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### Folklore

Taylor Swift has undoubtedly become one of the most popular public figures in pop culture today. Most fans and foes credit her success to her background in country and pop music and songs written about ex-boyfriends. Despite her ability to put on an incredible performance and strategic marketing skills that have allowed her to integrate the worlds of business and popular music, her true success is a result of her artistry. Swift has always said that she is a writer before she is a singer, which has allowed her to encapsulate emotions into her music in a way very few artists have achieved. This is especially shown through her eighth studio album, “Folklore.” The Folklore album is an entirely fictional album that showcases Swift’s ability to capture an audience through solely her writing, allowing her to become a dominating force within the music industry.

Beginning her career at age 16, Swift quickly became a country music phenomenon. Later as she switched into the pop music genre, she continued to gain loyal fans by producing music about her personal life. Because she had such an honest relationship with her fans through her candid music, the general public's interest in her personal life grew as she dated other famous celebrities and wrote about her experiences. From this effect, many critics began claiming that she only wrote songs about her ex-boyfriends, a claim that has stuck with her since her 20s. Disregarding the opinions of critics, it is impossible to deny that these factors have allowed public interest in her life to increase and has been the source of many of her fans.

Since being in ‘the know’ of a major celebrity’s life acted as an attraction for some fans, this made it risky for Swift to not only switch genres for a third time – from pop to indie – but to also write an entirely fictional album. When talking about her experience creating *Folklore*, Swift reflected on how writing fiction as opposed to an autobiographical album was new for her and was exciting because, “It’s allowed to exist on its own merit without it being: Oh! People are only listening to this because it tells them something they could read in a tabloid.” However, Swift was able to reach new heights in her career with the release of this album, *Folklore*. Fans were immediately entranced by her fictional stories that showcased her writing and poetry skills in a way she had never shown fans before. This infatuation with the album was reflected through the album’s success as it spent eight weeks as No.1 on Billboard’s Top 100, and became the best selling album of 2020.<sup>1</sup> *Folklore* also went on to win Album of the Year at the Grammys, making Swift the first female artist to have ever won this award three times. Therefore, the success of the album allowed her career to reach new milestones despite the fact that she was no longer writing about her personal life. Instead, this level of success can be attributed to her skills as a writer.

One reason Swift’s *Folklore* was able to reach such levels of success is due to the timing of its release. Written during quarantine, Swift released the album in July of 2020 and gave listeners the chance to escape from the ongoing pandemic, Covid-19. While the world and ideas of normality were crumbling around her, she was able to give her fans the chance to feel an emotion other than uncertainty for the first time in a while, through her music. When reflecting on her process making this album, Swift said, “If we’re going to have to recalibrate everything,

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<sup>1</sup>Caulfield, Keith. “How Taylor Swift’s Recent Album Releases Tell a Story of the ‘midnights’ Rollout.” *Billboard*, Billboard, 22 Oct. 2022, [www.billboard.com/lists/taylor-swift-first-week-album-sales-streams-compare/evermore-dec-26-2020-date-d-chart-329000-equivalent-album-units-154500-in-traditional-album-sales/](https://www.billboard.com/lists/taylor-swift-first-week-album-sales-streams-compare/evermore-dec-26-2020-date-d-chart-329000-equivalent-album-units-154500-in-traditional-album-sales/).

we should start with what we love the most.”<sup>2</sup> Meaning amidst uncertainty she held herself together by turning to what she loved the most and finding a new way to create music. By doing this she offered her fans refuge from the erupting world around them.

Another reason her writing skills allowed the album to achieve such levels of success, is directly correlated to the emotions Swift is able to invoke in her audience. A simple description of the album as a fictional indie record fails to explain the complex and emotional stories she tells throughout the 17 tracks on *Folklore*. Almost anyone can write about things they have experienced, but Swift showcases her true talent by writing about both fictitious and even historical characters. As an audience, listeners have and will always gravitate towards music that they can relate to or feel represents their life in some form. By increasing the topics of her songs on *Folklore*, Swift was able to reach a larger audience and give listeners the chance to feel seen.

What exactly is Taylor Swift writing about on *Folklore* that allows her to encapsulate audiences so well? Swift writes about a myriad of topics including a young teenage love triangle, mental health issues, loss, love, growing up, and the crippling expectations for women in today’s society. Essentially, she’s written an album that has something for virtually everyone. One particular topic that captivated audiences was mental health.

In her song “Mirrorball,” Swift dives into this topic of mental health, one that she had never experimented with previously. In particular, this track addresses the societal pressures people feel to become different versions of themselves for different people. This can also be tied to gender roles and the unattainable expectations for women to be different versions of themselves around friends, family, and co-workers. Right off the bat in this song, Swift establishes a mirrorball, or disco ball, as a metaphor for the performance aspect of people’s lives.

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<sup>2</sup>*Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Session*, Directed by Taylor Swift, Performances by Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff, and Aaron Dressner, Disney Plus, 2020.

She reflects on how a mirrorball must be shattered into thousands of pieces in order to be shiny and interesting. The more broken a mirrorball is acts as a representation of how women are seen as more interesting and entertaining when they can show more facets of themselves. However, when the light is off, they are still up on a pedestal, broken.<sup>3</sup> This entire track is a nod to the duality people, and particularly women, are forced to emulate in their daily lives. By writing this track, Swift offers her audience the chance to feel heard and know that they are not alone in feelings of frustration towards the impossible constructs of our society.

Another track about mental health, “This is Me Trying,” is about the people who struggle with mental illness everyday and have to make the active choice to keep going amidst their struggle. In this track, the unnamed character is trying their best and still feels they are falling short, and that their best is not good enough. Swift uses the lyric, “all of my cages were mental” to portray the idea that someone struggling with mental health’s toughest obstacle are the things they tell themselves in their head. The second verse of the song dives into themes of perfectionism and how high school and college breeds expectations that someone has to be perfect at something, and that a person’s worth is tied to academic success. Swift even toys with the idea of academic validation and being told a person has potential from a young age enables them to feel more pressure as they grow up and feel that they might be falling behind.

Both “Mirrorball” and “This is Me Trying” are two of Swift’s most emotional tracks which allow her to form a deep connection with her listeners who can relate to this shared experience of pressure and mental health struggles. Despite the fictional aspect of this work, the success of Folklore and these tracks is a result of Swift’s ability to use literary devices to turn

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<sup>3</sup>*Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Session*, Directed by Taylor Swift, Performances by Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff, and Aaron Dressner, Disney Plus, 2020.

heavy emotional struggles into metaphors, while allowing a listener to feel united in the struggles that their life possesses.

Swift also shifts gears in the album and uses three songs to tell the story of an adolescent love triangle. The songs “Betty,” “Cardigan,” and “August” each tell one story from a different point of view. “Cardigan” tells the story of a girl named Betty who experiences both her first love and heartbreak with a boy named James. “Betty” tells the story from James’ point of view as he realizes he made a mistake by leaving Betty and tries to win her back. The third song, “August,” tells the story of a second girl that James spent the summer with when he left Betty. The trilogy of songs offer a unique perspective to each side of the story and remind listeners that someone’s hero is always someone else’s villain. This realization allows folklore fans to find themselves in this trilogy whether they feel like they were wronged, made a mistake, or were wronged and no one believes them. Swift’s intense and imagery-filled story telling paints a clear picture of this story, which even further allows fans to find themselves in this story, and in Folklore as a whole. The trilogy also further exemplifies Swift’s talent that sets her apart from other artists: her ability to write about things she has never experienced. This innate talent broadens her horizon as an artist and allows her to incorporate a sense of relatability to her music that almost anyone can connect to. Therefore, her story-telling sets her apart in the music industry by adding depth to her career and allowing her to create art that more people can find themselves in.

Taylor Swift has undoubtedly grown through her music since she started her career at age 16. However, her most notable development is her story-telling ability. Swift’s eighth album, Folklore, is a perfect representation of this as she takes listeners through a multitude of emotions on her entirely fiction record. She dabbles with everything from complex themes of mental

health issues to adolescent love and coming-of-age in Folklore and entrances listeners by doing so. Her ability to capture audiences with fictitious characters and scenarios are a testament to her strength as a writer, and it is this natural talent for writing that allows her to succeed in the music industry on unprecedented levels.