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“Every Time You Call Me Crazy I Get More Crazy”:
Sylvia Plath, Taylor Swift, and Confessional Performances

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Abstract

This thesis explores the works and personas of Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift and analyses the popular confluences of their real lives and their works. Jon Helt Haarder's theory of *biographical performativity* is introduced to analyse the threshold aesthetics between reality and art and investigate the feedback loops between oeuvres and lives as well as the interpretation of these in the public sphere. The framework of *mad studies* is used to investigate how both the works and personas of Plath and Swift have been received and interpreted through the lens of modernist, sanist social structures. Reading practices informed by the mad movement are utilized, with the aim to reveal and subvert the dichotomy that values "objectivity", "reality" and "fact" over "subjectivity", "fantasy" and "emotion", arguing instead that they are deeply interdependent. Plath's and Swift's oeuvres are analysed as speech acts with social functions, while their personas are investigated as textually constructed products. Using Plath and Swift as illustrative examples, this thesis also examines the moral issues haunting the production and interpretation of mimetic art.

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1. Introduction

Between the spheres of life and art lies a precarious realm, one which blurs the borders and refuses to be categorised. Two well-known artists who function within this ambiguous field are Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift. They share the similarities of having their works interpreted through an autobiographical lens and being marketed towards similar demographics, namely adolescent girls and young women. Both function as examples of the perilous synthesis of artistic product, personal biography, and public persona achieved by social narrative processes. Their public personas also have similar narratives – as Eleanor Spencer-Regan points out in *The Conversation*, “young Plath, like the teenage Swift, was an obliging All-American blonde”, and both later enacted the good-girl-gone-bad trope; Taylor Swift in her *reputation era*¹ and Plath in poems “in which a powerful female protagonist emerges, phoenix-like, from the ashes of trauma, to wreak vengeance on male oppressors”.

Another similarity between the two artists is that their works are often concerned with matters of subjectivity, emotions, and personal experience, and this has bolstered certain reading practices. Exploring the receptions of Plath and Swift, both in terms of their creative outputs and their biographies, this thesis aims to show that the distinction between creative output and biography is not so clear-cut as it may seem. This is not intended as an argument against the precept that one ought not to make assumptions about an artist’s life based on the supposed evidence of their work, or vice versa. Rather, it is an investigation into the machinations surrounding the artists and works that are described as “confessional” or “autobiographical”. The objective here is not to prove a specific hypothesis, but to examine

¹ Colloquial term among Taylor Swift fans, derived from the change in Swift’s image around the release of her sixth studio album *reputation*, used more generally to indicate a change in attitude and image to something darker and edgier. The word ‘era’ is used by fans to define the entirety of the commercial and conceptual/aesthetic studio album rollout, and I use it in the same way throughout the text.

and describe certain phenomena from a multitude of angles and perspectives, and use the subjects at hand to approach topics of relevance in the arenas of public discourse and literary studies.

To carry out such a project, a variety of social and literary theories as well as genre analyses will be utilized. I will attempt to show how confessional poetry and similar genres complicate the author-text relationship, using Jon Helt Haarder's theory of *biographical performativity* to argue that the public persona of an author can and ought to be read alongside their textual output as a piece of performance art. The ambiguity between reality and art, created by confessional or auto/biographical works, destabilizes the audience's relationship to the texts and artists in question. Radical subjectivity is the emotional core of the confessional genre, which also contributes to the perception of the authors as mad. *Mad theory* and adjacent critical approaches will inform the analyses of Sylvia Plath's documented struggles with psychic pain as well as medial characterisations of Taylor Swift as "crazy". This is not to say that the "madness" of Plath is equal or comparable to the "madness" of Swift, merely that they are both results of the same sanist society that delegitimizes others through association with madness. Informed by these frameworks, the first half of the thesis presents and analyses the contexts and biographies of Plath and Swift, while the second is focused on analysing their textual products. A neat split between life and work is not possible, so there will inevitably be some suffusion on both sides.

2. Background

This section presents brief overviews of the most central theoretical frameworks, genres and terminologies discussed in the thesis. As many of the sources used are of a very peripheral nature, especially in the case of Swift, only the most central ones are introduced here.

Auto/biography

Philippe Lejeune, in his seminal essay “The Autobiographical Pact”, defines autobiography as “[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” and in this narrative “the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical” (Chansky et al. 34-35; emphasis in original). Lejeune’s precise and methodical definition has become foundational to subsequent studies of autobiography, but far from everyone adheres to its principles. In the introduction to *Getting a Life: Everyday Use of Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the autobiography as a phenomenon that is intimately entangled with that of postmodern American culture (3). Their concept of autobiography encompasses much more than just the genre that Lejeune describes; in their framework, the autobiography is closer to an avatar of a (distinctly American) process of identity creation via consumerism.

Confessional Poetry

Since it was first named as such by M.L. Rosenthal in 1959 (109-113), the genre of confessional poetry has been highly contentious. Scholars have had disagreements about practically every imaginable aspect: what the term “confessional” means; who the confessional poets are; the quality of the poetry; if the term should even be used at all. These, and more debates, are detailed in Miranda Sherwin’s “*Confessional*” *Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination* (11-16). She writes that confessional literature “can be seen as a direct precursor to the memoir craze and to reality television” (3) in that they all present the appeal of showing the real, unconstructed truth, while they are in fact substantially staged and manipulated to create a coherent narrative for an audience. As such, the lines between fictional character and real person are blurred.

Sherwin repositions ‘confessional’ literature as a poetic investigation of identity and the mind, one that uses psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework. Another one of her main arguments is that the interpretation of confessional writing as being inherently apolitical is mistaken, and that it in fact is inherently engaged with societal issues through the lens of the personal domain. The unofficial slogan of second wave feminism – “the personal is political” – seems appropriate here, especially when one considers the temporal overlap of the two movements.

Biographical Performativity

Biographical performativity as a literary movement was named and introduced in the book *Performativ Biografisme: En hovedstrømning i det senmodernes skandinaviske litteratur* (my approximate translation: *Biographical Performativity: A Mainstream Movement in Late Modern Scandinavian Literature*) by Jon Helt Haarder. As implied by the title, the book is mainly concerned with Scandinavian literature from the last few decades – a literary tradition which, plainly, neither Plath nor Swift are a part of. However, biographical performativity is not a new phenomenon (10), nor is it restricted by the borders of Scandinavia (14), which Haarder points out himself. In light of this, I argue that the spatial and (in the case of Plath) temporal discrepancies are negligible. Apart from Haarder’s discussions specific to the late 20th/early 21st century Scandinavian context (primarily, the claim that the Nordic welfare model is a (pre)requisite for biographical performativity), I believe that the theory is applicable to recent Western media and culture in general. As I make use of his work in the original Danish, all Haarder quotations throughout the text have been translated into English by me.

Outlining the causal background of biographical performativity, Haarder names Lejeune’s structuralist definition of the autobiographical genre as pivotal to, but ultimately unable to explain, the phenomenon of biographical performativity. Lejeune’s introduction of the

‘biographical pact’ later functioned as the catalyst for Serge Doubrovsky’s term *autofiction*, also an important precursor to biographical performativity. The aim of autofiction is to exploit the holes in Lejeune’s framework by publishing obviously fictional works with characters that share names with the author, creating a psychoanalytic playing field for one’s subject within the realm of fiction (Haarder 119).²³ Biographical performativity departs from both autobiography and autofiction in that it does not linger in questions of memory or verifiable factual circumstances. Instead, it is concerned with the *undertaking* of a biographical speech act, and *how* said speech act is performed, not whether the statement is true or false (123). Whereas the auto/biographical genre relies upon a linear concept of time – something happens, which is described in text afterwards – Haarder describes a type of literature where *text* and *experience* are in a continual, anachronous dialogue with one another: “Writing biographically is not just describing the past, but also to act in the present, and by doing so affecting the future” (2). The complex relationship with time is also reflected in relation to identity. Whether identity is something one *has* or something one *does*, and to what extent identity is controlled by the self or others, are central questions within biographical performativity. The creation of *identity* is intimately connected to the creation of *text* in its most general sense, and both are highly collaborative and intertextual.

Biographical performativity is defined as “artists making use of themselves and other real persons in an aesthetic manner, in order to interact with (the reactions of) readers and the public” (9). Audience interaction is key to the performative aspects of the movement, and one of the main factors separating it from autobiography. The dialogic aspects may be seen in

² The term *autofiction* has been used somewhat differently since Doubrovsky’s initial introduction of it. For reference, see Haarder 120.

³ Swift’s song “no body, no crime (feat. HAIM)” might be counted as an example of this, as the lyrics refer to a woman named Este who has at least one sister, and HAIM consists of the sisters Alana, Danielle, and Este Haim. As Este Haim is alive, it is (probably) safe to assume that the other murder in the song’s narrative is fictional, too.

scandals, debates, and the texts functioning as speech acts (125). Medial responses to an autobiographical work are not just responding to the isolated text, but to the real author (and their persona) as well as any other (allegedly) identifiable individual in the work. While the creator may exert some level of control over the image they project to the world they are not in control of audience responses or how other agents involved represent them.

Situated between aesthetic phenomenon and social occurrence is the dialogue between artist and audience, the dialogue which is the source of the circulation of energy powering biographical performativity. Fischer-Lichte's term *threshold aesthetic* is central to Haarder's discussions. Placing a piece of art at such a threshold blurs and erases the border between art and fiction, abstraction and material reality (116). Interfering if one sees a fellow human being physically harming themselves, and refraining from harming others, are (relatively) obviously morally and ethically correct in most social contexts. Can the same be said if the social context in question is a piece of performance art? Where does the artwork end and the person begin, and vice versa?⁴ The discomfort and confusion awoken in the audience by destabilizing the borders between art and reality are key to another important aspect of biographical performativity, namely investigating and revealing the strategies behind configuring 'authenticity' in an artwork, one of the strategies being the real wounds that the artist exposes (105). Rather than using the ambiguity between reality and fiction as a protective cover against criticism, which some undoubtedly do (124), or viewing this as an artform concerned with "ethical, rather than aesthetic" issues, Haarder views the ethical issues brought forward as "a particular aesthetic that puts the reader into an uncomfortable, but fascinating, rift between art and life" (125).

⁴ See Haarder's discussion of Marina Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas*, in which she carves a pentagram into her own stomach, in Haarder, 116. The discussion might also productively extend to other pieces by Abramovic, for instance *Rhythm 0*, in which the audience was invited to use any of 72 provided objects (including a rose, honey, a gun and a bullet) on her however they wished.

Mad Studies

Richard A. Ingram is credited with introducing the term *Mad Studies* in 2008, as a response to the inadequacies he experienced in disability studies, which failed to accommodate a “space within which to do research focusing on madness and Mad people” (11). One of the foundational tenets of Mad Studies is prioritising the voices of those with personal experiences of psychiatric services, institutionalisation, and past or present mental health issues. This core value of the movement, which is both academic, activist, social and psychological, informs all other practices (Reaume). As an example of this, a majority of the contributors in *Searching for a Rose Garden: Challenging Psychiatry, Fostering Mad Studies* have experiences of being psychiatric patients. Ingram argues that “showing that there is method in our madness” in order to enter academic spaces compromises the field as a whole, so they must simultaneously work to preserve “madness in our method” (13). The ultimate goal of this, according to Ingram, is for Mad Studies to be an *in/discipline*; destabilizing, unsettling and subverting the rest of academia (14). The field is highly interdisciplinary and intersectional, in that solidarity with other marginalised groups and the critical engagement with theories of disability, gender, race, class, and sexuality is central to its work (Reaume).

Mad Theory is a relatively new field, one that is concerned with issues that are sensitive and personal to many, meaning that the language and terminology is still in the process of taking shape. Some take issue with the word ‘mad’ and its derogatory associations, but others perceive using the word as a way to reclaim it (Gillis). As “Mad Studies” or “Mad theory” are the generally accepted terms for the field, I use ‘mad’ throughout the paper along with other synonyms like ‘insane’ or ‘crazy’, not as derogatory descriptors, but as a way to illustrate the stigmatizing attitudes I am referring to. There are also different approaches to writing the terms “Mad” and “Mad Studies” in the upper or lower case. I have elected to refer to it in the

lower case, except in direct quotations and in the present subsection where I use both variants to distinguish them from one another.

In his chapter “The Role of Survivor Knowledge in Creating Alternatives to Psychiatry” Peter Beresford writes that the knowledge about psychiatry that its users/recipients/survivors sustain “flies in the face of traditional positivist research values of neutrality, objectivity and distance and is judged inferior to them” (Russo, Sweeney et al 29). Or, in the words of Clare Shaw, describing the dominant attitudes in psychiatry in the chapter “Deciding to be Alive”, “[w]hen people are so mad that they attack their own bodies, we should disregard anything they say or think. Shouldn’t we?” (80). This way of thinking inherently removes agency from the patient, which is a standard practice in psychiatry despite the lack of evidence for positive outcomes. The most extreme embodiment of this is the practice of involuntary commitment to psychiatric hospitals, where patients may be physically and chemically restrained.

The framework of Mad Theory is used here both as a way to analyse the real, practical ways in which the subjects Plath and Swift have been received, perceived, and treated by others, and as a lens through which to read their works. Detecting the attitudes toward and treatment of madness in their works is one of the ways this is accomplished, but it also informs a more general reading practice which I aim to demonstrate throughout the text. Ingram’s dictum of retaining the “mad” in Mad Studies, and rejecting the dogmatic authority of the psychiatric field – and questioning authority in general – to assume the right to define reality is the starting point for the overall aims of this thesis. A grounding principle of the present work is to prioritize and centre subjectivity over objectivity; experience over fact; interpretation over reality – not to claim that either is inferior or non-existent, but to reveal and question the dichotomy which favours one over the other. I am not arguing that reality does not exist in the terms of philosophical scepticism (the premise of implementing the biographical lived reality of Plath and Swift into my analysis necessitates the existence of

reality), but rather that all knowledge and perception of reality is sifted through individual and social subjectivity. Certain ways to interpret and communicate reality, those focused on emotionality, have been and are categorically perceived as less valuable or true. While they may be more fluid and difficult to locate, emotional realities are as significant as objective realities, and both influence and affect the other.

3. Context

To introduce the topic, this part of the text is mainly concerned with Plath and Swift from a biographical and cultural perspective. The first part focuses on Sylvia Plath and contains three subsections, beginning with a meta-analysis of various Plath biographies and the popular narratives they foster. The following section is closely related to the first, discussing the tensions and ethical issues of Plath's role as a public figure in terms of her surviving family and friends. Concluding the part on Plath is a section introducing a variety of sociocultural imprints Plath and the Plath-myth have made in modern day culture. The intent is to bring the discussion on Plath to a contemporary context, bridging the gap between her and Swift.

The second half, devoted to analysing Swift, is divided into three subsections. The first provides a contextual background for the ways in which Swift has been characterised, by the media, her label, and herself, in accordance with archetypes like the 'Good Girl' and the 'boy-crazy' teen girl. In the subsequent section I outline the major events surrounding Swift's shift of public cultural identity according to the 'good-girl-gone-bad' trope, outlining its causes and consequences. In the last section Swift is discussed as a political actor, nuancing the oft-repeated narrative that she went from being completely apolitical to having a political awakening in conjunction with the *Lover* era.

Before commencing the discussions described above, I wish to acknowledge some that I will *not* be engaging with to the extent which they deserve and require. The topics in question

all have to do with issues of racism, whiteness, and appropriation, and the reason that they are not engaged with further is *not* that they are irrelevant, but simply that the scope of this thesis does not allow for it.

Plath's use of Nazism, genocide, and Jewishness as symbols in her poetry despite not being Jewish herself is a complicated issue, and deserves to be discussed with respect and nuance. The same goes for discussing other racist facets in her works, such as the use of the N word or using non-white physical attributes to convey ugliness.⁵ Works discussing these subjects include Jerome Ellison Murphy's "'God's Lioness' and God's 'Negress'"; Brian Murdoch's "Transformations of the Holocaust"; Al Strangeways' article "'The Boot in the Face'", and Matthew Boswell's "'Black Phones'" This is far from an exhaustive list.

Turning to Swift, the problematic racial aspects of her image have more to do with the words and actions of *others* than in the case of Plath. Whereas Plath is criticised for her words, the criticism Swift receives is more concerned with her *silence*, and the aesthetic associations between her image and the ideals exalted by the right wing, conservatives, and even fascists. Annelot Prins's article "From Awkward Teen Girl to Aryan Goddess Meme" analyses how and why Swift became the pop star of choice in white supremacist online communities. The optics of Swift's public conflict with Kanye West – the innocent and vulnerable paragon of white femininity being victimised by the aggressive and violent Black man⁶ – has been discussed by, for instance, Shaun Cullen's article "The Innocent and the Runaway" and Nicholas D. Krebs's "Confidently (Non)Cognizant of Neoliberalism" in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*.

⁵ For instance in *The Bell Jar*, where Esther describes herself looking "like a sick Indian" (108) or like "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically" (17). Of course, the thoughts and words of Esther do not equate those of Plath, but the racist attitudes are nonetheless present in her works.

⁶ The scholarly works on Swift's and West's conflict tend to predate late 2022, when West started to make public statements of an increasingly far-right, antisemitic nature. While this is long after the events of the Swift-West conflict, West's embracing Nazi ideology certainly makes the racial dynamic between the two more complex. Further investigation of this specific topic might prove fruitful.

Sylvia Plath

It is not primarily Sylvia Plath's *life* that is the source of popular ideas about her works, but her *death*. Despite being known in literary circles when she was still alive, Lindahl-Raittila writes, it was after her death that she became truly well-known (3). Howard Moss went further still in "Dying: An Introduction", stating that "death gave her work certain immediate values it might not otherwise have had", paradoxically giving herself and her work an "instantaneous immortality". He represents her 1963 suicide as providing stamp of authenticity and truth to her poetry, as if she had gone through with a promise made in her works – she became a "truth-dealer" by dying. Indeed, Plath's death has saturated both her life and her works to such an extent that even those who wish to subvert this are forced to confront the ghost of her suicide.

"I see her back, and reflect it faithfully"

Line 13 from Plath's poem "Mirror" (*Collected Poems* 173-174) is used here in juxtaposition to the concept of biographies. In the context of the full poem, the obvious interpretation of the clause "I see her back" is that the mirror speaker sees the physical back of the woman's body and reflects it even when she does not look at the mirror. "Back" is a polysemous word, though, and if one is willing to be linguistically unorthodox, "I see her back" could be interpreted as an act of resurrection through perception; the mirror is willing 'her' return from oblivion, using the power of sight. This means that 'her' existence is predicated upon the mirror-speaker's perception of her, that she now only exists in the incarnation of what the mirror saw in her. This makes the second part of the line, "and reflect it faithfully", dubious: faithful to whom? Regardless of the veracity of the reflection, it remains a medialised depiction, sifted through another entity. 'She' is not just 'her' anymore, but carries the traces of the mirror with her. This is also the case with biographies. Despite efforts made to stay close to the 'truth' – a problematic notion when applied to so capricious a subject as human

nature – there is no way to avoid the fact that it is a mediated, constructed narrativization of a human life.

Susan R. Van Dyne’s “The Problem of Biography” points out that, as Plath’s literary fame is largely posthumous, her works are unavoidably read and interpreted through her suicide. Describing the state of Plath biography, she writes that “each of the major biographies is in part motivated to counteract what is perceived as egregious bias in the one before”, drawing a picture of a contentious and tempestuous field. Of Ted Hughes, she writes that his “public and often litigious conflicts with biographers and literary critics demonstrate his aggrieved sense that Plath’s autobiographical acts were in fact biography, imprisoning him in her misrepresentation” (17). Frieda Hughes, their daughter, is also quoted expressing the same sentiment. Of course, one might say that the reverse is true; that *their* autobiographical acts function as biography of Plath, imprisoning *her* in *their* ‘misrepresentation’. This is the crux at the centre of it all; in order to communicate the narrative of one’s self, one is obliged to include a narrative of others, one that is inherently reductive and biased.

Assessing which version is closest to the truth may be insuperable. In the words of Lindahl-Raittila, the diversity of Plath depictions in biographies

have created not an ever more complete and consistent story of her life and character, but a number of contradictory views and versions, a collage which in the end might well be more true to the story of Sylvia Plath than any single biography on its own. Or to put it in another way, a feminist approach of this kind will see biography writing as a process which is not so much untruthful as profoundly social. (6)

According to Lindahl-Raittila’s analysis of Plath, there are a few major categories within this field. To summarize and simplify her findings, the Plath biographies can be said to fall into one or more of the following: the truth-seeking, pathologizing analysis that usually

perpetuates the mad poet-genius Plath myth (9-10); the feminist re-interpretations in which Plath is either a “victim of the feminine mystique” or a feminist heroine (10-11) or both; the postmodern and poststructuralist anti-biography, where Plath is analysed as a social phenomenon (12); and, the most recent one, a return to the first category with added elements of scandal and drama (13). Additionally, these categories reveal the macro-developments of society, culture and theories thereof going on at the time of producing the biography (4). Thus, her analysis not only accounts for the sociohistorical context of Plath, but also for those of her biographers.

Plath’s biographers have, much like the entertainment media writing about Swift, tended to either place her on a pedestal or unseat her from one. Lindahl-Raittila writes that Plath’s biographers have tended to characterise her as *Übermensch*, even as a schoolgirl, and mainly differ in how they approach this (136). Edward Butscher, for instance, uses this as background for his construction of Plath as the “bitch goddess” in his book *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (136) published in 1976, while Linda Wagner-Martin in *Sylvia Plath: a Literary Life*, published in 1987, is careful to note that Plath’s intelligence was fostered by hard work, and that her mental health issues were not a curse of fate (140). The constructed dichotomy between effort and talent is especially visible in this paradoxical quote from Butscher: “She continued the same dedication to hard work she had always shown, earning her ‘A’s’ with seeming ease” (qtd. in Lindahl-Raittila 138), depicting even the explicitly stated hard work as the result of an innate talent, performed effortlessly. However, Anne Stevenson’s controversial *Bitter Fame: The Life of Sylvia Plath*, published in 1989, downplays Plath’s academic life, according to Lindahl-Raittila. She even goes so far as to call Stevenson’s image of Plath “sinister” (142), “negatively loaded” and “heavily undercut by suspicion and critique” (144). This is especially interesting considering the fact that Stevenson’s Plath was “authorised”, produced on commission from the Plath literary estate

and with the ample assistance of its literary agent, Olwyn Hughes, sister of Ted Hughes (11). Stevenson focuses more on Plath's academic deficiencies (grades below A) and claims, in Lindahl-Raittila's words, "that Plath succeeded in all her subjects because she made it easy for herself" (142). This is in stark contrast to most other biographers, whose accounts have tended towards the opposite end of the spectrum, making Plath out to be a genius (143).

In their accounts of Plath's sexual life, Stevenson and Butscher are more similar, with Wagner-Martin as the outlier. Lindahl-Raittila describes Stevenson's account of Plath's expressions of sexuality as "a kind of war path of calculated promiscuity" (155), and states that Butscher's Plath "[c]alculatingly [...] measures each candidate against the norm for what a good husband should be and finds him lacking" (152). Butscher's version of Plath is a victim of her background, going through the motions of sex and romance as a social survival mechanism (151). Likely because of her explicitly feminist approach, Wagner-Martin's depiction of Plath's sexual behaviour has a more positive approach (154). Rather than seeing Plath's decision to become sexually active before marriage as a symptom of a mental affliction or a shrewd scheme, she positions it as an act of protest, a personal sexual revolution (155). Again, similar attitudes may be found in the reception of Swift – see the discussion of "Blank Space" on pp. 42-45.

The two more recent biographies discussed by Lindahl-Raittila, Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* and Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (both published in 1991) associate Plath's sex life to death and violence. Hayman, according to Lindahl-Raittila, connects "everything in her life to the death in the end" (160), including her sexuality, and Alexander draws a picture of Plath as a masochist seeking out sexually violent men as a result of the mid-century patriarchal double standards around sex

(160-161). He excuses Plath's being a "tease", writing that it was "understandable" "by the moral standards of the day" (Alexander 142).⁷ He also blames Plath for being sexually abused, constructing a narrative in which Plath herself wanted and sought out sexually violent men – which, for some reason, seems to have relieved the abusive men in question from responsibility. After describing a date wherein one of Plath's friends was "literally [chased] [...] around the sofa" (145-146) by a professor named Edwin, who refused to accept her refusals to his sexual advances, Alexander proposes that Plath might have been "fascinated" by such "boldness". Even though he stresses the fact that Edwin asked Plath out, the events are framed as though Plath engineered the whole situation. Alexander even goes so far as to imply that Plath's vaginal haemorrhage requiring two hospital visits to treat was not the result of rape, despite quoting Plath explicitly describing it as such, because she did not stop seeing Edwin afterwards (146-147). He claims that:

Either Sylvia accepted more of the responsibility for the episode than she wanted to admit and therefore did not blame Edwin or she felt drawn to men whose behaviour towards her tended to border on abuse. Just as she now continued to date a man who she said had "raped" her, she would soon become deeply involved with someone who would hit and spank her. Ultimately, there would be one man who, in part because of his violent nature, the brunt of which she often felt, captivated Sylvia so completely that only months after their meeting she had married him. (147)

Alexander's reasoning, in conjunction with the myths around Plath's mental health, support harmful ideas that she *enjoyed* suffering, and that pain was an unpreventable part of her

⁷ To be clear: even if this were true, being a "tease" is not a crime that requires an explanation or excuse; one can never be entitled to sex or physical intimacy.

destiny. It expresses not only a profoundly deficient understanding of how abusive relationships, sexual abuse, or the patriarchy functions, but also a deeply problematic misogynistic attitude. His argument that Plath's continued contact with the Professor is proof that he did not rape her betrays the – unfortunately common – lack of awareness of how people react to being violated. In addition, it ignores any notion of responsibility on the part of the abusive men, and perpetuates the patriarchal myth that women secretly enjoy being abused. While absolving all parties – except Plath herself – of responsibility in her sufferings, it also affirms the mad genius/suffering artist trope. Furthermore, it submits and assents to suicidal depression and sexual abuse as inherent and inevitable to Plath, rather than consequences of destructive social orders that we humans are as equally able to upheave as we were able to create them.

Interestingly, the different pictures of Plath the biographers have drawn over the years in many ways coincide with those that have been drawn of Swift. Most notable, perhaps, is *Bitter Fame: The Life of Sylvia Plath* by Anne Stevenson, which – in Lindahl-Raittila's description and critique of it – depicts a Plath that seems very much like the version of Swift satirized in "Blank Space". The feminist biographies, however, seem to provide a narrative of Plath that is very similar to the one pictured in the documentary *Miss Americana*, in that both Plath and Swift seemingly go from being perfectionist Good Girls, to breaking down as a result of the extreme pressure of constantly being Good, to having a feminist political awakening that makes them reject patriarchal standards of Goodness, and stand up to their oppressors.

"Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks."

The desire for and work to make Plath's private notes, communications and even childhood poems available for public consumption bears a striking resemblance to the more generally condemned work of contemporary paparazzi and tabloid magazines, a comparison that

Plath's husband Ted Hughes and their daughter Frieda have not hesitated to invoke. Line 21 from "Tulips" (160-162 *Collected Poems*) by Plath heads this section, in the poem referring to the hospitalized speaker's husband and child "smiling out of the family photo" (line 20). In the foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition* Plath's daughter with Ted Hughes, Frieda, addresses and challenges the public, expressing how its treatment of her father and her mother's legacy has been experienced by her. It reads like an apologia for Ted Hughes' revisions to the previous editions of *Ariel* and a scathing accusation of the public:

"But the point of anguish at which my mother killed herself was taken over by strangers, possessed and reshaped by them. The collection of *Ariel* poems became symbolic to me of this possession of my mother and of the wider vilification of my father." (Hughes)

She claims an ownership over the memory and legacy of her mother, one which has been stolen from her and abused by the public. Another example of such disputes is the 2003 public argument between Frieda Hughes and the BBC regarding the production of the biographical drama film *Sylvia*. A spokesperson for the BBC was quoted in *The Guardian's* article on the subject, saying that they were "naturally concerned about the family's feelings," but that they also believed that they had "approached making the film in a responsible and unsensational way". This clashes with Hughes' description of events. She publicly accused the BBC of pestering her with numerous requests for collaboration despite her already having turned them down: "Why would I want to be involved in moments of my childhood which I never want to return to?" she asks, quoted by *The Guardian* (Wilson), and it presents one with the moral conundrum of how much one can expect the real human individuals, who are personally affected, to endure for the sake of satisfying public – or academic – curiosity. What motivates the circulation of articles with titles like "Tragic poet Sylvia Plath's son kills himself" (Wilkinson), if not some manner of voyeurism?

Frieda Hughes' apparent attitude to her mother's poetry and their place in public life is, however, problematic. Her claim that Plath's poems "speak for themselves" is questionable; without context and interpretation they are but ink printed on paper or pixels on a screen. While her right to privacy, of course, deserves to be respected, that does not extend to her having the last word on all reading practices applied to her mother's work. Frieda Hughes was not yet three years old when her mother died, and the validity of memory as a source of objective truth is dubious even in the best of cases. She, herself, describes how her perception of her mother was dependent on her father's keeping "alive the memory of the mother who had left" her. Notwithstanding the cogency, or lack thereof, of her discernment: if one believes that it is morally wrong to harm another person without cause, one also has to take her perspective into account.

The interpretations of Plath's writings vary greatly, and as do the moral implications of those interpretations. This is one of the ways in which one might experience the threshold aesthetic described by Haarder. Where is the border between fiction and reality in, for instance, "The Jailer" (226-227 *Collected Poems*)? One's answer to that question is likely to affect how one thinks about Ted Hughes and his right to make decisions about Plath's literary legacy. The problematic aspects of a man who Plath – at least at some point – intended to divorce having the power to edit and control her work *should* be questioned and debated. For instance, Ted Hughes' statement that Sylvia Plath's biographers fail "to realise that the most interesting and dramatic part of S.P.'s life is only ½ S.P. – the other ½ is *me*" (qtd in Malcolm 201) is at best problematically biased, and at worst an expression of self-aggrandizing misogyny. On the other hand, Frieda Hughes' story about the public outrage she faced regarding the placement of the English Heritage blue plaque in honour of Plath is certainly an argument in favour of disenfranchising the public in questions of Plath's legacy, when it does emotional and social harm.

The interests represented by the estate are *not* solely those of Plath, but of her survivors (specifically the Hughes'), which is not an inherently bad thing – the ones who are still alive are the ones who really need protection, after all – but nevertheless morally complex and warrant examination. Tracy Brain, in the article “Plath’s letters and journals” claims that Plath wanted to, and intended for, her journals and letters to be published and available to the public eye (143). However, Plath’s desires are not and cannot be the only element to consider. Consequences, emotional and reputational, to her family and friends are unavoidable moral concerns, even if they ought not be allowed total rule in the question – and could not, as the interests of this group are as numerous as its individuals.

Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Sylvia Plath* chronicles the 1989 public debate on around Ted Hughes’ role as executor and, according to some, *executioner*⁸, of Plath. Bronfen describes criticism based on the alleged censorship and omissions in the material available to scholars (21). She argues that critics ought to “relinquish searching for a key and instead leave the crypt locked” (30), and that finding a clear answer to so complicated an issue is impossible and that the obsessive search for it actually reduces the quality of the literary research in question. Her suggestion to leave behind discussions on the estate’s hypothetical censorship is sensible, in that whatever is being kept away is not a code to secret truths about Plath, but the ethical question of who owns the right to another person’s story still warrants discussion. Sarah Churchwell’s article “Ted Hughes and the Corpus of Sylvia Plath” discusses and questions who has the power and the right to interpret a person’s life and works. According to Churchwell, Hughes “writes about Plath as if his readings are definitionally textual rather than biographical and others’ readings are biographical rather than textual” (100). Being depicted in a way one does not identify with, and being unable to challenge the creator about

⁸ Perhaps most famously Robin Morgan’s poem “Arraignment”; see Badia’s *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* pp. 89-112

it is, understandably, difficult. However, the discomfort of the accused is not sufficient evidence that the accusation is untruthful. The act of perceiving and processing experience into text is to mediate something from the concrete, real world and place it in the realm of abstraction. It is an expression of a specific, subjective person's recollection. Fictionality might, in biographical performativity, be interpreted as an allegory for the medialisation that occurs in human social interactions (141), as our only means of connection to the concrete, real world is sifted through our own subjectivities. One's perception of a person or event is not the same as the objective truth – but it is nonetheless an integral part of it.

“Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar”

Heading this section is line 13 from Plath's “Widow” (164-165 *Collected Poems*), used here to allude to the idea of depression as a wearable expression of fashion. One of the many ways in which Sylvia Plath has made her mark on society and culture is that she is the namesake for a (supposed) psychiatric phenomenon, an ‘honour’ few (if any) other authors hold. The introduction of the term ‘the Sylvia Plath effect’ is attributed to James C. Kaufman's 2001 article, but the idea of a connection between creativity and madness dates as far back as Aristotle (Smith Bailey). Kaufman's article added to the older notion of the tortured artist, claiming that female poets are “significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than female fiction writers or male writers of any type” (37). In a 2017 article Kaufman reminisces about the legacy of the Sylvia Plath effect, and his regrets about it:

I saw a lot of misinterpretation; many assumed it simply meant that all female poets were mentally ill (regardless of level of eminence), or else that all poets, writers, or anyone creative were more likely to have mental illness. [...] As I matured and studied more aspects of creativity, I was less thrilled about the Sylvia Plath Effect legacy. For a while, I tried to tackle it head-on. I made several arguments against the importance of my own work. (173-174)

The repercussions of the original study are difficult to estimate, considering the long history of the tortured artist trope. While the study did not invent the romanticising of mental illness, nor was it the first to construct this identity of Plath, it certainly contributed to ingraining the previously established myth of her as a “girl who lived mostly and terribly on her nerves” and her writings as “the work of a poet possessed by a demon if not by herself” (Donoghue).

A contemporary example of the stereotypical ‘Sylvia Plath’ character may be found in *Dickinson*, a TV show about Emily Dickinson created by Alena Smith.⁹ In the seventh episode of the third season, Emily imagines or hallucinates that she and her sister travel in time and end up in 1955 where they meet Sylvia Plath.¹⁰ Before introducing herself, Plath tells them that she has “had several mental breakdowns and tried to kill [herself]” and that her “brain feels like a black hole out of which no beauty or truth could ever come”, attributing this to “the electroshocks they gave [her] in the psych ward” (00:11:42-00:13:34). As they enter the Dickinson home-turned-museum, Plath expounds on what she knows about Emily Dickinson, describing her as “an obscure, strange female poet who lived a sad, miserable life” (00:17:50-00:22:54). If the show’s depiction of Emily Dickinson as a lively, funny, and passionate person were not enough to let the viewer know that this characterisation is mistaken, Emily’s exasperated protestations ought to be. A primary *raison d’être* of *Dickinson* is to dispel popular myths around Emily Dickinson (Shea), here put forward by Plath who claims to feel a kinship with her due to them both being “morbidly depressed” (00:17:50-00:22:54). In order to counteract shallow and simplistic depictions of Emily Dickinson’s legacy, the show utilizes a shallow and simplistic depiction of Sylvia Plath to serve as her

⁹ When referencing the character in the show, I use the name “Emily” in concordance with the diegetic universe. When referencing the historical poet, however, I use “Dickinson”. As Plath’s name is only used once in the episode, in full, I refer both to the character and the real person as “Plath”.

¹⁰ Depicting Emily’s fantastically heightened, hallucinatory, and dream-like world view is one of the main conceits of the show, as is the use of intentional comedic anachronisms (such as a blatantly modern language, soundtrack, mannerisms, and cultural expressions), so the aforementioned plotline is not as out of place as it may seem.

foil. Plath's constant allusions to depression and suicide attempts are performed, by actress Chloe Fineman, with a sense that she is boasting about her mental anguish and self-harm. As her narrative role is to embody the various notions about Emily Dickinson that have flourished since her poetry became known to the world, Plath also expresses various sexist ideas:

I mean, her life was *so* awful. They say she had a love affair with a man, someone she was crazy about who didn't love her back [...] so, I can only assume she wanted to kill herself. Undoubtedly, she tried – just like me when I slashed my legs up and took my mother's sleeping pills. (00:20:15-00:20:39)

In this, the show departs from other popular interpretations of Plath as a feminist heroine, and instead uses her as a mouthpiece for the patriarchal assumption that a woman's life lacks worth without a male lover. She also represents a caricature of teen girls and young women who idolize Plath. Janet Badia's *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Woman Readers* analyses the pervasive idea of Plath readers, in popular and academic imagination, who "have allowed their reading practices to be governed by their preoccupations with Plath's life and death—in other words, they have insistently read Plath's poetry as autobiography—and in doing so, they have failed as readers" (12). These readers have an obsessive, pathologically fanatical nature, and *Dickinson's* version of Plath depicts her as just such a reader of Emily Dickinson. Such readers are seen not just as incompetent, but also as a danger to the legacy of their idol. However, these supposedly incompetent female readers are not to blame for the derogatory characterisation of Sylvia Plath in *Dickinson*. If that were the case, she would have been depicted as a mythical proto-feminist heroine, or the victim of patriarchal abuse, suffering in an aesthetically pleasing way. Rather, the archetype that Plath (the character) embodies was invented by those who wished to protect Plath (the historical poet) from what they perceived as an 'obsessive' and 'incompetent' fanbase. Thus, in their attempts to protect Plath, they

have inadvertently contributed to a derogatory and inaccurate depiction of her, themselves becoming that which they feared and criticised.

One might also note the fact that this depiction of Plath occurs in a context in which Swift is part of the pop cultural landscape. The visual representation of Plath is clearly inspired by mid-century aesthetics and rockabilly fashion, as the narrative takes place in the 1950's. However, there is an argument to be made that the intended viewer of *Dickinson* might connect 1950's fashion to Taylor Swift's mid 2010's style. According to Hans Robert Jauss, a text is "considered in contrast to the background of the works which the author could expect his [sic] contemporary public to know either explicitly or implicitly" (19) and the main demographic of *Dickinson* seems to have been young, female, and interested in feminism and North American pop culture. Additionally, Hailee Steinfeld – the executive producer of the show and the actress playing Emily Dickinson – is herself a pop singer and a part of Swift's squad in the "Bad Blood" music video (00:01:12-00:01:22). It is reasonable to expect that the audience would be familiar with Taylor Swift and her aesthetics. While her persona might not carry the same strong connotation to the 1950's at the time of writing, it did do so in the mid 2010's. To quote the 2014 SNL sketch "Swiftamine": "Oof. Taylor Swift. She's always wearing, like, a 1950's bathing suit" (00:01:37-00:01:44). The appearance of Plath in *Dickinson* is not, to my knowledge, based on any particular photograph of Plath, but one aspect that stands out is her make-up. Not the red lipstick, which appears in a number of the pictures of Plath circulating online, but the eye make-up. None, to my knowledge, show her wearing any eye make up at all, but the Plath in *Dickinson* is wearing false eyelashes, eyeshadow, and winged eyeliner. While this could have any number of reasons – an attempt to identify the 1950's context as much as possible, or that they simply thought it looked better – it may also be worth pointing out the fact that red lipstick and winged eyeliner is Taylor Swift's signature look. This is not to say that the costume designer intended for Sylvia Plath

to resemble Taylor Swift, or that there is an exact likeness. Rather, that the contemporary perception of what young women looked like in the 1950's has been sifted through images by Taylor Swift, among others.

As demonstrated by the example of *Dickinson* discussed above, and according to Aime Ferrier in *Far Out Magazine*, Plath is “the poster child for depressive, angsty women” in public consciousness. In that capacity she has also become a convenient shorthand to characterise young female characters as such, too. She mentions the TV show *Gilmore Girls* and the ‘90s romantic comedy film *10 Things I Hate About You* as examples of media utilizing this trope, and Naomi Elias’ article analysing the phenomenon adds *Heathers*, *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Pretty Little Liars* to the list. Here, the mere mention of *The Bell Jar* is enough to indicate a specific type of female sadness, particularly that of an adolescent female misanthrope. This phenomenon has also been noted by Badia, who claims that Plath scholars have ignored these mentions of Plath as they “might suggest that Plath, as a writer, need not be taken seriously” (125). Badia, however, believes they “provide a helpful starting point” to understanding both the reception history of Plath’s novel and its association to “young adult female angst” (126).

This archetype also exists as a more culturally specific iteration, the ‘Sad Girl’. Artist Audrey Wollen popularized the term ‘Sad Girl Theory’ in 2015, describing it as “the proposal that the sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest” in an interview with Ava Tunnicliffe, and cites Sylvia Plath as one of her “favourite sad girls”. Tellingly, the Plath character in the aforementioned *Dickinson* episode describes Emily Dickinson as “the original sad girl” (00:17:50-00:22:54). Fredrika Thelandersson’s book *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health* traces the history of female affective emotional states and analyses the Sad Girl subculture. In the online Sad Girl communities she describes, sadness is glorified and romanticized. Melancholia, she writes,

“might be said to glorify feeling bad because of its promise to produce great art; it is the driving force of the archetypical tortured genius”. This is expressed as the reverence shown to idealised female “trainwreck celebrities”, who are made into figureheads for a sadness that is “romantic, mystical and inspirational” (169). Note that Lana del Rey, a Sad Girl fan favourite, sings that she has “been tearing around in my fucking nightgown / 24/7 Sylvia Plath” in her song “hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it”. The song situates both Lana del Rey and Sylvia Plath in a modern narrative of women making art about psychic pain. Like many labels for niche cultural identities in contemporary culture, the Sad Girl aesthetic has been commodified. One particularly pertinent example of this is Swift’s release of the track “All Too Well (Sad Girl Autumn Version) – Recorded at Long Pond Studios”, explicitly using the term “Sad Girl” in its title. Indeed, in different ways, both Plath and Swift are connected to Sad Girl culture.

Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift is more than your average globally famous pop star. According to Mary Fogarty and Gina Arnold’s introductory article to *Contemporary Music Review*’s “Taking Taylor Seriously” issue, she is a “monument to an old, white America”, an “avatar of a future that is female”, as well as “the girl-next-door/millionaire, the hopeless romantic/savvy businesswoman, and a silly teenager/serious adult singer-songwriter”. At the time of writing, Swift has been part of public discourse for almost 20 years, and soon her time in the spotlight will surpass her years outside it.

“Just a Girl / Trying to Find a Place in this World”

Scott Borchetta, who first signed Swift, has said that people laughed at him for signing a fifteen-year-old girl making country music to his newly started label. In the early 2000’s, the country music industry did not consider young women or girls a desirable, or even existent, demographic (Willman). The heading of this section is taken from the lyrics to Swift’s self-

titled debut album song “A Place in this World”, used here to illustrate the tensions between the individual subject as a (young) person and the role of a corporate persona in the public sphere. In the wake of the Dixie Chicks’ (now The Chicks) fall from grace due to comments made against George W. Bush and the Iraq war in 2003, the atmosphere in country music was one of forced apoliticism or patriotic conservatism (Tyranigel). Looking back on her earlier career in the documentary *Miss Americana*, Swift said “throughout my whole career, label executives and publishers would just say ‘don’t be like the Dixie Chicks’” (50:29-50:40), implying that any political comments would alienate her fanbase and end her career. Appeasing conservative demographics was considered vital in country music, so for a long time Swift was primarily marketed as the stereotypical ‘good girl’.

Appealing to a demographic of young women and girls, while also breaking into the country industry, sometimes meant adhering to contradictory demands. Swift’s aesthetics had to be engineered to appeal not only to her core demographic of young teenage girls, but also their conservative parents. Other young female (pop) stars in the early 2000’s, like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, had a highly sexualised image which conservative parents, who wanted their children to have good role models (meaning virtuous virgins), disliked. While appealing to the parents with her all-American-good-girl-next-door-debutante-from-the-good-old-days image, she was still trendy and “relatable” enough to present an aspirational fantasy and remain in tune with trends. In her public appearances, Swift wore (presumably carefully curated) ordinary clothes that an average middle-class girl might wear to school, with incorporated elements of Western wear as well as fairy tale ball gowns that made her seem more like a princess than a pop star (note the unspoken ‘sexually active/promiscuous’ modifier before ‘pop star’). Adriane Brown claims that “Swift’s popularity is premised upon fans’ simultaneous construction of Swift as an ordinary girl and

an irreproachable role model” (176), and that the idealized image Swift represents is closely tied to notions of white, chaste femininity.

Swift’s song “Fifteen” from her second studio album *Fearless* has, by some, been criticized for unfeminist, sex negative¹¹ views. The song, according to Swift, is written “around the story line of [her] best friend from high school, Abigail” (“Cut by Cut”), who plays herself in the music video (“Taylor Swift - behind the Scenes of Fifteen Part 1.” 00:04:49-00:05:10). While fans of Swift might be well-informed enough to know that the song drew inspiration from real-life experiences, the average listener is not likely to know this. This, in addition to the tendency to view popular culture – especially the kind marketed toward young people – through a didactic lens, has led to some assuming that the song’s narrative is intended to reflect a morality that the creator wants its audience to emulate. Brown’s article, and Swift’s commercial popularity, shows that her fans generally perceive her lyrics as personally relatable, but there are examples of the contrary, as well. One seventeen-year-old contributor to the Women’s Media Center platform for “intersectional teen feminists”, bases her critique of the song “Fifteen” on the fact that she does not relate to the experiences described in the song, and that the girls described are “ditzy”. The line drawing the most criticism from her, and others, is “Abigail gave everything she had to a boy who changed his mind / We both cried”. According to the young critic, “if one of my friends got laid [...] I would be proud. We would not cry about it. If they were upset and cried, I would tell them sex may be a big deal in our culture but in truth it really is not” (DrewsieDrewsie). For online publication *Jezebel*, Dodai Stewart writes “For Taylor, fifteen means falling for a boy and dreaming of marrying him. My fifteen was more like: Flirt with

¹¹ The opposite of sex positivity, which is a feminist framework focused on sexual liberation. In the eyes of the critics, “sex negativity” is likely used as a synonym to “puritan” or “prudish”, not in the meaning of the sex negative movement informed by radical feminist theory, like the writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon.

this one, make out with that one, try a cigarette, get drunk, lie to your parents, [...]”. An article from *Bitch Media*, a no longer operating publication self-described as a “feminist response to pop culture”, criticised the song and video thusly:

I mean, I have no doubt that young women are often pressured to go further, sexually, than they are comfortable with. I get that, and it is sad, and it is scary! But I also have no doubt that some girls have sex because they want to. And that’s not a narrative that gets told here. The narrative here goes as follows: there’s a girl who gets semi-sexual and regrets it (because BOYS want SEX, and GIRLS DON’T) and a girl who doesn’t get up to much of anything sexual and ends up wise and happy. (Doyle)

All three of the aforementioned writers assume that the song is supposed to model an ideal for teen girls, and interpret the narrative as Swift exerting authorial karmic punishment unto the Abigail, the character, for her sexual missteps. The intention here is not to criticize the then-teen critic for not having adequately nuanced media literacy, or the other two for their sardonic editorial voices. Rather, the intent is to provide context for how Swift and her songs were received by (feminist) casual audiences. As these examples show, while many viewed her good-girl image as something positive, others saw it in a negative light, leading them to characterise her as a judgmental, antifeminist prude.

Beside the good-girl image, the fans interviewed for Brown’s article also emphasise Swift’s perceived authenticity as the main reasons why they identify with her. Brown also identifies the fact that Swift’s lyrics and image treat the feelings and experiences emblematic of teenage girlhood seriously, rejecting the tendency to trivialize and mock anything associated with teen girls (170). While Brown’s assertion that Swift and her fans at this time (the article was published in 2012) were engaging with purity culture is correct, I would also add that Swift provided a counter-image to the status quo of extreme sexualisation of women

and girls. There is much to be said about the ordeals of going from girlhood to womanhood, especially as it is inherently tied to becoming a sexualized object. Swift's non-sexual image may have represented an escape from the terror of growing up only to lose one's humanity to a sexually exploitative patriarchy, instead showing a romanticized version of girl/womanhood where one's humanity is retained even in romantic relationships.

When Swift moved from the world of country music to pop, the irreproachable goody-two-shoes character began to be perceived as fake and calculated. Consequently, jokes about Swift feigning surprise when winning awards became immensely popular (Schutte), and the chaste, innocent girl became a woman whose ex-boyfriends were "like victory heads, who may as well be stuffed and mounted on the walls of her recording studio" (Kamer and Baker). While her dating life became extremely publicized, she was not primarily perceived through the lens of promiscuity – although that, too, played a part – but rather as a petty girl who enacts revenge through the medium of song lyrics. She played along with this persona, for instance when she hosted SNL, and for her introductory monologue sang: "I like writing songs / about douchebags who cheat on me / but I'm not gonna say that / in my monologue / I like writing their names into songs / so they're ashamed to go in public / but I'm not gonna say that / in my monologue" (Taylor Swift Monologue Song – SNL).

According to Jon Helt Haarder, writing about real experiences and real people, and letting them know that you are doing it, is "an exercise of power, a weapon, a form of social capital – that will, later, also function as aesthetic capital" (137). To explicitly perceive, write, and judge is a way to make people uncomfortably aware of themselves and how others perceive them. The social avatar of the writer takes on a new characteristic, because it is now associated with the weaponized act of writing. The consequences of this can become new fodder for future works. "Reduce, reuse, recycle" is an apt slogan for the never-ending cycles

of text and life, described by Haarder as a feedback loop, where recorded social interactions (meaning, the text) become social performances on new level (138).

Contending this view, Swift has said that she “never thought about songwriting as a weapon [...] I’ve only thought about it as a way to help me get through love and loss and sadness and loneliness and growing up” (Sales). This goes against the aforementioned SNL monologue song, wherein she jokingly expresses enjoyment in publicly shaming those who mistreat her. There is no inherent opposition between writing lyrics with a combative intent and therapeutic writing, but there is an opposition between the *optics* of the variants. While a real human may encompass both a petty, contentious side and an emotive, sensitive side, there is no room for both in a public persona – at least not one that is young and female. To quote Swift herself, the media does indeed turn her “into a fictional character” (Sales) – but one must not forget that Taylor Swift *is* the media, too.

“The Old Taylor Can’t Come to the Phone Right Now / Why? Oh! / ‘Cause She’s Dead!”

The sweet and chaste persona described above was killed and buried with the commencement of the *reputation* era in 2017. The music video to “Look What You Made Me Do” (henceforth referred to as “LWYMMMD”), the album’s lead single, begins in a graveyard where a zombie Swift rises from her grave, which brandishes a tombstone with the text “Here Lies TAYLOR SWIFT’S REPUTATION”. Zombie Swift – wearing the same dress she wore in “Out of the Woods”, the last music video released for her previous album *1989* – proceeds to bury another Swift (the second of many in the video) who is wearing the same dress she wore to the 2014 Met Gala (Acuna, Kirsten) which fans perceive as the start of the *1989* era. Swift’s voice and persona is sinister, vindictive, and decidedly more sexual(ly aggressive) than ever before. To further punctuate that the innocent Good Girl is gone, the song’s bridge includes the spoken line “I’m sorry, the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why?”

Oh! ‘Cause she’s dead!” which was used for this section’s heading. The line quickly became a meme, and despite many using it to mock Swift’s edgier rebranding, it also served to cement the song and music video in pop cultural memory (Louise-Smith).

What caused such a dramatic change? The narrative begins in 2009, with the now infamous VMA incident. Swift had just become the first country artist to win an MTV Music Video Award – Best Female Video for “You Belong with Me” – when her acceptance speech was interrupted by Kanye West saying that Beyoncé had “one of the best videos of all time” (“HD Kanye West interrupts Taylor Swift VMA 2009”).¹² The event became widely publicized, with such people as Jimmy Carter (“Carter Again Cites Racism as Factor in Obama's Treatment.”) and Barack Obama (MacAskill) commenting on it, and it also became a popular meme (Kanye interrupts / Imma let you finish). At this point, public opinion was on Swift’s side.

Media reception of the lead single of West’s 2016 album *Life of Pablo*, “Famous”, initially seemed to repeat the story of 2009, with West as the aggressor and Swift as the victim. The lyrics “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? / I made that bitch famous” and the music video wherein wax dolls of Swift and others appear naked in bed with West, seem to be a clear-cut example of misogyny and scandal mongering, despite West’s insistence on the artistic merits. In the words of Jon Helt Haarder, the song and video were “something in between aesthetic phenomenon and a social event”, and the debate surrounding them were “an autopoetic feedback loop” (112). Swift’s team stated that she had warned West against releasing the song (Brandle), but this narrative was upended when Kim Kardashian (then Kim Kardashian West) posted secretly recorded video snippets of a phone call between West and Swift, wherein it appeared that Swift gave her consent to the lyrics (Cox, Davis). The same

¹² Beyoncé’s video for “Single Ladies” would, in fact, win Video of the Year later that night, when she invited Swift to resume her previously interrupted speech onstage.

day Kardashian tweeted “Wait it's legit National Snake Day?!?!?They [sic] have holidays for everybody, I mean everything these days!” followed by 37 snake emojis, in a not-so-vague aspersion cast against Swift. Not only did this result in the trending hashtags #kimexposedtaylorparty and #taylorswiftisoverparty – the latter becoming a meme template for expressing glee that someone is being ‘cancelled’¹³ (Gelman) – but it also became the first case for a new social media content filter when Swift’s social media comment sections “began to look like the Reptile Discovery Center at the National Zoo” due to the quantity of snake emojis (Thompson). Haarder writes, “biographical performativity causes reactions that, in their turn, lead to other reactions” (105), and as Swift’s response that she “would very much like to be excluded from this narrative, one that [she had] never asked to be a part of, since 2009” *also* became a meme, it certainly seems like that was the case here. The events were a testament to the seemingly never-ending source of entertainment fodder that is the Swift-West feud, as detailed by Daisy Pignetti’s article “Petty things and nemeses” in the *Celebrity Studies* journal.

Following these events, Swift seemingly disappeared for a year. While, of course, she was still talked about, she herself made no public appearances for events, interviews or paparazzi. In 2017 all her previous social media posts were deleted, and short cryptic videos of a snake were posted in their stead (Holterman), commencing what is now known as her *reputation* era. Snakes are central to the imagery of *reputation* and appear throughout the “LWYMMD” video as a clear allusion to the feud with West and Kardashian. Here, the snake is reclaimed as a symbol of power, as she sits atop a golden throne surrounded by snakes serving her tea¹⁴, wearing snake jewellery, and enacts a hissing snake-persona. The snake represents both (the image of) Swift, the *reputation* album, and Swift’s emotional reactions to the media

¹³ Slang, synonym to ‘ostracized’.

¹⁴ Serving/spilling tea is slang for providing especially interesting gossip.

debacle(s) of 2016. It essentially functions as a shorthand to reference the entirety of Swift's public identity at the time, so when the music video for the lead single "ME!" of the following album, *Lover*, is introduced by a snake erupting into butterflies, it signals not just a new album, but a new persona and artistic identity.

In the end of the LWYMMD video (from 00:03:36 and on), several of the Swift clones that appear throughout the video are standing in a line in front of an airplane, which another Swift has de-winged using a power saw and graffitied "Reputation" onto. Excepting the Swift in the back, by the airplane, there are fourteen Swift clones; eight of which are introduced for the first time in this video, the remaining five being references from previous music videos or award shows. The Swift clone from her character in the "You Belong With Me" video looks delighted, mouth agape and hands on her cheeks exclaiming "You guys!", and is immediately shut down by Zombie Swift, saying "Stop making that surprised face, it's *so* annoying" followed by ballerina Swift from the "Shake it Off" music video snidely agreeing, saying "Yeah, you can't *possibly* be *that* surprised *all* the time," referencing the aforementioned jokes about Swift faking her surprised facial expressions when winning awards. Another Swift points to Zombie Swift and asks "What's with that bitch?", to which the zombie threateningly replies, "Don't call me that!", clearly referencing her own reaction to West's *Famous*. Then, the Swift wielding a bedazzled guitar, curly hair and cowboy boots attempts to deescalate, crying out "Y'all!", only to receive the response "Oh, stop trying to act like you're all nice, you are *so fake!*" and a mocking imitation of her tears. Motorcyclist Swift sighs, saying "There she goes, playing the victim – *again...*", while the snake clone hisses aggressively. Swift's 2014 Met Gala clone clutches her metaphorical pearls, asking "What are you doing?" in a scandalized voice to the leopard fur wearing Swift doing something on

her phone, who replies “Getting receipts!¹⁵ Gonna edit this later” in a tone of gleeful schadenfreude. Concluding the video, the 2009 VMA clone hesitatingly speaks into her microphone, stating “I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative”, to which the other clones shout “Shut up!” before the screen goes black. Swift has split her various public personas into separate corporal entities, hyperbolic aggrandizements apart from and outside of herself. “Nevertheless,” as Plath wrote in “Lady Lazarus”, she is “the same, identical woman” (line 34, *Collected Poems* 244-247).

At the time of writing, the latest major update in the drama between Swift, West and Kardashian occurred in 2020, when the full twenty-five-minute phone call between Swift and West leaked without any edits made to it. After four years, there was proof that West never actually said that he would use the word “bitch” in reference to her (Willman). Kardashian took to Twitter, arguing that “The lie was never about the word bitch, It [sic] was always whether there was a call or not and the tone of the conversation” (“declined and cautioned [...]”). Both sides maintained their own version of events, simultaneously indicating that the issue was unimportant and beneath them (Pignetti). The war between Swift and Kardashian/West is one in which image, perception, and narrative are utilized as weaponry. One might say the same thing about the conflict participated in by the Plath estate, Plath scholars and the public. Different interpretations and perceptions of people, events, and artistic output result in continual struggles to be in control of the grand narrative. In the case of Plath, the issue has spanned decades and generations. While contemporary pop culture is generally characterised by a transient, short-lived nature, the story about the Swift-West conflict has now been part of the cultural landscape for well over a decade. Only time can tell where it will end.

¹⁵ Slang for acquiring evidence, especially in order to ‘cancel’ someone.

“Fuckin’ Politics and Gender Roles” (Taylor’s Version)

Swift’s public persona was, for a long time, strictly apolitical. The heading to this section is a lyric from Swift’s song “Question...?” from *Midnights*, currently her newest album. While, admittedly, this is not the most hard-hitting political commentary, it is still a long way away from Swift’s previous approach to politics. As mentioned in the section *“Just a Girl / Trying to Find a Place in this World”*, this was in large part a consequence of the boycott the Dixie Chicks faced after making public political comments. If asked explicitly about politics, Swift parried with self-deprecating jokes: “I’m a twenty-two-year-old singer, I don’t really know if people wanna hear my political views, I think they just kind of want to hear me sing songs about breakups and feelings” (“Taylor Swift - Interview on Skavlan”). It was in conjunction with the promotion for and release of the 2019 album *Lover*, in the words of Eric Smialek in the article “Who Needs to Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism”, that Swift “asserted her political advocacy to a public extent she had not previously done”. However, this paints a simplistic image. Earlier steps toward political commentary can be traced back to 2013, in response to media depictions of her dating life and characterising her as “boy-crazy”. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, she described these depictions as “taking something that potentially should be celebrated—a woman writing about her feelings in a confessional way—that’s taking it and turning it and twisting it into something that is frankly a little sexist” (Sales). Some saw this as Swift taking advantage of feminism recently having become more mainstream, using it as a shield to cast herself as the victim and “absolve herself of any blame for the way her relationships had been reported and perceived” (Woodward). While some appreciated Swift’s efforts, significant parts of popular feminist opinion leaders identified her as a representative of white feminism (Florio; Prins).

One of Swift’s most significant public political acts to date occurred during a court case in 2017. The story behind it goes back to a 2013 meet-and-greet, after which Swift accused

radio host David Mueller of groping her during the photo session. This led to an internal investigation culminating in Mueller's bosses firing him (Gonzalez, McLean). As a response, Mueller sued Swift, along with her mother Andrea Swift and Swift's radio promotions director Frank Bell. Swift countersued for \$1 in damages (Yahr) and ended up winning the case, her testimony receiving widespread medial attention:

When asked why the pictures taken during the assault didn't show the front of her skirt wrinkled as evidence of any wrongdoing, she said simply, "Because my ass is located at the back of my body." When asked if she felt guilty about Mueller losing his job, she said, "I'm not going to let you or your client make me feel in any way that this is my fault. Here we are years later, and I'm being blamed for the unfortunate events of his life that are the product of his decisions—not mine." (Dockterman)

The trial and the reporting surrounding it occurred at the same time that the #MeToo movement first began amassing traction, with the result that Swift's case was received in conjunction with and as a part of the larger movement, despite the fact that the case began years earlier. Crimes like sexual harassment and assault are, sadly, commonplace, meaning that the timing of this is probably not as remarkable as it may seem at first, but it is nonetheless significant to the reception of Swift in this context.

Annelot Prins's article "On Good Girls and Woke¹⁶ White Women: *Miss Americana* and the Performance of Popular White Womanhood" analyses Swift's shift in public persona toward a more explicitly political identity. She argues that the good girl/bad girl dichotomy of female sexuality has been replaced by an evaluation based on "controlled and regulated

¹⁶ Slang for socially progressive. Originally, being "woke" meant a Black person becoming aware of how racist social structures inhibit them, but the word has since been used more generally. See Ishena Robinson's "How Woke Went from 'Black' to 'Bad.'"

presentations of their individual political consciousness”. She places Swift in a historical tradition of white womanhood and the performance of it, beginning with Victorian sensibilities of white womanhood as non-sexual beings guided by emotional empathy, developing into the current neoliberal emphasis on authentic individuality and agency. In Prins’s narrative, both the nineteenth-century white women and the contemporary white women are acting as “the civilisers of society” who “fulfil foundational ideological labour in the social sphere”. This function also positions them as neoliberal heroines, whose “rhetorics that invoke individualist empowerment, resilience, and success” are highly valued. Indeed, Swift’s public political (and personal) identity is intimately tied to its position as commodity in the capitalist marketplace. There is no more obvious iteration of this obfuscation of personhood/artistry and merchandise/assets than in Swift’s public struggle to own her musical works.

In 2018, when Swift’s new contract with Republic Records and Universal Music Group was announced as her previous contract with Big Machine ended (Swift, “My New Home [musical note emoji].”), she was – in the words of Paul Théberge’s article “Love and Business: Taylor Swift as Celebrity, Businesswoman, and Advocate” – able to use her “leverage as a major celebrity and top-selling artist to ensure that the company would make distributions ‘non-recuperable’, thus allowing younger and less successful artists to retain their portion of the payout”. The following year, Swift commented on the news that Scott Borchetta, who first signed her in 2005, had sold her master recordings up until that point to Scooter Braun. In the post, she writes that she had attempted to purchase the rights to her master recordings, but was offered unfavourable conditions. She accuses Braun of “incessant, manipulative bullying” and says of Borchetta that “‘loyalty’ is clearly just a contractual concept” to him, since he sold her music to someone like Braun (Swift, “For years I asked, pleaded for a chance to own my work [...]”). Théberge writes that:

it is worth noting how Swift, rather than simply resolving the conflict through legal negotiations behind closed doors, or publicising her discontent in a more limited way via the trade press, chose to enlist her fans, en masse, transforming a dispute over a relatively obscure case of rights management into an issue of artistic integrity, ownership, gender, and morality. In so doing, Swift signaled that she knows her celebrity, and in particular, the attendant devotion of her fans, is a form of ‘power’.

The consequences of this were not limited to Swift’s fans targeting Braun and Borchetta on social media, but also led to American presidential candidates criticizing private equity firms.¹⁷ One of the most interesting aspects of this is, however, also the most difficult to analyse. Swift’s decision to re-record and re-release her back catalogue as a means to acquire ownership of her masters in such a publicized, politicized and economically and culturally successful way is unprecedented. As this process is, at the time of writing, still ongoing, it is impossible to say anything about it with finality. Théberge’s analysis of the economic consequences may be summarised thusly: Swift’s move paradoxically manages to both *affirm* the value of her musical catalogue, *and* devalue it at the same time. While the re-recorded albums heretofore have been commercial successes, they have also devalued the original masters (which was, in part, the point). No matter the outcome, this conflict will function as an illustration of contemporary structures of culture and power. Referring to how the Carlyle Group, which helped finance the original deal between Braun and Big Machine LLC, also own a manufacturer of combat aircraft parts utilized by Saudi Arabia, a tweet quoted in a New York Times article on the topic humorously illustrates fan responses to the conflict:

¹⁷ Swift’s impact in politics can also be seen in the 2023 senate hearing on Ticketmaster following the fiasco over the tickets to Swift’s *Eras* Tour and the concern over Ticketmaster’s high monopoly status. Several politicians quoted Swift lyrics during the hearing, amassing widespread publicity as a result.

“When you think about it, you either support Taylor Swift or the war in Yemen” (Kelly et al.). Albeit a joke, it concisely illustrates the nature of Swift’s and Braun/Borchetta’s war as one of personal and political principles, and the narratives thereof.

4. Textual analysis

There is a tension created by the two currents that flow in opposite trajectories in the works of both Plath and Swift. The first current is that of lived reality and material history. This includes everything from historical events to personal experiences, anything one might trace back to tangible events or real people belong here. The second current is filled instead with fantasy and madness, the emotional and subjective interpretations of the topics in the first current. Therein lies the twist; what might first seem like a dichotomy of opposites is in fact codependent and intermixed. To extend the metaphor, the currents collide to become a maelstrom, functionally indistinguishable. In the maelstrom, the dichotomy ceases to be. In the following subsections I show the currents described above in the works of Plath and Swift. The headings follow the same order as above: the first is mainly concerned with the ways in which their texts reference and interact with reality and truth; the second is mainly concerned with elements of fantasy and unreality; the third brings the two together in a chaotic union that destabilizes the notions of both.

“So Casually Cruel in the Name of Being Honest”

Jon Helt Haarder has described writing about others and letting them know that you are doing it as a kind of weapon (137). This view has been shared by many when interpreting the works of both Plath and Swift, hence the quote used in the heading from this section. While the “cruelty” in the original context of Swift’s “All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor’s Version) (From the Vault)” (henceforth referred to as “ATW”), is referring to the addressee calling up the speaker “just to break [her] like a promise”, applying the same words to confessional writing does not require a big mental leap.

Plath's and Hughes' relationship was, in one way or another, undergoing change when Plath died. As such it became consigned to remain forever in that ambiguous, liminal stage wherein Hughes was both Plath's closest relation and her worst adversary. Being at odds with someone who used to be an intimate relation is portrayed in Swift's song "my tears ricochet" in such a way that it almost seems like a deliberate depiction of Plath's and Hughes' relationship. Swift has written that the song is about an "embittered tormentor showing up at the funeral of his fallen object of obsession" (Swift "In Isolation My Imagination Has Run Wild [...]"). As the title implies, the emotional war going on between speaker and addressee is one of mutually assured destruction – any and all attacks against the other will ricochet. Swift has stated that the song is "in some ways imaginary, in some ways not, and in some ways both" and that it was emotionally inspired by the "messy, upsetting" end of a "15-year relationship" – implying her business relationship with Scott Borchetta, who sold her masters to Scooter Braun (Suskind). This makes the connection to Plath's situation especially pertinent – both are female artists whose oeuvres have ended up controlled by men with whom they have a relationship that is at best ambiguous, and at worst downright antagonistic.

Swift's speaker does not reveal the circumstances around their death, leaving it ambiguous. "I didn't have it in myself to go with grace" suggests that the speaker made an active choice to 'leave', but that it was a last resort. The addressee regrets the speaker's death, and blames them for it ("Cursing my name, wishing I stayed"), but the lyrics also claim that the addressee "had to kill" the speaker. Both speaker and addressee are "tossing out blame, drunk on this pain", hurt by what they have done to the other and what the other has done to them, and both blame the other for the speaker's death. Sylvia Plath's death was, famously, self-inflicted, but people have nevertheless blamed Hughes for various reasons. "Identifying the author and/or characters in a text as empirical individuals," Haarder writes, "complicates the notion that literature is only concerned with ubiquitous subjects," because it

forces the audience to consider the real-world moral implications and thereby creates a threshold aesthetic (114-5). Certainly, Plath's works have made audiences feel obligated to take a moral stand, some blaming Ted Hughes for her suicide. Perhaps it is in the nature of suicide that questions of guilt become so contentious. In *The Bell Jar*, when Esther expresses feelings of guilt after Joan's suicide, Doctor Nolan responds that "Of course you didn't do it! [...] Nobody did it! *She* did it!" (229), and while this is, for the bereaved, an important truth about suicide, David Webb's work in the field of suicidology also shows that there are institutions, individual representatives of those institutions, and ideological discourses that *are* to blame for the toll of suicide. Additionally, the primary approach he suggests to reduce the toll of suicide (besides the cessation of current harmful practices) is to facilitate "mentally healthy communities" that support psychosocial wellbeing through open and non-judgemental dialogue (92). In effect, by directing the focus away from the biological individual to the social collective, the whole community becomes responsible for the whole community – one for all, all for one. Perhaps that is the only possible answer to the question of guilt, as well; that we must all bear the burden together.

A major argument used in favour of Plath's estate is that it is protecting the privacy and reputations of Plath's surviving friends and family. Similar concerns raised during the trial surrounding the 1979 film adaptation of *The Bell Jar*. Dr. Jane V. Anderson sued the film, claiming that she was the basis for the character Joan Gilling in both novel and film, and that the film defamed her by portraying her as "having homosexual inclinations; as having made a suicide attempt; as encouraging another person to commit suicide, and as a person who committed suicide by hanging" (Blau). The case illustrates the ontologically paradoxical nature of defamation and libel in the context of art; the text is accused both for depicting reality too closely, *and* for deviating from it. Evidently, Anderson had not committed suicide, and she herself worked hard to establish the fictionality of Joan Gilling's "homosexual

inclinations” with the words: “I am not now a homosexual and I have never been a homosexual” (qtd. in Rose 109). The case was settled out-of-court, so no legal precedent was established, but it remains an illustrative example of how complex the distinctions between truth, fiction and reality are, especially legal contexts.

The very same thing might also, perhaps unfortunately, be said about the tabloid/gossip industry. Swift does not have any diagnoses of mental illness known to the public¹⁸, but that is ultimately irrelevant. Whatever the real circumstances, she has been *characterised* as crazy. As an example, in an article about Swift’s dating life and purported tendency to write songs about ex boyfriends, the tabloid magazine *New York Post* interviewed a sex therapist (without any affiliations to Swift), who stated that “if she’s doing this for publicity, that’s someone with anti-social traits, sociopathic traits” (Tucker). Professional misconduct aside, the narrative pushed here and elsewhere is that Swift’s artistic references to reality are a symptom of malevolence and/or insanity. This is but one example, and one year after this particular article was published, the musical parody of these characterisations, “Blank Space”, came out. Swift describes how she treated the “Taylor Swift” of tabloids as a fictional character (00:01:53-00:02:36), stating that “half the people got the joke, half the people think that I really owned the fact that I’m a psychopath” (00:03:13-00:03:19).

Swift’s “Blank Space” manages to be both autobiographical and fictional at the same time. Even though the speaker of “Blank Space” is not to be identified with the empirical Swift, the inspiration behind the character originates from her interpretation of how the media has interpreted her. Haarder emphasises the dynamic aspect of biographical performativity, stating that a text is never quite finished, even after it has been publicized. This is especially true, he writes, for works that amass substantial social feedback loops (115) – which the

¹⁸ She hints at having struggled with an eating disorder in the documentary *Miss Americana* (00:29:15-00:32:14), but that is not what the ones depicting her as “crazy” here mean.

works of both Plath and Swift surely have. I would argue that Swift's "Blank Space" – as well as her other songs in the same satirical vein, such as "Don't Blame Me" and "I Did Something Bad" – is the aesthetic response to the ways in which Swift's social avatar has been altered by others in the public arena. No one maintains complete control over their social avatar or identity; it is not as simple as "choosing" who or what one wishes to be (134). Forming the identity of an individual, a persona, or a work of art, is a fundamentally social process, and as the example of "Blank Space" shows, the "self" of "auto" in "autobiography" is complex and multifaceted.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is another example of the complexities of identity and autobiography in art. Parallels between Plath and Esther are plentiful, as are the differences, and the scholarly assessments on where, how, and if, to draw the line between Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood differ greatly. For instance, Sherwin argues against autobiographical interpretations while also operating on the assumption that Esther *is* Plath. When Esther attempts to write a novel about herself, "only in disguise" (116), but writer's block keeps her from writing more than a few sentences, Esther blames her lack of experience: "How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die?" (117).

Sherwin concurs:

Plath seems to be suggesting that autobiographically-based writing is problematic in that it restricts the writer to telling the truth about her circumscribed life. But the literary conceit of presenting the novel as Esther's autobiographical account of her breakdown [...] suggests that madness has functioned as a solution to the lack of experience her life has offered [...] her breakdown and madness have supplied what a conventionally lived life could not: material worth writing about. To this extent, too, madness is presented as

a strategic method of counteracting the restrictions inhibiting women's lives.

(139)

This interpretation not only mistakes Esther's thoughts and opinions for Plath's, but it also makes the mistake of attributing more legitimacy to them than they deserve. The reader has already followed Esther for more than 100 pages, so her life lacking "material worth writing about" until that point seems contradictory. It is evident from the start of the novel that Esther is mentally unwell, so the claim that autobiographical writing is to blame is shaky at best. Finally, a "conventionally lived life" is just as full of (or lacking) "material worth writing about" as any other, and suicidal depression is, as the novel shows, hardly a source of inspiration or creativity.

The parallels between the cultural idea of Plath and the Swift-character constructed in "Blank Space" are numerous. In her foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Frieda Hughes, after detailing how her father has been unfairly cast as the villain of Plath's life, writes:

It was many years before I discovered my mother had a ferocious temper and a jealous streak, in contrast to my father's more temperate and optimistic nature, and that she had on two occasions destroyed my father's work, once by ripping it up and once by burning it.

If one replaces "work" with "clothes", the above quotation could just as well have been in reference to the histrionic character in Swift's music video. After the beguiling front described in the first verse of the song slips, the "daydream" becomes a "nightmare"; idyll shifts to sudden bursts of violent rage and possessive jealousy. She is unreasonably demanding and temperamental, and quick to violence. She destroys her own artistic renditions of the relationship, such as the portrait she paints of her lover (00:02:22-00:02:31) and the heart with their initials carved into a tree (00:03:36-00:03:41); his possessions

(00:02:15-00:02:19), his clothes (00:02:30-00:02:50) and his car (00:03:13-00:03:46); she even harms him physically (00:01:53-00:02:13 and 00:03:24-00:03:44 and 00:02:53-00:03:12). Most interesting of these acts is when she destroys the portraits she has painted of the lover, cuts up the canvas and defaces them in a passionate rage. This act matches what Frieda Hughes described as Plath's poetry "dismember[ing] those close to her" with "extreme ferocity" (Foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*). The previously mentioned *New York Post* tabloid article pathologizing Swift's dating life argues that Swift "has morphed from virginal to man-eater" and that her songs about heartbreak are akin to defamation. Emotionally charged art, inspired by real experiences, is seen as brutal acts of violence committed against the honour of the person who inspired the piece.

The title "Blank Space" is extremely suggestive. There is a vacancy at the centre, in which anything can be projected; a vacuum in the place of a sign, in which any signifier or referent can exist:

Got a long list of ex-lovers
 They'll tell you I'm insane
 But I've got a blank space, baby
 And I'll write your name

One interpretation of this is that the blank space in question is next to the name of the speaker; a placeholder for her lover's name, alluding to the narratives of romantic relationships between anyone Swift is seen in the vicinity of: "Taylor Swift + _____". An alternative analysis places the blank space at the centre of Swift herself. The *idea* of Taylor Swift is a container for the grand narratives of corporations, cultures, and ideologies. The addressee, then, is not the lover, but the audience. Taylor Swift™ is the sign onto which anyone may project, the *tabula rasa* on which one can write anything. Only, in this case, *Swift* is the one holding the pen – the authority – and she is writing down the "name" of the

audience. This is exactly what she does throughout the song – reclaiming herself by performing as and parodying the idea projected onto her.

Haarder suggests asking questions such as “how does the publication of this text intervene in human affairs?” and “what kinds of reactions may be provoked by its biographical speech acts?” (128) to analyse biographically performative texts. In the previous discussion of Swift’s “LWYMMD”), these questions were investigated primarily through the lens of culture, but when focus is shifted to a close reading of lyrics and imagery, the sense of a real-life warning, directed toward certain individuals, remains. The music video begins with a zombie clone of Swift clawing her way out of a grave, proceeding to re-bury another iteration of herself. The zombie recalls the fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas of Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”:

Peel off the napkin

O my enemy.

Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath

Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh

The grave cave ate will be

At home on me

The Swift clone who is getting buried by the zombie clone is in stark contrast to her environment. Her light dress, the carefully styled hair, perfectly clean appearance, and slight smile augment the effect of the feminine propriety. The shot barely lasts for the blink of an eye (00:00:34-00:00:35) but is nevertheless highly suggestive, especially when compared

with Plath's poem "Edge" (*Collected Poems* 272-273). The three first lines might as well be explicitly referenced: "The woman is perfected. / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment". While this is the most obvious connection, there are further links between the poem and the music video.

In the sequence starting at 00:00:50, the audience is introduced to Swift sitting on a golden throne surrounded by twelve snakes (making Swift herself the thirteenth snake; Swift's penchant for the number thirteen is well documented (Stubblebine; "Taylor Swift Talks about Her Lucky Number 13 [...])). The serpents are not "at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty" (lines 10-11), but instead serve her tea, a reversal of the relationship established in "Edge". During this sequence Swift is depicted singing the following lyrics:

But I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time
 Honey, I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time
 I got a list of names, and yours is in red, underlined
 I check it once, then I check it twice, oh!

Raquel Iglesias Aguete's "The Myth of Sylvia Plath and Its Influence on Contemporary Indie-Pop Music" connects these lines to Plath's "Lady Lazarus" (36). She compares them to the final stanza of Plath's poem:

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air.

Iglesias Aguete argues that the use of the colour red ties Swift's lyrics to the powerful, fiery undead bitch-goddess of vengeance in Plath's poem, but she also points out Swift's 2012 album *Red*, in which the colour is a major symbol for passionate, but ultimately flawed, romance. Here, however, Swift has shed the romantic girl-persona who gushes about love:

“as the golden girl vanishes and gives way to this powerful witch, red becomes the symbol of violence, rebelliousness, and hell” (45). In addition to Iglesias Aguete’s points of connection, I argue that Swift’s bridge also relates to the first, fifteenth and sixteenth stanzas of “Lady Lazarus”:

I have done it again.
 One year in every ten
 I manage it——
 [...]

 Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well.

 I do it so it feels like hell.
 I do it so it feels real.
 I guess you could say I’ve a call.

Again, like with the snakes in “Edge”, there is an inversion of the imagery posited in Plath’s poem. Both repeat the cycle of death and resurrection (“all the time” and “One year in every ten”), as means of ascension (“I got smarter, I got harder” and “I do it exceptionally well”). Detailing the abuse suffered at the hands of the addressees, both speakers threaten them with the promise of vengeance. However, whereas Plath’s speaker focuses on her repeated deaths, Swift’s emphasises resurrection.

In Plath’s poem the audience is consuming the speaker until, finally “there is nothing there——” (line 75) but inanimate objects and “Ash, ash——” (line 73). It is, however, out of these ashes that she rises again to consume those who burned her – a vicious, cannibalistic cycle. This is reflected in the sequence where various Swift clones are ferociously fighting

each other to reach the top of a ‘mountain’ of their own bodies, on top of which the victorious Swift adorned with a *reputation* logo stands (00:02:21-00:03:05). Histrionic and over-the-top (no pun intended), she sings “I don’t trust nobody and nobody trusts me / I’ll be the actress starring in your bad dream” to emphasising the performativity of the show she is putting on. The neon T for Taylor is a visual mirror to the cross of Christ with the top part cut off. A dark shadow of the sacrificial lamb, she is not going to show mercy or forgiveness to her persecutors. When she died for their sins, the forgiving part of her died forever.¹⁹ In fact, she is ready to keep killing those versions of herself, constantly resurrecting and reimagining herself.

“Is there no way out of the mind?”

Turning away from reality, this section focuses instead on the internal prison of the self. Plath’s “Apprehensions” (*Collected Poems* 195-6) conceptualises an anxious and depressed emotional state in spatial terms, mirroring the outside-inside movement that the transition between the previous section and this one makes. The question “Is there no way out of the mind?” is taken from line 7, in the second stanza, and the present section aims to investigate how various aspects of *unreality* are represented in the works of Plath and Swift. Taking many forms, they range from explicit discourses around madness, to expressions of emotions or fantasies, to the social and metaphysical issues of subjectivity. The first wall in Plath’s “Apprehensions” is white, symbolising a source of creativity out of the speaker’s reach. While the stars and angels have positive connotations, they are emotionally cold and distant, caring not for the speaker’s suffering. Moving deeper into the depressive state, a “gray wall now” replaces the white one in the second stanza. Colour-wise it functions both as a step

¹⁹ Swift’s album immediately following West’s award show interruption included the song “Innocent”, which was written and performed as a public exoneration and reconciliation for West (“Innocent - taylor swift #VMA”)

between the white wall and the black wall of the last stanza, and as a suggestion of a concrete prison wall. Continuing the journey from outside to inside, the natural entities found in the first stanza, the trees and birds, are gone, and the visceral body of the third stanza appears here, too: bloody remnants of the speaker's attempts to claw a way out of the prison stain the wall, and the speaker's spine becomes a spiral staircase down into a deep well. With nowhere else to go, after the attempts to escape have failed, the pit of despair is the only place left to turn to. Deeper into the body now, the wall of the third stanza is red like bleeding flesh. Inside the body now, organs like the heart ("A red fist, opening and closing" in line 11) and the lungs ("Two gray, papery bags" in line 12) are on display, a vivisection sans anaesthesia. "This is what I am made of," observes the speaker, but also adds "a terror" of death into that which constitutes their being. Now the speaker has delved as far inside the physical body as possible, the journey moves on to the metaphysical body, the soul, into the dark depths of the grave, where the black wall of the last stanza is found. Despite the speaker's depression, death is not sought after, but feared. Death is the lack of identity or means to identify. While there are birds, they can neither be identified or talk about immortality, as neither holds any meaning in death. The oblivion of the "Cold blanks" appear threatening, not comforting; the speaker is hunted down by them, not seeking the "Cold blanks" out as a reprieve from the struggles of life. Madness, here, is a mental prison.

Madness, as a concept, functions as a prison in more ways than one. The word "mad" can mean both 'angry' and 'crazy', but in the case of women, they may as well be the same thing. Expressions of emotions from female points of view, particularly if they are not flattering to men, are pathologized. Swift thematizes this in "mad woman":

Every time you call me crazy
 I get more crazy
 What about that?

And when you say I seem angry
 I get more angry
 And there's nothing like a mad woman
 What a shame she went mad
 No one likes a mad woman
 You made her like that

This chorus reveals how female expressions of anger are treated as irrational and violent, even if they are justified. It also expresses how this treatment constructs reality. In the documentary concert film *folklore: the long pond studio sessions*, Swift and her co-writers Jack Antonoff and Aaron Dessner discuss the creative process behind the songs on *folklore*. When discussing “mad woman”, Swift states:

“The most rage-provoking element of being a female is the gaslighting that happens when, you know, for centuries we’ve been expected to absorb male behaviour silently. [...] And, oftentimes when we, in our enlightened state, and our emboldened state, now, respond to bad male behaviour [...] that response is treated like the offense itself.” (01:05:53-01:07:28)

Instead of having her feelings of anger taken seriously and the cause of them resolved, the woman is belittled and pathologized. The deprecating treatment makes her angrier (telling someone to “calm down” is a reliable way to *make* them angry, even if they were calm to begin with), and by treating a woman as irrational and aggressive, she effectively becomes just that in the eyes of society. In the chapter “A Denial of Being: Psychiatrization as Epistemic Violence”, Maria Liegghio writes that epistemic violence manifests through the declaration that an individual’s “experiences are ‘disordered,’ or the symptoms of a ‘mental illness’” (125), which is what Swift’s speaker describes happening. By denying the

legitimacy of what she, the ‘mad woman’, is saying, she is rendered “out of existence, unable to be heard and to have [her] interests count.” (124).

The speaker in Plath’s “Mad Girl’s Love Song” (“Sylvia Plath’s ‘Mad Girl’s Love Song’ from *Mademoiselle*.”) expresses the same world view as the speaker in Plath’s later poem “Soliloquy of the Solipsist” (37-38 *Collected Poems*) but with vastly different attitudes. While the latter speaker is secure in the notion that there is no reality outside their own sensations, the “mad girl” demonstrates self-doubt, repeating “(I think I made you up inside my head)” (lines 3, 9, 15, 19). However, *perception* still holds power over reality. Compare the first two lines of “Mad Girl’s Love Song”:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.

With lines 5-9 from “Soliloquy of the Solipsist”:

When my eyes shut
These dreaming houses all snuff out;
Through a whim of mine
Over gables the moon's celestial onion
Hangs high.

Whereas the solipsist is secure in their omnipotence to create and destroy worlds, the mad girl distrusts herself and her own sensations. “I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed / And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane” introduces several states of mind in which one lacks the ability to separate reality from fantasy: dreams, being ‘bewitched’, insanity. The Cartesian evil demon haunting the poems provokes very different reactions in the speakers. The solipsist believes that the objective reality is borne from their experience, while the mad

girl doubts and mistrusts the existence of reality because she has realised that her perception is affected by her subjectivity.

Swift's re-recording of "ATW", and the accompanying short film written and directed by Swift, thematizes the difficulty of consolidating different perceptions of the same situation. The very first sound in the short film is the voice of Sadie Sink, playing the speaker, asking "are you for real?". The addressee, played by Dylan O'Brien, responds by asking "what do you mean?" while they are cuddling face-to-face in bed. Sink replies, "I don't know, I just feel like maybe I made you up" (00:00:00-00:00:24). Nothing has been said about the similarity to Plath's line "(I think I made you up inside my head)" from "Mad Girl's Love Song", but the parallel is there, nonetheless.²⁰ Like Plath's speaker, the "I" of Swift's song and short film is concerned with her memories and perceptions and their relation to reality. The phrase "I was there" repeats vehemently throughout the song, proclaiming her status as an eyewitness, as if in response to someone doubting her account of events.

This conflict is realised further when an argument breaks out. During a dinner party, Sink's character tries to hold hands with O'Brien's character, who hurriedly detangles their fingers before paternally patting her hand. Immediately, the camera pans from their hands to Sink's face, hurt by the rejection (00:02:33-00:02:53). Sink's character perceives this as highly significant, and the audience is told in visual and narrative terms that this is so. During the argument, her exclamation: "You dropped my fucking hand, what am I supposed to do with that?!" (00:04:21) is followed by O'Brien's character's jarring response that he "didn't even fucking notice, what are you talking about? [...] I don't even remember the moment that you're talking about, how can you be, like, attacking me about something that I don't even

²⁰ Note also the multiple expressions of self-doubt encompassed in such a short passage, both in words and how the addressee – whose existence is doubted – is depended on to reassure and assert the truth and reality of the situation.

fucking know?!” (00:04:21-00:04:43). The same thing that was deeply significant to her barely even registered with him. The argument escalates to something bordering on gaslighting²¹. He not only rejects her version of events, but projects her accusations back to her (*he* is not the one making her feel stupid, *she* is) and accuses her of exaggerating (by exaggerating himself, claiming that she is “holding [him] hostage” and calling her “insane” and “crazy”). In short: he, the older man, is rational and has the correct assessment of the situation, while she, the younger woman, is hysterical and acting out because of her uncontrollable emotions. Accusations of madness and emotionality (often used synonymously) are used as an epistemic weapon to degrade and delegitimise those with less power, especially if what they say is uncomfortable.

In “‘Breaking Open the Bone’: Storying, Sanism, and Mad Grief”, Jennifer M. Poole and Jennifer Ward explain the ways in which intense emotional reactions – specifically grief – are socially subjugated and regulated. According to them, caregiving institutions, and society at large, treats grief as an inconvenience the individual should move forward from to return to normalcy and (more importantly) productivity. If an individual’s grief deviates from this model, the grief becomes pathologized. In the diagnostic criteria for *prolonged grief disorder* as described by the APA, a person whose reaction to loss lasts “longer than might be expected based on social, cultural, or religious norms” (more than one year for adults and more than 6 months for children and adolescents) is abnormal. Poole and Ward reject such practices, instead suggesting a perspective on grief that does not demand it to be anything other than what it is (103). Some grief scholars have suggested utilizing storytelling as an alternative to the institutionally sanctioned forms of “grief work”. Poole and Ward agree,

²¹ Gaslighting’ is a form of psychological abuse wherein someone makes another person question their own sanity and perception of reality. The word may be traced back to George Cukor’s 1944 film *Gaslight*, in which a man makes gaslights dim and flicker but tells his wife that she is imagining it, attempting to manipulate her into believing that she is losing her mind (“gaslight, v.”).

arguing that this would break stigmas and allow more people to open up to others and share their experiences (100). This would return autonomy to the bereaved, and equip them with the power of self-determination, instead of assigning those faculties to an authority figure.

The poetry and music of Plath and Swift could count as examples of the storytelling practice described above, although on a parasocial level rather than an interpersonal one. Rose Miyatsu's chapter "'Hundreds of People Like Me': A Search for a Mad Community in *The Bell Jar*" in *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health* argues that mad communities are imperative, and criticises "popular feminist portrayals of female madness as rebellion", like the one presented by Sherwin (see discussions of this on pp. 43-4). Miyatsu argues that Esther's isolation contributes to her deteriorating health, and that the community she forms with her patient-comrades is what allows her to rebuild herself. Esther flinches from associating with the fellow inmates she perceives as more normal than herself, and according to Miyatsu, Esther's interest in Miss Norris, the mute patient, reveals her "desire to have a community inclusive enough to accommodate her even in this state of unresponsiveness that she believes she is headed toward" (60). By acting as though Miss Norris is worthy of companionship, devotion, and respect, she proves to herself that she, too, is worthy of the same. However, the asylum's hierarchical structure infects the mad community between Esther, Joan, and the others at the Belsize, the wing for the patients closest to release. They "see each other as competitors in the quest for wellness rather than as fellow sufferers" (62). These issues are not resolved by the end of the novel, although Esther leaves the asylum with the realisation that she is not alone in her feelings, seeing them reflected even in seemingly normal college girls (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 227). Miyatsu's insights on community are astute and incorporates the legacy of the novel as well: *The Bell Jar* has become an important focal point of a real-world mad community.

The idea of what grief “should” look like in contemporary Western culture may be observed in certain responses to Swift’s “ATW”. While critics generally reviewed the song and the accompanying short film favourably, some interpret them as Swift’s expressions of inappropriate and abnormal emotions. When the song, assumed to be written about Jake Gyllenhaal, was discussed in TMZ’s podcast, one of the two male hosts states “Apparently, they dated for three months! [...] Like, let it go! [...] Oh, come on, she was a little 19-year-old kid at the time, leave him alone!” (00:01:03-00:01:17). These comments are informed by the same sanist structures outlined by Poole and Ward above. Swift has, according to the podcast hosts, deviated from acceptable emotional expressions: the relationship was too brief, she was too young at the time of the relationship, too much time has passed since the relationship ended. In addition, the song is treated as an unprovoked attack on Jake Gyllenhaal. During an interview with Seth Meyers, Swift explicitly states that her emotional state is completely different from what it was during the song’s initial release a decade earlier (00:05:49-00:06:23), contradicting the podcast host’s assumptions. However, as Poole and Ward show, the idea that emotions must conform to a specific set of rules and regulations to be acceptable is not only ineffectual in terms of mental health care, but actively harmful (99).

At its initial release, *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, a fact which Sherwin uses as an argument against placing it in the category of confessional literature (130). However, the main character Esther Greenwood herself employs not one, but two, pseudonyms: Elly Higginbottom, when she is among strangers and does not want “to be associated with [...] [her] real name” (11), and Elaine as the main character in an autobiographical novel: “My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. [...] There were six letters in Esther, too.” (116). Sherwin does point out the latter example, and notes that “Sylvia”, too, has six letters. She interprets this as critique against the act of autobiographical writing, as Esther’s attempt at writing fails (139). This reading of the

text ignores one of the central themes, namely Esther's use of pseudonyms to express different aspects of a fragmented identity. "Elly Higginbottom" is employed whenever Esther wishes to do something without having to be beholden to the societal consequences of the act. Or, in the words of Taylor Swift, a pseudonym is used "when you still have a love for making the work and you don't want the work to become overshadowed by this thing that's been built around you, based on what people know about you"²² (Doyle). It is a way to act more like her 'true' self than she could with her real name. Even the made-up story about "Elly's" childhood in *feels* true:

"The tears came in a rush, then, and [...] I thought what an awful woman that lady in the brown suit had been, and how she, whether she knew it or not, was responsible for my taking the wrong turn here and the wrong path there and for everything bad that had happened after that." (129)

While the objective facts are false, there is a sense that she is now free to express something which, at its centre, is real. Like Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, "fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact" (2-3). "Elly" also serves as a way for Esther to try out different identities without having to ascribe to them fully. Her first identity experiment fails; she is unable to consolidate "Miss Greenwood", the good and proper young lady who excels at school with "Elly", the wild rebel who drinks and flirts with strangers. When the night maid calls out for "Miss Greenwood" at the same time as the blackout drunk Doreen calls for "Elly, Elly, Elly", she feels as though she "had a split personality" (20). Esther's use of pseudonyms socially and in writing are not entirely analogous. While still in New York, thinking about the writing class she means to attend later that summer, she decides to "send

²² This is in reference to the pseudonym Nils Sjöberg, which was used instead of Swift's name in the credits for the song "This Is What You Came For" performed by Rihanna.

in a couple of the stories [she] wrote in this class under a pseudonym” to the editor of the magazine where she is interning (99). In her fantasy, her work is appreciated for its literary qualities, not because of her name. Only after the work had already been accepted would her identity be revealed. This fantasy is a cover for Esther’s perfectionism and fears of disappointing everyone’s – and her own – high expectations for her. Written pseudonyms allow her only to be identified with her successes, not her failures, while the verbal ones act as a way to escape her own identity and situation.

Miyatsu’s chapter on *The Bell Jar* is introduced with a characterisation of happiness and joy as something that some people, namely those struggling with madness or mental anguish, are inherently incapable of feeling. If this is true, Miyatsu argues, communities organised around the goal of achieving happiness are inherently exclusionary. “What about those who cannot be happy, who refuse to orient themselves toward positive affect?” she writes (51). This is a result of mistaking the *appearance* of happiness, the aesthetics of politeness, with genuine happiness. Or, as it is sometimes called, *toxic positivity*. *Psychology Today* defines the term as rejecting any negative emotion, without acknowledging them. Negative emotions are “tools we use to get important needs met”, so if they are ignored without making any effort to change the source of the negative emotion, the result will likely be bad for mental wellness (Davis). Forming communities “in which no one gets left behind” (54) should not mean giving up on happiness or improving our lives and, like Miyatsu notes, the community between Esther and Miss Norris makes Esther happier, and that is a good thing (61). It is true that “the expression of negative feeling is often met with indifference, hostility, or denial” in *The Bell Jar*; this is exactly what toxic positivity is. However, a community that stops at “relationships of shared pain and distress” (64) seems like the Sad Girl online communities (discussed under the heading “Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar”), which may provide temporary solace and comfort, but ultimately they provide no alleviation to mental

anguish. David Webb's chapter "Thinking (differently) about suicide" engages in the discourse around mad community with the goal of preventing suicides and suicidality. He introduces the concept of "mentally healthy communities", communities that prioritize suicidal people, where survivors are treated as sources of valuable knowledge:

Imagine a person, perhaps a young person struggling with their sense of self, who begins to doubt whether they want to continue living. Imagine that this person lives in a community where they know they can talk about these feelings safely – a mentally healthy community. [...] Imagine, if you can, a community where the suicidal feelings are respected rather than feared and despised, and where the suicidal person is welcomed rather than shunned. (93)

Despite its focus on improving one's health, this seems more like what Miyatsu was *actually* requesting. The utopia Webb imagines would have been significantly more helpful than any of the endeavours to help Esther depicted in *The Bell Jar*. Perhaps it would have helped Plath, too, but sadly we will never know.

Plath's "Lesbos" depicts a dramatic conflict primarily between two women, investigating the social mechanics of their animosity (Collected Poems 227-230). The addressee has taken the kittens belonging to the speaker's daughter and put them "outside [the] window / In a sort of cement well / Where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear" (12-14), causing the speaker's daughter to have an emotional meltdown. Much like the kittens trapped in the well, the women and children in the kitchen are trapped in a fetid, noxious, claustrophobic space with the threat of death hanging over them. The addressee advises the speaker to drown the kittens, due to their smell, and her daughter, due to her already-apparent mental illness. Everything is contaminated and sick, and the closed-in environment traps the poisonous air, egging on the infectious malice. In "another life", the addressee suggests, they "should meet in air" (31-32), implying that they could have been something other than "two venomous

opposites” (36) had they only met in another context, free of the kitchen’s toxicity.

Considering this, the gruesome suggestion to drown the kittens and the daughter (20-22) gleams a slightly different tone – is death her solution to clear out the “viciousness in the kitchen” (1)? Indeed, Plath’s works often connects damaging social structures to dirt and contamination, and death to purity and transcendence.

The first line of Sylvia Plath’s “Fever 103°” asks “Pure? What does that mean?” (*Collected Poems* 231-232). In *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, Tim Kendall’s answer is that “Purity, whether sexual or religious, is not opposed to, but born out of, ‘the sin, the sin’” (164). I, however, argue that purity is born out of a *rejection* of the societal norms of sexual purity and sin. The speaker’s journey to be purified begins with the failure of hell and Cerberus to lick her clean of sin. Hell’s inability to cleanse is described in Plath’s introduction to the poem on BBC radio: there are “two kinds of fire – the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second” (qtd. in Kendall, 163). Expanding past the worn-out imagery of flames as licking tongues, to the images of slobbering tongues of a three-headed dog, the saliva and “wheezing at the gate” (line 5) provide associations of a disagreeable cunnilingual situation. As the speaker is left unsatisfied, she does not achieve purification. Isadora Duncan, famous breaker of social taboos, is referenced in line 12. Duncan’s scarves get stuck in the wheel, “the globe” (line 16); that which should be flowing free is trapped and destroyed by the mundanity of the world. However, the scarf is also likened to the “low smokes” (line 11) being burned out of the speaker, that which she must leave behind in order to ascend. The metaphoric scarf entangles the speaker to the wheel of life, trapping her in such a way that only death will provide release. The scarf/smoke chokes “the aged and the meek” (line 17), the old social conventions and those that uphold them. The “yellow sullen smokes” (line 14) threaten to choke and poison everything in its path, weighing heavy on the

world much like the poisonous air in the kitchen of “Lesbos”. Toxicity here, too, is a result of oppressive social structures, attempting to infect the speaker before she reaches freedom (climax).

Three flowers appear in the poem; first the “ghastly orchid / Hanging its hanging garden in the air,” (lines 20-21), then in lines 41-42 when the speaker becomes “a huge camellia / Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush”, and finally the roses attending her in line 48. If analysed through the same sexual perspective as before, one might be reminded that the genus ‘Orchis’ is derived from the “Greek name for testicles, alluding to the shape of the twin tubers of some species” (Hyam). If the ghastly hanging orchid is to be identified with the drooling Cerberus earlier in the poem, the camellia and roses are aesthetically and culturally suggestive of the vulva. It is only when the speaker is left alone, when the “Devilish leopard”²³ (line 22) has been killed, that she is able to burn away the notions of sins and adultery (lines 25-27) by “flickering, off, on, off, on” (line 29) amongst the sheets. After this the speaker begins to realise her self-worth, and the unworthiness of the addressee: “I am too pure for you or anyone. / Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God. [...] my gold beaten skin / Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.” (lines 34-39). She has rid herself of that which made her impure; her male sexual partner and the social conventions that made her think of herself as impure in the first place – “(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—” (line 53). The syntax becomes more interrupted, ecstatic, as she reaches climax and paradise by herself, *la petite mort*.

“Swear to be Overdramatic and True”

Paul de Man, appropriating Genette’s whirligig metaphor, compared the ontology of autobiography with the discomfort of being “caught in a revolving door [...] capable of

²³ One might note Ted Hughes’ poem “The Jaguar” as an intertext, here.

infinite acceleration” (921). In an act of further appropriation, I extend and combine this with the earlier maelstrom metaphor introducing this chapter. Whereas de Man solves the problem of autobiography by declaring it “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or understanding” (921), I am more inclined, in the case of reality versus unreality, to refute the supposed polar opposition altogether. Both require the other for their existence, build upon each other, and most importantly: they do not negate each other. Emily Dickinson’s imperative to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant —“, or Swift’s promise to be “overdramatic and true” in the song “Lover”, both show how artistic expressions of subjectivity are capable of revealing truth, sometimes more so than reality itself.

Jacqueline Rose’s discussion of “Fever 103°” is focused on the interpretation of Plath’s late poetry which is “strangely shared” by Ted Hughes and one strand of feminist critique. Where Ted Hughes reads Plath’s late poems as her ‘false self’ being burned away, to free her true and authentic self, feminists see Plath freeing herself from the shackles of Hughes and the patriarchy he represents. Whatever she has freed herself from, this new self then “sheds all others, as well as any otherness in its relation to itself; it sheds the trappings of language and the world” (144). The ambiguous nature of language and worldly morality is left behind, and a new stage where certainty and clarity is entered – the complexity of life is exchanged for death, the ultimate incarnation of simplicity. This image of washing away worldly filth to emerge anew, clean of memory, is reoccurring in the works of Plath, one example being the bath Esther takes in the beginning of *The Bell Jar*: “All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure” (19). Rose posits that Plath does not, in fact, portray this idea of transcendence as an ideal or goal, but that she examines and critiques it on the grounds of its contradictory nature as it “involves not the assertion but the sublation of self” (144-5). As proof she quotes several passages from Plath’s journals and letters, including one stating that “there has always furthermore in

addition and inescapably and forever got to be a Thou. Otherwise there is no i because i am what other people interpret me as being and am nothing if there were no people.” (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 72, qtd. in Rose 146). The ego cannot exist without being perceived by another, a “Thou”, which means that if one were to rid oneself of the layers through which one is interpreted and conceived (the “old whore petticoats”), existence and identity itself becomes impossible. In an attempt to answer the introductory question of the poem, Rose identifies “paradise”, the poem’s final word, as the definition of purity, insofar as the mind of God is the only possible definition of either paradise or purity; “a place free of all distortion where nothing, and nobody, would have any recognisable claims” (146). Thus, the ego of identity cannot coexist with purity, as the latter demands the dissolution of the former. In Rose’s analysis, this process of self-sublation is intimately tied to the image of amnesia, the crime of forgetting. By forgetting the crimes of history, one is doomed to perpetuate them ad infinitum. Again, the same idea appears in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther witnesses a “twilight sleep” birth: “Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been [...]” (62). Undoing oneself, escaping the prison of identity through transcendence and death, is in fact what allows and ensures the crimes and horrors of the world to continue (148).

Instead of the actual end-of-life death of Plath’s poetry, Swift often uses death as a metaphor for escaping the public eye. One of the most notable examples, “LWYMMD” has already been discussed, but “the lakes” has yet to be mentioned here. Sonically, the song conjures a sense of wistful nostalgia, the introductory string arrangement overlaid with a gramophone-like effect. The lyrics follow the musical aesthetic only in part – while lines such as “I bathe in cliffside pools / with my calamitous love and insurmountable grief” perfectly reflect the dreamily sentimental orchestral style, they are interspersed with lines like

“I’m not cut out for all these cynical clones / These hunters with cell phones” and references to “namedropping sleaze” that seem jarring in their contrast. When discussing the track in *folklore: the long pond studio sessions*, Swift describes being inspired by a past trip to the Lake District and the poets who lived there in the nineteenth century:

“the lakes” is really talking a lot about relating to people who, hundreds of years ago, had the same exit plan and did it. [...] I went to William Wordsworth’s grave, and just sat there, and I was like, “wow, you went and did it. You just did it. You just went away, and you kept writing, but you didn’t subscribe to the things that were killing you.” (01:39:47-01:40:28)

Following the overarching theme of *folklore*, the song describes a desire to escape from the crude mundanity of life to an idealized, pastoral environment and days filled with introspection and natural beauty. “Is it romantic how all my elegies eulogize me?” the singer asks, hinting both at the artistic movement championed by the Lake Poets and the futility of this escapist ideal. Swift’s speaker reveals, or admits, that her ‘elegies’ – the break-up songs she is known for – are not in fact simply lamentations of loss and mourning, but homages to herself. Not quite Whitmanesque, the focus is not on the *act* of eulogizing oneself, but rather on whether it is *romantic* to do so. ‘Romantic’, here, is equivocal in meaning. It is partly in reference to the Romantic literary movement, but the connotation to romance in the sense of amorous courtships is also significant.

For clarification as to what, exactly, this alludes to, a prime example of an elegy in which Swift eulogizes herself would be the song “Wildest Dreams”. Narratively, the song can be effectively summarized in the line “I can see the end as it begins”. Despite being in the very beginning of a relationship, the speaker imagines the inevitable end to come, expressing her hopes for how her lover is going to remember her after their courtship has ended. It is not that the speaker is planning to end the relationship herself; she explicitly predicts being left by her

lover. It is in her own imagined hopes for how her lover will remember her that the “eulogy” occurs:

Say you'll remember me
 Standing in a nice dress
 Staring at the sunset, babe
 Red lips and rosy cheeks
 Say you'll see me again
 Even if it's just in your wildest dreams

This is not describing a real memory, but an idealised surface. Memories, in Swift’s lyrics, are usually characterised by specific sensory experiences and tangible details – “ATW” is a prototypical example of this. In fact, it seems more like a superficial portrait than anything else. None of the listed features seem to be unique or inherent to the speaker; she is generically beautiful in “a nice dress”, “the sunset”, and presumably make-up is giving her the “red lips and rosy cheeks”. “The woman is perfected”, as the first line of Plath’s “Edge” reads. This is in stark contrast to Swift’s debut song, “Tim McGraw”, which also details the speaker’s hopes for how her lover is going to remember her after the end of their relationship, where the speaker asks her lover to remember very specific items tied to memories they share. Margaret Atwood’s *mot juste* that “You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.” (392) only seems even more poignant in relation to the “Wildest Dreams” music video, which depicts Swift as an actress in the classical Hollywood era, having a love-affair with her co-star while shooting a film. The couple is constantly shown through a lens of simulacra; being filmed on-set, posing for photographers on the red carpet, attending the premiere and watching their film. Even a scene that seems to take place in the privacy of a bedroom/tent shows them behind draperies or through a mirror (00:01:11-00:01:23).

With that example in mind, what is the meaning of the question posed in “the lakes”? The song plays with the tensions between commercialism and culture, money and aesthetics; the opposing ends of the model Bourdieu introduced in *The Field of Cultural Production*, the autonomous and heteronomous fields. Art, beauty, nature, and authenticity represent the autonomous field, all of which are under the direct threat from the heteronomous field’s ephemeral scandals and feuds fuelled by modern technology. Swift aligns her speaker with the Romantic movement both through this and by referencing William Wordsworth (“I’ve come to far to watch some namedropping sleaze / tell me what are my words worth”) and the Lake District. However, the speaker is separated, spatially and temporally, from both the Romantics and the Lake District. Lyrically, the speaker expresses the wish and intention to go there, which means that they are *not* there now, and constructs it as an almost celestial place “where all the poets went to die”. In the literal sense, Wordsworth was the only one of the poets who died in the Lake District, but the death Swift is referring to is more akin to the death of one’s public persona – compare with the gravestone dedicated to “Taylor Swift’s reputation” in the “LWYMMMD” music video. The song expresses the idealised, indeed, romanticised, dream of escaping the realm of celebrity. However, there is the important detail that the speaker is not *acting* on these dreams, and neither is Swift. Of course, in the context of the pandemic, during which the song was written, travelling was made impossible and isolation mandatory, so the fantasy of the song was half-realised through that, but the fact remains that Swift has not left the realm with all the “cynical clones” and “hunters with cell phones”. Is it possible to unite the spheres of artistic expression and commercialism, authenticity, and performance? This question is recurring throughout Swift’s oeuvre. Confessionalism constructs a complicated relationship between writer and audience, and Plath’s works, too, examine these complexities.

Exploitative, voyeuristic audiences, being trapped on a stage to perform acts of self-mutilation, and being valued only by means of objectification and dehumanization are common themes of “Lady Lazarus” and “LWYMMMD”. “Lady Lazarus” (*Collected Poems* 244-247) tells the story of self-inflicted death in a threatening tone of vindication and triumph, not sadness or defeat. Everything, including death, is “an art”, meaning that everything is a performance. Death is depicted as a burlesque show, a “big strip tease” where the performer peels the flesh from her bones instead of clothes from her body. In the seventeenth stanza of “Lady Lazarus”, the speaker introduces the cell in which she performs her show of death. The cell of Plath’s poem is akin to the gilded cage in which Swift is imprisoned in the video, in that both are a combined prison and stage. The “peanut-crunching crowd” (line 26) is ready to pay a “charge, a very large charge” (line 61) not just to watch a performance, but to *consume* the performers. The charge escalates from “the eyeing of [her] scars” (line 58), listening to her heartbeat (line 59) to the higher costs of “a word or a touch” (line 62), actually interacting with the speaker. There is a direct parallel to the market logic of the entertainment business here; the vulnerability of making art about one’s personal experiences is transformed into the commodification of itself. Scars and heart are not just up for display, but for sale, in the form of art. The value is that of a thing, not a person – “The pure gold baby” (line 69).

The violent commodification of pain depicted in “Lady Lazarus” can be read as a metaphor for the publication of Plath’s diaries and letters. Just like in the poem, her private writings were sold after her death, which might be seen as a prerequisite for publishing someone’s diaries or letters. This is not so in the case of Taylor Swift. The documentary *Miss Americana* begins with Swift surrounded by her diaries. As Swift flicks through them, the writing inside is blurred out to prevent scrupulous viewers from deciphering the contents, but those who want a peek into those diaries had other ways to do so. The four deluxe editions of

the *Lover* album also included thirty pages of “a unique set of Taylor's journal entries” – one would have to buy all four to access all the pages (“Deluxe US”). The entries are printed in what appears to be the (replicated) original handwriting, to further emphasise the authenticity. During a promotional event for the album Swift reads a few entries out, peppering them with self-deprecatingly comments (“Taylor Swift - Lover's Lounge (Live)” 00:04:46-00:09:42), enhancing the impression that the audience is gaining access to some exceedingly intimate mementos. Doubtless, the entries were very carefully selected so as not to be too revealing or embarrassing. Typically, authenticity and marketability are not viewed as compatible ideals, but they certainly collide in these diaries. They also reveal the mechanics behind the confessional conceit in a capitalist context when Swift, during the aforementioned promotional event, says “metaphorically I’ve been sharing my diaries with you for years, so I figured why not just do it for real, and just take the symbolism out of it, not make it a metaphor anymore” (00:05:26-00:05:39). While there is a difference between confessional poetry, or songwriting, and personal diary entries, they have often been seen in conjunction; the first as the refined reconstruction of the other, the second as a key to interpreting the first. Swift has heretofore had more authority over her diaries than Plath has – but both have been removed from the realm of the private and intimate, transformed into commodities and placed in the public sphere for anyone’s consumption. Again, the audience finds itself experiencing the threshold aesthetic, the unclear distinction between art and life provoking questions of morality, privacy, and the capitalist marketplace logic.

The lead single to Swift’s album *Midnights* serves as yet another example of the curious middle ground between marketability and authentic vulnerability. “Anti-Hero” is a pop song that appears to be engineered to go viral on TikTok, not just because of the catchy melody or the lyrical similarity to the TikTok audio “is it me? Am I the drama? [...]” that trended in 2021 (Brocklehurst), but also because the dialogue-esque lyrics in the chorus are a perfect fit

for the platform's popular comedy sketch format. However, when one looks to Swift's video detailing the background of the song another image emerges:

I struggle a lot with the idea that my life has become unmanageably sized, and not to sound too dark, but I struggle with the idea of not feeling like a person.
[sarcastic fake crying] Don't feel bad for me, you don't need to. This song really is a real guided tour throughout all of the things I tend to hate about myself. We all hate things about ourselves. ("Behind the song! [...]")

Here, Swift corroborates much of what has been discussed throughout the text: she is treated as, and in part functions as, a fictional character or a brand rather than as a real human being. Predictably, this treatment has taken a toll, and according to the above quote has led to feelings of depersonalization and self-loathing. This is immediately dedramatized, to prevent responses about her "playing the victim". This might be considered a complicating factor to the previously suggested practice of storytelling (pp. 54-55). Poole and Ward organize their arguments through the metaphor of bone breaking: "when we break open the bone and let the stories slip/spew/trip/rage from our lips, we make it possible for others to break out too", they write (102). Breaking bones is painful, but sometimes it is necessary to facilitate healing – but what happens when too much weight is put on the broken bone? Or, moving from the metaphor, back to storified grief, what happens when the stories reach beyond the immediate support systems? Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale discuss these issues in the chapter "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?", warning that trauma narratives risk becoming "a media commodity", sensationalised for the sake of profit (213). Additionally, they argue, a paradigm of confessionalism creates "a coercive imperative on survivors to confess, to recount our assaults, to give details, and even to do so publicly" (214). Their text was published in 1996, and much of what they say has since been proven to be correct. As #MeToo has shown, there is considerable power in the act of speaking out, but

also considerable danger to the one who does so. When is the price for authentic storytelling too steep? Again, the threshold aesthetic (and what Haarder refers to as “literary cutting”) aims to make the audience realise their own culpability in a real person’s pain. What happens if the audience does not care? Swift’s struggles are the direct consequence of her fame, to which the audience contributes when consuming and engaging with her art. However, just as with Haarder’s examples of Marina Abramovic’s performance art pieces, she has actively chosen to continue her career in the spotlight, publishing songs of a confessional nature, aware of the consequences. This situation might, perhaps, be most appropriately described by Swift and her audience singing the line “it’s me / hi / I’m the problem, it’s me” in harmony with each other.

Much like the music video accompanying Swift’s “Anti-Hero”, Plath’s “In Plaster” (*Collected Poems* 158-160) narrativizes self-hatred through a severed subject, splintered into “This new absolutely white person” and “the old yellow one” (line 2). The yellow “ugly and hairy” (53) one is weak, sickly, violent, while the other is tidy, calm, and patient (25). A precarious symbiotic relationship is formed between them. The other initially lacked personality (5), life (6), warmth (9), and soul (16), but as the two grow closer the white surface-half begins to form an independent identity. As the plaster-person becomes less like its yellow template, the more the speaker loses of herself; “my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces” (33).

The first two Swifts in the “Anti-Hero” video mirror the characters introduced in Plath’s poem; the second is introduced as the bright new double of the weaker original (00:00:47). Immediately following the initial destructive party, the second Swift disparages the first one “in spite of herself,” (30) teaching her that “everyone will betray you” (00:01:06-00:01:12).

Much like Plath's plaster person, the second Swift "doesn't need food" (4) continuing her lesson in self-loathing by weighing the first and criticizing the result (00:02:04-00:02:11)²⁴. The third Swift in the video is "the monster on the hill / Too big to hang out", ruining the friendly gathering with her immense size filling up the room (00:01:13-00:01:52). Like ivy, the white plaster person is aesthetically pleasing, but ultimately causes its own demise by its parasitical exploitation of the host body. The yellow speaker, looking back, realises that it was *her* flaws and personality that "attracted everybody's attention" (18), not the beautiful surface of the copy. Newness, youth, and beauty are combined in an unsettling way in the plaster person, and at first she seems more like a dead body, lacking personality and never complaining. In this sense she seems more like a sex doll than anything else, the perfect "woman" in the patriarchy –not a woman at all, not even a person. Swift's lyric "Sometimes I feel like everybody is a sexy baby" has been commented on by many, some finding it strange and paedophilic, some seeing it as incomprehensible and amusing (Mercado). The "sexy baby" is the plaster sex doll, the uncomplaining sweet and empty servant with an unblemished surface, unburdened with a past or anything that makes her a real adult person.

The funerary theme in both texts depicts the speakers imagining their deaths at the hand of their copies, their surfaces. When reading the copies as Plath's and Swift's respective public personas, the line "She lay in bed with me like a dead body" (6) in Plath's text seems eerily prescient. Both the lifeless others are on the receiving end of abuse they are unable to respond to; the plaster person like a "true pacifist" (12) and Swift's ghost only able to look on in horror as her selfish and privileged children, her legacy, say that she is "laughing up at [them] from hell" and fall into violent chaos (00:02:13-00:04:32). Soulless, indestructible, and beautiful, the personas of both works are engaged in a struggle for power with the insecure,

²⁴ The original video included a shot of the scales showing the result "FAT", but this was removed due to accusations of fatphobia (Nesvig).

anxiety-ridden “authentic selves” from which they originated. The personas inevitably outlast their originators – the human lifespan is much shorter than that of an idea. Whereas Swift’s “Anti-Hero” seems to end in a tentative friendship between the three split subjects, Plath’s subjects are only getting further and further away from each other. What once was considered “a kind of marriage” (51) is on its way to divorce. It does not seem self-annihilating, however, but triumphant and independent. While neither speaker is able to control their postmortem legacy, at the end of their respective narratives both are more at peace with their own perceived deficiencies and flaws in life, which perhaps makes the question of the legacy less important.

As has been shown throughout the present text, the respective legacies of Plath and Swift have been shaped by their own confessional/autobiographical creative outputs, but they have also been controlled and authored by others. Using circular reasoning, general and scholarly audiences alike use Swift’s and Plath’s perceived authority over their self-depiction to validate specific interpretations. Examples of this range from Tracy Brain’s assertion that Plath must have wanted scholars to read her journals (a conclusion reached from researching her journals) to those convinced that Swift is engaged in the – somewhat self-defeating – purposeful leaving of clues to fans that she is a closeted bisexual or lesbian woman (@ashleynorton). Because they are competent and accomplished artists whose works have layers of meaning, the authorial intentionality seen in their art is also seen in other areas of their lives, which means that there are hidden messages to be extracted from anything one can possibly access. Both ideas stem from the blurred borders between reality and fiction. One can reasonably infer purpose and meaning to fiction, but when this is applied to the chaos and randomness of reality, one runs the risk of over-extrapolating significance from the source material.

However, the risk of misinterpretation is always present, both in life and art. Responding to Ronald Hayman, who wrote that “nobody owns facts” during the fierce 1989 debate around Plath’s desecrated gravestone, Ted Hughes stated that he hopes “each of us owns the facts of his or her own life” (qtd. In Rose 67). Rose’s own response to Hughes follows:

Clearly Plath does not own the facts of her own life, not just because she is no longer here to speak for herself but because even in relation to one’s ‘own’ life (especially in relation to it) there can be no simple ownership of the facts. For that potential for misreading which lies between speech and its reception also resides internally to subjectivity itself. (67)

Rose’s point is important, and she proves it with examples of, as Hughes himself admitted, Plath telling “many different people many different things, and different things at different times” (Hughes, qtd. In Rose 67). The example of Swift goes even further in disproving Hughes’ point, though. While she does retain certain legal rights to the songs with her words, voice, thoughts, feelings, and heartbeat²⁵, the fact remains that the products of her labour – the “facts of her life” – are at the time of writing legally owned by Shamrock Capital. The problem of subjectivity, truth, and the hypothetical ownership thereof, is not “just” philosophical theorizing about art, but concerns the exploitative nature of the capitalist system at large.

When Esther, in *The Bell Jar*, has her initial meeting with Doctor Gordon she is suddenly struck by the realisation of how performative, even literary, interpersonal interactions are: “I only need tell him what I wanted to, and that I could control the picture he had of me by hiding this and revealing that” (125). As “Lady Lazarus” in particular shows, these performances never end, but continue even in death. In Frieda Hughes’ poem “My Mother”, a

²⁵ The beat in “Wildest Dreams” is a recording of Swift’s heartbeat.

paraphrase of “Lady Lazarus”, Plath has been turned into “Their Sylvia Suicide Doll” (line 44) who gets “up-dug for repeat performances” (line 12) of her suicide for the crowd of “peanut eaters” (20). The speaker of Swift’s “mirrorball” is also trapped in the habit of performance and keeps “spinning in my highest heels” and “on my tallest tiptoes” even when the audience is all but gone. If the “authentic self” never shows or interacts with its surroundings, is it “real” in any way that matters? If the performance never ceases, and the “authentic self” never reveals itself, does not the performance at some point *become* the “authentic self”? Identity is not constructed as a deep-rooted, constant truth here, but the fabricated result of relentless work: “I’ve never been a natural, all I do is try, try, try [...] to keep you looking at me”. Not the intuitive, effortless expression of inner truth, but a perpetually created and re-created simulacrum of the “self”. This acute awareness of the constructions behind the veneer of authenticity is part of what propels the aesthetics of biographical performativity; using forged parts to construct an end product of reality and truth.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this text, as it was set out in the introduction, was to use Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift as examples to investigate the conflation of life and art, and to “de-stinguish” (as opposed to distinguish) the categories of person and product; life and art; objectivity and emotion; viewing them not as opposites, but as a unity and as co-dependent co-creators of each other. Life is the basis for art is the basis for life is the basis for art. Mad studies and biographical performativity have been used to reveal how textual and personal identities are constructed by building on each other. These frameworks have also facilitated the analysis of how narratives actively *construct* reality, while also *being constructed* within their context.

Plath and Swift are both cultural icons of a modern era, and while they may be very different, this thesis has also shown that they have many similarities. Confessional and

auto/biographical art is not usually interpreted as a collaborative artform, but as the examples of Plath and Swift show, they have many contributors to their works. A text is not finished when it is published; publishing is but the moment when it enters a new stage of synergy. The texts saturate reality, and vice versa. The dynamic energy of the text is not relegated to “the text itself”, nor does it lie in its potential for scandal – rather, its power is situated in its engagement with the aesthetics of identity through performance.

Both confessional poetry and auto/biographical works have a tenuous relationship to truth in the objective sense, on account of the inherently subjective perspectives contained within them. By exploring how the authors and their works have been interpreted, and how they destabilize the author-text relationship, questions that have ramifications far beyond those of confessional poetry, auto/biography, or biographical performativity have been raised. The #MeToo movement has served to illustrate both the power and the danger of a confessional paradigm. It can be used to dethrone powerful abusers, initiate a process of healing, and build communities on a foundation of solidarity and understanding, but it can also leave the “confessor” vulnerable to exploitation and harm. While it might be easier to keep a mental separation between art and reality, to do so would be to deprive oneself of the interesting artistic practices at play within the threshold aesthetic. More importantly, it would be to ignore one’s moral responsibilities. Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to draw from the discussions in this thesis is that the act of interpretation, both of reality and of art, is a responsibility that should be handled with care.

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