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Transcendent suffering and the human condition: A study of 'Mary on a Cross'

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Abstract

This study explores the philosophical and cultural themes embedded in the song 'Mary on a Cross' by Ghost, analyzing how it engages with concepts of suffering, love, authenticity, and redemption within the human experience. Through a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study examines the lyrics' portrayal of existential themes, focusing on the symbolic use of "Mary" to represent both purity and suffering, and highlighting the duality between fame and disillusionment as a critique of modern societal values. Using textual analysis and philosophical hermeneutics, the research situates the song within existentialist and cultural theories, drawing on thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Erich Fromm to interpret its messages on personal and spiritual transformation. The analysis also incorporates perspectives from cultural theorists like Theodor Adorno and Jean Baudrillard to examine the song's rejection of superficiality and its advocacy for genuine human connection. Furthermore, the study considers the role of music in philosophical reflection, illustrating how 'Mary on a Cross' functions as a medium for audience engagement with complex existential themes, allowing listeners to explore their own experiences of suffering and meaning. Ultimately, this paper positions 'Mary on a Cross' as a reflection on the human condition, underscoring music's unique capacity to prompt introspection and foster connections through shared existential insights.

Keywords: Existential Philosophy; Redemption and Suffering; Religious Symbolism; Authenticity and Modernity; Cultural Critique in Music; Audience Engagement through Music

1. Introduction

The song 'Mary on a Cross' by the band Ghost encapsulates a rich tapestry of philosophical themes that resonate with the complexities of human experience, particularly in relation to suffering, love, and existential reflection. The lyrics present a narrative that juxtaposes the allure of fame and success with the underlying pain and disillusionment that often accompany such pursuits. This duality is evident in the repeated references to "sorrow" and "bruised" experiences, suggesting that the journey through life is fraught with challenges that can lead to profound personal growth and transformation.

Moreover, the invocation of "Holy Mary" within the song serves as a powerful metaphor for redemption and transcendence. The character of Mary, often associated with purity and suffering, embodies the struggle between earthly desires and spiritual aspirations. This duality mirrors the philosophical inquiry into the nature of suffering, as explored by, who emphasizes the importance of context and audience participation in understanding musical experiences [1]. The lyrics suggest that even amidst the chaos and sorrow, there exists a possibility for connection and liberation, as the narrator expresses an unwavering commitment to their companion, stating, "I never let you go." This sentiment echoes the philosophical discourse surrounding relationships and their capacity to provide solace and meaning in times of distress.

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Furthermore, the song's exploration of societal norms and the rejection of superficiality resonate with contemporary philosophical critiques of modernity. The lyrics critique the pursuit of glamour and the societal pressures that often lead individuals to compromise their authenticity. This aligns with the arguments presented by, who posits that music can serve as a medium for addressing central philosophical questions about identity and existence [2]. The notion of "running away" together symbolizes a desire to escape societal constraints and embrace a more profound, authentic connection, reflecting the existential quest for meaning in a world that often feels fragmented and disenchanting.

In summary, 'Mary on a Cross' serves as a poignant reflection on the human condition, intertwining themes of suffering, love, and existential inquiry. Through its rich lyrical content, the song invites listeners to engage with the complexities of their own experiences, encouraging a deeper understanding of the interplay between personal struggles and the search for meaning in life.

2. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach to analyze the philosophical and cultural themes in the song 'Mary on a Cross' by Ghost. Through textual analysis, the lyrics were closely examined to identify recurring motifs of suffering, redemption, love, and societal critique. Specific phrases and symbols, such as the invocation of "Mary" and references to fame and disillusionment, were analyzed to reveal underlying themes. Additionally, philosophical hermeneutics were applied to interpret these themes within the context of existential and religious philosophy, drawing on the works of thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This interpretive framework allowed the study to explore how the song's lyrics resonate with ideas of existential suffering, redemption, and the search for authenticity. A review of relevant philosophical and cultural literature, including texts by Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, and Jean Baudrillard, further supported the analysis, offering a critical perspective on the song's treatment of modernity and superficiality. Finally, the study considered existing scholarship on the role of music in philosophical reflection to situate 'Mary on a Cross' within broader discussions on music as a medium for exploring human experience. This methodology facilitated a nuanced understanding of the song's engagement with complex philosophical questions.

3. Philosophical and Cultural Themes in 'Mary on a Cross'

3.1. The Philosophical Underpinnings of Suffering in 'Mary on a Cross'

In 'Mary on a Cross', the depiction of suffering resonates with central themes in existential and religious philosophy, where suffering is not merely a negative experience but a path toward growth and transformation. The lyrics of the song encapsulate an understanding of suffering that aligns with existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard, who argued that suffering is an inevitable part of the human condition and a means to develop deeper self-awareness and authenticity [3]. This is reflected in the song's portrayal of pain and "bruised" experiences, which suggest that hardship can lead to enlightenment and self-realization, echoing the existentialist belief in the necessity of facing one's inner struggles to attain personal growth [4]. Additionally, the song's invocation of religious figures such as Mary represents a symbolic embrace of suffering as a means of redemption and spiritual elevation. This approach aligns with the work of Viktor Frankl, who emphasized that suffering can lead to a higher sense of meaning if one finds purpose within it, as explored in *Man's Search for Meaning*, where he posits that enduring suffering with dignity can transcend physical hardship [4].

Furthermore, the dualities expressed in 'Mary on a Cross'—between fame and disillusionment, earthly desires and spiritual aspirations—reflect the dialectical approach of Friedrich Nietzsche, who viewed suffering as essential to the development of the "overman," a being who transforms adversity into strength [5]. Nietzsche's perspective is echoed in the song's lyrics, which suggest that embracing suffering is crucial to overcoming superficial values and reaching a more authentic, self-determined existence. In a broader sense, the song's portrayal of suffering within the human experience resonates with contemporary interpretations of music as a reflective space for exploring themes of loss, growth, and transcendence, enabling listeners to process personal hardships and to find solace in shared existential struggles [2].

3.2. Duality of Fame and Disillusionment: A Cultural Critique

The song 'Mary on a Cross' by Ghost critiques the modern pursuit of fame and the often-overlooked disillusionment that accompanies it, reflecting a duality between external success and internal emptiness that aligns with critical theories on celebrity culture and authenticity. This theme is particularly resonant with the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who argued that modern media perpetuates a "culture industry" that creates illusory desires, compelling individuals to pursue fame and success at the cost of genuine self-fulfillment [6]. The song's lyrics expose this tension, suggesting that the pursuit of fame, while alluring, often leads to a sense of isolation and dissatisfaction, a sentiment

also discussed by Chris Rojek, who notes that fame can create a “cultural prison,” where individuals become trapped in the very image they have crafted for public consumption [7]. This critique highlights how fame can distance individuals from their authentic selves, fostering an existential disillusionment when personal identity becomes subordinate to public perception.

Furthermore, ‘Mary on a Cross’ explores this duality through a narrative of escapism and rejection of superficiality, resonating with the work of Erich Fromm, who contrasted “having” and “being” as modes of existence. Fromm argued that modern society emphasizes “having” — material success, fame, and status — over “being,” which prioritizes genuine self-expression and authentic relationships [8]. The song’s desire to “run away” from societal constraints reflects this conflict, advocating for a life rooted in deeper connections rather than external validation. Additionally, contemporary critiques by David Giles on celebrity culture emphasize how fame often leads to emotional struggles, as individuals navigate public expectations and struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self [9]. By highlighting this dichotomy, ‘Mary on a Cross’ echoes philosophical critiques of modernity that question the sustainability of pursuing identity through fame and societal recognition, instead advocating for a rejection of superficial values and a turn toward authenticity and personal meaning.

3.3. Religious Symbolism and the Character of Mary as a Metaphor

In ‘Mary on a Cross’, the symbolic invocation of “Mary” serves as a potent metaphor for the interplay between purity, suffering, and redemption, drawing on centuries of religious and cultural imagery surrounding the figure of Mary, mother of Jesus. In Christian tradition, Mary represents an archetype of compassion and endurance, embodying the notion of redemptive suffering—an idea extensively explored in the work of theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar, who described Mary’s role as one of profound empathy, joining in humanity’s suffering and offering a path to spiritual transcendence [10]. The song uses this imagery to signify the struggle between earthly desires and spiritual aspirations, a theme that parallels Kierkegaard’s concept of the “knight of faith,” wherein true faith involves a paradoxical commitment to both the finite and the infinite [3].

The character of Mary also symbolizes a bridge between the material and the spiritual, invoking the concept of the “divine feminine” as discussed by Carl Jung, who saw Mary as an embodiment of the Anima—an archetype representing the unconscious aspects of the soul and a path to inner wholeness [11]. This dual representation of Mary resonates with the song’s exploration of redemption, suggesting that the path to spiritual growth often involves reconciling the physical and spiritual aspects of existence. Additionally, the notion of Mary as both a figure of purity and an emblem of suffering echoes Erich Neumann’s interpretation of the “Great Mother” archetype, which embodies the nurturing and transformative aspects of femininity, suggesting that suffering can lead to personal and spiritual transformation [12]. Through the metaphor of Mary, ‘Mary on a Cross’ thus offers a nuanced portrayal of suffering as both a deeply human experience and a catalyst for transcendence, positioning the character as a symbol of enduring strength and redemptive hope.

3.4. Existential Themes of Love, Connection, and Redemption

‘Mary on a Cross’ delves into existential themes of love and connection as pathways to redemption, reflecting a core belief in existentialist philosophy that authentic relationships offer solace and meaning in the face of life’s inherent suffering and isolation. This perspective echoes the ideas of Martin Buber, who emphasized in *I and Thou* that true connections between individuals allow them to transcend isolation and experience a form of spiritual connection that is transformative and redemptive [13]. The song’s lyrics, with their expression of unwavering commitment—“I never let you go”—suggest that meaningful relationships have the power to ground individuals, creating spaces of mutual support and acceptance amid life’s hardships, a view shared by existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who recognized love as an encounter with another’s freedom, enabling individuals to confront their own existence [14].

This theme of relational redemption is further developed through the song’s portrayal of love as an act of resilience against despair. This aligns with Viktor Frankl’s assertion that even in suffering, love provides a sense of purpose that can carry one through life’s trials. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl notes that the ability to maintain a connection to loved ones can sustain one’s will to endure and transform suffering into a meaningful experience [4]. In this way, ‘Mary on a Cross’ reflects existentialist ideals by portraying love and connection as paths to redemption, helping individuals confront and find meaning within their suffering. Additionally, the song’s exploration of love as a form of escape from societal pressures aligns with the thoughts of Søren Kierkegaard, who viewed love as a “leap of faith”—a commitment that allows individuals to transcend societal expectations and connect with their true selves [3]. Through this lens, the song suggests that love is not merely a response to loneliness but a transformative force that enables individuals to embrace vulnerability and experience personal redemption.

3.5. Modernity and the Rejection of Superficiality

'Mary on a Cross' critiques the superficial values prevalent in modern society, echoing philosophical arguments that modernity, with its emphasis on material success and outward appearances, often alienates individuals from their authentic selves. This theme aligns with Erich Fromm's exploration of "having" versus "being" in *To Have or to Be?*, where he argues that the modern emphasis on possession and status eclipses deeper, intrinsic values, leading individuals to prioritize appearances over authenticity [8]. The song's lyrics, which speak to the allure of "running away" from societal constraints, suggest a desire to escape this superficial culture in favor of a life defined by genuine connection and self-discovery, resonating with Fromm's call for a return to an existence centered on "being."

Additionally, this critique reflects Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity," where the instability and transience of modern social structures encourage people to adopt flexible, often superficial identities that can easily adapt to changing norms and expectations [15]. Bauman argues that this fluidity, while freeing in some respects, creates a paradox of freedom without fulfillment, as individuals constantly seek validation through external symbols of success rather than internal satisfaction. 'Mary on a Cross' captures this tension, portraying the pursuit of fame and glamour as hollow and ultimately unsatisfying, and inviting listeners to question societal values that prioritize image over substance.

Furthermore, the song's rejection of superficiality resonates with the critique posed by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he posits that modern society is dominated by simulacra—copies without an original—that blur the line between reality and representation [16]. Baudrillard argues that this hyper real environment leads to a disconnect from genuine experiences, as individuals are increasingly drawn to symbols of success that lack substance. By confronting this superficial culture, 'Mary on a Cross' calls for a more authentic existence, urging listeners to find meaning beyond societal pressures and to value inner growth over external validation.

3.6. The Role of Music in Philosophical Reflection and Audience Engagement

'Mary on a Cross' serves as a powerful example of how music can function as a medium for philosophical reflection, allowing audiences to engage with profound themes such as suffering, authenticity, and redemption. This capacity of music to evoke deep, personal responses is well-articulated in the work of Tia DeNora, who, in *Music in Everyday Life*, explores how music shapes individual experiences and aids in self-reflection by resonating with listeners' emotions and personal histories [17]. Through the emotive power of lyrics and melody, the song encourages listeners to examine their own lives, transforming passive listening into an active, introspective experience. Such engagement aligns with Martin Heidegger's concept of *Stimmung* (mood), which suggests that art, including music, can reveal truths about human existence by connecting individuals with their own emotional landscapes and drawing them into reflective states [18].

Additionally, the song exemplifies how music enables shared philosophical inquiry, providing a communal space where audiences can collectively explore existential questions. Philosopher Theodor Adorno contends that music possesses a dialectical nature, serving both as an aesthetic experience and as a critique of society by revealing underlying social and existential conflicts [19]. This dual role is evident in 'Mary on a Cross', as its themes of disillusionment with fame and the search for authenticity resonate with listeners' own struggles in modernity, allowing them to find solace and solidarity through shared reflection. Similarly, philosopher Simon Frith argues that music is not only a form of personal expression but a cultural practice that helps individuals make sense of societal values and their place within them, fostering a deeper, participatory engagement [20].

In this way, 'Mary on a Cross' transcends entertainment, becoming a reflective tool through which audiences can explore philosophical concepts and their own inner experiences. The song's engagement with themes of suffering, love, and societal critique allows it to function as a space for collective reflection, illustrating music's unique ability to foster personal and communal insights into the human condition.

4. Conclusion: Embracing Suffering and Seeking Meaning in the Human Experience

In 'Mary on a Cross', Ghost encapsulates a profound meditation on the human condition, weaving themes of suffering, love, and existential inquiry into a cohesive narrative that resonates with listeners. The song's exploration of fame, disillusionment, and the quest for authenticity reflects a cultural critique of modern values, suggesting that true meaning lies not in societal approval but in the courage to confront one's inner struggles and desires. By invoking the figure of Mary, the song connects themes of personal suffering and redemption with universal human experiences, emphasizing the transformative potential of adversity. Through love and authentic connection, the song suggests, individuals can find solace and resilience, allowing them to rise above superficial pursuits and seek a life imbued with genuine purpose and meaning.

In a broader sense, 'Mary on a Cross' serves as a reminder of music's role in philosophical reflection, illustrating how songs can become vehicles for exploring complex existential themes and engaging audiences on a deeply personal level. Ultimately, the song encourages listeners to embrace suffering as a path to self-discovery, urging them to seek meaning in the relationships and experiences that define the human journey. This message of resilience, connection, and redemption provides a powerful commentary on the search for fulfillment in a world often dominated by ephemeral values, inviting listeners to find strength and meaning in their own lives.

Compliance with ethical standards

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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