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“It’s Me, Hi, I’m the Problem, It’s Me”: Taylor Swift as a Fourth-Wave Confessional Poet

Slaats, Lennie

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“It’s Me, Hi, I’m the Problem, It’s Me”: Taylor Swift as a Fourth-Wave Confessional Poet

Lennie Slaats

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Dr. K. Rolfe Ph.D., First Reader

Prof.dr. P.T.M.G. Liebrechts, Second Reader

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Abstract

Taylor Swift is a global icon. Her success is largely due to her deeply personal lyricism and relatable persona. This thesis explores Swift's artistic evolution by analyzing her transformation from a country music artist to a global pop star. By examining her public persona and intimate lyricism, this thesis places Swift within the tradition of Confessional poetry which is characterized by its emotional vulnerability, autobiographical storytelling, and vivid imagery. Additionally, Swift pushes the boundaries of Confessional poetry by weaving feminist ideals into her lyrics. By bridging personal vulnerability with cultural commentary, Swift transforms deeply personal experiences into universal reflections that resonate with her audience. This thesis argues that Swift asserts her place as a modern Confessional poet and feminist lyricist whose work contributes to contemporary cultural and literary discourse.

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Introduction. “Mirrorball”: Taylor Swift, Confessional Poetry, and the Feminist Voice in Pop

“I’m a mirrorball / I’ll show you every version of yourself tonight” (*folklore* 2020).

With this line from *folklore* (2020), Taylor Swift offers a glimpse into the power of paradox in her lyricism: deeply personal and universally relatable, introspective yet reflective of her listener’s experiences. Swift has evolved from a country artist chronicling teenage heartbreak to a global superstar whose work engages with themes of love, identity, and resilience; themes that are central to modern feminist discourse. But what exactly does it mean for Swift – a global pop star – to write like a “mirrorball”?

Through the years, Swift’s lyricism has evolved to embrace a Confessional style with a distinctly feminist perspective. Since the release of her debut album, *Taylor Swift* (2006), Swift has been known to write diaristic lyrics like “And I was right there beside him all summer long / And then the time we woke up to find that summer gone.” Over time Swift engaged more with societal dynamics. Lyrics like “I’m so sick of running as fast as I can / Wondering if I’d get there quicker if I was a man” from “The Man,” explicitly address double standards and call out systemic inequalities women face (*Lover* 2020). Similarly, the song “Shake It Off” references the scrutiny women face concerning their dating lives with the lyrics “I go on too many dates / But I can’t make them stay / At least that’s what people say” (*1989* 2014). This thesis examines Taylor Swift’s lyricism through the lens of Confessional poetry and fourth-wave feminism, arguing that her lyricism combines autobiographical and diaristic storytelling with cultural critique to navigate themes of identity, love, and societal expectations. By analyzing her evolution from country artist to pop star, this study explores how Swift’s lyrical persona and intimate narratives align with the tradition of Confessional poetry while simultaneously challenging and expanding its boundaries within the framework of contemporary feminist discourse.

This thesis is a case study of *Time* Person of the Year 2023 and *Spotify*'s most streamed Artist of 2024: Taylor Swift. Swift entered the music scene in 2006, at just sixteen years old. At the time, she could only dream of what would become. Rob Sheffield said it best in his 2024 book *Heartbreak Is the National Anthem: How Taylor Swift Reinvented Pop Music*: "Nothing like Swift has ever happened before. There's no parallel to her in history. In 2024, she's at the peak of her fame, her cultural and commercial impact, her artistic powers, her warp-speed work pace. But she's been at this level for eighteen years" (1). Similarly, Sam Lansky summarizes Swift's career in his *Time* Person of the Year interview:

Swift's accomplishments as an artist – culturally, critically, and commercially – are so legion that to recount them seems almost beside the point. As a pop star, she sits in rarefied company, alongside Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and Madonna; as a songwriter, she has been compared to Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, and Joni Mitchell. As a businesswoman, she has built an empire worth, by some estimates, over \$1 billion. And as a celebrity – who by dint of being a woman is scrutinized for everything from whom she dates to what she wears – she has long commanded constant attention and knows how to use it.

While Swift is currently at the pinnacle of her career, her journey to success has not been without challenges. In 2015, Swift faced backlash and was "cancelled" by the media following a highly publicized dispute with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian. This controversy led Swift to retreat from the public eye for two years, a period she later addressed through the tone and themes of her album *reputation* (2017). In 2019, Swift encountered another setback when Scott Borchetta sold Big Machine – including the rights to Swift's masters – to Ithaca Holdings, which music manager Scooter Braun owns. Braun was an ally of West during the Swift/West dispute. For Swift this felt like she had her "life's work taken away from [her] by someone who hates [her]" (qtd. in Lasky), highlighting the ongoing struggle Swift faced

despite her achievements. Luckily, Swift found a way to regain control of her music. In April 2021, she released her first rerecording: *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*. Followed by *Red (Taylor's Version)* (2021), *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)* (2023), and *1989 (Taylor's Version)* (2023). These “Taylor’s Versions” are subtly different versions of her old albums and include unreleased tracks that did not make the album the first time it was released.

Swift's strength lies in her talent for storytelling and her unparalleled ability to connect with her audience. “Taylor’s always a songwriter before she’s anything else,” Sheffield claims, “She’s always had a unique flair for writing songs in which people hear themselves – her music keeps crossing generational and cultural boundaries, in the most mystifying ways” (4). This ability was evident in Swift’s debut song “Tim McGraw.” The opening lines – “He said the way my blue eyes shined put those Georgia stars to shame that night / I said, ‘That’s a lie’” – are literary and poetic. These lyrics conjure the image of a fairytale-like romance in the first half and then deflate it in the second. The theme of fairytale romances recurs throughout Swift’s discography, often reflecting her personal experiences. In her early albums – *Taylor Swift* and *Fearless* – Swift explores idealistic notions of love, filled with dreamy imagery and youthful optimism. Songs like “Love Story” and “Today Was a Fairytale” lean heavily into this narrative, capturing the magic and innocence of young love. As Swift’s career progressed, her approach to the theme of fairytales grew more complex, reflecting a deeper understanding of the challenges and imperfections of relationships. “All Too Well” from *Red* (2012) presents a more mature and confessional perspective on love, blending vivid imagery with raw emotional depth to depict heartbreak. Swift’s songwriting evolves further on the album *reputation* where she examines the fragility of love in the face of public scrutiny. The song “Delicate” for instance no longer relies on magical fairytales, but instead portrays love as a balance between vulnerability and resilience. During the *Lover* (2019) era, Swift chronicles a more mature love, exemplified in tracks like “Daylight” and “Cornelia Street.” This album

highlights Swift's ability to balance realism with optimism, portraying relationships as imperfect. The albums *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020) mark a shift in Swift's lyricism. For these albums, she took a fictional approach to narrative-driven songwriting. For these albums, Swift crafted stories that blend her personal experiences with fictionalized accounts. For example, the songs "Betty," "Cardigan," and "August" discuss a teenage love-triangle. With the album *Midnights* (2022), Swift returns to a more introspective and Confessional style by reflecting on moments of vulnerability and redemption. Songs like "You're on Your Own, Kid" and "Anti-Hero" delve into the themes of identity and resilience. This album further solidified Swift as a diaristic and autobiographical storyteller who captures the complexities of human emotions. Swift's most recent album, *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), is her most Confessional work. Her diaristic lyricism and her poetic tendencies on this album definitively place her into the tradition of Confessional poetry. Tracks like "So Long, London" and "My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys" are reminiscent of classic Confessional poetry while remaining rooted in Swift's signature ability to connect personal narratives with universal feelings.

By constructing her storytelling based on personal experience while also maintaining universal themes, Swift bridges the gap between fantasy and reality, allowing her audience to see themselves in her lyrics. In the liner notes of *1989* (2014) Swift wrote: "These songs were once about my life. They are now about yours." This quote displays that she is aware that her personal experiences are universal feelings.

In addition to her songwriting, Swift's strong connection with her audience is due to the way she engages with her fans. From the early days of her career, Swift has been incredibly intimate with her fans. She is active on all forms of social media – *My Space*, *Tumblr*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *TikTok* – and regularly interacts with fans on these platforms. Additionally, Swift is known to select fans for events like "secret sessions" – album

release parties – and meet and greets. In 2019, Swift even released parts of her diaries together with the *Lover* album. Additionally, Swift has been known for her easter eggs. For her first five albums, Swift left hidden messages in the liner notes. She would capitalize random letters to make a phrase that would be some kind of clue to the meaning of the song. For example, the hidden message for the song “You’re Not Sorry” on the album *Fearless* – a song that chronicles a partner cheating on Swift – is “she can have you,” and the hidden message for “I Almost Do” on *Red* is “wrote this instead of calling.” Swift stopped putting these hidden messages in the liner notes of her album, but she still likes to add easter eggs in music videos, interviews, and speeches. For example, the commencement speech Swift did when she received an honorary doctorate at NYU’s 2022 spring graduation ceremony was full of lyrics for her then-unreleased album *Midnights*: “As long as we are fortunate enough to be breathing, we will breathe in, breathe through, breathe deep, breathe out,” and “Scary news is: You’re on your own now. Cool news is: You’re on your own now” (qtd. in Dailey).

Swift’s artistry goes beyond songwriting, her multi-faceted approach to storytelling and engagement is displayed through her music and interactions with fans. By intertwining personal vulnerability with universal themes, Swift created a legacy of shared emotional resonance. Swift’s ability to weave her personal experiences into her lyrics while inviting fans to find their own stories within them underscores her unparalleled impact as both a Confessional poet and a global superstar.

Confessional poetry is a poetic movement that emerged in the 1950s. This movement blends autobiographical elements with cultural critique. The term “Confessional poetry” was coined by M.L. Rosenthal in his 1959 review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* and refers to the “naked chronicles of private life and personal turmoil that the book exemplifies” (Beardsworth 5).

Because of the misleading nature of the term, Confessional poetry has gained a negative connotation over the years. Some argue that the use of the term “confessional” leads to a passive acceptance of the struggles described by the poet. As a result, the intellectual and political complexity of these poets and their work were diminished due to critics choosing instead to focus on their recounting of private suffering (Beardsworth 5). Additionally, the term “confessional” carries both a legal and religious connotation. It conjures associations of topics that are sinful, illicit, and pleading for censure (Schetrumpf 117). Other terms like “autobiographic poetry” and “mid-century poets” have been used to describe the same movement. However, I will use the term “Confessional poetry” in line with Adam Beardsworth who favors its “ubiquitous nature” and its “reference to an unbalanced power relationship between confessor and auditor” (5). This unbalanced power dynamic between poets and audience is crucial for the analysis of Confessional poetry and offers a clear parallel to Taylor Swift. David Haven Blake argues that Confessional poets are predecessors to today’s celebrities, like Swift, whose lives are shaped by both public fascination and media intervention. While celebrities today are forged by teams of marketing and public relations specialists and are now pervasive in the cultural landscape, this is not the case for poets. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, social changes, a rise in youth culture, and a rise in consumerism in post-World War II led to an increase in popular culture. Therefore, Confessional poets attracted a large audience and drew significant media attention to themselves. According to Blake, “with its intense concern for tragedy, pathology, and the unconscious, Confessional poetry developed into an unusually participatory form of verse. One in which readers became fans and writers became stars” (717). Through their exploration of deeply personal and taboo topics – which are often relatable for their audience – Confessional poets make the personal professional.

Literary critic and poet Sandra M. Gilbert argues that while Confessional poetry stems from Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and is widely associated with male poets like John Berryman and Bruce Beaver, it is in fact mostly a female poetic style. She argues that male Confessional poets are able to write with "larger, more objectively formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society" (444). The male Confessional approached their self-exploration with an analytical lens. While they explore personal feelings, they see themselves as "representative specimen" that represent broader human conditions (445). This creates a dual perspective where they are both the subject being analyzed and the observer. This analytical approach allows male Confessional poets to frame their personal struggles as universal.

In contrast, Gilbert argues that the female Confessional poet is often less familiar with her feelings and explores them through her poems: "To define her suffering would be to define her identity, and such self-definition is her goal, rather than her starting point" (Gilbert 446). In this search for the self, Gilbert argues, female poets often find that there are two (or more) selves. First, there is a "public and social" version that is defined by "circumstance and by the names the world calls her" (451). This public self is constructed by societal expectations and often becomes the lens through which women are perceived, even by themselves. By contrast, the "second self" is associated with her "secret name, her rebellious longings, her rage against imposed definitions, her creative passions, her anxiety, and – yes – her art" (Gilbert 451). Gilbert argues that this second self provides energy and complexity in the struggle for self-definition. While male Confessional poets tend to stop exploring when they have defined their first self, Gilbert argues that female poets are often obsessed with finding and expressing this second self.

However, Gilbert's argument poses the question of whether these dynamics stem from inherent differences between male and female poets, or from the societal and cultural constraints that shape their respective experiences. Her framing risks imposing an essentialist

view on female Confessional poets by suggesting that they are solely preoccupied with the search for the “second self.” Instead, it might be more accurate to consider that for female poets navigating the public/private divide is a response to the societal expectations imposed on women and reflects the constraints of patriarchy rather than an innate focus on self-definition. Furthermore, when looking through the lens of literary construction, the “second self” could be about the creation of a persona, rather than an innate duality in women’s identities. Instead of reflecting an inner self, the second self could function as a poetic voice crafted to express critique on external cultural forces that shape womanhood. This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of Confessional poetry as a movement where both male and female poets adopt personas to explore personal struggles and cultural critique.

This thesis will consider the key thematic aspects of Confessional poetry as described by Charles Molesworth in “With Your Own Face On: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry.” First, Confessional poetry is fundamentally autobiographic, focusing on the poet’s private life and delving into themes of trauma, conflict, and personal struggle. Additionally, it portrays intense emotional vulnerability by inviting readers into the inner psyche of the poet. Confessional poets portray a self-awareness of this vulnerability, which creates a tension between sincerity and performance. Furthermore, many Confessional poets engage with religious and mythological imagery.

An essential aspect of Confessional poetry is its lyrical address – namely, who speaks to whom in these poems? In Confessional poetry there is no doubt that the speaker, the “I”, is the poet. Some might become anxious because of this “naked ‘I’” as Jane Schetrumpf defines it. “Confessional poetry is emotionally arming when the reader is daunted by psychological exploration,” she argues, “or [when they] cannot identify with the poem” (119). Thus, Confessional poems can be confrontational when the reader is or has experienced what the poet is describing. On the other hand, a Confessional poem can be disturbing when the reader

is not familiar with the situation or feelings at hand. Schetrumpf argues that for Confessional poetry the emphasis should be on recognizing the value of the readers who can identify with the poetry: “[C]onfessional poetry engages with Anne Sexton’s maxim that ‘the self can only be perceived as part of a larger social context, as one among many’” (119). Anne Sexton said, “one writes of oneself [. . .] in order to invite in” (qtd. in Schetrumpf 119). This way, the poet becomes a conduit, utilizing the naked “I” to cultivate openness and dialogue. For readers who identify with the poem, this exposure invites a state of emotional receptivity. For those who do not identify, the poem encourages engagement with marginalized voices and creates an awareness of shared human experience.

The “you” in Confessional poetry is generally one particular listener, thus increasing the intimacy of the dialogue. However, since the poet intends individuals other than the addressed to read the poem, this construction creates ambiguity regarding the position of the reader. According to William Waters, the use of “you” encourages readers to feel that they are “not eavesdropping but ‘meant,’ figuratively spoken to, as if by proxy, in the poem’s ostensibly private address to another” (19). However, when readers identify with the “I”, the “you” will become a thematic direction instead of a true address: “the person addressed (whether actual or fictional) is a metaphor for readers of the poem and becomes a symbolic mediator, a conductor between the poet and each of his readers and listeners” (W.R. Johnson qtd. in Waters 19). Thus, with Confessional poetry, readers may identify with both sides of the dialogue and therefore approach the thematic concern from all angles, which in turn creates a sense of shared experience.

This thesis will draw on these aspects of Confessional poetry to analyze Swift’s lyricism, focusing on her use of autobiographical details, intimate address, and constructed personas to explore themes of identity, love, and societal expectations. By doing so, it situates

Swift within the literary tradition while demonstrating how her songwriting reflects and expands the scope of Confessional poetry in contemporary popular music.

Two of the most notable and important female Confessional poets are Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. While these women were not actively involved with the Women's Movement, their poetry was influential to this movement. After the Second World War, second-wave feminism emerged. Naturally, this movement continued the struggle for equality for men and women, which was the main focus of the First Wave. Additionally, they addressed further economic and social inequalities. This movement is best known for their fight for reproductive rights. One of the key members of the Women's Movement was Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*. In this book, Friedan argued that women felt trapped in their assigned gender roles. Most scholars consider the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* to be the official start of second-wave feminism. Historian Ruth Rosen argues that before the publication of Friedan's book, women would rather give up their dreams and condemn themselves to home and hearth, "rather than to face social ostracism" (Rosen 35). These women interpreted their dissatisfaction with life as "evidence of individual madness" (Rosen 35). They were not yet ready to broadcast their discontent because they simply did not have the language to express the common grievances. While Friedan had not set out to start a revolution, the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* provided the language needed to create a sense of group solidarity.

Over time, with the rise of the Women's Movement, a great number of female writers emerged. Author Lisa Moore notes: "For a generation of women to whom 'finding voice,' 'breaking silence,' and 'speaking out' were not just powerful metaphors but conscious political strategies, poetry was almost an obligation, one's feminist duty, a lesbian rite of passage." As stated above, both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were not active participants in any of the different feminist movements. However, their style of poetry – which was deeply

personal – related to a large number of women. This personal poetry is reminiscent of the unofficial slogan of the Second Wave: “the personal is political” coined by Carol Hanisch in 1968. According to Rosen, by stating this, Hanish “meant to convey the then-shocking idea that there were political dimensions to private life, that power relations shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and at work” (196). Thus, the work of Plath and Sexton resonated with women in the Second Wave, who were beginning to see their personal struggles as part of a broader political framework. Their poems bridged personal experience with collective action and paved the way for future feminist movements.

As feminism evolved through the third-wave movement, it eventually led to fourth-wave feminism which further builds on the ideals of all the movements before while adapting to contemporary issues and the digital landscape. Fourth-wave feminism, which emerged in the 2010s, is characterized by its focus on intersectionality, the empowerment of women, and the influence of the internet. According to Nicola Rivers, this movement is identified by a “heightened visibility in media and popular culture” (Rivers 7). The internet provides feminist movements a tool to reach more women, nationally and internationally. Some critics have argued that because of the internet, fourth-wave feminism is more accessible, and that this modern version of feminist culture is defined by “pragmatism, inclusion, and humour” (Cochrane). This widely accessible form of feminism caused a different age demographic of feminist activists than in the movements before. Teens were growing up with social media as an integral part of their lives, and therefore they have “a perfect grasp of feminist language and concepts” and are “active on a huge range of issues (Cochrane).

The term ‘intersectionality,’ coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, tries to recognize and define the overlapping and interesting aspects of identity, including race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Crenshaw's theory was foundational in addressing how mainstream feminism centered around white middle-class women, and, therefore, failed to

address the discrimination faced by marginalized groups. While intersectionality is considered to primarily be a part of Black feminist theories, in current literature intersectionality serves as a guiding framework within fourth-wave feminism which highlights the importance of inclusivity and recognizes the complexity of identity in feminist discourse. Swift has been criticized for being overly “white feminist” and thus not intersectional enough in how she engages with politics.

Digital platforms such as *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and *Tumblr* have been crucial to fourth-wave feminist activism. In *Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*, Jessalynn Keller discusses how social media has provided a space for marginalized voices and also helped spread feminist messages globally. Social media platforms allow for rapid response to incidents of, for example, discrimination and sexual harassment. Movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp are critical examples of how digital spaces empower feminist causes. As Nicola Rivers argues in *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave*, the internet has allowed feminism to become increasingly democratized. The internet and social media offer the opportunity “to build feminist communities across social, cultural, and global boundaries, and create feminisms that are nuanced, representative, and effective in establishing political and cultural change” (Rivers 127-128). This shift towards a more open conversation signifies a move away from academic or activist circles toward a broader, more accessible feminist engagement.

This exploration of Confessional poetry and feminist movements provides a framework for understanding Taylor Swift’s evolution as a songwriter and cultural figure. Like Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Swift uses deeply personal narratives to connect with broader social themes, regularly blurring the boundaries between the private and the public. Swift’s lyrics reflect the feminist ideals of finding your voice, claiming agency, and breaking silence, which aligns her with the feminist principle that “the

personal is political.” Furthermore, Swift’s embrace of digital platforms to share her stories and strengthen her feminist messages positions her within the context of fourth-wave feminism, in which intersectionality, accessibility, and social media play central roles in reshaping the cultural landscape. In doing so, Swift bridges the Confessional tradition with contemporary feminist discourse.

For this thesis, Swift’s lyrics will be analyzed as poetry rather than consumed solely as musical productions. This approach aligns with the book *The Poetry of Pop*, where Adam Bradley argues that song lyrics are poetry. Bradley concludes that “the poetic tools of sound, meaning, and feeling are at work in even the most banal pop song, just as they are at work in the most trite ode or sonnet. Yet the poetics of pop songs remains overshadowed by bombastic polemics on whether this or that songwriter should be considered a poet” (312). While I agree with Bradley that “the poetry of pop is never about lyrics alone” (315), I think that Swift’s lyrics can and should be read as poetry. Swift’s ability to layer meaning and emotion into her lyrics elevates her songwriting beyond conventional pop music and invites deeper literary analysis. Similarly, in *The Literary Taylor Swift: Songwriting and Intertextuality*, Betsy W. Tontiplaphol and Anastasia Klimchynskaya argue that in her lyricism, Swift embraces literature and is literary herself. They argue that “Swift inhabits a text-full and text-made world, and it’s not surprise that when she portrays that realm in her lyrics, she does so with a writer’s appreciation for literary and rhetorical devices” and that she should be considered “literary” because she engages with “the many aspects of engagement and consciousness, including [...] the exigencies of time, the pains of aging, the challenges of identity, the profundities of place, the cruelties of politics, the glories of the body, and [...] the complexities of love” (3-4). Swift’s lyrics demonstrate poetic expertise that deserves literary recognition.

The framework presented in this introduction is crucial to understanding the scope of this thesis. I will explore the intersection of Confessional poetry and fourth-wave feminism through a case study of Taylor Swift's lyrics. Confessional poetry and fourth-wave feminism are two movements that share a deep engagement with personal narratives, emotional honesty, and the politics of identity. By examining these two movements together, I aim to explore how the tradition of Confessional poetry, rooted in personal exposure and introspection, transforms within the context of fourth-wave feminist values such as intersectionality, inclusivity, and digital activism as reflected in Swift's songwriting and her public engagement. In this thesis, I aim to answer the question: "How does Taylor Swift's lyricism and public image reflect the traditions of Confessional poetry and fourth-wave feminism in her exploration of identity, love, and societal expectations?" First, I will analyze Swift's early career by looking at the albums *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless* and *Speak Now*. Second, I will analyze Swift's transformation to pop artist by exploring the albums *Red*, *1989*, and *reputation*. Next, I will analyze Swift's political awakening and the albums *Lover*, *folklore*, and *evermore*. Finally, I will discuss Swift's latest albums *Midnights* and *the Tortured Poets Department*.

Chapter 1. “A Place in this World”: Early Career and Confessional Beginnings

On June 19, 2006, then-unknown female country artist Taylor Swift released her debut single “Tim McGraw.” Unbeknownst to all, this would be the beginning of an incredible career. This chapter examines Swift’s early career, focusing on how her lyrics and public image during this period exhibit characteristics of Confessional poetry and the beginnings of her engagement with feminist themes. Firstly, Swift’s early career and public image will be discussed. Secondly, by analyzing three songs from Swift’s first three albums, this chapter explores how Swift’s autobiographical style and introspective themes align with the tradition of Confessional poetry and set the stage for her later, more explicitly feminist work.

1.1. Taylor Swift’s Early Career, Public Image, and Feminist Beginnings

Swift’s early career, marked by the release of her albums *Taylor Swift* (2006), *Fearless* (2008), and *Speak Now* (2010), established her as a prominent figure in the country and pop music industries. This period in her career was significant for Swift’s musical achievements, public image, and cultural impact. Her deeply personal and confessional lyrics resonated deeply with audiences and established an emotional connection that defined Swift’s further career.

Swift’s debut album was released in 2006 when she was only sixteen years old. The album was a commercial success: it sold over seven million copies and topped the *Billboard* Top Country Albums chart for 24 non-consecutive weeks (Whitaker). The album showcased Swift’s ability to be personal and vulnerable. Pop music critic Jon Caramanica describes the album as: “a small masterpiece of pop-minded country, both wide-eyed and cynical, held together by Ms. Swift’s firm, pleading voice” (“A Young Outsider’s Life”). Swift gained even more commercial fame in 2008 when her second album *Fearless* was released. This album’s

singles “Love Story” and “You Belong With Me” not only topped the charts but also received critical acclaim. Swift’s third album *Speak Now* (2010) further solidified Swift as a songwriter as it was entirely self-written and co-produced by her (Sheffield “Speak Now”).

In the early days of her career, Swift was portrayed in the media as a wholesome and relatable young woman. American journalist Vanessa Grigoriadis notes that “Swift has gotten far playing Little Mis Perfect” and pop music critic Jon Pareles calls her music “big-sisterly advice” (“A Little Bit Country”) This image was carefully curated by Swift and her team: “Intimidation isn’t what I’m going for. ... I try to write songs about what’s happening to me and leave out the part that I’m living in hotel rooms and tour buses. It’s the relatability factor. If you’re trying too hard to be the girl next door, you’re not going to be” (qtd. in Caramanica “My Music”). Caramanica describes the relationship between Swift and her fans as the fair trade of “intimacy for control.” During interactions with fans Swift seemed to take control, Caramanica describes: “When surrounded by a group of fans clamoring for pictures ... she warmly appropriated the camera of each one, struck a cute pose, snapped the picture and then handed it back, usually followed by a hug.” Similarly, during her first shows, when performing the song “Should’ve Said No,” there was a moment where Swift dropped to her knees and bent forward, “holding her head still as fans in the front row patted it concernedly” (Caramanica). Such intimate moments of fan interaction are essential to Swift’s self-representation: there is no barrier between her and her songs, and the audience.

From the start of her career, Swift’s music and public persona largely adhered to traditional gender norms, yet she subtly challenged these norms in meaningful ways. A recurring theme in her interviews was advocacy for self-empowerment and independence – ideas that would become more pronounced in her later work. One notable example is Swift’s decision to avoid “sexy photoshoots.” She explained to journalist Nisha Lilia Diu, “It wasn’t a career decision, it’s just a life decision. I like wearing pretty dresses and I like trying out new

styles but I don't feel comfortable taking my clothes off. I wouldn't wear tiny amounts of clothing in my real life so I don't think it's necessary to wear that stuff in photo-shoots." This intentional choice set Swift apart and informed her image throughout her career. Lilia Diu notes that Swift was not a "fetishized innocent" in the way that contemporaries like Britney Spears or Selena Gomez were due to their publicly declared virginity. Instead, Swift embraced a different approach to expressing desire, using her songwriting to explore these themes. For instance, in the song "Fearless" she sings "You're running your fingers through your hair / Absentmindedly making me want you," (*Fearless* 2008) which reflects her deep romantic and sexual desires. This combination of emotional vulnerability, unfiltered honesty, a clean-cut public image, and a rejection of overt sexualization gave Swift's music what music critic Jon Caramanica calls a sense of "radical intimacy." These choices resonated deeply with her audience and positioned Swift as a pioneer who redefined the boundaries of femininity in the music industry.

1.2. Confessional Elements in Taylor Swift's Early Lyrics

Swift's early lyrics, characterized by their autobiographical nature and emotional transparency, exhibit many of the hallmarks of Confessional poetry. This type of poetry is marked by its focus on the personal, often addressing themes of mental illness, familial relationships, and existential angst. In Swift's music, Confessional elements manifest through her introspective and personal songwriting. Her first three albums – *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless*, and *Speak Now* – are filled with narratives that explore Swift's experience of love, heartbreak, and self-discovery. In the words of Jon Caramanica, Swift's songwriting strength is "looking in the mirror." One of the defining features of Confessional poetry found in Swift's early work is the use of first-person narrative and their lyrical address. By positioning herself as the protagonist in her songs, she creates an intimate connection with her audience. This approach

not only invites the audience into her world but also allows them to see reflections of their own experiences in her music.

1.2.1. *Exploring Identity Through Relationships in Taylor Swift*

Swift's debut album, *Taylor Swift*, demonstrates the principles of confessional poetry by blending deeply personal storytelling with universal themes of love, heartbreak, and self-discovery. Written during her teenage years, the album's central theme of finding your place in the world captures the true emotions of adolescence. The album is emotionally vulnerable and introspective with songs like "Teardrops on My Guitar" and "Should've Said No" that chronicle teenage heartbreak. In the liner notes, Swift concludes the album by thanking everyone who helped her create the album, including the people who inspired the songs: "To all the boys who thought they would be cool and break my heart, guess what? Here are 14 songs written about you. HA" (*Taylor Swift* 2006).

Swift's debut single "Tim McGraw," reminiscent of a past relationship, is a perfect example of Swift's diaristic lyricism. The song recounts a romance that ended over the summer, leaving Swift with memories tied to country singer Tim McGraw's music. Central to the song are the themes of love, loss, and self-reflection. The song's refrain – "When you think Tim McGraw / I hope you think my favorite song / The one we danced to all night long" – highlights the connection between memory and music. This specific song that the speaker is referring to becomes a keepsake, a tool for emotional recollection which recalls a shared past that will stay even as the relationship disappears.

The song heavily relies on imagery related to both this specific relationship of the speaker and American adolescence in general. References to the "Chevy truck" and "that little black dress" – a classic first date outfit – are specific to the speaker's relationship with the addressee. However, they are universal enough to conjure memories of past relationships for

the listener. The same goes for the references to “old faded blue jeans” and country singer Tim McGraw. The speaker also employs vivid imagery to create a sense of place and time. Lines like “The moon like a spotlight on the lake” and “I was right there beside him all summer long” transport the listener to a movie-like setting, infusing the narrative with a sense of intimacy. The relatable details of long summer nights, old trucks, favorite songs, and favorite clothes transcend Swift’s individual narrative and create a bridge between her story and that of the listener.

The song embraces vulnerability and intimate feelings of love, yearning, and loss. The opening lines – “He said the way my blue eyes shined / Put those Georgia stars to shame that night / I said, ‘That’s a lie’” reflect the speaker’s initial optimism and emotional investment in the relationship. The following lines of the first verse conjure an image of a summer romance, young love, and Americana: “Just a boy in a Chevy truck / That had a tendency of gettin’ stuck / On backroads at night.” Swift calls these memories “bittersweet” in the pre-chorus. Therefore, the last lines of the song that are the same as the first lines – “He said the way my blue eyes shined / Put those Georgia stars to shame that night / I said, ‘That’s a lie’” – capture the melancholy of loss by revisiting the initial optimistic feelings of the relationship, that are now laced with sadness.

The speaker alternates between autobiographical storytelling and directly addressing the addressee, emphasizing the emotional weight of the relationship ending. In the first verse, the focus is autobiographical: “And I was right there beside him all summer long / And then the time we woke up to find that summer gone.” However, this shifts in the chorus and second verse, where the speaker directly addresses the person they loved: “But when you think Tim McGraw / I hope you think my favorite song” and “And thanking God that you weren’t here.” This switch emphasizes the speaker’s struggle to reconcile their feelings. While they attempt

to reflect on the relationship objectively, the depth of their emotions makes this detachment impossible.

The closing lines of the song return to the autobiographical style, mirroring the opening and creating a cyclical structure: “He said the way my blue eyes shined / Put those Georgia stars to shame that night / I said, ‘That’s a lie.’” This repetition emphasizes the emotional journey of the song, as the speaker revisits the initial optimism of the past. The interchange between personal reflection and direct address throughout the song illustrates the speaker’s difficulty in processing their emotions, which makes the narrative relatable.

“Tim McGraw” exemplifies Swift’s ability to transform personal experience into poetic expressions. The song presents a confessional perspective on the power of memory. Even though the song is laced with vivid imagery specific to Swift’s relationship, it captures the universal emotions of young love and its end. The contrast between hope and heartache found in the song mirrors the introspection of Confessional poetry.

1.2.2. *Celebrating Adolescence on Fearless*

Swift’s second album, *Fearless*, is both a celebration of high school experiences and a testament to embracing vulnerability and courage. In the liner notes, Swift explains the deeper meaning behind the album title:

This album is called FEARLESS, and I guess I’d like to clarify why we chose that as the title. To me, ‘FEARLESS’ is not the absence of fear. It’s not being completely unafraid. To me, FEARLESS is having fears. FEARLESS is having doubts. Lots of them. To me, FEARLESS is living in spite of those things that scare you to death. (*Fearless* 2008).

This sentiment highlights the emotional core of the album, which chronicles love, heartbreak, and self-discovery against the backdrop of formative high school memories. Swift concludes

the prologue with a playful nod to the muses behind her songs: “And to the boys who inspired the album, you had fair warning.” This blend of introspection and openness sets the stage for an album that celebrates fearlessness in its truest form.

Fearless contains several songs that combine Confessional elements with feminist undertones. For example, “Fifteen” tells the story of Swift’s best friend and critiques how girls are taught to measure their self-worth based on their relationship. Additionally, “The Way I Loved You” portrays the emotional intensity and conflicted feelings that come with adolescent relationships when you have not learned the difference between emotional love and practical love. In this section, I will analyze the song “White Horse” which uses fairy-tale notions of love to discuss a toxic relationship. This song portrays Swift’s characteristic vulnerability by combining vivid imagery, a personal narrative, and universal feelings.

“White Horse” narrates the unraveling of a relationship that once seemed like a fairy tale. Swift disassembles the “knight in shining armor on a white horse” image with a maturity that signifies emotional growth. The song mirrors the stages of heartbreak, progressing from disappointment to acceptance. The opening lines, “Say you’re sorry, that face of an angel / Comes out just when you need it to,” establish a bittersweet tone that contrasts the idealized image of her partner with the reality of his flaws. The following lines – “As I paced back and forth all this time / ‘Cause I honestly believed in you / Holding on, the days drag on” – signify that the relationship is difficult and not as the speaker imagined. The emotion portrayed in the final line of the first verse – “I should’ve known” – creates an intimate connection between the speaker and the listener. This authenticity transforms this song about personal heartbreak into a universal narrative.

The song’s chorus plays with imagery and symbolism to describe the speaker’s view of this ending relationship. The chorus contains the lines “That I’m not a princess, this ain’t a fairytale” and “This ain’t Hollywood, this is a small town,” which depict that the speaker at

one point truly believed the relationship to be magical. They believed that it would be just like fairytales and the movies with a prince and a princess that would live happily ever after.

Sadly, the relationship was not like that. The second and third lines of the chorus – “I’m not the one you sweep off her feet, lead her up the stairwell” – solidify that the speaker feels that they are not “the one” for the addressee. Sweeping someone off their feet means falling completely and utterly in love quickly. Regrettably, the addressee did not feel that way. The “stairwell” in this line conjures the mental image of a big ballroom with the prince and princess walking down it. However, the speaker mentions being led up a stairwell. This probably refers to being led up to the bedroom. The final lines of the chorus mention the titular “white horse” which symbolizes the idealized romance that has failed the speaker. Traditionally, a knight on a white horse is there to save a damsel in distress. The lines “Now it’s too late for you and your white horse / to come around” symbolize the speaker’s shift from hope to disillusionment.

In the song’s second verse, the speaker blames themselves for believing that the relationship would be like a fairytale:

Maybe I was naïve, got lost in your eyes

And never really had a chance

My mistake, I didn’t know to be in love

You had to fight to have the upper hand

The speaker describes how toxic the relationship truly was, with its constant fighting. As the speaker is in the bargaining stage of heartbreak, they blame themselves for what went wrong.

The song’s bridge and final chorus show a shift in the speaker’s feelings about the addressee. In the first verse, they were disappointed about the course of the relationship and in

the second they were bargaining for the relationship. However, in this bridge and final chorus they accept that it is over and realize they deserve better: “And there you are on your knees / Begging for forgiveness, begging for me / Just like I always wanted, but it’s too late.” They solidify this feeling this in the final verse by saying: “Cause I’m not your princess, this ain’t our fairytale / I’m gonna find someone someday who might actually treat me well.” The lines “Now it’s too late for you and your white horse / to catch me now,” signify that the speaker is leaving. This relationship is in their “rearview mirror disappearing now” and they will find a new and better love.

“White Horse” subtly aligns with feminist themes by rejecting the notion of the damsel-in-distress. The speaker’s realization that they cannot wait for a knight on a white horse signifies a reclaiming of agency. By standing up for themselves and walking away from the relationship, the speaker resists the societal expectation of passive romantic fulfillment. The repeated references to fairy tales emphasize the theme of disillusionment as the speaker struggles with the realization that love is not as magical as they once believed.

1.2.3. *Reaching Out and Speaking Your Mind on Speak Now*

Swift’s third album, *Speak Now*, is a concept album centered around the theme of things left unsaid. In the liner notes, Swift explains the deeply personal nature of the album: “These songs are made up of words I didn’t say when the moment was right in front of me. These songs are open letters. Each is written with a specific person in mind, telling them what I meant to tell them in person” (*Speak Now* 2010). While this album broadens its scope to address themes beyond heartbreak and romance, it retains the emotional intimacy that defines Swift’s earlier work. Playfully tying it back to her first two albums, Swift concludes the prologue with a PS: “To all the boys who inspired this album, you should’ve known”. This prologue set the tone for an album of reflection, confrontation, and growth, displaying Swift’s evolution as a songwriter and storyteller.

The song “Dear John” is a haunting exploration of heartbreak and emotional manipulation. The song is supposedly about Swift’s relationship with the more than ten-year-old country singer John Mayer. The song is framed as a direct address to Swift’s former partner, giving the song an immensely intimate feel. The song’s title and structure reference it being a letter written to inform them that the relationship is over.

The song opens with the line “Long were the nights when my days once revolved around you,” displaying a reflective approach to the relationship which signifies that since the relationship ended the speaker has grown and realized how bad the relationship was for them. The following lines of the first verse are examples of why this relationship was bad for the speaker: “Counting my footsteps praying the floor won’t fall through” shows that they were walking on eggshells and obsessively trying to do everything right by their partner. Also, the line “And I lived in your chess game / but you changes the rules everyday,” displays how manipulative the speaker’s partner was. To the speaker it would feel like they finally understood the rules of the game – the relationship – and then their partner would change the rules thus making them feel like they were not good enough.

The speaker employs imagery and symbolism throughout “Dear John” to illustrate the emotional turbulence of the relationship. The repeated motif of light and darkness underscores the contrast between the initial allure of the romance and its eventual toxicity. Lines like “You paint me a blue sky and go back and turn it to rain,” evoke a sense of manipulation and power imbalance. The metaphor of the chess game in the first verse is particularly important because it captures both the calculated nature of the addressee’s behavior and the speaker’s realization that they were a pawn in the addressee’s game. Another striking image is the line, “The girl in the dress cried the whole way home,” which captures the vulnerability and youthfulness of the speaker. The “dress” implies femininity and innocence, while the act of crying suggests an unfiltered emotional response.

A central theme of “Dear John” is betrayal, particularly in the context of power imbalance caused by an age gap. The speaker confronts the emotional manipulation they experienced in the lines “Don’t you think nineteen is too young to be played by / your dark twisted games when I loved you so.” These lines are both an accusation and a reflection on their vulnerability, emphasizing the predatory nature of the relationship. The power dynamics are further explored through the motif of warning signs. The speaker says, “All the girls that you’ve run dry have tired, lifeless eyes,” suggesting a pattern of destructive behavior. This imagery positions the speaker as one in a line of victims, but their ability to articulate their pain and leave sets them apart. By naming the manipulation, they begin to reclaim their narrative and assert their strength. The final line in the bridge shows that the speaker recognizes their power and reclaim their agency:

But I took you matches before fire could catch me

So don’t look now

I’m shining like fireworks

Over your sad empty town

In conclusion, “Dear John” is a deeply personal song to Swift that reflects on a mentally abusive relationship. The song is structured as a Dear John Letter, which underscores the Confessional nature of the song. The song blends vivid imagery and emotional vulnerability which elevates the song beyond a simple breakup song.

1.3. From Heartfelt Lyrics to Empowered Voices

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Swift’s early career was defined by autobiographical storytelling and the beginning of feminist themes. Additionally, Swift’s autobiographical style, first-person narrative, and emotional honesty position her within the tradition of Confessional poetry. Swift’s early albums – *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless*, and *Speak*

Now – reveal her ability to blend personal experiences with universal themes. The lyrics of “Tim McGraw” – “Just a boy in a Chevy truck / That had a tendency of getting’ stuck / On backroads at night” (*Taylor Swift* 2006) – are very specific to Swift’s high-school summer romance, however, they are universally Americana and will resonate with the audience.

As Schetrumpf argues, the use of the naked “I” in Confessional poetry invites listeners to identify with the speaker’s experiences (Schetrumpf 119). Simultaneously, Waters argues that the use of “you” draws listeners into the narrative, making them feel involved (19). This interplay between the “I” and “you” in Swift’s lyrics fosters an emotional connection that enables her audience to recognize themselves in both sides of the story. In this way, Confessional poetry – and by extension, Swift’s songwriting – creates a place where personal vulnerability becomes a shared, universal experience. An example of a lyric that elicits this is from “Dear John”: “Don’t you think nineteen’s too young / To be played by your dark, twisted games when I loved you so?” In this line, “you” referring to the addressee, but also invites the listener to engage.

In traditional Confessional poetry, the poets often employ religious and mythological imagery to make their work more recognizable. These familiar references allowed readers to contextualize and connect with the themes of the poems. While Swift does not use this type of imagery, she achieves a similar effect by drawing on imagery that is familiar to her audience, such as high school, Americana, and fairy tales. For instance, the extended metaphor of the knight in shining armor in “White Horse” or games in “Dear John” evoke universal experiences and emotional resonance.

In addition to her introspective lyrics, Swift subtly challenges traditional gender norms by rejecting overt sexualization and portraying self-empowerment through her music and public persona. This period of Swift’s career laid the groundwork for her evolution as a feminist and confessional poet.

Chapter 2. “Treacherous”: Introduction to Popular Culture and Feminist Beginnings

After the success of her first three country albums, Swift started experimenting with different musical genres, marking a pivotal shift in her career. This period reflects Swift’s journey of self-expression, genre experimentation, and defiance of societal expectations for women. This chapter is divided into three sections, each focusing on a specific era of Swift’s career: *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014), and *reputation* (2017). First, I examine how *Red* bridges Swift’s country roots with pop experimentation by blending genres while exploring heartbreak and identity. Next, I explore *1989*, Swift’s synth-pop album that redefined her public persona. Finally, I analyze *reputation*, an era characterized by defiance and reinvention, with a darker theme. Swift’s Confessional lyricism evolves throughout these eras as she explores complex emotional narratives and increasingly engages with feminist themes.

2.1. Deepening Confessional Elements in *Red*

The release of *Red* should be considered a turning point in Swift’s lyricism, where her Confessionalism reaches new depths by covering themes of complex emotions and personal growth. Jonathan Bernstein calls *Red* a “second career beginning” for Swift: “the moment when she amassed the fresh songwriting tools and pop sensibilities that she’d spend the following decade deploying in full” (“Red”). In 2020, Swift labelled *Red* as her only true breakup album. To her, it is an album that portrays the complex and conflicting feelings stemming from lost love and “all the different ways that you have to say goodbye to someone” (qtd. in Gallo “Q&A”). In the liner notes Swift states: “This album is about the other kinds of love that I’ve recently fallen in and out of. Love that was treacherous, sad, beautiful, and tragic. But most of all, this record is about love that was red” (*Red* 2012).

After writing *Speak Now* completely alone, Swift considered *Red* a creative challenge. For this album, she wanted to move away from country music and worked together with her favorite pop songwriters. “Part of this record is acknowledging [that] all these emotions are very loud and very different from one another,” Swift told *Billboard*, “at one end of the spectrum you have ‘Sad Beautiful Tragic,’ which is a breakup song in the form of a funeral march, and you also have ‘Never Ever Getting Back Together’ again, which is a breakup song in the form of a parade” (qtd. in Gallo “Red”).

Red contains several songs that combine Confessional elements with feminist undertones. For instance, in “I Almost Do” Swift describes the struggle of wanting to reconnect with an ex-partner but knowing this is not in her best interest, thus portraying the internal struggle between vulnerability and self-preservation. The song is an example of Swift’s Confessional songwriting, noted for its vivid imagery and emotional depth with lines like “I bet it never, ever occurred to you / That I can’t say hello to you and risk another goodbye” and “In my dreams, you’re touching my face / And asking if I want to try again with you / And I almost do” (*Red* 2012). In “All Too Well” Swift shares memories of a breakup unlike any she had before. Analyzing “All Too Well” through the lens of Confessional poetry reveals layers of emotional transparency, self-reflection, and intimate storytelling.

The song’s lyrics are structured as a reflective narrative that recounts a past relationship in intimate and detailed memory. The speaker recounts the details of the breakup, the emotional aftermath, and its lingering effects. Swift uses the Confessional practice of using the naked “I” to expose her personal experience and feelings. Swift’s emotional vulnerability and use of vivid imagery invite the audience into her psyche. The song’s structure reflects the passage of time and the emotional stages of the breakup: betrayal, grief, and finally acceptance.

The first line – “I walked to the door with you, the air was cold / But something ‘bout it felt like home somehow” – is incredibly specific and conjures a perfect picture of that moment. “Walking through a door” is a metaphor for the start of something new. In this case, the speaker refers to a relationship with a person who even though the outside world was “cold” made her feel safe. The last two lines of the first verse mention a scarf: “And I left my old scarf at your sister’s house / And you’ve still got it in your drawer, even now.” While this scarf could simply be a physical object that holds memories of the relationship, it could also be a metaphor for the speaker’s image of themselves before the relationship; they were a completely different person after this relationship than they had been before.

The second verse of the song is reflective of the wholesome moments of the relationship, while also recognizing that the speaker might have been naïve. The speaker describes themselves as being “wide-eyed” which means that they recognize that they were inexperienced and easily impressed. The final lines of the second verse – “Autumn leaves falling down like pieces into place / And I can picture it after all these days” – conjure the image of autumn with its beautiful and vibrant colors. While in the moment this scenery might have felt like everything was falling into place and going to last, in hindsight autumn is the season where things die.

In the pre-chorus, the speaker admits that in the aftermath of the relationship she is “okay” but “not fine at all,” which indicates that she has accepted the breakup but is not over the relationship. In the chorus, the speaker reminisces about the relationship:

‘Cause there we are again on that little town street

You almost ran the red ‘cause you were lookin’ over at me

Wind in my hair, I was there

I remember it all too well

The second line of the chorus might seem romantic upon first reading; the speaker's partner was so enamored by her that they almost got into a car accident. However, considering red is the color of stopping, this line could be a metaphor for how the two were blinded by love for each other which made them miss all the signs that their relationship was unhealthy.

The third verse references the speaker meeting the addressee's family – “And your mother's telling stories ‘bout you on the tee-ball team / You taught me ‘bout your past, thinking your future was me” – which indicates that the relationship was fairly serious. In the pre-chorus the speaker again mentions how they are coping after the relationship ended by saying “There was nothing else I could do / And I forget about you long enough / To forget why I needed to,” indicating that they are not over the relationship but trying to get there. In the chorus, the speaker paints a picture of a happy moment in the relationship: “‘Cause there we are again in the middle of the night / We're dancing ‘round the kitchen in the refrigerator light.” The use of vivid imagery transports the audience to that intimate moment.

The bridge is the emotional catharsis of the song where the speaker describes the end of the relationship. At first, the speaker seeks the answers for why they broke up within themselves – “Well, maybe we got lost in translation / Maybe I asked for too much” – but soon she realizes that she might not have been the issue – “But maybe this thing was a masterpiece / ‘Til you tore it all up.” These lines indicate that the speaker and addressee had a different idea of the relationship. Additionally, the speaker references the movie *Lost in Translation* (2003) which revolves around two strangers who have an intimate yet short relationship. The last six lines of the bridge capture a moment of intense emotional destruction:

And you call me up again

Just to break me like a promise

So casually cruel in the name of being honest

I'm a crumbled up piece of paper lying here

'Cause I remember it all, all, all

Too well

The use of “again” suggests that this is not the first time that the speaker was subject to this kind of manipulation and cruelty from the addressee. The simile of “[breaking] like a promise” indicates that the speaker feels betrayed by their ex. Promises are considered to be sacred and a form of trust between two people, breaking a promise is essentially betraying someone's trust. The phrase “casually cruel” is indicative of how emotionally neglecting the addressee was. “Casually” implies a lack of deliberate intent, which means there also was a lack of empathy. The phrase reveals that this ex would often hurt Swift by being too honest or pretending that cruelty is honesty. The imagery of the “crumbled up piece of paper” indicates that the speaker felt used and tossed away by the addressee. People use blank pieces of paper to scribble on, and they will crumple this paper and toss it away when it is not as they intended. The speaker feels like the addressee used them – perhaps to try a different life – but since they were not perfect they were tossed away. Finally, the repetition of “all” in the last line emphasizes how intense this situation was for the speaker and how vividly they still remember everything that happened. This bridge highlights the song's themes of manipulation and betrayal, and the lasting effects of this trauma.

The fourth verse of the song depicts the aftermath of the breakup. The speaker indicates that they had completely lost themselves during the relationship – “I'd like to be my old self again, but I'm still trying to find it – and they cannot return to who they were before. They mention the scarf again, – “But you keep my old scarf from that very first week / 'Cause

it reminds you of innocence and it smells like me” – to indicate that they truly lost a piece of themselves in the relationship.

The emotional honesty portrayed in “All Too Well” is unmatched by any other song on *Red*. The speaker explores uncomfortable emotions through poetic techniques. The song demonstrates the qualities of Confessional poetry through its vivid imagery, emotional honesty, and introspection. By sharing specific details of the relationship, the speaker offers a glimpse into their life. By doing so, a personal memory is transformed into a universally resonant song.

2.2. Feminist Undertones in *1989*

Following the success of an increased pop sound on *Red*, Swift decided to lean into this even more for her fifth studio album. Rob Sheffield notes: “rather than trying to duplicate the wide reach of [*Red*], she focuses on one aspect of her sound for a whole album” (“1989”). With this shift from country to pop music, Swift’s songwriting also changed. While there are still references to Swift’s past relationships, the album as a whole “feels less diaristic than her previous work” (Caramanica “Farewell to Twang”). With *1989*, Swift redefined her sound and established her place as a pop star by proving that she could thrive beyond her country roots.

Swift’s *1989* is an album about being reborn. Not only is Swift reborn as a pop artist, but she is also a completely different person than she was when she wrote *Red*. In the liner notes she writes about moving to New York and how a city that always seemed so daunting has become her home. “This is a story about coming into your own,” Swift writes, “and as a result... coming alive.” This album combines personal narrative with broader reflections on identity and resilience, aligning with the feminist ideals of self-expression and agency. For example, “Out of the Woods” describes a relationship that is difficult largely due to external

factors. The song employs vivid imagery to reflect the anxiety of holding on to a love that is doomed to fail. The final track on the album is “Clean.” This song stands out for its introspective views on emotional healing and resilience. The titular metaphor of being “clean” emphasizes the transformative power of time. The lyrics describe the end of an emotional relationship, where the speaker recognizes their ability to move on. This is a process rather than a destination.

The speaker uses imagery and symbolism to express her healing journey. The opening lines of the song – “The drought was the very worst, ah-ah, ah-ah / When the flowers that we’d grown together died of thirst” – juxtapose drought and flowers as a metaphor for the emotional deprivation of a once beautiful relationship. The drought symbolizes pain, heartbreak, and loneliness, while the flowers represent shared memories. Similarly, the chorus uses the imagery of water: “The rain came pouring down / When I was drowning, that’s when I could finally breathe.” This paradoxical line portrays the speaker’s healing journey: they felt their strongest and learned the most about themselves when they were going through their toughest times. The drowning motif represents being overwhelmed, while breathing signifies coming into a state of clarity. The speaker also uses this motif in the pre-chorus when they say “The water filled my lungs, I screamed so loud / But no one heard a thing.” The speaker is drowning in pain and emotions. By allowing these emotions in and actually feeling the pain, they can start the healing process.

I believe “Clean” to be the most Confessional song on *1989*. The use of the first-person perspective and the personal narrative creates intimacy. However, by embedding personal struggles in broader metaphors, the speaker invites the listener to project their own experiences onto the song. Additionally, the song subtly ties into feminist ideals by highlighting independence and the reclamation of agency. The speaker chooses to no longer

seek validation from external sources but relies on their strengths to grow, which aligns with the fourth-wave feminist themes of autonomy and resilience.

2.3. Responding To Public Scrutiny on *reputation*

Before the release of *reputation*, Swift had disappeared from the public eye. She did not attend public gatherings and deleted all her social media posts. In her documentary – *Miss American* – Swift discusses this period of her life:

#TaylorSwiftIsOverParty was the number one trend on *Twitter* worldwide. Do you know how many people have to be tweeting that they hate you for that to happen? [...] When people fall out of love with you there is nothing you can do to make them change their mind, they just don't love you anymore. I just wanted to disappear. Nobody physically saw me for a year. And that is what I thought they wanted.
(00:34:55-00:36:17)

This *Twitter* trend was a response to the Taylor/Kanye feud that had been going on for years at that point. The tension between the two artists started in 2009 when West interrupted Swift's acceptance speech during the Video Music Awards. West stormed the stage and took the microphone from Swift to speak the infamous lines: "I'm really happy for you; I'm going to let you finish. But Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time" (qtd. in Mather). Even though West apologized the day after the incident, and Swift even presented West with an *MTV* Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015, the issues between the two continued in 2016. West released his song "Famous" in which he takes credit for Swift's fame and career with the line "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex. / Why? I made that bitch famous." At the time of the release West's sources revealed that Swift had approved the song. Swift, however, responded that she was not made aware of the misogynistic message of the song. In July

2016, a video was released by Kim Kardashian that recorded a phone conversation between West and Swift in which Swift appeared to approve of the provocative lyrics. As a reaction to the release of this video, Swift faced an incredible amount of backlash, partly in the form of the #TaylorSwiftIsOver party on *Twitter*.¹

Swift struggled with her mental health during this period. Swift moved to the United Kingdom and “didn’t leave a rental house for a year” (Swift qtd. in Lansky) to work on her mental health. During this period away from the spotlight, Swift fell in love. The album that resulted from this tumultuous time – *reputation* – is about losing everything on the outside but holding onto yourself on the inside. In the liner notes Swift explains the title of the album: “We think we know someone, but the truth is that we only know the version of them that they have chosen to show us. There will be no further explanation, there will be just reputation” (*reputation* 2017). While Swift was deliberately secretive about the inspiration of the album, the songs are diaristic and deeply emotional. The song “Look What You Made Me Do” seems to acknowledge the public scrutiny Swift faced. With lines like “The old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now / Why? Oh, ‘cause she’s dead,” Swift symbolically sheds her former self and embraces reinvention. Similarly, in the song “I Did Something Bad,” Swift equates the public scrutiny she faced with a witch trial: “They’re burning all the witches even if you aren’t one.” These confessional declarations acknowledge the weight and cost of being under constant public scrutiny while also reclaiming agency. “Call It What You Want,” has a different tone. In this song, Swift reflects on finding love and safety in a romantic relationship. The line “I’m doing better than I ever was,” highlights the redeeming power of love. In this section, I will analyze the song “Delicate” which explores the fragility of new love in the shadow of Swift’s public reputation.

¹ A longer recording was leaked in March 2020 that showed West had not informed Swift of the exact line in “Famous.” Instead he had quoted the line as “What if I said I made you famous?” (qtd.in Mather).

The song's opening lines – “This ain't for the best / My reputation's never been worse, so / You must like me for me” – set a tone of vulnerability and self-awareness. These lines reveal the speaker's intense insecurity, rooted in her awareness that something like her tarnished reputation can influence something real and private, like her emotional connection with a new romantic partner. This tension between the public and private self is central to “Delicate” and mirrors the confessional tradition of exposing internal struggles shaped by external forces.

These insecurities are echoed in the chorus, where the speaker repeatedly questions their actions and the fragility of the situation:

Is it cool that I said all that?

Is it chill that you're in my head?

'Cause I know that it's delicate

Is it cool that I said all that?

Is it too soon to do this yet?

'Cause I know that it's delicate

Isn't it, isn't it, isn't it?

The repetition in this chorus portrays the speaker's anxiety and also invites the listener to engage directly with the lyrics. In the first three lines, the speaker seems to speak directly to the addressee, and in the last three lines they seem to appeal to the listener. Through their questions, the speaker asks the listener to evaluate the situation. Does the listener believe the speaker's reputation is too damaged for them to deserve this happiness? Do they think the speaker should tread carefully, or are they rooting for the speaker to take this emotional risk? By asking these questions, Swift creates a dialogue with her audience, drawing them into her

emotional world and prompting them to empathize with her struggles. This layered approach heightens the song's Confessional quality, transforming a personal narrative into a broader exploration of public judgment and private desire.

The verses of "Delicate" contrast this broader vulnerability with intimate details of the speaker's relationship. The first verse – "Dive bar on the East Side, where you at? / ... / Come here, you can meet me in the back" – depict a text exchange between the speaker and their partner. These lines juxtapose the uncertainty of her external life with an intimate and simple private life. The setting – a dive bar on the East Side – adds a sense of relatability, placing the narrative in a shared cultural backdrop. A text inviting someone to come over is normal in new relationships. These first moments are magical and exciting. However, having this person meet you in the back because you have to avoid the public is very specific for this relationship of the speaker and this period in their life.

In "Delicate," Swift crafts a layered narrative that balances vulnerability with strength. The Confessional nature of the song lies in its exposure of the speaker's doubts and fears, not just about their partner's feelings but also about their own worthiness in the face of public judgment. Swift's assertion of her right to navigate love on her own terms despite social and cultural practices, provides the song with a feminist undertone. By contrasting the intimate with the public, and the personal with the performative, this song captures the complexities of Swift's world and transforms them into a universally relatable exploration of love, trust, and resilience.

2.4. Switching Styles and Claiming Agency

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Swift's Confessional style matured during the *Red*, 1989, and *reputation* eras. In these albums, Swift explores complex emotional

narratives, while addressing societal expectations, public scrutiny, and personal growth. In *Red*, Swift reached a turning point in her lyricism by delving into the conflicting emotions of love and heartbreak. The album's introspective songs highlight Swift's mastery of vivid imagery, emotional honesty, and poetic introspection, aligning her with the tradition of Confessional poetry. On *1989*, Swift embraces reinvention. This album reflects Swift's resilience and autonomy. This was the first time in Swift's career that she openly expressed being a feminist. She told the Guardian that as a teenager she did not understand what being a feminist actually meant. She thought the term held a lot of weight. However, in her early twenties, Swift realized that "[I've] been taking a feminist stance without actually saying so" (qtd. in Hoby). This is crucial for understanding Swift's lyrics at this period in her career, as she is figuring out who she is, she is also figuring out her feminist stance. While she does not feel the need to broadcast this journey, feminist themes like female empowerment, agency, and equality are central to Swift's lyrics. With *reputation*, Swift confronts the duality of her public and private lives. Through her Confessional songwriting, Swift reclaims her voice and redefines her image.

These eras illustrate Swift's capacity to transform her personal experiences into universally resonant lyrics. Her lyrical evolution demonstrates not only her growth as a songwriter but also her increasing engagement with feminist themes by challenging societal expectations and reclaiming her narrative. Swift's journey during these eras encapsulates a broader narrative of self-expression, reinvention, and empowerment. Thus, claiming her place as both a Confessional poet and pop star.

Chapter 3. “Mad Woman”: Explicit Feminist Confrontation

In 2019, Taylor Swift boldly declared “If I was a man, then I’d be the man,” with the release of her single “The Man” (*Lover* 2019). These lyrics mark a turning point in Swift’s willingness to confront societal inequalities in her music. From this moment, she blends her Confessional style with feminist commentary. This chapter explores Swift’s albums released in 2019 and 2020, focusing on her explicit engagement with politics and fourth-wave feminist themes. Through an analysis of the albums *Lover* (2019), *folklore* (2020), and *evermore* (2020), this chapter examines how Swift’s Confessional lyricism evolved to include a broader commentary on gender, power, and societal expectations. Firstly, however, this chapter examines Swift’s public image and activism with fourth-wave feminist principles, positioning her as an influential figure in contemporary feminist discourse.

3.1. Taylor Swift’s Political Voice in the Era of Fourth-Wave Feminism

In the first twelve years of her career, Swift was not actively involved in politics. In 2009, she admitted to *Rolling Stone* that she had voted for Obama during the elections the year before: “I’ve never seen this country so happy about a political decision in my entire time of being alive,” Swift said, “I’m so glad this was my first election” (qtd. in Grigoriadis). During the 2012 elections, Swift did not comment on her political affiliations, stating to *Time Magazine*: “I don’t think I know enough yet in life to be telling people who to vote for” (qtd. in Macsai). Swift’s silence during the 2016 elections, which coincided with her media blackout, fueled speculations about her political stance. Republicans, in particular, took this silence as an opportunity to spread the idea that Swift would vote red. They argued that Swift’s background in country music and the fact that “[she] is very white and very blonde. She was born on, and grew up in, a Christmas tree farm in rural Pennsylvania” was enough reason to assume that Swift would vote for Trump (Milo). Even though these conspiracies

gained traction with Trump followers, Swift stayed silent until October 8, 2018, when she posted on Instagram regarding the upcoming midterm elections on November 6.

Swift's political awakening was deeply personal. In *Miss Americana*, Swift reflects on the unwritten rules for country artists regarding politics: "Part of the fabric of being a country artist is: 'Don't force your politics on people, let people live their lives.' That is grilled into us" (*Miss Americana* 00:49:24-00:49:37). This hesitancy to speak out about politics was shaped by the backlash faced by the Chicks – formerly the Dixie Chicks – when they criticized U.S. intervention in Iraq by saying: "We're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas" (qtd. in Campbell). This statement led to boycotts by radio stations and for years there were protesters outside their concerts. This influenced how artists, including Swift, approached political discourse.

Swift's perspective changed through her experience with a sexual assault case. In 2013, radio host David Mueller assaulted Swift during a meet-and-greet. When Swift reported the incident to her team and the appropriate authorities, Mueller was fired and subsequently sued Swift for defamation. Swift filed a countersuit for a symbolic \$1, alleging assault, and she won the case. Because of this lawsuit, Swift became involved in the #MeToo movement, earning her recognition as one of *Time* magazine's "Silence Breakers" in the 2017 Person of the Year issue. Swift's interviews with the magazine highlighted the challenges and the impact of her testimony. Swift recalls the jokes that were made before the trial took place: "I spent two years reading headlines referring to it as 'The Taylor Swift Butt Grab Case' with internet trolls making a joke about what happened to me" (qtd. in Dockterman). During a 2018 concert, Swift addressed the trial's emotional weight, saying: "A year ago I was not playing in a stadium in Tampa, I was in a courtroom in Denver, Colorado. This is the day the jury sided in my favor and said that they believed me ... I guess I just think about all the people that weren't believed and the people who haven't been believed, and the people who are afraid to

speak up because they think they won't be believed" (qtd. in Hoffman). This experience strengthened Swift's determination to use her voice to advocate for others. In *Miss Americana*, Swift is shown struggling with the decision to endorse a candidate in the 2018 midterm elections. A pivotal scene features Swift in a heated argument with her team – three older men – about whether she should take a stance. As Swift is trying to argue that this election is important to her because the favorite candidate in her home state Tennessee – Marsha Blackburn (Rep.) – would infringe Swift's right as a woman, a member of her team warns: "Imagine if we came to you and said, 'Hey we've got this idea that we could halve the number of people that come to your next tour'" (1:01:40-1:03:40). This moment highlights the pressure on artists, especially women, to stay neutral on political matters. Despite these concerns, Swift chose to break her silence by posting on *Instagram*. Swift received praise for 'finally' speaking out politically. It was noted that she made a "courageous choice" and that she had "earned the respect of millions of Americans who have watched aghast at recent political events" (Sehgal). With this endorsement, Swift officially became a political influencer. Swift's statement, which accompanied a sepia-toned picture of herself, acknowledged her previous silence and expressed her commitment to voting based on human rights:

I always have and always will cast my vote based on which candidate will protect and fight for the human rights I believe we all deserve in this country. I believe in the fight for LGBTQ rights, and that any form of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender is WRONG. I believe that the systemic racism we still see in this country towards people of color is terrifying, sickening and prevalent. (Taylor Swift 2018)

Swift urged her followers to educate themselves about their state candidates and emphasized the importance of voting. Swift's post is notable for its respectful tone and strategic framing. While she endorsed Phil Bredesen (Dem.) for Senate and Jim Cooper (Dem.) for House of

Representatives, she did so by explaining why she opposed conservative candidate Marsha Blackburn, rather than imposing her views on her followers. This approach fosters dialogue and encourages personal reflection among her audience.

Swift's reasons for opposing Blackburn are rooted in her feminist beliefs. Swift highlighted Blackburn's voting record, which included opposition to equal pay for women and the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, as well as support for discriminatory practices against LGBTQ+ individuals. "These are not my Tennessee values", Swift stated (Taylor Swift 2018). By speaking out, Swift became a political influencer and demonstrated the evolution of her political voice. Her decision to engage with politics, despite the potential risks, reflects her dedication to aligning her platform with her personal values.

In June 2019, Swift celebrated Pride Month by publishing an open letter to Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander, urging him to vote in support of the Equality Act. This bill would protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in places of work, homes, schools, and other public spaces. Alongside this letter, Swift launched a petition encouraging fans to show their support for the Act. Swift also highlighted the Equality Act in her music video for "You Need to Calm Down," emphasizing her advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights.

Swift's support for the Equality Act aligns with the principles of fourth-wave feminism, which emphasizes intersectionality, inclusivity, and activism on digital platforms. By using her public influence and platform to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, Swift demonstrated solidarity with marginalized communities but also exemplified how contemporary feminism intersects with broader social justice movements. Her effort reflected a commitment to dismantling systemic discrimination while using her art and voice to inspire collective action. This are characteristics of fourth-wave feminist engagement.

3.2. Political Narratives on *Lover*

In April 2019, Swift released the first song the *Lover* era. The music video for this “bubbly pop song” – “Me!” was full of pink, glitter, rainbows, and unicorns (Coscarelli). This starkly contrasted the grey theme and snakes that had defined the *reputation* (2017) era. In the liner notes, Swift writes: “I’ve decided in this life, I want to be defined by the things I love – not the things I hate, the things I’m afraid of, or the things that haunt me in the middle of the night. Those things may be my struggles, but they’re not my identity” (*Lover* 2019). She characterizes the album as “a love letter to love itself” (*Lover* 2019). The songs on the album describe all kinds of love: from friendships – “It’s Nice to Have a Friend” – to family “Soon You’ll Get Better” –, from lost love – “Death By a Thousand Cuts” – to magical love – “Paper Rings” –, and uncertain love – “Paper Rings.” Simultaneously, on this album Swift becomes political on songs like “The Man”, “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince”, and “You Need to Calm Down.” Perhaps portraying Swift’s love for having discovered her political voice.

“Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince” is the most politically charged song on *Lover*. The song explores themes of disillusionment, social critique, and the resilience of love in turbulent times. The song goes beyond the personal storytelling that Swift is known for, and crafts a metaphorical narrative that is about societal failures but also promises hope through love. Through extended metaphor, vivid imagery, and emotional juxtaposition, Swift crafts a song that intertwines the personal and the political.

At the center of this song is the metaphor of high school as a representation of America. Familiar motifs like school hallways, prom dresses, and homecoming queens are used to reflect on societal power dynamics. In the first verse Swift sets up this metaphor:

You know I adore you, I’m crazier for you

Than I was at sixteen, lost in a film scene

Waving homecoming queens, marching band playing

I'm lost in the lights

The high school setting functions as a model where idealized figures symbolize unattainable standards; “bad guys” represent corruption, and the narrator is a voice of resistance. In lines such as “American stories burning before me” and “boys will be boys then, where are the wise men?”, the speaker critiques societal complacency and moral failures. The high school imagery, therefore, becomes a tool for exploring disillusionment in modern America. High school imagery is evident in a lot of Swift’s lyrics, but this time she makes it political. It’s a familiar image for most. Using it in this political critique simplifies the issue but simultaneously the metaphor strengthens the message.

Disillusionment is profound in lines like “American glory faded before me” and “my team is losing, battered and bruising”, where the narrator expresses a sense of defeat and helplessness. This imagery extends beyond the personal and reflects broader societal issues such as political division, gender inequality, and systemic corruption with lines like “The whole school is rolling fake dice.” Yet in the middle of this chaos, love emerges. In the chorus, the line “It’s you and me, that’s my whole world” positions love as an act of defiance against hopelessness. By centering the song around love and solidarity the speaker suggests that human connection can offer support and strength in challenging times.

One of the most striking elements of the song is its use of symbolism and imagery to convey both personal and collective struggles. The speaker describes running through rose thorns and ripping up a prom dress, which suggests the pain of facing societal expectations and the loss of innocence. Similarly, the marching band and the scoreboard symbolize competition and theatricality which suggest that life is a performative spectacle.

Feminist undertones resonate throughout the song as the speaker challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. Lines like “the damsels are depressed / Boys will be boys then, where are the wise men?” critique the persistence of harmful stereotypes. This line plays with the notion of a “damsel in distress”, in which a man rescues a woman in trouble. However, in this song, the “damsels” cannot or will not be rescued because there is no hero, there are just boys who are playing “stupid games”. Thus, the damsels are depressed. Additionally, the narrator’s refusal to conform, reflected in the line “They whisper in the hallway, ‘she’s a bad, bad girl’” aligns with fourth-wave feminist ideals.

The song reflects Swift’s experience with the 2016 presidential race. Lines like “Running through rose thorns, I saw the scoreboard / And ran for my life” and “My team is losing, battered and bruising” represent Swift’s negative feelings towards the win of Donald Trump during this election. During the 2016 elections, Swift had not endorsed any of the candidates, which prompted Republicans to claim that she would vote red. Swift reflects on this experience with the line “Voted most likely to run away with you.” Swift likely reflects on the same experience with the line “They whisper in the hallway, ‘She’s a bad, bad girl’” because Swift was heavily critiqued for not endorsing a candidate. Swift explained to *Vogue*:

The summer before that election, all people were saying was ‘She’s calculated. She’s manipulative. She’s not what she seems. She’s a snake. She’s a liar.’ These are the same exact insults people were hurling at Hillary. Would I be an endorsement or would I be a liability? ‘Look, snakes of a feather flock together. Look, the two lying women.’ The two nasty women. (qtd. in Aguirre)

The line “We’re so sad, we paint the town blue” plays with the proverb “paint the town red” which means to go out and have a fun and reckless time. However, red is the color of the Republican party, while blue is the color of the Democratic party who Swift supports. Thus, Swift chooses to paint the town blue instead of red. Additionally, the color blue is associated

with sadness. This layered imagery allows the audience to interpret the song on multiple levels, from personal heartbreak to political commentary.

By connecting personal emotion with broader societal commentary, the song exemplifies the principles of fourth-wave feminism and Confessional poetry. It critiques systemic inequalities while embracing vulnerability, turning individual struggles into a collective voice of empowerment and resistance.

3.3. Creating a Fictional World on Lockdown Albums *folklore* and *evermore*

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Swift surprised the world with her eighth studio album: *folklore*. On July 23, Swift announced the album's release on social media, stating: "Most of the things I had planned this summer didn't end up happening, but there is something I hadn't planned on that DID happen. And that is my 8th studio album, folklore. Surprise" (Taylor Swift 8 Oct. 2020). Departing from the pink and bubbly production of *Lover* (2019), *folklore* (2020) embraces "acoustic arrangements that evoke folk music and chamber pop" (Thompson et al.). Jon Caramanica describes the album as "a conclusion (temporary or not, it's unclear) to her long march into the teeth of contemporary mega-pop" ("Pop Star Done With Pop"). Critics praise the album for its introspection and craftsmanship, with John Pareles calling the songwriting "self-conscious and meticulous" ("Folklore") and Rob Sheffield praising the record for containing "the most head-spinning, heartbreaking, emotionally ambitious songs of her life" ("Swift Leaves Her Comfort Zone"). While exploring themes of empathy, imagination, and growing up, the album portrays Swift's venture into character-driven narratives. In the album's liner notes Swift explains: "It started with imagery. Visuals that popped into my mind and piqued my curiosity. ... I found myself not only writing my own stories, but also writing about or from the perspective of people I've never met, people I've known, or those I wish I hadn't" (*folklore* 2020). Critics like Bernstein

noted the album's transformative nature, stating that Swift "has spent the past 15 years developing an internal world of melody and song structure so sui generis that her songs now belong more to her than to whatever sonic palette she's working in at any given time" ("Folklore"). By combining stream-of-consciousness storytelling with intricate musical arrangements, Swift created what Sheffield calls a "host of characters to keep her company," portraying "her deepest wit, compassion, and empathy." Through *folklore*, Swift redefined her approach to storytelling making the album feel timeless and deeply personal.

To everyone's surprise, on 10 December 2020 Swift announced her ninth studio album and *folklore*'s sister album: *evermore* (2020). In the album's liner notes, Swift explains: "To put it plainly, we just couldn't stop writing songs. To try and put it more poetically, it feels like we were standing on the edge of the folklorian woods and had a choice: to turn and go back or to travel further into the forest of this music. We chose to wander deeper in" (Taylor Swift 2020). Like *folklore*, *evermore* is rooted in narrative-driven songwriting. Claire Shaffer notes that "story songs are still the heart of the matter on *evermore*, and Swift has a whole new cast of characters to join Betty, James, Rebekah and the rest." While continuing the thematic exploration of its sister album, *evermore* "turns even further inward, away from her pop past," Jon Pareles writes, "drifting toward elegant but cerebral craftsmanship" with songwriting that is "poised and careful" yet maintains "a certain emotional distance" ("Evermore"). Together, *folklore* and *evermore* solidify Swift's evolution into a storyteller whose poetic lyricism suggests a timeless, literary quality.

While these albums are a step away from Swift's autobiographical and diaristic lyricism, they do display Swift's Confessional lyricism on songs like "This Is Me Trying" – "I was so ahead of the curve, the curve became a sphere / Fell behind all my classmates and I ended up here" – and "Tolerate it" – "I wait by the door like I'm just a kid / Use my best colors for your portrait" (*folklore* 2020; *evermore* 2020). Another, Confessional song on

folklore is “Mirrorball.” In the *folklore: Long Pond Studio Sessions* documentary Swift reveals that she wrote the song after she found out that the *Lover* tour was cancelled, “So it’s like I realize, here I am writing all this music, still trying” (00:33:17-00:36:56).

The imagery of a mirrorball is a metaphor for celebrities and people who feel like they have to be “duplicitous” to fit into society (*Long Pond Studio Sessions* 00:33:17 – 00:36:56). Swift explained why she used the imagery of mirror balls:

We have mirrorballs in the middle of a dance floor because they reflect light. They are broken a million times, and that’s what makes them so shiny. We have people like that in society too. They hang there, and every time they break, it entertains us. And when you shine a light on them, it’s this glittering, fantastic thing, but then a lot of the time when the spotlight isn’t on them they’re still there, up on a pedestal, but nobody’s watching them. (*Long Pond Studio Sessions* 00:33:17-00:36:56)

The song explores the pressures of being in the spotlight and constantly pulling the attention of the audience. The extended metaphor of mirrorballs symbolizes the pressure to perform. In the opening lines, - “I want you to know / I’m a mirrorball / I’ll show you every version of yourself tonight” – the speaker positions themselves as a mirror for others, reflecting their desires and emotions, which is an idea often imposed on public figure who are supposedly a reflection of society. The phrase “every version of yourself” suggests a multiplicity of identities people adopt to connect with others. The mirrorball also symbolizes fragility, as it continues to reflect light while it is made up of broken pieces and easily shatters. This duality is captured in the lines “shimmering beautiful / And when I break it’s in a million pieces” and “I’m still on a tightrope / I’m still trying everything to keep you looking at me.” The image of a tightrope walker indicates a precarious balance that suggests the constant pressure the speaker faces to stay relevant and connect with the listener. This sentiment is also present in the lines “I’m still a believer, but I don’t know why / I’ve never been a natural, all I do is try,

try try.” These lines also reference the song “This Is Me Trying” on the album in which the speaker is experiencing an existential crisis.

“Mirrorball” displays Confessional elements through its use of first-person narration. This creates a sense of intimacy and emotional exposure. By presenting themselves as a mirrorball, the speaker reveals the emotional price of being a performer. The lines “Hush, when no one is around, my dear / You’ll find me on my tallest tiptoes” suggest that the speaker is aware of and acting according to their role even when completely alone. While this song is deeply personal, it resonates with the listener due to the extended metaphor of a mirrorball and the recognizable imagery of a ballroom, a tightrope, and the circus: “and they called of the circus / Burned the disco down / When they sent home the horses and the rodeo clowns.” Even though the speaker is seeking validation from the listener throughout the song, the listener will identify with the speaker because of the universal feelings the song conveys.

“Mirrorball” is a clear critique on being a celebrity. The song displays the Confessional practice of employing a persona to explore personal struggles and cultural critique. Therefore, the song can also be considered a feminist critique on the expectations placed on women. Lines like “I’m a mirrorball / I can change everything about me to fit in” display the sentiment of keeping people looking at you and trying to stay relevant reflects societal pressures on women to maintain a flawless facade and to adapt to the desires of others.

3.4. Political Commentary and Confessional Storytelling

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Swift’s political awakening caused a willingness to confront societal inequalities in her music. In 2018, following a sexual assault case, Swift was determined to use her status to stand up for people who might not be able to.

Her political engagements reflect the principles of fourth-wave feminism,. This movement emphasizes intersectionality, inclusivity, and activism on digital platforms. Through her platforms, Swift advocated for LGBTQ+ rights, which demonstrates how fourth-wave feminism intersects with larger social justice movements.

The albums discussed here – *Lover*, *folklore*, and *evermore* – mark an evolution in Swift’s artistic and personal journey. These albums blend Swift’s Confessional lyricism with broader themes of politics and identity. On *Lover*, Swift critiques social inequalities on songs like “The Man,” “You Need to Calm Down,” and “Miss Americana & the Heartbreak Prince” while exploring the concept of love on songs like “The Archer” and “Daylight.”

folklore and *evermore*, two albums written in isolation of the pandemic, display Swift’s growth as a storyteller by weaving fictional narratives with deeply personal insight. Songs like “Mirrorball” and “This Is Me Trying” reaffirm Swift’s Confessional style by exploring vulnerability, self-doubt, and expectations. These three albums show Swift’s transformation into an artists who can combine personal introspection with broader cultural commentary.

Chapter 4. “The Manuscript”: Reflective Confessional Poetry

Following the story-driven albums *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020), Taylor Swift returned to an autobiographic and diaristic approach with her albums *Midnight*s (2022) and *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024). These albums solidify Swift as a poetic lyricist who employs Confessional techniques in her songs. First, this chapter explores how *Midnight*s captures the introspection that comes with the middle of the night. Second, this chapter examines how *The Tortured Poets Department* is Swift’s most Confessional album to date that employs vivid storytelling and diaristic details to explore themes of love and identity.

4.1. Sleepless Nights Full of Confessional Pop on *Midnight*s

In September 2022, Swift announced her tenth studio album *Midnight*s (2022). She described the album on Instagram as “a collection of music written in the middle of the night, a journey through terrors and sweet dreams. The floors we paced and the demons we face. ... *Midnight*s, the stories of 13 sleepless nights scattered throughout my life” (Taylor Swift 5 Feb. 2022). The album’s liner notes explore its thematic focus by capturing the emotional turbulence and introspection of midnight thoughts: “We lie in love and in fear and in turmoil and in tears. We stare at walls and drink until they speak back. We twist in our self-made cages and pray that we aren’t — right this minute — about to make some fateful life-altering mistake” (*Midnight*s 2022). With this album, Swift returns to her pop sound while also displaying the introspective depth she refined on *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020). Rob Sheffield called *Midnight*s “Swift at her most gloriously obsessive, an album of moody nocturnal electro dream pop” and praised songs like “Maroon” and “Anti-Hero” as “confessions of a mastermind who just can’t stop building emotional labyrinths for herself” (Sheffield “*Midnight*s”). The songs on *Midnight*s function both as intimate confessions and commentaries on Swift’s public persona. Jon Caramanica observed, “Swift sees the world

seeing her, and rather than shut it out, she absorbs it” (Caramanica “Midnights”). The album blends “self-referential” themes with “backward glancing sound,” thus, creating a “record about stasis, arrested development, and that liminal time between yesterday and tomorrow” (Zoladz “Revising”). With *Midnights*, Swift masterfully bridges the personal and the universal. The album not only explores the complexities of self-reflection and fame but also solidifies her place as a storyteller capable of transforming sleepless nights into timeless art.

“Hits Different” is an emotional song that displays Swift’s Confessional lyricism by blending vivid imagery with deeply personal themes of heartbreak and growth. The song is centered around the pain of heartbreak, a pain that “hits different” than anything the speaker has experienced before: “Moving on was always easy for me to do / It hits different / It hits different ‘cause it’s you.”

The song’s opening lines – “I wash my hands of you at the club / You made a mess of me” – convey the song’s tone of contradiction. The speaker attempts to move on, which is expressed through the act of washing their hands. However, this is done at the club, a social setting which was probably visited with the addressee, suggesting that this is a performative act. This is confirmed in the second line where the speaker admits to still being broken after the breakup. These opening lines set the stage for the rest of the song which explores the nuanced and contradictory emotions that accompany a breakup.

Throughout the song, the speaker juxtaposes universal imagery of public spaces and recognizable “artifacts” with private moments of grief. For example, “I find the artifact, cried over a hat / curse the space that I needed.” In these lines, the “artifact,” a hat, holds so many memories that it becomes a symbol of the past relationship. Similarly, the lines “Each bar plays our song / Nothing had ever felt so wrong” displays how a once-cherished memory tied to music, now evokes deep sadness and turns a familiar space into a reminder of loss.

“Hit’s Different” explores heartbreak through layered reflections of the speaker’s identity and their process of loss. Lines like “Oh my, love is a lie / Shit my friends say to get me by” highlight the problem of external comfort when dealing with overwhelming emotions. The grief the speaker experiences feels isolating; they feel misunderstood while their friends are trying to support them. These lines that describe the support are contrasted by the lines “Yeah, my sadness is contagious / I slur your name ‘til someone puts me in a car / I stopped receiving invitations.” The speaker indicates that their sadness influences their social life to such a degree that they are no longer fun to be around. This portrayal of sorrow is relatable for anyone who has experienced heartbreak, displaying how this song makes the speaker’s personal pain feel universal.

In the second verse, the speaker reflects on how they previously approached heartbreak:

I used to switch out these Kens, I’d just ghost

Rip the band-aid off and skip town like an asshole outlaw

Freedom felt like summer then on the coast

Now the sun burns my heart and the sand hurts my feelings

These lines describe how the speaker once embraced detachment and independence but now finds herself affected by the end of this relationship. The imagery of the sun and sand now causing pain instead of joy highlights the transformative impact of this heartbreak; even previously enjoyable experiences are now tainted by the loss.

In the song’s bridge, the speaker states to “not need another metaphor, it’s simple enough.” This suggests that the pain that the speaker feels is so raw that it does not need to be dressed up in poetic language. However, this line is followed by a simile: “A wrinkle in time

like the crease by your eyes.” This line indicates that the relationship was so influential for the speaker that it changed the passage of time. The speaker feels like they are stuck in the past due to the breakup. The following line “This is why they shouldn’t kill of the main guy” compares the breakup to the death of a main character being killed in a fictional work. This line builds an extended metaphor where the speaker’s life is a work of fiction; the speaker is a character in their own story. The last line of the bridge – “Argumentative, antithetical dream girl” – plays with the concept of the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” trope which is the counterpart to the “main guy” in romcoms from the 2010s.

The lyrical themes and techniques in “Hits Different” display Swift’s engagement with Confessional poetry. Swift’s use of vivid imagery, intimate details, and self-reflection draws listeners into the speaker’s world. The song’s juxtaposition of public spaces and private grief, make the deeply personal song feel incredibly universal.

4.2. Confessions and Chaos on *The Tortured Poets Department*

In February 2024, during her acceptance speech for winning Best Pop Vocal Album for *Midnights* (2022), Swift announced her album *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024). This album displays a raw and chaotic exploration of love, heartbreak, and self-reflection; Swift’s most autobiographical and Confessional album to date. Swift introduces the album with a prologue poem in the liner notes where she confesses: “as you might all unfortunately recall / I had been struck with a case of restricted humanity” (*The Tortured Poets Department* 2024). The speaker of this poem – Swift – describes the inspiration to the album, her six year relationship with actor Joe Alwyn – “tried dimming the shine / tried to orbit his planet / some stars never align” – her six week fling with singer Matty Healy – “And so I was out of the oven and into the microwave / Out of the slammer and into a tidal wave” and “He never even scratched the surface of me” –, and her current relationship with American Football player

Travis Kelce. After all, “All’s fair in love and poetry” (Taylor Swift 2024). Just three hours after the release of the original album, Swift released *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology* (2024), which contains fifteen more songs. Rob Sheffield described the album as “the cathartic confession of a woman who thought she had adulthood – and adult romance – all figured out, only to find herself realizing she knows nothing” (Sheffield “The Tortured Poets Department”). The album combines the intricate storytelling of *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020) with the synth pop gloss coating of *Midnights* (2022). Kitty Empire calls *The Tortured Poets Department* “Swift’s most Swiftian album,” for its blend of heartbreak, lyricism and emotional honesty. While some, like Lindsay Zoladz, critique the album for its focus as “hermetic” and overly focused on “the salvation of romantic love” (Zoladz “The Tortured Poets Department”). Swift best captures the feel of the album with the lines “So tell me everything is not about me / But what if it is?” (“Who’s Afraid of Little Old Me?” *The Tortured Poets Department* 2024).

The song “Cloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus” from *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*, tells the story of a relationship filled with hurt and self-examination. The song blends diaristic details, intimate address, and constructed personas, to explores themes of identity, love, and loss.

The song's opening lines – “Your hologram stumbled into my apartment / Hands in the hair of somebody in darkness / Named Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus” – suggest that the speaker was confronted by a picture of the addressee, their ex, on social media. “Your hologram” refers to a picture on social media. The speaker does not know who the addressee is kissing in the dark, but it is either “Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus” who are tagged in the picture. The following lines of the first verse suggest that the addressee is also confronted with the speaker on social media: “And you saw my bones out with somebody new / Who

seemed like he would've bullied you in school / And you just watched it happen." These lyrics suggest that the speaker is in a new relationship.

The song is laced with diaristic details of the speaker's life. They recount memories of the relationship and evoke a sense of heartbreak and regret. Especially in the second verse, the lines "You needed me, but you needed drugs more / And I couldn't watch it happen," reveal intimate and vulnerable details of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Simultaneously, they display the emotional toll of loving someone who is battling addiction. The next three lines – "I changed into goddesses, villains, and fools / Changed plans and lovers and outfits and rules / All to outrun my desertion of you" – are ambiguous in this context of addiction. These lines suggest a struggle with identity which is either caused by being with the addressee or by the loss of the addressee. These lines could be interpreted as the speaker admitting to constantly changing and adapting so they will fit into this world of the addressee; so that they would not desert the addressee. However, these lines could also be interpreted in the sense that the speaker changed themselves and kept busy as a way to not have to deal with the "desertion of you." The closing line of the second verse – "And you just watched it happen" – is also ambiguous. The "you" in this line can be the addressee. In this case, this line indicates that the addressee was aware that the speaker was changing so much about themselves to cope with the relationship. The "you" in this line could also be the listener. This would suggest that the speaker is turning to the listener and kind of blaming them by saying "You saw all this happening and did not interfere."

The song's chorus serves as the emotional center of the song that encapsulates the themes of heartbreak and identity:

If you wanna break my cold, cold heart

Just say, "I loved you the way that you were"

If you wanna tear my world apart

Just say you've always wondered

The use of the phrase “cold, cold heart” is ambiguous due to its specificity. The phrase employs metaphorical imagery to convey the speaker’s emotional detachment from the situation. The repetition of “cold” intensifies this sense of emotional numbness. However, the use of these words could also indicate that the addressee once told the speaker they have a cold heart. This could have had an immense emotional impact on the speaker, so much so that even after this relationship has ended it still preoccupies them. Similarly, the declarations “I loved you the way you were” and “you’ve always wondered” made by the addressee are deeply personal details of the relationship. The use of “were” instead of “are” is heartbreaking because it suggests that the addressee declared that they loved the speaker more before they adapted themselves to be more compatible with the addressee.

In the song’s bridge, the speaker reflects on the relationship and ponders where things went wrong: “If the glint in my eye traced the depths of your sigh / Down that passage in time back to the moment.” The lines “I crashed into you, like so many wrecks do / Too impaired by my youth to know what to do” suggest that the speaker pursued the addressee. “Like so many wrecks do” suggests that the addressee was popular and probably regularly had a new partner. The line “Too impaired by my youth to know what to do” indicates that the speaker is critical of their behavior at the time. They admit to being overly excited and inexperienced to properly deal with the situation.

The third verse describes a possible future for the speaker and the addressee: “So if I sell my apartment / And you have some kids with an internet starlet.” The speaker wonders that if they move, “will that make your memory fade from this scarlet maroon / Like it never happened?” This line references Swift’s song “Maroon” from *Midnight*s which is about a

complicated past relationship, where she sings “so scarlet is was maroon.” In this line, the speaker could be referring to two different shades of red. However, I believe them to be playing with the different meanings of both “scarlet” and “maroon.” The speaker could be referring to themselves as a “scarlet” which is a sexually promiscuous woman or a woman who commits adultery. Additionally, “maroon” is a verb that means to leave someone alone in an inaccessible place. Essentially deserting them, which is a word that is also used in the second verse. Thus, while this line references a previous Swift song and could therefore simply be referring to a complicated relationship, it could also be saying “will you forget me after you left me because I cheated?” or “now that you left me, will you pretend like we never happened?”

The final four lines of the second verse explore whether it would be possible to remain friends after the relationship had ended:

Could it be enough to just float in your orbit?

Can we watch our phantoms like watching wild horses?

Cooler in theory, but not if you force it to be

It just didn't happen

The speaker asks the addressee if it would be possible to be around each other again: “Could it be enough to just float in your orbit.” To simply exist in each other’s world and not engage with what happened between them. This is similar to the act of watching wild horses which is something that needs to be done very carefully so as to not scare them. Being friends with an ex-romantic partner is “[cool] in theory” but if you force it, it is extremely awkward and will not happen.

The final chorus is different from the two before. Instead of declaring “So if you wanna break my cold, cold heart / just say, “I loved you the way that you were”, the speaker says “Say you loved me.” This line would suggest that either the addressee never told the speaker that they loved them. Or never confessed their true feelings. However, it could also mean that the speaker is so emotionally distraught by the relationship that simply hearing that the addressee loves them would break their heart.

The final lines of the song – “Cause I wonder / Will I always / Will I always wonder?” – express a continuing sense of uncertainty and introspection. The repetition in these lines emphasize that the speaker is questioning what could have been.

“Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus” is a deeply emotional and introspective song. It employs Confessional elements like the direct address to an ex-partner which draws the listener into the emotional world of the speaker. The song explores themes of love and identity in a way that bridges personal vulnerability and universal vulnerability.

4.3. From Sleepless Nights to a Tortured Poet

This chapter demonstrated how *Midnights* and *The Tortured Poets Department* portray a reinvention of Swift’s lyricism. On both albums, she draws from the Confessional tradition. Throughout these albums, Swift blends autobiographical elements, vivid imagery, and introspection which creates two works that are both personal and universal.

With *Midnights*, Swift captures the emotional turbulence of sleepless nights. She uses themes of self-reflection, identity, and public perception to craft songs that resonate with listeners on an intimate level. Swift’s ability to juxtapose vulnerability with self-awareness, reveals that she is able to experience herself through the lens of the world around her.

Similarly, *The Tortured Poets Department* marks Swift's most Confessional work to date, as she delves into themes of identity and love through the use of elevated poetic language. Song like "Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus" display Swift's ability to construct layered and emotionally rich songs.

Swift's use of the naked "I" and direct address draws the listener into the story. Her use of vivid imagery allows the listener to experience the story as it unfolds. Additionally, the use of universally known imagery and references allows the listener to relate to the songs.

Conclusion. “Dear Reader”: A Pop Star and a Confessional Poet

This thesis has aimed to answer the question: “How does Taylor Swift’s lyricism and public image reflect the traditions of Confessional poetry and fourth-wave feminism in her exploration of identity, love, and societal expectations?” Throughout her career, Swift evolved from a diaristic country singer-songwriter to a pop star who employs Confessional elements in her lyrics.

Swift’s early career – the *Taylor Swift* (2006), *Fearless* (2008), and *Speak Now* (2010) eras – was defined by a carefully curated public image of relatability. These eras defined Swift as an artist with no barriers between herself and her audience, both emotionally and physically. Her willingness to share deeply personal narratives invites listeners to perceive Swift as an authentic and approachable figure which fosters a unique sense of intimacy. During this period in her career, Swift subtly challenged traditional gender norms. She rejected overt sexualization and instead portrayed a version of self-empowerment that was rooted in individuality and artistic integrity. This defiance of societal expectations alongside her relatable persona laid the basis for her evolution as a feminist and Confessional poet. The songs on these first three albums are diaristic; they describe the inner thoughts of a girl who is trying to navigate life. These songs are beautifully written, but they generally do not display the poetic and elevated language used in later albums. However, there are outliers like “Tied Together With a Smile” which contains the lyrics:

I guess it’s true love that love was all you wanted
 ‘Cause you’re giving it away like it’s extra change
 Hoping it will end up in his pocket
 But he leaves you out like a penny in the rain

Oh, ‘cause it’s not his price to pay (*Taylor Swift* 2006)

These lines portray Swift’s poetic abilities even in these first eras. The following eras – *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014) and *reputation* (2017) – signified a shift in Swift’s public persona. She switched to more of a pop sound which elevated her career. Consequently, Swift received more media attention, both positive and negative. This accumulated to Swift disappearing from the public eye before the release of *reputation*. *Red* was a turning point in Swift’s lyricism. On this album she explored the conflicting emotions of love through the use of vivid imagery, emotional honesty, and poetic introspection. *1989* and *reputation* display Swift’s resilience and autonomy. Even though *1989* is a synth-pop album, the songs display a growth in Swift’s lyricism. The use of extended metaphors for “Out of the Woods” and “Wonderland” suggests that despite the switch to a different musical genre, Swift’s focus is on her lyrics. *reputation* solidified Swift as an artist who can overcome obstacles. This album explores the duality of Swift’s public and private lives through Confessional songwriting. The *Lover* (2019) era coincided with Swift’s political awakening. Swift became a political influencer by endorsing the Democratic Party and by campaigning for the passing of the Equality Act. These political engagements reflect the principles of fourth-wave feminism, which emphasizes intersectionality, inclusivity, and activism on digital platforms. By using her platform to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, Swift demonstrates how fourth-wave feminism intersects with larger social justice movements. On *Lover*, Swift critiques social injustices on songs like “The Man,” and “You Need to Calm Down.” Additionally, she explored the concept of love in songs like “The Archer” and “Paper Rings.” Swift’s two pandemic albums, *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020), display her growth as a storyteller. These albums portray an elevated use of poetic language. Finally, *Midnights* (2022) and *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024) portray how Swift is able to employ Confessional elements and poetic language while exploring themes of identity and love.

Swift's autobiographical style, first-person narrative, and emotional candor positioned her within the tradition of Confessional poetry.

In conclusion, Swift employs Confessional techniques throughout her entire discography. Swift employs the Confessional techniques as described by Molesworth. Swift writes autobiographically. She writes about past traumas and personal struggles. The emotional vulnerability she displays in her lyrics invites the listeners into her psyche. Swift portrays self-awareness which creates tension between sincerity and performance. Through her lyricism, Swift adopts a persona which she employs to explore personal struggles. Additionally, by drawing on the "naked I" as described by Schetrumpf, Swift's lyrics encourage listeners to identify with the speaker's experiences, whether it be heartbreak, vulnerability, or self-discovery. This is further enhanced by the use of "you" in her lyrics, which Waters argues draws listeners into the narrative, making them feel involved. Together, the interplay between the "I" and "you" in Swift's lyrics creates an emotional bridge, enabling her audience to relate to both sides of the story. While traditional Confessional poets often rely on religious and mythological imagery to connect with their audience, Swift achieves a similar effect through the use of popular culture references that are familiar to her listeners. Her lyrics are rich with references to high school, Americana, and fairy tales, which evoke a sense of universal experiences.

Of course, this thesis has its limitations. There is infinitely more to say about Swift and her discography, but that would be outside the scope of this research. One thing that I have not analyzed are the re-recordings. This choice was made due to the limits set for this thesis. However, building on this research it would be interesting to explore the alterations Swift made to these albums and what the vault tracks could imply for the evolution of Swift's lyricism. Similarly, this thesis has not considered the *Eras Tour*. This tour had an immense

cultural impact and probably also inspired the release of *The Tortured Poets Department*.

Exploring the connection between the re-recordings, *Eras Tour* and *The Tortured Poets Department* would give rise to interesting research.

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