



# ALWAYS ROOTING FOR THE ANTIHERO: A DIVE INTO THE EVOLUTION OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S POETIC PERSONA

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze how Taylor Swift's public persona has evolved over the last years, from her beginnings in the music industry to her latest works. To do so, we have studied some of the lyrics of her songs with the objective of understanding the three phases Swift has gone through in the creation of her personal brand: damsel in distress, hero and anti-hero. We have examined how, in her first albums, Swift portrayed herself as a naïve, young, woman always hoping to be rescued by her prince. Later, we have delved into how she depicts herself as a hero, so we have analyzed the coincidences between Campbell's hero's journey and some of the tracks in the album *1989*. Finally, we have focused on how, since 2017, Taylor Swift embodies the anti-hero, reviewing the shared traits between Swift's poetic persona and these characters of questionable morality. To this end, we have used some theoretical tools such as textual analysis or Greimas' actantial scheme and we have considered some of the most relevant studies on damsels in distress, the hero and the anti-hero.

*Keywords:* lyrics, popular music, pop music, antiheroine, Taylor Swift.

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Few artists today can dream of Taylor Swift's level of fame, as she has established herself almost as a bastion of American culture. The singer's rise in popularity has been unstoppable in recent years, especially since the release of her latest studio album, *Midnights* (2022).<sup>1</sup> The album catapulted her to the top of every chart, making her the most listened-to artist in the world on the Spotify platform, with over 26.1 billion global streams during 2023 (Spotify 2023; Chan 2023). Moreover, Swift stands as the sole recipient of the Grammy Award for *Album of the Year* on four occasions, and her world tour (*The Eras Tour*) has garnered international acclaim, with the songwriter achieving the remarkable feat of selling out every venue in record time. Such overwhelming demand has even resulted in technical difficulties, with platforms like Ticketmaster experiencing system failures during ticket sales (Ticketmaster 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> During the writing of this paper, another album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, has been announced, with an anticipated release date of April 19th, 2024.

But what has made Taylor Swift the cultural landmark she is today? While offering a definitive response to this inquiry remains elusive, it is apparent that her songwriting skills have significantly contributed to her success. In this regard, multiple relevant artists, such as Billy Joel or Paul McCartney, have addressed her talent and even admitted her influence in their own works (Ahlgrim 2023). Furthermore, the construction of a strong poetic persona in her lyrics, rooted in widely recognized archetypes, might have significantly contributed to her prominence. Consequently, this paper aims to explore the evolution of the lyric I in Taylor Swift's songs over the last two decades. This entails a preeminently literary analysis of Swift's compositions. While the treatment of song lyrics as poetry may engender some controversy, due to inherent disparities between the two forms of artistic expression, there are already multiple examples of this type of study. An exemplary illustration can be found in the notable scholarly work titled *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* (Pence 2012).

To accomplish this objective, an examination of select song lyrics will be undertaken, aimed at delineating three distinct phases in Swift's development of her poetic persona: the damsel in distress, the hero, and the anti-hero. Methodologically, textual analysis will be deployed as a primary tool, which is used to understand how people make sense of the world around them (McKee 2003, 1), and can reveal information about how particular groups are represented by society (31). Additionally, pertinent literature on archetypal figures such as damsels in distress (Adamou 2011; Idris 2013), heroes (Campbell 2008; Vogler 1998), and anti-heroes (Freire 2022) will be consulted. Another valuable theoretical tool that will be used in this study is the actancial model proposed by Algirdas G. Greimas (1973), despite its traditional association with narratology rather than lyricism. Given Swift's adeptness in storytelling (Gallo 2023; Lee 2023; Spencer 2023) and in creating credible characters, this analytical framework is deemed relevant.

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that Taylor Swift has defined her songwriting as "confessional" (Tayleesi 2018). Consequently, listeners have readily engaged in a process of identification, often attributing the persona depicted within her lyrics—frequently represented solely by the pronoun "I"—with the artist herself. Such a phenomenon of transference is usually observed within the realm of poetic expression and "can be understood as the result of a sort of contract: the author pretends to be the speaking 'I' in the poem, the reader joins the game" (Winko 2010, 228).

Returning to Greimas' proposed methodology, he divides the spheres of action of the characters in a story into seven roles, referred to as *actants* (Greimas 1973, 80). We will specifically concentrate on the role of the *object* (defined as what the subject desires) and the *subject*, described as "someone who performs the action" (Greimas 1973, 265).

It is imperative to clarify that the objective of this research is not, at any time, to make an analysis of the reception of Swift's songs nor of the aesthetics that accompany her through her different eras as the archetype she embodies evolves. However,

occasional reference to events from her public life will be indispensable to elucidate the transformation in the construction of the character associated with her poetic self. Likewise, selective mention of Swift's artistic appearance during specific junctures is pertinent as they serve to better comprehend the archetypal representations found through her lyrics. We also need to specify that, throughout this paper, we will refer mostly to Swift's original songs and not to her re-recordings. This decision is based on our assertion that the evolution of her poetic persona has been a process that has unfolded chronologically, and considering her versions would only obscure this progression.

### 1. YOUNG, SWEET, INNOCENT DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

Afsari and Omrani make an archetypal reading of the damsel in distress and assert that it is one of the most traditional archetypes in literature, characterized as someone "who is always vulnerable, and in need of rescue" (2015, 11). Similarly, Idris (2013, 138) emphasizes the recurrence of this archetype, delineating it as the antithesis of the knight in shining armor, which together constitute the two poles of gender representation in traditional narratives. Thus, the damsel in distress "is a woman who is young, beautiful, naïve, vulnerable and sexually attractive, and is always in need of a man to save her life or chastity" (Idris 2013, 138). In addition, the researcher delves into the etymological roots of the term and affirms that

[s]he is dominated by the patriarchal figure, either a dominating father, or a monster, or a villain, and on the verge of losing her life or virginity. She is unprotected against such forces and is entirely dependent upon a man, traditionally referred to as "Knight in Shining Armor," for physical protection, social standing and emotional support. (Idris 2013, 139)

Recent portrayals of female characters continue to exhibit manifestations of the damsel in distress archetype. For instance, notwithstanding the fact that "each new generation of Disney princesses reflects the cultural shifts associated with the respective feminist waves" (McDonough 2017, 12), there are not few that embody each and every one of the requirements of this archetype.

Ramaswamy posits that the damsel in distress, which she equates to the typical princess in fairy tales, "is a romantic figure whose role in the narrative is passive. Her function is to be rescued from a villain, human or monster, by the prince" (2014, 163). Notably, the author underscores the archetype's inherent passivity, emphasizing that, while she may be relevant in the plot, she seldom emerges as the main character.

Christina Adamou (2011) also stresses the inactivity inherent to the damsel in distress and she explains that the heroes' love interest can "aid the plot and development of the main characters" and tend to "offer themselves to the heroes at the end of the film as prizes for their bravery and skills" (Adamou 2011, 103). In the same vein, Betty Kaklamanidou highlights that "there are still superhero narratives which prefer to 'use' women as the leading man's object of affection and/or 'damsels in distress'" (2011, 61).

In light of these observations, it can be deduced that the predominant attributes of this archetype revolve around notions of beauty and passivity. Typically depicted as a youthful, innocent woman, she appears as the object of the male protagonist's sexual desires (or love, in more sweetened versions). In addition, her ability to wait is usually also part of the equation, since her passivity renders her reliant solely on the arrival of the gentleman who will rescue her from her dismal fate. Essentially, the archetype of the damsel in distress usually fits the "object" actant, a passive element devoid of narrative agency that has no other function in the story than to be what the hero desires.

In her first studio albums, Swift depicts herself precisely as a damsel in distress or a princess in need of rescue. In them, she tends to embody the passivity typical of this archetype, so that motifs such as an exacerbated emotionality or waiting are recurrent throughout her lyrics, as will be shown below. While Taylor Swift's self-titled first studio album features certain songs where the poetic persona embodies the archetype of the damsel in distress, such as "Teardrops on My Guitar," we contend that the character undergoes a more profound and compelling development from her second album onward. Consequently, the lyrics of her debut album will not be subjected to further in-depth analysis.

*Fearless* (2008), the artist's second record, is the one that possibly best illustrates the idea of Swift as a damsel in distress. In the song that launched the singer to stardom, "Love Story," the American envisions herself as the protagonist in a *Romeo and Juliet*-esque narrative, embodying the role of a good girl yearning to be saved (Figure 1). Key verses from "Love Story," such as "Romeo, take me somewhere we can be alone / I'll be waiting, all there's left to do is run / You'll be the prince and I'll be the princess" (Swift 2009, track 9) or "But I got tired of waiting / Wondering if you were ever coming around" delve into the motif of waiting, inaction and the need for a rescue. Likewise, the song "White Horse," also from *Fearless*, recreates a similar fantasy. However, in this case, Swift's dream is shattered when the "prince" in her narrative abandons her. Here, the singer conveys the innocence characteristic of damsels in distress, coupled with a sense of helplessness and incapacitation. Expressing her inability to act upon falling in love, Swift laments "Maybe I was naive, got lost in your eyes / And never really had a chance" (Swift 2009, track 11). Once again, the absence of agency in her character is evident, as the poetic self assumes the role of the object within Greimas's actantial schema (1973, 80).

In addition, it seems pertinent to emphasize that, in this album, the singer demonstrates meticulous attention to the scenery, as her narratives unfold within a realm of fantasy evocative of medieval literary traditions, legends, and fairy tales (Figure 1). In this sense, it is worth mentioning that the song "Forever & Always" begins with the well-known phrase "Once upon a time" (Swift 2009, track 17).



Fig. 1. Frame from the music video for “Love Story” © Big Machine Records, LLC, 2008.

Waiting becomes a *leitmotiv* of the album, appearing repeatedly in other songs such as “Come in with the rain” (Swift 2009, track 4) (“I’ll leave my window open/ ‘Cause I’m too tired at night to call your name./ Just know I’m right here hoping/ that you’ll come in with the rain”), where the poetic persona resigns agency to such an extent that she refrains from even calling out to her beloved. Furthermore, in the bonus track “Today was a fairytale,” included in the album re-record—*Fearless Taylor’s Version*—(Swift 2021, track 20), explicit reference is made to the archetype under discussion, commencing with the lines: “Today was a fairytale, you were the prince/ I used to be a damsel in distress.”

Although on her third studio album, *Speak Now* (2010), Swift continues to portray herself as a fairytale princess, her capacity for action is somewhat greater than on *Fearless*. Despite the continued thematic presence of waiting, shifts in aesthetics and emotional expression distance her from the role of damsel in distress previously portrayed. The character embodied by Swift is no longer able to actualize the actant “object,” and transitions to the active “subject,” assuming the central role in the narratives she presents. This evolution is rendered evident in tracks such as “Back to December,” where she confesses, “Maybe this is wishful thinking, probably mindless dreaming, but if we loved again I swear I’d love you right” (Swift 2010, track 3). The use of a verb as powerful

as “I swear,” in the active voice, signifies a transformation in her lyrical style and, consequently, in her poetic persona. Similarly, in “The story of us,” Swift articulates, “I used to know my place was the spot next to you. / Now, I’m searching the room for an empty seat” (Swift 2010, track 7). There is a departure from the prior depiction of herself as a peripheral figure, seeking a place beside her lover, to actively searching a spot of her own. The utilization of action verbs serves to blur the passivity associated with the singer’s persona in her earlier compositions.

In her subsequent album, *Red* (2012), Swift has notably forsaken the archetype of the damsel in distress, yet has not fully reached the next phase in the evolution of her poetic persona. In fact, the song “I knew you were trouble” commences with the formula “Once upon a time” (Swift 2012, track 4), traditionally associated to fairy tales, as we have previously stated. However, in this album, her romantic partner no longer monopolizes the narrative spotlight and, in her reflections on love affairs, she assumes a protagonist role, equal to his. Two illustrative instances suffice to elucidate this transition. In “State of grace,” Swift writes: “So you were never a saint and I loved in shades of wrong” (Swift 2012, track 1), thereby eschewing idealized portrayals of her lover. On the other hand, the song “Treacherous” begins with an imperative: “Put your lips close to mine” (Swift 2012, track 3), accentuating the lyric-I’s agency. Henceforth, she unequivocally occupies the position of the “subject,” rather than the “object.” In the transitional album that *Red* represents, bridging her former country-style recordings with the emergent pop sounds, Swift progressively assumes the mantle of the hero, a transformation fully realized in her next album, *1989*, to be discussed herein.

## 2. THE HERO AND HER QUEST

Northrop Frye defines the *archetype* as “a symbol which connects one poem to another and thereby helps to unify our literary experience” (Frye 1957, 99–100) and few symbols can be found to be more stable than the figure of the hero. As Bruce Meyer points out, “the universality of the term *hero* seems to suggest that it is a concept of capital significance for our imagination” (2008, 48) and, consequently, numerous researchers have reflected on their importance. Jung, for one, regards the victory of the hero as “the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious” (Jung 1969, 167), while Frye endeavors to categorize heroes based on their power of action (Frye 1957, 366).

But if there is anyone who has undertaken an exhaustive exploration of the figure of the hero, it is undoubtedly Joseph Campbell. For the critic, the hero “is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (2008, 39). In his work *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, Campbell delineates the stages of the hero’s journey, positing a common narrative structure shared by heroic protagonists across different temporal and

spatial contexts. Moreover, “the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation - initiation - return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (49). Building upon Campbell’s framework, Christopher Vogler (1998) simplifies the stages of the hero’s quest, offering a more accessible approach for analysis. For him, the initial phase encompasses stages such as “ordinary world,” “call to adventure,” “refusal of the call,” “meeting with the mentor” and “crossing the first threshold.” In the second part of the hero’s journey, the protagonist enters a new world (literally or metaphorically) and will have to face the dangers he encounters there. Vogler differentiates four moments: “test, allies, enemies,” “approach to the inmost Cave,” “Ordeal” and “Reward” (Vogler 1998, 19–23). Finally, the last stage includes “The road back,” “Resurrection” and “Return with the Elixir” (1998, 23–26).

Upon comprehending the theoretical framework of the hero’s journey, a critical examination of Taylor Swift’s fifth studio album, *1989* (2014), will be undertaken. Hitherto, the artist had been progressively reshaping her poetic persona from that of a conventional damsel in distress to one imbued with greater autonomy. However, in *1989*, Swift appears to portray herself as the hero, entering a novel world and encountering adventures. While we do not attribute deliberate intentionality to Taylor Swift in replicating the various stages of the hero’s journey, it is worth noting that throughout *1989* a significant number of songs could readily be associated with the diverse phases of this narrative archetype. The ensuing analysis elucidates this phenomenon.

The album begins with “Welcome to New York,” an anthem in which the artist recounts her arrival in New York City. This track encapsulates the sensation of embarking upon a novel chapter in her life, evoking feelings of surprise and novelty, as articulated in the chorus: “It’s a new soundtrack, I could dance to this beat, beat forevermore./ The lights are so bright, but they never blind me, me./ Welcome to New York, it’s been waitin’ for you” (Swift 2014, track 1). This initial track could easily represent the crossing of the first threshold: the ordinary world, shown in her previous albums, is left behind. The lyrical composition epitomizes a significant juncture, characterized by a transition from the comfort and familiarity of the known realm to the unexplored domain of novel experiences and adventures.

In the second part of the monomyth, the hero must face a succession of trials. In the track “Out of the Woods” (Swift 2014, track 4), the singer ponders whether she is out of danger yet. Swift undergoes a series of challenges akin to those endured by traditional heroes in their quests. Moreover, on this path of trials, the hero encounters various characters, some of whom assume the roles of allies while others adopt adversarial positions. In “You Are In Love” (Swift 2014, track 15), Swift reflects upon falling in love with her best friend. Conversely, “Bad blood” explores themes of betrayal and disillusionment, as the protagonist grapples with the aftermath of being deceived by a once-trusted confidant.

The lyrics depict Swift's lamentation over the treachery, encapsulated in inquiries, such as "Did you have to do this/ ... Did you have to hit me/ Where I'm weak?" (Swift 2014, track 8), and reflections upon the tarnished relationship, symbolized by the metaphor of rusting, once-shiny aspects of their bond. As she travels along the path of the trials, the poetic self steadily approaches the profound depths of the darkest cave. Throughout this journey, she asserts that she is incessantly pursued, as articulated by the artist in the lyrics of "I know places": "Cause they got the cages, they got the boxes and guns / They are the hunters, we are the foxes and we run" (Swift 2014, track 12).

Finally, Swift's poetic persona enters the inmost cave, an experience she discusses in "Wonderland." As Vogler (1998) notes,

In mythology the Inmost Cave may represent the land of the dead. The hero may have to descend into hell to rescue a loved one (Orpheus), into a cave to fight a dragon and win a treasure (Sigurd in Norse myth), or into a labyrinth to confront a monster (Theseus and the Minotaur). (20)

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the artist references the metaphorical fall down a rabbit hole in "Wonderland" (Swift 2014, track 14). Within this cave, the traditional hero must confront their deepest fear, a moment that continues to be recounted in the same track. Swift reflects on this encounter by stating: "Didn't you calm my fears with a Cheshire cat smile?/ Ooh, didn't it all seem new and excitin'?/ I felt your arms twistin' around me/ It's all fun and games 'til somebody loses their mind" (Swift 2014, track 14). The realization that a once-loved person has succumbed to madness prompts Swift to acknowledge the necessity of returning home, which represents the final phase of the hero's journey: "I reached for you, but you were gone/ I knew I had to go back home."

At this juncture, the traditional hero, heavily wounded after the battle, appears to undergo a symbolic death, emblematic of a transformative process. In Vogler's words "the hero, who has been to the realm of the dead, must be reborn and cleansed in one last Ordeal of death and Resurrection before returning to the Ordinary World of the living" (1998, 24). This experience finds vivid depiction in the song "Clean." Within this composition, Swift's poetic persona, embodying the hero in their ultimate battle, explains how she thought she was about to die, which paradoxically served to purify her:

Hung my head as I lost the war/ and the sky turned black like a perfect storm./ The rain came pouring down,/ when I was drownin', that's when I could finally breathe./ And by mornin', gone was any trace of you,/ I think I am finally clean. (Swift 2014, track 13)

The concluding phase of the hero's journey entails the return to the ordinary realm bearing the elixir acquired through the battle. The hero must come back to the ordinary world "but the journey is meaningless unless she brings back some Elixir, treasure, or lesson from the Special World" (Vogler 1998, 25). Swift expresses that idea of acquiring insights from her journey in "New Romantics," where she sings "We cry tears of mascara in the bathroom./ Honey, life is just a classroom" (Swift 2014, track 16). Within this track, Swift



reflects on embodying a new paradigm of romance, departing from the conventional romanticism depicted in her earlier albums, with highly established and polarized gender roles. She asserts “we’re the new romantics,” ending the song (and the album, as this is its last track) with the learned lesson from her journey: “The best people in life are free.”

### 2.1 *THE HERO’S DEATH*

Following this comprehensive analysis, it would appear evident that, in 1989, Taylor Swift assumed the role of the central protagonist within her narrative. Moreover, parallels can be discerned between the scenes she depicts in her songs and the various stages of the heroic monomyth. However, towards the conclusion of the 1989 era, a pivotal event transpired, catalyzing a profound shift in the promotion of her music and personal brand. While the preceding analysis has primarily focused on scrutinizing the lyrics of Swift’s songs, endeavoring to minimize references to external events, it is imperative to address here an episode that significantly impacted Taylor Swift’s career trajectory. This occurrence profoundly influenced the evolution of her personal brand and, consequently, the portrayal of her poetic persona reflected in her lyrics.

In 2016, rapper Kanye West was preparing the release of his new album, *The life of Pablo*. Allegedly, West intended to include a provocative line about Taylor Swift in the song “Famous” (West 2016, track 4), insinuating that they should have sex at some point. The rapper purportedly informed Swift of this impending lyric. Nevertheless, upon the song’s release, the lyrics diverged from the communication Swift received, leading her to publicly express discomfort, particularly denouncing the line “I made that bitch famous,” which she claimed she never authorized. West’s then-wife, Kim Kardashian, posted to social media an edited video of the call between Kanye and Taylor, where the artist appeared to give her consent. This episode precipitated a widespread backlash against Swift and the hashtag #TaylorSwiftIsOverParty became a global trending topic on Twitter. The posts were accompanied by an inundation of derogatory comments and adorned with snake emojis across Swift’s social media platforms. In all the chaos, Swift opted for a strategic withdrawal, deleting all her social media posts and unfollowing everyone. The image of hero was dead. This incident would trigger the last stage of Swift’s public persona evolution, which is also represented by a change in the treatment of the poetic I in her lyrics.

### 3. “ALWAYS RISING FROM THE ASHES:” THE ANTIHERO IS FORGED

The figure of the antihero holds considerable intrigue for researchers, given its profound impact on consumers of such narratives. Various scholars have endeavored to elucidate the reasons underlying the irresistible allure of these morally ambiguous characters. Drawing upon cognitive psychology, some researchers, such as Albert Bandura (1986,

1991, 1999, 2001), propose that individuals are able to enjoy this type of characters through a mechanism termed *moral disengagement*. This process allows them to temporarily suspend their moral judgments, enabling them to appreciate and engage with characters who defy conventional ethical norms. Other scholars, such as Jonathan Cohen (2001, 2006), contend that empathy plays a central role in fostering a connection with antiheroes, as audiences identify with their complexities and internal conflicts. More recent research, focused on the so-called *Affective Disposition Theory*, suggests that this phenomenon occurs because we tend to be more permissive with those characters that, from the start, we like. Scholars such as Raney (2003, 2004, 2017) and Zillmann (1991, 1995, 2000) have contributed to this line of inquiry.

Be that as it may, it seems clear that audiences are drawn to the enigmatic allure of antiheroes. Alfonso Freire Sánchez defines the antihero as

that character who is the protagonist of a narrative, with their own purposes, whose *leitmotiv* is revenge or the search for their identity, and who is characterized by moral ambiguity, excessive pride, the presence of inner conflict and an uninhibited, solitary and skeptical behavior ... . Among their traits, they stand out for their strategist mentality, superior intelligence and a feeling of incessant uneasiness. In their arc of redemption they will align their purposes with the common good or with a greater cause and, thanks to their fortitude and resilience, they will achieve their goals regardless of the means and outside the established law, even if they must sacrifice themselves to achieve them<sup>2</sup>. (Freire 2022, 37–38)

Although many of the ideas outlined by Freire resonate with our understanding, we find ourselves unable to fully align with all of them. One point of contention pertains to the notion that the antihero must invariably opt to fight for the common good or a noble cause. Contrary to this perspective, we assert that an antihero may exhibit identical traits to those of a villain in terms of moral outlook. The fundamental distinction lies in the structural role they assume within the narrative framework: antiheroes are protagonists, whereas villains are necessarily antagonists. Hence, the narrative of antiheroes' exploits typically employs an internal focalization (usually fixed) according to Genettean nomenclature (Genette 1983, 241).

Furthermore, we maintain that antiheroes ought to offer glimpses of positive attributes, albeit not necessarily aligned with the common good. Rather, it suffices for audiences to discern expressions of love and self-sacrifice towards a significant individual. Upon closer examination, such acts may stem from a predominantly selfish impulse, as the loss of a beloved figure constitutes a personal loss. However, as consumers of narratives, we derive satisfaction from witnessing such actions, thus positing that the redemption arc of the antihero ultimately centers on love. Notwithstanding these points of dissimilarity, we can agree on a good part of the features proposed by Freire.

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<sup>2</sup> Since there is no official version of this text in English, my translation will be offered henceforth.

Although Taylor Swift is not a fictional character, in the music industry, “the construction of the personal brand and the narrative is as or more important than that in the construction of literary or cinematographic characters” (Freire 2022, 133). Moreover, a discernible correlation exists between “the development of the personal brand of musical artists and current trends in audiovisual narrative.” Undoubtedly, there has been a noticeable proliferation in recent years of narratives featuring characters of dubious morality who nonetheless captivate audiences (Vaage 2016, xi). In fact, many researchers have stated that this is “a recent phenomenon, a product of post-modernity” (Freire 2022, 53). Examples of this are the characters of Joe Goldberg, from the Netflix series *You*; Villanelle, from *Killing Eve*; Walter White, from *Breaking Bad*; or Thomas Shelby, from *Peaky Blinders*, the oldest of these series being *Breaking Bad*, which premiered in 2008.

But how does this relate to the American singer? Following the tarnishing of Swift’s reputation subsequent to the incident involving West and Kardashian, the restoration of her hero archetype became markedly challenging. Consequently, her personal image underwent a perceptible shift towards a darker aesthetic in her clothes, music videos and, notably, in her lyrics. As a result of this change in her social status and her public persona, the anti-hero was born, an image that she has maintained to this day and that vertebrates, to a greater or lesser extent, her current discography. At this point of the study, it is crucial to underscore that the two albums penned by Swift during the pandemic, *folklore* and *evermore*, diverge significantly from the trajectory previously outlined. These albums manifest as markedly intimate creations, emerging amidst a period of confinement, wherein the depiction of the anti-hero archetype is less pronounced compared to Swift’s earlier (and later) works. However, as will be expounded upon subsequently, the portrayal of the antihero is imbued with considerable complexity, characterized, among other facets, by the presence of inner turmoil. In this regard, by delving into her fears and vulnerabilities, these albums hold substantial potential to enrich the narrative of the poetic persona that Taylor Swift has been cultivating since 2017.

Examining how the distinctive traits of this narrative archetype manifest in her music, it becomes apparent that antiheroes do not typically undergo the conventional “call to adventure” characteristic of the hero’s journey; rather, are forced to it, often driven by motives of vengeance. Swift’s return to the public eye, after three years without releasing music, was initiated with the single “Look What You Made Me Do,” which would eventually become part of her sixth studio album, *reputation* (2017). The opening verses of this single unequivocally convey Swift’s sense of betrayal and the ensuing sentiment of anger she experiences:

I don’t like your little games/ Don’t like your tilted stage/ The role you made me play/ Of the fool, no, I don’t like you. / I don’t like your perfect crime/ How you laugh when you lie/ You said the gun was mine/ Isn’t cool, no, I don’t like you. (Swift 2017, track 6)

In the same song, the singer asserts “All I think about is karma. And then, the world moves on, but one thing’s for sure: maybe I got mine but you’ll all get yours.” The desire for vengeance that initiates the antihero’s story arc is articulated from its outset, aligning with the events that had transpired in the artist’s personal life.

Another of the antihero’s characteristics, as mentioned in previous pages, is moral ambiguity: antiheroes are capable of feeling positive emotions and behaving commendably but, at the same time, they can carry out the most despicable actions. This narrative motif is exemplified in numerous compositions by Swift since 2017. To illustrate, in “Getaway Car,” the singer-songwriter paints herself as a traitor: “We were jet-set, Bonnie and Clyde (Oh-oh)/ until I switched to the other side, to the other side./ It’s no surprise I turned you in (Oh-oh)/ ‘Cause us traitors never win” (Swift 2017, track 9). Moreover, in the song “I did something bad,” Swift self-figures as an evil and manipulative woman (“I never trust a narcissist, but they love me/ So I play ‘em like a violin/ And I make it look, oh, so easy” [Swift 2017, track 3]) exhibiting an absence of remorse for the transgressions committed, as articulated in her declaration “I don’t regret it one bit ‘cause he had it coming.” In this track, Swift makes a display of a “Machiavellian and persuasive personality” (Freire 2022, 90), one of the traits frequently associated with antiheroes. Furthermore, as posited by the researcher, the antihero tends to be a prideful character, potentially bordering on narcissism. Swift demonstrates that kind of behavior in “I think he knows” (a song from her album *Lover*), by saying “He’s so obsessed with me and, boy, I understand” (Swift 2019, track 6) or in *ME!*, as she states “I promise that you’ll never find another like me” (Swift 2019, track 16).

However (and this is imperative to understand the depth of this type of character), the antihero is a tormented being, gnawed by an inner conflict as they see their own flaws and feel terrified of being ostracized from society again. In “The Archer,” from her *Lover* album, Swift sings “Who could ever leave me, darling? But who could stay?” (Swift 2019, track 5). This anxious sentiment is echoed in other recordings, such as “Delicate,” from *reputation*, where Swift asks her lover, filled with dread, “Is it cool that I said all that? Is it chill that you’re in my head? ‘Cause I know that it’s delicate” (Swift 2017, track 5). Lastly, in *Midnights* (2022), the album wherein the antihero archetype reaches its zenith within Swift’s narrative, the song “Antihero” emerges as a prominent feature. In this song (we cannot overlook the title), the artist grapples with the looming specter of abandonment: “I wake up screaming from dreaming,/ One day, I’ll watch as you’re leaving/ ‘Cause you got tired of my scheming” (Swift 2022, track 3). In the same album, also the song “Mastermind” delves in this feeling, as she states that she has been scheming since childhood to make people love her. Swift’s acute awareness of her own flaws engenders a sense of vulnerability. This human side, “delicate,” as she terms it, is what, to a great extent, balances the scales and makes her the antiheroic protagonist and never a villainous antagonist.

Furthermore, the tormented psyche of the antihero emerges as a prominent thematic concern explored by the artist across her albums *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020). Although we will not conduct an exhaustive analysis of the lyrics (as this alone could lead to a separate study), we can highlight certain songs resonating with the anxious sentiments under discussion. “Mirrorball” (Swift 2020b, track 6) and “This Is Me Trying” (Swift 2020b, track 9), featured in *folklore*, exemplify this phenomenon. Similarly, the anguish stemming from self-awareness of one’s divergence and internal darkness finds poignant expression in compositions within *evermore*, notably evidenced in “Tolerate It” (Swift 2020a track 5).

Another element typical of the antihero is the emphasis on their sexuality (Freire 2022, 90). In addition, the character’s behavior is quite uninhibited. In stark contrast to the Swift of the first albums, characterized by innocence, the persona portrayed by the artist now exudes a significantly more sensual demeanor, evident in her discography through songs such as “Dress,” from *reputation* (with lines as “Carve your name into my bedpost/ ‘Cause I don’t want you like a best friend/ Only bought this dress so you could take it off” [Swift 2017, track 12]) or *False God*, from *Lover* (which features lines such as “The altar is my hips/ even if it’s a false god” [Swift 2019, track 13]).

Sexuality is also very present in the song “Vigilante Shit,” from *Midnights*, where Swift uses the double meaning attributable to “do” in the phrase “You did some bad things, but I’m the worst of them” (Swift 2022, track 8). In addition, the performance staging of this song on her tour seems straight out of the film *Chicago* (2002), and contrasts wildly with the costuming and performance of songs from older albums (see a comparison in Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Performance of the song “Vigilante Shit” (left) and “Enchanted” (right) in *The Eras Tour*.

One last feature that is utterly inherent to the figure of the antihero is their high intelligence and that they are, first and foremost, strategists. Swift concludes her last studio album so far with the song “Mastermind” which, by the way, begins with the phrase

“once upon a time,” thus closing the cycle that began in her first albums, where the setting was that of a fairy tale. In this recording, the artist confesses that she is, precisely, a great tactician who had it all planned from the beginning:

What if I told you none of it was accidental?/ And the first night that you saw me/ Nothing was gonna stop me./ I laid the groundwork, and then/ just like clockwork/ the dominoes cascaded in a line./ What if I told you I’m a mastermind?/ And now you’re mine./ It was all by design/ ‘Cause I’m a mastermind. (Swift 2022, track 13)

But, once again, she lets us glimpse her deepest fears as she shouts out her most profound confession in the song’s bridge:

No one wanted to play with me as a little kid/ so I’ve been scheming like a criminal ever since/ to make them love me and make it seem effortless./ This is the first time I’ve felt the need to confess./ And I swear/ I’m only cryptic and Machiavellian/ ‘Cause I care. (Swift 2022, track 13)

The hero died with the fall of her reputation and her desire for revenge and, since then, the artist has been scheming as if she were a villain. But we, as the audience, know the truth: there is goodness within her, there are the contradictions inherent in someone afraid of losing, there is love. Swift’s arc of redemption is completed with the stitches that run through her albums, full of love, desire and capacity for self-giving, songs in which she assures us that “I would die for you in secret” (Swift 2020b, track 15). We, as the audience, align ourselves with her and acknowledge the verity: “it must be exhausting always rooting for the antihero” (Swift 2022, track 3).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper intended to explore the evolution of Taylor Swift’s poetic persona through the analysis of selected lyrics from her songs. Throughout her career, Swift has presented her poetic self in various forms, resonating with archetypal figures such as the damsel in distress, the hero, and the antihero. Initially depicted as a passive fairy-tale princess, the artist undergoes a transformation, emerging as a self-empowered heroine, notably exemplified in her album *1989*. Subsequent to a public incident that tarnished her public image, Swift embraces the antihero archetype, delving into more intricate and multifaceted emotional landscapes within her lyrics. This thematic shift parallels the contemporary cinematic trend favoring antiheroic characters.

This study has only been intended as an introductory overview of the subject matter and, as such, has certain limitations that must be addressed. The primary objective of this research was to provide a broad panorama of the development of Taylor Swift’s poetic persona by employing literary archetypes. Consequently, some aspects are in need of a more in-depth exploration and some song lyrics have been excluded in favor of achieving an overall picture of this evolution. Nevertheless, the study invites further investigation into the particular development of these archetypes. Additionally, a

reception-oriented analysis becomes imperative, particularly given Taylor Swift's current prominence. Furthermore, complementing this study with interdisciplinary approaches would enrich understanding of various facets shaping Taylor Swift's public persona, including her music videos, aesthetics, and public portrayal in the media.

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