
Music Review: Cavetown's 'Guilty' Through a Sociological Lens

*Tenille Blackburn
Department of Sociology
California State University, Los Angeles*

As a moving piece with emotive lyrics and imaginative storytelling, “Guilty,” by indie/alternative singer-songwriter Cavetown (2021), paints an image of loyalty and pain through the metaphor of a dog's relationship with their owner, given the album name *Man's Best Friend*. Beyond the metaphor, the lyrics of this song have a multitude of different interpretations, and as a result, it resonates with many on various levels while remaining sociologically sound. There are layers to this song as it covers a range of themes involving mental health, fear of isolation, identity management, and humans' need for connection in society.

Robin Skinner, the face and artist of Cavetown, writes about touching and anecdotal human experiences in his songs and uses them as a platform for self-reflection. Through his work, one may find that there's more to love and emotions in one's everyday life, and the complexity of emotions and identity are creatively expressed through his music. From start to finish, “Guilty” captures the struggles involved with identity, social disconnect, and relationships in a sociologically significant manner. The narrator introduces their predicament as no longer feeling connected to a person or situation but continuing as they are because they do not want to avoid isolation.

*“I don't think that this feels like love,
but I don't wanna let go.
Maybe if I just do what you want,
then you'll leave me alone.”*

To preface: Skinner is a transgender artist who falls on the aromantic and asexual spectrum. An interpretation of this verse is that it may be a reference to aromanticism, although it may also apply to other orientations. In such a case, many individuals on these spectrums may feel like they need to live up to their partner's wants or needs to maintain relationships. While this can be done in a way that is comfortable and consensual, it may also induce

feelings of guilt or discomfort for those who may feel like they have to make a sacrifice for another. Beyond a lens of romantic or sexual orientation, this idea of putting others' needs before one's own, and the repressed feelings associated, may be a common experience in unhealthy relationships. The decision to remain in a connection where one isn't happy is related to the concept of *moral isolation*, or the fear of social isolation, by classical sociologist Fromm.

Fromm (1941) states that rules of society exist and are set for each individual before they are born, and they must learn to accept the conditions in which they live. This may be more challenging for individuals who find greater difficulty in navigating the conditions they live in due to their background, status, and identities (i.e., minorities and marginalized individuals). In Skinner's and the narrator's situation, maintaining relationships may be difficult while being on the aromantic-asexual spectrum or historically by having an identity that deviates from what is dominantly deemed 'normal' in society. However, the song narrator still strives to maintain a sense of connection in a relationship.

In order to survive in this world, Fromm (1941) describes moral and spiritual aloneness as being as intolerable as being physically alone. There is a psycho-sociological emphasis on relating to the outside world, being integrated and connected with others and ideas. Although the narrator is physically connected with someone, the mental and emotional connection may be lacking. Fromm (1956:8) touches more upon the topics of loneliness, guilt, anxiety, and other mental health difficulties as a result of social isolation or separation:

Being separate means being cut off, without any capacity to use my human powers. Hence to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world – things and people – actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react . . . Beyond that, it arouses shame and the feeling of guilt . . . The awareness of humans separate, without reunion by love – is the source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety.

In a similar stance, attribution theories in the sociology of emotions describe how certain emotions are experienced not only

due to the nature of an event or situation, but to what an individual attributes an occurrence. It is theorized that an individual may experience feelings of guilt or regret when they perceive themselves to be the cause of an undesirable situation, as pictured in this song, in which the narrator may attribute the state of the situation to their identity or mental health. Alternatively, individuals may experience feelings of anger when the cause is attributed to another person, while sadness is experienced when fate is believed to be the blame (Bericat 2015; Brody 1999). In this sense, the narrator may partly blame their partner for the nature of their relationship, potentially arousing feelings of resentment and disconnect in the lyric, “*maybe . . . you’ll leave me alone.*” The pre-chorus reinforces Fromm’s theories of isolation and emotions:

*“It feels like you’re taking me home,
but every other day I see another bone.
I hate your guts, but I’ll meet you same time,
same place tomorrow.”*

Goffman’s dramaturgical is another essential theory that comes to light in the opening lyrics and is applicable to the overall theme of this song. As the world is one’s stage, one’s identity is managed differently: *frontstage* before others and *backstage* to themselves or when a person is alone. It involves the concept of *stigma*, or deeply ‘discrediting’ attributes on the basis of tribal identities (e.g., religion), physical disabilities or ‘deformities’ (e.g., deafness), and one’s character (e.g., homosexuality and mental illness) (Clair 2018; Goffman 1963). Nonetheless, Skinner and the narrator are individuals with stigmatized identities who must endure impression management to be ‘normal’ in the *frontstage* of society and social interactions to avoid negative experiences. As described in “Guilty,” the narrator strives to maintain a connection at the expense of oneself, one’s identity, wants, and/or needs. The chorus follows in a way that directly speaks to Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to identity management and the different stages one faces.

*“An archaeology excavation on my body,
and I’m brushing so gently
They’re tryna cover up the bones underneath*

No matter what I do, I feel guilty.”

The narrator appears to be trying to cover or manage a part of themselves to maintain relationships, connections, or their image. The “archaeology excavation” may also potentially speak to the unhealthy nature of the relationship described at the beginning of the song. The less ideal parts of themselves, their thoughts, or their feelings may become apparent as time goes on with this person, but they try to repress it all while aiming to maintain this relationship. Despite the narrator’s efforts, their “guilt” or inner feelings still exist. This may also describe a relationship an individual has with oneself and other factors involving mental health or self-harm, and the guilt associated with self-harming behavior. The themes of this song may also be interpreted through the lens of depression and body dysphoria for gender and/or disordered eating. Such themes may be intentional, given Skinner’s experience with transitioning and commonly discussing mental health in his work.

***“Crossing all my fingers and toes
that I don't wake up again in a black hole
She said she would send me back home to the side
if I wanna die, miserable
Doctor, I'm not doing too well.
If this shit was a choice,
I wouldn't need your help.
I see the world through the eyes of a dog,
but I can't see yellow.”***

These lines represent one’s desperation in not wanting to return to a mental state that feels heavy or dark. The narrator holds onto an unhealthy relationship or behavior to keep themselves from returning to this state. It may be interpreted that “*she would send me back home . . . if I wanna die, miserable*” may refer to the words of a mental health professional. The “*black hole*” overall represents a setback, which may also be seen in the dysphoric lens of the narrator’s progress with identity and gender development. While mental health may have its issues on its own, a disconnect between one’s true identity and how others perceive them may also contribute to feelings of stress, discomfort, depression, suicidal ideation and more.

*“Man's best friend's on first name terms with God
I thought I could fake it but almost
I'm a scarecrow in someone else's garden.”*

In writing how one extends themselves to benefit another, Skinner comes full circle, repeating the chorus following this verse. Through the narrator, he continues to tell the story of an individual living for someone else. The narrator serves a purpose for another person. But these actions in themselves don't serve the narrator (such themes reminiscent of the first few lines of the song). This reinforces the idea of self-sacrifice for another's happiness; it continually emphasizes a fear of isolation. Yet, a scarecrow without a field or garden also serves no purpose, which may describe codependency in a relationship. As dogs are often referred to as 'man's best friend,' the writer may have written this line as the word is very similar to 'God.' Though, it is possible that the narrator of this song would prefer to be bigger and something closer to innocent or holy, in contrast to the negative thoughts and feelings they experience throughout the song.

It is desirable to have confidence, take ownership of one's life, and think and feel in a healthy and positive way. However, the narrator emphasizes the idea that it's not as easy as it seems, nor is it something they can always pretend to be. Identity management may be a heavy weight to carry for stigmatized individuals or a difficult task to achieve on a daily basis. The narrator falls into a comfortable yet unsatisfactory predicament, whether that is dealing with depression, dysphoria or an unhealthy relationship.

Without a doubt, Skinner paints a clear, sociological picture through carefully thought-out lyricism. As discovered through this song and through the lyrics of many others, emotions and identity are both complex and interconnected. The conveyed messages in his works are profound and reflective, with much room for interpretation as they resonate with many individuals facing varying circumstances. There is much to be anticipated in the sociological, story-telling journey that is Cavetown and their discography.

REFERENCES

- Bericat, Eduardo. 2016. "The Sociology of Emotions: Four Decades of Progress." *Current Sociology* 64(3):491–513. DOI: 10.1177/0011392115588355.
- Brody, Leslie. 1999. *Gender, Emotion, and the Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Claire, Matthew. 2018. "Stigma." *Core Concepts in Sociology*. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/matthewclair/files/stigma_finaldraft.pdf.
- Ferber, Lawrence. 2022. "Sense and Sensitivity: Cavetown Talks New Projects, His Musical Evolution and War on Trans People." *Pride Source*. <https://pridesource.com/article/sense-and-sensitivity-cavetown-talks-new-projects-his-musical-evolution-and-war-on-trans-people>.
- Fromm, Erich. 1941. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart.
- Fromm, Erich. 1956. *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" New York: Simon & Schuster.