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Close Reading & Rhetorical Analysis with Alex Warren's "Ordinary"

Alex Warren's widely celebrated pop ballad, "Ordinary," has been at the top of the charts for months. Throughout the lyrics, the speaker offers a vulnerable and emotionally charged argument that has captivated listeners around the world... and now we get to analyze it!

Using the graphic organizer below, examine the language that Warren uses throughout the argument. In the left-column, you will find excerpted lyrics, in the middle-column, you will find guiding questions to help steer your analysis, and in the right-column, you will find space to jot down your own questions, notes, and insights.

Be thoughtful and thorough in your analysis, and be prepared to use your notes for a deeper discussion to follow!

Excerpted Lyrics	Guiding Questions	Your Notes & Analysis
They say, "The holy water's watered down"	Why might the speaker have chosen to open this argument with this particular line? By referring to a "they"...? (Who might "they" be?) How would this would be quite different if the speaker had omitted the words, "<i>They say,</i>" and simply opened with, "<i>The holy water's watered down.</i>" Analyze the symbolism that's already being introduced in the opening line: What does "<i>holy water</i>" traditionally symbolize? What might it mean for it to be "<i>watered down</i>"...? What tone does this already set for the rest of the argument?	
And this town's lost its faith	What might the multiple meanings associated with the word "<i>faith</i>" (e.g. religious beliefs, hope, trust in something, etc.) be doing to enhance this particular line? How does this continue or complicate the previous line?	

Our colors will fade eventually”	What might “<i>colors</i>” represent here? (Individuality? Youth? Energy? Something else?) Further, why might the speaker deliberately use a vague or abstract word like “<i>colors</i>,” rather than something much more specific? How might that kind of rhetorical choice enhance the argument? What does the word “eventually” suggest about inevitability and time?	
So, if our time is runnin’ out	What shift might the speaker intentionally be trying to create with the word “<i>so</i>”?...? (Is the speaker agreeing with or responding to the first three lines?) What kind of urgency or tension is created by the phrase, “<i>time is runnin’ out</i>”?...? (Does this mean “<i>our colors</i>” <u>are</u> actually fading? What’s going on here?)	
Day after day	What is the effect of this repetition? How does it contribute to tone or pacing or the argument? (In other words, why does the speaker go as far as to include this line in the argument? How would it be different if this line was omitted?)	
We’ll make the mundane our masterpiece	This is a powerful moment in the argument, but why? What does this line suggest about defiance or transformation? What stance does the speaker seem to be taking here, in the context of everything that was introduced so far? The speaker introduces a “<i>we</i>” for the first time here, which seems to stand out in contrast to the “<i>they</i>.” Who are these two groups? Why does the speaker frame this argument as “us vs. them” from the onset? This line uses the juxtaposition of two contrasting ideas, which also create alliteration: “<i>We’ll <u>make</u> the <u>mundane</u> our <u>masterpiece</u>.</i>” What’s the impact of these layered rhetorical devices?	
Oh my, my / Oh my, my love / I take one look at you	The speaker suddenly transitions to a direct and more intimate interaction with his target audience (“<i>you</i>” ... presumably part of the “<i>we</i>” that was introduced in the previous line	

	...). Why? How does this sudden intimacy contrast with the earlier existential tone? What is the speaker's intended effect? Consider the speaker's decision to focus on sight here. He says, "<i>I take one <u>look</u> at you,</i>" where he could have chosen from countless alternative possibilities, such as, "I feel your hand in mine," or, "Just the thought of you." How do these alternatives compare to his choice, "<i>I take one look at you</i>"...? How are these options rhetorically different?	
You're takin' me out of the ordinary	What does "ordinary" mean in the context of this relationship? How does this echo or counter the earlier reference to "<i>making the <u>mundane</u> our masterpiece</i>"...?	
I want you layin' me down 'til we're dead and buried	In a manner similar to our analysis of the earlier line where the speaker contrasts "<i>mundane</i>" with "<i>masterpiece</i>," we're offered another contrasting juxtaposition. Analyze it! (What is the tone here? Is it romantic? Morbid? Both? And more importantly, <u>why</u>? What is the speaker's intended effect?) How might the hyperbolic language in this line be heightening the emotional stakes of the speaker's position?	
I'm on the edge of your knife, stayin' drunk on your vine	The speaker introduces two different metaphors here, both of which are relatively "dark" in nature (and perhaps therefore consistent with the previous line, too). What do these metaphors ("<i>I'm on the edge of your knife... staying drunk on your vine...</i>") reveal about the power dynamics or risks associated with the relationship between the speaker and his target audience? Why might the speaker have chosen these particular metaphors, and this particular imagery? Why the edge of a knife? Why wine?	
The angels up in the clouds are jealous knowin' we found	The speaker builds on the previous imagery by offering yet another contrast: "<i>the angels up in the clouds.</i>" How does this juxtaposition strengthen the previous line? Why might the speaker be using the angels' jealousy to	

	convey a message about his love? (What is it, exactly, that the angels are jealous of? Of being on the “ <i>edge of your knife</i> ”?...? Unpack this!)	
Somethin’ so out of the ordinary	What might be emphasized by this repetition? How does the use of “so” intensify the statement, compared to the last time the speaker simply stated, “<i>You’re takin’ me out of the ordinary</i>”?...? Take a moment to consider how the speaker has cleverly shaped the language around the word, “ordinary,” to deliver an extraordinary result. (Even the song is titled “Ordinary,” and yet the recurring message seems to be about the opposition.) Why? What’s the impact? Is it effective?	
You got me kissin’ the ground of your sanctuary	Why does the speaker reference a “<i>sanctuary</i>”?...? What kind of imagery is the speaker continuously creating and folding into the argument? And <u>why</u>? What might this imply about the speaker’s reverence or surrender? About his relationship with the person he is speaking to?	
Shatter me with your touch, oh Lord, return me to dust	Continue your analysis of the speaker’s use of religious language. Why does he make this kind of language foundational to the argument? How does “<i>shatter</i>” contrast with “<i>touch</i>”?...? What is the speaker actually saying here? What does this line actually mean? What is the effect of invoking “<i>dust</i>” in this line? (This is an allusion to the widely known biblical line, “From ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” How does that contribute to the argument? And how might it reinforce the images and ideas that were introduced earlier in the argument?)	
The angels up in the clouds are jealous knowin’ we found Hopeless hallelujah	The chorus ends with a repetition of, “ <i>The angels up in the clouds are jealous knowin’ we found,</i> ” but instead of focusing on how they found “ <i>somethin’ so out of the ordinary,</i> ” the focus	

	shifts to having found “ <i>hopeless hallelujah</i> .” The grandiose religious imagery here suggests that the speaker is delivering a profound message, so unpack it! What does this mean? What is “ <i>hopeless hallelujah</i> ”? Why should anyone, let alone angels, be jealous of such a thing?	
On this side of Heaven’s gate	Extend your analysis of the previous line. Why does the speaker clarify that “<i>hopeless hallelujah</i>” was found “<i>on this side of Heaven’s gate</i>”? (What does that mean? And what might it imply, about both life and the afterlife? What’s the speaker actually saying here?) From a rhetorical standpoint, how do paradox and religious allusion continue to contribute to the argument’s tone and message?	
Oh, my life, how do ya / Breathe and take my breath away?	The speaker evokes contrasting imagery of life, breathing, and breath being taken away. Why? How does this imagery contribute to the argument? What might it intentionally be emphasizing about the speaker’s emotional experience? How is it contributing to the argument’s message? The speaker seems to be referring to his audience as “<i>my life</i>,” rather than “<i>my love</i>” (as he did earlier). Why this change? What’s the difference? What does it imply? How does this shift contribute to the argument?	
At your altar, I will pray	The speaker goes even further with the use of religious imagery. Why? What is the intended effect of this specific line (“<i>at your altar, I will pray</i>”), and of the bigger-picture use of religious imagery throughout the argument? Take a moment to fill in the gaps of the symbolism that the speaker has created. Who is the “<i>your</i>”? If the speaker is the person praying and/or worshipping, who is the “<i>you</i>” that he is continuously addressing in this argument?	
You’re the sculptor, I’m the clay	Unpack the metaphor that is being used here. What does this imply about the speaker, the audience, and the relationship between the	

	two? What might it suggest about agency, devotion, transformation, and love?	
Somethin' so heavenly, higher than ecstasy / Whenever you're next to me, oh my	What might this comparison between " <i>heavenly</i> " and " <i>ecstasy</i> " imply about the speaker's emotional or spiritual state?	
My world was in black and white until I saw your light	The speaker offers another metaphor here, and in doing so, incorporates another reference to religious imagery (i.e. seeing the light). First, unpack what the speaker means by this. Then, analyze why he chose to say it in this particular way. (How does this phrasing enhance the ideas that are at play here?) The speaker also utilizes a powerful rhetorical strategy in which the ideas that are introduced at the beginning of an argument ("<i>our colors will fade eventually</i>") are revisited in a surprising way at the end of the argument ("<i>my world was in black and white until I saw your light</i>"). Unpack this deliberate and profound moment in the rhetoric! What message is the speaker sending here? What point is he driving home?	
I thought you had to die to find / Somethin' so out of the ordinary	The speaker draws the argument to its close with one final religious reference that culminates with the song's frequently repeated refrain. In this moment, the speaker intertwines the idea of death with transcendence. Why? What is the speaker's intended effect? What message is he sending? What is being emphasized here? What might it reveal about the argument's speaker, audience, message, and overarching purpose?	

Name _____

Unpacking the Rhetorical Situation in Alex Warren's "Ordinary"

Now that you've closely read and unpacked the language in Alex Warren's "Ordinary," take some time to analyze the facets of the argument that are detailed below. Be sure to include textual evidence in the column on the right in order to substantiate your ideas. (If you don't use textual evidence from the argument to support your ideas, you're just making stuff up!)

Speaker What do you know about the speaker, and how does it contribute to the overarching argument? (Are there facets of the argument that are strengthened or weakened based on the manner in which the speaker portrays himself through language?)	
Audience What do you know about the audience that the speaker is addressing, and how does it contribute to the argument? (How does the relationship between the speaker and the audience enhance other facets of the argument?)	
Message What is the central message that the speaker is trying to convey in this argument? In other words, what's the core idea that the speaker is attempting to deliver to his target audience? State the message succinctly, and back it up with textual evidence.	
Purpose Not to be confused with the speaker's "message" – the purpose is what the speaker is hoping to <u>accomplish</u> by crafting this argument. (In other words, what is the speaker's <u>motivation</u>? What is the speaker hoping to <u>achieve</u>?)	

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Comparing, Contrasting, & Synthesizing Alex Warren's "Ordinary" With Hozier's "Take Me To Church"

Now that you've thoroughly analyzed Alex Warren's "Ordinary," it's time to consider it in the context of another similar argument!

Below, you'll find excerpted lyrics from Hozier's hit song, "Take Me To Church," which explores similar themes of love while relying heavily on religious imagery. The arguments have a lot in common, but they are also distinctly different in many ways... and that's where the analytical fun begins!

Your task is to compare and contrast the speaker, audience, message, purpose, and rhetorical strategies of the two arguments. Then, once you've identified similarities and differences, synthesize your findings to articulate how each argument conveys its ideas about love.

Hozier's "Take Me To Church"	Your Notes & Analysis
My lover's got humour She's the giggle at a funeral Knows everybody's disapproval I should've worshipped her sooner If the heavens ever did speak She's the last true mouthpiece Every Sunday's gettin' more bleak A fresh poison each week We were born sick, you heard them say it My church offers no absolutes She tells me, "Worship in the bedroom" The only heaven I'll be sent to Is when I'm alone with you I was born sick, but I love it Command me to be well A, amen Amen, amen Take me to church I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife Offer me that deathless death Oh, good God, let me give you my life	

Take me to church
I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife
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If I'm a pagan of the good times
My lover's the sunlight
To keep the goddess on my side
She demands a sacrifice
Drain the whole sea, get somethin' shiny
Somethin' meaty for the main course
That's a fine lookin' high horse
What you got in the stable?
We've a lot of starvin' faithful
That looks tasty, that looks plenty
This is hungry work

No masters or kings when the ritual begins
There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin
In the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene
Only then, I am human, only then, I am clean

Name _____

Essay: Compare & Contrast Alex Warren's "Ordinary" With Hozier's "Take Me To Church"

Both Alex Warren's "Ordinary" and Hozier's "Take Me to Church" employ religious language, symbolism, and imagery to describe intimate relationships.

Your task is to analyze these rhetorical strategies, and compose an essay in which you compare and contrast these choices as implemented by each speaker to elevate romantic love through spiritual or religious metaphors.

Be sure to consider tone, word choice, symbolism, and figurative language as you analyze how the tension between the sacred and the profane is used to develop each song's message about devotion and transformation.

Prewriting / Notes

Rough draft due: _____

Final draft due: _____

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Essay: Synthesize Alex Warren’s “Ordinary” With Hozier’s “Take Me To Church”

Both “Ordinary” and “Take Me to Church” explore the transformative power of love: one as a kind of sanctuary, the other as salvation through worship.

Using both songs as your sources, craft an argument in which you evaluate the extent to which love functions as a form of personal or spiritual transcendence in human experience.

In your response, analyze how each speaker uses specific rhetorical devices (e.g. metaphor, tone, etc.) and religious language to position love as something transcendent.

Prewriting / Notes

Rough draft due: _____

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