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'There's Nothing like a Mad Woman'

A Feminist Analysis of Gothic Elements and
Folklore Narrative in Taylor Swift's *folklore* Album

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Nicole Falkenhayner

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Abstract

This dissertation strives to explore the effect and utilization of Gothic folklore elements that are present in Taylor Swift's 2020 album *folklore*. The album differentiates itself from her previous 'diaristic' songwriting style, as it is inspired by dreams and her imagination "running wild" during Covid-19 lockdown. By creating and exploring individual characters and narrations, with Gothic tropes and folklore traditions, she is able to convey anxieties and emotions that resonate with many during turbulent times. Not only is she able to resonate with her fans and the feeling of isolation due to the pandemic, but also feelings of isolation and powerlessness within the patriarchal structures of society. Despite writing an album with various characters and narratives, the storylines throughout the album ultimately turn the lens back on herself in a mystical autobiography where fans speculate on what is "real" and what is not.

In this thesis, I will seek to thoroughly examine the stories presented in a selected number of songs. Through my examination, I will attempt to establish the purpose behind utilizing Gothic and folklore elements, as well as its effect on the listeners. To do this, I will first examine the historical and cultural purpose and relevance of Gothic folklore. Next, I will study Taylor Swift's artistic identity, significant life events, and political stance. From this information, the final chapter will be an analysis of selected lyrics from various songs on the *folklore* album through a feminist lens while also drawing attention to aspects of Swift's own life and how she re-works her public image in the songs. The songs selected for this are in order of appearance: *the lakes*, *mad woman*, *the last great american dynasty*, *my tears ricochet*, *mad woman*, *seven*, and *hoax*.

Establishing the female Gothic- and folklore tradition reveals recurrent themes of isolation, powerlessness, anger, retribution, and most importantly, criticism of patriarchy. Similarly, these themes are explored in Swift's *folklore* album. Whether this is a conscious decision by Swift, to pay tribute to these historical women writers, or if there is an underlying psychological reason behind the parallelism will be discussed.

Sammendrag

Denne masteravhandlingen forsøker å utforske effekten og utnyttelsen av gotiske folkløse-elementer som er til stede i Taylor Swifts album *folklore* fra 2020. Albumet skiller seg fra hennes tidligere dagbok-lignende låtskrivestil, ettersom det er inspirert av drømmer og hennes fantasi som «løper løpsk» under Covid-19-lockdown. Ved å skape og utforske individuelle karakterer og fortellinger, med gotiske elementer og folkløse-tradisjoner, er hun i stand til å formidle angst og følelser som gir gjenklang hos mange i turbulente tider. Ikke bare er hun i stand til å resonere med fansen og følelsen av isolasjon på grunn av pandemien, men også følelser av isolasjon og maktesløshet innenfor de patriarkalske strukturene i samfunnet. Til tross for at hun skrev et album med forskjellige karakterer og fortellinger, snur historiene gjennom albumet til slutt linsen tilbake på seg selv i en mystisk selvbiografi der fans spekulerer i hva som er "ekte" og hva som ikke er det.

I denne oppgaven vil jeg forsøke å grundig undersøke historiene som presenteres i et utvalgt antall sanger. Gjennom min undersøkelse vil jeg forsøke å fastslå hensikten bak bruken av gotiske og folkløse-elementer, samt dens effekt på lytterne. For å gjøre dette vil jeg først undersøke det historiske og kulturelle formålet og relevansen til gotisk folkløse. Deretter vil jeg studere Taylor Swifts kunstneriske identitet, viktige livshendelser og politiske holdninger. Fra denne informasjonen vil det siste kapittelet være en analyse av utvalgte tekster fra ulike sanger på *folklore* albumet gjennom en feministisk linse, samtidig som jeg vil rette oppmerksomhet mot hendelser i Swift's eget liv og hvordan hun omarbeider sitt offentlige image i sangene. Sangene som er valgt for dette er i rekkefølge etter når de er nevnt: *the lakes*, *mad woman the last great american dynasty*, *my tears ricochet*, *mad woman*, *seven*, og *hoax*.

Å etablere den kvinnelige gotiske tradisjonen og folkløse-tradisjonen avslører tilbakevendende temaer som isolasjon, maktesløshet, sinne, gjengjeldelse og kritikk av patriarkatet. På samme måte utforskes disse temaene i Swifts *folklore* album. Hvorvidt dette er en bevisst beslutning fra Swift, å hylle disse historiske kvinnelige forfatterne, eller om det er en underliggende psykologisk årsak bak parallellismen vil bli diskutert.

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Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Nicole Falkenhayner for her encouragement and guidance throughout this process. Her comments, as well as her pointers to sources, were incredibly helpful. I would also like to thank her for her encouraging feedback, reassuring me when I sometimes struggled to stay confident in my work.

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Lastly, I would like to thank Taylor Swift, as I could not have written this thesis without her and her incredible songwriting. I am looking forward to seeing you in August.

Notes on citation

Due to the dissertation's examination of various songs, the songs will be cited as their titles in the text but will be referenced in the bibliography as part of the folklore album.

Additionally, Taylor Swift is cited various times for different works and interviews within the same year (2020). The in-text citations for Swift's materials are therefore organized chronologically and will be cited as below:

Swift, 2020a – the *folklore* album (songs on the album)

Swift, 2020b – the *folklore* album booklet

Swift, 2020c – the Netflix documentary 'Miss Americana'

Swift, 2020d – the Disney+ documentary 'folklore: the long pond studio sessions'

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Introduction

In June 2020, during the first COVID-19 quarantine, music artist Taylor Swift surprised her fans with a new album, as a result of the isolation following the pandemic, called *folklore*. This album differs from her previous country-pop music, as it was written in an indie-folk style. The album is rich with descriptive scenes, complex characters, and cohesive narratives. She moves away from her usual diaristic songwriting style to a folklore-inspired storytelling narrative, utilizing Gothic elements and perspectives of both real people and made-up characters inspired by people in her life. Rolling Stone magazine described the album as "Goth-folk", as well as "full of unexpected experiments, ambitious story songs and moments of narrative mythmaking that often turn the lens back on herself" (Shaffer). In her work, the Gothic elements present can be compared to that of women writers of the 19th century. By drawing parallels between her works and the female Gothic literary canon, one might gain valuable insight into the thematic resonance and artistic significance that emerges from these elements.

This is significant research as analysing literature is of importance in an academic and social context. For instance, studying feminist literature, which these lyrics are argued to be, offers insight into the complexities of gender dynamics, social structures, and individual and universal experiences. Moreover, analysing and comparing contemporary feminist literature to earlier works help uncover how perceptions of gender have evolved and how they continue to shape individuals and society. By criticizing social power structures, such as the patriarchy, and how they perpetuate inequality, it is possible to encourage critical discussions on how to dismantle them. Exploring feminist themes and narratives in literature challenges traditional norms and stereotypes, promoting a deeper understanding of the diversity of gender experiences. As women's voices have historically been marginalized or silenced in literature and folklore, it is vital to bring them to the forefront. With that said, it is easy to justify the choice of Taylor Swift's work to be analysed, as she is arguably one of the biggest pop stars of our time. Her rise in popularity, especially among women, could be because of her highlighting and representing a female experience resonating with many. Swift's lyrics promote resistance, solidarity, and inspiration for women to challenge oppressive norms and expectations, ultimately empowering them. By engaging with feminist literature, readers and listeners can develop empathy and a deeper understanding of other individuals and their experiences. Analysing this contemporary album by such a highly relevant artist contributes to a new perspective in the field, as it is yet to be explored in depth.

The first chapter will focus on the historical and cultural purpose and relevance of Gothic folklore. The second chapter centres around Taylor Swift's artistic identity, significant life events, and political stance. The third and final chapter will analyse selected lyrics from various songs on the *folklore* album through a feminist lens while also drawing attention to aspects of Swift's own life and how she re-works her public image in the songs. Establishing the female Gothic- and folklore tradition reveals recurrent themes of isolation, powerlessness, anger, retribution, and most importantly, criticism of the patriarchy. Similarly, these themes are explored in Swift's *folklore* album. Whether this is a conscious decision by Swift, to pay tribute to these historical women writers, or if there is an underlying psychological reason behind the parallelism can be discussed. This thesis will therefore explore the reasons behind Taylor Swift's utilization of Gothic literary elements and her incorporation of folk storytelling traditions in her *folklore* album.

Moreover, its effect on her storytelling will also be studied. To gain a better understanding of the tropes and Swift's decision to utilize them, this thesis will also discuss the historical and cultural significance of folklore and Gothic literature. In addition, one chapter will discuss the importance of Swift's artistic identity considering Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. He argues the importance of contextualizing literature by attaining knowledge about the writer. The thesis question for this dissertation is therefore: "What impact does Taylor Swift's integration of Gothic literary elements and her engagement with folk storytelling traditions have on her album '*folklore*'?"

To conduct my research, I have utilized a combination of research methods such as content analysis and close readings of selected lyrics from the *folklore*¹ album. This qualitative method has allowed me to explore the Gothic and folklore elements, symbols, and motifs within the album. From this analysis, I have been able to select several songs from the album and extract lyrics from these songs to validate my thesis. The songs are my primary sources, and they are as follows (in order of appearance): *the lakes*², *mad woman*, *the last great american dynasty*, *my tears ricochet*, *mad woman*, *seven*, and *hoax*.

Furthermore, I have conducted a comparative analysis to draw parallels between Swift's usage of Gothic literary elements and folklore traditions with established works of Gothic and folklore fiction. By doing this, I have highlighted how she incorporates and adapts these elements within her albums.

In addition, I have analysed her work through literary theories such as feminist literary criticism by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susana Gubar. Through their work, *Madwoman in the Attic*, I have gained a better understanding of 19th-century women writers and feminist literary criticism, which I have incorporated in my analysis throughout this thesis.

Furthermore, I have engaged with relevant literary theories and critical frameworks, such as Gothic genre theory and narratology, which I have applied to interpret Swift's incorporation of Gothic and folklore elements. This way, I have gained deeper insight into her artistic choices and their significance. Lastly, I have incorporated other critical reviews and scholarly articles surrounding her work.

This study mainly focuses on qualitative data gained by studying various existing documents on folklore, the Gothic, and feminist literature chosen by me, which can potentially challenge the validity of the thesis. Analysing my primary sources and incorporating these documents to conduct my research, can be viewed upon as subjective, as I have selected sources myself and it can be hard to avoid being biased in some form. However, recognising this while researching can help you remain as objective as possible.

Furthermore, some of the secondary sources, such as Gilbert and Gubar, go back several decades (first published in 1979) and could therefore be viewed as 'outdated'. That said, it has been described as "the classic argument for women's literary tradition" by Scott Heller in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the endorsements to the 2020, Yale University Press edition. And like Appignanesi cleverly mentions in the introduction to the book, a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say (Appignanesi, xi). Moreover, the secondary sources have been assessed according to their relevance, with publication date in mind.

¹ Note that the title of the album *folklore* is stylized in lower case.

² Note that the titles of the songs on *folklore* are all stylized in lower case.

Chapter 1 Gothic Folklore

Folklore History, Cultural Importance, and Relevance

Before we begin analysing folklore themes and parallels between Swift's album and gothic and folklore fiction, it is important to establish the purpose and relevance of folklore. Swift herself describes folklore as something that is passed down and whispered about, sometimes even sung about (Swift, 2020a). The term 'folklore' is described as the "traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth" (Michalopolous & Xue). The key aspect in this description is 'traditional' and 'word of mouth', as traditional harks to how folklore is closely related to popular, non-professional art forms, meaning that women have historically had greater input in this genre than in the "fine arts." The term includes myths, folktales, legends, proverbs, riddles, folk beliefs, costumes, folk medicine, traditional foods, folk speech, charms, curses, games, folk music, folk dances, etc. (Dundes, 9). The fact that folklore is deep-set and traditional might render it towards the expression of 'universal' themes, as word-of-mouth refers to the popular, unlicensed aspect and being transmitted orally rather than in writing. It being 'popular' and oral, is similar to popular music today in its form. Like music and other sociocultural elements, folklore influences both history and society. For instance, in *Women and the Study of Folklore* by Rosan Jordan and F. A. De Caro, it is stated that; "The question of how society affects folklore is one side of a coin, the other of which is the question of how folklore as a means of communication influences a society and the perceptions of its individual members" (Rosan & Caro, 507). Folklore, then, is extremely significant as it not only provides us with a "retelling" of the past but also had a significant influence on history and culture in both the past and the present.

One example of this is the argument that folklore has been used to condition women to accept certain attitudes and gender roles. This can be found particularly in fairy tales, a subgenre of folklore which are generally perceived as being told to children who are in their early, formative years. Here, a common theme is the glorification of a woman's beauty, relaying the message that women will win a prize for being "the fairest of them all" (Rosan & Caro, 507). Unlike the girls, the boys are often described as bold, active, and lucky, acculturating girls to conventional roles depending on men, such as traditional marriages. These stories often deal with women as property to be bestowed and treat older women as witches, hags, and wicked stepmothers to be feared (507). In this case, these stereotypical descriptions of girls and boys contribute to the idea enforced by patriarchal structures that women are to be submissive to men, who are the 'natural leaders' as they are described to have natural leader abilities contrary to women who can only rely on their beauty. These portrayals of women can be deemed harmful as there is an important connection between folklore and the concept of identity, meaning that stereotypes in folklore not only reflect society but also enforce ideas on society as it is a significant part of people's cultures.

Given the significant role that folklore plays in culture and tradition, it is reasonable to assume that it is heavily related to the formation of individual identity. A person's identity is linked to their ethnic identity, which consists of a group's symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of culture, to differentiate themselves from other groups (Dundes, 9). Folklore is responsible in a large measure for creating ethnic identity (9). This is important because group identity consists of what a group continues to show as constant features despite variations in the reappraisal of group culture elements among

its members (4). The person that you are is shaped by the habits and values of the group you belong to, and traditionally, that would mean the culture of your family and ancestors. Philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder even argued that “the soul of a people is expressed in that people’s folk songs”, which are significant in folklore (9). This viewpoint is typical for the time (late 18th century) and school of thought during Herder’s lifetime. Folk songs originate in traditional popular culture or are written in that style, such as Bob Dylan’s *Blowin’ in the Wind*, which is classified as a folk song due to its musical and lyrical characteristics, as well as its historical context. Essentially, the profound connection between folklore, ethnic-, and individual identity is evident when looking at the historical, social, and cultural impact folklore elements, such as folksongs, have on individuals and groups of people. Examining folklore from a perspective can therefore provide insights into historical and social views on women and how it affects their identities.

Women and Folklore

Much like in other fields, the role of women has historically been overlooked in literature. The male literary hegemony and the lack of interest in women and their lives and contributions is not a new concept, as the pen has historically been in male hands (Gilbert & Gubar, 11). As Gilbert and Gubar point out in their monograph of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, writing, reading, and thinking were not only alien but also inimical to “female” characteristics in the nineteenth century (8). In a famous letter from the early 1800s to writer Charlotte Brontë, the English poet Robert Southey expressed that “Literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it cannot be” (8). This quote is based on the notion that, as literary paternity implies, it is physiologically and sociologically impossible for women to be writers, because male sexuality is associated with the assertive presence of literary power (8). This patriarchal theory of literature, which argues that the pen is some sort of metaphorical penis³, has historically prevented women from “attempting the pen” according to second-wave literary critics writing from a psychoanalytic perspective (7). Moreover, women have not only been historically excluded from authorship, but they have also been subjected to male authority. Therefore, they have been “penned up” or “penned in” by men, as they were viewed as property to be authored by the man (13). Women’s voices have therefore been dearth in literature as a result of the patriarchal structures that have been (and to a certain degree, still are) present in Western societies. Anne Elliot’s statement towards the end of *Persuasion* by Jane Austen illustrates this point very well:

“Men have had every advantage of us in telling their story. Education has been theirs to a much higher degree; the pen has been in their hands” (II, Chap. 11).

This is not only limited to the Victorian age or the act of writing, as it can also be found in other aspects of the field of folklore. When Marta Weigle and Claire Farrer edited pioneering collections of essays on women and folklore, they discovered that the general trend has been to rely on women for information about some charms and games, health, and various beliefs and customs. Meanwhile, in other areas, women informants were only used when men were unavailable. Moreover, when collectors had the choice between information provided by a man and a woman, the man’s version was generally the chosen one (Rosan & Caro, 501). Despite women possibly being very involved in reappraising and re-telling/singing folklore stories, their voices have been a dearth in

³ More details on this on pages 3-16, chapter 1, *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar

folklore, and their roles were often overlooked as the stories were written down and collected throughout history.

It might be argued that the underrepresentation of women and their supposed lack of influence on folklore has led to a problematic portrayal of women. Stereotypes embedded in folklore can be interpreted as the most fundamental, as folklore is not only written by a single individual whose biases might be personal rather than social. Folklore is re-created by various members of a society that share and spread such stories (Rosan & Caro, 502). Therefore, how women are portrayed in this area is fundamental for society's perception of them. Many folkloric woman figures have been defined and celebrated by males. This has led to them often appearing as monstrous and dangerous instead of gift-bearing heroines (506). One such example is Hulder from Norwegian folklore, who is described in *The Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia* as a supernatural female stronger and prettier than human women. Furthermore, she is portrayed as a seductive creature gifted with a beautiful voice which she utilizes to lure and capture men (Lutro). This description of a female creature is not uncommon in folklore and myths. Other supernatural creatures such as witches, sirens, and nymphs share the same qualities, often with the same wicked purpose. Whether this reflects society's view on women or not can be called into question. However, evidence points to the fact that this has been the general view on women shared by the majority of Western societies historically.

Women were deemed evil creatures who needed to act submissive to men, as women were trapped in their time's myth of "the natural" largely influenced by religion. Specifically, this is the case in Christianity, where women were victims of the aftermath of the original sin when Eve was responsible for the Fall and all human ills (Appignanesi, xiii). While women were historically hesitant to attempt the pen, men had the advantage of telling and shaping their stories. One can argue that the portrayal of women in folklore and society as a whole has therefore been heavily influenced by men and the patriarchal structures that have persisted for centuries, contributing to the continuing oppression of women. These evil, monstrous folkloric creatures have been very present in Gothic literature, written by both men and women. However, when these female figures have previously been depicted as inherently evil creatures, some gothic folklore written by women has introduced another perspective: that of the woman herself.

Gothic Folklore

The term "Gothic" holds a different meaning in various contexts. Critics have argued over whether it should be defined as a literary form, genre, sub-genre, mode of writing, set of conventions, or historical period (Wallace, 27). One could argue that it is all or any of the above, depending on the context. However, in this thesis, the term will be used to refer to a literary genre characterized by specific recurring themes and motifs. Moreover, one could also argue that the Gothic is a kind of metaphor or rather a series of interconnected metaphors (27). Such metaphors will be analysed and interpreted further in this thesis.

The Gothic is a distinctive aesthetic with certain persistent features that often leave the reader with an uncanny feeling. Such features include for example representations of ruins, castles, monasteries, forms of monstrosity, images of insanity, transgression, and the supernatural (Smith, 4). These characteristics could often be interpreted as metaphors, as we often turn to metaphors as a figure of comparison when something is "unspeakable", which is a Gothic trope in itself (Wallace, 28). Like Swift states in her song *epiphany*, "and some things you just can't speak about", there are things that are

so difficult to speak about that the use of metaphors is valuable as a way of addressing something. An illustration of this is how Gothic conventions such as the haunted castle or the family curse can be a representation of the fall of the patriarchal family (Williams, 22). Such metaphors can be found throughout Swift's album as well.

While the *folklore* album incorporates themes and elements that resonate with Gothic tradition, albeit in a modern context, it is important to point out that the album is not strictly a Gothic work. The album is a versatile and genre-blending album that draws from various influences. While the album may not fit neatly into the traditional Gothic genre, it captures a mood and thematic depth that resonates with certain aspects of Gothic storytelling and atmosphere. This all resonates with the subgenre of Gothic folklore, which refers to the gothic adaptations and appropriations of folkloric figures. These include supernatural figures such as vampires, vengeful ghosts, werewolves, witches, etc. Typical for Gothic folklore is employing these figures in literary Gothic narratives, although aspects of the folk ballad narrative structure remain, such as in Swift's songs on the *folklore* album (Hart, 5). Moreover, the album, with its Gothic folklore aesthetic, utilizes these elements to establish a sense of nostalgia amongst the listeners, which establishes a form of comfort.

Like folklore, the Gothic is driven by a form of nostalgia. This nostalgia is rooted in the traditional plots of folklore, where one can draw monsters into the human fold (Hart, 3). Examples of such traditional plots are heroes/heroines on impossible quests, the heteronormative marriage plot, age-old villains, and so on. Such stories make people accept gothic-folkloric monsters as 'one of us', as they are included in the nostalgic folklore narrative (3). This is a trend we see in contemporary literature and media, for instance with the rise in popularity of the sympathetic vampire or werewolf. This transition from cruel monster to hero/heroine is found in popular franchises and series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries*, and *Teen Wolf*. In all these series, the usually evil folkloric figures are depicted as sympathetic characters who struggle with the moral implications of being vampires/werewolves and try to conform to human society by going against nature and not feeding on humans. These examples demonstrate not only the Gothic's rise in popularity but also how folklore and Gothic intertextuality influence one another.

Taylor's *folklore*

With Taylor Swift publishing her album *folklore*, one could argue that she is protesting the literary canon by establishing herself as a female voice within a generally male dominated genre. Moreover, she utilizes these folklore elements that have been passed down throughout history and introduces a female point of view. For instance, the idea of the "madwoman" is a well-known term that has been used to describe women for centuries. Now, Swift gives us an insight into the mind and story of the "madwoman" in her song *madwoman* (2020a);

"And you'll poke that bear 'til her claws come out
And you find something to wrap your noose around"

With powerful imagery, metaphors, and symbolism, she is able to depict how a woman is pushed to her limit, acting out in a fit of "madness", only to be targeted and attacked for this behaviour and met with little to no understanding. I will be analysing this and other songs from *folklore* in more depth in chapter 3.

Swift releasing an album within this genre of music was against the grain of her image as a pop artist and therefore did not fit her public persona. In addition, how the album was announced and published did not fit with her usual marketing strategies. She has become a mastermind in building up excitement over time on social media by posting easter eggs and clues about new music for the fans to engage with. Usually, she also has a stated release date. This album was announced the day before and was a total surprise to her fans, both due to its shock release and its folklore aesthetic and style. The album, with not only the music but also the music videos and promotional pictures, contains mystical and fantastical aesthetics abounding with nature, full of imagery that resonates with the folklore genre. This sudden change led to both fans as well as music critics questioning why she turned away from her usual pop-country genre to explore this other genre of indie-folk/folksongs. To address this question, one must examine the potential autobiographical elements that influenced her to make this artistic choice.

One such element that might have influenced her artistic style can be discovered when looking at when it was produced and released. Swift wrote and released this album during a time of grave uncertainty around the world, with the threat of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic spreading worldwide leading to a global "lockdown". During this time, many artists used music as an outlet as they dealt with isolation, searching for comfort in an imagined past. Folk music can be considered preferable in order to achieve this because it has always had this mythology of a lost past (McGrath, 77). One result of this is the *folklore* album, which provides an example of a social search for foundations, such as nostalgia, during the lockdown (72). Swift herself explains in the booklet of the album how isolation made her imagination run wild, as she picked up the pen as her escape into fantasy, history, and memory (Swift, *folklore*, 2020: booklet, 1). McGrath describes this rise in popularity of folk music as a "return to craft" (1). He explains that it can be read as a distillation of the nostalgic, folkloric mode of contemporary Western societies, that has arisen in response to the cultural issues partly raised by the pandemic, but also by neoliberalism, homogenization, and the anxiety brought on by climate change (70). What he is referring to is crafts such as knitting, pottery, baking, outdoor living, and hiking. He describes it as a figurative life raft during lockdown, bringing solace to many. It is evident that each of these components has shaped and influenced the music of Swift and other musicians. But why folk music? What is it that makes it appear to provide comfort and solace during turbulent times?

The focus on essentials, authenticities, and first principles provides people with something deeper, a genuine source of relief in turbulent times. This return to craft often arises as a reaction to turmoil, as it offers a sense of familiarity, the idea of a "lost past", often described as a utopia that in reality never existed (McGrath, 72). We can see it across the arts, people find comfort in a reconnection to the supposed "old ways", reconnecting with nature and the wild. The lockdown increased such crafts and activities. This return to crafts is a form of folk aesthetic that mirrors earlier instances of similar phenomena (72). In the same way that other people returned to handicrafts and the wilderness, Swift returned to a different craft: storytelling. The nostalgia that Swift offers in the album, with its folkloric aesthetic, complex stories and characters, imagery, and symbolism, provided the listeners with familiarity and solace at a time when it was gravely needed.

Chapter 2 Artistic Identity

Freud argued that in order to analyse or decode Gothic narratives, that possess a dreamlike surrealism and rich symbolism, you had to possess some knowledge of the “dreamer” (author) and their life experiences (Smith, 6). In a way, you are psychoanalysing the author as if they are a patient, revealing the anxieties that are specific to their lives through their tales (6). That said, it is also possible to psychoanalyse the texts by examining the anxieties that are inherent to a culture (6). Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar argue in their feminist critical review that the body of work they analyse gives evidence of the writer’s inner struggles, which are sometimes unconscious (Appignanesi, 2020, p. xii). That said, one could argue that in order to better understand the Gothic metaphors and symbolism present in her songs, one must possess some knowledge of Swift and her life. In an interview with the Australian radio show *Jules, Merrick & Sophie*, Swift stated that autobiographical writing is of importance to her: “The most important thing for me is maintaining artistic identity, which means as a songwriter, I still continue to write about my life (Swift, 2014, 04:50).” She makes a meta-fictional (or meta-poetic comment) in her song *the lakes*, reflecting on herself as the central concern of her “eulogies”, or her poems of praise. One could argue that Swift flirts here with the narcissism of her own writing, praising herself; “is it romantic how all my elegies eulogize me” (Swift, 2020a). Referring to her discography as elegies, which are described as poems of serious reflections, typically a lament for the dead. This could be an indicator of how she perceives her music as a poetic expression of herself. However, in order to analyse the lyrics of the album, one must have some insight into how she represents her identity as an artist, as it aids us in ultimately gaining a better understanding of the metaphors, symbols, and narratives that she utilizes in her songs. Furthermore, it is vital to understand the purpose behind her lyrics and what she is trying to communicate to her listeners.

A New Songwriting Style

Despite her *folklore* album differing from her earlier ‘diaristic’ work, the songs on the album appear to give us insight into her life in a more metaphorical sense. We as listeners are forced to read between the lines and find connections between her lyrics and moments in her life, as she uses disnarration to create an ambiguous and mysterious aesthetic to the album. Disnarration is an unconventional storytelling strategy that presents events that did not take place (Harrison & Ringrow, 4). By doing this, the listeners are not able to tell the difference between what is “real” and what is not, as she stated that she created a mythological place and characters inspired by real and imagined people in her life. This is also a great marketing strategy as she partakes in creating her own mystique, therefore making herself more fascinating to fans who can partake in spinning out theories and interpretations on what is autobiographical and what is not. She explained how she had taken a distance from the more confessional narrative style with real stories from her life, to creating a mythological American town with characters and arcs where she could reflect her own emotions onto what she thinks they might be feeling (2). This worldbuilding and storytelling made up of personal and mythological characters establishes a different relationship, a distancing effect, with the listeners as they are no longer confidantes, but instead as readers/listeners of a fictional narrative (2). By doing this, Swift invites the listeners to participate in the emotional projection, which can similarly be seen in other songs produced during the same Covid-19 lockdown period (3). This might be a result of the disorientated feeling created by the

pandemic and its many uncertainties. Despite the disnarration style and the 'made up' narrative, she does ultimately turn the lens back on herself.

Political Agenda and Gender Oppression

Based on Taylor's lyrics and her outspoken political persona, one can argue that Swift utilizes certain elements in her songwriting to expose gendered oppression. Not only does she write about contemporary gender issues, but she uses figures of ghosts, witches, and madwomen to remind us of a silenced past and hidden histories. Swift confirms her political stance on several issues in her documentary "Miss Americana", which follows her over several years and was released in 2020. In this documentary, Taylor states that despite her team being unhappy with her, she had to make a statement about the Tennessee election and that despite her avoiding political involvement for twelve years, something changed in her after her sexual assault case in 2017, where she was sued by a former DJ, David Mueller for getting him wrongfully terminated following a meet-and-greet where he assaulted her. She counter-sued for a symbolic \$1 and won the lawsuit, but states that you do not feel any sense of victory when you win because of the dehumanizing process (Swift, 2020b, 00:56:40-00:56:59).

I can't not at this point. Something is different in my life, completely and unchangeably different since the sexual assault trial last year. Like, and no man in my organization or in my family will ever understand what that was like. (Swift, 2020b, 01:01:10-01:01:33)

The reason Swift wanted to make a statement in the context of this election was because she was opposed to Tennessee Republican Marsha Blackburn being elected to the Senate. A teary-eyed, frustrated Swift passionately argues with her father and another man on her team about why she has to speak out against this injustice despite being known as a 'polite at all costs' American sweetheart, risking her safety, losing fans, revenue, and being targeted by powerful people like (then) President Donald Trump. She is ready to face the consequences of her actions as she states that she has to speak out against Blackburn;

She votes against fair pay for women, she votes against the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which is just basically protecting us from domestic abuse and stalking. Stalking! (points to herself) She thinks that if you're a gay couple or even if you look like a gay couple, you should be allowed to be kicked out of a restaurant. It's really basic human rights, and it's right and wrong at this point (Swift, 2020b, 01:02:55)

Before this, Swift had remained silent on political issues, which led to many fans believing she was a conservative Republican as she was a Tennessee Christian Country artist. Much like her music, one could argue that her political stance is affected by her own life experiences. This is evident in her statement about how life changed for her after the sexual assault case.

Public Feuds – The Madwoman

When going forward with an analysis of the album, it is crucial to attain background knowledge about certain instances and themes in Swift's life, in order to understand her lyrics. She includes snippets of her life within her songs, some of which appear obvious, and some subliminal (Shaw, 33). This correlates with what Freud argues; the peculiar

surrealism and rich symbolism found in Gothic narratives, such as Swift's *folklore* album, require an analyst who has knowledge of the author's life experiences to be able to decode them (Smith, 6). The tale communicated by the author corroborates the presence of anxieties that are specific to their life (6). Examples of instances that are being reflected on this album are her feuds with rapper and producer Kanye West and record executive Scooter Braun. Despite having previously discussed these situations at length, she is retelling them differently on this album by utilizing gothic folkloric elements to convey emotions she had not previously expressed (Shaw, 33). The female Gothic narrative has historically been used as a way to express certain emotions towards patriarchal structures and gender oppression, which is no different on this album. These will be addressed at length in the next chapter.

Many of the lyrics refer to her musical battle with Scooter Braun and Scott Borchetta, her previous record label executive. This feud centres around the ownership of her Masters' recording at Borchetta's record label Big Machine Records and the new owner at the time, Scooter Braun. Not only did Swift lose the opportunity to gain ownership over her first six recorded albums, but they were "sold" to Braun, who according to Swift was someone she suffered "incessant, manipulative bullying" from for years (Swift, 2019). In addition to going through this battle, the dispute was highly publicized and gained widespread media coverage. Swift addressed the issue herself in a Tumblr post where she expressed great sadness over the actions of her former producer and friend, describing it as her "worst case scenario" (Swift, 2019);

For years I asked, pleaded for a chance to own my work. Instead I was given an opportunity to sign back up to Big Machines and 'earn' one album back at a time, one for every new one I turned in. I walked away because I knew once I signed that contract, Scott Borchetta would sell the label, thereby selling me and my future. I had to make the excruciating choice to leave behind my past.

She elaborates on the bullying she refers to in the same Tumblr post. She states that she is referring to when Kanye West and his then-wife Kim Kardashian orchestrated an illegally recorded snippet of a phone call between them, and then Scooter got two of his clients to bully her online about it (Justin Bieber and Kanye West). Furthermore, his client, Kanye West, released a revenge porn music video where a wax figure of Swift is stripped naked and placed in a bed next to West and other celebrities (Swift, 2019). She further states that she was not given an opportunity to buy her life's work, despite her willingness and desperation. Swift expresses that this is a case of men in the industry who want to control a woman who did not want to be associated with them in perpetuity and that their idea of 'Music has value' means its value is "beholden to men who had no part in creating it" (Swift, 2019). Like other women writers utilizing Gothic folkloric elements in their writing, Swift argues she is being controlled and oppressed by certain men and the patriarchal structures present in today's society.

This feeling of being powerless, with your life's musical legacy in the hands of men who are trying to bully and control you, can be somewhat compared to nineteenth-century women writers' lack of autonomy. When they were confined to dependency by legal and familial strictures, it drove them to create long-lasting written work that has been shown to constitute a women's tradition (Appignanesi, xii). This seems to be the case with Swift, as her confinement by a contract she signed with a grown man as a 15-year-old girl, has led to her feeling more or less controlled, which led to her creating an album utilizing the same Gothic themes as many of the nineteenth-century women did. Being partially

trapped in the myth of “the natural” as a woman, meaning submissiveness to men and being kept under their control, these women expressed a desire for greater freedom to write, to love freely, and to challenge the status quo (xii). This is a freedom that Swift might have, but not without harsh judgment from the outside world. This feeling of entrapment and the writer’s self-division led to what they sometimes experienced or conjured as madness (xii). Imagination and turmoil are evident in the canvas of the women’s work, such as “madwoman” Bertha Mason, who blinds her husband and burns his entire estate to the ground after spending ten years locked up on the third floor of Thornfield Hall by her husband after being forced by her father into an arranged marriage. The character’s deep internal conflicts, made by the expectations of them as women and what they truly desire, lead to a rage that can all too easily end with losing one’s self-control. This theme of “madness” and female rage is a recurrent subject on Swift’s album, which is apparent in songs such as *mad woman*, and *the last great american dynasty*.

Her frustrations about the treatment of women are evident in her music as well as statements she has made to the public. She has repeatedly been vocal about her frustrations and struggles as a woman in the music industry. In the Miss Americana documentary, she expresses her frustration;

We do exist in a society where women are discarded in an elephant graveyard by the time they’re 35. The female artists that I know of have reinvented themselves 20 times more than the male artists. They have to. Or else you are out of a job. Constantly having to reinvent, constantly finding new facets of yourself that people find to be shiny (Swift, 2020, 1:10:00-1:10:40)

She argues that there are different standards for women than men in the industry. Women are confined to expectations of having to stay young, new, and constantly interesting, having to reinvent themselves multiple times to stay relevant. Furthermore, Swift addresses another double standard in the industry in an interview in 2014 on Australian radio show *Jules, Merrick & Sophie*. She discusses the unfair sexist angle that people diminish her work to just “songs about her ex-boyfriends”. She argues that it is a sexist take as “no one says that about Ed Sheeran, No one says it about Bruno Mars” (Swift, 2014, 05:37). This double standard in the music industry reflects society to an extent but might also be affected by the industry being highly male dominated, with a study revealing that only 3.4% of producers were female, while approximately 96.6% were male in 2022 (Götting, 2023). Swift then shares another similarity with the women writers of the 19th century, as they were enclosed, not only in an overwhelmingly male dominated society but specifically within the literary constructs of Gertrude Stein referred to as “patriarchal poetry” (Gilbert & Gubar, xvii). By this, she is referring to how they were constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored. A desire to break free from these restraints is something Gilbert and Gubar have identified as a striking coherence in their literature. They describe it as a “common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (xvii). These parallels between Swift and the authors might be the reason behind her utilization of Gothic elements on the album.

The similarities between Swift’s lyrics on the folklore album, and Gothic literature written by women in the nineteenth century, might be traced back to more than the confinement by the patriarchal society’s expectations of women. One parallel between these writers and Swift, is the physical confinement made by their husbands/fathers or agoraphobia,

and the Covid-19 pandemic. Gilbert and Gubar argue that they found in their exploration of Gothic literature by 19th-century women that both in life and in art, the artists they studied were literally and figuratively confined (xvii). This was a phenomenon that can be compared to Swift's Gothic songwriting. She is part of an interesting phenomenon observed during the Covid-19 lockdown when there was a relative increase in creative endeavours (Krishnan). Researchers saw an increase in the experience of boredom in people as a result of the lockdown, as well as an increase in the level of social isolation and loneliness (Krishnan). This research suggests that there is likely a relationship between these factors and creativity. In her introduction to the folklore album, Swift confirms that isolation led to her creative writing: "In isolation, my imagination has run wild, and this album is the result, a collection of songs and stories that flowed like a stream of consciousness (Swift, 2020b)". Being isolated in this way led to a lot of uncertainty and turmoil, which can result in creative measures such as writing as a means to "escape" such anxious realities, which is what Swift confirmed in her introduction that she was doing as "picking up a pen" was her way of escaping into fantasy, history, and memory (Swift, 2020b). Thus, one can argue that there is a correlation between her writing style on the folklore album and the Gothic literary work of 19th-century women writers, as a result of gender oppression and isolation.

Chapter 3 Analysing the Madwoman

After establishing the Gothic Folklore context of her artistic identity, it is possible to analyse the lyrics from the folklore album through a feminist lens, while also drawing attention to aspects of Swift's own life and how she reworks her public image in the song. We have established that there are many similarities between Swift's lyrics and literature written by women in the 19th century, particularly the Gothic elements. The reasoning behind making this comparison is that the literature written by women in the nineteenth century seemed to be the first era in which female authorship was no longer some sense of anomaly (Gilbert & Gubar, xvii). Elements such as ghosts, death, mad women, enclosure, and witches are all present in literature written by Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Austen, and Emily Dickinson, as well as in Swift's album. One could argue that these women were inspired by each other's works. However, Gilbert and Gubar found that despite the coherence of theme and imagery in their works, these nineteenth-century women writers were often geographically, historically, and psychologically distant from each other. Moreover, when studying women writers in radically different genres, they discovered a distinctively female literary tradition (xvii). I find it important to mention that I am aware that what Gilbert and Gubar called a 'female literary tradition', is that of a white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class tradition. Their study suggests that there might be a psychological factor as to why women utilize these specific elements in their art, which is why it is possible to analyse Swift's work by uncovering distinctive female anxieties. While there is of course a large difference between the experiences and lifeworlds of nineteenth-century women writers and a twenty-first-century pop superstar, I argue that Swift draws from this tradition of female writing to make the topics and themes she addresses more tangible and that there might be aspects of being a (white, Anglophone, middle to upper middle class) woman that were addressed by the nineteenth-century writers which are still being felt today. However, the analysis will also point to the links between Swift's lyrics and the public feud between her and her former producers.

There is Nothing Like a Madwoman

The 12th song on the folklore album, *mad woman*, explores female anger, which is often stigmatized and ridiculed. The female anger is often dismissed as irrational when in reality, it is the only 'sane' reaction to irrational social forces. Sarah Ahmed argues that expressing rage as a woman often leads to being branded a 'feminist killjoy', as oppression involves the requirement that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself (Ahmed, 583). To be recognized as a feminist and unhappy with your circumstances as a woman in society, you are assigned to a category of difficulty and not easy to get along with, which is enough to cost one's livelihood (Ahmed, 584). Much like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this song illustrates the path to becoming a "madwoman", urging listeners to reconsider their perceptions of women who refuse to silence their rage. The song also explores the consequences of betrayal, with Swift utilizing the imagery of a "mad woman" to portray how women often are labelled irrational or crazy when expressing anger or seeking retribution in the face of injustice. Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, grew out of her own enforced rest cure in confinement in a single room without access to books or pen and paper, as prescribed by her doctor husband. The short story became her protest against society and the patriarchy, with the main character eventually turning mad due to the confinement forced upon her by her husband (Appignanesi xiii).

Similarly, in Swift's song, she blames her madness on a symbolic person with her repeated lyrics throughout the song: "What a shame she went mad. You made her like that." The 'you' in this lyric is ambiguous, as no name is mentioned. However, one could argue that the song refers to her feud with Scott Borchetta and Scooter Braun. One reason for this assumption is the opening line of the song; "What did you think I'd say to that?", which could be referring to his offer for her to sign back up to Big Machine Records and earn back her albums. She then goes on to sing "Does a scorpion sting when fighting back? They strike to kill and you know I will", indicating that she will fight back and get her revenge. The scorpion works as a symbol of fighting back and defending herself when threatened into a corner. With Swift refusing his offer and taking action by rerecording her masters, she is ultimately defending herself and her life's work by taking ownership of them. Moreover, her rise to success, as demonstrated by being named "Person of the Year" in 2023 by Time Magazine, could be her revenge on the ones who have betrayed her.

She then goes on to utilize the idea of being haunted by this "mad woman" in her lyrics. She speaks to this ambiguous 'you', saying: "What do you sing on your drive home? Do you see my face in the neighbour's lawn? Does she smile? Or does she mouth, 'Fuck you forever'?" Firstly, the speaker here seems to be referring to her music, suggesting that her music is always on his mind, maybe because he is haunted by his decision to betray her, but also because her songs are often played on the radio and in public spaces due to her success. Moreover, he sees her in his neighbour's lawn, indicating that even in the safety of his own home, he is not able to avoid being 'haunted' by the guilt of his disloyalty. In these lyrics, she empowers the "mad woman", as her 'madness' inevitably drives him mad. This might refer to a cycle of Karma, which is not a strange term for Swift, as she published a song under that name on her tenth studio album *Midnights* in 2022.

Swift then uses powerful imagery as a tool to emphasize how a woman is pushed to her limit, forcing her into a fit of anger, which is frequently perceived as "madness": "And you'll poke that bear 'til her claws come out. And you find something to wrap your noose around". Not only is she saying that she is being pushed into a fit of madness, she is then also targeted and attacked for this behaviour and met with little to no understanding as they 'wrap their noose' around her. This could also be a reference to the idiom "don't poke the bear", meaning to intentionally make or try to make someone angry or offended, especially someone more powerful than you. The image of the bear is interesting as traditionally, it is common to imagine a bear as a male figure, such as in the expression 'he is a bear of a man', referring to one's strength. However, the use of a she-bear could also refer to protection, as the term 'mama bear' is frequently used to describe protective mothers. This aligns with the imagery of the scorpion protecting itself when threatened earlier in the song.

Swift then shifts the focus from defending and protecting herself to fighting back in the next verse. The lyrics are: "Now I breathe flames each time I talk. My cannons all firin' at your yacht". In this verse, she is utilizing a fairytale folkloric mood by describing herself as breathing flames like a dragon and firing cannons, like on a battlefield. Moreover, she may be referencing famous lines from the feminist confessional poem *Lady Lazarus* by Sylvia Plath, as they appear to have similar imagery: "I rise with my red hair and eat men like air." (Plath). In this verse, she is utilizing a fairytale folkloric mood by describing herself as breathing flames like a dragon and firing cannons, like on a battlefield. This part also indicates that the ambiguous 'you' person in the song might be her previous

producer or someone else with money as a yacht often represents riches and luxuries. She then makes a point that it is not only men that are after her in the line: "And women like hunting witches, too. Doing your dirtiest work for you." Here, she could be referring to Kim Kardashian and her involvement in the public feud. Her reference to hunting witches could be her making a point of how 'impossible' it is for a woman to be as successful and talented as she is, as women were often trialled and killed for having certain talents that were deemed 'impossible' for a human woman to have and therefore they were argued to be witches. The use of witches in literature written by women could be argued to be a way of 'escaping' their feeling of powerlessness in real life and therefore imagining themselves with supernatural powers to gain power and control that they lack in their real lives.

The next lines focus on how they have schemed together against her as they have made her a common enemy: "It's obvious that wanting me dead has really brought you two together." This could be a reference to Brochetta and Braun, but it could also be a reference to Kim and Kanye. However, in a broader sense, she seems to be referring to how people get closer when fighting a common enemy, which in this case would be her. Another piece of evidence pointing to Kim and Kanye is in the next verse: "Good wives always know. She should be mad. Should be scathing like me. But no one likes a mad woman." Here, stating that Kim was completely aware of what Kanye was doing to Swift when he illegally recorded a phone call between them, releasing a snippet of the call to the public and stating that it was proof he had Swift's permission to include the lines: "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex. Why? I made that bitch famous" and include a naked wax figure of her in a bed next to him and his wife (among other celebrities) in the revenge porn music video. Swift expresses that Kim, as a woman and a wife, should be upset about his actions, urging her to be 'scathing' like her but blaming her inaction on the fact that no one likes a mad woman. Therefore, it is not socially acceptable for women to express their rage and they can often remain silent. She rounds off the song with the repeated sentences: "What a shame she went mad. You made her like that." This refrain emphasizes the fact that the treatment by others pushed the speaker in the song (and by extension, Swift herself) to become "mad."

The song utilizes other musical elements that are often seen in folksongs, such as a minimalist and intimate production. With the focus being on the haunting piano melodies and Swift's vocals, the stripped-down arrangement allows the lyrical content to be the focus of the song, therefore emphasizing the rawness and sincerity of the emotions she is trying to convey. Many folksongs have the same sort of production, as the focus on lyrics and the message are essential to the genre. Furthermore, the song has a build-up and release where the song gradually builds in intensity, which could mirror the rising anger and frustration of the protagonist (Swift). The build-up culminates in the chorus, where her voice becomes more forceful, which could reflect the unleashing of repressed emotions.

Rebekah Harkness - the "Mad Woman"

Mad woman is not the only song on the album referencing the Gothic trope of the mad woman. It is also the theme of the song written about American composer Rebekah Harkness, *the last great american dynasty*. The song is a blend of historical biography in the form of storytelling and social commentary. Swift cleverly draws parallels between herself and Harkness, who was the previous owner of her Rhode Island home. She particularly focuses on their reputations and the public's perception of them. Much like

mad woman, Swift expresses her frustrations with social expectations of women. The song explores the same themes of female rebellion and being misunderstood, which leads to their 'rebellion' by not conforming to the social standards to which they are held by society. Swift does this by comparing herself to Harkness, who is portrayed as a woman who defied social expectations and faced scrutiny and misunderstanding by the public. Furthermore, she explores themes of wealth and class, reflecting on how success and wealth can influence public perception of individuals, criticizing the double standard wealthy women face when often perceived as unconventional and excessive. She highlights the importance of challenging such social norms, as they seek to define and limit women's expressions of self.

Swift utilizes the story of Harkness, and her portrayal as a "mad woman" to illustrate the double standards successful women face within the music industry. Moreover, she uses her story as an extension of her own experiences. Harkness is described as someone living extravagantly and unconventionally, which resulted in her being labelled as a "mad woman" by society in the early 1900s. This is not unusual for the "mad woman" trope, where deviation from social expectations results in being labelled insane. In the opening line of the song, Swift narrates how Rebekah married Standard Oil heir William "Bill" Harkness and how the town wondered "How did a middle-class divorcee do it?" The people in town were already sceptical of her, as a woman and divorcee of that time when it was not as socially acceptable for women to remarry, and even less to marry upwards in the social strata. Questioning how she was "able to do it", already paints Harkness as almost having magical abilities, being able to defy such social norms and charm a rich man to marry her, almost insinuating she is a supernatural creature, like, for example, a witch. Witches have a history of being hunted for their 'magical abilities', which in this case could be a metaphor for successful women being targeted by the public for their talents. This insinuation continues in the next verse in the lyrics "The doctor had told him to settle down. It must have been her fault his heart gave out". In these lines, she describes how people perceived Rebekah as responsible for her husband's death, either as a mad woman causing him stress to the point of heart failure or as an evil person who conspired in his death. This could point to Swift commenting on how women are often to blame for the downfalls and failures of their husbands or other men in their lives.

The song suggests that the public often places blame and shame on women like Rebekah. The chorus of the song suggests that Rebekah is to blame for not only the death of her husband but for the downfall of American dynasties. The chorus goes: "And they said 'There goes the last great American dynasty' 'Who knows if she never showed up, what could've been.'" Here, she is insinuating that the public opinion is that she is marrying him and inheriting his money after his death, which was the end of the last great American dynasty. The next two lines emphasize this point as she elaborates on what people would say about her: "There goes the maddest woman this town has ever seen /She had a marvellous time ruinin' everything." Harkness is described as "mad" multiple times throughout the song, which suggests that being labelled a "mad woman" could often be used to dismiss or undermine women's autonomy and achievements. Swift finishes the song by changing the protagonist from Harkness to first-person narrative about herself with the lines: "Who knows if I never showed up what could've been. There goes the loudest woman this town has ever seen. I had a marvellous time ruinin' everything." By doing this, she expresses solidarity with Harkness and other women who have similar experiences. This parallel between them also works as a reflection of social expectations towards women and the importance of challenging these stereotypes today, just like in the early- to mid-1900s.

Lastly, but also importantly, both songs embrace the “madness” trope as a form of empowerment. Swift reclaims the narrative of the “mad woman” as she portrays Harkness and herself as women who defy expectations and live life on their own terms. By utilizing the trope through a narrative that is not only about herself, she can convey the message in a broader sense, emphasizing that what she is experiencing is not an isolated case, but the case of various women throughout history. Reclaiming the “mad woman” trope acts as a powerful statement against the stigmatization of women’s emotions and behaviours with Swift advocating that there is strength and liberation in embracing yourself regardless of social judgment, urging women to not conform to society’s expectations.

Haunting Ghosts

Other Gothic elements explored in the *folklore* album are themes of death, the afterlife, and ghosts. Diana Wallace argues that ghost stories as a literary form allow women writers “special kinds of freedom” (57). This freedom allows the writers to criticize male power and sexuality in a more radical way than those in more realist genres. Moreover, she argues that the mode allows women to explore deep-rooted fears about their powerlessness and imprisonment within the patriarchy (57). Ghost stories are often written as short stories, which is a narrative form closely implicated with desire, as they often work as dreams or dream structures (58). One could therefore argue that the ghost story genre uncovers the author’s desires, such as a desire to be liberated from the oppressive structures of patriarchy. According to Vanessa Dickerson, Victorian women writers were drawn to the supernatural as a result of their own ambiguous legal and social positions; “the ghost story could express and explore their status as ‘the “other”’ living in a state of in-betweenness between the walls of the house, between animal and man, between angel and demon” (61). However, the ghost can represent two things; one of which is a state of mind, with women feeling invisible, erased, and repressed by male power, while the other points to the redemptive possibilities of female power. Ghost stories exploring the ‘ghosting’ of women within patriarchy are therefore also stories of empowerment, as they deal with the return of the repressed, the undead.

Swift utilizes this trope, like the Victorian writers, to explore the feeling of powerlessness and retribution in her life as a woman artist subjected to male power in society and the music industry. There are elements of haunting in both *mad woman* and *the last great american dynasty*. In the first song, the speaker imagines the addressee being haunted by the appearance of her face in the neighbour’s lawn as he hears her music while driving in his car. In the latter, Harkness is described as an almost ghostly, mysterious figure: “They say she was seen on occasion. Pacing the rocks, staring out at the midnight sea.” However, there is one song on the album in which the haunting/ghost trope is very prominent, which is *my tears ricochet*.

In *my tears ricochet*, Swift utilizes metaphors of death and haunting to symbolize the end of a relationship. However, despite what many people tend to believe, this song might not be written about the end of a romantic relationship even though it can be interpreted in this way in a broader sense. The song explores themes of betrayal, loss, conflict, and reflection. It navigates the emotional turmoil following the loss and betrayal of someone who was once close to you. The song starts with Swift describing a funeral: “We gather here, we line up. Weepin’ in a sunlit room.” Funerals often start with the priest welcoming everyone by saying “We are gathered here today to honour the memory of...”, which is what she is referencing in the first line. They line up, weeping, to say their

goodbyes to the deceased. The imagery of the funeral alludes to the final death in their relationship and the mourning that comes with it. There is no going back, as death is final. In this funeral, Swift mourns the person that has been lost, but also the shared past and the loss of a shared future.

The song shifts from a mournful atmosphere to a vengeful one in the same verse. With the lines "If I'm on fire, you'll be made of ashes too." This vengeful tone, saying that "if I burn, you burn with me", is also present in the title, as the imagery of tears ricocheting can be read as a metaphor for the pain he causes her, coming back to haunt him in the end. This is an interesting image because normally, the term ricochet refers to bullets that deflect off a hard surface and hit back at the shooter. Here, the addressed person (the shooter) is the cause of her tears, which then appear to ricochet off her face to hit back at him. This metaphor is then simultaneously an image of vulnerability and power, much like the image of the scorpion in *mad woman*. She then emphasizes the betrayal, singing: "Even on my worst day, did I deserve, babe, all the hell you gave me?" She then goes on to say that she loved him till her dying day, implying that, ironically, only in death was she liberated from the hell he put her through when alive. In the chorus, the vengeful tone carries on as she sings "I didn't have it in myself to go with grace." She cleverly expresses that she could not leave this relationship gracefully by taking a silent course of action. She gets her revenge in death. But for her, getting revenge is perceived as unsuitable by society as she is held to a different standard as a woman and expected to absorb male behaviour silently (Swift, 2020d, 01:06:30). She compares herself to him by describing him as a hero "flying around saving face", implying that even though he wronged her, he is perceived as the hero in the situation. Despite him being perceived as the "hero" by the public, she makes it clear that she will get her revenge in the form of haunting him. This is made clear in the next lines, "And if I'm dead to you, why are you at the wake? Cursing my name, wishing I stayed. Look at how my tears ricochet." These powerful images evoke a sense of inescapable presence, despite the finality of their relationship, suggesting that some bonds affect us even in their absence.

She further employs the eerie haunting trope in the following verse, intensifying its presence and importance. The first two lines express how she initially did not want a conflict between them, blaming her retribution on him: "You know I didn't want to have to haunt you. But what a ghostly scene." The following lines contain lyrics that have led to many fans theorising that the song is not about a romantic relationship, but rather about her relationship with her previous producer Borchetta: "You wear the same jewels that I gave you as you bury me." Fans have interpreted the jewels as a metaphor for her masters, which Borchetta owned when he betrayed her and sold them to Braun, which can be seen in various tweets:

@HidingObsession "You wear the same jewels That I gave you As you bury me Who made BMR successful? Who made Scooter Rich? EXACTLY." 12:02, 25/07/2020.

@annieswifts "I'm getting behind the theory that my tears ricochet is about leaving bug machine !!! 'You wear the same jewels that I gave you as you bury me' 'I can go anywhere I want just not home.'" 17:20, 25/07/2020.

@taylorsrbitch "the more I listen to my tears ricochet the more the big machine theory makes so much sense." 20:56, 27/07/2020.

She then emphasizes again that she could not go "with grace" because "when I'd fight, you used to tell me I was brave", highlighting how his attitude towards her changed as

they were no longer partners and she was no longer on his "team". His love and support for her were not unconditional but depended on whether he could make money from her. Despite utilizing the ghost trope as a form of freedom, when feeling a lack of autonomy in real life, gaining autonomy in the form of a ghost, she notes that even in death, he limits her freedom: "And I can go anywhere I want. Anywhere I want, just not home." What was once considered her "home", where she would work on her passion, her music, is no longer what it once was. She is free from the chains of his record label, however, the price to pay is not being able to go back. The past is left behind.

Despite the past being left behind, it still haunts both of them in present times. She makes it clear that living with the guilt of what he has done to her, is the karma that will haunt him for the rest of his life. In her lines "and you can aim for my heart, go for blood. But you would still miss me in your bones" she emphasizes that attacking her body and disembodying her, would only make him miss her deep down, as her spirit cannot be killed and will forever haunt him for what he did. His guilt has manifested as her ghost, giving her power over him. Despite the emphasis on how the conflict affects him negatively, she also shows vulnerability by expressing how the situation similarly haunts her: "And I still talk to you (when I'm screaming at the sky). And when you can't sleep at night (you hear my stolen lullabies)." Like him, she cannot let the relationship and the betrayal go, screaming at the sky in frustration and anger, while he is held up at night by her haunting music. The reference to her "stolen lullabies" could be interpreted as her albums that she felt were stolen from her when she was denied the opportunity to own the music she wrote and produced.

While the song likely draws from Swift's personal experience, specifically her conflict with her former record label, the themes of betrayal, loss, grief, and unresolved conflict have a universal resonance. The lyrics resonate with listeners, as they address experiences of loss, mourning, and the end of a relationship, making it relatable to a broader audience. Not only does the song resonate on an individual level, but it could also be interpreted as a feminist commentary on women oppressed by men throughout history, with the ghost trope being frequently used in female Gothic literature as a symbol of the oppressed woman. In the song, Swift can use the trope to portray a state of mind, feeling overlooked, almost invisible to her former friend and producer. However, the "ghostly scene" could also refer to the world being presented as a stage where women are treated as ghosts, erased, and repressed by male power. The ghost also works as an empowering figure in the song, as she gets revenge in the form of haunting him. In a broader sense, this could symbolize women gaining autonomy in their deaths, as they were finally free from their oppressors. They desire an afterlife where they can "go anywhere they want", while the guilt of what the oppressors did to them would haunt the oppressors for the rest of their lives.

This argument is strengthened in the song seven on the same album. The song is a nostalgic reflection on childhood, friendship, protection, and escape. Swift expresses a desire to protect her friend from her troubles, by offering to run away together to a place where they can be free. What they are running from is revealed in the third verse: "And I've been meaning to tell you, I think your house is haunted. Your dad is always mad and that must be why." The haunted house in this case could represent patriarchy, as it often does within female Gothic literature: a Patriarchal architectural structure keeping women entrapped. In this song, Swift imagines herself being able to save her friend from suffering abuse at the hands of her father, which indicates that she could be referring to men's oppression of women. She blames the "haunting" on her "mad" father, with her

only way to freedom being to escape his control: "And I think you should come live with me, and we can be pirates. Then you won't have to cry or hide in the closet." Pirates are often associated with freedom, as they roam the sea, liberated from any system of government and society, making their own rules for living. In this song, there is no reference to a woman ghost. However, the lack of reference to the girl's mother could suggest that she is the invisible ghost haunting the house as a victim of the father's violence, erased and repressed by male power.

The themes of death and ghosts explored in these songs are powerful tools used by Swift to get her point across that it is important to put an end to harmful patriarchal structures that repress and oppress women. The elements of haunting and the "mad woman" trope represent what is often referred to as "female rage". Swift herself explained in her documentary about the album, *folklore: the long pond studio sessions*, that when she heard the piano piece that was written for *mad woman*, she knew it had to be about female rage. She then goes into depth about what she means by female rage and the purpose of the song:

The most rage-provoking element of being a female is the gaslighting that happens when, for centuries, we've been just expected to absorb male behaviour silently. Right? Silent absorption of whatever any guy decides to do. And oftentimes when we, in our enlightened state, in our emboldened state now, respond to bad male behaviour or somebody just doing something that was absolutely out of line and we respond, that response is treated like the offence itself. (Swift, 2020d, 01:06:00)

She relates this to her own life, where she explains that someone is guilty of exactly this behaviour. She argues that the person treats her as if she is the offender by having a defence to his offenses. She says: "It's like, oh, I have absolutely no right to respond or I'm crazy. I have no right to respond or I'm angry. I have no right to respond or I'm out of line." (01:06:47)

Various feminist themes are subtly explored in the aforementioned songs. Firstly, the album critiques patriarchal narratives, exploring the way women are often portrayed in media and society. In addition, she reflects on gendered expectations placed on women. She reclaims the narrative by taking control over her own story and the stories of other women both in the past in the present. By doing this, she is challenging the patriarchal narratives that tend to limit women's roles and enforce stereotypical attitudes toward women. Moreover, this reclamation encourages women to tell their stories and be heard on their terms. Lastly, she emphasizes the importance of empathy and solidarity among women, which suggests a collective understanding and shared experiences. By narrating the stories from different perspectives and including various characters in her stories, she can connect and resonate with her listeners on a universal level.

Isolation and Escape

Another Gothic element present in the album is the theme of isolation. As previously mentioned, Swift wrote *folklore* while in isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore natural for this feeling of loneliness and emotional turmoil to be a present theme in her storytelling. In the first song on the album, the 1, she mentions this in her lyrics: "I guess you never know, never know. And it's another day waking up alone." Suggesting a feeling of never-ending loneliness. Traces of isolation and loneliness can also be found in female Gothic literature of the nineteenth century, which might be a

result of their own isolation as women living in a patriarchal society that valued women as property and saw them as inferior to men. Despite isolation often being interpreted as a gloomy theme, Swift is able to use this to portray the beauty of it. As she beautifully describes in the lakes, going through hardships is what makes you grow; "A red rose grew up out of ice frozen ground." The rose is a metaphor for herself, growing despite the climate being against her. Another aspect of isolation on the album is the escape from it.

The various stories and imagery of escape on the album can have multiple meanings simultaneously. However, given the theme of the album, one could argue that it likely represents escaping the isolation and limitations of a patriarchal society. Just like Bertha Mason being locked in the mansion of Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, the characters in Swift's narratives desire freedom from the chains put on them as women. In her bonus track *the lakes*, she describes how she feels she does not belong and has to escape: "Take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die. I don't belong, and my beloved, neither do you. Those Windermere peaks look like a perfect place to cry. I'm setting off, but not without my muse." The lyrics refer to Windermere in England, which has been mentioned in the works of canonical English poets like William Wordsworth and Oscar Wilde, who could be the poets she refers to in the verse. She describes her wish to escape to nature. She romanticizes nature in various songs, describing cliffsides, barren lands, frozen grounds, flowers, and northern lights in the songs *the lakes* and *hoax*. Furthermore, in *seven*, she romanticizes childhood and the savage side that comes with not having learned civility: "Please picture me, in the weeds, before I learned civility. I used to scream ferociously, any time I wanted." The romantic representation of nature and the expression of a deep connection to the untamed aspects of nature are a common trope within Gothic literature. Describing her escape into nature suggests that the patriarchal oppressive structures within society are not natural, but socially constructed.

Conclusion

Exploring the impact of Taylor Swift's integration of Gothic literary elements and folk storytelling traditions in her *folklore* album has revealed distinctive female anxieties, specifically linked to patriarchal structures both historically and in contemporary times. By exploring and comparing these elements and tropes, I have discovered that despite the large difference between the experiences and lifeworlds of nineteenth-century women writers and a twenty-first-century pop superstar, there are aspects of the female experience that are still present today. However, it is important to point out that it is mainly the white, Anglophone, middle to upper-class woman that is being addressed, as the female experience is complex and is affected by many other variables as well, such as ethnicity and poverty. Moreover, the analysis focused on more specific areas of Swift's life, such as her public feuds with other celebrities and her former producers.

This study has found that by utilizing the 'mad woman' trope, Swift explores female anger, which is something that has often been dismissed, stigmatized, and ridiculed even though it is usually the only 'sane' reaction to irrational social forces. For instance, being recognized as a 'feminist' and unhappy with your circumstances as a woman in society, you are often labelled as difficult to get along with. Swift urges her listeners to reconsider stereotypes and perceptions of women who refuse to silence their rage, encouraging women to speak out and stand up for themselves. She also utilizes the trope as an exploration of the consequences of betrayal, as women who express anger or seek retribution in the face of injustice are often labelled a 'mad woman'. This is a trope that has been present in previous feminist literature, such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which indicates that this issue is still present today, despite it being addressed for over a century.

Swift also expressed her frustrations with social expectations of women in her lyrics on the album. Songs such as *mad woman* and *the last great american dynasty* explore the mad woman trope themes of female rebellion. This 'rebellion' is not conforming to the social standards to which they are held by society. She highlights the importance of challenging social norms and being able to express yourself as a woman on your own terms. Moreover, Swift embraces the "madness" trope as a form of empowerment as she reclaims the narrative of the 'mad woman' as a woman defying expectations and living life on their terms. By doing this, she is advocating strength and liberation in embracing who you are regardless of social judgment. Moreover, she uses the Gothic image of a 'witch', a supernatural being with magical powers, to express how successful or talented women are often 'hunted' and targeted by the public, their 'magical abilities' being a metaphor for their talent.

Other Gothic elements of importance explored in the album are themes of death and the afterlife, as they represent a special kind of freedom. Ghost stories as a literary form allow women the freedom to criticise male power in a more radical way than those in more realist genres. Swift is using these 'haunting' and 'ghost' tropes as a way to explore anxieties about powerlessness and imprisonment within the patriarchy, and ultimately the desire to be liberated from these oppressive structures. When these women feel a lack of autonomy in their real lives, as they are imprisoned by the structures in which they find themselves, they gain autonomy in death, as their spirits are free to roam as they please. In addition, they can get their 'revenge' by haunting their oppressors, which is a powerful imagery of retribution. Swift plays on this imagery in multiple of her songs, but especially in the song *my tears ricochet*, which is thought to be written about her

feud with her previous producer and friend Scott Borchetta. The ghost can therefore represent two things: a state of mind, with women feeling invisible, erased, and repressed by male power. The other is the redemptive possibilities of female power. Ghost stories exploring the 'ghosting' of women within patriarchy are therefore also stories of empowerment, as they deal with the return of the repressed, the undead.

Lastly, another Gothic element found in the album is the theme of isolation and escape. The feeling of isolation has been identified in Swift's lyrics, which could refer to both the Covid lockdown and the isolating feeling of being a woman in a male dominated industry. She romanticizes the escape from it. The various stories and imagery of escape on the album can have multiple meanings simultaneously. However, given the theme of the album, one could argue that it likely represents escaping the isolation and limitations of a patriarchal society. Escaping to nature in her lyrics suggests that the patriarchal oppressive structures within society are not natural, but socially constructed.

This thesis is not without limitations. Firstly, it is a relatively short dissertation, with a limited word count and time. In addition, while writing the thesis, there has been other work taking up my time as I also had two other classes during the same time. Because of the limited time and length, there has also been a limitation of resources, as I had to prioritize what material was most important. This, however, could also be argued to be a strength, as the research had to be relevant to the thesis, making the task of discovering and deciding the most important aspects a big priority. Moreover, the validity of the thesis can be questioned as it is difficult to stay objective when writing due to emotional investment, as emotions can drive you to interpret information through a subjective lens. However, acknowledging your biases and seeking diverse sources while employing critical thinking might aid you in maintaining a clearer separation between opinions and facts. Seeking diverse sources is also important to avoid confirmation bias. Lastly, the complexity of the topic makes it challenging to make a concise text. Further research on the topic should therefore be of interest.

Further interesting research on the topic could be a psychological analysis of Gothic folklore fiction. It could be interesting to go into depth about how the narratives articulate inner fears, desires, and conflicts, delving into the therapeutic effects of engaging with Gothic folklore. It could also be of interest to a comparative study of Gothic literature across periods to reveal how social changes influence the expression of the Gothic, such as the portrayal of ghosts and other supernatural elements in response to cultural and social evolution. Here, we could also investigate the evolution of Gothic folklore in digital narratives, such as video games and media. Lastly, it could be interesting to examine Gothic folklore in a broader sense through a feminist lens, studying how femininity and masculinity are constructed in those settings.

Despite this dissertation focusing on a specific album by one artist, it is also connected to larger themes such as feminism and gender oppression. It offers insight into the complexities of gender dynamics, social structures, and individual and universal experiences. Analysing and comparing contemporary feminist literature to earlier works helps uncover how perceptions of gender have evolved and how they continue to shape individuals and society. Through this analysis, it is apparent that the feeling of injustice and powerlessness that women felt in the 1800s, is still present today (though in a different way), as many people resonate with Swift's lyrics, making her the successful artist that she is today. It is therefore still important to criticize social power structures, such as the patriarchy, and how they perpetuate inequality. Engaging with feminist

literature allows readers and listeners to develop empathy and a deeper understanding of other individuals and their experiences. Analysing this album, by a highly relevant female artist is therefore of significance as it adds a new perspective in the field that should be explored in depth.

Ultimately, the journey towards gender equality requires more than just institutional change, but a shift in the social attitudes and understanding of gender roles. By highlighting the double standards and negative stereotypes associated with women, Swift is contributing to the ongoing discussion on gender issues and encouraging a movement of change.

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Appendix: Relevance for Teaching

Literature is, and always has been, an important aspect of language learning. Reading is described by The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training as a *Basic Skill* (2017). According to the Directorate, to be able to read is the ability to create meaning from text (2017). This means that the students should be able to understand, use, reflect on, and engage with various texts. To be successful in this, one should not only be able to increase their reading skills, but also their motivation to read. To encourage the students to read, the aim should be to inspire them to enjoy the literature and read for pleasure. Having a diverse selection is therefore important. Utilizing song lyrics and popular music as a tool in the classroom can therefore be beneficial, as many students might find it interesting to engage with such materials.

I, therefore, argue that writing my thesis on lyrics from an album written by one of the most famous pop stars of our time is inherently valuable as a teacher as it introduces another perspective on how to incorporate music as literature in the English classroom, similar to poetry. Moreover, it provides a broader and deeper understanding of the complex literature we can find in popular music and how to utilize this in our teaching practice. Introducing music as a tool in the English classroom could aid us in motivating the students to participate and engage with literature they find interesting. Through intertextuality, the students might be inspired to explore further, which could lead to a higher interest in literature. For instance, by reading and analysing Swift's lyrics in the *folklore* album, and investigating the Gothic themes, they might be inspired to explore other Gothic fiction.

Lastly, reading and engaging with literature aids me in gaining a better understanding of the humanities and the tools available when analysing. Working on this thesis has given me the opportunity to utilize the theoretical knowledge I have gained from my studies in a more extensive area.

In short, this thesis is relevant for teaching as it can motivate students to develop and improve their reading skills, as it can appeal to their inner motivation to work on popular music, which might be of interest. Despite lyrics being short texts, such as poetry, it might inspire them to read further, wanting to explore other works such as novels. Writing this thesis has also been relevant for me as a teacher as I have been able to use theoretical knowledge from my studies in practice. It has therefore improved my competency in literary studies, which will be a central aspect in future classes.

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