INTERPRETING STUDENTS' FAVOURITE TV-SERIES IDIOMS

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Abstract:The Sons of Anarchy series explores current concerns concerning the troubled self and its integrity, home, and the precariousness of a biased society, these bikers are self-aware, expressing their dilemmas related to questions about morality and loyalty, through this fresh preoccupation with their choices, this new self-reference is in fact a constant attempt at criticizing the circumstances of their own existence. A classic dreamer, the biker, expressing himself through speech, fashion, swagger, and his motorbike, becomes a stereotype of masculine longing for stability in a contemporary civilization that fails to offer any alleviation to individuals whose soul is torn apart by contradictory forces of society. The hipster, originally, was "an underground man, requiring especial adjustment to ordinary conditions; he was a lucifugous creature of the darkness, where sex, gambling, crime, and other bold acts of consequence occurred."[1] Much like the gangster bikers of the Sons of Anarchy series. Though these characters represent our uneasiness when it comes to Otherness, to alienation, and to violence; showing their human face, they manage to win us over, covering the quintessence of anxiety in postmodern individuals, his solutions to profoundly spiritual questions being extremely quick and violent; and these solutions make him even more appealing to audiences who do not want to waste any more time on metaphysical issues of right and wrong, of the fundamental rules of belonging to the human race.

Keywords: "Sons of Anarchy" series, English idioms, students, interpreting, hipsers

Our quixotic desire for fair play, for loyalty and belonging to the coolest group who will stand up for us, no matter what, is an essential element of an elevated human utopia of justice. Hipster teenagers are no exception to this overwhelming desire. The gangster film genre is brave enough to present and narrate a world where justice prevails; the audience feels that its deepest angst, highest hopes, and wildest dreams appear on screen. The catharsis derives from the fact that, following these victimized villains or vilified victims aids us in better coming to terms with our own choices in life. "Gangster films are narratives in which moral legibility, a shared understanding of justice, simplifies a complex and confusing world, allowing an imaginative – but not imaginary – engagement with questions of self and other. This genre employs tropes of victimhood and villainy to validate, and propose solutions to, viewers' fears about the changing roles of men in America and pervasive social inequity."[2] The *Sons of Anarchy* series explore current concerns concerning the troubled self and its integrity, home, and the precariousness of a biased society, these bikers are self-aware, expressing their dilemmas related to questions about morality and loyalty, through this fresh preoccupation with their choices, this new self-reference is in fact a constant attempt at criticizing the circumstances of their own existence. A classic dreamer, the biker, expressing himself through speech, fashion, swagger, and his motorbike, becomes a stereotype of masculine longing for stability in a contemporary civilization that fails to offer any

[1]John Cotkin, G. 2003: *Existentialist America*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, p. 196.
[2]Ennis, L. 2012: *Melodramas of Ethnicity and Masculinity: Generic Transformations of Late Twentieth Century American Film Gangsters*, a Dissertation, Presented to the Department of English and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Oregon, p. 4.

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alleviation to individuals whose soul is torn apart by contradictory forces of society. The hipster, originally, was "an underground man, requiring especial adjustment to ordinary conditions; he was a lucifugous creature of the darkness, where sex, gambling, crime, and other bold acts of consequence occurred."[3] Much like the gangster bikers of the *Sons of Anarchy* series. Though these characters represent our uneasiness when it comes to Otherness, to alienation, and to violence; showing their human face, they manage to win us over, covering the quintessence of anxiety in postmodern individuals, his solutions to profoundly spiritual questions being extremely quick and violent; and these solutions make him even more appealing to audiences who do not want to waste any more time on metaphysical issues of right and wrong, of the fundamental rules of belonging to the human race.

The show becomes addictive for viewers, more so for teenagers, who easily identify with the swagger, the moral dilemmas, the melodrama, and the speech patterns of the protagonists, who make serious attempts at doing everything together, which is like a teenage dream come true. "The gangster is a paradigm of the American dream (…) Our involvement with the gangster rests on our identification with him as the archetypal American dreamer."[4] The Club sees itself as the small town's protector from fast food, huge malls, drugs, and the „A.B.- Aryan Brothers", a Neo-Nazi group. Their utmost desire is to keep the status quo through their collaborations, while having fun and a good steady profit. They get into prison together, they are released together, and they celebrate weddings together – during which they perform mass retaliation execution on common enemies. Opie's marital vows are reminiscent of a pledge of loyalty to his "cut/leather" (club jacket) and "dyna" (Harley Davidson motorbike), and inherently, to the club: "I will treat you as good as my leather and ride you as much as my Harley"[5] The Sons' "cuts" are so powerfully signalling membership and all the crime that goes with it, that the moment the bikers are released from prison in Season 4, the new sheriff in town considers them gang colours and threatens to confiscate them the second he sees anyone wearing one. The viewers empathize with the injustice done to their favourite ant-heroes, forgetting that the injustice was performed by a representative of the law. "Its (the show's) criminal characters – and some of its cops, too – are venal, violent people, and if you are invested in the series, the emotional mechanics of TV create a push-pull, attraction-repulsion effect. You let these people into your homes once a week and get used to caring about them and their problems (or at least being fascinated by their illegal shenanigans), and then they do something hideous and inexcusable and compartmentalize it, and you think about turning the damned thing off and never watching it again."[6] However, viewers will watch the next episode, too, because they have already identified with these criminals, and they want to see justice prevail over other monsters that were disloyal, and betrayed the trust of this favourite gang. The bikers, and the hipsters imitating their idiom "banish all comparatives, qualifiers, and other syntactical uncertainties."[7] Everything becomes reassuringly unequivocal, a world reduced to the universe of the "cut."
Their dialogues seem deceivingly simple. These bikers, but especially the Presidents – first Clay, then Jax – are strong but hurt, sentimental but ruthless, have to take decisions, upon which the life of opponents and members of their own families depend, decisions founded on

[3] Cotkin, G. 2003: *Existentialist America*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, p. 196.
[4]Shadoian,E. 2003: *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, Oxford, p. 3-4.
[5]Bark,E., *FX's Sons of Anarchy Gets its Bikers Back on Track*, on http://unclebarky.com/reviews_files/8f093a807bb44e2d51a03842b6daae6e-1145.html, 11.04.17.
[6]Seitz, M.Z. September 11, 2012: "*Sons of Anarchyi's Quality TV That Makes You Root for the Monsters*", in *"Vulture, Devouring Culture*", Florida
[7]Broyard, A. June, 1984:*A Portrait of the Hipster*, in "*Partisan Review*," http://karakorak.blogspot.com/2010/11/portrait-of-hipster-by-anatole-broyard.htm, , 06.05.18

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common knowledge of equity, honour and integrity, not to mention the melodramatic bereavement and calamity resulted from seemingly advantageous compromises. The communication reminds us of *The Godfather* in so many respects, so the series will fit the following description like a glove: "These scenes of negotiation and communication among men that are the heart of *The Godfather*, even more than the scenes of violent attacks. Violent acts serve to punctuate the narrative's general tone of camaraderie and masculine closeness."[8]

The mould of a taciturn man, powerful in all his actions, but uncommunicative and reticent from previous films dealing with masculine features is a fake presence on the screen, constructed in order to convey silent virility that is inexistent. In older movies, such as film noirs, the silent man's lack of loquacity is supposed to enhance his psychological strength and depth, however, ever since trendsetter gangster movies such as *The Godfather* trilogy gained territory, the public have been cherishing the histrionic, exaggerated, blood-and thunder gangster characters. These films are popular among men, no matter what their social or ethnical background is, exactly because their storyline unravels in quick fixes of retaliation or expressions of love (romantic, family, or brotherly),"beef on the plates" (problems in the lives) of fathers and sons, husbands and brothers that ordinary people from the audiences face on a daily basis – solutions inexistent in real life otherwise. The liberating effect of these solutions performed by men easy to identify with, is tremendous among viewers, especially teenagers. To quote Linda Williams:"In melodrama there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice that gives American popular culture its strength and appeal."[9] This identification works brilliantly because it has admittedly been created by Kurt Sutter, as a soap opera for men, marked by specific SAMCRO "ink" (club members' tattoo on their back), a brilliant combination of heart-warming tales of family love, treachery, crime, romance, sacrifice, outrage and "high adrenaline outlaw action. For every scene with a shooting or beating – and there are a lot – there are also moments of misguided love, tangled loyalties, complicated friendships and deadly family politics,"[10] rendered through metaphors of the closed universe of biker groups.

The concept of the club acting as a surrogate family is well conveyed in the film, the protagonists make us believe that they consider fellow club members to be family and that they take care of each other, whatever the circumstances, in the same manner as teenagers will look upon peers with greater awe than upon their own family. All of the protagonists in the film series have conspicuous "ink" (tattoos) and proudly wear the "cut" (the SAMCRO vest) to show their allegiance to their group. Nonetheless, their pride in these conspicuous symbols is intensely felt by the public. Viewers understand and feel that once a "prospect" (candidate to club membership) is "patched" (accepted), he cannot part with the aforementioned symbols. This is taken so seriously that, the moment the MC discovers that a traitor still has not got rid of his "Reaper" tattoo, they punish him by burning it off his back with gasoline, sending him to meet "Mr. Mayhem," the destiny of anyone who betrays or fails at being a man of his word. Extreme violence is part the club's life, aggression being a learned behaviour, as theorized by psychologist Alleyne, when people witness violence on a day-to-day basis, they are more likely to get involved in further acts of violence.[11] The sense of belonging and protection is so profound that not even their real family or romantic partner

[8] Shadoian, E. 2003: *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, Oxford, p. 83.
[9]Williams, L. 1999:"*Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess."* in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5th Ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford UP, New York, p. 701.
[10]Deggans, E.: " *Sons of Anarchy Succeed as a soap Opera geared Toward Guys*", on http://www.npr.org/2014/09/09/347106628/sons-of-anarchy-succeeds-as-a-soap-opera-geared-toward-guys, 17.04.17.
[11] Alleyne, E. & Wood, J.L. 2012:*Gang membership: The psychological evidence* in *Youth gangs in international perspective*, Springer, New York, pp.151-169.

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could offer anything similar. ”Deviant behaviour is likely to be positively reinforced, not only from the acquisition of material profit, but also from the approval of other gang members.”[12] Though they consider themselves tolerant people who despise the Nazis, they would refer to themselves as ”Whites”, in stark contrast with their enemies: Mexicans, Chinese, Iranian, etc. Those who are from any other group, are deeply derided and undervalued, as shown by the sarcastic, often offensive idioms used to talk about them. They call the Irish ”Green”, the enemy club is ”the Niners,” the Mexican bikers are called ”Mayans”, their leader, Alvarez is nicknamed ”La Bamba”, their motorbikes are creatively and ironically called ”ape hangers”. The “Mayans” is a nice phrase used during neutral or times, but when their relationship is tense, Alvarez’s club is called “the Wetbacks,” the Chinese gangsters are called “Chinos”, “Yellows” or “Rice monkeys.” Scorn is felt when the “R.U.B.s” (Rich Urban Bikers) are mentioned, those bikers being unworthy of any other biker’s respect. The police officers on their trails are “peelers”, as if they were peeling off their pride and freedom. Even people who are sympathetic to the group, are shown disdain towards them: a person who just spends time with them is a “hang around,” a “nomad” is a member who is not taking part in the daily life of the crew, a “prospect” is someone who yearns to become a member, and, in order to become one, has to go through countless tests and prove his loyalty while not being allowed to ride a “dyna” (a Harley), only a “rat bike” (scooter or weak motorbike) or a “cage” (automobile), which obviously sets some limits to the freedom of the rider. A person, who is an outsider only taken into consideration when help is needed, is called simply “muscle” (manpower). Female protagonists have a number of discriminatory names, even the matriarch Gemma or Tara, Jax’s girlfriend, is an “old lady” (serious girlfriend of Clay, the President). Others, like groupies, are “crow eaters” (girls who hang around and sleep with gang members), the ones picked up by the side of the road, usually for a one-night stand, are “does in the headlight.” Unimportant ones are “gashes,” “sweetbutts,” “Jessicas” (Top of the crow eaters’ chain), or if they are too young, “jailbaits” (person who appears to be of age of consent). If there is a girl riding on their motorbike, they are “packing double,” as if she were a piece of luggage. We witness a “language (that is) the revolution of the word, the personal idiom.”[13]

On the other hand, phrases of endearment which denote allegiance to the club abound. The new members are “patched in,” becoming “soft colours,” wearing the “colors” (the MC back patch). The founding members are “O.G.s” (Original Gangsters), or “First Nines," affiliation to the club is “our crew” or “our colors,” in case your peer is in trouble, you are supposed to “participate” (aid in the fight), all the while riding your “shovel head.” The different subsidiaries of the SAMCRO (Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club – Redwood Original) are called “SAMWA”– San Joaquin County, “SAMBEL” – Belfast club, “SAMTAZ” – Tucson, Arizona club. And then, there are the numerous variations of the phrases with “patch,” the Reaper” logo sewn on their jackets: “a patch over” is when a club takes over another one, “a patch in” is when someone is accepted in the club, a “flash patch” is the front patch of someone who is promoted in the club. Idioms of authority are unique to the club, too: “the gavel” is the President’s hammer, “the jury” refers to decision taking members, and a “top rocker” is a club member who takes active part in the crew’s life on S.O.A. territory, usually at the “T.M.”- the Teller-Morrow shop and garage. Their activities, usually illegal, involve language use as “books” (gambling), “on the Lam” (on the run from the police), the erotic “in bed with another club” (in partnership), and “burners” (untraceable

[12] Wood, J. L.2015: *Gang members: Group Processes and Social Cognitive Explanations*, in *Forensic Psychology*, Second Edition, Ed. By David A. Crighton & Graham J. Towl, Wiley and Sons Ltd., Chichester, West Sussex, p. 360.
[13]John Cotkin, G. 2003: *Existentialist America*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, p. 196.

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cell phones) for secret conversations. Ironically, their feelings when it comes to their intimate rites at the club resemble a religious fervour, signalled by the metaphors imbued with pathos: "church" is a club meeting, "chapel" is the holy meeting room, "Saint Thomas" is the local hospital, murderers, on the other hand, are "unholy ones." ("Like many biker patches, the real meaning of this one is debated. Some say it means that the wearer has killed for the club; others say that it is a reference to when a member is ordered to do a hit on a fellow member of the club, making them Unholy in carrying out a deed usually met with death for killing another member. Happy is a known assassin and Clay is known to have killed at least 2 members already. According to the sons of anarchy collectors' edition book, the unholy ones patch is referred to as the patch club members wear that shows they will fight to the death for the club.")[14]

Jackson Teller, a.k.a. Jax (Charlie Hunnam) is the V.P. of the club, a character reminiscent of Hamlet, the son of John Teller who is a the club's late founder. The moment we meet Jax, his father is long gone, and Gemma, (a Gertrude figure, combined with Lady Macbeth), Jax's mother (Katey Sagal) is married to John's best friend, Clay, currently the President of the club (Claudius). Jax is on the verge of questioning Clay's choices and the direction the club is taking up, all sparked by a manuscript from his late father, John. The manuscript throws light on how the initial goals of the club involved living a quality life, in avoidance of society's hypocritical rules. This hippie commune ideal has not stopped them from protecting the citizens of Charming, the nice little town, through occasional violence and bribery of the police. They are vilified by the local society and some viewers, not surprisingly, as they seem to represent the root of all the problems. "If there is a problem the society is worried about or a fantasy it is ready to support, odds are it can be located in the gangster"[15] The club has become preoccupied with aggression, immorality, and the cutthroat politics of self-preservation. "These thugs wear jeans and leather, they smoke lots of pot, and, while they have evolved into psychopatic outlaws, they have roots in 1960s west Coast hippie-cowboy culture."[16] However, their life-story is morally complicated, problems proliferating like a Lernaean Hydra, the multi-headed serpent, every time the victim seems to have solved an older drama, a new one appears, more aggravated and more complex than the previous ones, they are forced by circumstances to "re-edit the world with new definitions. (…) In a vocabulary of a dozen verbs, adjectives, and nouns"[17] they are able to describe all the events of their lives.

Jax, the heir to the leader's seat, is a meditative spirit, and the viewers soon realize the gang of thugs is really organized around their true leader, the manipulative matriarch Gemma, Jax's mother. As she is ruthless when it comes to her family (close family and the club members), she also proves to be tolerant and good-hearted when it comes to petty matters. The club becomes indulgent and progressive enough – under her influence – to include members who are not Caucasian: a Scotsman, a Jew, and a Puerto Rican. It is close-knit family, impregnated by machismo and undying loyalty to other members, infused on occasions by the characters understandable despondency who prove again and again that they are not only a bunch of outlaw bikers. The group is all about psychological depth and swagger, features that make it more appealing to teenagers watching its everyday life. The prestige of the group, the high esteem of peers from the club and ordinary inhabitants results

[14]SAMCROPEDIA, on http://sonsofanarchy.wikia.com/wiki/SOA_Dictionary, 09.05.17.
[15] Shadoian, E. 2003: *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, Oxford, p. 5.
[16]Gilbert, M.2008: *Biker Gang Saga 'Sons of Anarchy' has 'Sopranos' appeal* ,in The Boston Globe, September 3, http://archive.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2008/09/03/biker_gang_saga_anarchy_has_sopranos_appeal/, 17.04.17.
[17]Broyard, A. June, 1984:*A Portrait of the Hipster*, in "*Partisan Review*," http://karakorak.blogspot.com/2010/11/portrait-of-hipster-by-anatole-broyard.htm, , 06.05.18.

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in higher self-esteem, as specified by Abraham.H. Maslow, in his *A theory of human motivation*[18] no wonder many club members have given up on starting a real family or have neglected their existent one in favour of hanging out with MC partners. The only real outsider is Jax's wife, Tara, a constant reminder of the dilemmas and inner turmoils of complex personalities who deal with illegal activities day-by-day. This is a storyline that makes one cheer for criminals and not have remorses over it, as these monsters are as human as possible. Tara seems to aid Jax in making up his mind about leaving the club when he realizes that it is not about brotherhood any more, but fear and greed. Although, he broods over this thought a lot, the Club will be saved and lead back to the initial dream of brotherhood and anarchic freedom with his guidance and ultimate self-sacrifice.

The story supposedly starts in the milieu of a willingly anarchic hippie collective, and "three decades later, it's become the kind of violent, swaggering, amoral bunch of bullies who have been giving motorcycle riders a bad name since Lee Marvin and his biker pals tore up a town in *The Wild One* 54 years ago."[19] The Sons in fact are members of a motorcycle club who deal with guns in a small town, ironically called Charming. In this context, the motorbike becomes the centre of the universe, a sanctuary that needs to be safeguarded by bikers, to be defended against contenders. The Sons of Anarchy (SAMCRO) gang members contrive their own universe in the garage and on the road, a universe where manhood is defined through club membership, where virtue and value can be proven, and where any act of disrespect of others – shown in speech or acts must be vindicated. Shakespearian parallels spice the series from a linguistic point of view, too: the famous Shakespearian line "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown"[20] appears in the club's idiomatic translation as "It ain't easy being king"[21], when the club's President, Clay, during a turf war, dares a member of an enemy club, to shoot him in the head.

In the past few years, hipsters have emerged as an essential part of teenage and young adult millennial fashion and culture. One can recognize them by their preference of indie films and music, skinny jeans, so-called "old-fashioned" T-shirts and old literature. The origins of this trend can be discovered in the 1940s, the authentic, original hipster being "a discrete entity – separate, critical, and defining."[22] As they were polemic by nature, their language had to become revolutionary in its isolation, able to translate impressions of being a special individual, misunderstood by the rest. What is more, they are well-known for their admiration for anything that is out of the ordinary, breaking the rules of contemporary conventions; by bringing back not only classical fashion, but also vintage use of language, along with rare expressions fashioned by several more-or-less outcast groups of society. Their nostalgia extends from mainstream cultures of the past to underground subcultures of our current civilization. These individuals grasp the extraordinary in order to clearly distance themselves from bourgeois values and transpose their loneliness into idioms of extreme simplicity. The fashion, the language, the interests contribute to a metamorphosis of their lifestyle. The hipster chooses creativity above all, tending to watch unwatchable films and not

[18]Maslow, A.H. 1954: *A Theory of Human Motivation*, in Psychological Review, Vol.50,No.4, 1943, and in *Motivation and Personality*, Harper and Row, New York, p.370-396.
[19]Hinckley, D.: *'Sons of Anarchy' Fueled by Road Rage*, on http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/sons-anarchy-fueled-road-rage-article-1.319802, 17.04.17.
[20]Shakespeare, W. 1994: *Henry IV*, Part II, in Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, Compact Edition, Ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 453.
[21]*Sons of Anarchy*, season I, Kurt Sutter, FX Channel, USA, 2008.
[22]Broyard, A. June, 1948:*A Portrait of the Hipster*, in "*Partisan Review.*", http://karakorak.blogspot.com/2010/11/portrait-of-hipster-by-anatole-broyard.html, 06.05.18.

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only to quote them, but make their idiom his own. "The hipster – once an unregenerate individualist, an underground poet, a guerrilla – had become a pretentious poet laureate."[23]

At any given time in history, in case one yearns to belong to hip trends and groups, it has been compelling that they have proper conversations, making themselves understood. Starting with gangster movies about Al Capone, up to The Sopranos, vernacular speech started its own life off the screens once audiences left the cinemas or their TV sets. The public hears colloquial speech, projects the struggle of gang members' to belong onto itself, and ends up using the protagonists' idiomatic expressions in a process of psychological identification with modern day Robin Hoods: criminals who can somehow justify their actions. Generally, these criminal dialogues can easily be understood, however, in the case of a few filmic gangs, speech presents itself like an encrypted way of communication, the use of a specialized dictionary coming in handy for viewers. This language of an inferred camaraderie is"pure street poetry."[24] Language, the same way as clothing, are symbols of gangs' attempts at implementing powerful boundaries between gang members and average society. In this way, virility is created and underlined in the streets. In the case of the "*Sons of Anarchy*" series, whose nucleus family is a drug-dealing, gun-running biker gang, manhood is born and sustained in the garage and on the road. The thrill of the deciphering process makes a lasting impact on hipsters who make the new idioms their own and flaunt them even on social media networks.

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