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Utrecht University
English Language and Culture
BA Thesis

Plath and Swift: The Feminist Confessional Lyric of Two “Ladies Lazarus”



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5.834 words

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January 2021

Abstract

This thesis argues that Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift could both be seen as feminist confessional lyricists. It explores and defines the Second and Fourth Wave of feminism and the style and form in which writers within those waves wrote. For the Second Wave, Sylvia Plath will be read as the previous century's model of a feminist confessional poet. Her poetry defines the self and breaks with previous conventional restrictions. In regard to the Fourth Wave of feminism, this thesis argues that Taylor Swift could be seen as Plath's contemporary counterpart, the twenty-first century's feminist confessional lyricist. The concept of confessionalism in this wave is defined particularly by feminism's digital reach and new forms of "spreading consciousness" or awareness.

This thesis results in a close reading of "Lady Lazarus" by Plath and "mad woman" by Swift, in order to demonstrate the points made about the lyricists' writing styles in relation to their social contexts in the first two chapters. Both women use their words in order to define the self in their works and to spread the feminist confessional lyric in their own mode of communication. While Sylvia Plath does so mostly in her literary works, as was common for many Second Wave feminist writers, Taylor Swift, as a Fourth Wave feminist writer, also makes deliberate use of social media and her public persona.

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Introduction

*No one likes a mad woman,
you made her like that*
- “mad woman”

After her suicide in 1963 and with the publication of *Ariel* in 1965, Sylvia Plath’s fame quickly escalated. According to Ann Kennedy Smith, her death did not make headlines immediately, because “gas poisoning was a common way for women to kill themselves,” but days after her death, an elegiac essay was published in the *Observer* by Al Alvarez, claiming Plath to be a “peculiar genius” (Al Alvarez in Kennedy Smith) that garnered greater attention. From then on, Plath was to be recognized first for her difficult life and tragic death, the loss of her genius, and only later for her work, the genius itself.

Still, Plath’s posthumously published poetry, and in particular *Ariel*, was welcomingly accepted by the Women’s Movement who “saw in her narrative many parallels to their own struggles” (Badia 34). Second Wave Feminism promoted a break from the traditional and unequal position in society most women had been pressured to fill. The “myth of the happy housewife” (Walters 80) was torn down and the feminist truism “the personal is political” (Moore) became important both to activists engaged in “consciousness raising” to women writers seeking to find a way to validate their contributions to the literary industry. In this regard, Sylvia Plath’s poems in *Ariel* became known for providing a break away from her previous work. The poems here have been read by many scholars as deeply personal, and it seems as if she is defining her previously hidden, silenced self in her poetry. The female poet “observes herself with amused irony, as Plath does in “Lady Lazarus,” [and] she enacts as well as dissects her suffering, her rage, her anxiety” (Gilbert 445).

Pre-*Ariel* Plath has been described as cultivating the persona of “an obliging all American blonde” (Spencer-Regan). This description also fits the early persona of contemporary pop star Taylor Swift, who is known for her songwriting and “real-life experiences in her diary-entry style lyrics” (Wilkinson 441). Her more recent albums *Reputation*, *Lover* and *folklore* can be interpreted as being more outspoken - as “dissect(ing) her suffering, her rage, her anxiety” much more so - than her songs were ever before. Where Swift’s songs used to be mainly about love and heartbreak, in these three albums Swift includes lyrics responding to male dominance in society and to the difficult journey of defining her true self. The Netflix documentary about the period between *Reputation* and *Lover*, called *Miss Americana*, follows the ways in which Swift went from a deliberately apolitical image to getting actively (and controversially) involved in the 2018 Senate election in her home state, Tennessee. The documentary is an important source, the film gives the reader more information about the relationship between her lyrics and her life. Moreover, the documentary shows how Swift gets more involved and outspoken about the male-dominated recording industry and how she is still struggling with how to get rid of her own, internalized, patriarchal assumptions and judgements: “I’m trying to be as educated as possible (...) on how to de-program the misogyny in my own brain” (*Miss Americana*).

Swift also provides an interesting counterpoint to Plath because of the way she “draws on literary figures for inspiration as she self-consciously cites herself in a long tradition of “good girls gone bad”” (Spencer-Regan), with the most famous of these literary figures now being Plath herself. In an article for *The Independent*, titled “Here’s Why Taylor Swift Is the New Sylvia Plath,” Eleanor Spencer-Regan pays attention to the lyrics of “Look What You Made Me Do”, a song from the album *Reputation*, where Swift, like Plath in *Lady Lazarus*, tells the reader that she “rose up from the dead” and that she “does it all the time” (Spencer-

Regan). It is as if Swift is undergoing a rebirth, with the result of being more open and outspoken. It is a whole new her.

Where Plath's poetry became popular during and can be read in conjunction with the Second Wave of Feminism, Swift's lyrics can be analyzed as indicative of the Fourth Wave of Feminism. This Fourth Wave is the outcome of "a revival of the past few years, at least in terms of a heightened visibility in media and popular culture" (Rivers 7) of feminist ideals, including how famous popstars, such as Swift, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, now "publicly embrace the label 'feminist'" (7). Through pop lyrics in particular, in songs such as "Lemonade" or "Born This Way" one could argue that feminism has become more approachable, accessible and certainly commercially viable to a broader public.

In this thesis, I argue that Taylor Swift should be seen as a feminist confessional lyricist in the twenty-first century as Sylvia Plath was a feminist confessional poet in the twentieth century. Further, I want to establish how both women exemplify the two waves of feminism within which they wrote. In this thesis' first chapter, I define the Second Wave of Feminism and explore the style and form in which the female writers of this wave wrote, with a focus on Sylvia Plath. I will explicate the genre of confessional poetry and how self-definition is a primary concern in its feminist iterations. Then, I define the Fourth Wave of feminism and focus on the similarities in the feminist literary form and style and connect those to the lyrics and statements made by Taylor Swift. I will further explicate the concept of confessionalism and explore how Swift makes use of these genres in her lyrics. Finally, I demonstrate my points about emphasis on self-definition in confessional writing through a close-reading of a poem by Plath and song lyrics by Swift.

Although Swift's lyrics were intended for performance, differing from Plath's poetry intended for publication, I approach them as a text. A musicological study would exceed the capacity of this BA thesis and in order to put Plath and Swift's employment of language as a

tool for self-definition and determination into a level dialogue with each other, I want to consider them within the same, common medium. Thus, in the context of this paper, I will leave any musical elements of her songs aside and will focus primarily on her written words.

In conclusion, through this thesis I hope to show the affinity between different generations of feminists through the different eras in which Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift live(d) and how central navigating between self and cultural expression has been for both of them.

Chapter 1: The Second Wave, Confessionalism and Sylvia Plath

Out of the ash I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air

- "Lady Lazarus"

Second Wave Feminism emerged after the Second World War. It carried through with the importance of equality in citizenship, which was the main focus in the First Wave, but it also tried to identify and to address further the economic and social inequalities faced by women (Drucker). In the United States, a Declaration of Human Rights was established in 1949 that acknowledged that "men and women had equal rights" (Walters 97). It's safe to say that more and more women became aware of the struggles their mothers and grandmothers had gone through, with regard to lacking the capacity for self-determination, and realized that that was not the future they wanted for themselves and their daughters.

Two key members of the Women's Movement were Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. De Beauvoir argued that women had been denied their right "to create, to invent, to go beyond mere living to find a meaning for life" (Walters 98). She claimed that women were only seen as an object for men and never as the subject of their own lives. Betty Friedan wrote in her book *The Feminist Mystique* that a woman must "at least ask what she truly wants" (102). She emphasized that a husband, children or house are not going to make a woman who she is, they cannot define her (102).

Notably within the rise of the Women's Movement also emerged great numbers of women writing (Walters 98). Even nonprofessional writers started organizing group meetings to share their stories, perform poetry and ultimately to "raise consciousness." In her article about the Sister Arts, Lisa L. Moore states that "for a generation of women to whom 'finding voice,' 'breaking silence,' and 'speaking out' were not just powerful metaphors but conscious

political strategies, poetry was almost an obligation, one's feminist duty, a lesbian rite of passage" (Moore). This coincided with the Movement's unofficial slogan: "the personal is political." Subsequently, female poets, such as Plath, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and Gwendolyn Brooks, began to have a greater "impact in the mainstream of American literary life" (Moore).

Although Plath is now a household name, her poetry was not immediately popular and universally acclaimed when it was first published. This in part was because of the more personal problems that she wrote about, which many critics found not universal enough (Nelson 22). In her journal, Plath even wrote to herself: "you have seen a lot, felt deeply and your problems are universal enough to be made meaningful" (Nelson 22). After her death, however, her poetry gained popularity among new readers informed by the concerns of the Women's Movement. Although she had published the collection *The Colossus* previously, it was her posthumous work, *Ariel*, that evoked "their social and political milieu in a telling way" (Axelrod 73). Further, her poems seethed "with anger, hope, desire and disappointment" (Axelrod 73). When *Ariel* was published in 1966, it became immensely popular with women readers, not just women who read poetry regularly, but also housewives and mothers "whose ambitions had awakened" (Moore) through the Women's Movement and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

As noted earlier, the Movement kicked open the doors for women writers and created a publishing culture that welcomed texts written by women that included the women's concerns (Badia 33). Plath was quickly adopted as "an iconic woman writer" (Badia 34). Plath's poems represent the "immense creative drive" (Axelrod 74) of a woman who is trying to publish her work in a world that tries to "impede, paralyse and silence her voice" (Axelrod 74). Further, Plath's poems described scenes of domestic life, a life that was filled with balancing "children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes" (Badia 34) which led many women in

that time to find a sympathetic ally and de facto spokesperson in her poetry as Axelrod notes her writing reflects a “feminist awareness” (74). Poetry provided a way to raise consciousness for women, it was a way to “speak the unspoken” (Walters 112).

A mode of poetry that arose in the 1950s in North America, was confessional poetry. This genre identified and articulated the traumas of poets “so that they become easier to heal” (Schetrumpf 120). Any taboo experiences were outspoken, because there was no reason to leave them undiscussed in this highly open and honest form of poetry. The lives and psyches of the poet became “the basis of their art” (Haven Blake 717). In her article on “The Poetry of Self-Definition,” Sandra M. Gilbert states that confessional poetry is mostly a female poetic mode. She claims that most male poets, when trying to write in the confessional genre, are still able to write to “larger, more objectively formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society” (444). The male poet observes himself romantically, but “he’s nevertheless an ironic sociologist of his own alienation” (445). The female poet, however, is not familiar with her feelings and explores these anxieties while observing herself. She is searching for herself, for a way to define herself. Often, she finds that there is not just one self, but two (or more). The first self is “usually public and social” (451), and this is the self that the world sees. It is defined by the circumstances in her life. A daughter, a mother, a wife, it seems “to be her natural personality” (451). The second self is associated with the often-unknown side of a woman. Her creative self, her furious self, her anxious self. This self generates “the woman’s uneasiness with male myths of femininity” (451). Gilbert states that where male confessional poets stop exploring when they have found the first self, women poets go beyond and are mostly obsessed with the exploration and defining of the “second, supernatural self” (452).

Sylvia Plath is probably the poet most commonly associated with this confessional mode of writing. Starting with her novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath has explored the limits of “women’s autonomy and the secure first-person singular” (Evans 79). Furthermore, this

exploration and slightly touching the limits and boundaries of female writers carried on in her confessional poetry. Many of her poems in *Ariel* also suggest that these poems were autobiographical. “Daddy” implicates the hard relationship Plath had with her father and the sequence of “Bee Poems” move along with this idea, confirming this by the fact that Plath’s father was a biologist with an expertise in bees. Plath was known for completely rejecting the first self that was described by Gilbert and for identifying “entirely with her supernatural self” (Gilbert 454). She claimed in a BBC interview, the month before she died in 1962 that she did not know what this supernatural self entailed, but that she wanted to share her explorations. She claimed that personal experience “shouldn’t be a kind of shut box and a mirror-looking narcissistic experience” (Haven Blake 718). Plath always puts the speaker in the full focus of the poems. She did this in such a way that her own psychological vulnerability and shame became a normal “embodiment of her civilization” (Uroff 104). She made her problems, once again, universal. In her poetry, while on her journey of self-definition, Plath recalls on many other people in her poetry, however, she never uses real names. This again, is a typical aspect of the female mode of confessional poetry. Where the male poet uses “real names of real people” to discover his own sociology, the confessional female poet uses names as “symbolic motifs, as mythic ideas” (Gilbert 450). Margaret Dickie Uroff states that this is in fact a downfall of Plath’s poetry, because it creates a lack of reality in her poems. Her use of “generalized” (105) figures is a way of manipulating the audience to believe in a limited story. But, to not use any other “real” names, brings a focus on the journey of self-definition the poet is undergoing. The female poet is striving “for self-knowledge” (Gilbert 446) and her poem is not a place to catcall any other people, this journey is hers to explore and to define. Plath’s “mental illness and suicide” (Schetrumpf 122) are the issues that are mostly explored through her confessional poems. She experiences these issues

and defines them in “patriarchal language” (121) which was popular among the feminists in the 1960s in America.

With this new, highly popular mode of poetry came a new group of poetry readers. It was a new way of connecting with the author and “readers became fans and writers became stars” (Haven Blake 717). Plath became not only a poet but got the label of celebrity as well. Poetry became a more popular form of writing and confessional poetry especially “immersed in the commercial world” (Haven Blake 719). Plath’s poetry was commercially valued as well, resulting in the Hollywood film “Sylvia” starring Gwyneth Paltrow and “fashion houses such as Donna Karan” displaying their mannequins “clad as Sylvia Plath” (Banita 38). Also, Plath started to appear on t-shirts, mugs, posters and other merchandise for her fanbase. She became, alongside her role as a feminist poet, a celebrity icon.

Chapter 2: The Fourth Wave, Celebrity and Taylor Swift

Now I breathe flames each time I talk

My cannons all firin' at your yacht

They say, "Move on," but you know I won't

- "mad woman"

In the 2010s, half a century after the emergence of Second Wave Feminism, a new revival of feminism started to appear, now also known as the Fourth Wave. This wave is not a break from the older values and methods by which feminist activism was organized, but it is particularly characterized by a "heightened visibility in media and popular culture" (Rivers 7). Further, the wave is defined by new technological possibilities for mobilization, with the Internet as a central focus point. Varying digital platforms, like Instagram, Twitter or Facebook, now allow women to build a "strong, popular, reactive movement online" (Cochrane). Further, the Internet gives feminist platforms a good base from which they can reach more women and go internationally more easily. Some critics have argued that this has made feminism more accessible, and that this modern way of feminist culture is defined by "pragmatism, inclusion and humour" (Cochrane). Global problems surrounding gender inequality are easier to learn about, and more women can get involved in activism because of the ease of participation built into online platforms and media. In the Second Wave, feminists met up physically in groups to talk about what they have experienced and what they should do, in the Fourth Wave, they can go online and, in a few clicks, they have reached multiple feminist Instagram accounts and can find hundreds of people who are likeminded.

This has also shifted the age demographic of feminist activists, as many teens are growing up with social media being a central part of their life, and a positive consequence of this is that they can have "a perfect grasp of feminist language and concepts" at an earlier age (Cochrane). Now, young women have "more than enough confidence to shout back"

(Cochrane). Attempts to silence women only “made the movement larger and louder”

(Cochrane).

Furthermore, more and more famous popstars are starting to speak up as well about gender inequality in the world and their own industry. A notable, recent example is Taylor Swift. Since her debut in 2003, Swift has been known for her personal way of writing and her songs that seem to express directly her thoughts and feelings as if we are reading her diary (Wilkinson 441). Her early albums, known as *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless*, *Speak Now* and *Red* explore a variety of different genres, beginning with purely country music and concluding with a more pop-like album. This change in genre has come with quite some critique, but as Joshua Clover also argues that “she has come out to the other side.” When Swift’s album *1989* came out in 2014, it was clear that she had made the switch to pop music entirely, leaving her country girl image behind.

Announcing her new album in 2017, called *Reputation*, Swift claimed that “the old Taylor (...) is dead” (“Look What You Made Me Do”). With this ‘new Taylor’ came four albums that differed in songwriting from the albums previously released. *Reputation*, *Lover*, *folklore* and *evermore* all present a more outspoken Swift, one who prides herself in not being afraid question the inequality in the music industry. In a song like “The Man,” Swift states: “I’m so sick of running as fast as I can, wonder if I get there quicker if I was a man” (Swift, “The Man”). Moreover, she speaks up about an actual sexual assault case, in which a “Denver DJ (...) groped the pop singer” (Beaumont-Thomas). In her Netflix documentary, she addresses the issue and explains what the whole process did to her. She countersued him for just one dollar to make her point about the inequality of this case. She states that she was angry that she had to be there, that “this happened to women” and that the “process is so dehumanizing” (*Miss Americana*). This was not the only time Swift has employed feminist rhetoric to defend herself. In 2019, Scooter Braun bought Big Machine Records which owned

Swift's music. With this, he bought most of the rights of Swift's work. Swift claims that she "was never given the opportunity to buy her masters outright" (*The Guardian*). The two have been in a legal battle ever since. Swift has kept her 144 million followers updated on the whole issue and brings out several social media statements. On 20th June 2019 she posted a statement on Tumblr explaining the issue. She states that the people who are now the owners of her music are "men who had no part in creating it" and that they are "controlling a woman who didn't want to be associated with them." Further, she posted a statement on Twitter on 15th November 2019, following the preceding. She is open about the offers that Scooter Braun and Big Machine Records have given her, but also states that it is clear that they want her to "be a good little girl and shut up." She claims that they are "men who are exercising tyrannical control" over her. Swift uses her digital reach to get involved in the feminist community and to do more, not only in her personal life, but also politically. In *Miss Americana* she states that "next time there is any opportunity to change anything, you had better know what you stand for and what you want to say" (*Miss Americana*).

Again, this new wave of feminism gives women the awareness to define themselves and to strive for the things they want to achieve. Like Plath, Swift is doing this by her use of words in her lyrics and public statements, which could be seen in the same light as Plath's confessional poetry. As explained before, confessionalism was a mode of poetry that became very popular for the bigger public. It gave a glimpse into the life of the poet and readers became fans of the writer and their life. The writer's life became, in a sense, as dissected and known as that of a celebrity. There is no difference with Swift's lyrics and persona. It is an "unusually participatory form of verse" (Haven Blake 717). As with Plath, Swift uses the construction Sandra M. Gilbert introduced that explained the use and definition of different selves. Swift makes use of this construction by breaking away from her old music that implied the image of a good country girl. With the release of her album *Reputation*, there

came a breakaway from this image and a new Taylor was on the horizon. It is this change that could be seen as the breakaway from the first, natural self. In Swift's case, the fifteen-year-old girl with curly hair that made sweet country songs. The change brought a second self; the girl without a sweet smile, but with black outfits, symbolic snake rings and lyrics that opened up about her self-exploration and her journey towards defining herself. This change is especially visible in her music video of "Look What You Made Me Do" in which you see the new Swift on a throne, with an army of old Swifts, recognizable by the signature outfits worn in older music videos or award shows, trying to climb up the throne, but falling down. This image is reinforced by the scenes on the graveyard, confirming that the old Taylor, is in fact, dead.

The openness of Swift's personal experience in her lyrics is very similar to that of Plath. When Swift has parted with her first self, she takes her fans with her in her journey to define her second self. In her song "mad woman" she responds to the Scooter Braun case and she lashes out to him and Scott Borchetta. This will be further discussed in chapter three.

Chapter 3: Comparing the Confessional and Celebrity

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot –

The big strip tease

- “Lady Lazarus”

The use of the confessional mode of writing in both Plath’s poetry as Swift’s lyrics became their way of trying to get their feminist message across. In Plath’s case, she started as a writer and became a popular celebrity because of her work and the reception of her work by the Women’s Movement. For Swift, this was different. She began her career as a country music celebrity who, after fifteen years, decided that she was done being the “good girl” and that she could decide herself what she would write about. As she describes it, “I’m tired of it, it just feels like it’s more than music now at this point” (*Miss Americana*). This tension between the celebrity and the confessional is very apparent in both women’s oeuvre and how they have been interpreted. For this chapter, I will give a close reading of Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus” and Swift’s lyrics of “mad woman” in order to point to these two concepts in the literary works of both women and to show how both women could be seen as the quintessential feminist confessional writer of her century.

Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” is a poem that “expresses rage at a dominating male” (Axelrod 82). The poem reflects a period of Plath’s writing in which she was “very serious, very personal” (Axelrod 73), and it acts with a “rebellious agency” (84). The overall narrative of this poem seems to be about a woman who is performing a “big strip tease” (29). The “I” is emphatically centralized in the poem, which makes it a very powerful, ostensibly personal poem to read. The title of the poem suggests that it is about a female speaker, like Plath. “Lady Lazarus” is a title that, by the use of alliteration, provides a portrait of a woman who is associated with the resurrection from death. The biblical reference to “Lazarus” can refer to

John 11 in the New Testament, where Lazarus, after four days, is restored miraculously from death by Jesus (*Oxford World Encyclopedia*). This seems to be pertinent to this poem, as will be further discussed.

The first stanza starts with the speaker telling the reader that she has “done it again”, “One year in every ten // I manage it” (1-2). For many readers familiar with Plath’s biography, and inclined to read the contents of this poem as personal, this first stanza refers to the multiple suicide attempts Plath has made through the years. It is a bold opening; it feels as if Plath is peeling back the curtain, “exposing us to the darker contemplations” (Schetrumpf 123-124). She proceeds, exposing that she is a sort of “walking miracle” (4). This reference ties in with the biblical reference of Lazarus being resurrected from death. Plath indicates that she is still around, but actually, she should not be. Her skin is pale, as a “Nazi lampshade” (5). Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery has been notable to numerous readers. With a father who was a German immigrant to the US, Plath “never got over the shock” (Axelrod 79) of encountering these images and uses them in her poetry to create the same shock. There have been several critical analyses of these references (Strangeways), stating that one cannot use such a traumatic, large-scale historical event for a poem about personal experience. I think that Plath’s use of these references is clearly to create a shocking element to her poetry, to rip apart any “conventional boundaries” (Axelrod 74) and to break away emphatically from any sort of rules or restrictions she felt she had.

In the poem, her (Plath or Lady Lazarus’s) skin, like a lighted lampshade is pale, and “featureless, fine” (8), her foot not moving, heavy as a “paperweight” (7). It is clear that this speaker is stuck in a position. She feels exposed. Her plan did not work, and now she is a miraculous sight to see. She is the woman who lived. The bystanders of this miracle, “peel off the napkin” (10) and she asks daringly, “Do I terrify? (12). This reads as sarcastic, as if the woman is triumphant. “She is not covered by grime or grit” (Lant 653), but instead

readers encounter a pale woman lying there, exposed. According to Lant, the undressing, both literally and figuratively, is a “powerful poetic gesture” (651). The speaker makes use of the situation. She has done it before; she knows what will happen: “The sour breath // Will vanish in a day” (14-15). After that, she will be “a smiling woman” (19) again. It seems as if the speaker is thinking of the responses that will appear after another suicide attempt and she accepts this sarcastically: “What a trash // To annihilate each decade” (23-24).

This feeling of being looked down upon, is reinforced by the next stanza, which portrays a stage with a “million filaments” (25) and “a peanut-crunching crowd” (26) looking at her, exposing her as if she is a circus-act. The speaker plays along, again, playing with her audience, “Gentlemen, ladies // These are my hands // My knees” (30-32). However, she is the “same, identical woman” (34) claiming that she is still determined and that she intended to kill herself in the first place. The speaker elaborates on the previous attempts, the first “an accident” (36), the second time intended to “not come back at all” (38). The image of her still being on that stage, uncovering this information to the crowd, ties in with her next claim. She says “Dying // Is an art, like everything else // I do it exceptionally well” (43-45). She sees herself as the performer, the one with a “call” (48). In other words, this is all a theatrical performance.

Then, the poem turns, and it feels as if the speaker gets a reality check. When she is brought back, it is that “same face” and “same brute” (53) that knocks her out. The speaker is reminded of the fact that she is, once again, back in the “same place” (53). She realizes that there is “a charge” (58) anyone that would like more than a “hearing” (59) of her heart. To have a piece of her, is not self-evident. Plath then addresses two males: “Herr Doktor and “Herr Enemy” (65-66). She, again in an ironic tone of voice, claims that she knows that she is their “opus” (67), their “pure gold baby” (69). She melts into whatever they want her to be. But it seems as if this ironic note in her voice is her breaking away from this narrative. They

“poke and stir” (74), they give her many, domestic, gifts “A cake of soap // A wedding ring, // A gold filling” (76-78). But it is not enough. They should “beware” (80).

The final stanza answers about what these men should beware. “Out of the ash // I rise with my red hair // And I eat men like air” (82-84). The speaker perishes in flames like a phoenix and then rises again from the ashes to start a new life - a life where she is the director of the narrative, of her theatrical show, of her big strip tease. The speaker “threatens [the male addressee] openly” (Lant 653-654). The claim about eating men like air is particularly interesting. Men seen as air is men seen with a loss of substance. The relation of Plath and air is also quite dubious. She would have liked to succeed in her suicide attempt, which means that she is not breathing anymore. In this case, she does not need the air. This implies, perhaps, that in real life she needs (or cannot get away from) both the air and the men.

It is clear that Plath is not afraid to openly discuss her feelings and emotions anymore. She is taking the control back again and does so through a metaphoric theatrical show, of which the men in her life are not part anymore. Bringing the image of such a public, performative figure (a celebrity) into feminist confessional writing is something that is also apparent in Swift’s lyrics of “mad woman.”

“mad woman” is a song about “female rage” (*Long Pond Studio Sessions*). Swift introduces the song lyrics in this documentary by stating that they are about the uneasy feeling of a woman towards bad male behaviour. She claims that women are thought to “silently absorb” this behaviour and that, if and when a woman decides to speak up, “that response is treated like the offensive self” (*Long Pond*). Furthermore, she states that this text is about an experience that has happened to herself recently, which makes this text explicitly confessional. It is her story we are reading here. The female anger and rage that Swift states this text is about are very apparent in the text, from the beginning.

The lyrics start with a very striking verse that immediately brings the attention to the central problem here: “what did you think I’d say to that?” (1). This question seems to be the epitome of this text. Because what is expected of a “good girl” or nice woman in this situation, is to be quiet, because “a nice girl smiles and waves and says, ‘thank you’” (*Miss Americana*). But this is not the Swift we are going to see in these texts and statements anymore: “Does a scorpion sting when fighting back, they strike to kill, and you know I will” (2-4). The reference to a scorpion seems to be ambiguous. A scorpion, with its “associations of betrayal” (156), is seen as a symbol of treachery and of backstabbing. The ambiguity in this reference is that Scooter Braun, aforementioned as the man who Swift stood up against and who seems to be the addressee of this text, is, aside from his job as a manager of several big stars, also known for his CBS TV show called *Scorpion* (Yahr).

The lines continue, portraying a picture of the addressee in this text arriving home and seeing the face of the speaker in “the neighbour’s lawn” (6). The neighbour is female and the reader, once again, is asked what they think she is doing. Is she really smiling like is expected of her, or is she not so nice this time? The use of profanity in “fuck you forever” (8) is new for Swift. Helen Ringow, in her essay on *folklore* and *evermore* claims that the use of swearing should be seen as a stylistic choice of writing that “breaks certain rules of politeness.” This coincides with the first line of this text, claiming that the girl in this narrative is not doing what is expected of her anymore. The use of explicit language presents a Swift that is becoming a “freer, truer version of herself” (Ringow).

The first two verses proceed into the pre-chorus, which state that the female speaker is crazy and angry and that this is the result of someone calling her out on these emotions. Swift addresses this issue, claiming that if she tries to defend herself, it is seen as calculated and wrong. She has felt for a long time that “she has no right to respond” (*Long Pond*) or she is seen as crazy or angry or “out of line” (*Long Pond*). But not anymore.

The first part of the lyrics concludes in a chorus. Here, the title of the text is the main subject: a “mad woman” (12). The term “mad” is ambiguous. Firstly, the term could refer to a woman who is “foolish” or “unwise” (*OED*). In this case, the mad woman is looked down upon in this text. It is a shame that the woman in the narrative went mad, because “no one likes a mad woman” (14), even though, “you made her like that” (15). This states that the woman in this case had nothing to do with the term and associated emotions in the first place. In that case, the term “mad” in this text might refer to the emotion of someone who is “furious” or “moved to uncontrollable rage” (*OED*) and the lines further explicate this idea. The woman is poked like a bear until “her claws come out” (16). This adds up to the image of Swift who is fed up with all the accusations and excuses to be nice and is now speaking up, with her claws out. She states in *Miss Americana*: “I felt like a wounded animal lashing out.” Moreover, the woman in the lyrics is wrapped in a “noose” (17) by the addressee of the text. A noose is symbolic in this instance, it refers to the emotional feeling of being caught and being controlled by something, in this case, the male dominance in the life of the speaker. The use of this word here is interesting, as it is a homophone of the word ‘news’. Aside from the image of being controlled by someone, in this case it is also interesting to note that Swift, being a celebrity as well as a writer, is someone who is discussed extensively in the media. The news and media portraying her in an untruthful way is something that made her a, so-called, “mad woman” in the first place.

The lyrics continue, going into a new verse. “Now I breathe flames each time I talk” (19). Aside from the Plath-like lyrics here, evoking the same phoenix image as in “Lady Lazarus”, it is clear that Swift has broken away from the nice girl image. When she speaks, she will speak with fire and passion and she will not “move on” (21) if someone tells her to. Then, Swift makes an interesting turn exposing the women in this issue, because “women like hunting witches too, doing your dirtiest work for you” (22-23). This address could be seen in

two ways. Generally, it is a common motif for men to get women involved in their actions, to justify the wrong they are doing to other women. A more specific way of looking at this accusation, is to look at a statement that Scooter Braun's wife, Yael Braun, posted on Instagram during the legal battle for Swift's music. She states that Swift is attacking her husband and that Swift is "supposed to be a role model" but that she continues to "model bullying." Further, she accuses Swift of having a "temper tantrum" because she did not get her way. In this case, it is not just men that are "hunting" on Swift, but also the women involved with the work of the dominating male in this narrative.

The pre-chorus and chorus are repeated and finally, in the bridge of these lyrics, Swift once again repeats that she is taking her time telling this story, because "you took everything from me" (36). Further, she is, again, accusing the "good wives" (40) of the "master of spin" (39). This woman should be mad as well, "scathing" (41), but because being mad as a woman is not the expected thing to be, this "good wife" is not applying to this. The reference to the "master of spin" (39) is very explicitly directed to Scooter Braun. The ambiguous use of the word spin, referring in one way to the way someone could spin his words, but also to the way someone could spin records, the latter referring to Braun being a popular manager for the music industry. The way in which Swift is addressing this issue of male dominance in her life should be seen as a modern, Fourth Wave version of feminist confessional lyrics. By using her mode of modern communication, songwriting, but also her social media statements, she opens up about these issues to her followers, giving them transparency about situations they might want to avoid themselves. Her writing in this song is, like Plath in her poetry, a way of addressing her problems with the male dominance in her industry and her life.

Both Swift's and Plath's way of writing is confessional and deals with a refusal of previous rules and restrictions. Summer Kim Lee, in her essay on *folklore*, puts it perfectly: "Writing is revenge without the need to ask for permission or apology, and the very question

of ethics is pushed aside for the political act of refusing to give in to gendered expectations of etiquette and propriety in one's writing where, as we know, the personal is political" (Lee).

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to argue that Taylor Swift should be seen as a feminist confessional lyricist in the twenty-first century, as Sylvia Plath was a feminist confessional poet in the twentieth century. Both women use their words and the public platform given to their words through their individual art forms in order to project their personal problems, situations and observations on inequality in their world and industry.

For Plath, this was a groundbreaking move. Her poetry provided a breakaway from the mainly male dominated industry of literature and helped other women to identify and define their artistic selves. After her suicide, her poetry quickly got adopted by a wider readership, and many women praised her for speaking up about the inequalities in the domestic lives of U.S. and European women in the 1960s. Plath's poems reflect a strong woman who was not afraid to shy away from taboos and who was trying to forge a path for other women to do the same. Further, her confessional works brought along a new group of readers who not only saw her as a poet but as an iconic persona, a celebrity, as well.

For Swift, the role of celebrity was the first 'self' that she discovered and defined in her works. Her albums consisted of songs about love and breakups, but all written in a diary-style language. Starting with the album *Reputation*, Swift is breaking away from the image of the nice American girl-next-door and is speaking up about issues she has dealt with in the industry. Using her digital reach on social media, her celebrity-status, as well as her song lyrics to bring these issues to light is typical of the Fourth Wave of feminism. This wave is defined by the easy accessibility for feminists of all ages, reaching across multiple social media platforms internationally.

Both women, in their own century, in their own wave of feminism, use words and writing as their crucial expressive outlet. By writing their feelings about the inequality in their own industries and domestic lives, in lyrics or poetry, they push away any restricted

boundaries that were there before. They write because they have something to say and because they are fed up and done with being the smiling, waving, nice girl. Both Plath and Swift are feminist confessional writers, crossing different centuries, but we are left wondering why their struggle against sexist norms had to remain remarkably the same.

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Attachments

Sylvia Plath – “Lady Lazarus”

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it –

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

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

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot –
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman
The first time it happened I was ten
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

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.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart –
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash –
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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

Source:

Plath, Sylvia. "Lady Lazarus." *Ariel*. London: Faber & Faber, 1965. Print.

Taylor Swift – “mad woman”

What did you think I'd say to that?
Does a scorpion sting when fighting back?
They strike to kill, and you know I will
You know I will

What do you sing on your drive home?
Do you see my face in the neighbor's lawn?
Does she smile?
Or does she mouth, “Fuck you forever”?

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
And you'll poke that bear 'til the claws come out
And you find something to wrap your noose around
And there's nothing like a mad woman

Now I breathe flames each time I talk
My cannons all firin' at your yacht
They say, “Move on”, but you know I won't
And woman like hunting witches too
Doing your dirtiest work for you
It's obvious that wanting me dead has really brought you two together

Everything 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
And you'll poke that bear 'til the claws come out
And you find something to wrap your noose around
And there's nothing like a mad woman

I'm taking my time, taking my time
'Cause you took everything from me
Watching you climb, watching you climb
Over people like me
The master of spin has a couple side flings

Good wives always know
She should be mad, should be scathing like me, but
No one like a mad woman
What a shame she went mad

You made her like that

Source:

Swift, Taylor. "mad woman." *Folklore*. Republic Records, 2020. Spotify.