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More Than Words: Form and Meaning in Mitski's "Your Best American Girl"

A song can tell a story through its lyrics, but sometimes the way it sounds communicates just as much as what it says. In her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag argues that people often focus too much on finding the hidden meaning behind art instead of experiencing the art itself. She believes that constantly trying to explain what a piece of art means can take away from its emotional and sensory impact. Instead, Sontag wants people to pay more attention to how art looks, sounds, and makes them feel. She explains this idea when she writes, "In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art" (Sontag 10). Although I agree with Sontag that the form of art deserves more attention, I do not think its content should be separated from how it is presented. Mitski's "Your Best American Girl" demonstrates how lyrics and musical form work together to communicate meaning. The lyrics express the struggle of feeling culturally different from someone you love, while the song's changing instrumentals and vocal intensity emphasize that feeling through sound. Rather than arguing that meaning is unimportant, Mitski's song shows that understanding art requires paying attention to both what it communicates and how it communicates it.

First, the contrast between the song's quieter verses and louder chorus shows how its musical structure reinforces the meaning of its lyrics. The verses begin with a more restrained sound, allowing Mitski's voice and the words she sings to remain at the center of the song. As

the chorus arrives, the music becomes much louder and more intense, with distorted guitars and heavier instrumentation. This shift creates a noticeable difference between the song's more intimate moments and its emotional release. Sontag points out that standard interpretation "takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted" in its hurry to figure out what a piece is trying to say (9). If a listener focuses only on the lyrics, they might understand the song as being about cultural differences and feeling like an outsider in a relationship. While this interpretation is important, it does not fully explain the effect of the music. The transition into the louder chorus makes the emotions behind the lyrics feel more intense and difficult to contain. The shift in volume also changes the listener's experience, moving from a more personal and reflective atmosphere to one that feels overwhelming. The musical structure does not replace the song's meaning; instead, it emphasizes the frustration and vulnerability already expressed through the words. This shows why Sontag's argument is valuable while also demonstrating that form and content can depend on each other.

Second, the song's lyrics are essential to understanding its cultural context, but the music makes that context feel more personal and emotionally immediate. In "Your Best American Girl," Mitski explores the tension between loving someone and feeling that differences in cultural background make it difficult to belong in their world. The song's references to family expectations and the way someone is raised show that this conflict is about more than a relationship between two people. It also involves the cultural values and expectations that shape how they see themselves and each other. The lyric about how one person's mother might judge the way the other was raised makes this difference especially clear. Without the lyrics, listeners might recognize the song's frustration or sadness without understanding the specific cultural conflict behind it. This is where I partially disagree with Sontag: the content matters because it

gives the listener important context for understanding the experience the music creates. The lyrics allow listeners to recognize that the speaker's feelings are connected to a larger struggle involving identity, family, and belonging, rather than just disappointment in a relationship. However, the lyrics alone cannot fully communicate the song's emotional impact. The contrast between the softer verses and the explosive chorus makes the tension between wanting to belong and feeling excluded more noticeable. The music gives the lyrics an emotional intensity that a summary of their meaning could never fully capture.

Finally, Mitski's changing vocal delivery demonstrates how the form of a song can add meaning without needing to communicate a separate message. Throughout "Your Best American Girl," her vocals shift from softer, more controlled singing to a louder and more intense delivery during the chorus. These changes make the song feel increasingly emotionally charged, allowing the listener to hear the frustration behind the words rather than simply identify it through their meaning. The contrast between her restrained delivery and the intensity of the chorus creates a sense of emotional tension. It feels as though the emotions expressed throughout the song become harder to contain as the music builds. Sontag argues that "the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" (9). I agree that paying attention to how Mitski sings is necessary to understanding the song, but I do not think this means we should ignore what she is singing about. Instead, her vocal delivery and lyrics work together to create a more complete experience. The words establish the conflict surrounding cultural identity and belonging, while the changes in her voice make that conflict feel more vulnerable and intense. Sontag also warns that over-interpretation "makes art manageable, conformable" (5). Reducing the song to a simple statement about cultural differences would make it easier to explain, but it would overlook the way Mitski's voice and the

music communicate emotions that cannot be fully captured in words. The song's form does not make its content less important; it makes that content more impactful.

Ultimately, Mitski's "Your Best American Girl" demonstrates both the value and the limitations of Sontag's argument. Sontag is right that art should not be reduced to a single interpretation because doing so can cause people to overlook its sensory and emotional qualities. However, the song shows that lyrics and musical form do not have to compete for importance. Its lyrics establish the cultural conflict at the center of the song, while its changing instrumentals and vocal intensity emphasize the frustration and vulnerability associated with that experience. Without the lyrics, some of the cultural context would be lost, but without the music, the emotional impact of that context would be diminished. This relationship between form and content also shows why art can be difficult to explain through a single interpretation. Different listeners might connect with different parts of the song, whether it is the cultural conflict expressed in the lyrics or the emotions created by the music. Rather than choosing between interpretation and experience, listeners should consider how both contribute to a work of art. Mitski's song ultimately suggests that understanding art involves more than identifying what it means; it also requires experiencing how that meaning is expressed.

Work Cited

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." *Against Interpretation*, Picador, 1966, pp. 1-10.

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