



Reassessing and Expanding the Literary Canon: Are Taylor Swift's *folklore*, *evermore*, and *The Tortured Poets Department* Forms of Contemporary Literature?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the growing recognition of popular music as literature, focusing on the literary significance of Taylor Swift's albums *folklore* (2020), *evermore* (2020), and *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024). The study examines selected lyrics, analysing Swift's use of poetic techniques such as extended metaphor, narrative fragmentation, intertextuality, and symbolic imagery. These techniques connect her songwriting to literary traditions and allow her music to explore themes common in traditional literature. The research situates Swift's work within broader discussions of the literary canon, popular culture, and literary value. It challenges the divide between music and literature, arguing that music, like written texts, can carry emotional and intellectual depth. The paper also explores how Swift's albums address themes of identity, memory, and artistic expression, questioning the exclusion of popular music from serious literary study. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to efforts to expand the literary canon in the digital age. It shows how Swift's work reflects the evolving relationship between contemporary songwriting and literary traditions, suggesting that music should be considered part of the literary world. This research emphasizes the valuable insights music can offer into timeless literary themes.



Introduction

The lines between literature and popular music are becoming increasingly blurred, pushing academics to rethink how we define and value artistic works. The significance of this research lies in highlighting the fact that Taylor Swift's work has been introduced into the study of American Literature. Bloom argues that "literature is not merely language; it is also the will to figuration, the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere" (*The Western Canon* 12). Harvard University has introduced a course titled Taylor and Her World, taught by Professor Stephanie Burt, as part of its English Literature curriculum. According to The Harvard Gazette, the course "studies pop star's lyrics alongside classic literature" ("New English Course Studies Pop Star's Lyrics").

Amid this shift, Taylor Swift stands out as a particularly compelling case. Her albums *folklore* (2020), *evermore* (2020), and *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024) mark a clear departure from the traditional pop sound she was known for, moving toward a more introspective and literary style of songwriting. These albums are rich with intricate narratives, layered symbolism, intertextual references, and refined poetic techniques. Swift's work taps into traditions of narrative poetry, confessional writing, and modern lyricism, using devices like extended metaphor, shifting character perspectives, lyrical ambiguity, and allusions to canonical literary works. In doing so, she blurs the old divides between song and poem, between popular culture and high literature. As noted by The Grammys in the article "Taylor Swift, The 'Tortured Poet': 6 Times She's Used Poetry in Her Work," what is often overlooked are "the poetic tools Swift channels to better understand herself. From turning short stanzas into songs to categorizing tracks as 'quill' or 'fountain pen,' Swift deftly incorporates her love of poetry and writing into her work" (The Grammys, 2024). The Ringer notes that "along with Swift and Emily Dickinson—whom the musician herself has cited as a major influence for her 'Quill Pen' song catalogue—the 'members' include William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, and John Keats, with Sylvia Plath, Robert Frost, and William Wordsworth as late additions" (Grady).

This paper argues that Swift's recent albums deserve to be read and valued as literary texts, not just as products of popular culture. Through close analysis of selected lyrics, the study explores how her songs engage deeply with themes of memory, identity, emotion, and artistic creation—concerns at the heart of much canonical literature. For a long time, song lyrics—especially those from the realm of popular music—were dismissed as entertainment rather than seen as serious literary expression. Yet today, with



a growing interest in the depth and artistry of popular music, these rigid boundaries are being questioned, opening up the possibility for a broader, more inclusive view of literature.

In the end, this research aims to show that Swift's *folklore*, *evermore*, and *The Tortured Poets Department* are powerful examples of how contemporary songwriting can meet and even expand literary traditions, offering fresh ways to rethink the evolving shape of the literary canon in the twenty-first century. Therefore, despite ongoing debates, the question remains: can Taylor Swift truly be considered part of contemporary literature—and does her work challenge and expand the boundaries of the literary canon?

Analysing Poetic Techniques in Taylor Swift's Anthologies

In this section, we explore how Taylor Swift employs poetic techniques across her critically acclaimed albums *folklore* (2020), *evermore* (2020), and *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024). With these albums, Swift pivots away from conventional pop songwriting, embracing a style deeply rooted in literary traditions. Her use of storytelling, symbolism, aesthetic richness, and emotional depth not only elevates her music but also carves out a meaningful space for contemporary songwriting within the literary canon.

a. *folklore* (2020)

With *folklore*, Swift makes a deliberate and striking shift in her creative direction, embracing a more reflective and literary approach to songwriting. Moving away from the polished pop sound that had defined much of her earlier work, she turns inward, crafting an album shaped by introspection, narrative depth, and rich symbolism. *folklore* feels less like a traditional pop album and more like a collection of interconnected short stories set to music—populated by layered characters, shifting perspectives, and symbolic landscapes. Through its exploration of memory, identity, and emotional experience, the album echoes the timeless role of folklore in literature: preserving complex human stories through myth, imagination, and lyrical art. Leah Flettrich observes that “folklore has been centered around a want for shared community, which directly associates it with Robbins’ standpoint on pop music and poetry. The contours of this debate, then, can help us see Swift’s *folklore* as an album worthy of literary interpretation, as well as an album allowed to be compared to folklore” (28).



Swift's *folklore* isn't just a collection of songs—it's a carefully constructed narrative that tells a story from multiple perspectives. In *folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions*, she opens up about the emotional world behind three key tracks: “*cardigan*,” “*august*,” and “*betty*.” She reveals that these songs form part of what she calls a “Teenage Love Triangle,” with each track giving voice to a different character. As Swift puts it, “‘*cardigan*’ is from Betty’s perspective, ‘*august*’ is from Augustine’s perspective, and ‘*betty*’ is from James’ perspective,” allowing listeners to piece together the same story from three unique emotional standpoints (Swift).

In “*cardigan*,” Swift evokes a soft, nostalgic tone that taps into the tradition of confessional poetry, transforming personal memory into a universally resonant experience, much like the work of Sylvia Plath.

“*the last great american dynasty*” reads almost like a short story set to music. Swift tells the lively, rebellious tale of Rebekah Harkness while cleverly tying it back to her own life. It’s not just a history lesson—it’s a reflection on how women who defy expectations are remembered and judged, a theme echoed throughout much of literary history.

The emotional ambiguity in “*august*” mirrors the open-endedness of modernist poetry, where what is left unsaid carries as much weight as what is expressed.

“*the lakes*” is a track steeped in literary tradition, drawing directly from the Romantic poets who sought refuge in nature as a way to escape society’s constraints. According to *The Grammys*, “‘*the lakes*,’ a deluxe track featured on *folklore*, directly references the Lake Poets, who called the idyllic Lake District in England home.” The article notes that the track specifically nods to William Wordsworth through lines such as:

Take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die

I don't belong, and my beloved, neither do you [...]

I've come too far to watch some name-dropping sleaze

Tell me what are my words worth.

Together, these songs demonstrate how Swift weaves literary devices—symbolism, narrative voice, imagery, and emotional ambiguity—into her songwriting, blurring the lines between pop music and literature in ways that feel both fresh and timeless.

b. *evermore* (2020)

With *evermore* (the sister album to *folklore*, released in the same year), Taylor Swift continues the literary journey she began with *folklore*—but this time, the storytelling is even more intricate, resembling a collection of interwoven short stories or a novel of layered emotions. Music critic Alexis Petridis observes that *evermore* shows emotional growth, even in comparison to *folklore*: “Swift is good at character studies. Lovers of gossip might disagree, but the well-drawn portraits of a disenchanted wife on ‘*tolerate it*’ or a distraught recent divorcée on ‘*happiness*’ feel substantially more edifying than the stuff she wrote for 2017’s *Reputation*, bitterly dressing down former chums for their mysterious transgressions” (Petridis).

In its shifting perspectives, moral ambiguity, and lyrical subtlety, *evermore* echoes the work of novelists and poets who explore the fragile boundaries between people. The album feels less like a diary and more like a tapestry of carefully crafted vignettes—where silence is as powerful as speech. In his *Variety* review, Chris Willman praises Swift’s storytelling: “‘*evermore*’ is full of narratives that really come into focus on second or third listen, usually because of a detail or two that turns her sometimes impressionistic modes completely vivid. ‘champagne problems’ is a superb example of her abilities as a storyteller who doesn’t always tell all” (Willman).

You booked the night train for a reason

So you could sit there in this hurt

Bustling crowds or silent sleepers

You’re not sure which is worse



Because I dropped your hand while dancing

Left you out there standing

Crestfallen on the landing

Champagne problems

These lines from “champagne problems” demonstrate Swift’s subtle narrative style. The song paints a scene of quiet devastation—a breakup wrapped in misunderstanding. The protagonist books a night train not just to escape, but to be alone with their grief. The contrast between “bustling crowds or silent sleepers” intensifies the sense of isolation. The moment of heartbreak—letting go of a hand mid-dance—feels cinematic and raw. While others might dismiss it as a privileged sorrow (“champagne problems”), Swift frames it as deeply human pain.

In “happiness,” Swift draws the inspiration from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. As Kelly Fung notes, the line “I hope she will be a beautiful fool” directly echoes Daisy Buchanan’s tragic wish for her daughter to remain blissfully ignorant. The lyric “green light of forgiveness” also reinterprets *Gatsby*’s iconic symbol of longing and unattainable love (Fung). Similarly, in “tolerate it,” Swift channels Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, as she describes the pain of being overlooked and unloved. As *South China Morning Post* explains, the song captures “the struggles of loving someone who is apathetic and unappreciative,” echoing the emotional solitude of du Maurier’s unnamed narrator (Fung).

“willow” draws on classical literary imagery—rivers, spells, and fated journeys—to craft a ballad that reads like a modern myth. “no body, no crime” dives into Southern Gothic tradition, compressing betrayal, revenge, and justice into a vivid murder ballad. “dorothea” feels like a character sketch straight from an Alice Munro story, tenderly exploring ambition, memory, and small-town identity. Finally, “marjorie” becomes a musical elegy—a quiet meditation on legacy, grief, and inherited wisdom.

Together, these songs reveal Swift’s continued evolution as a storyteller through her songs. Through symbolism, perspective shifts, and emotional nuance, *evermore* blurs the boundary between current popular music and literature, offering a body of work fit for close reading and open interpretation.



c. *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024)

The Tortured Poets Department (2024) marks a bold step in Taylor Swift's evolution as a songwriter, blending her confessional songwriting style with layered literary references. The album reflects themes of creative anguish, personal identity, and emotional vulnerability, often echoing the style of confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Dylan Thomas. Swift uses literary allusions not just for decoration, but as tools to explore emotional depth and artistic struggle. Ann Powers, writing for NPR, places Swift within a long lineage of autobiographical female writers, including Plath and Maya Angelou, stating: "Using autobiography as a sword of justice is a move as ancient as the women saints... and, of course, Swift's reluctant spiritual mother, Joni Mitchell" (Powers, 2024). In this context, Swift's album becomes a modern take on the confessional mode—intimate, honest, and self-aware.

In "I Hate It Here," Swift writes:

I hate it here so I will go to secret gardens in my mind

People need a key to get to, the only one is mine

I read about it in a book when I was a precocious child.

This alludes to *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, a novel about healing through retreat. Swift transforms the garden into a metaphor for personal emotional refuge—a private world where she can escape the pain of reality.

In "The Albatross," she sings:

She's the albatross

She is here to destroy you.

The lines reflect S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", where the albatross symbolizes the feeling of guilt. Swift compares herself to the cursed bird that brings chaos, darkness and negative energy along with it.



In the title track, Swift mentions renowned poets such as Dylan Thomas and Patti Smith. As Shannon Carlin writes, she “made a complex reference” to Thomas’s tragic death and Smith’s rebellious legacy, while simultaneously suggesting she feels separate from them: “She makes it clear she has nothing on her” (Carlin, 2024). Swift positions herself in a tradition of tortured, expressive artists, but also questions the cost of such a legacy.

The song “Guilty as Sin?” parallels Delia Owens’s “Where the Crawdads Sing”, reflecting the loneliness of being misunderstood by society. Similarly, “Clara Bow” explores the burden of fame, drawing comparisons between the silent film star’s public image and Swift’s own. “But Daddy I Love Him” draws from *The Little Mermaid*, a children’s book by Hans Christian Andersen, evoking the pain of sacrificing one’s voice and selfhood for love.

“Cassandra” invokes the Greek myth of the cursed prophetess to express frustration with being ignored despite telling the truth. Through vivid imagery like “the truth is drowning,” Swift reflects on the emotional toll of being silenced—a theme that mirrors her experience with public scrutiny.

Emily Burack, in *Time*, observes that Swift’s lyric “days of wild” in “My Boy Only Breaks His Favourite Toys” may echo Emily Dickinson’s poem *Wild Nights – Wild Nights!* and that the song “Peter” draws from another children’s book, J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, continuing a thread from “cardigan,” where she sang of “Peter losing Wendy” (Burack, 2024).

Through these literary allusions, Swift crafts an album that functions as both personal diary and library. The anthology of *The Tortured Poets Department* invites listeners into a world where music and literature intertwine, making it one of her most thematically rich and emotionally resonant works to date. The tracks in this album each have their own story to tell, and the songs invite listeners to navigate through the album on their own.

Critical Reception and Cultural Impact

Taylor Swift’s albums *folklore*, *evermore*, and *The Tortured Poets Department* have changed how people view popular music and literature. Many critics, fans, and scholars now see her recent works as



more than just entertainment. Her lyrics are filled with emotional depth, storytelling, and literary references, making them feel like modern poetry or short stories. This shift shows that music—especially Swift’s—can push the boundaries of what is considered literature. Swift herself is heavily influenced by books, both as a reader and a writer.

When *folklore* was released in 2020, it received praise from both fans and critics. Swift’s poetic, story-driven songs caught the attention of not only music lovers but also academics. Critics from Rolling Stone, The New York Times, and The Guardian noted that the album felt like a collection of literary short stories. Jon Caramanica of The New York Times wrote that Swift moved away from personal storytelling and created fictional characters and narratives—similar to a fiction writer. *evermore*, released later that year as a sister album, continued this style with even more emotional and psychological depth. Together, *folklore* and *evermore* mark a turning point in Swift’s literary approach to songwriting.

In 2024, *The Tortured Poets Department* took Swift’s literary exploration further. The album includes references to poets like Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath, mythical figures like Cassandra, and fictional characters like Peter Pan. Critics such as Ann Powers of NPR and Shannon Carlin of TIME recognized the album’s poetic quality. Powers described Swift’s writing as part of a tradition where women use autobiography as “a sword of justice,” calling the album “written in blood.” These reactions show that critics now see Swift’s music as more than pop—it is viewed through a literary lens. Her albums are discussed the same way we study literature: through analysis of themes, characters, and references. As Julia Kristeva once wrote, “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (*Desire in Language* 66). Swift’s lyrics reflect this idea, weaving in influences from other texts and traditions.

Educational and Academic Relevance

Swift’s work has found its way into the classrooms and curricula of academic institutions. At Stanford University, a course titled “All Too Well (Ten Week Version)” examined her lyrics alongside American literary texts. New York University’s Clive Davis Institute offered a course focused on her career, songwriting, and cultural influence. Scholars have published academic essays analysing her albums—especially *folklore* and *evermore*—from literary and feminist perspectives. They study how she blends



fiction with real emotion, using tools like narrative theory and postmodern criticism. These responses show that her work is complex, not just commercially successful.

Including Swift's music in university courses and scholarly research challenges the idea that only traditional authors belong in the literary canon. Her writing uses literary devices like symbolism, metaphor, and allusion. Her lyrics are open to interpretation, just like poems and novels, and deserve a place in academic discussions.

Cultural Reflection and Literary Evolution

One reason Swift's music resonates deeply with audiences is that it explores themes people care about today. Songs like "mirrorball" express feelings of isolation, "mad woman" explores betrayal and anger, and *The Tortured Poets Department* examines identity and creativity. These are timeless literary themes, approached in a way that feels modern and relatable.

Swift also introduces her fans to classic literature. She references authors like Emily Dickinson, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Listeners may discover these writers through her lyrics, making Swift a kind of bridge between literature and pop culture. Her work also reflects how literature is changing in the digital age. Today, stories are told through songs, videos, and social media. Swift's storytelling—full of emotion, metaphor, and character—fits into this new world of contemporary literature. Her songs show that powerful writing doesn't need to be in a book; it can live in a song, a lyric video, or even a late-night lyric drop.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after a close study of Taylor Swift's albums *folklore*, *evermore*, and *The Tortured Poets Department*, it becomes evident that Swift is not just a popular music artist, but also a significant literary figure in contemporary culture. Through her lyrical storytelling, she has consistently used literary devices such as symbolism, metaphor, allusion, and stream of consciousness to craft emotionally rich and intellectually layered songs. Her deep engagement with literary themes and references—ranging from classic authors to mythological and poetic traditions—shows her ability to write with the same depth and intention as many recognized literary authors.



Despite initial skepticism about whether popular music can be considered literature, Swift's work has begun to change the conversation. The fact that her songs are now included in university courses, academic articles, and literary discussions proves that her writing is not only artistically valuable but also academically relevant. These developments reflect a growing acceptance that literature is not confined to novels, poetry collections, or canonical authors, but can also be found in music, digital media, and other creative forms. Taylor Swift's songwriting reflects the evolution of literature in the modern age. As storytelling methods change with technology and culture, her work represents a new kind of literary expression—one that is accessible, emotionally honest, and intellectually engaging. Her lyrics speak to a wide audience and often deal with universal themes like identity, love, loss, growth, and artistic struggle, all of which are essential to the human experience and to literature itself.

While her earlier albums may have been more rooted in autobiographical pop narratives, her later works have taken a more reflective, intertextual, and literary turn. This shift marks a new phase in her career—one that aligns more closely with the traditions of contemporary literature. Therefore, based on her growing influence, academic recognition, and the depth of her writing, it is fair to say that Taylor Swift is helping expand the boundaries of the literary canon. Her work demonstrates that literature continues to grow, adapt, and surprise us—even in the form of a song.

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