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Catching Flowers off Choctaw Ridge

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Catching Flowers off Choctaw Ridge

The Mississippi sun was shining when Bobbie Gentry, a typical Southern farmer's daughter, received news about her lover that would cause an emotional storm to her routine life. She would have never expected such a tragedy to wreck her life and leave her all alone. In her musical hit, "Ode to Billie Joe," Gentry describes her experience hearing about her boyfriend committing suicide by jumping off the Tallahatchie Bridge on Choctaw Ridge. Her family's unconcerned reactions further complicate the situation and deprive Gentry of the community she needs to grieve the tragedy in a healthy manner. "Ode to Billie Joe" suggests that people should interrupt their lives to empathize with others yet often fail to do so because they fear the suffering that will inevitably come their way.

Bobbie Gentry uses irony in the lack of lyrics about Billie Joe to provide evidence for the selfishness of people refusing to disturb their lives with empathy. Typically, odes express the memory of someone else, but in this case, less than half of the lyrics recall Billie Joe. Common life occurrences, such as eating dinner or daily work, take precedence over the boy's death and distract the family from recognizing the seriousness of Billie Joe's actions. Although the song is called an "ode," the lyrics do not revolve around the boy in the title, but instead, around his lover's experience. This truth leads to fact that the singer herself refuses to empathize with how Billie Joe must have been struggling, signifying a human pattern to deny empathy even to loved ones. While Gentry refuses to express the pain of her lover, her family also denies empathy for her. With subtlety, the family members mention Gentry as the lover of Billie Joe but ignore the obvious emotional turmoil of the singer. They speak revealing comments such as, "And wasn't I talkin' to him last Sunday night?" and "he saw a girl that looked a lot like you... and she and Billie Joe was throwing somethin' off the Tallahatchie Bridge." The singer's loved ones speak these casual comments without any concern for the impact of this event on Bobbie Gentry, leaving her to cope alone as she refuses to eat and spends an unduly amount of time throwing flowers over the bridge where Billie Joe jumped. The denial of empathy and consideration for

others leads to a broken community, as exhibited by the singer and her lover, as well as the singer and her family.

The monotonous strumming and lyrical repetition throughout “Ode to Billie Joe” emphasizes the single-minded lifestyle that denies any action to look to others and help in community. Initiated before the start of Bobbie Gentry’s lyrics, the strumming pattern creates a continuous dull, sad mood, repeating throughout the entire song and pausing only at the end of each stanza to state, “Billie Joe’s jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge.” At this point in the song, the strumming stops and the only music is Gentry singing this statement and a cello bowing low, dramatic notes. As soon as she expresses the news of his tragedy, the strumming once again continues as though the death of Billie Joe indicates no significance. This pattern directly reflects the theme of the song: People have their own lives and responsibilities apart from others and do not want to interrupt their own life patterns, putting themselves at risk for emotional suffering. Like the motif of the guitar, people want their lives to continue as before despite the misfortune of others. Each time the strumming picks up after the depressing statement, the family members make a subconscious rejection of empathy and fall back to old life patterns.

Each stanza describes the fear of a different family member to allow himself to empathize with the suffering of the singer. Each passes judgement to Billie Joe and denies any remorse or validation to who he was as a person. With such reactions, they separate themselves from acknowledging the importance of the event, leaving Bobbie Gentry without support in her grief. The first character to speak is Papa. He is clearly not interested in Choctaw Ridge for he says, “Seems like nothin’ ever comes to no good up on Choctaw Ridge.” He then judges the boy saying, “Well, Billie Joe never had a lick of sense.” This judgement is a refusal to provide empathy for the boy, but more than that, he has the first speaking point and the leadership role in the family. As the head of this traditional family, making such statements limits conversations that could have happened at the dinner table to promote support for his struggling daughter. Unfortunately, he has already invalidated the event with these two statements.

Also fearful of hindering his own life routine, Bobbie Gentry’s brother focuses on himself rather than give attention to his sister. He follows his father’s cue by only briefly recalling a memory with Billie Joe and quickly moving on to ask for another piece of pie. Even as a friend of Billie Joe, he offers minimal empathy in the statement, “it don’t seem right.” The event does not impact him deeply like his sister, as obvious in the fact that he gets married, buys a store and moves away—all within the year.

Bobbie Gentry's mother also has all the evidence she needs to see her daughter's relationship to the boy, yet fails to acknowledge the effects of this tragedy on Bobbie Gentry. With previous cues from her son, she continues to speak as if nothing happened, asking Bobbie Gentry, "Child, what's happened to your appetite? ... you haven't touched a single bite." The mother even states that the preacher had come because he had seen the two together but still blatantly chooses selfishness over her daughter's reality. The mother's priorities are that the preacher is coming over for dinner and not that the two were seen together, as evident in the order that the mother talks about her and the preacher's conversation. The song suggests that the preacher wants to offer support, yet her mother refuses to recognize the importance of support in her daughter's life. Gentry's mother also uses casual language throughout the discussion such as, "oh, by the way...". This indicates the ignorance in her mother's view of the significant tragedy. Following in her mother's footsteps, Bobbie Gentry will also later deny empathy for her mother after her father's death, thus creating a cycle of broken community.

This lack of community for Bobbie Gentry gives significance to the song as a solo, rather than a duet. It would be contradictory for the song to be a duet since the singer's lover has just died and left Bobbie Gentry alone—her brother married and moved away, her father dead and her mother so depressed that she will not do anything, which also indicates the implications of living without empathy. As explained in the family's reaction to the tragedy of Billie Joe, such life without expressed empathy creates emotional and relational separation, destroying kinship. Without this community, people will end up like mother and Bobbie Gentry, alone and wallowing in their grief.

The mournful tone of the song expresses emotional turmoil that results because of the fear to be vulnerable with empathy when hearing the news of Billie Joe's suicide. The string instrumentals add build with long, dramatic mellow-sounding notes each time the song mentions the Tallahatchie Bridge. At the end of "Ode to Billie Joe," the singer finally hints at her relationship with Billie Joe when she throws flowers off the bridge, just as her brother mentioned Billie Joe and her doing before Billie Joe's death. The strings at this point perform an intense chromatic scale, concluding the song and attributing final emotion to the overall story as the audience ponders the implications of the song. The sadness provokes thought about what community could have been for Bobbie Gentry and her family if they would have listened to each other's emotions and supported each other through suffering.

"Ode to Billy Joe" reveals the tendency for people to destroy community by ignoring the misfortune of others because of a selfish fear of the effect that empathy will have on them.

Without the support of others, one can remain in the depression state in the grieving process. Bobbie Gentry's family is an excellent example of what would happen if humans refused to acknowledge and assist in one another's suffering. This message is not only evident in the failure of some to fully recover from tragic life events, but to be in community is also a Biblical directive. In Hebrews 10:24, God instructs His children, "And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works...encouraging one another" (Holman Christian Standard Bible, Hebrews 10:24). As God teaches in His Word, the human community has the capability of moving past many hardships to live out productive, happy, relational lives that encourage and build each other through hard times. One can accomplish this by validating each other's emotions and recognizing misfortune. In a symbolic sense, loved ones should be there for each other to catch the flowers that may be thrown off the Tallahatchie Bridge on Choctaw Ridge.

Works Cited

The Bible. Holman Christian Standard Bible, Holman Bible Publishers, 2012.

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