

# TAYLOR SWIFT AND THE EVOLUTION OF WOMANHOOD

**LEKHAA MS**

UG Student, Department English Language and Literature  
Madras Christian College, Chennai

**Dr. S. FRANKLIN DANIEL**

Head, Department of English (Aided)  
Madras Christian College, Chennai

## Abstract

Dr. Taylor Alison Swift is an American singer and songwriter. She is one of the world's best-selling music artists. She is the highest-grossing tour artist and the richest female musician. In 2024, she won the Grammy Award for Album of the Year for *Midnights* (2022), making history as the first artist to win this award four times. This paper proposes to analyse how Taylor Swift represents women's independence through her song lyrics and how they evolve through her albums, drawing parallels with how women are represented throughout historical ages. Taylor Swift has released fifteen albums, including four re-recordings, spanning across different genres and exploring different themes. Her discography serves as a reflection of the stages in the representation of womanhood. As we analyse her lyrics, we can see how each album represents a different historical age and the shifting roles of women and women empowerment over time. This paper showcases how Swift's work aligns with historically defined gender roles and changing identities.

**Keywords:** women, reflection, feminism, representation, Taylor Swift, empowerment

Dr. Taylor Allison Swift, Grammy winner, trendsetter, record holder and one of the most influential artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, explores themes of womanhood, women empowerment, independence, and love. This paper intends to analyse each of Taylor Swift's albums and their themes, aiming to relate them with the portrayal of women in society throughout historical ages.

## Taylor Swift Debut and the Victorian Age

Taylor Swift's self-titled debut is an album focusing on innocence, romance, and the joys of first love. Women in the Victorian era in England were expected to be innocent, feminine and clueless about the world, love, and marital life. Taylor Swift's song 'Mary's Song' is a song that talks about first love and the innocence that one has when one experiences first love.

*I dared you to kiss me and ran when you tried.*

(Swift, "Mary's Song")

This lyric shows the innocence of first love as well as the childish ignorance that young girls possess. In the Victorian era, women were believed to be pure and naïve. The way the song depicts first love is similar to how women in the Victorian era would discover love after their marriages were arranged. Women in Victorian England

would be naïve in the ways of the world and marital life similar to girls experiencing first love.

## Fearless and the Romantic Age

*Fearless* is an album delving into self-discovery and struggles faced while discovering oneself. Women in the Romantic age began challenging norms and trying new things, for the first time. They indulged in hobbies and explored things that were taboo or frowned upon earlier. There were women writers emerging, which was unheard of in earlier historical periods. The song 'Fifteen' narrates the story of a teenage girl making her way through high school.

*In your life you'll do things greater than dating the boy on the football team.*

(Swift, "Fearless")

These lyrics show that there is a lot more a woman can accomplish if she takes the time to discover who she is. This can be compared with a woman making her way in English society. In this age, women had to face a lot of problems when they were out in society. They had to protect themselves and it was very hard for them to explore their interests or hone their talents. High school is a simple metaphor, but girls do face struggles related to

finding their identity, whether in Romantic England or in the modern age. The song 'White Horse' deals with self-exploration and becoming one's own self.

*I'm not a princess, this ain't a fairytale.*

(Swift, "White Horse")

These lyrics delve into cementing identity and standing firm in who you want to be. Similarly, women in the Romantic Era in England had to struggle and overcome obstacles to find their place in the society. Everywhere they turned was a man telling them not to do something. A woman had to fight to discover herself.

### Speak Now and First-Wave Feminism

Speak Now is an album exploring the idea of women asserting their opinions and voices, making themselves heard rather than seen. This album draws a parallel with the first wave of feminism, which spread from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The song 'Mean' is an example of a woman calling a man out for his mistakes. She is not afraid to speak her mind.

*And I can see you years from now in a bar, talking over a football game, with that same big loud opinion but nobody's listening.*

(Swift, "Mean")

These lyrics show the narrator pointing out a man's flaws. Before the concept of feminism was discovered, propagated, and popularized, women didn't speak out against the cruelty they faced. She had to keep it to herself and endure endlessly. A woman was told that she had to be seen and not heard. With feminism came the knowledge that a woman could speak up and she didn't have to be afraid of raising her voice against harassment.

### Red and the Roaring 20s

Red is a vibrant album, dealing with the complexities of modern love. This album relates to the Roaring 20s, where women were freely passionate and expressive and had complex relationships. The song 'All Too Well' speaks of the complexities of modern love.

*You call me up again just to break me like a promise, so casually cruel in the name of being honest.*

(Swift, "All Too Well")

These lyrics illustrate that the speaker knows that the relationship has problems and that her partner is being

cruel. Women in the 1920s had to deal with problems like infidelity, casual yet intimate relationships, and problems arising from such situations. The song 'Red' speaks of the passion that a woman can hold, which she wasn't allowed to express.

*Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead end street, faster than the wind, passionate as sin, ending so suddenly.*

(Swift, "Red")

These lyrics show the depth of passion that a woman can hold. Earlier, women weren't allowed to freely express their emotions because it was believed that if a woman expressed her emotions, she would be taken advantage of and her virtue and purity would be at stake.

### 1989 and the 1980s

1989 is an album embracing independence and the idea that women are equally as knowledgeable as men. In the 1980s, the number of women holding high or prominent positions in workplaces and women being educated rose significantly. The song 'Shake It Off' represents independence and a new identity that comes with independence.

*But I keep cruisin'. Can't stop, won't stop moving... I make the moves up as I go.*

(Swift, "Shake It Off")

These lyrics show that the speaker is independent and can make decisions for herself. She is unbothered by rumors and gossip, remaining focused on herself and what she is doing. Women in this period were not afraid of gossip or slander and remained focused on their goals. The song 'I Know Places' represents the idea that women are knowledgeable.

*Baby, I know places we won't be found. And they'll be, chasing their tails tryin' to track us down.*

(Swift, "I Know Places")

These lyrics show that a woman knows exactly what she is doing. Once she sets her mind to something, no one can keep her from achieving her goals.

### Reputation and the Second-Wave Feminism

Reputation deals with intense public scrutiny and maintaining an individual's uniqueness throughout. It is about the constant struggle that a woman faces in a

society where people are always telling her what to do and criticizing her at every step, not allowing her to be herself. This reflects the second wave of feminism, where women fought for equality in all areas, including the right to make decisions for themselves without being judged by society. The song 'I Did Something Bad' speaks of how people will always have something to say against a woman, even if she is innocent and doing something useful or productive.

*They're burning all the witches even if you aren't one.  
They got their pitchforks and proof.*

(Swift, "I Did Something Bad")

These lyrics show that society doesn't wait for a woman to defend herself, but quickly jumps to conclusions. If they let her stand up for herself, they could learn a lot from her endeavour. The song 'Look What You Made Me Do' shows how hard it is for a woman to make a place for herself in the world and how hard it is to hold on to that position she has now, after so many hardships.

*You asked me for a place to sleep, locked me out and  
threw a feast.*

(Swift, "Look What You Made Me Do")

These lyrics show that things can be snatched from a woman at any time, even if she worked hard for them. Women have to work very hard for things, yet they can be taken away in seconds. The second wave of feminism saw women fighting for rights to hold on to their achievements.

### **Lover and the Struggle for Gender Equality**

One of the themes of the album *Lover* is gender discrimination. This reflects the ongoing, everlasting, and never-ending struggle for gender equality. A woman is not considered as valuable as a man, even after struggling for equality for decades. Her contributions are often overlooked and undervalued. The song 'The Man' critiques these double standards and the speaker wishes she was a man, just to gain approval and recognition.

*I'm so sick of running as fast as I can, wondering if I'd  
get there quicker if I was a man.*

(Swift, "The Man")

These lyrics show that a woman has to work twice as hard as a man to gain recognition for her talent and skills. The speaker laments that it would be easier for her to create a name for herself in the world if she were a man.

### **Folklore and Transcendentalism**

Folklore explores themes of inner complexities and the individual self. This reflects some of the ideals of Transcendentalism, individualism, intuition, and inner truth. The song 'The Last Great American Dynasty' talks about one woman's quirks and story.

*She had a marvelous time ruining everything.*

(Swift, "The Last Great American Dynasty")

These lyrics leave us wondering why "she" ruined things. This is an example of a person's inner complexities and problems. We never know why someone does the things they do. The song 'This Is Me Trying' focuses on mental health struggles.

*I've been having a hard time adjusting... I just wanted  
you to know, this is me trying.*

(Swift, "This Is Me Trying")

These lyrics show the battles one faces within themselves, the ones they don't show the world and struggle with on their own.

### **Evermore and Post World War II**

*Evermore* is an album that explores nostalgia, loss, and grief. This reflects the Post War Era, after the Second World War, where women reminisced about their pre-war lives and the luxuries they had before the war. Many women lost their male relatives and were thrown into the world with nothing but their wits to guide them. The song 'Marjorie' is about loss and grief, which was been common in the post war society.

*What died didn't stay dead, you're alive, you're alive  
in my head.*

(Swift, "Marjorie")

These lyrics show the effects death and loss can have. Women in this period were very resilient. It takes a lot of strength to move past grief while working to keep yourself and your children going.

### **Midnights and Gothic Romanticism**

*Midnights* is an album that explores confronting personal demons. Gothic Romanticism often delves into the darker aspects of human nature and human characteristics that aren't commonly accepted in society. The song 'Anti-Hero' deals with the narrator believing she is the problem in society and that something is wrong with her.

*It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me.*

(Swift, "Anti-Hero")

A demon that many people face is believing that they are always at fault. These lyrics are an example of that problem. Similarly, Gothic Romanticism explored other dark aspects of human behaviour.

### The Tortured Poets Department and Post-Modern Age

The album The Tortured Poets Department is an album that features female rage and intense emotions. This is reflected in the Post Modern Age, where women expressed raw emotion in their art. The song 'Who's Afraid of Little Old Me' is a song that delves into a woman's rage when she is underestimated and undervalued.

*I wanna snarl and show you just how disturbed this has made me. You wouldn't last an hour in the asylum where they raised me.*

(Swift, "Who's Afraid of Little Old Me")

These lyrics show how powerful a woman's rage can be. The song 'Guilty As Sin' shows pure emotion.

*My bedsheets are ablaze. I've screamed his name. Building up like waves, crashing over my grave, without ever touching his skin. How can I be guilty as sin?*

(Swift, "Guilty As Sin")

These lyrics are an innuendo that represents pure emotion, raw and powerful. It shows how expressive women can be.

### Conclusion

Taylor Swift's songs have explored the evolving ideas of feminism and womanhood, mirroring how those perceptions and ideas have changed throughout the different periods in history. From the innocent portrayals in her early work to the assertive and strong feminine narrators in her later albums, Swift shows how gender norms have changed throughout the ages. She portrays a portrayal of the evolution of womanhood that inspires conversations about gender roles and feminism.

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