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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**Did All the Poets Die in ‘the lakes’?: A
Reinterpretation of the Romantic Literary Tradition in
Taylor Swift’s *folklore* (2020)**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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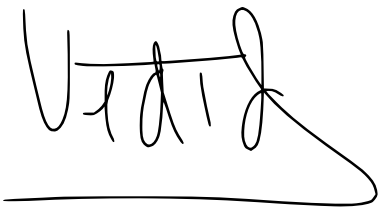
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction	1
0.1. An introduction to Taylor Swift: milestones and literary influence	1
0.2. A brief outlook on Romanticism.....	7
0.3. State of the Art	10
0.4. TFG Outline	12
1. Praise of Nature	13
1.1. 'seven'	15
1.2. 'the lakes'	19
2. Individuality.....	22
2.1 The Romantic Hero	22
2.1.1. 'the last great american dynasty'	24
2.2 Confessional writing	28
2.2.1 'betty'	29
2.2.2 'peace'	31
3. Conclusions and Further Research	32
Future research	34
Works Cited.....	36

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Abstract

Over the past seventeen years Taylor Swift has made a name for herself in the music industry with her powerful and eloquent storytelling, from being the most-streamed artist globally in Spotify with over 26 billion streams, to having fourteen Grammy Awards, four of them being Album of the Year. While it is true in all her albums she refers to past times in her lyrics, the album *folklore* (2020) is especially conspicuous for echoing the Romantic ideas Wordsworth, Mary Robinson, and S. T. Coleridge, among other poets, included in their poems.

Swift's ballads are emblematic of a larger motif than heartbreak, and several academics such as Liv Shaw (2021) have already covered this statement. Previous studies have identified the ideas of nineteenth-century writers such as Emily Dickinson in Swift's lyrics (López 2021). However, the present study focuses on the influence of British Romantic poets in *folklore*.

This paper proposes that Swift's approach in *folklore* offers a contemporary reinterpretation of the Romantic literary tradition. Rooted in a shattered past, the songs reflect an inherent desire to connect to relatable memories and experiences in order to ensure a fuller sense of identity, praising the magnificence of nature and exploring life in order to reinforce the sense of individualism that so characterized the poets of the Romantic era. By analysing the songs from *folklore*, I will explore how her nostalgic introspection—contemplated through different points of view, such as of the evildoer, the isolated writer, or the wistful lover—endures the relevance of the nineteenth-century literary movement of Romanticism, suggesting that her lyricism in this album reinterprets the Romantic literary tradition.

Keywords: *folklore*, Romanticism, lyrics, reinterpretation, Taylor Swift.

0. Introduction

0.1. An introduction to Taylor Swift: milestones and literary influence

Taylor Swift debuted in 2006 with her self-titled album *Taylor Swift* (2006), making a name for herself in the country music industry with the discography Big Machine Records. With her second album *Fearless* (2008), released two years later, she managed to win the most important award in the music industry, the Grammy for Album of the Year, which she would win again years later with her fifth studio album *1989* (2014), with *folklore* (2020), and with *Midnights* (2022), thus becoming the only artist in history to win this award four times. After her fourth studio album *RED* (2012), Taylor was crowned at the Country Music Association (CMA) awards in 2013, being awarded the Pinnacle Award, which would become the most important award in country music, for having sold over twenty-five million albums and accumulating the milestone of seventy-five million downloads of her songs. Feeling that she had already achieved everything in the genre, Swift made a radical change to her catalogue, releasing her first pop album in 2014, which shaped a whole new generation of pop music. “*1989* wasn’t just the musical evolution of a country artist” claims Bruner. “It was a contemporary pop manifesto, a clapback against criticisms of both her personal life and artistic skill. It was also a powerful statement of identity, presented with a glittering, knowing wink” (Bruner 2023). “Young female artists historically struggle with being pigeonholed by genre or sound: on *1989*, Swift made it clear that she was interested in expressing herself over a full, uninhibited range of musical moods and production styles”, and she succeeded in it.

Nearly twenty years into her career and fifteen albums later, Taylor Swift is now the biggest singer and songwriter to completely change not only the music world by notching more number one albums than any other woman in history (Jacobs 40), but also

the economy of the countries she tours to with her world tour "The Eras Tour". Megan McCluskey from Time Magazine in 'The Numbers (Taylor's Version)', shares how the economy of the countries she visits is boosted due to the number of flights and hotel bookings that increase on the dates she performs. Solely in the US, her tour had an economic impact of \$5.7 billion, as the boost to the US economy generated by fans spending an estimated \$93 million per Eras show, and a bump in hotel-room revenue produced by the Eras Tour cities summing up to \$208 million.

However, her success has not been a matter of pure luck; she has built a solid empire. A clear example of such a phenomenon was her 2016 feud with the reality TV star and influencer Kim Kardashian and her husband, the rapper Kanye West, who faked a phone call for the public to see her as fake. With her career shattered in those years, Swift disappeared from the public eye for over eighteen months, until August 2017 when she announced her return to music with her sixth studio album *reputation* (2017), making it one of the most impactful comebacks in music history, followed by a record-breaking world tour, the Reputation Stadium Tour, which received nearly three million attendees and grossed \$345.7 million (Touring Data) making clear her power as an artist. Since then, her career has only escalated to the point where she has become the biggest artist in history to ever exist by holding numerous world-breaking records and as demonstrated by the following figures. Some of these achievements include being the person with most American Music Awards (AMAs) with a total number of 40, surpassing Michael Jackson who held 26 and Whitney Houston who held 22. She also set the record for "the highest-grossing music tour ever" (Morrow) with her world tour The Eras Tour surpassing "\$1 billion in revenue, according to the Guinness World Records" (Morrow); being the highest earning female musician in the industry, with an estimated net worth of more than a billion dollars. When it comes to charts, she broke the record for most streams in a

single day in Spotify, which confirmed that in less than twelve hours, Swift's latest album *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024) accumulated over three hundred million streams (Morrow); having the most-awarded album in country music history with her second studio album *Fearless* (2008); being the first and only artist in history to claim all top 10 entries on the Billboard Hot 100 in a single week (Bose), as well as being the most streamed female artist in Apple Music history (McCluskey).

Not only her fans have acknowledged her true success and power, but academics such as Raquel López, and research institutions, such as The University of New York, have recognized her success. The University of New York awarded her with an Honorary Doctorate degree in fine arts in 2022 for being “one of the most prolific and celebrated artists of her generation”. Her celebrated music is not due to pink-pop catchy basic songs, but to the eloquent storytelling she uses in her lyrics. The public has noticed the literary references she makes in numerous songs, evidencing the significant influence of literature in her artistic development.

In the YouTube interview by Vogue “73 questions with Taylor Swift”, she declared she would teach English if she were a teacher, letting the public know her interest in the subject beyond hinting literary references in her lyrics. The most evident reference existing in her catalogue is the song “Love Story”, in which she alludes to *Romeo & Juliet* (1597) by William Shakespeare. In this song, the singer tells the story of two lovers whose love is forbidden, addressing her lover as *Romeo* in various lyrics, “That you were Romeo you were throwing pebbles” (Swift, line 9), “Romeo, save me, I’ve been feeling so alone” (Swift, line 29), and referring to herself as *Juliet*, “And my daddy said, ‘Stay away from Juliet’” (Swift, line 10), “He knelt to the ground and pulled out a ring / And said, ‘Marry me, Juliet’” (Swift line 42), attributing to the song characteristics of Shakespeare's play.

Another literary work she references in more than one song is the poem *The Road Not Taken* (1916) by Robert Frost, which she mentions in the songs “The Outside” with the lyric “I tried the road less travelled by” (Swift, line 5), just as Frost mentions in the last stanza of his famous poem, “I took the one less travelled by” (Frost, line 19). Likewise, in “’tis the damn season¹”, she sings “And the road not taken looks real good now” (Swift, line 12), it being another clear reference to the well-known poem by the Modernist poet. Further references she makes to Modernists works is the novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which she mentions briefly in her song “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things” when talking about ostentatious parties “It was so nice throwin’ big parties / Jump into the pool from the balcony / Everyone swimmin’ in a champagne sea” (Swift, lines 1-3), clearly referencing the great feasts that the nouveau riche were eager to celebrate for no apparent reason other than to flaunt their wealth. Later on, she directly addresses the main character of the classic by saying “Feelin’ so Gatsby for that whole year” (Swift, line 6), alluding to their similar *modus vivendi*.

In fact, not only she pays tribute to American and English works, but she opened the prologue of her fourth studio album *RED* (2012) with a verse by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, claiming that she has always been captivated by an old poem of his, particularly with the line “love is so short, forgetting is so long” of the poem *Tonight I can write* (1924) from the book *Twenty love songs and a song of despair* (1924). Swift continues the prologue by affirming that this is a line she has related to in the saddest moments (Swift). A subtle parallelism exists between her album *RED* (2012) and Neruda’s recollection of poems, for both of them are a recollection of verses about profound love and nostalgia, and were written when both artists were around the same

¹ This song is not capitalized as it belongs to the album *evermore* (2020), and its original format is written in lowercase letters. Its sister album, *folklore* (2020) follows the same dynamic and the name of the album and the title of its songs will not be capitalized in this paper.

age, between nineteen and twenty-two years old, sharing a feeling which seems to be universal among young adults when it comes to love.

Moreover, Swift has also referenced classic children's literature, among which are *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, and *Peter and Wendy* (1904) by J. M. Barrie. The former book is mentioned in the song 'Wonderland' in the lyrics "Fell down a rabbit hole" (Swift, line 3), and "Didn't you call my fears with a Cheshire Cat smile" (Swift, line 31), it being a direct allusion to the character of the purple cat, which disappears leaving only his smile behind. In the chorus of the song, she evidences the explicit reference with the lyrics "We found Wonderland" (Swift, line 13). On the other hand, when it comes to the play by J. M. Barrie, Swift dedicates not only a handful of lyrics, but an entire song to the main character. The first time she mentions this character is in her song 'cardigan', where she sings "I knew you / Tried to change the ending / Peter losing Wendy" (Swift, lines 35-37), but several years later, in her latest album *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), she would include a song called 'Peter' which talks about an immature lover of hers. Finally, a literary reference I would like to highlight would be how she talks about how the novel *Rebecca* (1938) inspired her song 'tolerate it'. In an interview with Zane Lowe for Apple Music, Swift says that while reading *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier she was surprised at how the protagonist's husband simply tolerated her without paying attention to the effort she put into the relationship, and how she ended up relating to the main character and writing a song about that same feeling (Swift 00:24:57).

In fact, when it comes to Romanticism, Swift's most interesting citation appears in her seventh studio album *folklore* (2020), which includes the bonus track 'the lakes'. With its storytelling, this song, whose references and meaning I will analyze in section 1.2., pays tribute to the Romantic poet William Wordsworth and 'the Lake Poets' such as

Samuel T. Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Lake Poets, including the before mentioned authors and Robert Southey, drew inspiration from the folklore of the Lake District region in England. They often incorporated elements of folklore, myths, and legends into their poetry, exploring themes of rural life. Moreover, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), William Wordsworth emphasizes the importance of using everyday language and themes drawn from common life and popular culture, including folklore, in poetry.

Essentially, numerous ideas of the Romantic movement endure today, and there are artists such as Taylor Swift, who, through their contemporary art, manage to maintain these ideas still relevant. In this album, numerous songs refer to Romantic ideas such as the admiration for nature, and various aspects of individualism, including escapism and confessional writing, making this indie-inspired album be an ode to nostalgia, faintly nodding to the 18th century poets. The creation of this album certainly holds a tone of irony when it comes to the Romantic literary tradition, as Swift composed and recorded all the songs during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, a period of isolation, a theme which was so long celebrated by the Romantic poets.

The album *folklore* (2020) has been an object of study since the day of its publication, accumulating studies by different academics who have analysed its storytelling, as did Chloe Harrison and Helen Ringrow (2022); its figurative language, as did Sabrina Nabila and I. Petrus (2022); and several aspects and authors which I will delve into in section 0.3. Moreover, it held a considerable impact on the music charts for being a surprise album which was not announced weeks prior its release, taking a spot for more than six weeks in Billboard's top 200 (Unteberger 2020). An Apple Music source told *Billboard* that "surprise records tend to drop further because they had more initial listeners and most touristic ones", but that "*folklore* in particular has been very durable. Quality

wins out in the end, and this is [a] really good record that sounds great as a whole – and listeners are still engaging with it that way” (Unteberger 2020). Additionally, *folklore* (2020) became the best-selling album of 2020 with almost three million global sales (Chart Masters). Beyond charts and streamings, this album holds a special meaning as it subtly raises a modernization of a two-hundred-year-old literary tradition: Romanticism.

0.2. A brief outlook on Romanticism

Romanticism (1789-1837) was a literary movement whose revolutionary intellectuality generated several of the most popular and influential works in British literary history during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Day), such as *Songs of Innocence* (1794) by William Blake, *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, or the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge and its preface by Wordsworth. These latter works outline the principles and main themes of the Romantic movement, such as rebellion, nature, subjectivity, and the use of simple language.

As a reaction to the cultural, social, and political developments of the eighteenth century known as the Enlightenment, artists began to see mass movements, such as the Industrial Revolution, as a threat to the individuality of the soul. Consequently, they commenced placed a high value on fervent emotion and the need for personal freedom, thereby celebrating individualism and rebelling against “Neoclassicism’s strict rules and formalism” (Anamika). The Romantics also stressed the individual’s relationship with nature, praising landscapes and its competence to heal the pain rooted in the suffering soul of the individual occasioned by urban life. For nature’s ability to soothe emotional misery, Romantics found it to be “a source of revelation” (Ali 1), Sidney Colvin declares John Keats to be a master "in nature poetry, and especially in that mode of it in which the

poet goes out with his whole being into nature and loses his identity in delighted sympathy with her doings” (Colvin, cited in Begg 1). Yet, while Keats’s passion and devotion to nature were evidently portrayed in his poems, he was not the only poet who depicted natural elements. For example, William Wordsworth also frequently relied on natural imagery in his poems. Similarly, Percy Shelly, in his lyrical poems “To a Skylark” (1820) and “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), employed “metaphors from nature to create a connection between his mood and art” (Ali 2). This literary device, also known as pathetic fallacy, was commonly employed by Romantics. Although it was not a literary device exclusive of the Romantic poets, they used it extensively to connect their feelings, both positive and overwhelming, with the beauty of landscapes and natural phenomena, as they would express their emotional state through the weather and natural elements.

On the other hand, Wordsworth spoke of mountains, forests, skies, and rivers, dedicating his poems to the nostalgia for the simple, natural life that landscapes could provide in a world that was slowly being consumed by industrialisation and globalisation. Certainly, his poem 'Daffodils' or 'I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud' (1807), celebrates not only the beauty of nature, but also its capacity to heal and lift the human spirit through admiration. Moreover, while he admires nature itself, he is at the same time "lonely as a cloud", which allows him to have a moment of solitude and introspection in which admiring nature alleviates his sense of loneliness. Even at the end of the poem, when the speaker is far away from the landscape described, he longs for its beauty and claims that just imagining the scene brings him peace, “[...]when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood, / They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude; And then my heart with pleasure fills / and dances with the daffodils” (Wordsworth, lines 19-24). The meaning behind this poem also introduces several themes and literary devices

worked on by the Romantics, such as vivid imagery and detailed and delicate descriptions of natural elements, and nostalgia.

Nostalgia is powerfully explored in the poem “The Deserted Garden” (1836) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning², in which she dives into the transience of life by longing for a garden she used to haunt when in her childhood. This poem combines key ideas of the Romantic period, as it describes an old memory using vivid imagery and praising the magnificence of nature. The last stanza of this poem reminds of the last stanza of Wordsworth’s ‘I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud’ (1807), because both authors, at the end of the descriptions of their memories, conclude their work by expressing their hankering for being able to revisit the scene they described. “It is something saith for earthly pain, / But more for heavenly promise free, / That I who was, would shrink to be / That happy child again” (Browning, lines 109-112). The ideas of childhood and its memories exhibited by Browning similarly combine with the nostalgia aimed to transmit by Wordsworth and other Romantic poets.

Involving personal experiences in the past, nostalgia focuses on personal adventures highlighting one of the most important topics of Romanticism: individualism. During this period, Romantic poets thought of themselves as “unique individuals who have the strength of character to go against the flow” (Cotterill). Rebelling against the traditional roles assigned to the individual, this idea was perfected by Lord George Gordon Byron, who created the ‘Byronic Hero’ as an “archetype of all the dark and brooding antiheroes of subsequent fiction” (Anamika 1). Inspired by Milton’s character Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1667), the Byronic Hero can be considered a rebel due to his dark qualities and lack of heroic virtue, usually being isolated from society as a wanderer

² Elizabeth Barrett Browning is primarily associated with the Victorian era, although her work exhibits elements of both Victorian and Romantic poetry.

(Marín, 1). Some Byronic heroes include Don Juan from *Don Juan* (1819-1824) by Lord Byron, and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Charlotte Brönte. Interestingly, as Wordsworth's writing longed "for a return to the pastoral and older societal forms" (Anamika 1), Byron and the Byronic Hero embraced individualism by attributing rebellious attitudes and anti-social arrogant behaviour to the character.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his book *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1782), develops a narrative, attributing his childhood misfortunes and traumas to justify his questionable actions in adult life. Although he was not part of British Romanticism, his works were very influential for British authors and Romanticism in general, as seen in the character created by Lord Byron. In the same manner, the British author Charles Lamb also wrote his confessions in his work *Confessions of a Dunkard* (1822), where he talked about the effects of alcoholism on his life.

All the previously mentioned topics which Romantic poets celebrated in their works throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries , are in various guises seen in Taylor Swift's lyrics of numerous songs in her album *folklore*.

0.3. State of the Art

Since Taylor Swift is at this moment one of the main characters of contemporary pop music, not much research has been done throughout her career as an artist. Notwithstanding, since her album *folklore* (2020) was published after the worldwide lockdown, academics and institutions began taking a closer look at its lyrics and literary references. One of the first papers I encountered was Raquel López's postgraduate thesis *Lesbian subtext and symbolism in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's albums Folklore and*

*Evermore, in relation to poems by Emily Dickinson*³ (2021), While the aim of this work is no less than interesting and original, I found no connection of the subjects treated by López with the prevalence of Romanticism that I had intended to demonstrate, since López pays a greater attention to the context in which Dickinson and Swift elaborated their works in order to decipher a deeper sapphic meaning, while my analysis is not based on assumptions beyond what is written in the songs, nor revolves around sexuality.

Notwithstanding, I turned to more academic papers to find material related to my purpose for this paper. Among other papers that I will mention below, I found “*Tell me what are my Wordsworth*”: *Lyrical Connections and Romantic Reverie in Taylor Swift's Folklore (2020)* (2021) by Zoë Van Cauwenberg, whose abstract caught my attention by hinting the work was very similar to my proposal, hinting some notions on Romanticism but not going beyond adoration for nature. Similarly, *Picturesque Tourism in The Lake District from William Wordsworth to Taylor Swift: Aesthetic Attention and Literary Legacy* (2023) by Megan Zeitz provides an insightful exploration of the aesthetic and literary legacy in *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes* (1835) and how Romantic themes have been adapted in Swift's son ‘the lakes’ (2020). Even though both works have provided me with insightful and captivating ideas, after reading them I was able to conclude that my research would go much further and I would draw on evidence from the Romantic poets beyond Wordsworth's themes, and delve into several songs rather than talk about the persistence of Romanticism in a single song or in the album in a generic manner.

³ Original title in Spanish: *Subtexto y simbología lésbica en las letras de los álbumes de Taylor Swift Folklore y Evermore, en relación con poemas de Emily Dickinson*.

0.4. TFG Outline

Taking into account all the information presented, this paper aims to demonstrate Swift's lyricism in *folklore* shares numerous characteristics typically employed by Romantic poets. This analysis seeks to establish that the songs in this album are written in a tone reminiscent of a contemporary reinterpretation of the Romantic literary movement. The number of limitations that have risen in the journey of writing this paper have been very few, as Romanticism, as well as its characteristics and its authors has been explored and studied for decades. All the same, while there are numerous academic sources on the study of Taylor Swift's lyricism, as I previously mentioned and cited, much more website publications conducted by members of Swift's fandom, as well as online newspapers publications, exist. Yet, when it comes to websites, I managed to rely on those written by scholars such as Katherine Ebury, who is a Senior Lecturer in Modern Literature at the University of Sheffield; and J. T. Welsh, who is a Senior Lecturer in English and Creative industries at the University of York.

To conduct my research, I divided the paper into two main aspects of Romanticism. The first chapter deals with the adoration of nature Romantic poets manifested and how the aesthetic of it is similarly observed in the visuals of Swift's *folklore*. Additionally, I branched the chapter in two songs and related the vivid lyricism in them with the praise of nature. Chapter two focuses on Individualism and two main aspects of it: The Romantic Hero and Confessions. These two subsections contain songs in *folklore* which deal with said topics.

1. Praise of Nature

A key component of Romanticism was the continuous adoration and praise of nature, which Swift acknowledges and manifests not only lyrically, as I will explore in section 1.1 and 1.2, but also graphically, as evidenced by the cover of the album *folklore*. Set against a stage of dense woods, the cover picture shows the singer standing amidst towering trees and gallivanting the forest. The aesthetic backdrop of the cover picture, amalgamated with the soft lighting of it, unites, creating a successful ethereal atmosphere; an image that can be similarly seen in the paintings of Caspar Friedrich, one of the leading figures of the German Romantic movement (Britannica, “Caspar David Friedrich”). Immersed in contemplative never-ending landscapes, a solitary figure plays the part in most of Friedrich’s paintings, as it is conspicuous against the natural environment. This same image is seen in Swift’s cover picture for the album, evoking as well a sense of individualism by isolating the figure, emphasizing the human need for introspection and self-discovery.

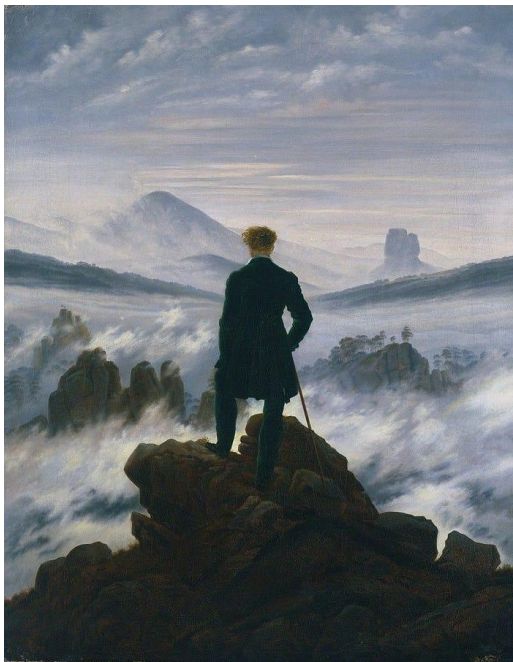


Figure 1. Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (c. 1818), oil on canvas, 94 × 74.8 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg



Figure 2. Taylor Swift, *folklore*, 2020, Cover Art

Caspar Friedrich's work evidences deep traces of German Romanticism: a high sensitivity towards nature; the belief in the correspondence between nature and mind (Pinto), finding a parallel in the depth of the human mind and the infinitude of nature, in this way rejecting the idea that nature and the human mind were passive. Actually, German Romanticism's intellectual and artistic influence held a profound impact in England during the Romantic period (Vaughan 1979). Likewise, the use of nostalgic elements is recurrent in his paintings: mist and fog, dead trees, dramatic light effects, ruins, a boat sailing away from the beach (an evocation of the myth of Charon, the ferryman of the netherworld), and bleak cemeteries, among others (Pinto). Friedrich claimed that "the painter should paint not only what he has in front of him, but also what he sees inside himself" (Friedrich, cited by Honigman). Thus, Friedrich exhibits a "[...] fanatical inclination for solitude and melancholy" (Zhang, 2003: 177, cit. by Pinto). This intentional eagerness to represent solitude and self-introspection amidst nature is emulated by Swift both aesthetically in her folklore era and through the album's songwriting.

While Friedrich often represented astounding landscapes and scenes of nature, evoking a sense of wanderlust and solitude, Swift's aimed aesthetic in *folklore* exudes as well a specific woodland vibe, an impression that the singer confessed she wanted to elicit when she composed *folklore*, claiming that she did not see herself as a "millennial woman drinking her weight in white wine" while writing the album, but that she envisioned her persona as "a ghostly Victorian lady wandering through the woods with a candle in a candlestick holder" (Swift, cit. by Cidoncha Moreno, 2024). As noted by Katherine Ebury and J.T., "it appears clearly that Swift crafted the album as to be inscribed in the legacy of Romanticism" (Zeit 7), "draw[ing] heavily on what Wordsworth calls the 'humble

and rustic life' in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a book co-written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge during their own *annus mirabilis*" (Ebury and Welsh, n.pag., cited in Zeitz 7).

Even having a song titled 'Mastermind' (*Midnights* 2022), Swift has demonstrated on more than one occasion that her art is not born of chance, and that she often plans every detail that is going to come to light as entertainment for her fans, getting them to gradually discover the 'easter eggs' she leaves between albums (or eras and eras, as she calls them), so that her audience is able to foresee what will come next. Knowing this, it is not to be doubted that all the imagery behind the 'era' of *folklore* is deliberately made to create an expectation that incites mystery. As a matter of fact, Friedrich claimed that "when a landscape is covered in fog, it appears larger, more sublime, and heightens the strength of the imagination and excites expectation" (Friedrich cit. Koerner, 2009: 212). Correspondingly and to a certain degree, the intention in the art behind both the painter and the singer invites the observer to go and find peace in the solitude and calmness only nature is able to provide, a practice commonly manifested by Romantic poets who insisted on nature being the healing key to a broken soul. Moreover, Swift's intention of portraying a Romantic vibe in her album goes beyond the aesthetic, as she, in her lyrics, paints vivid pictures of landscapes and nature through a deliberated storytelling, as do the songs 'seven' and 'the lakes'.

1.1. 'seven'

All tracks of *folklore* were conceived by Swift as imageries and visuals from her deep subconscious, a result of her imagination running wild while isolating herself during the Covid-19 pandemic (Taylor Swift Switzerland, "seven"). Again, the theme of solitude and isolation is replayed, linking the purpose and circumstances behind this album even

more deeply to Romanticism. The lyrics in ‘seven’ reflect on a story about a childhood friend who seemed to have a downhearted relationship with her family at home.

Throughout the lyrics of this track Swifts talks about the innocence of being a child, supporting her verses narrating a Romantic imagery. Still walking on the path of nature adoration, she begins with the lyrics “please picture me / in the trees / [...] in the swing / over the creek” (Swift, lines 1-6), a very vivid description of a scenery that reminds of the painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard *The Swing*.



Figure 3. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, oil on canvas, 1767 (Wallace Collection, London)

This painting belongs to the Rococo, the artistic trend preceding the Romantic movement, which found its literary expression in the trend of Sensibility. The literature of sensibility witnessed the emergence of several Romantic authors who began their careers by exploring its themes and sentiments. Notable examples include William Wordsworth and Helen Maria Williams. Interestingly, the fact that the literature of Sensibility preceded Romanticism made it inevitable for Romanticism to work with ideas that began to develop in the last stages of the trend of Sensibility. As a fact, historical

artistic changes do not happen categorically, but undergo a transition across literary movements, making it practically unavoidable for the characteristics that initiate in one period to eventually be embraced by the first stage of the movement that succeeded it. Thus, while this painting depicts a playful and in-depth image of the illicit sexual activities in the high classes (Widowcranky “The Happy Accidents of the Swing – Jean-Honoré Fragonard”), the Romantic aesthetic of it is reminiscent of Swift’s lyrics when she mentions the trees and the swing being above a creek. In this way, the deeply sought-after relationship in the background of the painting and of the song is subtly palpable, yet both scenarios speak of the loss of innocence. While in Fragonard's painting the lady loses her innocence by giving herself not only to her husband but also to her lover, the protagonist of Swift's song loses her innocence as she grows older and becomes aware of the realities of the adult world.

When it comes to the loss of innocence, the Romantic era would portray nature as a nucleus of purity and candidness. Similarly, Swift reinterprets this connection to landscapes by developing a storyline about a childhood friendship that wallows in the continuing innocence of youth, which is not yet corrupted by the evils of society, while enjoying the tranquillity of nature, echoing in this way the Romantic notion of finding comfort and serenity amidst wilderness. In fact, these concepts are evocative of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, where children interact with the natural world, and unlike other explorations of this subject by other Romantics, Blake’s rendering emphasizes childhood as something magical and holy, though there are hints of darkness on the horizon. This juxtaposition of ideas can be seen in Blake’s poems *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*⁴, where the duality of innocence and darkness are portrayed. On the one hand,

⁴ *The Tyger* is a work that belongs to *Songs of Experience* (1794). *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are two complementary works by William Blake.

everything about the tiger seems to embody danger and evil, especially in the opening verse “Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night” (Blake, lines 1-2), where the tone of the poem is instantly set in danger and mystery, placing the tiger as a strange creature lurking in the depths of the forests. On the other hand, the verses of the lamb, an animal used as a universal symbol of selfless innocence, evoke pure innocence with the usage of soft adjectives such as ‘softest clothing’ (Blake, line 6) and ‘tender voice’ (Blake, line 7) to describe aspects of the animal. At the same time, the poem depicts an idyllic pastoral scene, intending to highlight the beauty of nature and worshipping it.

The comparable concept of seeing childhood as pure while something lurks on the horizon is what Swift writes about in ‘seven’, where two girls play at being pirates, and dream of going on a voyage to a faraway place, like India, when she says “Pack your dolls and your sweater / We’ll move to India forever” (Swift, lines 37-38), while danger, in this case the friend's father, is present but they continue to live in their parallel fantasy that the innocence of youth allows them to have: “And I’ve been meaning to tell you / I think your house is haunted / Your dad is always mad and that must be why / And I think you should come live with me and we can be pirates / And you won’t have to cry / or hide in the closet” (Swift, lines 20-25). The mention of pirates interested Romantic poets such as the Spanish José de Espronceda and the British Lord Byron, who dedicated poems such as *La Canción del Pirata* and *The Corsair* respectively. Beyond the clear literary references in a simple verse, it is also worth noting that the Romantics saw the pirate as a free figure, living in the margins of society without facing any expectations, surrounded by an infinitude of nature (oceans and islands), holding a special bond with the elements Romantic poets depicted in their works. Therefore, Swift also plays with the tireless search for freedom, convincing her friend in the song to set free from any abusive familiar bonds in order to find liberty, and the pirate is the figure that best represents this concept.

1.2. 'the lakes'

The bonus track 'the lakes' is the one song in the album *folklore* that best portrays how the Romantic poets praised the magnificence of nature, since practically every verse in this song is a direct reference to the Romantic movement. This song echoes the desire of escaping the circumstances of a current self, avoiding the reality of it by slipping away to find peace. An analysis of the song conducted by Ren Ashley, claims 'the lakes' "doesn't necessarily represent a physical place" but that "it's about stealing away from what the world expects of you in favor of embracing something more raw, honest, and vulnerable"(Ashley). Thus, the meaning of the track title goes beyond the location of the Lake District in Great Britain. It serves as an allegory for a place where an individual can escape the cruelties of the quotidian world, celebrating, as the Romantics did, the concept of seeking refuge in the imagination.

Taking a closer look at the lyrics, the opening line of the first verse, 'is it romantic how all my elegies eulogize me?' (Swift, line 1) promptly resembles the new perspectives the Romantic poets brought to death, as seen in *Adonais* by Percy Bysshe Shelley written in memory of John Keats, where Shelley laments Keats's decease yet celebrates his life and career achievements. Similarly, Swift highlights how her elegies lack mourning yet celebrate her life achievements, consequently representing the Romantic vision of death, as portrayed by the poets of the time, which disregards lamentations.

Before the Romantics, poets such as Milton and Donne in their works like *Death Be Not Proud* and *On His Deceased Wife* rooted death deeply in religion. However, the Romantic period coincides with a fundamental shift in Western attitudes toward death and dying (Johnson iii), connecting it more deeply to the imagination and to nature

(Burgess). The Romantics began considering that death was open to interpretation, as they conceived death as a natural part of nature's cycle.

In *To Autumn*, John Keats illustrates life and death through the usage of nature, describing the vitality of life through the personification and deification of Autumn itself: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (Keats, line 1), highlighting the fulfilment of life through nature (Dunn). Likewise, the semantic field of abundance reinforces Keat's positivity: "ripeness to the core" (line 6), "swell the gourd" and "plump" (line 7), and "brimm'd" (line 11), underscoring his celebration of life (Dunn). Keats's usage of Autumn presents death and decay as inevitable and natural, just as it is inevitable that Winter will follow Autumn, therefore nothing to fear (Dunn). This Romantic way of representing the cycle of life can be seen in line 20, where Swift mentions how a rose grows in the face of winter's adversity, "A red rose grew up out of ice frozen ground" (Swift, line 20).

In the chorus, Swift sings "Take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die" (Swift, line 4), a straight allusion to The Lake District in Western England, where Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and Robert Southy found inspiration and celebrated its natural beauty. Wordsworth, in particular, even wrote a guide through the district. Throughout the song Swift addresses specific locations of the district, "Those Windermere peaks" (Swift, line 6), claiming that they "look like the perfect place to cry" (Line 6). In this way, she is again manifesting the Romantic idea that nature holds such power that it can provoke highly emotional responses in individuals. Moreover, in this verse it is also understood that the singer longs to be surrounded by nature to be able to lament, searching and finding the most aesthetic landscape to explore inner feelings. In addition, the line "I want to watch wisteria grow right over my bare feet" (Swift, line 17) is another manifestation of the singer's constant longing to be in

contact with nature, in the most natural and pure way, i.e. feeling it barefoot. Curiously, wisteria is a climbing plant, suggesting that Swift is expressing her desire to merge with nature. Interestingly, the desire to escape to the Lakes is a subtle wink to the desire to run away from reality, to escape to an imaginary reality. This tendency, celebrated by the Romantics as ‘escapism’, reflected their discomfort with “the responsibilities and the routine of real life” (Chauhan 49), a sentiment clearly expressed by Swift all throughout the song. Likewise, her song ‘my tears ricochet’, expresses in the chorus this same desire with the lyrics “And I can go anywhere I want / Anywhere I want, just not home” (Swift, lines 24-25).

In ‘the lakes’, the artist gives more clues that the poets of Romanticism and their themes have been of great inspiration for the concept of the album. Swift makes this even more evident when she plays with the words and the pronunciation of them. Taking a closer look into verse 11, where she asks, “Tell me what are my words worth” (Swift, line 11) it is recognisable the last two words are a clear allusion to the poet William Wordsworth. Furthermore, it is important to note that many written references are nods to Romanticism. She also incorporates elements of contemporary times into her compositions. This framework of ideas is seen in verses 20-21, where romantic ideas are juxtaposed with contemporary ones "A red rose grew up out of ice frozen ground / With no one was around to tweet it" (Swift, lines 20-21). The concept behind these lines is very contemporary, but at the same time, it evokes a time prior to social media, again, connecting her lyrics to the past. Also, the rose growing in an environment of adversity, the frozen ground, is a mention of nature’s life cycle, as the rose blooming symbolizes renewal and rebirth. Yet, growing amidst lifeless ground is also a depiction of resilience. This strength of character given to the rose is also given to Wordsworth, as mentioned by Swift in her documentary *Long Pond Studio Sessions*, in which she addresses the

inspiration behind the whole album, “I went to William Wordsworth’s grave and just sat there, and I was like, wow you went and did it. You went away and you kept writing, and you didn’t subscribe to the things that were killing you” (Swift, *Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions*). Here, Swift shows her intention to merge Romantic themes with contemporary elements in her song writing. Thus, she recognizes the enduring relevance of Romanticism in today’s forms of expression.

2. Individuality

Putting an end to the Enlightenment and its focus on societal progress and rational thinking, Romantic poets began making personal experiences a foremost to the inspiration of their work. On behalf of this purpose, Romantics shed light into the realities of human life, shifting to a movement that would enhance the artistic backdrop and begin a critical point in the development of Western thought. Some themes related to individuality, allowing the writer to show their most genuine self, include the figure of the anti-hero introduced by Lord George Gordon Byron and the culture of confession, where the author expresses the most questionable truths of their being.

2.1 The Romantic Hero

In traditional portrayals, the former archetypical figure of the hero, that had hitherto existed in literature was depicted as a man of an elevated status, high morals and bravery who embarked on a quest to test his abilities and prove his honour. Romanticism proposed a new different figure who would behave against societal expectations and had his own moral codes. The most famous Romantic hero is the character created by Lord George Byron, or Lord Byron. He introduced in his work and in the literary world itself a

character type which would be known as the “Byronic Hero”, involving a “manipulation of standard narrative expectations and character types” (Palfy 162). Compared to the standard narrative of the classical hero, the Byronic hero embodies moral ambiguity and presents a more introspective character who lies on a highly complex psychological level.

The first time Lord Byron presented the Byronic hero was in his poem ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ (1812-1818), an autobiographical poem published in four cantos, about a young man and his journey to find meaning in life and peace in isolation, a topic long celebrated by Romantics and discussed in section 1. After this work gained popularity, Byron created more literary pieces with this anti-hero as a main character, such as Manfred from *Manfred* (1817), and Don Juan from *Don Juan* (1819-1824). On some level, he fused his anti-hero character with his own personality, acting like the Byronic Hero he wrote about. For example, after his separation from his wife Anne Isabella Milbanke, Byron left England and settled himself in Switzerland with Percy Bysshe Shelley (Historic UK), where he finished the third canto of ‘Childe Harold’ (1816). This voluntary isolation in search of what could be considered peace of mind is not only a behaviour similar to the Byronic hero, but also to the Romantics.

Traditionally, the Romantic hero was gendered male, who wandered as a misunderstood soul holding a tortured sensibility, but at the same time carried a morally questionable attitude, and behaved promiscuously. This hero proves himself to have a questionable attitude by manipulating and acting vengeful towards those who wronged him, like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), as well as alienating himself from society refusing to face the consequences of his actions, like Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* (1818). This character was portrayed to be distrusted by society, constantly being the subject and object of scandalous behaviour; “characterized as a rebel who stands apart from society and societal expectations, who is deeply jaded, [...] and obsessed with

lost love” (Palfy 164). Sharing characteristics from the Gothic Villain, as they are “willingly lonely, isolated and antisocial people who rebel against civilization, themselves, Nature or even a divine being” (Villar 6), the Romantic hero is not “dissociated from early heroes, but is rather a continuation of them” (Palfy 164).

In her song ‘the last great american dynasty’, Swift talks about a woman who had previously owned her mansion in Rhode Island, Rebekah Harkness (1915-1982), presenting her as a heroine who behaved against society standards. In the nostalgic storytelling of this song, Swift talks about how Harkness broke society's expectations with her carefree behaviour, being an object of scrutiny throughout her life and how the singer herself continued her legacy as a supposedly scandalous woman when in 2013 she bought the Holiday House⁵ Watch Hill.

2.1.1. ‘the last great american dynasty’

In 1988, North American journalist and writer Craig Unger published *Blue Blood*, a biography detailing the origins of Rebekah Harkness, her controversial life as an American socialité, and her legacy after her death in 1982. Born in St. Louis, Missouri and originally from a wealthy family (Dunning), Harkness developed a somewhat rebellious reputation in her youth, being part of a group who called themselves ‘Bitch Pack’, and whose members were “extremely sophisticated and daring for their time” (Unger 33). Her reputation for rebelliousness was not in vain, but some of her pranks included pouring mineral oil into the punch at a debutante ball or putting “Coke bottles under the tires of cars in the parking lot” (Unger 34).

⁵ Intentionally capitalized as this was the name the Harkness family gave to their house in Rhode Island.

In her adult life, Harkness married a total of three times. The first time she got married she did because she “had nothing better to do” (Harkness, cited in Taylor). After a few years, the couple divorced. Soon after, and although she already belonged to an affluent family, she married William Hale Harkness, heir to Standard Oil, a union that catapulted her into high society. It is from this point in Harkness life that Swift writes the exploits of this socialite, alluding from the outset to the torpidity and pretentiousness of the nouveau riche, “there is only so far new money goes / [...] / the parties were tasteful, if a little loud” (Swift, lines 6-8). Unger claims that, at their Watch Hill mansion Holiday House, the Harkness threw lavish parties with hundreds of guests. In fact, Rebekah's ostentation reached the point where it was rumoured that she filled her swimming pool with *Dom Perignon*, an anecdote to which Swift alludes in line 8 of her song, where she says, “Filled the pool with champagne and swam with the big names” (Swift, line 18). From that point on, and after the death of her husband in 1954 due to a heart attack, Rebekah became the object of scrutiny by society. As Swift describes in her lyrics, “It must have been her fault his heart gave out” (Swift, line 10), high-class people began speculating about the bad influence that Rebekah had had on her husband William, and how the world surrounding the Harkness family had taken a turn for the worse since she had appeared.

It came as no surprise to the public to learn that Rebekah had carried her reputation for insubordination and mischievousness from a young age. Interestingly, the line “she had a marvelous time ruining everything” (Swift, line 15) goes back to the time where Betty, as her family called Rebekah, would act mischievously with her group of friends, as mentioned in the previous page. These acts of supposed rebelliousness for the time resemble the moulds that the Romantic hero wanted to break, claiming individuality and the need to challenge society and to fulfil their expectations, rejecting social conventions

and fitting perfectly into the idea of the Romantic hero. Nevertheless, Rebekah Harkness was a woman, and the traditional Romantic hero had traditionally been portrayed as a man.

When looking at Swift's depiction of Rebekah Harkness from a gender perspective, it is interesting to highlight that she retains the appeal, sharpness, and rebellious spirit typical of the Romantic hero, yet she is not described as a personification of sensitivity and does not bear witness to a male hero's journey. Historically, Romantic heroines have been portrayed to embody capacity for forgiveness, like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The protagonists of this novel are interesting to look at, as, on the one hand, Mr Darcy refuses to play the role of a gentleman of the time, exhibiting extremely poor manners, acting as morose and fastidious (Todd 1), playing a debatable role of the Romantic hero. On the other hand, Elizabeth has this 'rebelliousness' as marriage is not her main focus, while at the same time she ends up being able to see Mr Darcy with eyes of bonhomie. In fact, marriage not being Elizabeth's main focus was a subtle gesture against the social conventions of the time, as marriage was seen as the natural and best status for women and elevated women up the social ladder, due to marriages occurring for resources such as money and land (Marin). Similarly, as cited on the previous page, Rebekah's main focus was not on marriage either, as she declared she married her first husband because she had "nothing better to do".

It is especially in the character of Lizzy Bennet that the two gender perspectives can be appreciated, as she is a woman who shares characteristics of the Romantic hero, such as rejecting social conventions like marriage, mocking and disagreeing with the hero and rejecting his first proposal, as well as those of the heroine, displaying a sense of empathy towards the hero at the end of the novel when she endeavours to understand Darcy's behaviour. Another example of a Romantic heroine would be Jane, from *Jane*

Eyre (1847), who although the novel was published in the Victorian era, hints characteristics of the Romantic heroine. Jane breaks the social conventions of the time by advocating for equal treatment by the man she loves, running away the moment she is made known that her lover Rochester is secretly married to Bertha, his insane wife. All the same, Jane's character grows in resilience and empathy when she shows compassion towards her aunt who mistreated her, and Rochester who is left blind after a fire. This resilient spirit can also be seen in Rebekah, who after the adversity of her husband's death, invests her fortune in founding the Harkness Ballet, thus enhancing her status. Although these investments eventually went bankrupt shortly before her death, the fact that she found a project to be invested in after a tragedy is what makes her stand out as a resilient character.

Likewise, Rebekah's narrative proves her empowerment and personal growth. While her character shows attributes related to some Romantic heroines such as Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre, as previously mentioned, Rebekah is an evolution of the Romantic hero, as this character archetype has developed in different branches throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and into the present day. Moreover, the sense of resilience she demonstrates after the death of her husband, investing her inherited money in improving her status, battling social criticism and living in isolation from society's disapproving comments still reminds of the Romantic heroine. As Swift says, "There goes the most shameless woman this town has ever seen / She had a marvelous time ruining everything" (Swift, lines 24-25), Rebekah was oblivious to society's backlash because she enjoyed her reality. Furthermore, although Rebekah shares subtle notions of the Romantic hero, her character also fits into the narrative of American characters of the late 19th and early 20th century. Some of these characters, such as the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby* and

Madame Olenska of *The Age of Innocence*, like Rebekah defy the social norms of the time, but at the same time belong to the American social elite.

Additionally, it is remarkable how Swift inserts herself into the song's narrative at the end of it, suggesting that she is following Rebekah's reputation by buying her house, "And then it was bought by me / Who knows, if I never showed up, what could've been / There goes the loudest woman this town has ever seen / I had a marvelous time ruinin' everything" (Swift, lines 33-36). This supposed succession Swift refers to is because both have been victims of popular scrutiny, fighting an endless battle against a public that is unable to accept a woman in a high rank of society, both of them rebelling against societal expectations.

2.2 Confessional writing

Romanticism shifted away from the emphasis on Classical objectivity towards subjectivity, placing a high value on uniqueness, which arises from individuality and subjectivity, as previously mentioned. The emphasis on uniqueness is amply exemplified in Rousseau's *Confessions* which in its very form asserts the value of the confessional mode and of private experience (Habib). In his memoir, Rousseau delves into extensive detail about his imperfections, shedding light into personal choices and how every decision has an ethical side as well as an immoral one, continuously trying to justify himself. Rousseau's influence can be observed in the protagonist of Mary Shelley's romantic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), where the doctor, instead of taking responsibility for his action, which was acting as God by giving life to a monstrous being, flees, leaving his creation behind, only to later regret the accumulation of misfortunes that his evil deed unleashes. Both Rousseau and British Romanticism explore aspects that eventually become central issues in Romanticism, reflecting Rousseau's profound influence on the

Romantic movement. This includes nuances between right and wrong, the impossibility of controlling an individual's emotional drives, and the complexities of human experience.

Regardless of the circumstances, Victor Frankenstein and Rousseau himself share characteristics with the speaker of the song 'betty', James. Likewise, James enters into a dynamic of exculpating himself by insisting that his ethically questionable actions are due to unfortunate events, perhaps triggered in their childhood. This theme is raised by Swift raises in her song 'betty'⁶, which is narrated by a male voice mourning his lover after being unfaithful to her.

2.2.1 'betty'

The only song in the album narrated by a male voice is 'betty', forming part of the narrative of a love triangle with the songs 'cardigan' and 'august'. This love triangle is composed of the aforementioned James, who narrates 'betty'; Betty, who narrates 'cardigan'; and Augustine, who narrates 'august'. For the analysis of 'betty', it is essential to understand the sentimental circumstances of all the characters in this convoluted love story. Betty and James had an established romantic relationship, but because of James's insecurities, which I will explore later, he is unfaithful to Betty with Augustine, who falls hopelessly in love with him. As Augustine's feelings grow in magnitude during the summer, James only thinks about Betty, letting Augustine know that his heart does not belong to her, never did and never will.

At the very opening of the song, the voice of the seventeen-year-old boy already blames himself for his actions, "Betty, I won't make assumptions / About why you

⁶ See 2.1

switched your homeroom, but / I think it's 'cause of me" (Swift, lines 1-3), beginning to shape his narrative of guilt and regret without considering that other people's actions may not be rooted in his evildoing. He continues lamenting himself, at the same time acknowledging the consequences of his actions, "The worst thing that I ever did / Was what I did to you (Swift, lines 10-11), redirecting the traditional love confession from pureness and honesty, to shame and pity. In this song, James himself the subject of negative scrutiny. As the protagonist's lament unfolds through the lines, he leaves subtle hints reminiscent of the Romanticism of Coleridge and Browning, for they used shame as a way to reconsider the Romantic claim that self-construction is a solitary process (Holleman 1). Even more, the fear of rejection that underlies shame keeps individuals in isolation until unconditional acceptance delivers them from shame's torment (Holleman 21), and this manifestation for the lonesome self is seen in line 24, where James claims "I was nowhere to be found / I hate the crowds, you know that" (Swift, lines 24-25), echoes the Romantic idea of isolation. In addition, his desire for acceptance is repeated in the chorus, where he asks Betty if she would take him back if he showed up to her house, "But if I showed up at your party / Would you have me? / Would you want me?" (Swift, lines 12-14), only willing to appear back in her life if he is certain she will excuse his actions. However, after all the guilt-tripping James undergoes, he concludes the verses by exonerating himself, saying "I'm only seventeen, I don't know anything / But I know I miss you" (Swift, lines 19-20). This approach of downplaying his mistakes by excusing himself with adverse factors is reminiscent of the intentions with which Rousseau wrote *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1782).

Furthermore, and recovering the nature worship mentioned in the first point, there is an interesting line in the middle of the song's guilt that in a way reminds of the escapism the Romantic poets linked nature with. When James asks Betty if she would be willing to

take him back, he offers two possibilities, “Would you tell me to go fuck myself? / Or lead me to the garden?” (Swift, lines 15-16). Here the garden may symbolise the purity of nature, as well as a convenient backdrop for a romantic encounter, serving as an archetypal image of the soul, of innocence, and of happiness. In the case of *Frankenstein*, nature serves as a refuge from the pressures and complexities of society, providing the doctor with a sense of tranquility that alleviated his guilt.

2.2.2 ‘peace’

The song ‘peace’ serves as an interesting and balanced fusion of the themes of guilt, confession, and nature adoration, as the speaker uses natural imagery and incorporates the pathetic fallacy while recognizing all the reasons why the relationship with her lover is doomed owing to her responsibility. This song explores the pursuit of inner peace in the middle of the chaos of life, battling at the same time to maintain a healthy relationship with a significant other.

While the speaker in this song does not seek refuge in nature from inner demons, it still uses landscape references to explore both unfavourable and auspicious feelings, “But I’m a fire and I’ll keep your brittle heart warm / If your cascade, ocean wave blues come” (Swift, lines 8-9), offering her sympathy in case gloom, often associated with the colour blue, invades her partner again. It is interesting how she uses lexicon associated with warmth and peace to convey that same feeling to him, like in line 26, where she advocates for her ‘sunshine’, while she attributes negative feelings to humid elements “But the rain is always gonna come if you’re standin’ with me” (Swift, line 27). This last line also hints at the guilt she feels at lacking the ability to offer her beloved a life of peace. This feeling of guilt, of shame, that has been previously explained in ‘betty’, is the same feeling she opens the song with, attributing to herself the role that she is to blame

for their situation and that, as long as he is with her, he will never be able to live in peace. However, unlike the protagonist of the previous song, James, the speaker of this one does not seek to excuse her actions, but simply explains the reality while offering positive solutions. She personifies these solutions by using a vocabulary relevant to landscapes and natural elements.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

This dissertation aimed to determine the notions of Romanticism present in Taylor Swift's music album *folklore*. The thesis proposed argued that Swift's lyricism offered a contemporary reinterpretation of the Romantic literary tradition, in this way enduring the relevance of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Romantic literary movement. In addition, two main topics of Romanticism set the basis for my study; the first one being the adoration and praise for nature endured by poets such as Wordsworth, Keats and artists such as Caspar Friedrich, and its relevance in Swift's storytelling; and the second, contemplated throughout confessional writing and the Byronic hero, the sense of individuality portrayed by Romantics which Swift maintains and explores through different lenses in several songs.

As for the worship of nature, throughout this dissertation it has been observed that, except for 'the last great american dynasty', natural phenomena and elements are present in all the songs presented in this paper. On the one hand, the two main songs under section one are presented as healing factors, especially in 'the lakes', where natural landscapes offer a sense of serenity for the speaker, while in 'seven', a natural setting is presented at the beginning of the song in order to picture the speaker in a placid and innocent image. Similarly, the songs under the second section, whilst they do not revolve exclusively

around nature, still contain several allusions to it, whether it is directly, like the mention of the garden in the song 'betty'; or using the pathetic fallacy, as Swift does in the song 'peace', where she uses certain meteorological concepts to express sentiments both favourable and hostile.

Addressing now the second topic that this paper aimed to approach, the results of this dissertation show that in Swift's storytelling, individuality is intrinsically related to character development. Throughout the analysis of the characters' points of view, this paper has assessed how the sense of individuality is presented in different contexts and characters, ranging from the confessions of a wronged male to the rebelliousness of a woman socially outcasted. The songs 'betty' and 'peace' convey this sense of self-blaming while at the same time their speaker aims to find a justification in order to make their confessions lightweight. Alternatively, the protagonist of the song 'the last great american dynasty' does not follow the pattern of confessional culture, but does rebel against societal conventions, a characteristic shared with Romantic heroes. Additionally, I was able to conclude that Rebekah's character, while sharing subtle characteristics with the Romantic hero, also represents an evolution of this persona, which fits into an archetype prevalent in American literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Additionally, by demonstrating to have been in contact with literature, Swift endeavors to project herself as an original artist aware that her work will endure over time. This awareness of the posthumous reputation and artistic longevity is a characteristic of the Romantic poets. The emphasis she places on referencing classic works, and in this case a literary period, illustrates that Romanticism endures today because contemporary work is an evolution of the foundations set by Romantic poets.

To conclude, through the analysis of various songs included in the album *folklore*, this study has assessed the relevance of key aspects of the Romantic literary movement within the contemporary framework of the album. By doing so, it has offered a thorough analysis of how the lyricism of Swift in her post-pandemic album aligns with the Romantic literary tradition and the characteristics shared in the poems by their authors, highlighting the relevance Romanticism still has in the present day, and how its powerful influence is able to shape contemporary art.

Future research

Even though the Romantic literary period has extensively been an object of study, I believe the Romantic lens could be employed in order to conduct a further investigation in the remaining songs of *folklore*. Moreover, although in this dissertation I have studied Romantic instances in Swift's *folklore*, I consider a deeper insight could be given on the topic if Swift's sister album *evermore* was included in the research, as it follows the same tone, topics, and aesthetic as *folklore*, and it was published less than five months after the former one. Similarly, a further topic of interest for me would be all the aesthetic behind the *folklore* era beyond the cover picture of the album, including merchandise available for fans, the section of this era in The Eras Tour, and its relation to the Romantic literary and perhaps artistic tradition. Furthermore, even though Swift plays with different voices in her storytelling, it would be interesting to look at the lyricism of this album solely from a gender perspective, contrasting her work with those of female writers exclusively.

All things considered, drawing on the main basis of my thesis, I would like to propose Swift's lyricism as a field of study in literature lectures. Since I believe her storytelling would be interesting for new generations of writers and even poets to study,

it could be interesting to compare her works to those of famous figures in literary history who shaped their respective literary movements and generations.

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Filmography

Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions. Taylor Swift (dir.), (scr.), Taylor Swift. (prod.). Taylor Swift Productions, Big Branch Productions. 2020. United States.

Image Credits

Figure 1.

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Figure 2.

<https://lastfm.freetls.fastly.net/i/u/avatar170s/b8da93ab6d8aa00384998fdae7451d92>

Figure 3. <https://smarthistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Fragonard-Swing-Whole-870x1092.jpg>