

The Poetry of Gospel Music

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The article explores how the emotional impact of Black Gospel music often stems more from the singers' vocal performances than the lyrics themselves, yet upon closer examination, the poetry within these songs reveals a deliberate and profound use of language that encapsulates deep themes like death, eternity, and spiritual assurance, reflecting T.S. Eliot's views on the role of poetry in conveying complex emotions.



Voices of Triumph: A Soulful Serenade in the Heart of the Community. Amid the chorus of believers, her soulful voice rises, a powerful testament to faith and resilience, echoing through the hearts of many.

T. S. Eliot writes, "It [the experience of poetry] may be formed out of one emotion, or maybe a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result," (Eliot 959). Gospel music,

particularly *Black Gospel music*, is called *emotional music*, but often, the emotion comes from the vocal ability of the singer instead of the lyrics/poetry of the song. Looking at the poetry of the songs of *Gospel music* will show that the writers of this music are "conscious and deliberate," as Eliot states in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (961).

There is a gospel song, "There's a Leak in this Old Building," sung by singer LaShun Pace. Pace sings the song with power and authority, causing the listener to have a heavenly experience. If one were to look at the poetry of the song, he would see that the poetry is as powerful as Pace's voice.

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"There's a leak in this old building, and my soul has got to move... To another building not made by man's hands..." (There's). This is the chorus of the poem. It must be stated that various other deteriorating conditions of the building are used in the poem. The unknown poet uses figurative language and metaphor. The building is a metaphor for the human body. When the poet refers to "this old building," he refers to someone who has reached old age. The leak in the building relates to the deterioration of the body. Using this figurative language, the poet causes the reader to feel the emotion of death and dying, which causes the reader to think of their final destination. This final destination is another building not made in my man's hands. The building not made by man's hands is the heavenly body that man has waiting for him in Heaven. The poet uses the reader's knowledge and history of the Bible to create visual images of leaving a complex and sometimes tragic life for a blissful heavenly home.

The poem's first verse says, "Before this time, another year, I may be dead and gone. But before I go, I want to let you know, I'll be moving to my brand new home" (There's). This verse lets the reader know that the main character in the poem is a Christian and that if he is dead, he will be going to his heavenly home. This is what Eliot called "structural emotion" (Eliot 960). The poet uses the drama of death to remind those who remain after the main character is dead that he has a brand new home, so those who mourn do not have to worry about him because he is in Heaven.

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The poem's final verse is a powerful statement from the main character. It says, "When I can read, my title clear to mansions in the sky. I'll bid farewell to all of my friends. God said he would wipe my weeping eyes" (There's). The main character uses the emotion of the hardships of life to let the audience know that once he has completed his life, his suffering is over, and God will wipe the tears from his eyes. In essence, the main character's suffering on Earth is done. Eliot states, "The poet's business is not to find new emotion, but to use ordinary ones" (Eliot 960). The poet uses the ordinary emotions of life, death, and Heaven to express emotions in the poem.

Eliot writes, "The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum" (958). The poet's mind is an essential element of the poem. The other aspects of the poem that operate as the "transforming catalyst" are emotions and feelings (959). The experience is formed because of the emotions and feelings the reader receives from reading the writer's words. The poetry of Gospel music shows emotion, and the poets write their poetry deliberately with the singer's delivery, the music lover's encounter, and the reader's experience in mind.

Expanding on this examination of Gospel music and its poetic elements, T.S. Eliot's insights into the nature of poetry provide a fitting lens through which to view the lyrical construction of songs like "There's a Leak in this Old Building." Eliot argues that a poem's effectiveness stems from its ability to transform the mundane into the profound, a process vividly mirrored in the emotive lyrics of Gospel music.

The poet's business is not to find new emotions but to use ordinary ones and, by working them up with his own mind, to express feelings in an uncommon way, Eliot posits in his critical work. This approach is clearly embodied in Gospel music, where everyday struggles and triumphs are elevated through lyrical ingenuity. Much like Eliot describes, the poetry in Gospel music relies on familiar emotions—hope, despair, redemption—rendered with a freshness that resonates deeply with its audience.

Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative" — the set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion that the poet wants to evoke — finds its echo in Gospel lyrics. The deteriorating physical structure in "There's a Leak in this Old Building" symbolizes the aging human body and evokes a visceral understanding of spiritual renewal and transcendence. This correlation between tangible and spiritual realities

invites listeners to find deeper meaning in their personal experiences, echoing Eliot's assertion that poetry should be an escape from emotion, not an expression of personal feeling.

The singer's voice and vocal stylings in Gospel music play an integral role in enhancing the complexity of its poetry, adding a dynamic layer of interpretation that extends beyond the written word. The emotive power of a Gospel singer like LaShun Pace brings the lyrics to life, transforming the poetic text into a visceral, auditory experience. This vocal expression is not merely about delivering notes with technical precision but about saturating each word with a depth of feeling that can stir the soul of the listener. The way Pace might stretch a syllable, modulate her tone, or inflect a particular phrase highlights and amplifies the lyrics' emotional and spiritual stakes. Her ability to convey a sense of urgent longing in "There's a Leak in this Old Building" resonates with the listener's own experiences of spiritual and emotional decay and renewal. These vocal nuances create a richer, more textured understanding of the poetry, demonstrating that the singer's voice is as much an instrument of emotional expression as the words themselves. Gospel music achieves a profound complexity that engages listeners intellectually, deeply, emotionally, and spiritually through this synergistic relationship between the singer's vocal stylings and the poetic lyrics.

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By dissecting the poetry of Gospel music through Eliot's critical perspectives, we uncover deliberate craftsmanship to evoke specific emotional responses. This technique reinforces the idea that Gospel poets are not merely creating simple song lyrics but are engaging in a sophisticated literary process. They sculpt their verses to resonate on multiple levels—personal, communal, and spiritual—thus offering a multi-dimensional experience to the listener that is both grounding and transcendent.

The emotional power of Gospel music lies not just in the vocal delivery but significantly in the poetic craftsmanship of its lyrics. The poets behind these songs are indeed "conscious and deliberate" in their artistic expression, fulfilling Eliot's criteria for what constitutes true poetry. They draw from a deep well of cultural, spiritual, and communal experiences to forge lyrics that speak to the listener's soul, encouraging reflection, comforting, and inspiring transformation. Eliot's insights into the nature of poetry help us appreciate the complex interplay of text and performance that makes Gospel music a profound agent of emotional

and spiritual expression.

Works Cited

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