

The Repression of Sexuality, the Incitation of Sublimity: Discussion of Sex and Pleasure in the music of The Pretty Reckless

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Upon its debut in 2010, The Pretty Reckless promptly elicited parallels to esteemed female-fronted hard rock ensembles such as The Runaways and Hole due to its overtly explicit sexual imagery and lyrical content. Within the lyrical fabric of their compositions, explicit allusions to sex, drug use, and diabolical elements not only conjure religious trepidation but also evoke inclinations towards morbid gratification. Notably, the front person of The Pretty Reckless, Taylor Momsen, emerges from a Roman Catholic upbringing, a faith tradition imposing abstinence from carnal desires and any form of sexual engagement prior to marriage. Thus, her musical repertoire ostensibly emerges as a channel for articulating her perspectives on sexuality and pleasure. Moreover, her music may encapsulate a divergence from her religious upbringing, serving as a vehicle for the nuanced exploration of her identity as a former adherent of Catholicism juxtaposed against her embodiment of profound sexual desires.

To discuss the music of The Pretty Reckless, one must look into the concept of sexuality. Sexuality is an individual discourse that involves desires and pleasures (Jia 44), and a seismic sensitivity that includes the wide variety of needs and desires: “for love and anger, tenderness and aggression, intimacy and adventure, romance and predatoriness, pleasure and pain, empathy and power” (Weeks 1). Sexuality, in its essence, has the potential to evoke a sense of the sublime. This sentiment is rooted in the shared encounter with pleasure, a quality that is both irresistible and imbued with a perception of boundlessness. The concept of the sublime encompasses not only an emotional state but also a

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visceral experience. It is characterized by a profound sense of limitless expansiveness, derived from the engagement with formlessness and unpredictability. This phenomenon encapsulates an amalgamation of feelings, intertwining the disagreeable with an accompanying sense of pleasure. (Kover 59).

Conversely, popular music, serving as a pervasive medium, consistently embodies a discourse surrounding sexuality. Frith and McRobbie stated that rock music had been the aesthetic form most closely connected with the youths' sexual experiences and difficulties, and music was both a means of sexual expression but also as a mode of sexual control. Rock n roll was a state of empowerment. It rejected "many of the structures of contemporary boredom" and transforms them into "the structures and pleasures of its musical and listening" practices (Grossberg 116), it challenged "hegemonic constraints on sexuality, desire, and even gender construction" (114).

To narrow down, I specifically read into the texts of female rock band to see how sexuality was presented as a sublime experience, for the reason that sexuality was repressed due to patriarchal culture that female desire was structurally excluded so that sexualities were generated as power and pleasure through the discourses in rock music (Shepherd 68).

Thus, the current study undertakes a critical examination of the notion of sublime sexuality within the musical compositions of the contemporary rock band, The Pretty Reckless. In the study, I will analyze three songs from The Pretty Reckless: "Goin' Down", "Follow Me Down", and "Nothing Left to Lose". By analyzing these three songs, the study endeavors to explore the intricate process by which the discourse surrounding sexuality undergoes a transformation into a phenomenon of sublime nature. Recognizing that language and textual constructs have the capacity to both encompass and mold individuals' perceptions of reality (Machin & Mayr 16), this research endeavors to conduct a meticulous analysis of song lyrics in order to decipher the underlying messages encapsulated within the textual content.

Goin' Down: The Power, the Sublimity, and the Discourse of Sexuality

The compositions featured in The Pretty Reckless's inaugural album, *Light Me Up*, distinctly diverged from a conventional, family-oriented characterization.

Instead, these songs prominently centered around a discourse centering on themes of sexuality and pleasure, forming the principal thematic underpinning of the album. The song “Goin’ Down” displayed a strong message of sexual desire and pleasure. In the song, Momsen turned her sexual desire into confession, as Foucault illustrated, the confession system served as an exercising power to engage sexual pleasure when questioning and searching. The central idea of sexual repression was that it was only a hypothesis that sexuality was only a means for the dominant group to perform manipulation. Therefore, sexuality was not really repressed or been silent but has a visible explosion and deployment of sexualities. In the first verse of their song “Goin’ Down”, “I” was portrayed as “I” went to a priest to confess a sin for killing her boyfriend who has cheated on “me”. The “age of 16” and the “mind of taking off dress” played a significant representation of the “free sex” ideology of rock music and the contemporary culture since the sixties that broke free from the “all of the associated societal values and needs of parental and societal constraints” (Harris 121). The “good parts” and the friendly reminder of “cross up your legs” implied a strong sensory sexual content in the confession. Sex and desires were dangerous. They engaged envy and greed which eventually led “I” to murder.

However, the dialogue concerning sexuality within the song exuded an alluring yet perilous quality. The act of suppressing sexual impulses paradoxically seemed to intensify the allure of such desires. The correlation between interdictions and pleasure made sexuality a vice that would not diminish pleasure but turned it into masturbatory (Klein 182). With the continuance of the confession in the second verse, “I” implied more sexual hints. To trade for impunity, “I” in this song offered sex as debt. Here sex became a noble object that allowed one to get away from sin. The fear was gone, and the pleasure of impunity arose. The use of “Perhaps” here was more than a negotiation. It implied a confirmation that led to the illusion of having options and/or allowing uncertainty. Therefore, sex was unavoidable and non-negotiable.

The confession of sexual desire in the song reflected the concept of sexual repression. In Foucault’s perspective, sexual repression is always associated with power. Power was a process than an object. It was that “knowledge and truth are produced out of power struggles” (Danaher et al. 64). It operated the mechanisms of control through complex and overlapping mechanisms, which domination and oppositions, subordination and resistances were produced (Weeks 35). According to Foucault, sexuality was first carefully confined by the Victorian bourgeoisies,

where “on the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (3). Foucault further stated that “repression operated as sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (4). The bourgeoisies used the agenda for repressing sexuality to control the labor by not dispelling itself in pleasurable pursuits because while sex was hard to deciphered, their repression was easily analyzed.

In this song “Goin’ Down”, the priest represented the power mechanism that could “give [God] a nod”. The pleasure of listening and watching sexuality was showed as “I noticed your breathing is starting to change”. “I” was small because there was nothing “I” could do except confessing to the priest, but such insignificantly small used sexuality to evoke the sexual instinct of the mighty power. Sawicki argued that the power institutions’ discourses and practices created an authoritative status which enabled them to be utilized as effective means of social control. The sex then became a pleasure feeling of “sublimity accompanied by ‘quiet wonder’, evoked by a great height” (Clewis 35). The “wonder” evoked by great height, in this case, was the power of getting away from control and finding peace for her soul without the quiet element.

As a result, the title of this song, “Goin’ Down” played a pun as both the fearful “going down to hell” and the irresistible “going down on the ground”. It also played as sarcasm to the confession mechanism of the Catholic Church who used discourses of sexuality as the tool to control and gain pleasure but was controlled by the discourses of sexuality. According to Foucault, the central idea of sexual repression was “the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (18). By transforming every detail of sex fully into discourse, there was a proliferated quantity of discourse about sex. On the other hand, sex was the political, economic, and technical subject to be turned into discourses, where people were forced to talk about sex because it was administered (Foucault, 23-24). Therefore, “repression” was the production of dominant power that allowed the agencies of power to verbalize sexuality in order to satisfy their pleasures and desires.

Thus, by turning sex from discourses to the actual corporeal experience, “I” challenged the authority to experience the intangible pleasure of sexuality. As a

result, sexuality became a silent but eloquent expression. Sex, therefore, evokes the absolute greatness of the sublime feeling of taking the power from the exercising power both corporeally and sensuously.

Follow Me Down: Sexuality and the Dark Pleasure

In the second album *Going to Hell*, released in 2014, The Pretty Reckless took a deeper approach on the discourse of sexuality as pleasure, pains, and chaos. The first song of the album, "Follow Me Down", started with the sounds of orgasm with erotic and libidinous moaning and breathing. The orgasm, representing sexuality, originates from an inherent impulse within human nature and possesses an innate capacity to arouse a sense of sublimity. This arousal was attributed to its ability to evoke a state of chaos and potency, contributing to the heightened emotional and experiential dimensions inherent in the sublime. After the strong rock beats kicked in, Momsen started a story about tasting the forbidden fruit. This song was a metaphor of the relationship between a younger girl and an older man. This "pure girl and mature man" relationship is a signifier of a tradition patriarchal society in which male takes female's virginity without concerning female's sexual desires, where such relationship Momsen highlighted in several other of the band's songs such as "Nothing Left to Lose" and "Sweet Thing". This idea is closely related to Foucault's perspective of sexual depression. According to Foucault, sex was always related to power. It was where the dominant group executes its superiority as a "deliberate transgression" and the act extends "outside the reach of power" (Foucault 6). In this song, the patriarchal society, the mature man, turns sexuality into the social forms and social organization that is governed by the social force.

Such social force created by repression made the seduction of sexuality powerful, while the resistance was powerless. Paradoxically, the act of resisting seemed to exacerbate the relinquishment of pleasures to the captivating influence of sexuality. In the context of comprehending the sublime, an encounter with the negative aspect of sublimity was inevitable, as it encompassed an inescapable confrontation with pain and discomfort as given by repression. In "Follow Me Down", Momsen started the first verse by telling the loss of her sanity as the seduction of sexuality was painful and dangerous. The experience of sexuality here drew a line for dualism between sanity and instability, wholeness and disintegration, clarity and obscurity. As soon as love became a metaphor for an

object, it became something that could be valued and measured. When the cost of love became unbearable, love turned into something painful and negative from something joyful and positive. However, the line “Have I lost my mind?” referred to the confusion of such transformation - the body difference, the sexual impulse and the lust that have never been seen in virginity. Since nature “excites the ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation” (Kant 84). The impulse of sexuality is thus the sublime chaos and might. Like smoking a cigarette, the experience of sex was a negative pleasure: “a darkly beautiful, inevitably painful pleasure that arises from some intimation of eternity” and “the taste of infinity...resides precisely in the ‘bad’ taste [one] quickly learns to love” (Klein 2).

The second verse of “Follow Me Down” plays like a confession to the listener as an engagement of the “pleasure in the truth of the pleasure” (Foucault 71) as the following to the confusion rose from the first verse. Sex and night are perfect combination for their boundlessness and darkness. The word “unholy” signified the pureness and the virginity of the young girl who has never experienced lustful feelings. The “sin” was another signifier that implied the loss of virginity was unholy and guilty. In the second two lines of this piece of lyrics, sex was portrayed as a gentle but coarse experience and feeling which was infinite with ecstasy and mighty sensory pleasure. On the other hand, it also aroused the feeling of resistance, the feeling of inevitably painful pleasure because sex was a sin. However, with such painful pleasure, it stirred a great pleasant that made “me” beg for not confessing the sins. The seduction to sexuality and the resistance to power turned the sublime experience into silence, where Foucault pronounced that “on the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (3).

In the chorus and the bridges of “Follow Me Down”, Momsen further discussed the experience and feelings of sexuality. The word “river” in the lyrics was a signifier to body and “clean water” referred to something deep in the body as pureness like a virgin. The experience was a massive and raw nature that one must be awed for its power and might. The bridge of this song delineated the feeling of infinite ecstasy with a certain dread of death. Like smoking a cigarette as Klein described, sexuality can also be an “extase infinie” which induces “a feeling of having died and gone to heaven” (60).

The sexual repression was the certain power that one was seduced to sex but had to put it into secret, into discourse. Thus, sexuality was mighty, and the sensuous pleasure of sublimity that bicycles and sprinklers could not compare,

especially when it was long be repressed for a young girl, the breaking free from the pure virginity to the first taste of forbidden fruit brought a greater sense of both confusion and pleasure. Forbidden censorship incited the very practice it wished to inhibit and would therefore make such practice more dangerously compulsive due to the illicit. Danaher et al. demonstrated that sexuality was a human experience that “affects and involves the body, desires, forms of knowledge, fears and social rules” (136). However, people were conscious of defying established power for decades now, while the tone of voice showed that “we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future” (Foucault 6). In this case, what made the repression of sexuality sublime was that one must break free from power to experience the truth of sexuality and resist the fears from the social rules. The fear from the social rules, the cautiousness of defying the power established the sense of terrifying sublime. Therefore, sexual repression was an experience where one must measure themselves as insignificantly small in comparison to the might of power. The sexual instincts and inclinations were those one would resist against the dominant power. This made the feeling of sexuality sublime.

Nothing Left to Lose: The Splendid, the Noble, and the Terrifying

The Pretty Reckless depicted less a dreadful feeling of the sublime sexuality in their song “Nothing Left to Lose”. According to Kant, the sublime was divided into three types, which were the splendid sublime, the noble sublime, and the terrifying sublime (48). As Clewis concluded, the splendid sublime was the feeling of sublimity with that of beauty; the noble sublime was the feeling of sublimity associated with the ‘quiet wonder’ evoked by a great height; while the terrifying sublime was the basic feeling of sublimity accompanied by dread or horror, such as a far-reaching depth, profound loneliness, the notion of limitless and eternity (35). In this song, love and sex were the splendid sublime and the quiet wonder that was hard to forget. Kant read the sublime as intangibility. He claimed that the sublime, unlike the beautiful in nature that has a tangible form of the object and definite boundaries, was only to be found in formless and boundless shapes. Hence, we emerged the feeling of sublime with speechless emotion, unpredictability and infinity. Again, Momsen took a “young girl older guy” approach to depict the sexual relationship. However, unlike the story from “Goin’ Down”, the narratives of this story were less dreadful and depressing.

“Late night sex, smokin’ cigarettes” were the reconstruction of the sexuality. Although there was no further description, the simple and plain language gave a less ornamented beauty but a more noble sublimity. Cigarettes here, associated with sex, were the signifier to the pleasure of infinity. It was bad, but the pleasure was boundless and raw. “...I can’t forget...I would do it all again” reflected sexual attraction and pleasure of desires. However, whether it was the sex itself or the cigarettes was not known. They could be converged as a whole, as the perfect combination of pleasure.

The depiction of sex and pleasure within this song adopted an aesthetic perspective that endorsed notions of beauty and simplicity. The pursuit of pleasure from desires necessitated an approach characterized by a formless cognitive engagement to fully appreciate its aesthetic appeal. Foucault argued that desire, act and pleasure were in a circle where “the desire that leads to act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire” (Foucault 43). This approach endowed the experience with a sense of sublimity, as the very sensation of the sublime demanded such aesthetic judgement. Kant accentuated that since the sublime was formless and boundless, the experience of the sublime was therefore the “cognitive powers in the estimation of magnitude” to which the judgment of reflection and representation was applied (88). Kant concluded that the sublime is “the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense” (89). Therefore, the infinite of the sublime was an idea, a cognitive representation. On the other hand, a sublime presentation required the absence of sensibility and loss of purposiveness. Therefore, as Kant followed, we must make sure the ideas of the sublime was separated from the purposiveness of nature and made them only the appendix to the aesthetical judging of such purposiveness since no particular form was represented in nature but a purposive use which “the imagination makes of its representation” (84-85).

In the chorus, Momsen continued her confession of sexual pleasure, but this time, it was more for the terrifying sublime. According to Brillenburg Wurth, the sublime feeling always involved the negative moment of fright, frustration, or confusion (2). This feeling went beyond pleasure, transporting one close to “ecstasy, touching pain or even disgust” (Kover 61).

Kant argued that because we resist the power and the fear, we therefore experience the sublime: “[the powers of nature] exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might...they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance

of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature” (100-1). The dominion, the mighty, and the aesthetical judgments superiority consisted of how we valued the fear but sublime experience. Doran articulated Kant’s idea that the resistance to the power of nature was also the resistance to people’s own physical instincts and inclinations. Therefore, our resistance and will were absolute because nature was not able to make us do anything against our will (Doran 247). Therefore, death and suicide are merely the power of nature that we cannot resist since we are small compared to the mighty nature. In the song, “Ever since the day we died” was the metaphor of the day of the sex which was the feeling of having died and the feeling of falling into an infinite abyss. Same as the bridge of the song “Follow Me Down”, sex was again a metaphor of feeling died. “Between Elvis and suicide” and “after Jesus and rock n roll” put sex in a between position that was both noble (Elvis and Jesus) and terrifying (suicide and rock and roll). It was terrifying because after the sex, there was nothing left, but it was also noble because there was nothing to lose.

The Finale

The sublime is “the highest in art and must be employed when the mind is to be attacked with powerful strokes, when admiration, awe, powerful longing, high courage, or also fear or terror are to be aroused” (Brillenbug Wurth 47). One must realize that the sublime is not the beautiful, it was the feelings of awe and esteem, and never too small. Sexuality is the certain object that allows our minds to be invaded by such feelings. Sexuality possesses the potential for beauty, yet it is the inherent peril, uncertainty, and risk that it carries that ignites a range of emotions including fear, apprehension, and even terror. On one hand, people enjoy the impulse and lust that sexuality evokes. On the other hand, people admire and awe the power that sexuality brings: the power of the feeling of having died, and the power of resisting existed rules and institutions.

Foucault's perspective on sexual repression can be viewed as a hypothesis, as it posits that suppressing discussions of sexuality within the public sphere inadvertently facilitates the proliferation of discourses that are generated from within the confines of the prevailing power system. As a result, it became a social force that only allowed sexuality to exist in its social forms and social organization (Weeks 18), and not a natural impulse that was driven by pleasures

and desires. The reason to choose The Pretty Reckless as the case to investigate falls into this circumstance. When Momsen, who was raised in a Roman Catholic family, uses rock music as the format to talk about sex, it becomes a sublime experience. The songs reveal that sexuality is a danger zone. It triggers the feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing what it is. The formlessness in such feeling evokes the dreadful of having died. Because it was long repressed, therefore by tasting it and talking about it, it turns into an overwhelming yet noble first-time experience. When sex was expressed in their songs, they explicitly express such feelings into discourses without concealing any parts of the details.

Thus, The Pretty Reckless was a proper representation of such dreadful but pleasant desire to imply sexuality in their songs while being repressed by a faithful religious background. All three songs analyzed in this study showed strong and explicit sexual implications with a taste of forbiddance. They showed that sexual implications and sublimity could be presented in popular music. The first two songs showed the dark side of sexuality which led to death and hell. The constant uses of “down” after verbs in both songs further reflected such idea through the concept of orientational metaphors, as “down” was culturally and physically considered as low status, bad, and/or sick as Lakoff and Johnson stated. Sexuality, therefore, was not a beautiful garden, but an infinite and boundless abyss down there. However, as Kover stated that the sublime feeling was a feeling through the experience of unpleasant yet accompanied by a certain pleasure (59), the songs showed how the dreadful and terrified but pleasant corporeal and sensuous experience of sexuality could trigger the feeling of sublimity. Furthermore, both songs had strong religious hints. The explicit sexual portrayal in the songs was also the defiance to the dominant system. The sublime pleasure, therefore, drew not only on sexuality itself, but also on the experience of enjoying sex while defying and challenging the existed rules that repress the discourses of sexuality.

The third song, on the other hand, gave a noble feeling of sexuality. Although the sublime feeling was inevitably engaged with the unpleasant, it could be in a “quiet wonder” that involved less terrifying moment. It was undeniable that sex was nowhere near beautiful because of its coarse and raw nature. However, when sex became irresistible and unforgettable, it transformed itself from the terrifying present to the noble past. The memory became noble even though the experience of sexuality was painful. In all, the truth of sexuality and the knowledge of sexuality as Foucault reiterated were generated from either *ars erotica*, where

truth was drawn from pleasure, or *scientia sexualis*, where truth was based on scientific principles (Danaher, 2000, p.142). All songs showed that the knowledge of sexuality was drawn from the coarse and raw or subtle and noble pleasure that generated from the sexual experience. The truth was not beautiful. Instead, it was dark, dreadful, and painful regardless of the feelings of being noble or terrifying. Such knowledge learned from direct pleasure was what Kant described as the aesthetical judgment upon the sublime which has no judgment of understanding or reason mixed up.

In this case, when The Pretty Reckless actively seek to unveil the truth underlying sexuality, they enable an immersive integration of the experience into their beings, causing it to manifest as discourses. It is the feeling that one has never been allowed to talk or even to have. Therefore, it becomes an overwhelmingly sublime feeling, especially for The Pretty Reckless and Taylor Momsen, whose religious faith that represses the discourses of sexuality collides with the sexual desire in the songs. It is the sublimity of breaking free in sexuality, the sublimity of enjoying sexual discourses. When there is the repression of sexuality, there is the incitation of sublimity.

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