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SWIFTLORE:

An Analysis of the Narratives Constructed in Taylor Swift's *Folklore* Album

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado à Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, como parte dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de licenciatura em Letras - Inglês/Português.

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To my love, my muse, my best friend, the one who belongs with me. André, there is truly an invisible string tying us together. Thank you for motivating and supporting me on this monograph, and on everything else in life. It really is fun that you are the 1, my one.

*“I wanna be defined by the things that I love
Not the things I hate
Not the things I'm afraid of, I'm afraid of
Not the things that haunt me in the middle of the night
I, I just think that
You are what you love.”*

– Taylor Swift, *Daylight*.
In: Lover, 2019.

1. RESUMO

Esta monografia se ocupa de realizar uma análise textual das composições líricas das canções do oitavo álbum de estúdio da cantora e compositora norte-americana, Taylor Swift, intitulado *Folklore*. O objetivo do texto é de explicitar as características narrativas das canções, assim como traçar paralelos entre suas inspirações em ocorrências e personalidades reais, memórias e sentimentos pessoais da compositoras, e suas criações e complementos imagéticos e fictícios. Além disso, o trabalho apresenta em seu quinto tópico, “Song Analysis”, a interpretação de cada estória individual construída e narrada com início, meio e fim, em cada faixa do álbum, evidenciando seus personagens, locais, momentos de acontecimento e enredo, que são elementos que estão presentes nas composições de Swift, assim como em outros corpos narrativos, uma junção de cenários que compõem um universo imagético. É concluído que, apesar do formato musical, as faixas de *Folklore* têm, conforme seu estilo de composição, a capacidade de tecer estórias que evocam sentimentos individuais e coletivos, assim como as narrativas tradicionais e os cânticos folclóricos, trazendo à tona tópicos que estão tanto no âmbito particular, como da memória e dos sentimentos, assim como no plural, apresentando cenários corriqueiros do ser como coletivo — situações amorosas e vivências compartilhadas como o momento da pandemia de COVID-19.

Palavras-chave: Folklore, Narrativa, Taylor Swift, Canção, Análise Textual.

2. ABSTRACT

This monograph occupies itself of making a textual analysis of the lyrical compositions of the songs listed on the north-american singer and song-writer, Taylor Swift's, eighth studio album titled *Folklore*. The aim of this text is to explicit the narrative characteristics of the songs, as well as to trace parallels in between its inspirations of real life occurrences and personalities, personal memories and feelings of the song-writer, and her imagetic and fictional creations and complements. Furthermore, this paper presents in its fifth topic, "Song Analysis", the interpretation of each individual story constructed and narrated with a beginning, middle and end, in each one of the album's tracks, bringing to light their characters, places, moments of happenings and plots, that are elements present in Swift's compositions, as well as in other narrative bodies, a conjunction of scenarios that build an imagetic universe. It is concluded that, even though its format being musical compositions, the tracks present in *Folklore* have, for their style of composition, the capacity of weaving stories that evoke individual as well as collective feelings, like the traditional narratives and folkloric carols do, bringing up topics that are as much as in a particular scope, such as memory and feelings, as also in a plural scope, presenting unexceptional scenarios of the being in a collective point of view – love-life situations and shared experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key-words: Folklore, Narrative, Taylor Swift, Song, Textual Analysis.

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*“I hit the ground running each night
I hit the Sunday matinée
You know the greatest films of all time were never made”*

– Taylor Swift, *the 1* (track no. 1)

3. INTRODUCTION

The art of storytelling is more than just a method of communication and creating fictional realms, it is a timeless craft that connects individuals across cultures, eras, and experiences. It is the thread that weaves together the human experience, preserving emotions, beliefs, and memories in ways that transcend generations. From the oral traditions of ancient Greece, where epics, like *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, were recited and sung in the squares, to the storytelling of the Renaissance, to contemporary songwriting that turns melodies into vessels for narratives, storytelling has always adapted to the mediums and moments in which it exists and to their public. Whether passed down in the form of epic poetry, folktales, novels, or through the art of music, stories have remained essential in shaping the way society perceives the world and communicates shared human experiences.

The general nature of storytelling lies not only in the content it conveys but also in its structure. Narratives have the ability to capture the complexities of life and feelings – heroes, conflicts, love, tragedy, and resolution. They are able to explore the depth of human emotions, creating both personal bonds and collective connections, either way, touching the inner places of one's minds and hearts. Through storytelling and folktales, societies have been able to preserve their memories, shape their identities, and create a sense of belonging. In this sense, storytelling is a tradition that has a life of its own, constantly evolving and changing while keeping its main objective: to flourish the imagination and reach people's hearts.

In exploring this tradition, one can see how storytelling evolves while maintaining its essence: the ability to evoke emotions, paint vivid imagery, and bring shared truths to life. Whether through ancient myths or modern-day songs, storytelling retains its power to captivate and resonate with people all around the globe. In the world of music, Taylor Swift's songwriting stands as a remarkable example of how this age-old craft is alive and thriving today. Taking inspiration in the tradition of folklore – the art of tales passed from person to person – her eighth studio album, titled *Folklore*, represents a synthesis of narrative craft and musical expression. With her intricate lyrics, vivid settings, and complex characters, Swift

transforms personal memories, historical references, and fictional personas into a cohesive narrative universe that is both accessible and deeply evocative.

This work occupies itself of analyzing Taylor Swift's *Folklore's* lyrics, it will explore how music can be a medium for narrative exploration, blending the qualities of traditional storytelling with Swift's composition technique. There are eight tracks being interpreted in the text, that have their own plots, characters and sceneries that, together, create the musical universe of the album. Through her ability to craft fully detailed stories in each one of her songs, Swift demonstrates how storytelling in music can serve as both a mirror to society and a bridge between the personal and the universal, uniting listeners in shared emotional experiences while continuing to honor the deep cultural legacy of narrative.

*“And I still talk to you (when I’m screaming at the sky)
And when you can’t sleep at night (you hear my stolen lullabies)”*

– Taylor Swift, *my tears ricochet* (track no. 5)

4. STORYTELLING

A dive into the technique and how Taylor Swift utilizes it in her writing

Storytelling is a quintessential human craft that has been around since the dawn of civilization. Long before there was even the advent of paper and ink, and any formal registers of history, people were telling stories. Whether its purpose was to perpetuate a local history, to tell great myths or to put a child to sleep, stories have been told in many different ways around the world, and more than just told, sometimes they were sung. Reflecting on historical practices, one can imagine bustling public squares in ancient Greece and Rome where the great epics were performed, read and sung. Poets and bards would gather to share their stories, captivating audiences with tales of heroism, love, and tragedy. And as much as they were written as poems, taking the renowned examples of epics like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* these productions had many narrative characteristics. There were characters, each with their unique traits and motivations that propelled the story. The vividly described places that allowed the listeners to visualize the settings, all of it while the time established the context for the unfolding events. And, of course, the plots, filled with conflict and resolution, mirroring the complexities of life, just like every other narrative that has captivated audiences throughout the ages.

Narratives rely on a set of fundamental elements that give them structure and meaning. At the heart of any story are the characters – whether they are the main figure driving the plot, or the opposing force, an antagonist, creating conflict. Their development and motivations push the narrative forward, engaging the audience and giving purpose to the events that unfold. The setting, both in terms of time and place, forms the backdrop against which the story is told. It helps create the mood and atmosphere, grounding the narrative in a particular context. The plot itself follows a natural progression, moving through different stages, from the introduction of characters and conflict, to the rising tension, and finally toward resolution. This structure ensures that the story flows logically and keeps the audience interested. Beyond the surface of the main aspects and characteristics, themes and symbols bring depth to the

narrative. Universal ideas and beliefs are intertwined throughout the story, while motifs and symbols reinforce these ideas. The structure of the narrative may be straightforward or complex, and the pacing helps guide how the story is experienced. Each element work together to create a cohesive narrative that not only tells a story but also explores larger and more interesting concepts that evoke emotions on the ones reading, or in this case, listening. As a narrative can be explained by a combination of signs and symbols that build cohesive stories, why could it not be exploited in the field of music? J.M. Lotman states on the chapter “The structure of the narrative text” of the collection *Narrative Theory: Critical Concepts in Literature and Cultural Studies*, Volume 1, that:

The principle of joining signs together and of the sign chain lies at the basis of the narrative genres of the verbal arts. The narrative principle is more complex in texts that do not have an internal, regulating division into discrete units and where narration is constructed as the combination of some initial stable state and subsequent movement. [...] but music is just as ideal a model of development and movement in a pure form, and here the semantic aspect is reduced to a minimum and yields its place to syntagmatics. (LOTMAN, page 23, 2004.)

In this sense, it is possible to say that songwriting, as well as other textual productions, can be a craft that creates narratives, being fictional, based on true historical facts, or even the writer's own life experiences. Furthermore, it is a more dynamic way to tell stories, joining the lores to the melodies, and for that reason, massifying an even stronger atmosphere to the story being told.

Taking this into consideration and looking at the title of the album, it is possible to paint the picture that Swift was drawing the entire time. The term “folklore” refers to stories of the common folk told by people to people. Although the most known folklore nowadays are of fantastic and fictional creatures, like the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood” for example, the folktales have been around for centuries, being the backbone of a tradition that bonds groups of people through their shared beliefs and experiences, as in the words of Henry H. Glassie – Professor Emeritus, whose studies are focused on folklore – in his work “*Tradition.*” *The Journal of American Folklore*:

[F]olk and lore link people and expression in a functional circle. Epic and nation, myth and society, custom and community - all conjoin communications and groups. The group exists because its members create communications that call it together and bring it to order. Communications exist because people acting together, telling

tales at the hearth... develop significant forms that function at once as signs of identity and forces for cohesion. (GLASSIE, page 400, 1995.)

In this sense, it is viable to say that the craft of storytelling in Taylor Swift's *Folklore* is a work of folkloric tales and, more specifically, narrative ones, that are composed and performed in the form of music.

This craft that has the ability to take the readers, or listeners, to unknown, sometimes magical and intriguing places is the foundation of Swift's writing. From the beginning of her career, she has taken inspiration from novels and dramatic classics like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to illustrate her lyrics, for lacking real life experiences at a young age, the song-writer would seek love in novels and in her family member's life stories to narrate in her songs. This skill to translate full stories into music has been mastered in Swift's eighth album titled *Folklore*. The album is a collection of stories the songwriter thought of during the fearsome moment in time of the pandemic, mixing personal memories and events in history with made up characters, Taylor builds narratives that transports the listeners to the imaginarium of the album, creating a coherent atmosphere that goes beyond the melodies. Not only do each song has its own narrative, but in a few cases, some of them connect with each other, creating an even bigger scenario and different points of view to the same story. There are settings, locations, complex characters and narrators that show, in a lyrical way, their point of view of the situations they face along with their feelings. Swift manages to tell stories from three to four minutes that go beyond the surface and exhale emotion, and immerse the listeners in the tales of *Folklore*.

*“Time, curious time
Gave me no compasses, gave me no signs
Were there clues I didn't see?”*

– Taylor Swift, *invisible string* (track no. 11)

5. SONG ANALYSIS:

Breaking down each detail that builds the narratives in Swift's songs

This topic will cover the interpretation of details that construct the narrative fabric of *Folklore's* tracks, explaining the connection between real life historical events and personalities and the characters created by the song-writer. In the sub-topics, it will be unraveled how Swift evokes her own personal experiences and memories, makes tributes to great names in history, as well as gives life to brand new personas through different points of view to different stories — and, in the case of item 5.2, the same story with three different perspectives. All of this to create the imagetic musical universe of the album that may be taken as a narrative book, made up of different stories that just as the concept of folklore, tell tales of the people, to other people, creating a bond through the art of emotion. Whether it is by telling something fantastic, such as the life of an eccentric socialite, a common feeling of betrayal and heartbreak, love and friendship memories, or even the tragic times of the pandemic, *Folklore* is able to reach out the most intimate points of one's mind: their memories and feelings, building a proximity to its listeners that enables them to picture the imaginary of Swift's eighth studio album.

5.1 Track no. 3:

the last great american dynasty

On this emblematic track 3, Swift tells the adventurous stories of the previous owner of her Rhode Island's Holiday House, the American socialite Rebekah Harkness. The mansion on the Watch Hill that now hosts every 4th of July Taylor parties, used to have even more luxurious parties and guests back in its high society days. Swift turns this historic real life figure into the main character of the exuberant and whimsical stories of the track, bringing her back to life. Structure-wise, the first few stanzas of the song introduces the character, the story's setting and place:

*“Rebekah rode up on the afternoon train, it was sunny
Her saltbox house on the coast took her mind off St. Louis
Bill was the heir to the Standard Oil name and money
And the town said, "How did a middle-class divorcée do it?"
The wedding was charming, if a little gauche
There's only so far new money goes
They picked out a home and called it "Holiday House"
(the last great american dynasty, track no. 3)*

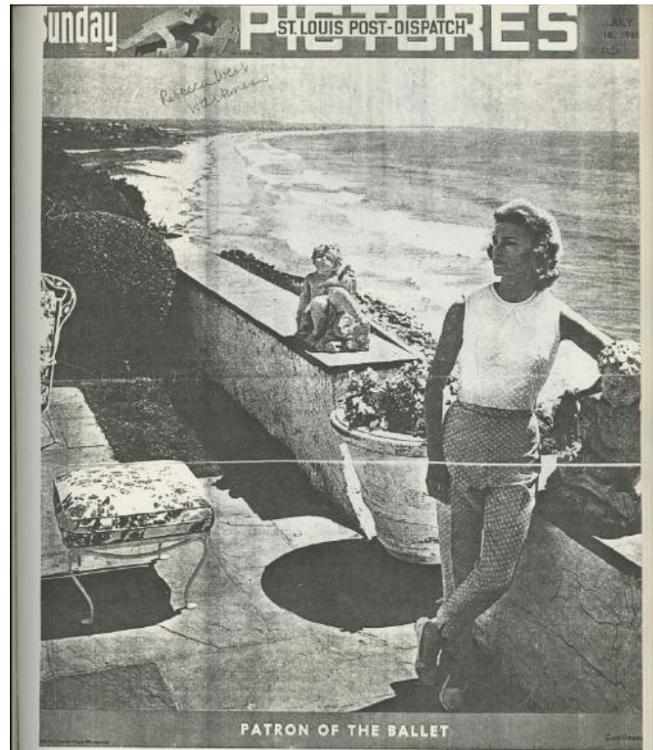


Image 1: Rebekah Harkness at her home, 1965. Missouri Historical Society Collections. Source: Teen Vogue.

The song-writer starts the narrative with the resource of weather to paint a happy start that goes along with the upbeat melody of the song. It was sunny when Rebekah met her then husband, Bill, and moved to the Holiday House – where the entire narrative takes place. When the public thinks of “sunny”, it brings the imaged of summer, that exhales fun and lightness in the common sense. On this set, there is also character description through the eyes of high-class society. Bill, being a fortune heir and Rebekah being painted as a middle-class divorcée, shows how the main character is badly seen by her neighbors. Following up, there is the tension before the chorus, that is expressed in the lyrics with the beginning of the adventures that the Holiday House would set:

*“Their parties were tasteful, if a little loud
The doctor had told him to settle down
It must have been her fault his heart gave out”*

(the last great american dynasty, track no. 3)

On the decease of Bill, is when Rebekah is most harshly judged. The integrants of their society blamed Rebekah for her husband's death and for disrupting their calm and full of polish masked manners way of life. This judgment is illustrated in the first two chorus of the song:

*“And they said
“There goes the last great American dynasty
Who knows, if she never showed up, what could've been
There goes the maddest woman this town has ever seen
She had a marvelous time ruining everything””
(the last great american dynasty, track no. 3)*

Tired of judgments, Rebekah frees herself from society's restraints and starts hosting outrageous parties and spending her fortune in her widow era:

*“Rebekah gave up on the Rhode Island set forever
Flew in all her Bitch Pack friends from the city
Filled the pool with champagne and swam with the big names
And blew through the money on the boys and the ballet
And losing on card game bets with Dali”
(the last great american dynasty, track no. 3)*

When Swift writes “blew the money on the boys and the ballet”, she refers to how Rebekah spent her dollars supporting art. Rebekah Harkness has left a quintessential mark on the history of Ballet of the US. Back in her time, she supported ballet companies, would receive dancers at Holiday House to practice and later on, founded her own ballet company and bought the old New York's Colonial Theatre, which she renamed as Harkness Theatre.

As the song approaches the end, the story of Rebekah and the Holiday House also comes to conclusion.

*“They say she was seen on occasion
Pacing the rocks, staring out at the midnight sea
And in a feud with her neighbor
She stole his dog and dyed it key lime green”
(the last great american dynasty, track no. 3)*

This is the last time the listeners hear about Rebekah, as she was seen only on occasion pacing the shore near her house, it gives the subtext that the socialite is now retiring from her eras of

party hosting and grand adventures. Rebekah's adventures come to an end, but her beloved house lives on, and Swift gifts the listeners with a plot twist right before the last chorus:

*“50 years is a long time
Holiday House sat quietly on that beach
Free of women with madness, their men and bad habits
And then it was bought by me”
(the last great american dynasty, track no. 3)*



Image 2: Taylor Swift at the Holiday House. Source: Taylor Swift/Instagram.

The narrative is concluded in the first person, as Rebekah passes the hat to Taylor herself, to be now responsible for hosting parties and being talked about and judged by her high-class neighbors. She introduces herself as a character to the story of the Holiday House, that was left quiet for fifty years until another woman with love for arts habits it again, reopening the circle.

5.2 Tracks no. 2, 8 and 14:

The love triangle between *cardigan*, *august* and *betty*

Love triangles are novel's classics, they are very commonly used artifacts to build tension in the story and give more complexity to the character's love journey, like in the literature's classics *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Sense and Sensibility*. On the album, Swift creates one in an unusual way. Instead of writing one song that would narrate the tragedy, the song-writer brings to life the three perspectives of the same occasion in the songs

cardigan, *august* and *betty*, writing parallels in the stanzas and leaving to the public the responsibility to understand each side of the story. On her “Eras Tour”, when introducing *betty*, Swift admits to the public her intentions to build the three-sided story. She says that for the first time she created characters to her songs instead of talking about her own personal life stories. And these characters are the ones living this tragic love triangle.

The second track of *Folklore*, and its first single, *cardigan*, narrates the point of view of the story narrated by Betty, a suburban girl that has her heart broken and her trust lost by her boyfriend, James, who has a summer affair – that is, later on, explicit in *august* and *betty*. The track involves the listener on a feeling of nostalgia of knowing someone in your young years, falling in love, and feeling warm and embraced by that person in the first few stanzas of the song. The character tells how she trusted her beloved and how he used to make her feel special and like she belonged with someone:

*“And when I felt like I was an old cardigan
Under someone's bed
You put me on and said I was your favorite”
(cardigan, track no. 2)*

This trust will soon be shown to be lost in the following stanzas, introducing the love affair that James had:

*“A friend to all is a friend to none
Chase two girls, lose the one
When you are young, they assume you know nothin'”
(cardigan, track no. 2)*

At this moment, Swift builds the first parallel between the tracks. When “Betty” says “when you are young, they assume you know nothing” it is like she is directly quoting an excuse James gives to justify his mistakes, creating a dialogue between the tracks two and fourteen, that leads the listener to make the connection between the two stories, and understanding that the main character of *cardigan*, is in fact, Betty:

*“In the garden, would you trust me
If I told you it was just a summer thing?
I'm only 17, I don't know anythin'
But I know I miss you”
(betty, track no. 14)*

Following the bridge of the song, it is the moment of climax, when the tension in the lyrics and in the melody are leading to the conclusion of the story through Betty's eyes, and the events unfold. In this moment, the listeners understand that Betty is much more mature than James — even though they seem to have similar ages —, still on the parallel of knowing things when you are young, as she says “cause I knew everything when I was young” (*cardigan*, track n°2), which develops the reason why she would know what was going to happen. It also makes another dialogue that confirms the events of the story were experienced by both characters in *cardigan* and *betty*, when James goes to Betty's house at her party:

*“I knew you'd miss me once the thrill expired
And you'd be standin' in my front porch light”
(cardigan, track no. 2)*

*“Betty, I'm here on your doorstep
And I planned it out for weeks now
But it's finally sinkin' in
[...]
So I showed up at your party
[...]
Will you kiss me on the porch
In front of all your stupid friends?”
(betty, track no. 14)*

Leading to the conclusion that both tracks have in common: James goes back to Betty after his love affair, regretting his decisions and stating that she is the one he misses and wants to be with, so the nostalgia of the memories narrated in *cardigan*, turns into a returning occurrence motivated by the longing of both parts:

*“But I knew you
Dancin' in your Levis
Drunk under a streetlight
[...]
To kiss in cars and downtown bars
Was all we needed”
(cardigan, track no. 2)*

*“Standin' in your cardigan
Kissin' in my car again
Stopped at a streetlight
You know I miss you
Standin' in your cardigan
Kissin' in my car again
Stopped at a streetlight
You know I miss you”*

(*betty*, track no. 14)

But still, these are only two sides to the same story. The third point of view is given by the girl who narrates *august*, the one who has the infamous summer affair with James. Although it is a love-triangle with an affair type of story, Swift shows on track number eight, that the third party of the story is not a villain, as other stories like these tend to paint the picture of the “other woman”, she was simply someone who was involved in a feeling that would never flourish more than a single summer harvest. Although the listeners know the names of two out of the three characters of this tragic tale, the one who tells her side on the eighth track does not have a name, which expresses how she can be seen as someone how merely passess through the lives of the other two momentarily, being forgotten by time just like *august* slips away.

Her side of the story starts with the uncertainty of the involvement, as well as the feeling of being left behind because that road never had a safe ground to step on:

*“Whispers of "Are you sure?"
"Never have I ever before"*

*But I can see us lost in the memory
August slipped away into a moment in time
'Cause it was never mine”
(august, track no. 8)*

And while the one in *august* sees the situation as an experience, a relationship she wishes she could have lived for longer than just a end-of-summer month, James, on the other hand, has a very regretful sight on the occurrence:

*“You heard the rumors from Inez
You can't believe a word she says most times
But this time, it was true
The worst thing that I ever did
Was what I did to you”
(betty, track no. 14)*

The lady of track number eight remembers how it all started with a car ride that she offered James, and how hopeful she used to be in that forgotten time, while the boy sees the situation as if she was the one to blame for him cheating on his girlfriend, Betty, who he claims, when telling his side of the story, that was the one who he was thinking of the entire time:

*“But do you remember?
Remember when I pulled up and said, "Get in the car"
And then canceled my plans just in case you'd call?
Back when I was livin' for the hope of it all”
(august, track no. 8)*

*“I was walkin' home on broken cobblestones
Just thinkin' of you when she pulled up like
A figment of my worst intentions
She said "James, get in, let's drive"
Those days turned into nights
Slept next to her, but
I dreamt of you all summer long”
(betty, track no. 14)*

And that would not be the first time James would put the blame of his own actions on one of the two girls, as he also blames Betty in the first place, for creating distance between the couple, that would, in his point of view, lead to the love affair:

*“Betty, I know where it all went wrong
Your favorite song was playin'
From the far side of the gym
I was nowhere to be found
I hate the crowds, you know that
Plus, I saw you dance with him”
(betty, track no. 14)*

However, the listeners already know how the love triangle story comes to an end: with the broken up couple, Betty and James, getting back together, and the persona in *august* being just seen as a summer mistake, a mere figment of the boy's worst intentions personified. As the track eight ends, the instrumentals slowly fade, while the girl longs on how all her hope was lost, representing how she, herself, was also faded away in the story, and how the feelings she caught in those summer nights still lingers in her.

On that note, melody-wise, the three songs have instrumentals that help the reader feel the mental state of the characters, along with the point of the story they are telling. While *cardigan* has a more mystical, calm and sentimental tone that creates an atmosphere of nostalgia, longing, hope and heartbreak, *betty* is more upbeat and sounds more youthful, however, not in a sense of happiness or joy, but in a more naive, apologetic and even anxious by the end of the song, tone. And *august*, much like *cardigan*, has a nostalgic feel in its melody, but different than the second track, it exhales lost and hopelessness in the “living for the hope of it all” that was completely blown away.

5.3 Track no. 7:

seven

The seventh track of the album, also titled *seven*, is a recollection of the song-writer's childhood fogged memories, as well as it is an ode to childhood. Swift, throughout her career, has written a few songs within the theme of childhood, however, on *Folklore*, her child memories become fantasy, much as if it was a fairytale, but not in the sense of a magical story, but the reality and the feelings through a child's perspective. It is an ode to the lost purity of feeling and letting people know how you feel, without having the restraints of adulthood and society's manners. In the documentary "Folklore: the long pond studio sessions", streamed on the platform Disney+, Swift talks about how she got the inspiration to dig into her childhood feelings when she watched a child throwing a tantrum at the grocery store, and reflected on the rawness of the emotions that children let out when they do not know the rules to civility.

In the first few verses of the song, Swift recalls her yearly years of life, in Pennsylvania, asking the listener, or a third person, to picture her like she was back then, feeling like she was flying when sitting on a swing, and questions: "are there still beautiful things?" (*seven*, track no. 7). This last verse evokes the overall feeling of the album, that is nostalgia. Is the world people see in their adult life as beautiful as it is when they are children? There is a magical and pure way to see the world in the early years of one's life that gets lost throughout the continuous influences of the real adult world, and this way is translated into the narrative of the track. The story of the seventh year old Pennsylvanian girl and her friend, although it may be faded in the present, still left its marks and remains:

*"Sweet tea in the summer
Cross your heart, won't tell no other
And though I can't recall your face
I still got love for you"
(seven, track no. 7)*

This character, who seemingly parted ways with the persona of the narrative, had such a significant impact on the core memories of the narrator, showing what real friendship and love was like, that even if their name got lost in the fog of time, is still remembered.

There is also a connection that may be made between the song and the Pulitzer Prize winner, Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem, titled *Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies*, as there are other mentions and hidden clues towards the poetic inspirations who led Taylor's compositions throughout the album. In the poem, Millay refers to adults as people

who are dead, and “do not drink their tea, though they always said / Tea was such a comfort” (MILLAY, 1937), and the track starts by remembering how tea was sweet in the childhood memory. That can be a reference to how life is more sugar-coated when you are younger and still have your innocence intact, and how the bitterness of growing up makes people forget to take their tea, or to cultivate what makes them as happy as a child. And that is what the American poet meant to say with “a kingdom where nobody dies”, it is the more innocent and pure years of one’s life, where creativity is on its rise, and fantasy and reality are one same intertwined fabric of time, when you can be anything and go anywhere:

*“And I think you should come live with
Me and we can be pirates
Then you won't have to cry
[...]
Pack your dolls and a sweater
We'll move to India forever
Passed down like folk songs
Our love lasts so long”
(seven, track no. 7)*

The world is even bigger when you are a child, but you know what means the most: your most beloved belongings and a company that is real and loving.

5.4 Track no. 13

epiphany

On the thirteenth track of the album, Swift weaves a parallel between her grandfather’s war experiences to the COVID-19 experiences that people all around the world were having. This track is one of the compositions that create a dialogue between the song-writer’s own life stories — in this case, the memories of one of her grandparents — and the collective memory and feeling of the moment the world was in when the song was written. Comparing a battlefield to a hospital is not an unusual picture, especially during the period of time of the pandemic. On the documentary “Folklore: the lake pond studio sessions”, Swift brings forward her writing process to the track, that is a result of curiosity and the tragedy of the lived time when it was written. She claims that her grandfather, who fought in World War II, would never speak about his time in the military, and by his family’s research on the curiosity of not knowing much about what he had faced, they got to know that

he had, just like the people on the frontlines of the battle against the virus, seen such sadness that it became unspeakable.

*“Keep your helmet, keep your life, son
Just a flesh wound, here's your rifle
Crawling up the beaches now
"Sir, I think he's bleeding out"
And some things you just can't speak about”
(epiphany, track no. 13)*

The verses of the song paint a picture of pain and atrocity, along with its melancholic acoustic melody, the track transmits well the feeling of despair that must be felt in a battlefield, facing its terrors, and the moment of loss of the pandemic, that was a moment in time that no one was prepared to live, in the verocious way that it was:

*“Something med school did not cover
Someone's daughter, someone's mother
Holds your hand through plastic now
"Doc, I think she's crashing out"
And some things you just can't speak about”
(epiphany, track no. 13)*

In these two verses in between the chorus, it is clear the parallel that was built, one of a soldier and the other of a medical professional, both seeing unspeakable sadness of the end of a life.

5.5 Track no. 17 - Bonus Track

the lakes

The bonus track of the deluxe version of *Folklore* is a tribute to the art of poetry. With a dramatic melody and ultra romantic lyrics, once again, Swift transposes a personal experience into a narrative. In the case of the seventeenth track of the album, the song-writer reminisces about a trip to Windermere, in England, and creates a link to the Lake Poets, who lived in the Lake District around the nineteenth century and were responsible for the founding of the “Lake School” of poetry.

*“Take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die
I don't belong, and my beloved, neither do you
Those Windermere peaks look like a perfect place to cry
I'm setting off, but not without my muse”*

(the lakes, track no. 17)

In this track, Swift tells the story of how she longs to escape the madness of her public life to live in a peaceful place and moment with her beloved, for she mentions how she no longer is built to take the heavy burden of the stalking media in the first few stanzas of the composition: “I’m not cut out for all these cynical clones / These hunters with cell phones” (*the lakes*, track no. 17). In the third verse of the song, also on the setting of the distress her career has brought to the song-writer, Swift makes clear the influence of the Lake Poets in her writing:

*“What should be over burrowed under my skin
In heart-stopping waves of hurt
I’ve come too far to watch some namedropping sleaze
Tell me what are my words worth”
(the lakes, track no. 17)*

Swift plays with the words “words” and “worth” to make a subtle anagram that compose the surname of the English romantic poet, who was one of the main names of the Lake Poets, William Wordsworth.



Image 3: Portrait du poète anglais William Wordsworth. (Translation: “Portrait of the English poet William Wordsworth.”). API/Gamma-Rapho. Source: Getty Images.

Wordsworth's influence on Swift's composition is noted throughout the elements of nature that surrounds The Lakes, and how emotion and sensations are captured alongside the natural components, like the trees, the auroras, waves and wisteria are connected to the intensity of grief, love and sadness.

*"I want auroras and sad prose
I want to watch wisteria grow right over my bare feet
'Cause I haven't moved in years
And I want you right here
A red rose grew up out of ice frozen ground
With no one around to tweet it
While I bathe in cliffside pools
With my calamitous love and insurmountable grief"
(the lakes, track no. 17)*

As no word in Taylor Swift's compositions is not meticulously planned, the wisteria is not just any random plant, it holds symbolism. Although it may have a few different folklore origins where it bloomed, whether it was in Korea, Japan, China or even in Europe, where it was spread during the Victorian era, one thing was common in all tales: it is a tree that symbolizes love and luck. And to complement, in the Victorian era, it was also a symbol of being clung to someone, or somewhere, as when it grew its vines formed a clinging pattern. Therefore, it creates the idea of wanting to create roots and stay still for a long time in that same place, with that same person, as the lyrics say: "I want to watch wisteria grow right over my bare feet / 'Cause I haven't moved in years / And I want you right here" (*the lakes*, track no. 17), and to be there till the end of one's life, as the chorus suggests: "Take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die" (*the lakes*, track no. 17).

*“I know they said the end is near
But I'm still on my tallest tiptoes
Spinning in my highest heels, love
Shining just for you”*

– Taylor Swift, *mirrorball* (track no. 6)

6. CONCLUSION

Final thoughts

Through the analysis of the lyrics of the eight songs mentioned in this work it is possible to see that, in fact, Swift is able to construct entire settings to the stories she builds in each track. The mixture of melody and plots involve the listeners into the magic fabric of the universe of *Folklore*, flourishing strong emotions like sorrow, love, heartbreak, despair, grief and sadness. Each song has components that recall why the album is named the way it is, for it narrates stories that could be easily relatable to many people, making its audience feel a sense of community, for the general feelings evoked in the album are, at their purest form, above all, very human. It is an ode to the art of storytelling at the same time it is a replica of folktales, sung stories that could be lived by many different people, give them advice and comfort, like a shoulder to cry on. *Folklore* is a recollection of memories that transports its listeners to the deepest oceans of their minds, creates a dialogue with their inner child, and through the art of music, embraces their experiences and emotions. Much like the words of Wordsworth, Swift tells tales of her mind, mixing reality with fiction and coming up with involving stories.

“Sometimes it suits me better to invent
A Tale from my own heart, more near akin
To my own passions, and habitual thoughts,
Some variegated Story, in the main
Lofty, but the unsubstantial Structure melts
Before the very sun that brightens it,
Mist into air dissolving! Then, a wish,
My last and favourite aspiration, mounts,
With yearning, tow’rds some philosophic Song
Of Truth that cherishes our daily life;”
(WORDSWORTH, from line 221 to 230, in: *The Prelude*)

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