

## Study Guide for "An Emotional Autopsy in Three Minutes and Fifty Seconds: Operator: The Most Devastating Song Ever Written (And It's Not Even Trying)"

### Synopsis:

This blog by The Snark delves into the complexity and subtle devastation of Jim Croce's song "Operator (That's Not the Way It Feels)," analyzing the emotional layers of grief, regret, denial, and ultimately acceptance. The blog breaks down the song's deceptively simple structure, revealing how each line conveys contradictory emotions and a deeper story than the narrator is aware of. Through the lens of this song, the blog explores the power of language to stir emotions and the art of writing characters who inadvertently expose their deepest vulnerabilities.

Blog [here](#).

### Discussion Questions:

1. Why is Jim Croce's "Operator" considered an emotional autopsy? What makes it more than just a simple heartbreak song?
2. What role do contradictions play in the song's narrative? How do they deepen the emotional impact of the song?
3. How does the line "She's living in LA / With my best old ex-friend Ray" reveal deeper emotional truths than the narrator realizes?
4. The blog discusses "The Five Stages of Grief" as applied to the song. How does the narrator's emotional progression align with these stages?
5. How does the blog use the phrase "emotional autopsy" as a metaphor for the song? What other examples of "emotional autopsies" can you think of in literature or media?
6. Why is the ambiguity of the narrator's perspective so crucial in the song? What does it reveal about how we cope with loss and heartbreak?

### Writer's Prompts:

1. **Write a song:** Create a couple or three lines from a song (or a whole song, if that's your gig) with a similar emotional complexity to "Operator." Focus on emotional contradictions within the lyrics, and explore how the song's narrator might be blind to the deeper truth of the situation.
2. **The Villain in the Best Friend:** Write a scene where a character discovers that their best friend has betrayed them in an unexpected way. Make sure that the betrayal feels both inevitable and surprising, using language that reveals emotional contradictions in the character's reactions.
3. **Drowning in Denial:** Write a scene from the perspective of a character who is in complete denial about a painful truth. Use their dialogue and thoughts to reveal that they are deeply aware of the truth but refuse to face it.

4. **Unreliable Narrator:** Imagine a character who is telling a story to an audience (a therapist, a friend, etc.) about a past heartbreak. Have them reveal contradictions that show they're not fully aware of the emotional depth of their experience.
5. **A Missed Connection:** Write a flashback of a character remembering a conversation or moment in their past that now reveals something they missed at the time (like the narrator in "Operator" missing the signs of betrayal). Show how this realization shapes their current emotional state.
6. **Stage of Grief Scene:** Pick one stage of grief (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance) and write a scene where your character experiences that stage. Use the song's emotional progression as a model, and show how this stage unfolds in the character's thoughts, actions, and dialogue.
7. **Regret and Self-Deception:** Write a monologue where a character regrets a decision they made, but they don't fully acknowledge their own role in the outcome. They may attempt to justify their actions, lying to themselves to avoid the truth.

### **Class Activities:**

#### **1. Group Discussion:**

- Break into small groups and discuss how contradictions in character emotions can create depth and complexity in storytelling. Choose a scene from a book, movie, or TV show, and analyze how contradictions in the character's feelings reveal deeper truths. Share examples of songs, poems, or literature that effectively use ambiguity and emotional contradictions.

#### **2. Design Exercise:**

- Have students create a character whose emotional state is full of contradictions. For example, a character who is both excited and terrified about a new life change. Use the song "Operator" as inspiration for showing the character's self-deception and their failure to see deeper truths. The students should create a backstory, key scenes, and dialogue that reflects the emotional contradictions.

#### **3. Debate:**

- Split the class into two groups: one defending the perspective of the narrator in "Operator" (denial, self-deception, etc.) and the other arguing against it (calling him out for ignoring the obvious signs of betrayal). This will help students explore the ways in which language, character psychology, and emotion intertwine.

#### **4. Collaborative Story-Building:**

- As a class, collaboratively create a story using a narrator who is completely unaware of their emotional contradictions. The class will take turns writing scenes, each adding layers of emotional complexity and showing how the character's understanding of the situation slowly unravels. The goal is to create a narrative that

leads the reader through stages of emotional realization, much like the song's progression.

**Closing Note from the blog's author, The Snark:**

*Writing, like life, is often full of contradictions, and it's through these contradictions that the deepest emotional truths are revealed. Just like the song "Operator," great writing doesn't just scratch the surface—it digs in, layers by layer, forcing both the characters and the readers to confront truths they weren't ready to see. It's messy, it's uncomfortable, and it's absolutely essential. So, the next time you find yourself writing a character in denial, or revealing a long-hidden betrayal, remember the power of contradiction. Embrace the unexpected, and don't be afraid to break your character's heart. After all, it's in the broken bits that the real beauty of storytelling lies.*