**FORMATION – Beyonce**

[[Intro: Messy Mya]](http://genius.com/8640826/Beyonce-formation/Intro-messy-mya)

What happened at the New Wil’ins? Bitch, I'm back by popular demand

[Refrain: Beyoncé]

Y'all haters corny with that Illuminati mess

Paparazzi, catch my fly, and my cocky fresh

I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress (stylin')

I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces

My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama

I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros

I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils

Earned all this money but they never take the country out me I got a hot sauce in my bag, swag

[Interlude: Messy Mya + *Big Freedia*] Oh yeah, baby, oh yeah I, ohhhhh, oh, yes, I like that

*I did not come to play with you hoes, haha*

*I came to slay, bitch*

*I like cornbreads and collard greens, bitch*

*Oh, yes, you besta believe it*

[Refrain: Beyoncé]

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[Chorus: Beyoncé]

I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it

I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it

[I twirl on them haters,](http://genius.com/8641248/Beyonce-formation/I-twirl-on-them-haters) [albino alligators](http://genius.com/8641017/Beyonce-formation/Albino-alligators)

El Camino with the seat low, sippin' Cuervo with no chaser

Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard) Get what's mine (take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star) Cause I slay (slay), I slay (hey), I slay (okay), I slay (okay) All day (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay) We gon' slay (slay), gon' slay (okay), we slay (okay), I slay (okay) I slay (okay), okay (okay), I slay (okay), okay, okay, okay, okay

Okay, okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, cause I slay Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, cause I slay Prove to me you got some coordination, cause I slay Slay trick, or you get eliminated

[Verse: Beyoncé]

When he f-- me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay When he f-- me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay

If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, cause I slay Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up, cause I slay

I might get your song played on the radio station, cause I slay I might get your song played on the radio station, cause I slay

You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, cause I slay I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making

[Chorus: Beyoncé]

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I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it

[I twirl on my haters,](http://genius.com/8641248/Beyonce-formation/I-twirl-on-them-haters) [albino alligators](http://genius.com/8641017/Beyonce-formation/Albino-alligators)

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[Bridge: Beyoncé]

Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, I slay Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation

You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper

[Outro]

Girl, I hear some thunder Golly, look at that water, boy, oh lord

**TASK**

Song lyrics are essentially poetry designed to be set to music. Some are pretty shallow in terms of how much you can get out of them, but the best and most complex lyrics can (and deserve to be) treated just like a poem.

But understanding complex poems can be challenging. That’s because, unlike a novel, the entire point of poetry is to make you STOP and THINK. Poets (read: good songwriters) don’t want to just serve up an idea on a platter to you. They want you to *feel* something, and they want you to have to struggle a little with what they’re trying to say.

That’s because when you make an emotional connection to something, and when you have to work for something, it’s more valuable to you: whether they do it intentionally or subconsciously, good poets, songwriters and storytellers know that if they can make you emotionally invested in figuring out what’s going on and then make you fight to understand it, they are fifty-bazillion per cent more likely to make you value their message than if they just wrote it in plain English on a banner and waved it at you.

That’s part of why social justice and poetry (in all its various forms, including songs and some speeches) have a long and involved history with one another. So let’s dig down and figure out what it is Beyonce is saying in ‘Formation’.

**How To Analyse A Poem**

Please do the following things with the poem ‘Formation’. It’s best to do this on paper with coloured highlighters or markers, so if you’re feeling keen you could copy the lyrics down into your notebook—but I’ll forgive you this once if you want to just do it on-screen ;) (If you are going to copy it out on paper, I recommend double spacing so you have room to write around it.)

1. Read it.
2. Read it again, preferably aloud. It can be confronting to read things aloud where others can hear you, but even mumbling it under your breath will give you a different spin on things than just reading it in your head.
3. Write a one or two sentence description of what you think the poem is about.
4. Pick a colour and highlight all the words that you don’t understand the meaning of.
5. Look up ALL of those words in a dictionary, and write a short definition for each ON THE PAGE NEAR THE WORD. (If you are doing this on a computer, use the comment feature under the Review tab.) Bonus assistance: New Wil’ins is a slang term for New Orleans. ‘Bama’ in this instance is a somewhat pejorative term for a black Southerner in the USA.
6. Using more different colours, identify any instances of: alliteration, repetition, onomatopoeia, metaphor or allusion (especially allusions to events and famous people). Unpack them: for simple techniques like alliteration, repetition and onomatopoeia, what is the impact of emphasising that/those word/s? For metaphor and allusion, what is the connection Beyonce is trying to make?
7. Annotate the poem: go through and make notes in the margins or using the comment feature about what you think some of the lines mean, or what they make you think of, or how they make you feel (even if you don’t quite understand them). Try rephrasing some parts into your own words. Try connecting some parts to events you know about, or things you’ve seen. Try leaving questions for yourself: I wonder if this part means….? Could this bit refer to…? With annotations, anything goes. This is the part where you grapple with the text and brainstorm it all out on the page (which is why doing this on paper is usually better—it’s easier to make random notes all over everything). The more notes you get from this, the easier it will be to understand the poem in the end.
8. Read the poem again.
9. Revisit your description from (3). Do you need to change it? Add to it?
10. Intertextuality can often play a significant role in the meaning of a poem, but it can be hard to spot if you don’t know to look for it. Research the following and take some notes about each:
    1. Messy Mya
    2. Big Freedia
    3. Hurricane Katrina, specifically the backlash against the government’s response to it
    4. “Hands up, don’t shoot” (this is referenced in the video clip)
    5. “LeBron James hoodie protest” (again, referenced in the visuals)
11. Revisit your description of what the poem is about and expand it into *at least* an 8-10 sentence paragraph.

Hopefully by now you have a better understanding of what is going on in this song. Remember, you don’t need to understand every single line in order to understand the point of a poem. Now, [read this short article and rewatch the music video at the bottom](http://www.businessinsider.com/beyonce-new-video-anti-police-formation-references-2016-2/?r=AU&IR=T), then answer the questions below.

1. What is the significance of opening the clip with that line by Messy Mya?
2. Taking into account both the beginning and the ending, what is the significance of Beyonce being atop the police car in a setting reminiscent of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina?
3. Why does Beyonce mention that she likes her baby with afros and her own “Jackson Five” nostrils? (Think about the usual ‘standards of beauty’ that are imposed on non-white people.)
4. Beyonce says that even though she’s earned all this money, they can’t take the country out of her. List some ways in which you think black people (or other minorities) are expected to become ‘like white people’ once they are successful.
5. One of the repeating motifs in the clip is the scene where Beyonce is wearing a large black hat and a black dress, and is surrounded by people in black. What’s the significance of the black? What might they be mourning?
6. Given that the line right before it is ‘I twirl on my haters’, what does ‘albino alligators’ refer to?
7. What do you think the significance might be of the fact that some of the dancing in the second “I slay” bit (denim costumes in the parking lot) is filmed as though through a surveillance camera? (Think about ideas of surveillance, being watched, etc.)
8. There is a huge range of costumes in this clip, spanning a wide range of time periods. Why might that be?
9. “Slay trick or you get eliminated”: what does this mean?
10. In the verse, Beyonce talks about taking ‘him’ to Red Lobster and letting ‘him’ go shopping as a reward. How is this entire verse, including the allusion to Bill Gates, a comment on stereotypical gender roles?
11. Near the end, what is the significance of the fact that after the little boy finishes his hip hop dance, the police respond by raising their hands?

**FINAL ACTIVITY**

In summary, answer this question:

*What is the meaning of Beyonce’s music video ‘Formation’, and how does she convey this meaning?*

**Extension:** Read [this analysis](http://newsouthnegress.com/southernslayings/) of the Formation video. Choose one or two issues it raises and respond in the form a of a journal entry (from your own perspective).