

Literariness in select popular songs of Taylor Swift

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Abstract

Taylor Swift is one of the moving forces on planet at the present moment hailed for her writing and cultural impact. Hailing from Reading, Pennsylvania, who started her career at a young age of sixteen, she has been a critically acclaimed songwriter during her long enduring career of almost two decades. Her songwriting skills are slowly entering academics as they are worth noticing as a part of literature. Therefore, this paper aims to read a few of her songs in the light of a model of literariness, as provided by two Professors Emeritus, Dr. David S. Miall and Dr. Don Kuiken, who necessitates an integrated approach of three elements of literariness. By excluding the performance of the songstress and focusing on the lyrics right off the bat, this paper examines her literariness that aids her literary functionality.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Songwriting; Literariness; Taylor Swift

1 Introduction

One of the generation-defining pop stars of the twenty first century, Taylor Swift is a force to be reckoned with. Known for her songwriting skills right from the beginning of her career, the best selling artist is known for her storytelling, her articulation of personal life through her songs and delivery of the most intricate emotions through her songwriting due to which she has notably entered the academics in different parts of the world as well. Her connectivity with her huge fanbase and the youth across the world owes a large part to her writing acumen which is being recognized by academicians widely recently. Born on December 13, 1989, in West Reading, Pennsylvania, she started learning music at the age of nine in New York City. Inspired by country-pop artists like Dolly Parton, Shania Twain, Faith Hill, Paul McCartney and with literary influences ranging from Shakespeare, Hawthorne, William Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost to F. Scott Fitzgerald, she penned her first song at around the age of twelve. In her early teenage years, her family moved to Nashville so that she could successfully pursue her country music career over there where she started working with songwriter Liz Rose during afternoon sessions. Later signing a big record deal with Big Machine Records, she went on to release her first single "Tim McGraw" at the age of sixteen with an eponymous debut album in 2006 (Wikipedia). Right from the inception of her career, she was noted for her songwriting skills that made her a successful artist in the industry today and also one of the leading forces that brought the lyrics of the songs to the focus at an age of high pop culture fused with heavy experiments in music and lesser focus on lyricism. During the course of her career that spans across almost over a decade, she had multiple world records, awards, number one singles and albums that celebrate her artistry in all aspects. Recently, she also won the Nashville Songwriters award in 2022 and also became the only artist to win Album of the Year at Grammys four times, that provides evidences enough of how excellent of a songwriter she is (Wikipedia). With her recent entry into the academics, she has begun to be critically acclaimed as a writer; one fine example being an undergraduate course with the name "The Taylor Swift Songbook" being run by Professor of English, Dr. Elizabeth Scala, at University of Texas. Hence, this paper too is an attempt to explore her songwriting skills and to look for the elements of literariness in her writing with the help of the theory on literariness developed by Dr. David S. Miall and Dr. Don Kuiken through their jointly published paper titled "What is literariness? Three Components of literary reading".

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Professor David S. Miall is an Emeritus English professor at the Department of English and Film Studies in the University of Alberta who had his doctorate in 1980 from the University of Wales. His contribution in academics includes numerous publications on British Romantic period, literary computing and empirical study of literary reading. He co-wrote the paper "What is literariness? Three Components of literary reading" with his long-time collaborator and colleague at the same university, Prof. Don Kuiken. He is serving as Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta while he received his doctorate degree from the University of Texas. His areas of interests include cognitive psychology, psychological aesthetics, dreaming, phenomenological psychology, memorable literary reading and more. Their formerly mentioned collaborative paper was published in the journal *Volume 28 of Discourse processes* in Issue 2 in the year 1999. The paper aimed to critically examine and empirically study the concept of literariness. It counter-argues the models elaborated by Postmodern literary theorists and Cognitive psychologist by analyzing reader responses and proposing a three-component model of literariness. The three components that determine the literariness of a particular text are - a. Foregrounding stylistics or narrative features, b. Readers' 'defamiliarizing responses and c. The consequent modification of personal meanings or reinterpretive transformations.

It was argued in the paper that various theorists have differing perspectives on what literariness implies. For example, from the viewpoint of Postmodernist theorists, to read literature follows seeing it as an "outcome of rhetorical devices designed to promote a particular ideology" (Miall and Kuiken); while cognitive theorists see literary reading as "second order effect" (Miall and Kuiken) involving an organization that requires cognitive processes cognizant to any other prose or even a conversation. It can be easily derived that in any way, "anything can be literature" (Miall and Kuiken) as proposed by Eagleton. Hence, following this tenet, this paper also aims to seek a literary reading of a few select songs by the singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift to check the underlying literariness of these songs. The term literariness was first coined by Roman Jakobson in 1921 suggesting literariness to be anything but a "characteristic set of conventions" (Miall and Kuiken). But Miall and Kuiken find it to be a "product of a distinctive mode of reading that is identifiable through three key components of response to literary texts" (Miall and Kuiken). All of these must co-exist and interact for a text or discourse to be literary.

"The Great War" is the first bonus track off of her 2022 album *Midnights (3 am Edition)* that serves the purpose of her album that is about the songs that she wrote during her sleepless nights as the song discusses the haunting fear of losing her partner in a romantic relationship, while promising a future together by the end of the song as they overgrew the tension between them. The song describes the narrator, that is probably Taylor herself, reflecting on a tumultuous time of her relationship as she felt devastated by the conflict between her and her lover. She likens this period of time to the World War I, as it is suggested from the title. Throughout the song, she brilliantly allegorizes the battle scene to her tough times using various literary devices and techniques to share a slice of her life through her subjective lyrics. The song ends on a point of reconciliation, as she becomes one with the lover and even after a win, she feels lost in her confidence, truth and love for him as she lowers her guards down and gives in to their love and survives the war. A detailed analysis of the song that brings out its literariness is studied further, that easily establishes it as one of the most literary songs she has ever written.

Her song, "So Long, London" is also one such song which was released in 2024 as a part of her latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, that revolves around the theme of heartbreak, rumored to be about her long-time boyfriend, Joe Alwyn, with whom she broke up in 2023. The song drops cues on the reason for their tragic breakup, as she reminisces of him through the metaphor of the place he belongs, that is, London. The vulnerable track details her emotions about her relationship status in the rawest form as she sees through the relationship now that it is over.

"Bigger Than the Whole Sky" is another bonus track from the 2022 album *Midnights (3 am Edition)* that ambiguously talks about the grief felt at the loss of someone whom the narrator has not ever met. Critics and her fans have speculated the song to address the loss felt at miscarriage too yet the singer-songwriter never confirmed this. The song is also a musing on a short time spent with a person who became quite important during that short time that was spent between the two. The tone of lamentation and grief spans the entire song regardless of the addressed person it is aimed at. The song is written from the perspective of an unnamed narrator who faces a relationship that lasted for a brief period of time and hence she contemplated the entire musing in the form of a song. If it is taken from another perspective that sees it from the point of view of a soon to be mother who recently had a miscarriage, then the narrator might be that woman as well. Yet no detail of autobiographical image prevails, the intricate details remain ambiguous.

1.1 Foregrounding stylistics or narrative features

On Reading a literary text, there must occur some unique stylistic variations that are unique to that text and disassociated from other texts as well. In simple words, there should be a distinctive style of writing which can be

figured out by the use of specific rhetorical devices like metaphors, personification and simile. These devices foreground literariness and devoid the text of any ordinary use of language.

The song, "The Great War" opens with the use of simile and a striking symbol of violets, which might refer to the delicacy of flowers and hence symbolizing vulnerability; while in literature, violets are often associated with fidelity, faithfulness and modesty. Also, the color of violet is left when knuckles are bruised enough and it is visible in the lyrics as well, as she says, "My knuckles were bruised like violets/ sucker punching walls, cursed you as I sleep talked" (Swift 00:00:02-00:00:11). Hence, it shows how frustrating it had been for her sustaining that tension as she is left bruised punching walls where the violet color symbolizes her fidelity, frustration and modesty on a deeper level, and on a shallow level, her constant punches have made her knuckles become bruised and hence turned violet, again showing frustration and self-harm in relationship. Further she feels as if she has become "spineless" because she cannot take her stand anymore and silence has been personified as to give an image of death as she says "spineless in my tomb of silence" (Swift 00:00:12-00:00:16), hence referring to how silence between both of them has made her give up in the face of the war she was facing. Further, she uses a clever metaphor of "banners" which she tears down as she goes for an underground battle which symbolizes a passive attack on her opponent which is her partner here in the war. Hence, devices like metaphor, personification, symbols and simile are used in entire poem to show various colors of a battle scene, as she fights against her partner and herself as well, and all that remains intact all the while is the scene of war, which is the part of her narrative to describe the entire situation.

In "So Long, London", she uses the urban landscape as a metaphor to bid goodbye to her ex-lover as she remembers him through the metaphor, London. The melody in the opening lines, "So (So) long (Long), London (London)" (Swift 00:00:01-00:00:17) resemble wedding bells and she juxtaposes this idea with the lines in the latter part of the song where she says, "I died on the altar waiting for the proof" (Swift 00:03:03-00:03:05). In a crafty manner, in the first verse, she likens the image of mist of London to the symbolic mist in their personal space which made their relationship difficult yet she could still look backwards into the time when they lit the Christmas lights together to which she has referenced in her previous song "Lover" from her 2019 eponymous album. Through the symbols of mist and fairy lights, she illustrates the status of their bond which was once brighter and dazzling but everything changed and it turned hazy because of the obstacles in their path as the song opens up with these lines, "I saw in my mind fairy lights through the mist" (Swift 00:00:30-00:00:33). Another imagery further into the song where she says that her "spine split from carrying us up the hill" (Swift 00:00:42-00:00:44) can be likened to that of Sisyphus rolling the boulder upwards, signifying the absurdity of their relation which had become so exhausting, dull, boring and redundant for them. Further personification of her relationship through the song can be seen when she complains of stopping CPR because it felt useless to her. Her relationship is compared to a human that needs to grow and nurture but they see no viability in performing even CPR for their exhausted and dying relation. The image that she draws in the chorus, "Two graves, one gun" (Swift 00:01:56-00:02:01) indicates the fact that while calling it quits, they both hurt each other equally. After shooting the other, the person shot himself eventually. "White knuckle dying grip" (Swift 00:02:14-00:02:16) shows her willingness to hold on to their bond while not letting him go that she was even ready to drown for him, in her symbolic ship, which she was accused of abandoning. The image of knuckles is something which was witnessed in "The Great War" too, hence showing the verisimilitude of the status as depicted in both the narratives, yet the only difference that in the former song, the relationship was saved but in the latter, the relationship ended brutally.

She plays with the imagery and myth of King Midas in her song "Bigger Than the Whole Sky" as she seems to make everything she touches "sick with sadness" (Swift 00:00:29-00:00:36) implying how contagious is her grief at the loss of her short term relationship. The title is an allusion to the poem "The Brain is Wider Than the Sky" by Emily Dickinson. The songstress draws the parallel between the expanse of imaginative power and inner thoughts that make the outlook on external things quite monumental as the narrator here made things bigger for herself through her hopes and expectations of that bond.

1.2 Defamiliarization

Literary texts have the quality of making familiar and conventional moments look unfamiliar. Authors often pick familiar objects and events from life to represent them unfamiliarly in their writings. It is evident in the entire song itself as to how she picks up a conventional theme of tension/conflict in a relationship, but gives it a larger than life treatment by likening it to a war scene, particularly "The Great War" here. The unusual narrative is served through the uses of various rhetorical devices again to magnify a conventionally common/usual concept. In the song, she describes her having flashbacks later on in the manner where she has fought the battle and now the flashes or horrors of war are haunting her, hence leaving her devastated and drained. She writes, "Flashes of the battle come back to me in a blur" (Swift 00:00:32-00:00:37), using the symbol of battle again to refer to her fight with her partner, which was everything like a war. In the chorus again, she contrasts the image of bloodshed with a flower, which is crimson clover this time as she

narrates “All that bloodshed, crimson clover” (Swift 00:00:40-00:00:43). It is not a literal physical fight, but the emotional torture and tension is nothing more than a battle to her, and it was so intense that she felt the bloodshed, metaphorically, all over her mind and senses. The violent imagery of the war is constantly pushing the narrative forward in such other examples in the song further, like “you drew some good faith treaties/ I drew curtains closed, drank my poison all alone” (Swift 00:01:02-00:01:05) where she is referring to consumption and insobriety as a part of coping mechanism during her times of anxiety. Despite his constant efforts to make amends, her toxic habits are putting more tension between them, and what relates it to the entire scene of war in the lines is the scene of aftermath of war, where compromises are being held and the other party is reluctant, symbolically for personal reasons here. A further use of metaphor to define this situation is taken forward as she goes on to write “but diesel is desire, you were playing with fire” (Swift 00:01:17-00:01:21).

By picking up landscape for a metaphor, she exemplifies a unique trait to her writing which was evident in her previous song, “Cornelia Street” as well. Hence, her lover’s national identity becomes synonymous with his and indicates the depth of their relationship. Her symbol of ship and the imagery of drowning is again one of the ways she articulates how desperately she was trying to save their bond. Another image of her using CPR on the relationship personified as human is yet another way of expressing the dying affection and impending danger on their love.

In the song, “Bigger Than the Whole Sky” she alludes to the butterfly effect through her lines, “Did some bird flap its wings over in Asia?” (Swift 00:01:39-00:01:45) as she sees the separation and loss as a part of a bigger cosmic experience that might have happened far off in the east. She furthers this cosmic consequence as a result of lack of faith in prayers and religious activities when she says, “Did some force take you because I didn't pray?” (Swift 00:01:50-00:01:56). The line in the beginning where she talks about touching everything to turn it sad is also something where she puts synesthetic imagery to show her idea of sadness and grief.

1.3 Reinterpretive transformations

Following the reflection upon defamiliarizing expressions and their implications, their reinterpretive efforts transforms the conventional concepts, events or feelings. The interval that precedes reinterpretation is carried by the presence of feelings as the primary vehicle that helps in locating an appropriate context to render a new understanding. Hence, emotions are felt in an exclusively new way.

The setting of the entire song as a waged war gives a fresh outlook to the anxieties of a relationship. By using various metaphors, symbols and such figures, the songwriter has successfully transformed the usual tension between a pair to the likening of a war scene, where she has used diverse symbols of war like banners, bruises, battle, treaties and more. One fine example can be taken from the bridge of the song, which is highly notable. There she goes on to find an expression

It turned into something bigger
Somewhere in the haze, got a sense I've been betrayed
Your finger on my hairpin triggers,
Soldier down on that icy ground
Looked upon me with honor and truth
Broken and blue, so I called off the troops
That was the night I nearly lost you
I thought I really lost you. (Swift 00:02:12-00:02:49)

Here she feels lost and betrayed in the dust that follows the aftermath of the war and yet not being able to see clearly, she could equally see something bigger between them and sense a feeling of betrayal. She follows this expression by finding a sign of provocation from her lover as his fingers lay on her hairpin, triggering her enough causing frustration. Here, she wittily juxtaposes the imagery of a gun trigger and hairpin, hairpin being the sign of femininity. She compares her lover further to soldier laying on an icy ground, hence defenseless and beaten down. This is followed by a point of reconciliation, as even after so much struggle against the agony, anxiety and felt pangs of the speaker, he looks up at her

with honor and truth-honor being a sign of war again, that too at the face of defeat. This lets her in confidence of her lover that he could be trusted as even after winning the war, she loses herself to the trust in her lover, and he wins, defenseless against his lover. So she drops her guards and let the troops off — symbolically — and she regrets her decision to fight with him as she reinforces her regret by repeating her thought of thinking that she would have lost him in her fit of rage. Hence, the grand scale of a simple fight between the two lovers, reinforced by the imageries and scenes of war create a sublime way for the feelings of the songwriter, that is witnessed throughout the song.

In the song, “So Long, London”, she expresses her various efforts to save the relationship, which she could not eventually. She utters the lines,

So How much sad did you think I had

Did you think I had I me?

How much tragedy?” (Swift 00:02:34-00:02:45)

This shows the level of sadness that she hid all throughout the period of their togetherness. In fact the imagery of “stitches undone” (Swift 00:01:50-00:01:54) explains how their connection broke in an undone manner leaving the stitches open for her to hurt forever. The pangs of abandonment and the anxieties in a relationship are well discussed in the entire song effortlessly by the writer. By dropping exact whereabouts of her ex lover in verse second of the song, “I left all I knew, you left me at the house by the Heath” (Swift 00:01:25-00:01:29) makes the songwriting very obvious to whom it is pointed to. Her frustration at wasting her youth trying to hide their relationship from the public’s eye all got wasted as the person was never ready for all of it, and the annoyance becomes clear when she writes, “And I’m pissed off you let me give you all that youth for free” (Swift 00:01:35-00:01:42). Hence, the song vividly expresses the pangs of a breaking relationship through various dark images and realistic confessions that are rampant throughout the song.

The separation anxiety of the narrator is evident in the song “Bigger Than the Whole Sky” where she is lamenting the death of child from the perspective of a mother, if the interpretation is to taken to be about miscarriage, or it can point towards grief over a dead relationship that lasted for a short period of time. The magnitude of the narrator’s grief can be estimated by the metaphor of sky that she has used in the title and the chorus of the song. Through the use of the symbol of expanse of the sky, she skillfully measures how deep and wide her grief might be, while also demonstrating the image of all of this being part of a cosmic plan that led to the separation of the loved one. The intensity of the despondence felt in that short period of time can be measured from the order of modal verbs of probabilities she has used in the chorus of the song, “what could’ve been, would’ve been/ what should’ve been you” (Swift 00:01:12-00:01:16). The probabilities expressed by these modal verbs is in ascending order from being least possible to most strictly possible. Hence, she asserts the presence of that person to be everything that centers around the narrator. Moreover, by using the image of death and with the use of symbol of ashes in the second verse, she again reinforces the idea of how dead the narrator might be feeling inside because after the separation. With the parallel between her title and Emily’s title of the poem with a similar name, “The Brain is Wider Than the Sky”, she reinterprets the idea of how powerful the brain is and what limits it can cross to imagine things and bring it to the level of having seamless hopes and expectations, that makes the leaving worse.

David Miall and Don Kuiken have suggested that for a discourse to be literary, all the three components need to function together with integrity. In their words, “literariness is constituted when stylistic or narrative variations strikingly defamiliarize conventionally understood referents and prompt reinterpretive transformations of a conventional concept or feeling” (Miall and Kuiken) and hence a cohesive network of the three components is necessary for literariness to function. The three must function in a close symbiotic relationship in order to produce a literary effect in any discourse studied. Taylor Swift’s narrative features are characterized by the use of literary devices like simile, metaphor, and personification to create vivid imagery and convey complex emotions. In “The Great War,” she has used vivid imagery to illustrate the pain and frustration of a tumultuous relationship. She defamiliarizes her expression by transforming familiar themes into grand narratives. Swift incorporates metaphorical landscapes and synesthetic imagery to amplify the emotional impact through her words. Her songwriting employs reinterpretive transformations for the conveyance of deeply felt complex emotions. By using illustrative metaphors and symbols, she transforms ordinary feelings into larger than life narratives, as witnessed in “So Long, London” and “Bigger Than the Whole Sky”. These songs leave a profound impact by exploring themes of love, loss, and grief. As detailed in the song, “The Great War” itself, it can easily be found out that all the three components have worked really well together to bind emotions the songstress felt into a battleground scene. She pulls off different techniques of literary writing to create an impact on

the readers that defamiliarize the conventional emotions and values and hence modifies the meaning of a plain scene of fight between the two lovers, where one has totally lost the faith in other, while the other tries his best to let her in his confidence and goes defenseless to the point of reconciliation in the end. A diverse use of war related symbols and metaphors create a unique sensibility in the song that brings out the best literary acumen of the writer and hence proving a fact that even as a pop-songwriter, she has the ability to write literary pieces of work with a sensibility that is close to the writers of literary canon. Another witness of this calibre of hers is quite evident through her song "So Long, London" which is well crafted with images and unique metaphors of her own to describe a dying relation that is sure to break apart. Through the use of various tropes and figures of speech, she gives the every minute detail of their bond that she was trying so hard to save all through the passage of time. "Bigger Than the Whole Sky" is yet another song on the lamentation and grief once a relationship is over. The narrator here is unnamed and it's unsure whether the song is autobiographical or not, yet the song carries the same undertones in a different light. Hence, she has a way of writing sad songs, especially about break up and relationships, each time providing a range of tropes and unique ways of expression. Her narratives are peculiar to her writing style that can be traced in the study of her discography at length which can provide a rich repository for research again. The way she has articulated sadness and separation anxiety in the few select songs in this study is an exemplary effort to showcase how she can transform the same feelings in different expressions every time to give a fresher perspective and outlook. These songs are amongst the few that display her skills as that parallel any other literary figure. All of the selected songs might carry the same undertones and thematic concerns, yet they provide a wide scale of expression that suffices her image as a literary figure and proves her literalness as she uses a particular style to defamiliarize and eventually lead the readers to a point of reinterpetive transformation of the same feeling across different songs. She handpicks the universal emotion of heartbreak that is quite rampant in the contemporary generation owing to the hassles and relationship issues that youth culture face today to turn them into powerful expressions of literacy importance. This corroborates her position in academics at present as well and justifies the reason why she is hailed as one of the greatest songwriters of all times. Her writing skills in display here can serve as an exemplary feat to open up vistas of future researches that can be undertaken to determine different aspects of her writing style- be them intrinsic or extrinsic. This paper proves a point that she is 'literally' 'more than just being a pop star and can hold importance of literary significance where she can be equally launched into a platform alongside great writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and/or others. Her entry into academia can be accompanied by suggesting her writings as co-texts or suggested readings with the canon. Their use in language classes to teach tropes and language to the students can also be a great help owing to the massive appeal and mania she holds amongst the youth. By providing impetus to her writing as a subject of literary discourse and using her universal appeal amidst the contemporary generation, literature can gain momentum with her storytelling that is at par with the calibre of other authors of the same discipline. Hence, this paper can prove helpful to provide a lens into the vast discography by Taylor Swift that holds the same literary vitality, or at least similar literariness as that of the other writers included and taught inside the classrooms of literary and language studies.

2 Conclusion

Taylor Swift's artistry extends beyond pop music. Her songwriting is filled with rich devices and narrative depth that establishes her as a significant voice of this generation. She can prove to be a fine example of contemporary literature. By exploring literariness in her songs through the framework provided by David S. Miall and Don Kuiken, her unique stylistic features are revealed. She has finely defamiliarized expressions with her unique style of writing using vivid devices and tropes to render reinterpetive transformations of related themes of love, loss and grief as studied in the paper. She offers a valuable resources for further academic exploration and pedagogical use and has the ability to stand alongside literary giants. It can also help bridge the gap in academics between popular culture and academic enquiry.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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