

## “I’m Owned no Longer”: Unveiling Muse’s Ideology in the Song Won’t Stand Down

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### *Abstract*

Within a framework of political theory, and employing critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics, this paper demonstrates that the lyrics of the song “Won’t Stand Down” by the band Muse portray a left-libertarian political ideology. By focusing on the ideational function, which encompasses transitivity, textual, and interpersonal processes, the paper identified compelling evidence within the choice of words in the song. These words not only express a critical stance towards figures of authority but also shed light on their underlying negative intentions and the transformative process of attaining freedom. The analysis is based on the examination of the written lyrics of the song, ensuring a thorough understanding of its political implications.

**Keywords:** political theory, music, left-libertarianism, systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Muse is an English rock band formed in 1994 in Teignmouth, Devon. The band consists of vocalist and guitarist Matthew Bellamy, bassist Chris Wolstenholme, and drummer Dominic Howard. They are known for their unique sound that blends elements of rock, electronic music, and classical music, as well as their energetic live performances. Muse’s political ideology is one that emphasizes social justice, environmentalism, and anti-war activism. In an interview with Apple Music (2022), Matt Bellamy stated that there should be a systemic change in the way politics is done since there is corruption in the elites. In the same interview, Matt Bellamy identifies himself as a left-libertarian and shares Noam Chomsky’s position within this ideology. The band has tried to raise awareness about these issues and encourage their fans to engage in activism and social change. Muse has become one of the most politically engaged and outspoken bands of their generation, inspiring a new generation of activists and socially conscious music fans.

In this paper, critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics are employed to identify the linguistic elements Muse uses to critique the system taking a left libertarian position in the song “Won’t Stand Down” from the band’s latest album to date (*The Will of the People*, 2022). First, I present the main concepts and theories that encompass this analysis including political theory, left-libertarianism, and Chomsky’s political ideology. Then, I provide an overview of the literature of previous works regarding music and political ideologies in

discourse analysis. Next, I describe the methodology employed to analyze the song, and I present the discussion based on the analysis. Finally, I will offer a conclusion to this analysis.

- The word choice used in song “Won’t Stand Down” portray a left-libertarian political ideology.
- The band has negative attitudes towards authoritarian and oppressing figures.
- The lyrics project an attitude of rebellion.
- The song challenges the status quo by raising awareness of the injuries the authority figures have done.

## 2. Conceptual theoretical framework

In this section, the main concepts that underpin this paper will be discussed: political theory, left-libertarianism, Noam Chomsky’s political ideology since he has been an influence on Muse, and the role of music in politics.

### 2.1 *Political theory*

According to Kymlicka and Patten (2003), political theory has been related to discussions around the nature of political power, the organization of societies, and the principles that guide political decision-making. They explain that “there is a vibrant debate about how rights claims relating to these forms of diversity connect with liberal-democratic principles of freedom, justice, and democracy. There are well-developed liberal theories of immigration or liberal theories of nationalism” (p. 3). Political theory is concerned with questions about the legitimacy of government, the distribution of power and resources, and the rights and obligations of citizens. This complex field comprises a wide range of concepts and debates. According to Graham and Hoffman (2015), by exploring the nature of political power, the principles of justice, the organization of societies, and the role of the state, political theorists seek to better understand the complex relationship between individuals, communities, and political institutions. There are different proposals in politics about how societies ought to be organized. Hence, there is an evident division of ideologies.

It is worth mentioning that political theory is tightly related to discourse analysis, in which it is classified as political discourse (PD). Fairclough and Fairclough (2013) explain that PD “is understood as the analysis of political discourse from a critical perspective, a perspective which focuses on the reproduction and contestation of political power through political discourse” (p. 17). Discourse analysis helps identify the assumptions, meanings, and connotations attached to political concepts and terms. It explores the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed to define, frame, and categorize political phenomena.

I now turn to one of the most significant political ideologies, which is left-libertarianism.

### 2.2 *Left libertarianism*

In order to understand the principles of left-libertarianism it is important to refer to the notion of human nature. Chomsky (2009) asserts that “people have basic needs – not only survival, but those needs that are distinctive to human beings. The latter needs consist of freedom (creativity, autonomy...) and community with choice” (p. 51). Left libertarianism is a political philosophy that combines left-wing economic views with libertarian principles of individual

freedom and autonomy. Liberty ensures that we are not being used as a mere means of someone else's ends. According to Quong (2011), "Left libertarians offer an account of justice that appears firmly committed both to individual liberty, and to an egalitarian view of how opportunities or advantages must be distributed" (p. 64). Thus, left-libertarians believe that individuals should be free to make their own choices without interference from the state or other powerful institutions. This includes the freedom to engage in economic activities such as trading and entrepreneurship, as well as the freedom to express oneself through art, speech, and other forms of creative expression.

Another significant contribution of left-libertarianism is its focus on reducing economic inequality and promoting social justice. Vallentyne (2000) explains that "any violation of full self-ownership is unjust" (p. 3). Left libertarians argue that economic inequality and poverty are major barriers to individual freedom and autonomy and that the state has a responsibility to intervene in the economy to promote greater economic equality. This includes policies such as progressive taxation, social welfare programs, and the regulation of corporations and financial institutions.

Moreover, left-libertarians argue that the state should be limited in its powers, with a focus on protecting individual freedom and autonomy, which are human rights, rather than promoting the interests of the wealthy people in power. They propose alternative forms of governance such as participatory democracy, worker-owned cooperatives, and mutual aid networks. One ongoing debate within the field of left-libertarianism concerns the relationship between individual freedom and collective responsibility. Left libertarianism provides significant contributions to our understanding of the complex relationship between individual freedom, economic justice, and social change. By combining left-wing economic views with libertarian principles of individual freedom and autonomy, left-libertarianism provides a unique perspective on the role of the state and the possibilities for alternative forms of governance.

### *2.3 Noam Chomsky and left libertarianism*

To attain the objective of this paper, it is relevant to identify Chomsky's political position to identify if it has a relationship with the song to be analyzed bearing in mind that Matt Bellamy advocates for left-libertarianism, and specifically with Chomsky's view. Noam Chomsky is a prominent American linguist, philosopher, and political activist who has been active for more than six decades. Chomsky's political ideology is generally considered to be left-wing, specifically a form of libertarian socialism or anarcho-syndicalism. Chomsky's political views are deeply rooted in his analysis of power and social structures. He believes that power is concentrated in the hands of a small elite, who use their wealth and influence to maintain control over society (Osborn, 2009). He argues that the concentration of power in the hands of the few leads to social and economic inequality, as well as the erosion of democratic institutions. From Chomsky's view, it is necessary to exert individual freedom through a libertarian vision, though he does not establish a specific social organization.

Chomsky's vision of an alternative society is based on decentralization and popular control. He advocates for the creation of a participatory democracy, where decision-making is decentralized, and power is shared among the people. In this regard, he argues that "political institutions [...] are artifacts created by human beings to serve human interests and needs. They are supposed to serve interests and needs" (Chomsky, 2009: 52). However, these institutions fail to ensure the human nature of freedom and creativity. They exert control from their privileged position to serve their own interests. The state gives rise to the creation of elites that undermine the essential needs of the people.

### 3. Literature review

In this section, I will present some previous research related to the analysis of song lyrics regarding political ideologies and discourse analysis.

#### 3.1 *Music and politics*

Music has played an important role as a powerful tool to transmit messages. Musicians may inspire and mobilize people through their music since they have an influx to certain sectors of the population. For example, through lyrics, they can convey complex ideologies in a way that is accessible to the audience. There are some critical discourse analysis studies on music. Those studies are focused on different social issues, ideologies, or power relations. For example, Putri and Triyono (2018) examined the song “We Shall Overcome” by Roger Waters and concluded that the song contains socio-political nuances regarding the conflict between Palestine and Israel. For the analysis, they employed a Critical Discourse Analysis Model to unveil the intended meaning.

Some studies disclose the relationship between music and political features such as social justice, nationalism, and gender (Randall & Klein, 2005); resistance and liberation (Goodman, 2012); promotion of political ideologies and social movements (Ostendorf, 2000); and social change (Street, 2013). Certainly, music has the power to signal a political message to the audience and have an impact on society to challenge or maintain the status quo.

### 4. Methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on the song “Won’t Stand Down”. This song was chosen because it is a powerful and thought-provoking composition that effectively captures the essence of societal transformation. This song showcases the potential of music as a vehicle for social change and activism in a current panorama.

The analysis was conducted through Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Firstly, the lyrics of the song will be analyzed through systemic functional grammar features identifying the ideational and textual metafunctions of language in order to identify patterns, meanings, and attitudes. Then, through critical discourse analysis, I will examine how the song reflects power relations, ideologies, and societal discourses. The research question guiding the analysis is the following:

How does word choice portray the political ideology of the band in the song?

#### 4.1 *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a theoretical and methodological approach that emerged in the late 1970s and has influenced different fields of study such as linguistics, sociology, and other social sciences. CDA focuses on disclosing ideologies, beliefs, and social issues that are conveyed or not through language. It has been employed to analyze different discourses such as political speeches, media texts, advertising, and educational materials, etc. Paltridge (2013) asserts that “critical discourse analysis explores the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs. It explores issues such as gender, ethnicity, cultural difference, ideology, and identity” (p. 89). Therefore, one of the central ideas of CDA is the belief that language is a social practice that reflects and reproduces power relations in society. This view is grounded in the idea that discourse is not neutral but is rather shaped by the ideologies and interests of those who produce it.

By revealing the hidden power relations and ideologies that are encoded in discourse, CDA provides a powerful tool for understanding and challenging the dominant discourses that shape our societies. It is important to consider the context in the analysis since the context allows us to interpret the discourse and identify the implications it has.

#### 4.2 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), also known as the *Theory of choice*, is a linguistic theory that was developed in the 1960s by Michael Halliday and his colleagues. SFL considers language as a social semiotic system that enables people to make meanings in a particular context. According to Halliday (2009), “Language, like other semiotic systems, is a systemic resource for making and exchanging meaning. Language is a particular kind of semiotic system which is based on grammar, characterized by both a stratal organization and functional diversity” (p. 5). Therefore, by applying SFL, we can analyze how language choices in the song reflect broader social and political ideologies. It allows to uncover how the lyrics construct meaning and interact with the socio-cultural environment.

Egins (2004) states that SFL comprises four main claims regarding language: (1) Language use is functional; (2) the function of language is to make meaning; (3) meanings are influenced by the social and cultural contexts; and (4) language is a semiotic process of making meaning by choosing.

From the perspective of SFL, language consists of three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Ideational functions are related to the representation of experience through grammatical resources and comprise the system of transitivity. Interpersonal functions are related to social interaction, and textual functions are related to the organization of discourse.

As explained above, the ideational function includes the transitivity system which proposes that every clause in a sentence comprises three processes (i.e., material, mental, relational, verbal, existential, and behavioral), participants, and circumstances (i.e., time, location, manner, cause, and purpose). The interpersonal system includes several components, including mood, modality, and polarity. These components work together to express the speaker’s attitude towards what they are expressing, as well as to the listener. According to Haratyan (2011), “[m]ood is concerned with the topic of information or service and whether it is giving or demanding and the tenor of the relationship between interactants. Tenor deals with gender or status-based power” (p. 262). Mood can be declarative, interrogative, and imperative. Modality allows the speakers to express their attitudes. It can be expressed through modal verbs, and other structures to express the degree of certainty, obligation, or possibility.

The textual function includes the theme, information structure, and cohesion. According to Haratyan (2011), “theme includes the message in a text, indicating the identity of text relations. Topic comes first and after that Comment appears to expand, justify and provide additional information to preceding information” (p. 263). Cohesion “relates to the “semantic ties” or relations of meaning within text” (Haratyan, 2011: 263). Cohesion allows one to connect different parts of the text and creates unity and coherence.

#### 4.3 The analysis

The song was analyzed through systemic functional grammar. First, the words in the lyrics were counted and divided into types (i.e., the number of different words) and tokens (i.e., the total number of words regardless of their frequency throughout the song). For the analysis, each line was categorized based on two metafunctions: ideational, and interpersonal. For the ideational metafunction, the transitivity system was considered. The information was stored on a

table that included the number of clauses (i.e., 53) and the processes present in each one. Some causes have more than one process, while some clauses do not correspond to any process within the transitivity system (e.g., *now die alone*), but rather belong to the interpersonal system (i.e., mood). Regarding interpersonal metafunction, the mood was considered as part of the analysis. Thus, each clause was also classified into interrogative, declarative, or imperative. As for the modality process, there was no modal verb identified in the song. Thus, the process is non-existent in the song. In the following section, I will present the results of the analysis.

## 5. Results

In this section, the results of the analysis will be presented. First, I will describe the transitivity analysis of the ideational metafunction carried out. Then, I will explain the interpersonal function.

The lyrics of the song include the following proportion of tokens and types:

Table 1. Tokens and types in the song’s lyrics

Item	No.	%
<b>Tokens</b>	295	100
<b>Types</b>	101	34.2 %

Table 1 shows that a high proportion of the words in the lyrics of the song are repeated. This property is usual in this type of text genre since it contains verse, pre-chorus, chorus, and bridge. The total number in Table 2 below represents the number of times each process was present in the song, and the percentage is obtained concerning the tokens of the lyrics. The following subsections will present the results regarding the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions.

### 5.1 Ideational metafunction

As explained above, the ideational metafunction comprises the transitivity system, which will allow us to identify the patterns of how language represents actions, processes, and relationships between participants. Table 2 displays the processes that were identified in the song.

Table 2. Transitivity analysis

Transitivity process	Total number	Percentage	Examples from the song
<b>Material</b>	24	45.3 %	You’ve used me for too long
<b>Mental</b>	15	28.3 %	I see your disguise
<b>Behavioral</b>	12	22.6 %	Won’t stand down
<b>Verbal</b>	2	3.8 %	You were just gaslighting me
<b>Relational: attributive</b>	10	18.9 %	You are just a user and an abuser
<b>Existential</b>	0	0%	

*Note.* The transitivity analysis within the ideational function.

This analysis shows that most of the content of the song contains material processes, which encompasses the mood of the song which is mostly declarative and describes events carried out by an entity (this will be explained in the following section). The band uses the pronouns *I* and *You* to signal the actors in the process and, *me* and *you* as the most repetitive goals. This process

represents the interactions between the actor and goal which are constantly interchanged as can be appreciated in the two verses below:

***I** never believed that I would concede  
And let someone trample on me  
**You** strung me along, I thought I was strong  
But you were just gaslighting me*

***I've** opened my eyes, and counted the lies  
And now it is clearer to me  
**You** are just a user and an abuser  
Living vicariously*

...

The band predominantly employs verbs laden with connotations of violence, oppression, and rebellion to articulate these behaviors. For instance, phrases like “*but now, you have pushed me under*” and “*you’ve used me for too long*” vividly depict the singer’s sense of victimization. Additionally, the lyrics “*I’ll shoot you before you take aim*” further emphasize the retaliatory nature of their response. The actions undertaken by the authoritarian figure bear a profound influence on the singer, serving as a catalyst for their counteractive actions in the face of oppressive circumstances.

In relation to the mental process, there were many stances in the song mostly regarding the cognitive process. For example, in the following two consecutive lines:

*I've opened my eyes, and counted the lies  
And now it is clearer to me*

The phrase “*I’ve opened my eyes*” is employed metaphorically to symbolize the act of gaining awareness or insight. Consequently, it has been categorized as a mental process rather than a material one. Through this expression, the band seeks to convey a clear and unambiguous message of having uncovered the abuser's deceitful lies and hidden motives, and now possessing a heightened level of consciousness. The choice of words utilized by the band within the mental process aligns with the cognitive domain, as they epitomize the concept of becoming cognizant, altering thoughts, and exposing intentions and falsehoods.

Based on the analysis, an important number of behavioral processes were identified. The title of the song itself: “*Won’t stand down*” corresponds to this process and is repeated as part of the chorus eight times throughout the song. As indicated above, in SFL, language needs to be observed on the basis of the context in which it is used and not in isolation. Thus, even though “*stand down*” might seem like a material process, the context of the song indicates that it is a behavioral process as it captures the spirit of resistance. It signifies the singer’s determination and commitment to challenge and confront the existing order, highlighting their refusal to comply or give in. This may arise as a response to an emotional and/or cognitive trigger.

Regarding the relational process, a total of 10 stances were classified as attributive as they attribute specific characteristics to a dominant entity or figure. These relational processes were identified as intensive, possessive, and circumstantial. Examples of intensive processes include lines like “*You are just a user and an abuser,*” wherein the band employs adjectives such as “*abuser*” to describe a figure of authority, signifying their negative attitudes towards the political system. Additionally, the band uses adjectives like “*strong*” and “*stronger*” to illustrate a progression from a state of weakness to one of resilience, highlighting their capacity to withstand the harmful behaviors they have endured. The phrase “*I’m owned no longer*” further reinforces a sense of liberation from the oppressive figure, emphasizing the band’s newfound freedom.

### 5.2 Interpersonal metafunction

Regarding the interpersonal metafunction, the mood analysis is displayed in Table 3. This analysis will help to identify how language is used to represent attitudes and intentions in the song.

Table 3. Mood Analysis

Item	Total Number	%	Example in the song
<b>Imperative</b>	3	5.7	<i>Now die alone</i>
<b>Declarative</b>	48	90.6	<i>I’ve opened my eyes; you’ve used me for too long</i>
<b>Interrogative</b>	0	0.0	

*Note.* The analysis of mood within the interpersonal function.

As explained previously, the mood of the song serves as a significant indicator of the band’s attitudes toward the depicted situations. Primarily classified as declarative, the statements within the song present accounts of various scenarios that are portrayed as factual events. Phrases like “*You strung me along*” or “*I opened my eyes*” exemplify this process. Interestingly, the band employs only one imperative sentence, “*Now die alone*,” repeated three times throughout the song. Through this command, they express their intentions and attitudes towards the system, advocating for its disappearance. Notably, the choice of the word “*die*” carries a potent connotation, underscoring the band’s strongly negative attitude towards the entity in question. By incorporating the adverb “*now*,” they mark a transformative shift between the past events narrated and the necessity for change in the present. In the following section, I will now discuss the results presented by answering the research question.

## 6. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, Matt Bellamy explained that the album “*The Will of the People*” (2022) stands for a position changing the way politics are done. Considering the research question: How does word choice portray the political ideology in the song? Based on the analysis presented above, it becomes apparent that there is a strong consistency between the band’s ideas and the lyrics of this song. Primarily, the lyrics convey past oppressive actions and behaviors while projecting a sense of resistance and empowerment in the present and future. These actions are mainly represented through verbs related to violence, power abuse, and the deprivation of personal freedom. By recognizing that language involves the act of choice, the band intentionally selects words such as “*abuser*,” “*gaslighting*,” “*living vicariously*,” and “*you strung me along*” to depict power relationships and the concept of liberty. These concepts also align with Noam Chomsky’s position in claiming individual freedom as in the phrase “*I’m owned no longer*,” which is key in signaling the concept of liberty. The choice of words serves to convey negative attitudes towards a dominant authority that exerts control and serves its own interest. As discussed earlier from a CDA perspective, the use of discourse serves to represent ideologies or interests. In this case, libertarianism is reflected through the use of ideational and interpersonal metafunctions. Although the song does not explicitly mention the political system, it does allude to an entity indicated by the pronoun “*you*”. Considering the context of the song and the band’s interviews, it is plausible to interpret this song as embodying an attitude of rebellion towards both the political system in general and any entity attempting to subjugate or manipulate individuals.



Left-libertarianism opposes authoritarianism and strives to empower people to be autonomous and free, asserting their inherent rights as individuals. The lyrics of this song aim to depict the process of breaking free from a dominant entity, which could be the political system or any other oppressive figure. The message of the song aligns with the principles of this political ideology, taking a strong libertarian stance. Muse has been recognized for writing songs that emphasize social justice, and through their music, they encourage their audience to engage in activism and contribute to social change. In the lyrics of the song “Won’t Stand Down,” they attempt to challenge the status quo by raising awareness about the negative actions of authority figures and confronting them with an empowered attitude.

## 7. Conclusions

The results of this analysis conclude that the song “Won’t Stand Down” by Muse portrays a left-libertarian political ideology which is represented through word choice in the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions employed by the band. The application of critical discourse analysis as well as systemic functional linguistics in examining songs, particularly within the realm of political theory, yields valuable insights into power dynamics, ideologies, and social change. In the case of Muse’s song, a clear consistency emerges between the band’s ideas and the lyrics of the song. These depict past oppressions and advocate for resistance and empowerment in the present and future. Through careful word choice, Muse conveys negative attitudes towards dominant authorities, reflecting a strong libertarian position aligned with principles of autonomy and individual freedom.

The combined use of SFL and CDA offers a powerful analytical approach to examining the political implications of song lyrics. These frameworks enable comprehensive analysis, facilitate the detection of political ideologies, unveil power dynamics, provide contextual understanding, and ensure a rigorous evidence-based analysis.

Muse’s emphasis on social justice and its call to engage in activism and social change aligns with the band’s goal of raising awareness and inspiring listeners to challenge the status quo. By examining the lyrics of songs such as Muse’s “Won’t Stand Down,” we are reminded of the transformative potential of music and the importance of analyzing the discourses that shape our understanding of politics and society.

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