an online library of free eBooks that was founded by the inventor of eBooks, Michael Hart (Project Gutenberg n.d.)

one another and making sure that the community includes all its members, no matter how much time, effort and money they are able to dedicate to reading.

In some cases, fans documented their own reading progress to encourage others. Acceptable\_Rock3918 (2024) posted “Ok so I really wanted to start reading Dante’s *Inferno* because of the album and I cannot stop myself from annotating things that I definitely should not be writing” and a photo of their annotations featuring humorous pop culture references, making the 13th century classic feel approachable and relevant, and much less daunting to those new to the subject. The blending of playfulness with literary engagement provides an insight into how *Unreal Unearth* has revived interest in Dante’s work among a young modern audience.

The posts and comments on *reading motivation* reflect how Hozier’s music prompted curiosity among the fans to read the inspirations behind the songs. In their documentation of the reading progress, fans created a collaborative and welcoming environment for exploring the 13<sup>th</sup>-century classic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus exemplifying how Hozier and his fandom have driven a modern revival of the *Inferno*.

### 3.2.6 Reading Recommendations

The thematic grouping of *reading recommendations* was identified in nine posts out of 27 and as the key theme in six out of said nine posts. This thematic grouping was applied to posts that discussed book recommendations that thematically align with *Unreal Unearth*, that other fans would suggest reading, and that Hozier has used as inspiration for his prior works.

Multiple fans were particularly moved by the song “Francesca” and posted about reading books that carry the same feeling for them. User angrydiaperbutt (2023) asked for book recommendations that would resemble the tragic love story of Paolo and Francesca from the *Inferno*. Fans searching for more books to read that would emulate a story that they grew fond

of through music is a telltale sign of the impact that popular music has on listeners. Moreover, when said music is inspired by other authors' works, it also drives listeners to become readers of the original source and other similar works. Suggestions ranged from classics, such as the *Odyssey* (UnderGreenwoodTrees 2023), to modern retellings of classics, such as *The Song of Achilles* (AntQueen14 2023), and contemporary novels, such as the *Throne of Glass* series (Heavy\_Yellow 2023). The recommendations being from such vastly different genres and periods of literature exemplifies the diverse interests and tastes among Hozier's fans.

The song "Francesca" also sparked canislupus519 to post about a book series they had read and sensed a connection to with the song. Understanding the intertext in *Unreal Unearth*, canislupus519 (2023) raised the question that the Georgina Kincaid series by Richelle Mead might share the same intertext as Hozier's album. Others who had read the book responded, noting that they too had sensed similarities between the book series and the album, albeit with the song "Son of Nyx" (KitchenImagination38 2023). KitchenImagination38 also supported canislupus519's original idea of the shared intertext since the series is heavily inspired by Biblical themes and Greek mythology, similar to Hozier's own writing (KitchenImagination38 2023). Noticing such recurring themes in both books they read and music they listen to, Hozier's fans showcase that they are consuming literature and media actively and with a critical mind, drawing conclusions and noticing patterns that would stay hidden to a passive consumer.

Both users BuyOk6259 and CubaseGirl7 reached out to the subreddit with a wish to find more book recommendations, specifically ones that Hozier himself has been inspired by. BuyOk6259 (2024) mentioned a running interest in Hozier's use of intertextuality and that they are looking for more books that others had read due to being used as inspiration in Hozier's songwriting or that Hozier had recommended reading himself. User girlhamlet (2024) responded with Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, which contains the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The latter is directly referred to in Hozier's "Talk", a song on his second studio

album *Wasteland, Baby!*. CubaseGirl7 (2024) asked specifically for Hozier’s favourite books, since they wished to “expose [themselves] to whatever he [Hozier] reads as his writing is phenomenal”. The responses to CubaseGirl7’s post recommended they look around on the subreddit itself and prior posts, as many of them already list most of the books that Hozier has mentioned in interviews when asked about which books he likes. The responses were of few words and could be read as curt at times, but I would oppose such judgements from a different point of view. The fact that users have recommended the original poster to refer back to older posts on the subreddit shows their confidence in the members of the community to provide correct and valuable answers.

*Reading recommendations* posts emphasise Hozier’s fans being avid readers with a great interest in broadening their literary horizons with recommendations from Hozier and others on the subreddit. Fans are encouraging one another to read the *Inferno* and also discover related stories from collective recommendations, illustrating how *Unreal Unearth* sparked a broader literary exploration.

### 3.2.7 Spreading of Information

*Spreading of information* was identified as a theme in four posts and as the key theme in two of them. This category included posts that discussed the boarder spread of *Unreal Unearth*, and as its influence, the *Inferno*, to wider audiences unfamiliar with Hozier or Dante.

One of the most organic ways that knowledge spreads in the world is by word-of-mouth; therefore, it comes as no surprise that Hozier’s fans also aid in Hozier’s music and its influences reaching people who are not already part of the fan community. User niftymifty (2023) had told their English teacher in school about *Unreal Unearth* and its intertextual connection to Dante’s *Inferno*, after which they heard that their teacher had been telling other teachers of this connection. User niftymifty speculates a possible ripple effect of local teachers using the album

as a part of their teaching in class as well (niftymifty 2023). This whole chain of communication has made it probable for Hozier's music and *Inferno* to reach teachers and students around the area who otherwise might not have found it for themselves. Logical-Librarian766 (2023d) responded with "Doing the lords work", which, intendedly or not, connects with the Biblical notions that are inspiration to Hozier and to the Christian missionary work, which also serves the purpose of spreading information.

The aforementioned academic efforts of Familiar-Spread8606 (2024) also act as a form of spreading information and awareness of Hozier to crowds outside of the fan community. Since the wording of the post is "writing my senior thesis", it is assumed that they are an American high school student, 'senior' referring colloquially to the last year of high school studies. Though Hozier has reached more mainstream audiences as of late, he is still not a household name that most people would recognise. A fan describes Hozier's fanbase as "Your average Hozier fan is going to be one or more of the following: an English Major, mentally ill, physically ill, Queer or a former emo teen" (Magoon 2023). All of the abovementioned characteristics describe people who are part of peripheral, or at least not mainstream, groups of society to some degree. Thus, it could be said that if a Hozier fan, who is part of a peripheral group of society and most likely has interests that correspond with this status, writes their senior thesis for high school, a place where people of all walks of life meet up and socialise, on Hozier, then they are introducing Hozier to their peers who probably do not know much about the artist.

The posts on the *spreading of information* showcase how fans act as cultural ambassadors among their peers. In their efforts, fans help Hozier's work and its intertexts reach broader, more diverse audiences through everyday communication and academic work. The information spreading organically, as opposed to formal promotion, is driven by the fans' own enthusiasm for spreading the word of their beloved artist.

### 3.2.8 Translation

The theme of *translation* was identified in two posts in the database, and in both posts, it was the key theme of discussion. Posts sorted into the group of translation were those which discussed different translations of Dante's *Inferno* into English, either for their own personal reading or to understand the version that influenced Hozier when writing the *Unreal Unearth* album.

The question of which translation to choose for personal reading was especially near and dear to English majors and self-proclaimed literature nerds, such as queerchaosgoblin, who posted:

Do we have literature nerds here? Looking for recs for good modern translations of Dante's *Inferno* ~for science~ because bog man has piqued my interest beyond the scraps of the story I've gathered from my medieval lit classes. (queerchaosgoblin 2023)

The post highlights a theme that became evident in other threads as well. That is, there is a significant gap between literary interest in the *Inferno* and academic availability to learn about it. Comments from HazyliVerb (2023), "Thank you for asking this! I literally signed up for a world lit pre1400s class \*specifically\* to get into Dante and we're not covering it", and gbobin,

My university prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic used to offer course joint taught by the English and Italian department just on Dante's *Inferno*. They haven't offered it since due to budget cuts and i am so sad because of it (gbobin 2023),

exemplify that there is a profound interest to learn about Dante's work, but resources to do this with scholarly guidance are limited.

Other comments under the original post (queerchaosgoblin 2023) added to the discussion of which translation to choose with entrance-level suggestions and more in-depth research-based suggestions. Nuveraardich (2023b) called attention to a version available on the aforementioned Project Gutenberg and stated that "a free translation is a good translation to [them]". Since Project Gutenberg is a free online repository, it provides the opportunity to gain access to materials that might be hard to find or access otherwise. Though this option means

one cannot be as specific in choosing a translation themselves, it is an important reminder in an otherwise elitist discussion. While it is good to be aware and nitpicky when choosing a translation for one's specific needs and wishes, it is vital to remember that it is a privilege even to have access to books at one's whim.

A fan by the name of heathwitch put in the effort and researched which translation Hozier had referred to in a "Behind The Song" video interview for the song "Francesca" (Hozier 2023). heathwitch's comment (2023) included the specific lines from Canto V of the *Inferno* that Hozier quoted in the interview and the findings, which indicated that Hozier quoted the Hollander translation in that video. Having previously mentioned, in the introduction to this thesis, that Hozier has referred to the Pinsky translation in another interview, two versions of the artist's experience with the *Inferno* could be hypothesised; it could be that Hozier has either read multiple different translations of Dante's *Inferno*, or that for his interviews, he has compared different translations and selected whichever translation's wording he deemed best in that instance to illustrate the *Inferno*'s significance to his writing.

Posts concerned with *translation* provided an insight into the personal preferences of fans and also revealed a deeper theme of the fans' desire for academic engagement with the *Inferno* not being met by current university infrastructures. The discussion around translations also spotlighted the entrance barriers and privileges associated with accessing classical literature in the contemporary world. Hozier's ambiguity in revealing which translation he read and used as inspiration when writing the album did not hinder the fans in their search.

### **3.3 Discussion of the Findings**

The above thematic analysis of discourse reveals how Hozier's *Unreal Unearth* served as a catalyst for a modern revival of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, brought to life by the engaged and collaborative fan community on r/Hozier. The analysis shows that though Hozier's making

of the *Unreal Unearth* album introduced the classical reference, it was the fan activities that amplified and sustained its cultural impact.

Before the album's announcement, there is no recollection of people talking about the *Inferno*, neither discussing it nor reading it on a mass scale. By writing an album intertextually inspired by Dante's work, Hozier brought the *Inferno* to people's minds. Through the fans' collaborative efforts and, intentional or not, spreading of information about Hozier and his album *Unreal Unearth*, the fans started a wider discussion of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. Inspired by their favourite musician's new album, fans started reading the book and researching it, and talking about it with each other. This meant that the influence carried on to other fans and soon people outside of the fandom as well. In spreading the word to academics and educators, Hozier's fans secured a wider reach for the reawakening of the *Inferno*.

The word spread around, but that does not always correlate to a viable presence in the modern-day society. Not only was it necessary to get word of the *Inferno* out there, but it was also vital that people think about it in depth and discuss its contents. There were fans among the community who already had knowledge of Dante and the *Inferno*, which meant that they could include others in the conversation of sharing that information. Highlighting interesting facts and impactful passages from Dante's works, the more knowledgeable fans were able to capture the attention of other fans and have them join along in the journey of self-education. In reading motivation posts, fans could encourage and include other community members to follow along with their reading progress. Sharing their own experiences with the book made it seem more appealing and interesting, and meant that other fans, based on these posts, also decided to start reading the book.

Once people had made themselves more knowledgeable on the topic, they were able to discuss the different implications and reimagine the contents of *Unreal Unearth* based on their experiences with the source of intertext. The ability of the fans to (re)interpret the album in the

context of the *Inferno* shows that they have actively and mindfully engaged with the materials, taken the time to think about them in depth and figured out what the connection between the two meant for them. Being able to not only think this through for themselves but also engage in conversations with other fans, who often held opposing or differing views, underscores a long and often emotional process the community members had gone through in finding their own viewpoint and stance on the relationship between the album and the book. After establishing the relationship between *Unreal Unearth* and the *Inferno*, fans were also proficiently able to notice the intertextual references to other works of literature. All of this shows the proficiency in media literacy and critical reading (or listening) among Hozier's fans and an innate wish to connect to others and compare their understandings of the message relayed by the artist.

The fans on r/Hozier showed their opinionated and critical judgements when discussing which specific English translation of the *Inferno* to read. That means that they have once again made themselves aware of not just the fact that there are different versions but also that there are arguments made for each one on why it may or may not be suitable for their needs and wishes. As most of this discussion goes on in largely academic scenes, the fans again highlight the lengths they are willing to go to have the desired experience with the material. They are open to joining discussions and entering social spheres that might otherwise have stayed foreign for them. It highlights the two-way relationships Hozier's fans have with Dante's work – on one hand, the fans are spreading word of it to areas and people it had not yet reached; on the other hand, the fans are entering areas they had not yet ventured into in order to learn more about their passions.

The findings show us all the ways that popular culture and media can revitalise a piece of classical literature in the modern day. Hozier, taking inspiration from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* for his album *Unreal Unearth*, introduced the narrative poem to his fans, whose actions

ensured that the *Inferno* would become relevant again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even in the sphere of popular culture, and become widely known to a new generation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Though literary adaptations have been of interest to academics for a long time, the interactions of fan communities with the source texts have been understudied. In an effort to bridge the gap in academic literature, this thesis analysed fan communication on the subreddit r/Hozier to exemplify how fans interact with Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, the inspiration behind Hozier's studio album *Unreal Unearth* (2023). More specifically, the thesis studied the phenomenon of popular culture driving a modern renaissance of its inspirational classical culture.

The literature review showed an evident lack of academic research on the musical artist Hozier, despite his popularity among listeners. The few studies conducted on his person and his music revealed people's interest in uncovering the influences behind Hozier's music, which included notions of Irish oral tradition as well as intertext from literary greats such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and John Milton. Literature on Hozier's fans proved to be the first gap in current academic literature. The review discussed the three waves of fan studies that differ from one another by means of approach and main topic of concern. The empirical study later employed the framework of the third wave of studies that concerns itself with the intertwining of everyday life and fandom, largely due to and on the Internet in cyberspaces. Such is the nature of the r/Hozier subreddit, where fans can digitally come together and share about their lives and their fan object together. Studies from recent years highlighted the importance of analysing fan behaviour in online spaces and thus provided support for the reasoning behind the study at hand. Possible side effects and consequences of using data from Reddit were

addressed and the precautions taken in this study were explained, noting that conclusions drawn in this thesis were not made with the claim of reflecting the whole fandom but rather those active on the subreddit.

Though fans' presence on social media and their interactions have been studied before, it became evident that fans' actions online and their effect in powering a cultural movement have yet to be researched. With the foundation of studies on Hozier, fandoms and *Reddit* established, the empirical section of the thesis could build upon it by conducting a study using the method of thematic analysis to uncover the themes of communication in r/Hozier. After the pre-processing of data, eight thematic groups arose in the thematic analysis of posts made on the subreddit. Themes of *collaboration*, *(re)interpretation*, *intertext*, *knowledge of Dante and/or the Inferno*, *reading motivation*, *reading recommendations*, *spreading of information* and *translation* were uncovered and explained in the context of the study using examples from posts and comments. The discussion revealed the fans' actions and how they affected the spread of the *Inferno*. It was established that though Hozier writing the *Unreal Unearth* album set the ground for the modern renaissance of the *Inferno*, it was the fans' actions that made it flourish. Their collective efforts displayed skills in critical engagement and co-creation, media literacy and self-education driven from a place of passion and yearning to be more knowledgeable. Hozier's fans spread the word of Dante's *Inferno* and planted the seed in other areas of their lives, spreading its reach to areas and people it would not have naturally spread to otherwise. Thus, in their fandom activities, fans on r/Hozier revitalised the 13<sup>th</sup>-century classic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, underlining again the message of the third wave of fandom studies – fandoms and everyday life are inseparable from one another in the modern day and should be researched as intertwined phenomena.

This thesis has demonstrated the importance of popular culture and related fandoms in building a new phase of life for classical culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has shown that the online

social practices of younger generations are a powerful force in the creation of trends and the revitalisation of previously existing materials. Future research on the topic could be developed to analyse the phenomenon seen here in other influential fandom spaces and map the revitalising processes in different communities, providing us with a broader insight into the culture-reviving processes of fandoms across the world.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Loona Olesk

**A Modern Renaissance: A Thematic Analysis of Fan Discourse on Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* in r/Hozier**

**Tänapäevane taassünd: Dante Alighieri „Põrgu” käsitleva fännisuhtluse temaatiline analüüs r/Hozieris**

Bakalaureusetöö

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Lehekülgede arv: 46

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva lõputöö eesmärk on uurida keskseid teemasid Hozieri fännide suhtluses käsitledes Dante Alighieri teost „Põrgu” sotsiaalmeedia platvormil *Reddit* ning seeläbi uurida kuidas antud suhtlus näitlikustab fenomeni, kus popkultuur on kandev jõud klassikaliste teoste kaasaegses taassünnis.

Lõputöö koosneb sissejuhatausest, kirjandusülevaatest, empiirilisest uuringust ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatuses tutvustatakse muusikut Hozier, tema tausta isikuna ja muusikuna ning inspiratsiooni kirjutades oma kolmandat albumit „Unreal Unearth” (2023). Samuti annab sissejuhatus taustainfot sarnaste fänniuuringute puudumise kohta ja seab seeläbi põhjenduse antud uurimuse läbiviimiseks. Kirjandusülevaade käsitleb esmalt seniseid uuringuid Hozieri ja tema muusika kohta, teisena fänniuuringute ajalugu ja kolme eri fookusega lainet fänniuuringutes ning kolmandana tutvustab sotsiaalmeedia platvormi *Reddit* ja sealt pärinevate andmete kasutamist uurimistöodes. Käsitletakse ka viimase võimalikke puuduseid ja kuidas neid antud töös välditakse.

Lõputöö empiiriline osa kujutab endast temaatilist analüüsi, mille sisendiks on postitused ja kommentaarid Hozieri fännide *subredditist* r/Hozier. Analüüsi käigus avaldusid postitustest läbivate teemadena järgnevad: *koostöö, (ümber) tõlgendamine, intertekst, teadmised Dante ja/või „Põrgu” kohta, lugemismotivatsioon, lugemissoovitused, info levitamine ja tõlge*. Analüüsitulemuste tõlgenduses selgus, et kuigi Dante Alighieri „Põrgu” sai taas päevakajaliseks algselt tänu sellele, et Hozier kirjutas albumi „Unreal Unearth”, on fenomeni elujõudu kandev jõud just fännide omavaheline suhtlus ja tegevused. Tänu fännidele püsis „Põrgu” näol Hozieri tõstatatud teema aktuaalsena ning levis ka väljaspool fännide omavahelist suhtlust. Seega on uuritava fenomeni puhul popkultuur klassikaliste teoste taassünni sütitaja ning popkultuuri tarbivad fännid taassünni elujõu toitjad.

Märksõnad: temaatiline analüüs, Hozier, *Reddit*, fänniuuring, Dante Alighieri, „Põrgu”

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