

The Semiotics of Faith and Empowerment in Mariah Carey's Lyrics

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Abstract: This study argues that Mariah Carey's lyrics construct a symbolic narrative of empowerment through themes of perseverance, faith, and self-definition. Using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, it analyzes how recurring motifs—such as prayer, divine support, and emotional endurance—function as signifiers that produce cultural meaning. The analysis focuses on eleven purposively selected songs, including “Hero,” “Make It Happen,” and “Through the Rain.” These songs link personal struggle to spiritual resilience, forming a lyrical mythology in which hardship is reinterpreted as a path to inner strength. Carey's lyrics consistently link personal struggle to spiritual resilience, transforming hardship into a source of inner strength. Her religious language and autobiographical references encode a belief system where individual vulnerability becomes transformative power. Rather than merely expressing emotion, these songs construct a framework that helps listeners reinterpret adversity and rebuild confidence. The semiotic analysis reveals three key patterns: spiritual metaphors that universalize personal experience, narrative structures that reframe suffering as growth, and linguistic choices that position the listener as an empowered agent. This research contributes to popular music semiotics while demonstrating how lyrical symbolism shapes contemporary narratives of identity and emotional resilience.

Keywords:

Mariah Carey,
Popular music,
Semiotics,
Empowerment,
Faith and resilience

Article History:

Received:
25 Feb. 2025

Accepted:
18 Aug. 2025

Early View:
14 Sep. 2025

Mariah Carey'nin Şarkı Sözlerinde İnanç ve Güçlenme Göstergeleri

Öz: Bu çalışma, Mariah Carey'nin şarkı sözlerinin, azim, inanç ve kendini tanımlama temaları aracılığıyla nasıl bir sembolik güçlenme anlatısı oluşturduğunu savlamaktadır. Roland Barthes'ın göstergebilim kuramı kullanarak, dua, ilahî destek ve duygusal dayanıklılık gibi tekrarlayan motiflerin kültürel anlam üreten göstergeler olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü analiz eder. Bu inceleme, “Hero” (Kahraman), “Make It Happen” (Oldur) ve “Through the Rain” (Yağmurun İçinden) eserleri dahil olmak üzere amaca yönelik olarak seçilmiş on bir şarkıya odaklanmaktadır. Bu şarkılar, kişisel mücadeleyi manevi dayanıklılıkla ilişkilendirerek, zorlukların içsel güce giden bir yol olarak yeniden yorumlandığı lirik bir mitoloji oluşturur. Carey'nin şarkı sözleri, kişisel mücadeleyi tutarlı bir şekilde manevi dayanıklılıkla ilişkilendirir ve zorlukları içsel gücün

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Mariah Carey,
Popüler müzik,
Göstergebilim,
Güçlenme,
İnanç ve dayanıklılık

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bir kaynağına dönüştürür. Carey'nin dinî dili ve otobiyografik göndermeleri, bireysel kırılmanın dönüştürücü bir güce dönüştüğü bir inanç sistemini kodlamaktadır. Bu şarkılar, sadece duyguları ifade etmekten ziyade, dinleyicilerin zorlukları yeniden yorumlamasına ve özgüvenlerini yeniden inşa etmesine yardımcı olan bir çerçeve oluşturur. Göstergebilimsel analiz üç anahtar modeli ortaya koymaktadır: kişisel deneyimi evrenselleştiren manevi mecazlar, acıyı gelişim olarak yeniden çerçeveleyen anlatı yapıları ve dinleyiciyi güçlü bir eyleyici olarak konumlandıran dilsel seçimler. Bu araştırma, lirik sembolizmin kimlik ve duygusal dayanıklılığın çağdaş anlatılarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini göstererek popüler müzik göstergebilimine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Makale Geçmişi:

Geliş Tarihi:
25 Şubat 2025

Kabul Tarihi:
18 Ağustos 2025

Erken Görünüm:
14 Eylül 2025

How to Cite: Rudy, et al. "The Semiotics of Faith and Empowerment in Mariah Carey's Lyrics." *IDEAS: Journal of English Literary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2025, pp. 93–105. doi:10.62352/ideas.1646436.



Introduction

Music plays a central role in shaping American culture and reflecting social values. While mainstream narratives often highlight male artists like Frank Sinatra (1915–1998), Elvis Presley (1935–1977), or Michael Jackson (1958–2009), women have also contributed significantly to the music industry. Mariah Carey (1969–...), who rose to prominence in the 1990s, continues the legacy of artists such as Mahalia Jackson (1911–1972), Billie Holiday (1915–1959), and Aretha Franklin (1942–2018). These women used music to confront social inequality and express personal and collective resilience. Carey follows this tradition through her use of autobiographical lyrics, gospel influences, and spiritual imagery. Her songs often address hardship, faith, and perseverance, themes central to Black female musical expression (Davis 15; Neal 7). Like her predecessors, Carey uses her voice not only as a technical instrument but as a means of asserting identity and emotional truth. This positions her within a lineage of women who challenged industry norms and expanded the cultural meaning of popular music.

Mariah Carey is among the most commercially successful artists in American pop music, with over 19 Billboard number-one singles and more than 200 million records sold worldwide. Since her debut in 1990, songs such as "Hero," "Make It Happen," and "Thank God I Found You" have been recognized for their lyrical focus on overcoming adversity and spiritual perseverance (Sembiring et al. 102–103; Siow et al. 422; Valeri et al. 4458). While her vocal range has received substantial critical attention, her authorship and thematic contributions as a songwriter are less frequently studied (Putri et al. 40). Her lyrics frequently incorporate religious language, autobiographical struggle, and messages of inner strength, which contribute to her distinct narrative voice. Through these elements, Carey addresses specific forms of hardship—such as grief, marginalization, and self-doubt—and reframes them through motifs of prayer, faith, and endurance. This

lyrical strategy creates a direct emotional bond with listeners, particularly those negotiating similar life experiences. Moreover, this connection is not passive; her audience actively engages with and reinforces her cultural presence through fan discourse and digital platforms (Quan et al. 520).

This study applies Roland Barthes's semiotic theory to analyze how Mariah Carey's lyrics convey empowerment through signs of faith, resilience, and personal growth. Recurring elements—such as the invocation of “Lord,” references to prayer, and themes of inner strength—function as cultural signifiers that construct a narrative of overcoming adversity. Songs like “Hero” and “Through the Rain” frame spiritual belief as a source of strength, transforming vulnerability into empowerment. These findings show that Carey's influence lies not only in vocal performance but in her ability to shape meaning and offer emotional support through lyrical symbolism.

Existing research on Mariah Carey has primarily focused on the linguistic aspects of her songs, highlighting her use of idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, and figurative language. Studies by Clara Puspita (2018), Viona br Sembiring et al. (2020), Angelia Firstnov Siow et al. (2021), and Audrey Valeri et al. (2023) emphasize Carey's skill in employing hyperbole, metaphor, and personification to convey emotions and messages. These linguistic techniques enhance the emotional depth of her music, making her songs resonate intellectually and emotionally with listeners.

Beyond linguistic analysis, several studies have explored the personal and motivational themes in Carey's music. Erischa Rahayu Putri et al. examine how Carey's biracial identity—being the daughter of an African American-Venezuelan father and an Irish mother—informs her artistic perspective and lyrical focus on overcoming marginalization (41–42). Her autobiography, *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* (2020), reveals how experiences of racial exclusion shaped her emphasis on resilience and empowerment in her songwriting. These themes are especially evident in tracks that foreground spiritual strength and self-worth. In addition, research on the psychological effects of music by Graham F. Welch et al. (2020) and Andrew Kresovich (2022) supports the view that motivational songs can influence listeners' emotional states and coping mechanisms. Although Kresovich does not analyze Carey's work directly, his findings reinforce the claim that music with empowering content can shape thoughts, feelings, and behavior (617).

Previous studies on Carey's music have primarily focused on linguistic elements such as metaphor, idiomatic expression, and personification (Sembiring et al. 103; Siow et al. 425). This study takes a different approach by examining how Carey's lyrics function as semiotic signs that communicate specific values: spiritual dependence, emotional resilience, and personal agency. Using Barthes's semiotic theory, the analysis identifies how repeated references to prayer, divine strength, and inner fortitude construct a system of meaning that redefines adversity as a source of empowerment. This study

argues that Carey's lyrics do not merely describe hardship but transform it into a symbolic narrative that affirms faith-based perseverance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive method grounded in Barthes's semiotic theory to analyze how Mariah Carey's lyrics construct meanings related to empowerment, resilience, and spiritual strength. The analysis is based on secondary data, including academic publications, biographical sources, and selected song lyrics. Eleven songs were chosen through purposive sampling for their explicit engagement with motivational and faith-centered themes: "There's Got to Be a Way," "Make It Happen," "Anytime You Need a Friend," "Hero," "One Sweet Day," "Can't Take That Away," "Through the Rain," "My Saving Grace," "I Pray," "Fly Like a Bird," and "Bye Bye."¹ These texts were selected because they reflect Carey's recurring focus on overcoming adversity, making them representative of the symbolic content this study seeks to examine. The analysis focuses on identifying signifiers within the lyrics and interpreting their connotative meanings in relation to cultural narratives of personal transformation.

This study applies Barthes's semiotic theory to examine how Mariah Carey's lyrics function as cultural signs that convey themes of empowerment, faith, and resilience. According to Barthes, any object—linguistic, visual, or material—can be interpreted as a sign composed of a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept) (Barthes 67–72; Griffin 45–46). In this framework, meaning is not fixed at the literal level but emerges through cultural codes and connotations. This study analyzes how recurring lyrical elements in Carey's songs—such as references to divine strength or emotional struggle—operate as signifiers that construct connotative meanings related to spiritual endurance and self-empowerment. By interpreting these signs, the analysis seeks to uncover how Carey's music communicates symbolic messages that resonate with listeners' lived experiences.

Results and Discussion

This section examines how Mariah Carey's career and lyrics function as signs that construct meanings of success and resilience. Using Barthes's semiotic framework, the analysis identifies how both her public achievements and religious motifs in her lyrics generate cultural narratives that reinforce empowerment through hard work and faith. First, Carey's achievements—over 15 studio albums, eight compilation albums, 19 Billboard number-one singles, and numerous awards—act as signifiers of success. These visible accomplishments signify determination and recognition, forming a myth of hard work rewarded. In Barthes's terms, the association between Carey's output (signifier) and the cultural ideal of success (signified) creates a symbolic narrative that reinforces personal effort as a path to achievement. Second, Carey's frequent use of the word Lord

¹ The lyrics for all Mariah Carey songs cited in this paper were retrieved from AZLyrics (<https://www.azlyrics.com/>) and Genius Lyrics (<https://genius.com>) in April 2025.

in songs dealing with hardship functions as a spiritual signifier. In these lyrics, Lord denotes a call for divine guidance and strength. The resulting sign suggests that spiritual faith enables endurance, allowing listeners to reframe adversity as a source of empowerment. This lyrical pattern positions Carey's music as a semiotic space where vulnerability is transformed into resilience through belief.

Success and Struggle in Carey's Lyrics: Constructing the Myth of Hard Work

Mariah Carey's public image is often associated with perseverance and self-determination, qualities frequently emphasized in biographical accounts and media narratives. From a semiotic perspective, these attributes function not merely as traits but as signs that convey broader cultural meanings. Within Barthes's framework, Carey's career achievements—record sales, chart success, and artistic longevity—serve as signifiers of the concept of hard work. However, this meaning is reinforced not only by her public persona but also through her lyrics, which often narrate personal struggle as a path to success. In songs like "Make It Happen," hardship is presented as a necessary stage before achievement, producing a sign in which effort, sacrifice, and faith signify moral legitimacy and personal worth (Umami and Sobri 109). Carey's image and lyrics create a modern myth: success is earned through hard work and determination, not inherited or accidental.

Carey's artistic and commercial success functions as a signifier in a broader cultural narrative that equates achievement with effort and perseverance. In Barthes's terms, these accomplishments carry connotative meaning: they symbolize not just professional milestones but the ideal of hard work rewarded. This association is reinforced in her lyrics, particularly in "Make It Happen," where she recalls:

I was homeless and sleeping in the park
I didn't have nothing, I had to do something
And then I made it through the darkest times.

These lines reframe personal hardship as a moral and spiritual test, positioning endurance as the foundation of success (Wang et al. 2–3). Through this narrative, Carey constructs a myth in which resilience becomes both a personal virtue and a cultural expectation, transforming adversity into symbolic capital.

Mariah Carey's biracial identity—as the daughter of an Irish-American mother and an African-Venezuelan father—has influenced both her public representation and the thematic concerns of her lyrics. Rather than speculating on how this background may have motivated her professionally, this study focuses on how racial ambiguity and marginalization are encoded in her songwriting. Drawing on intersectionality theory, which examines how overlapping identities shape social experience and structural inequality (Crenshaw 1242), Carey's lyrics reflect the complexities of negotiating race, gender, and belonging in the American music industry. In "Outside" (1997), she writes:

It's hard to explain

Inherently, it's just always been strange
 Neither here nor there
 Always somewhat out of place everywhere.

These lines express a condition of in-betweenness, functioning semiotically as signs of displacement and cultural non-belonging. Similarly, in "Close My Eyes" (1997), Carey articulates emotional endurance and psychological fragmentation, constructing a symbolic narrative of resilience. These recurring motifs form a lyrical system through which Carey engages with themes of identity and exclusion.

Carey's engagement with motivation and performance is best understood through the lens of identity and cultural context. As a biracial woman navigating a racially stratified industry, her work encodes experiences of marginality and perseverance without reducing them to personal psychology (Ahmad 104; Hattie et al. 4). Drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality framework and Judith Butler's theory of identity performance, this analysis considers how Carey's music presents motivation not as an internal trait, but as a discursive act shaped by race, gender, and labor. In "Make It Happen" (1991), she writes:

Struggled and I prayed, and I finally found my way
 If you believe in yourself enough and know what you want
 You're gonna make it happen.

Here, belief and determination are not abstract values but culturally loaded signs of self-assertion in the face of structural barriers. The lyrics frame resilience as both a survival strategy and a public performance of identity. Rather than positioning her background as the source of motivation, Carey constructs it semiotically—using her lyrics to reframe adversity as symbolic capital within a broader narrative of empowerment.

Achievement in Carey's music is constructed through recurring lyrical themes that emphasize endurance, defiance, and self-belief. Rather than treating success as an external status, her songs frame it as a response to adversity and invalidation (Mahdavi et al. 315–316). In "Can't Take That Away (Mariah's Theme)" (1999), she writes: "They can say anything they want to say / Try to bring me down, but I will not allow." These lines function as a lyrical rebuttal to judgment, encoding strength as a symbolic stance. Carey's lyrics can be read as repeated assertions of self-definition, shaped by experiences of marginalization. Her songwriting transforms resistance into a sign of empowerment, constructing success not merely as an outcome but as a narrative formed through struggle and inner resolve.

Carey's lyrical narratives of perseverance are not only self-expressive but also invite interpretive participation from her audience. Studies on fan engagement suggest that listeners do not passively consume music; rather, they actively decode lyrics in ways that reflect their own identities and emotional realities (Derbaix and Korchia 112). This dynamic is evident in Carey's motivational songs, where themes of endurance and self-worth are presented through accessible and emotionally charged language. For example,

"Make It Happen" and "Can't Take That Away" have been widely cited in fan discourse as sources of encouragement during personal hardship (Putri et al. 40). Within Barthes's semiotic framework, these lyrics function as signifiers that circulate connotative meanings—struggle as moral legitimacy, adversity as transformative.

Semiotic Reading of Spiritual Strength in Carey's Lyrics

This section examines how Mariah Carey encodes spiritual strength and emotional resilience in her lyrics through recurring semiotic signs. Central to this analysis is the argument that Carey constructs strength not as a generic motivational message but as a culturally meaningful symbol shaped by faith, struggle, and self-affirmation. Through the repeated use of religious language and personal narrative, her songs transform individual hardship into a symbolic framework for endurance. In Barthes's semiotic terms, "strength" functions as a signifier whose connotative meaning is shaped by cultural narratives of adversity and redemption. This section analyzes how Carey's lyrics, particularly in songs that reference prayer, divine guidance, and self-reliance, circulate meanings that position inner strength as both a spiritual and psychological resource.

While Carey's lyrics promote strength as an ideal, they also acknowledge that resilience is not easily attained. The absence of inner strength can undermine self-confidence and hinder one's ability to act decisively (Ahmad 104). In Barthes's terms, Carey's portrayal of strength operates as a myth: a cultural construct that assigns deeper symbolic meaning to a common concept. In this framework, strength is not merely personal resolve but is redefined through connotations of divine intervention, moral endurance, and spiritual affirmation. Her lyrics transform resilience into a sign of transcendence—mythologizing strength as both a spiritual gift and a cultural value shaped by struggle and faith.

For example, in the lyrics of "Make It Happen" from her *Emotions* album (1991), Carey invokes the idea of divine strength:

And if you get down on your knees at night
And pray to the Lord
He's gonna make it happen.

Here, the act of praying becomes the signifier, while the signified is not merely personal strength, but divine intervention as the source of empowerment. According to Barthes, myth operates through second-order signification, where everyday expressions acquire broader ideological meaning (68). In this context, Carey's invocation of faith transforms spiritual dependence into a cultural narrative of inner resilience. The repeated emphasis on prayer repositions strength as something that is conferred, rather than solely cultivated—a gift accessed through belief. This reflects a mythologized vision of perseverance, in which divine presence legitimizes personal triumph. This symbolic structure aligns with psychological studies that identify spiritual belief as a key resource in developing inner strength. Kerstin Viglund et al. argue that resilience is often reinforced through perceived external support, especially in times of crisis (550). Carey's lyrics

encode this relationship: faith functions both as coping mechanism and cultural code, positioning belief in God as a pathway to emotional survival.

In Carey's lyrics, the word "Lord" functions as a signifier not only of divine power but of culturally embedded strength. This term draws from the gospel and blues traditions of Black American music, where invocations of God often symbolized resilience in the face of hardship (Davis 15; Stanley 3–4). Within this tradition, religious language operates as a semiotic tool that encodes both spiritual dependence and moral endurance

And then a hero comes along
With the strength to carry on
And you cast your fears aside
And you know you can survive
So when you feel like hope is gone
Look inside you and be strong.

Using Barthes's semiotic framework, the figure of the hero in Carey's lyrics functions as a signifier of inner strength shaped by divine influence. It does not merely denote a powerful individual, but symbolizes the connotative belief that strength is activated through faith. The Lord in the song serves as a parallel signifier, representing a higher power that enables resilience. Together, these elements construct a myth in Barthes's terms: a cultural narrative in which spiritual belief transforms vulnerability into strength

Carey's lyrics frequently emphasize reliance on God as a source of strength and comfort during times of loss and uncertainty. This theme is evident in "One Sweet Day," her 1995 duet with Boyz II Men from the *Daydream* album, where she expresses a quiet faith in divine presence: "Lord I know when I lay me down to sleep / You will always listen as I pray." In this context, the signifier Lord symbolizes not only God but a mythic relationship between the individual and the divine. Carey's invocation of God establishes a sense of security, presenting faith as a source of strength amid fear and uncertainty. The signified is not merely belief in a higher power, but the assurance that divine presence offers guidance and emotional resilience. This theme recurs throughout her music, forming a myth in Barthes's sense—a cultural narrative in which spiritual faith enables personal transformation. In "Hero," phrases like "Lord knows" and "In time you'll find the way" reinforce this connection, positioning divine knowledge as a guiding force.

Mariah Carey's lyrics consistently emphasize the strength of faith in God, reinforcing the semiotic link between spiritual guidance and personal empowerment. In her 1999-song "Can't Take That Away" from the album *Rainbow*, Carey sings, "Certainly the Lord will guide me where I need to go." Here, the signifier "Lord" directs attention to divine guidance, suggesting that God provides the strength to navigate life's challenges. This connection between faith and direction is also evident in the 2002 album *Charmbracelet*. For instance, in "My Saving Grace," Carey sings:

Lord, thank you for delivering me.
And giving me peace, giving me strength
Giving me hope when I'd Almost lost it all.

These lyrics reinforce the idea that divine intervention is a source of inner strength and hope during hardship. Similarly, in "Through the Rain," Carey expresses the theme of resilience through faith:

I can stand up once again
On my own, and I know
That I'm strong enough to mend
And every time I feel afraid
I hold tighter to my faith
And I live one more day.

In this context, the signifier "faith" functions as a means of psychological empowerment, with the signified being the assurance that faith in God provides the strength to overcome adversity. Carey's portrayal of faith in her songs suggests that, through prayer, individuals seek spiritual solace and cultivate the inner strength needed to face life's trials (Upenieks 1820; Deak and Mengga 60).

In "I Pray" (2005), Carey's direct appeal to God underscores the importance of prayer as both a means of spiritual connection and a way to find strength:

Oh Lord, I pray
For a world with no weapons, one day
Please give wisdom to the ones who lead us

Here, prayer serves as both a signifier and a signified, symbolizing a direct line of communication with God. It highlights the belief that through prayer, individuals can seek strength, guidance, and wisdom, reinforcing the semiotic link between spiritual devotion and empowerment. Carey's gospel influences are evident in her songwriting, especially in songs like "There's Got to Be a Way" (1990). The lyrics encourage social unity and compassion, emphasizing the importance of treating others with kindness:

There's got to be a way to unite this human race;
And together, we'll bring on a change;
Couldn't we accept each other?
Couldn't we help each other?

Through these words, Carey urges listeners to reflect on the values of empathy and equality, framing them as divine principles that should guide human interactions. The signifiers "unite," "change," and "accept" are imbued with a moral imperative that aligns with Christian teachings on love and equality before God. By connecting these themes to her music, Carey reinforces that faith should empower individuals and guide their actions toward greater compassion and unity.

Another example of Carey's belief in the strength derived from faith is evident in the song "Fly Like a Bird" from her 2005 album *The Emancipation of Mimi*. The lyrics say:

I need You now, Lord
Carry me high
Don't let the world break me tonight
I need the strength of You by my side

In songs like “Fly Like a Bird,” Mariah Carey uses the recurring signifier “Lord” to symbolize divine support, emphasizing the role of prayer in fostering inner strength. This belief aligns with research showing that prayer can enhance emotional well-being by helping individuals manage stress and build resilience (Jeppsen et al. 170–172; McCulloch and Parks-Stamm 257). By invoking God’s strength, Carey’s lyrics suggest that inner strength is essential for overcoming challenges, ultimately leading to greater self-confidence. Thus, Carey’s music connects prayer to personal empowerment, reinforcing that spiritual belief plays a key role in personal growth and overcoming adversity.

Carey’s emphasis on faith and strength also extends to the emotional aftermath of personal loss. Self-confidence, often undermined by grief and trauma, is framed in her lyrics as something that can be restored through spiritual reflection and memory. Houssein Eddine Ben Messaoud defines self-confidence as the ability to face challenges while accepting one’s limitations—a quality Carey evokes in “Bye Bye” (2008), where loss is acknowledged but not allowed to paralyze (30).

I miss you, but I try not to cry
As time goes by
And you’ve indeed reached
the better place

The song “Bye Bye” transforms personal grief into a symbolic narrative of healing. The phrase “the better place” serves as a signifier that evokes not just spiritual peace, but the culturally resonant idea of continuity beyond death. In Barthes’s terms, this becomes a myth—a second-order signification that naturalizes loss as part of a larger, transcendent order.

Mariah Carey’s music offers emotional and spiritual support by framing resilience through faith. Studies show that music can help reduce stress and strengthen emotional well-being, especially for those facing personal challenges (Kresovich 617). In songs like “Make It Happen,” “Anytime You Need a Friend,” and “Hero,” Carey presents faith and inner strength as key to overcoming adversity. This message continues in “Through the Rain,” “My Saving Grace,” and “I Pray,” where prayer and belief in God are linked to self-confidence and healing. As this study has shown, Carey’s lyrics create a symbolic narrative in which hardship is redefined through spirituality, making her music a meaningful source of empowerment for listeners.

Conclusion

This study analyzed how Mariah Carey’s lyrics construct two key narratives: one of perseverance and achievement, the other of faith and spiritual strength. Using Barthes’s semiotic theory, the analysis showed that Carey encodes hard work and resilience as cultural signs, particularly in “Make It Happen,” where she writes, “Struggled and I prayed, and I finally found my way.” Similarly, in “Can’t Take That Away,” lines like “They can’t take this joy I have inside” frame inner strength as a defiant response to external judgment. Her use of religious language—seen in “Hero” (“Lord knows, dreams are hard

to follow”) and “I Pray” (“Please give wisdom to the ones who lead us”)—positions divine support as essential to overcoming adversity. These recurring motifs form a cultural myth in which strength is both earned through effort and sustained through faith. By reading Carey’s lyrics as semiotic texts, this study highlights how popular music can communicate emotional and spiritual meaning.

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Disclosure Statements

- ✕ The authors of this article confirm that this research does not require a research ethics committee approval.
- ✕ The authors of this article confirm that their work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics.
- ✕ No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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