

Saint Maud

(Rose Glass, 2021)

Component 1 Section C: British film since 1995

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts of film**

Specialist Study Areas:

- **Ideology**
- **Narrative**

Rationale for study: *Saint Maud* is an expressionistic blend of religious psychological horror, and emotional character study. Rose Glass's debut feature immerses the viewer in the world of a traumatised and isolated young woman, whose visceral relationship with her God leads to more and more extreme behaviour.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

“My Little Saviour” 13:21 – 18:50

“Abandoned by God” 41:53 – 45:07

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Almost everything in the film is seen from Maud's point of view, so there are regular close-ups of her facial reactions, whether they be tender, disapproving, desperate or delusional. There are also many POV shots of her visions, the repeated swirling pattern motif that indicates ‘God’ is present. To begin with,

these are commonplace (e.g. water going down a plug hole) but as Maud's psychosis deepens they become increasingly bizarre (e.g. clouds, cyclones in pints of beer).

Mise-en-scène

- The locations for the narrative are divided between Amanda's vast cliff-top house (reminiscent of Gothic mansions like the one in *Rebecca*) and Maud's sparse bedsit.



Image by Landmark Media / Alamy Stock Photo

- Consider the set designs and décor in the two focus scenes. Amanda's house has a faded opulence that reflects her persona – a once famous dancer who is now dying. Almost every wall and floor is patterned and rich wood lines the walls. By comparison, Maud's bedsit is bare like a nun's cell, apart from the ‘shrine’ above the dresser. This reflects Maud's ascetic nature, as well as her economic impoverishment.

Editing

- Throughout the film we are almost completely immersed in Maud's perspective. The editing achieves this with extended close-ups and POV shots. Occasionally this rhythm is disrupted by high angle or bird's-eye shots, almost as if God is watching her.

- On a few occasions, the film cuts to how other people see her. This view is especially effective in the pub scene, and when Joy visits. Ironically, it's in these scenes where Maud tries her hardest to appear 'normal' (e.g. flirting with men, laughing at a stranger's joke) that she seems the most unnerving.

Sound

- Maud's voiceover conversations with God are remarkably free from dogma or deference. At the start, they are informal and intimate, as if she's chatting to a friend. After she is fired by Amanda, and begins to psychologically deteriorate, her tone changes to one of bitterness, almost like she's chiding a disappointing boyfriend.
- Distorted sound design and music are used during Maud's hallucinations to add both an otherworldly and threatening tone.

Performance

- Morfydd Clark's role is pivotal to our engagement with the film – Maud is in every scene and most of the shots. She switches between tender, devout, disapprovingly protective, and ecstatically delirious, but in a way that always encourages our empathy, and never veers into over-the-top psychotic behaviour.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Both mental and physical illness is represented sensitively and with nuance in *Saint Maud*. Amanda, though terminally sick, rarely wallows in depression. She is portrayed as mischievous, both sexually and sensually aware, and eager to continue having fun, even when it takes a toll on her health.
- Maud's psychosis is portrayed delicately. Glass has commented that throughout history, people who communed with God (e.g. hearing voices, talking to their deity, seeing visions) were regarded as 'holy' and highly respected. It's only in more recent years that society deems this a symptom of mental illness.

- Consider Maud's behaviour throughout the film. Her scenes bonding with Amanda, her disapproval of Carol and the party, and after when she begins to deteriorate/get 'closer to God'. How does Glass show this unravelling without resorting to horror movie clichés?

Aesthetic

- Saint Maud* has an expressionistic style - the colour palette, production design and cinematography all reflect the inner states of the protagonists. In the first half of the film, the scenes in Amanda's house contrast with Maud's aesthetic. Fitting for a dying stage star, the house is full of memories, externalised as props and richly patterned furnishings. There is tension between this decadence and Maud's strict and unshowy style. In the second half of the film, without the stabilising influence of a job or friends, Maud's descent into madness is expressed through disorienting camera angles, editing and sound design.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social/Cultural/Political

- Glass has said in interviews that she wasn't attempting to make any comment on organised religion, but rather about religious fervour. She said she had always been fascinated with real-life instances of self-immolation or suicide bombing in the name of faith, and "wondered where the genesis for this extreme act came from".
- Glass has also said it is a comment on the way psychologically vulnerable people in our society are ignored and marginalised.
- You may want to compare *Saint Maud* to other films that feature isolated, vulnerable loners who resort to extreme behaviour such as *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) or the more recent *Joker* (Phillips, 2019).

Institutional

- The film was funded by Film 4 and the British Film Institute (BFI).

- It is the director and screenwriter Rose Glass's first feature film. She is a graduate from the National Film and Television School. It was while studying that Glass had the idea for *Saint Maud*.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

Ideology

- Saint Maud* is a film that neither endorses nor condemns mainstream organised religion. The protagonist's relationship with her faith is far more informal than most religions would encourage, and her 'prayers' seem more like someone talking to an invisible friend than devout worship. Her behaviour may tip over into self-harm (particularly the pins in the shoes), but throughout history the devout have used self-inflicted pain to achieve a higher, more 'holy' state.

Narrative

- Saint Maud* was marketed as a horror film, with reviewers making comparisons with 'religious horrors' such as *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973). The relationship between Maud and Amanda – and the Gothic house in which the first half takes place – are also reminiscent of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (Aldrich, 1962). You could watch the trailers or read reviews of these films – how does *Saint Maud*'s narrative play with these expectations, whilst also deviating from them into a far more empathetic character study?

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

"Abandoned by God" 41:53 – 45:07

- The set for Maud's bedsit is the opposite of Amanda's house. The latter's is on the top of a cliff, overlooking the town; a position of clear superiority (in fact, Maud wonders aloud *why* Amanda is living in this English seaside resort). Maud's abode is almost subterranean – but it does have a view of the sky. It is also sparsely decorated, empty of any personality, compared to Amanda's, which is packed with posters, trinkets, and mementos of her past. Consider how the set design reflects the personae of the characters.
- This sequence intercuts Maud at home, literally picking at her scabs, and her wandering around the bleak town. The camera work and sound design in the exterior shots is deliberately disorienting. What does the cinematography and sound tell us about Maud's mental state?
- Maud's (one-sided) conversation with God is unusual for someone who considers herself so devout. Her faith has been questioned by Amanda, and God doesn't seem to be answering. Consider how this portrays religion and faith.
- Consider Morfydd Clark's performance as Maud. How does the actor encourage us to empathise with the character despite her obvious psychological deterioration?