Aimee Hinds, "Entry on: Pyramids by Frank Ocean [pseudonyme of Christopher Breaux] ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1185. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Frank Ocean [pseudonyme of Christopher Breaux]

Pyramids

United States of America (2012)

TAGS: Cleopatra VII Egypt



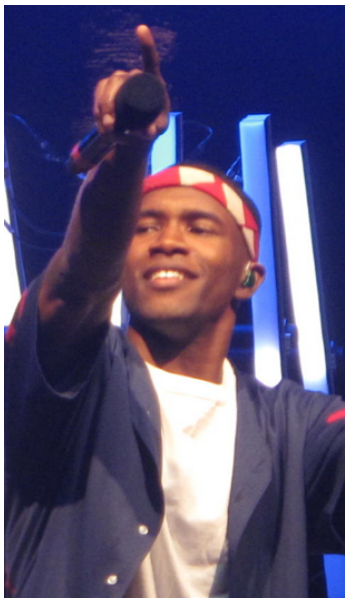


We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Pyramids
Title of the Album(s)	Channel Orange
Studio/Production Company	Def Jam
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America, United Kingdom, Belgium
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2012
First Edition Details	Frank Ocean, *Pyramids*. "Channel Orange" (album), Def Jam, June 7, 2012, 9:54 min.
Running time	9:54
Format	CD / MP3 / Digital
Official Website	blonded.co (accessed: February 16, 2021)
Genre	Alternative R&B*, Electronic*
Target Audience	Young adults (Explicit language and themes, not suitable for children)
Author of the Entry	Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton, hindsa@roehampton.ac.uk
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Frank Ocean performing at Coachella, 2012, Derivative work: AMangalick (WMF) CC BY 4.0. The file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike. (accessed: February 16, 2021).

Frank Ocean [pseudonyme of Christopher Breaux] (Author of lyrics, Vocalist)

Frank Ocean is an American singer songwriter. Born Christopher Breaux in California, he moved with his family to New Orleans when he was five years old. He began to study English at the University of New Orleans in 2005; however, he was forced to relocate to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005; the hurricane also destroyed his home and recording facilities. Ocean dropped out of university to focus on his music career, starting out as a songwriter. He signed with DefJam records in 2009, although self-released his debut mixtape, *Nostalgia, Ultra* in 2011. Ocean has released two studio albums to critical acclaim. He has a wide range of musical influences, and his musical often features themes of love, desire, longing, mortality, innocence, youth, and nostalgia.

Source:

wikipedia.org (accessed: February 16, 2021).

Bio prepared by Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton, hindsa@roehampton.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

The song is two distinct halves, one of which describes an alternative pseudo-historical Cleopatra, and the other of which is narrated by the partner of a sex-worker. The first half is narrated by Cleopatra's presumed pharaoh, and loosely describes Cleopatra's involvement with Rome, through lyrical description of the abduction/absconding of Cleopatra from her palace and her eventual retrieval and death.

Analysis

The second half of the song has little relevance to reception apart from that the female protagonist is named Cleopatra, but the first half is a revisionist version of the life and death of Cleopatra VII. (As the first half of the song is also often played without its explicit second half, this analysis will focus on the first half). It is particularly interesting as it is written from an explicitly African viewpoint, challenging the idea of the European Egypt that is so prevalent in Classics as a discipline and unambiguously positioning Cleopatra as Black: "my black queen, Cleopatra". Some of the elements that Ocean uses to tie the narrative into a wider African context are anachronistic: "set the cheetahs on the loose", as are those that place the action in Egypt: "chandeliers inside the pyramid", as are the pyramids themselves, most of which were built over two millennia before Cleopatra's time and used as burial monuments rather than dwellings. While the lyrics situate Egypt as an African country, they also feed from orientalist images of Cleopatra such as those seen in nineteenth century French paintings featuring scenes from her life or of her death. Much like the 2010 *Cleopatra Barbie* (also surveyed on this database), while a reinterpretation of Cleopatra is attempted here, it is heavily influenced by existing images.

The song is narrated presumably by Cleopatra's pharaoh, Cleopatra herself having been abducted or possibly having left by herself:

> How could you run off on me? How could you run off on us?
>
> You feel like God inside that gold
>
> I found you laying down with Samson and his full head of hair
>
> I found my black queen Cleopatra, bad dreams, Cleopatra

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The line "Samson and his full head of hair" references the Biblical story of Samson, whose strength was lost when his lover Delilah betrayed him and had his hair cut. In this revised African context, the reference to Samson's hair is possibly a reference to both the Egyptian preference for wearing wigs over shaved heads, and to either Caesar or Mark Antony (or both), who as Romans would have likely had "full" heads of their own hair in comparison to Egyptian men of the period. The references to God and Samson create an analogy for Cleopatra's apparent behaviour, highlighting the idea of her as treacherous and false; they also apparently recognise the connections between Egypt, Rome and Christianity (although the Romans were not to embrace Christianity for over four hundred years).

The song embraces Cleopatra as a pan-African queen, whose significance is as much to her people (a wider people than just Egyptians, as implied through the African imagery within the lyrics) as to her pharaoh; for example, she is described as "the jewel of Africa".

Towards the end of the first half of the song Cleopatra meets her end, closely following historical narratives:

Send the cheetahs to the tomb

It's over, our queen has met her doom

Oh no more, she lives no more

Serpents in her room

Oh no more, it has killed Cleopatra

Interestingly, while the serpents are present, it isn't made explicit that she has killed herself. Instead, it is implied that the "serpents" are metaphorical in a possible reference to those responsible for her death.

While the song provides a specifically African reception of Cleopatra, it is disappointing in its treatment of Cleopatra as a ruler; while the identity and status of the narrator are not made entirely clear, it is inferred that they are the pharaoh. While Cleopatra ruled alongside her younger brothers: Ptolemy XIII and then after his death, Ptolemy XIV (to both of whom she was also married), Ptolemy XIV died or was murdered in 44 BC, long before Cleopatra's own death. In any case,

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the song (especially when contextualised by the explicitly sexualised second half) heavily implies that there is an intimate relationship between the narrator and Cleopatra, one extremely unlikely to involve either Ptolemy as Cleopatra fought a civil war with Ptolemy XIII and allegedly murdered Ptolemy XIV to install her son with Caesar on the throne. Alongside both of her brothers, Cleopatra was effectively the primary ruler, and so the tone of the song (in which Cleopatra is being sought by the narrator, who has sent the "legions" to find her, seemingly suggesting their dominance over her) does not quite seem to fit the historical reality. Although the reference to legions would fit better if the song were narrated by Julius Caesar or Mark Antony (both of whom are commonly associated with Cleopatra as her lovers), the lyrics – which are clearly meant to speak from an Afro-Egyptian viewpoint - makes this unlikely. Ocean has made clear that the song is based on a fantasy narrative*; as the first half of the song feeds into the second, it is unsurprising that the dynamic between Cleopatra and the narrator is ahistorical. Young adult listeners, who will likely have studied Egypt at school, will recognise the ancient Egyptian setting and may also note the revisions. The single's cover art, featuring a sexualised scene drawn in a similar style to *The Simpsons*, references pyramids in the desert through several pyramid motifs; the animated style is likely to allow the cover to be freely shown.

* Rebecca Nicholson, "Frank Ocean: the most talked about man in music", *The Guardian,* 21 July 2012 (accessed: February 16, 2021).

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Cleopatra VII Egypt

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Abandonment Authority Conflict Death Desires Disobedience Historical figures Loss Race Relationships Suicide

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Further Reading

Bartsevich, Viktoryia, Karolina Anna Kulpa, and Agnieszka Monika Maciejewska, "Death as a Beginning: Transformation of Hades, Persephone and Cleopatra in Children's and Youth Culture", *Clotho* 1.2 (2019): 55–72.

Bingen, Jean and Roger Bagnall, eds., *Hellenistic Egypt: Monarchy, Society, Economy, Culture,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Nicholson, Rebecca, "Frank Ocean: the most talked about man in music", *The Guardian,* 21 July 2012 (accessed: February 16, 2021).

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