

# Sensuality and Spirituality in Hozier and the Romantic Tradition: A Comparative Study of “Take Me to Church” and “The Garden of Love”

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## Abstract

This research paper explores the lyrical and thematic connections between contemporary musician Hozier and English Romantic poets, with a focus on the interplay between sensuality and spirituality. Using William Blake’s “The Garden of Love” and Hozier’s “Take Me to Church” as central texts, the analysis traces a shared literary lineage in which institutional religion is critiqued and the body is reclaimed as a site of divine experience. The study argues that Hozier continues the Romantic project of transforming spiritual authority into a more personal, sensual, and rebellious form of transcendence.

**Keywords:** Hozier, William Blake, Sensuality, Spirituality, Institutional Religion

## Introduction

Music and Poetry have long served as a food for soul. Human beings have maintained a rather emotionally charged bond with them. From Geoffrey Chaucer to T. S. Eliot, and Frank Sinatra to BTS, poetry and music have never failed to dominate the world with their emotional lyricism and romantic appeal. These also serve as an outlet for the poets and the musicians to discuss, deconstruct, and unravel the harsh and tempestuous realities of the world. The English Romantic movement, emerging in the late eighteenth century, redefined

the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, the emotional and the sublime. Poets like William Blake, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley broke from neoclassical restraint and religious orthodoxy, instead embracing the power of imagination, emotion, and embodied experience. In the twenty-first century, Irish musician Hozier (Andrew Hozier-Byrne) has reanimated many of these themes, particularly the fusion of sensuality with spirituality in a post-Christian, secular world. Hozier's lyrics, often rich with religious imagery, question institutional dogma and reclaim desire as sacred.

This paper argues that Hozier's work, particularly his 2013 single "Take Me to Church," which later appeared in his album *Hozier* (2014), continues the Romantic tradition exemplified by Blake's "The Garden of Love," reconfiguring spirituality through the lens of the body, love, and transgressive desire.

### **Romanticism and the Body-Spirit Continuum**

Romanticism is often characterized by its intense focus on individual experience, emotional depth, and the natural world as a site of the divine. According to Dhaval Purohit, Romanticism marked a shift from mimetic and pragmatic modes of art toward expressive modes (Purohit 3) in which the artist's internal reality became paramount. Among the most radical of the Romantics, William Blake rejected the dualism that separated the spiritual from the bodily, asserting instead that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 4). In his poetry, Blake envisioned a world where the divine was not above or beyond the human but was immanent within the body, love, and imagination. His critique of institutional religion lay precisely in its rejection of this embodied spirituality.

This same thought can be traced in Percy Bysshe Shelley's work *Prometheus Unbound* and other poems, which aligns erotic and revolutionary liberation, arguing that love and desire are central to human freedom. The Romantic poets thus laid the groundwork for a

theological and poetic sensibility in which sensuality was not a sin, but a sacred portal to meaning.

### **Hozier and the Romantic Inheritance**

Hozier's "Take Me to Church" can be read as a modern Romantic manifesto. The song opens with:

"My lover's got humor / She's the giggle at a funeral" (lines 1-2).

From the outset, Hozier juxtaposes sacred ritual ("funeral") with irreverence and play, creating a tension that will pervade the entire song. The lover is not merely a romantic partner; she becomes a priestess of the body, the object and mediator of devotion. When Hozier sings, "I was born sick, but I love it" (lines 14-15), he echoes original sin but undermines its condemnation through affirmation.

The chorus "Take me to church / I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies" (lines 17-18), calls back to Blake's "The Garden of Love," in which the poet finds a chapel erected where "I used to play on the green" (line 3). The phrase "Thou shalt not writ over the door" (line 5) encapsulates Blake's critique: institutional religion transforms joy and love into guilt and repression. Hozier picks up this theme, contrasting the liberating physicality of love with the Church's condemnation of desire:

"The only heaven I'll be sent to / Is when I'm alone with you" (lines 13-14).

This lyric transforms erotic union into spiritual transcendence, reversing traditional Christian eschatology. Like Blake and Shelley, Hozier challenges the binary between the sacred and the sensual, offering a theology in which the body is not a barrier to the divine, but its very ground.

### **Embodied Devotion and Anti-Institutional Spirituality**

Both Blake and Hozier present the body as a site of divine revelation. In Blake's poem, the natural garden that is full of "sweet flowers" is cordoned off by priests dressed in

“black gowns” who bind his “joys and desires” (lines 10-12). The metaphor is stark: joy is not inherently sinful, but made so by religious institutions. Hozier, over two centuries later, continues this critique in a queer context. His interviews confirm that “Take Me to Church” was partially inspired by the Catholic Church’s condemnation of LGBTQ+ relationships.

This reclaiming of the body is not only erotic but political. The song’s music video, which depicts a gay couple pursued and brutalized, visually reinforces the critique of religious hypocrisy and moral panic. In both Blake’s and Hozier’s texts, desire is not only personal but also ideological and revolutionary.

As Camille Bull says, “Hozier reflects that this song is less about faith, and more about how powerful men and organizations use God against people to control them. He speaks about how “Take Me to Church” can also be seen as a rejection of the limits placed on homosexuality by Christianity” (Bull). Moreover, Hozier’s use of religious language, i.e., “worship,” “heaven,” “ritual,” “sacrifice,” etc is not simply ironic. It suggests that the language of transcendence need not be abandoned, but re-rooted in human love. Hozier replaces the verticality of divine hierarchy with the horizontal closeness of lovers. This echoes Blake’s insistence that God is not an authoritarian ruler, but the creative imagination itself.

### **Continuities and Transformations**

The Romantic movement arose at a time when traditional religious authority was being questioned by Enlightenment thought and political revolution. Today, Hozier’s music arises within a different context which is notably secular, global, digitally saturated, but the concerns remain strikingly similar: the search for meaning outside of institutional dogma, the sanctity of love, and the reclamation of pleasure.

What distinguishes Hozier’s contribution is his synthesis of literary tradition and popular music. His lyrics are accessible yet layered, inviting both critical and affective

engagement. As a musician, Hozier extends the Romantic legacy not through imitation, but through transformation, offering a theology of tenderness in a time of alienation, a liturgy of the body in a world often estranged from it.

### **Conclusion**

Hozier's work, particularly in "Take Me to Church," carries forward the Romantic impulse to reconcile the sensual and the spiritual, the body and the soul. In dialogue with poets like William Blake, he critiques the institutions that sever these realms and reimagines love, especially transgressive or marginalized love as sacred. The result is a lyrical theology rooted not in abstraction or asceticism, but in the lived, loved, and desiring body. In doing so, Hozier not only affirms the enduring relevance of Romantic poetics, but also enacts a contemporary form of resistance: one where the song becomes a sanctuary and the beloved, a shrine. "By drawing on his Catholic upbringing and repurposing traditional images from Christianity as metaphors for romance and sex, Hozier illustrates a kind of passionate, consummate love that would be considered corrupt by Catholic standards" (Cox 2).

This paper thus opens up pathways for further research, especially in Queer Studies, and Musicology. Future studies might extend this analysis by comparing Hozier's work with other contemporary artists engaging similar themes like Florence Welch, Frank Ocean, or Mitski, or by considering how digital platforms shape the circulation and reception of spiritualized eroticism in popular music. Moreover, exploring fan interpretations and affective communities around Hozier's lyrics could yield rich insights into how modern audiences construct meaning through art that bridges Romanticism, queerness, and critique.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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