

“I can’t shake the feeling that You must have saved me for something greater than this”: Faith, Meaning and Connection in *Saint Maud*
Saint Maud (2019). Written and directed by Rose Glass. Film4, BFI and Escape Plan Productions.

Rose Glass’s directorial debut, *Saint Maud*, is a disconcerting exploration of faith, doubt, and the need for human connection. Set against the dismal backdrop of a shabby seaside resort, it tells the story of Katie (Morfydd Clark), a healthcare worker who reinvents herself as the evangelical Maud after the bloody death of a patient in her care. When Maud becomes a private carer for terminally ill dancer Amanda (Jennifer Ehle), she takes it upon herself to ‘save’ the older woman and subsequently descends into a disorienting spiral of fervent faith, delusion and violence. The film’s religious themes are overt from the title and opening sequence alone – a blood-soaked Maud holds her palms aloft, stigmata-like to the heavens – and surface viewing presents a cautionary tale of obsession in the desperate search for salvation. Yet on deeper analysis, *Saint Maud* has much more to say about faith, about human relationships, and the interconnection between these foundational struts of existence. Although released in 2019, the movie was terrifyingly prescient considering imminent world events and its themes resonate more deeply within the context of lockdowns, distancing and social division.

We follow events through Maud’s perspective and her internal dialogue with God. From the outset, it is obvious that she exists on the lonely side of life: we see her staring wistfully into the bright warmth of a gaudy arcade, trying to ingratiate herself into the laughter of others, lurking in the Caravaggian shadows of a lavish party as staff rather than welcomed guest. Perhaps as an attempt to curb her loneliness, Maud casts herself as being on a militant mission from God, referring to her patients as ‘postings’ rather than jobs or caring endeavours, and while she seems to find comfort in the austere piety of this life, her dogged pursuit of meaning comes with great physical pain. She kneels on sharp objects, burns her hand, puts tacks in her shoes, seemingly as penance for the tragic events of her past or perhaps in attempt to sharpen her connection with God. Yet despite being a picture of virtue and abstinence, her road to salvation is riddled with confusion, doubt, and deep distress. Maud is lost and the little guidance she does receive from above is thrown into question by her tenuous interpretations and sharp mood shifts; a reliable narrator she is not and from early on, we start to fear for her sanity as well as her deliverance.

A key theme in *Saint Maud* is our inherent need for others. Maud’s suffering questions whether faith can be a comforting guide for the individual or if it requires the collective experience of community and connection. We do not see Maud enter a church, speak with a priest or a fellow believer; she communes with God alone, in her head and at her self-made altar. Her interactions with others are awkward or steeped in servitude and she sabotages all possibilities for the intimate connections she seemingly desires. The few tender moments in the movie are when she is with others – Amanda gifting her an artbook, requesting her company, laughing as she cheats at cards – and there is a fleeting moment of hope when we meet Joy, an ex-colleague who reaches out with heartfelt concern and regret that she had not been there when Maud/Katie needed her most.

Yet each opportunity for genuine connection is sabotaged by Maud’s jealousy, her pride, and a sanctimonious arrogance over others: we see this in her unbending efforts to convert Amanda

from the ‘indecent’ of enjoying what life she has left, an obvious revulsion toward Amanda’s lover and confidante, Carol, and a chilling lack of empathy for a man she encounters begging on the cold streets: “May God bless you and never waste your pain”. Her stubborn self-righteousness prevents her from seeing people, only sinful souls in need of saving and by pushing herself away from these avenues of hope, she spirals into old, destructive patterns of drinking alone in pubs and exploitative sexual encounters with strangers, obvious attempts to feel *something* through the presence of others.

Maud’s relationship with God is just as tenuous. There is an entitled petulance to her conversations, especially in moments of doubt: “If this is how You treat Your most loyal subjects, I shudder to think what awaits those who shun You”. Each point of her journey is punctuated with hesitation as she questions her calling, the motives of others, her own dedication. Maud’s easily wavered determination draws to mind Proverbs 3, 5-6: *Lean not on your understanding, in all your ways submit to Him, and he will make your paths straight*. Ironically, Maud’s fatal flaw is her intense *lack* of faith. Her final confrontation with Amanda demonstrates the sheer fragility of her belief, and whether the devil is real or just a hallucination, she succumbs to the temptation with very little push: “He isn’t real, you must know that?”. While spirituality is a personal experience, we are social animals by design and *Saint Maud* begs a timely question: if we rely on our isolated interpretation of signs and wonders in times of crisis, is redemption truly possible? Or is self-destruction a caustic inevitability?

Whether Maud does ‘see the light’ in the final scenes on the beach is open to interpretation. Although she bears the appearance of peace and fulfilment, with angelic wings and glowing, ghostly robes, this fleeting brush with sanctification is torn away with agonising terror, as the scales fall from her eyes to reveal the horrific reality of her act. A poignant moment that is almost lost in the chaotic dénouement, we hear a woman beg ‘somebody stop her, help her, oh my God’. If Maud had been able to embrace humility and accept the help of those who could see her for the lost, vulnerable soul that she was – Joy, a priest, a stranger on the beach – rather than seeking martyrous solace from those who would use and exploit her, she could have been saved. But instead, she leant on her own, terrifying understanding and lost all sight of redemption.

Saint Maud has been called a [crisis of faith](#) but at its heart the movie reflects the fundamental interconnectedness of self-acceptance through faith, and faith through our connections with others. We need to ask ourselves – as theologians and movie-lovers – can contentment be found outside of interactions which do not fall into trite patterns of servitude or exploitation? No woman is an island, regardless of the tenacity of our convictions, and *Saint Maud* is a frightening reminder of the dangers of placing ourselves as being above the need for others, our tribe, our community, especially at times of division and crisis. A message needed now more than ever.

Amy Beddows, London Metropolitan University