



Facultade de Filoloxía
Grao en Lingua e
Literatura Inglesas
Traballo de Fin de
Grao

The myth of Sylvia Plath and its influence on contemporary indie-pop music

Autora: Raquel Iglesias Aguite

Titora: Susana M^a Jiménez Placer

Xuño 2021

Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela para a obtención do Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesa no curso académico 2020/2021.



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The myth of Sylvia Plath and its influence on contemporary indie-pop music

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

The work will address Sylvia Plath as one of the major representatives of American confessional poetry. In the past, many articles have been published regarding the controversial mediatic process through which the figure of Plath has become a myth and a tragic symbol of girlhood, adolescence, and emotional pain. For this reason, pop culture and market have taken advantage of this tendency, and Sylvia Plath is, nowadays, more present in the arts and media than she was when she was alive. I will focus my work on this process of mythification of her figure and how it has influenced the musical landscape of the 21st century. Contemporary indie-pop singers and composers such as Lana del Rey, Lorde, Taylor Swift, or Mitski have mentioned, more than once, the influence confessional poetry has had on their music and lyrics. In fact, it is easy to grasp some similarities between these artists' songs and Plath's poetry, especially in the tone they use and the topics they deal with. My work will aim to explore, then, the relationship between these intimist artists and Sylvia Plath's myth and legend, which is still influencing, almost 60 years after her death, the youngest generations.

Santiago de Compostela, 12 de Novembro de 2020.

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Introduction

Sylvia Plath is one of the most important poets of the 20th century. Her work is part – if not one of the initiators – of the confessional poetry movement that took place in the 1950s in America, and it often depicts her particular female experience with an extremely intimate and personal tone. Due to her history with mental illness and her famous suicide in 1963, her figure has become a sort of legend, the spirit of a woman who barely reached adulthood. This is an extremely appealing – and dangerous – trope for female teenagers and young adults, who aim to be as pretty, talented and sensitive as Plath was (usually falling into the trap of banalizing her alarming psychological disorders). This trope – known as the “Sad-Girl Poet” – became extremely popular in the 1990s and, nowadays, it is especially present in our musical landscape, where we find a handful of female artists – or, rather, performative characters – clearly influenced by Plath’s figure.

My first contact with Sylvia Plath took place during my Erasmus exchange in the United Kingdom, where I had the chance to write an essay about Plath’s impact on Lana del Rey’s music and character, a topic that allowed me to tackle two extremely interesting issues. On the one hand, it enabled me to study the relationship and connections between literature and music, and how both disciplines can serve similar purposes. On the other, it was an amazing opportunity to explore different types of women’s literature, paying attention to their often-ignored voices and discovering whether or not their female experiences have changed over the decades. After writing the essay on Lana del Rey and Sylvia Plath – and enjoying each part of the process – I decided that I wanted to keep learning about this topic in my final degree project. Thus, in this paper I have broadened my scope of interest not only by analysing more poems and lyrics by these two artists, but also by including in my comparative study another musician allegedly influenced by Plath: Taylor Swift.

The aim of this final degree project is to examine the figure and work of Sylvia Plath and the impact of her legacy in the mediatic characters and music of two contemporary female artists: Lana del Rey and Taylor Swift. I intend to pay special attention to Plath’s conception and representations of girlhood and womanhood, and to how her depictions are echoed (or not) in Del Rey and Swift’s lyrics, proving the enormous influence of her confessional poetry on other artistic manifestations created by women, even several decades after her death.

The first of the three chapters that compose this paper offers an introductory approach to the persona and work of Sylvia Plath. It is divided into two sections. The first one provides biographical information about the poet, with special focus on her relationship with her parents and with her husband Ted Hughes. The second section presents a closer study of her work within the frame of confessional poetry, and of her depiction of girlhood and femininity. The second chapter deals with the mediatization and commercialization of Sylvia Plath. It lays out the different factors leading to her dramatic mythification and to the emergence of the popular Sad-Girl Poet trope. Finally, the last chapter consists in a comparative analysis of some of Plath's poems and Del Rey and Swift's lyrics, paying attention to the rhetoric use of language they make and the topics they address. At the end of the paper there is an appendix containing the songs and lyrics I will study.

For the elaboration of this dissertation, I conducted a textual analysis of six pieces by Plath – “Morning Song”, “The Applicant”, “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, “Lesbos”, and “The Detective” –, two songs by Del Rey – “hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it” and “Video Games” –, and three compositions by Swift – “Look what you made me do”, “mad woman”, and “my tears ricochet”. The primary resources I employed were the collection *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* by Faber & Faber (for Plath's poems) and the website *Genius* (for the songs). The work *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* by Jo Gill was especially important for the development of the first chapter, helping me acquire a general understanding of the main events in Plath's life and her relevance as a confessional poet. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* were also immensely helpful, for they offer a first-person account of the poet's life. For the second chapter, I was strongly inspired by the papers “Female Adolescence and the Trope of the Sad, Pretty Girl-Poet” by Christina Quintana and “American Millennial Girlhood and the Cult of Sylvia Plath” by Marisa Papenfuss, both dealing with the figure of Plath and its impact on the Sad-Girl Poet trope. Lastly, the third chapter was mainly elaborated by means of my personal analysis of the pieces, although I also employed some critical material such as Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* or Harold Bloom's *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide: Sylvia Plath* in order to back up my inferences.

1. Sylvia Plath: general approach to her figure and legacy

1.1. Biographical background

Addressing the figure of Sylvia Plath is a tricky undertaking, not only because of the complexity of her poetry and work, but also because, over the past decades, her persona has surpassed the boundaries of reality and humanity in order to become a fantastical creature, ‘sealed off like a ship in a bottle-beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth’ (using her own words from the poem “Ocean 1212-W”).¹ She has been romanticized, mythicised, and contentiously commercialized so that the actual writer has disappeared behind many layers of morbid stories and moral controversies regarding her psychological disorders, her relationship with men – especially with her father and with her husband, Ted Hughes – and, most importantly, her famous, lurid suicide when she was only 30.

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts. Her mother, Aurelia, was a brilliant woman who had given up her professional career to take care of her family. The relationship between the two women was not an easy one and it would affect Plath’s conception of womanhood and femininity for the rest of her life. The poet’s love for her mother is undeniable, as evinced in *Letters Home*, a compilation of her frequent correspondence with her family from the early 1950s until her death. However, Plath often felt extremely suffocated by Aurelia’s high expectations and demands. She depicts this bittersweet relationship in some of her most remarkable poems, such as “Medusa”, written in October 1962:

Did I escape, I wonder?
My mind winds to you
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.²

Plath compares Aurelia both to the mythological figure of Medusa, a rather threatening character, and to the Medusa jellyfish (whose genus name is *Aurelia aulita*, a clear allusion to her mother’s name). She depicts the Medusa as a series of isolated human body

¹ Sylvia Plath, “Ocean 1212-W”, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, (Harper Perennial: 1979), pp. 21-27.

² Plath, “Medusa”, *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), pp. 224-226.

parts – “mouth-plugs”, “eyes”, “ears”, “placenta” – that seem to surround the poetic voice, burdening her. The Medusa is not a complete individual, but a monstrous presence capable of haunting her from many different places.³ The anxious feeling Plath experienced towards her mother can be easily grasped in the long sentences, but also in the complex, lengthy words with multiple alliterations that make the reading of the poem (especially out loud) stifling and challenging: “old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable”.

Despite the importance of Plath’s relationship with her mother throughout the poet’s life, it was her father who marked her in a more significant way. Otto Plath was German and, to his daughter’s eyes, also a Nazi, although this has not been officially confirmed. He died when Sylvia was barely eight due to complications of diabetes, and the poet would always experience a feeling of resentment towards him for not taking care of his illness until it was too late. She knew that her love for him was “mingled with sadomasochistic feelings” and she admitted: “I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead”.⁴

Just like Aurelia’s, Otto’s presence would be haunting the young poet continuously, making her write harsh and vengeful poems about him employing a furious tone. He is often presented as a sort of domineering oppressor, an enemy Plath – who often identifies herself with a Jew – should defeat and liberate herself from, but also as a model for the men she was unavoidably attracted to. This can be appreciated in “Daddy”, one of her most acclaimed poems:

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

[...]

Every woman adores a Fascist,

³ Don Tresca, “Maternal Ambition and the Quiet Righteous Malice of Motherhood: An Examination of Sylvia Plath’s ‘Medusa’”, *MuseMedusa*, <https://musemedusa.com:443/dossier_1__trashed/tresca/> [accessed 12th March 2021].

⁴ Jahan Ramazani, “‘Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You’: Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy”, *PMLA*, Vol. 108, No. 5 (Oct, 1993), pp. 1142-1156 (p. 1143).

The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

[...]

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do.

So daddy, I'm finally through.⁵

The numerous references to Fascism and the German army in the poem – “Luftwaffe”, “mustache” “Aryan”, “panzer” (a German tank and, also, “armour” in German) – contribute to present the image of Otto Plath as a threatening, oppressive presence, and to confer the poem an extremely dark, wicked tone. This is reinforced by the constant repetition of the sound /u/ throughout the composition, constantly evoking the pronoun “you” and, therefore, Otto (the addressee of the poem). By these means, Plath manages to inspire in the reader a creepy, suffocating feeling, as if we also were victims of Otto Plath’s oppression. The alliteration of the /b/ sound in “The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you” contributes to create an atmosphere of violence, evoking, perhaps, the sound of an aggression (with a boot constantly kicking the victim’s face). “Every woman adores a Fascist”, she claims, and proceeds to create “a model” of him, one to whom she says “I do, I do”, suggesting a wedding and, therefore, marriage. Otto Plath has become her worst enemy, but also her darkest desire, and she marries a replica of him, proving those sadomasochistic attitudes she presumably had.

As a result of a childhood marked by the death of her father and the unrealistic expectations of her mother, Sylvia Plath struggled with depression and several psychological disorders throughout her whole life, and she was even treated with electroconvulsive therapy (an experience that would serve her as an inspiration for her famous novel *The Bell Jar*). Before killing herself at the age of 30, she had already tried to end her life twice: once, when she was only ten, with an overdose of sleeping pills, and

⁵ Plath, “Daddy”, *Collected Poems*, pp. 222-224.

later, when she was barely twenty, driving her car off the side of the road.⁶ She explores this topic in her poem “Lady Lazarus” (the title itself making reference to the resurrecting Lazarus, who comes back from death, just like she did after her unsuccessful suicide attempts):

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.⁷

In this fragment, the enjambment in the lines “I rocked shut / as a seashell” suggests the unstopping suffering she was experiencing, and we see a great contrast between the imagery of the “seashell” – a rather appealing creature that contains something extremely precious and valuable (and that could also be associated with innocence and virginity) – and the “sticky worms” that consume her unconscious body, corrupting and devastating it. The image suggested by that stanza is extremely vivid and potent, and it perfectly evokes the trope of the Sad-Girl Poet I will be analysing later: a young, pure, and beautiful teenage artist reduced to a corpse devoured by the worms of a patriarchal society that represses and subjugates her.

Despite her psychological struggles, Sylvia was a brilliant student with enormous artistic aspirations, a (in Quintana’s words) “golden child”:

Linda Wagner-Martin writes in her biography that young Plath was a “vibrant, outgoing, and brilliant student”; Anne Stevenson claims that by the end of middle school Plath had

⁶ Gary Lachman, *The Dedalus Book of Literary Suicides: Dead Letters* (Dedalus Press, University of Michigan, 2008), p. 145.

⁷ Plath, “Lady Lazarus”, *Collected Poems*, pp. 244-247.

“mastered the art of achievement”; and Paul Alexander notes that her scores on various IQ tests taken throughout high school “consistently categorized her as a genius”.⁸

After her graduation from Smith College in 1955, she travelled to the University of Cambridge on a Fulbright Scholarship, where she would meet the already acclaimed poet Ted Hughes. The two would marry only four months after their first encounter.⁹ Sylvia admired him and portrayed him as a powerful and dark figure (which recalls the poet’s description of her father in “Daddy”). The day after she first met him, she wrote in her diaries:

Then the worst happened, that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women, and whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes. [...] and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off. [...] and when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. [...] Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. [...] And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you.¹⁰

On the basis of this diary entry, we could affirm that Plath and Hughes’ relationship was, from the very first moment, one of love and passion, but also of violence and submission (at least on Plath’s side). Hughes was the “big, dark” man that emulated Otto Plath, the “model” of him and the “love of the rack and the screw” to whom she says “I do, I do”.

The Hughes’ marriage was initially ideal. Plath was feeling inspired and encouraged to write by whom she considered an excellent poet. During their honeymoon, she wrote: “never in my life have I had conditions so perfect: a magnificent handsome brilliant husband”.¹¹ However, their relationship soon started to deteriorate. They had two children: Frieda in 1960 and Nicholas in 1962, after Plath had suffered an involuntary

⁸ Christina Quintana, “Female Adolescence and the Trope of the Sad, Pretty Girl-Poet” (University of Florida, 2015), p. 16.

⁹ Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁰ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (ed. by Karen V. Kukil) (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), pp. 211-212.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 249.

abortion in 1961. Allegedly, Hughes had beaten her two days before the miscarriage.¹² Shortly after Nicholas' birth, Plath discovered her husband's affair with a German woman called Assia Wevill. One of Plath's friends, Elizabeth Sigmund, described the poet's disheartening reaction to the affair:

Then suddenly, late one evening, Sylvia arrived with Nick in his carry cot, and the change in her was appalling. She kept saying "My milk has dried up, I can't feed Nick. My milk has gone".

At last she told me that Ted was in love with another woman, that she knew Assia and was terrified of her. She wept and wept and held onto my hands, saying, "Help me!"

[...] She claimed, "Ted lies to me, he lies all the time, he has become a little man. [...] When you give someone your whole heart and he doesn't want it, you cannot take it back. It's gone forever".¹³

On the basis on this fragment, we can claim that Plath was so affected by Hughes' deception that even the most natural order of things turned upside down: she cannot produce milk to feed her son anymore, as if her abilities as a woman and a mother were frozen or cancelled, and Hughes, the "big, dark" boy she had first met, was now a "little" man, losing all power and attractiveness.

Shortly after, the couple separated and Plath moved to a house in Fitzroy Road, London, with both of her children. It was at that moment when she experienced the most important creative outburst of her life, and when her brightest poems were composed. She wrote to a friend:

When I was 'happy' domestically I felt a gag in my throat. Now that my domestic life, until I get a permanent live-in girl, is chaos, I am living like a Spartan, writing through huge fevers and producing free stuff I had locked in me for years. I feel astounded and very lucky. I kept telling myself I was the sort that could only write when peaceful at heart, but that is not so, the muse has come to live here, now that Ted has gone".¹⁴

¹² Danuta Kean, "Unseen Sylvia Plath letters claim domestic abuse by Ted Hughes", *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/11/unseen-sylvia-plath-letters-claim-domestic-abuse-by-ted-hughes>> [accessed 14th March 2021].

¹³ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Granta Publications, 1993), p. 60.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Being the miserable woman victim of an unfaithful man had turned her into an even more promising artist because she was no longer oppressed by the demanding expectations society places upon mothers and wives. She was now free to be both a poet and a woman.

Unfortunately, Sylvia Plath's depression and mental disorders worsened throughout the following months and in February 1963, she took her own life by placing her head into the oven with the gas turned on. She was 30 years old. Her journals from that final period were destroyed by Ted Hughes since he "did not want her children to have to read it".¹⁵ Therefore, it is really difficult to know exactly what happened during the poet's last days, besides from what can be grasped from her final poems.

1.2. Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet: her depiction of womanhood

Sylvia Plath was – along with other figures such as Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell – one of the first "confessional poets". Lowell's 1959 book *Life Studies* was the one inaugurating the tendency defined as "confessional" by the critic M. L. Rosenthal. He described it as "autobiographical, therapeutic ('soul's therapy' and 'self-therapeutic') and unflinchingly truthful, and Plath herself reflected upon these new trends in her diaries: "I've been very excited by [...] this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo . . ."¹⁶

Particularly worth mentioning in this context is the reshaping of the nature of domestic life. After World War II, the city suburbs experienced a remarkable increase in their population and Aurelia Plath herself was one of those who decided to move to these new residential areas. This phenomenon, together with other technological and economic developments taking place in the 1950s, changed the conception of family and domesticity, and women were the most affected participants. The psychologist Betty Friedan analysed in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) several extracts from 1950s female-oriented magazines, which mainly reinforced the idea that women's most appropriate role was as wives and as mothers, "conced[ing] the top jobs to men",

¹⁵ Katharine Viner, "Desperately seeking Sylvia", *The Guardian* (October 20th, 2003) <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/oct/20/poetry.gender>> [accessed March 14th 2021].

¹⁶ Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 20.

“marry[ing] younger than ever, bear[ing] more babies and look[ing] and act[ing] far more feminine than the ‘emancipated’ girl of the 1920s”.¹⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that women found this new concept of domesticity – isolated in the oppressive suburbs, far from any urban and rebellious sphere – inescapable and suffocating.

Plath was no exception. Besides being expected to devote her whole life to her husband and children, she felt excessively limited by her condition as a female poet in a world in which literature was reserved for men, and in which women who wrote – and, especially, who wrote “confessional” poetry about their intimate lives – were terribly underestimated and stigmatized. For that reason, Plath’s confessional poems give us an excellent perspective of women’s pain, anxieties, and particular experiences at the time.

One of Plath’s poems dealing with women’s reality is “Vanity Fair”. She wrote it inspired by a soap opera that became very popular in the 1950s and that the poet considered – just like other television programs – harmful and corrupting for young girls, who were incited to “believe in an artificial world and to place their own vanity first”:¹⁸

Through frost-thick weather
This witch sidles, fingers crooked, as if
Caught in a hazardous medium that might
Merely by its continuing
Attach her to heaven.

At eye’s envious corner
Crow’s-feet copy veining on a stained leaf;
Cold squint steals sky’s color; while bruit
Of bells calls holy ones, her tongue
Backtalks at the raven¹⁹

This first stanza describes the television in an incredibly unique way, using brilliant metaphors. The “frost-thick weather” might refer to the static noise old TVs produced,

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

¹⁸ Julia Gordon-Bramer, “History and a Case for Prescience: Short Studies of Sylvia Plath’s 1956 Poems”, p. 59.

¹⁹ Plath, “Vanity Fair”, *Collected Poems*, pp. 32-33.

and the “fingers crooked” could be the antenna that only by receiving signals “attach[es]” this witchy device “to heaven”.

Following with the second stanza, Plath argues that television programs cause envy and make people lose focus on reality, “steal[ing] sky’s colors” and using them in their images and screens. The “bruit of bells” and the “tongue backtalk[ing] at the raven” make reference to the corrupting gossip about the “holy ones” – the TV stars – that plagued society. Especially worth mentioning is the fact that, despite describing a completely lifeless, artificial device, Plath uses plenty of words that could be used to portray women in an especially devilish way: as “witches” with “crows” and “ravens”. Thus, the poet might insinuate that television is particularly harmful for women or that this artifact (with its corrupting programs) is just another participant in the envious fights between women caused by patriarchal expectations and internalized misogyny.

The poem continues to present female aspirations at that time, which are reduced to cooking and becoming the best housewife, whereas they entertain themselves watching vicious girls “straying” with any man who offers them a “trinket”:

Craves most to cook batter
Rich in strayings with every amorous oaf,
Ready, for a trinket,
To squander owl-hours on bracken bedding,
Flesh unshriven.

Then, in the last stanza, Plath returns to the devilish symbolism and presents a violent, satanic image:

[...]
The worst sloven

Vies with best queen over
Right to blaze as Satan’s wife;
Housed in earth, those million brides shriek out.
Some burn short, some long,
Staked in pride’s coven.

In these lines, women of all sorts (the “worst sloven[s]” and the “best queen[s]”) are involved in unscrupulous fights over men, who are so oppressive that are compared to Satan. They quarrel and scream – “burn[ing]” and “shriek[ing] out” –damned to stay forever too bigoted and prideful to overcome patriarchal influences and manipulations.

Sylvia Plath lived throughout a time when women were terribly pressured and downtrodden. They were expected to give up every ambition they had different from being a careful housewife and to fight, if necessary, over men, criminalizing and degrading their competitors. They had to be submissive and, at the same time, fierce. Innocent and seducing. As an early feminist - as some critics define her - Plath knew these bitter relationships among women were provoked by the patriarchal society we live in, and that girls were victims rather than executioners. However, that did not prevent her from being caught in that web of double standards and she ended up becoming a recurrent example of females in 1950s: submissive, fierce, seducing, innocent. Around her figure and, therefore, around these adjectives, the trope of the Sad-Girl Poet was created, with Plath as its main representative, and it would endure over time until our days.

2. Mediatization, mythification and commercialization of Sylvia Plath: the Sad-Girl Poet trope

Over the years, Sylvia Plath has turned into a fantasy rather than a real poet. In Georgiana Banita’s words, she has become “an ‘event’ at the borderline between cultural nostalgia (which tends [...] to romanticize pathological creativity) and a fetishist interest in personality images of all time”.²⁰

Contrary to what it might seem, Plath herself was one of the major participants in the process of her own mythification. When reading her poetry, it is easy to imagine that an ancient legendary character is telling us a story, with a universal, profound tone. This is not casual, for Plath intentionally plagued her work with mythological references and she often identified herself – or at least her poetic voice – with imaginary characters from classical stories (see, for example, “Electra on Azalea Path” or the already mentioned

²⁰ Georgiana Banita, “‘The Same, Identical Woman’: Sylvia Plath in the Media”, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* (2007), pp. 38-60 (p. 38).

“Medusa”). Regarding this tendency, she wrote in her diaries: “I pick up poetic identities of characters who commit suicide, adultery, or get murdered, and believe completely in them for a while”.²¹ And she believes so much in these characters that she fully transforms into them in her compositions.

Another important factor in the process of her mythification is the biographical work produced about her figure. Without underestimating their utility, biographies constitute a quite controversial literary genre, and their authors are often criticized for focusing on the most morbid details rather than offering a completely trust-worthy account. In Plath’s case, her importance as a professional author is often disregarded in benefit of her character as a beautiful and brilliant schoolgirl in the cusp of a great tragedy, a “golden child gone mad”. Christina Quintana collects in her thesis the following biographical pieces about Plath’s figure:

Edward Butscher [...] writes that Plath’s middle and high school years were filled with “success sparking success in a dizzying profusion of awards and special commendations.” She was a “veritable prodigy at work”, erudite and creative and almost obsessively productive. [...] Linda Wagner-Martin writes in her biography that young Plath was a “vibrant, outgoing, and brilliant student”; Anne Stevenson claims that by the end of middle school Plath had “mastered the art of achievement”; and Paul Alexander notes that her scores on various IQ tests taken throughout high school “consistently categorized her as a genius”.²²

Plath’s biographies have also contributed to her sexualization, for they often present her as attractive and charming, giving extreme attention to her body image. Thus, her physical appearance is “so tightly bound up with her artistic production that it becomes nearly impossible to separate them”.²³ She is portrayed as a pure, innocent, almost childlike adolescent:

Elizabeth Winder [...] writes confidently: “Contemporary observers agree upon three things regarding Sylvia’s appearance: that she was proper, that she was elegant, that she glowed.” Winder [...] includes interviews from Plath’s fellow guest editors who attest

²¹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, p. 204.

²² Quintana, p. 16.

²³ Ibid, pp. 17-18.

that Plath was “attractive, blond, outgoing” and “she had the most beautiful high coloring in her cheeks” [...].²⁴

But also, as a young girl who enjoyed dating plenty of boys and was even called “the Marilyn Monroe of modern literature”.²⁵ All these sexualizing comments and this excessive attention towards her physical image prove that, even after her death, she still tends to be a victim of our misogynist and patriarchal society, which values her attractiveness more than her writing abilities.

It is perhaps due to this sexualizing tendency that published editions of Plath’s works usually display photographs of the poet on their covers (one of them even shows Plath on a bathing-suit):

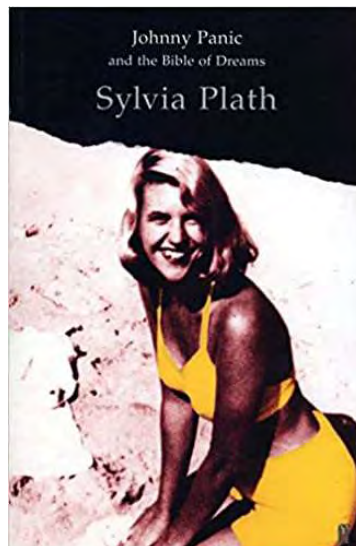


Figure 1: Cover of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (Faber, 1998)

²⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

²⁵ Carl Rollyson, *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2013), p. 1.

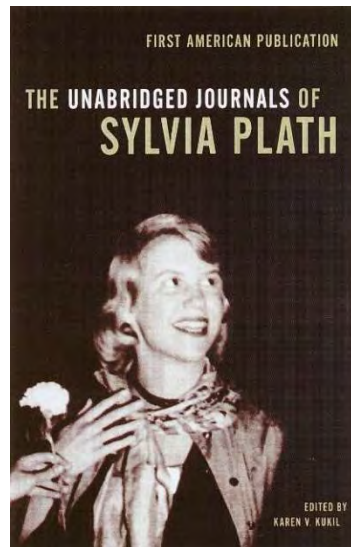


Figure 2: Cover of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (Anchor Books, 2000)

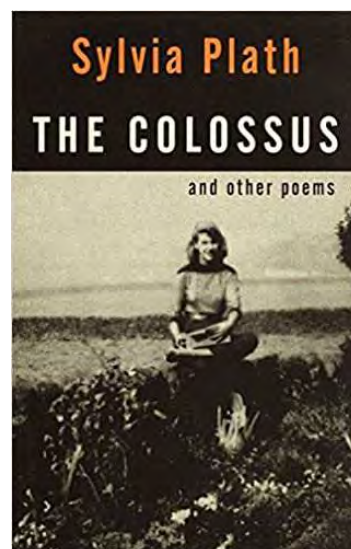


Figure 3: Cover of *The Colossus* (Vintage International, 1998)

These and other photographs of the poet have been widely disseminated during the past decades but, curiously, none of them displays the poet actually writing. They are usually private pictures that contribute to the forging of the myth of the poet. By characterizing Plath by means of her private photographs, once again the professional poet loses importance in benefit of the innocent schoolgirl destined to tragedy, and the two spheres – that of Plath’s physical appearance and that of her literary production – seem forever inseparable.

As a result of this process of mythification, Sylvia Plath has become a tragic character that is particularly attractive to white, privileged adolescent girls who identify themselves with the poet, and her novel *The Bell Jar* is even considered by some authors a female bildungsroman.²⁶ The reason behind this unhealthy attraction towards Plath might be the extreme fragmentation young girls generally suffer as they become adults. According to Marina Papenfuss, the process of self-discovery is more chaotic for women than for men, and that is why teenage girls might see themselves reflected both in Plath and in Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, who says “I’m very interested in everything”, a rather odd statement that reflects how lost and fragmented female adolescents are.²⁷ Papenfuss keeps on arguing:

Scholars constantly characterize Esther Greenwood as the archetypal middle class, disillusioned white girl. Her mutability rests largely on her status as an archetype, thus allowing readers to project their own anxieties onto her and find some reconciliation through her narrative journey.²⁸

Also, we cannot stop noticing the fact that both Plath and Esther are encapsulated in “suspended adolescence”: in the author’s case, because she killed herself at the age of 30; in the character’s case, because she lives inside a frozen story.²⁹ Thus, they will always be models and referents to female adolescents, unable to evolve into more mature grounds, and forever destined to be disregarded and patronized because of their naivety.

Another factor explaining Plath’s success among young girls is the extreme oppression and high expectations society puts on women and that Sylvia Plath, as I have already said, experienced herself. Thus, she becomes a symbolic victim of that terrible repression, but also a perfect model of a socially acceptable housewife (always serene and gorgeous on the outside despite her inner melancholia, prioritizing her husband and children over her personal ambitions), with whom teenage girls can empathize. In “Mad

²⁶ Marisa Papenfuss, “American Millennial Girlhood and the Cult of Sylvia Plath” (University of Florida: 2007), p. 1.

²⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), p. 29.

²⁸ Papenfuss, p. 24.

²⁹ Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver, “Mad Girls’ Love Songs: Two Women Poets—a Professor and Graduate Student-Discuss Sylvia Plath, Angst, and the Poetics of Female Adolescence”, *College Literature*, 36.4 (2009) (pp. 179-207), p. 187.

Girl's Love Songs", A. Greenberg and B. Klaver associate Plath's enchanting aura with this characteristic "conflation of glamour and destruction":

We know the traditional explanation for the self-destructive behavior of adolescent girls: because all girls can't be blonde, beautiful, glamorous, and thin, they punish themselves by starving, binging, purging, or cutting. Plath's appeal must have a lot to do with the fact that her story conflates glamour (beautiful, blonde famous poet...) with destruction (...kills herself).³⁰

As a result of this growing interest in Plath's persona, the poet's figure began to be commercialized. Many biographies were published, works that were only focused on Plath as a housewife, or on her relationship with her parents or Ted Hughes, turning her into a character on a gossip show at the expense of her actual value as an author. Both Quintana and Papenfuss agree that this process of commercialization reached its peak in the 1990s. At that time, many characters in books, films and TV shows – usually teenage girls in conflict with society – were portrayed as Plath readers or even Plath's reincarnations, consummating the Sad-Girl Poet trope. Some examples of this phenomenon are the films *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) and *Prozac Nation* (1994), starring young, white and beautiful actresses such as Kirsten Dunst, Winona Ryder, Angeline Jolie, and Christina Ricci. Their characters show the combination of glamour (feminine beauty) and destruction (mental illness) Greenberg and Klaver talked about and it can be argued that they

romanticize mental illness – at least when it occurs to white and attractive girls – as an expression of feminine beauty and talent: like Plath, all of the characters are described as young, sexually attractive girls with propensities for the arts and seemingly bright, promising futures.³¹

Instances of the commercialization of Sylvia Plath's figure can be also found in the music sphere during these decades but, very surprisingly, in these cases the Sad-Girl Poet trope is mainly used by male musicians who adopt a different approach: one of fascination with a certain degree of sexualization. Ryan Adam's song "Sylvia Plath" (2001) is one of the best examples of this tendency. The composition contains a funereal

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 186-187.

³¹ Quintana, p. 11.

piano melody but, rather than eulogizing and mourning the figure of the poet, it presents a sort of erotic scene between the singer and Plath, who is conceived as a seducing muse: “And she and I would sleep on a boat / And swim in the sea without clothes”. More noticeably, it is not the concrete figure of Plath the singer is attracted to, but a general category of women (“I wish I had *a* Sylvia Plath”), which reunites all the characteristics the poet is often associated with: white, beautiful, brilliant, depressed.

Dealing with the mediatization and commercialization of Plath, we cannot stop mentioning the moral controversies behind these phenomena. Since most of the poet’s representations and references are associated with her role as a woman and lover rather than with her importance as an author, we could argue that they contribute to her sexualization and to the romanticization of her mental illness. She is always represented as a white, pretty woman whose value resides in her “heteronormative desirability” and who “is not sexy *in spite* of her craziness but *because* of it”.³² By becoming a character, the writer’s value, then, is often disregarded and her symbolic problems with society, banalized. Frieda Hughes, Plath’s daughter, commented on this topic in a poem she wrote after learning about the project for the film “Sylvia” (2003):

Now they want to make a film
For anyone lacking the ability
To imagine the body, head in oven
Orphaning children.
"The peanut eaters, entertained
At my mother's death, will go home,
Each carrying their memory of her,
Lifeless - a souvenir.
Maybe they'll buy the video.³³

This essay is not concerned with the moral debate about this commercialization but, as a philologist, I will try to focus my study on Plath’s textual work rather than on her personal life (even though sometimes those two spheres seem to be extremely

³² Papenfuss, p. 33.

³³ Jamie Wilson, “Frieda Hughes attacks BBC for film on Plath”, *The Guardian* (February 3rd 2003) <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/feb/03/bbc.film>> [accessed March 19th 2021].

intertwined), valuing her as an author and not as a TV star, one of the “holy ones” from *Vanity Fair* she hated.

3. Sylvia Plath’s influence on contemporary indie-pop songs: a comparative analysis

During the past few years, the figure of Sylvia Plath has importantly impacted the musical sphere. Even though the influence of the poet had already been noticed in the 1990s and 2000s (see the already mentioned Ryan Adams), Plath’s impact on musical artists from 2010 onwards follows a different tendency. It is true that we still find songs referencing the poet but, mainly, what we find nowadays are multiple superficial and romanticized recreations of Sylvia Plath: young and pretty female artists who write sad songs from the intimacy of their bedroom, or, to put it in other words, a musical landscape plagued of Sad-Girl Poets where the most salient figures enjoy a considerable commercial success.

Even though we can find male musicians among this tendency, I will focus my analysis on women artists, since I believe they definitely are more influenced by Sylvia Plath than men, suffering in their own flesh the oppression of a patriarchal society the poet described in her poems and, especially, the despising judgement from the media Plath experienced herself. Thus, Sylvia Plath as the original Sad-Girl Poet becomes a model for these new female artists, a guiding figure in a process of mourning women’s problems and men’s abuse but, also, of vindicating the role of girls in a misogynist society using a tone of rage and power, similar to the one used by Plath in “Lady Lazarus”. There are multiple examples of the participants of this new wave of Sad-Girl Poets in music: Phoebe Bridgers, Fionna Apple, Lorde... but, in this paper, I will be focusing on two of the most commercially salient representatives: Lana del Rey and Taylor Swift.

3.1. Lana del Rey: a “24/7 Sylvia Plath”

Lana del Rey is one of the artists who most noticeably have built their character around the figure of Sylvia Plath. She consistently writes songs about love, sex, and death from a rather submissive, male-pleasing perspective, which recalls the “conflation of glamour and destruction” that also characterized Plath. She is openly sold as a

reincarnation of the American poet and she even appeared in a *Vogue* photoshoot clearly characterized as Sylvia Plath (figure 4): “clutching paperbacks, sitting next to a typewriter, and looking generally despondent”.³⁴



Figure 4: *Vogue Australia* photoshoot (October 2012)

Del Rey’s changing identity is something remarkable: born Elizabeth Grant, she first started a humble musical career under the friendly and intimate name of Lizzy Grant, but it was not until she adopted the name and personality of Lana del Rey, the American sad girl, that she was catapulted into the spotlight. Her character is so artificial and consistently built that we do not know who she is in reality. “I was a singer, not a very popular one” she says in the “Ride” music video. Is she implying that her identity as Lizzy Grant, or even as Elizabeth Grant, is forever lost? It is worth mentioning that if we search Lizzy Grant’s music on iTunes, we are automatically redirected to Lana del Rey’s songs: it almost seems like Grant disappeared and was supplanted by a darker and sadder alter ego. In fact, Del Rey herself drops some hints about her change of identity throughout her discography. Taking for instance the “Ride” music video, we see the marketable Lana del Rey in all her splendour: she is all dressed up as an American biker girl, with a very elaborated hairstyle and make up that recall the 1950s and 1960s and everything suggests a feeling of artificiality (figure 5).³⁵

³⁴ Papenfuss, p. 38.

³⁵ Lana del Rey, “Ride”, Universal Music Group, YouTube <https://youtu.be/Py_-3di1yx0>, 2012.



Figure 5: Del Rey's "Ride" artwork

Del Rey has admitted on several occasions having been influenced by Sylvia Plath's figure and work, but it was not until the release of her sixth album, *Norman Fucking Rockwell*, that she made a textual reference to how she feels connected to the poet. In her single "hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it", she sings: "I've been tearing around in my fucking nightgown / 24/7 Sylvia Plath".³⁶ The image of Del Rey "tearing around" wearing a "nightgown" links directly with Plath's lines "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown", from "Morning Song", one of her poems about identity.³⁷

"Morning Song" discusses the process of embracing your new-born child. At the beginning of the poem, we are presented a reified baby – a "fat gold watch", a "new statue" – and, as it advances, the child comes to life through vivid metaphors that now compare her to natural elements instead of objects: a "far sea", a "cat". As the baby's identity changes to become more real, the mother's identity also mutates, and she partially abandons her old self to become someone's mom, a process every woman must live through when they fulfil social expectations and have children. But this is not a sudden transformation, but a rather gradual one, as the verses "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand" suggest. As Carmen Birkle argues, Plath speaks about how her child's growing implies her own disappearance, as she will also grow old and eventually, she will die, letting her child occupy her place in the world:

³⁶ Jack Antonoff and Lana del Rey, "hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have", Universal Music Group, *Norman Fucking Rockwell*, 2019.

³⁷ Plath, "Morning Song", *Collected Poems*, p. 156.

The relationship between mother and child is compared to the one between cloud and mirror. The mother gives birth to a child, and the cloud distills the mirror. These are two parallel actions whose common denominator is that the agent effaces herself through the action. This parallelism expresses the mother's fear that her own identity has passed over to the child [...].³⁸

The presence of a mirror and its reflection reinforces this idea: she sees herself in a mirror that reflects her fading image and, at the same time, the image of her child as a copy of the poet. Other words in the poem such as “magnifying” and “window” also refer to lenses and glasses and continue this idea of fading reflections.

This process of losing one's identity to become a different person also appears in Del Rey's “hope is a dangerous thing”. The artist may have even decided to make a textual reference to this specific poem in order to express how she also gave up her old identity to create a new one, a new person, a marketable artist. It is almost as if Lizzy Grant was Lana del Rey's mother, and, as the child grew bigger and stronger (and more real), Grant weakened and faded away, until eventually Lana del Rey absorbed and replaced Lizzy Grant. Sylvia Plath's and Lana del Rey's presence in the lyrics of the song are rather clear, and they can be seen in the first two choruses respectively. However, the figure that speaks through the third chorus is ambiguous and, if we pay attention, we can find several hints that indicate that this mysterious voice is Lizzy Grant or, at least, what is left of her.

Compared to her previous songs, “hope is a dangerous thing” is much more intimate and moves away from some of the standards of pop music: the choruses present changes as a highlighting mechanism and, as the producer Jack Antonoff explained via Twitter, it was “recorded no click mostly live” (a click track is “a series of audio cues used to synchronize sound recordings” in commercial songs to help the listener to follow the rhythm and lyrics of a song and, therefore, to sing along and easily empathise with the singer).³⁹ Even the artwork for the song is far purer: a simple black and white picture

³⁸ Carmen Birkle, “Women's stories of the looking glass autobiographical reflections and self-representations in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde” (Munich, 1996), p. 75.

³⁹ Gavin Harrison, ‘Creating Click Tracks For Drummers’, Sound on Sound (2003), <<https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/creating-click-tracks-drummers>> [accessed 15th November, 2019].

of her face, with no make-up or ornaments, and she is smiling innocently (figure 6). According to Ditta Demeter, “hope is a dangerous thing”

shows a Lana we have never seen before. There’s a sense of double-ness to this new image: she appears both as a grown woman, reflecting back on her past with bitterness and grief, as well as a fearful child still battling the monsters under her bed. In many ways, she’s the opposite of her earlier Lolita-self: an adult with the fragility and vulnerability of a young girl.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that this is one of the most honest songs coming from such an artificial figure as Lana del Rey and we can perceive how she gives more hints about the construction of her character. Thematically speaking, the song apparently deals with Lana’s identity as a famous singer and how that condition does not make her depressive tendencies any better. But if we go a step further, we can glimpse a progressive transition from one identity to another within the lyrics, especially in the choruses.



Figure 6: Del Rey's “hope is a dangerous thing” artwork

As I have already mentioned, in the first chorus of the song we find a literary style that reminds us of Plath’s poetry, with intense and violent images that may evoke the poet’s last days, wandering around in her nightgown and writing violently and obsessively (using her own “blood” to paint her walls). Nevertheless, the figure speaking in this second chorus is the exact reflection of the public character of Lana del Rey. She

⁴⁰ Ditta Demeter, “From Lolita to Sylvia Plath, Lana del Rey reinvents herself in “hope is a dangerous thing...”, *Atwood Magazine* (2019), <<https://atwoodmagazine.com/ldrhd-lana-del-rey-hope-is-a-dangerous-thing-song-review/>> [accessed 27th May 2021].

is now “tearing up town in her fucking white gown”, a much more modern and urban image. Lana has worn white clothes in several album covers, so it is easy to imagine her walking through the streets of a city wearing a white dress. In these lines, she is depicted as a “sociopath” who dances and performs to keep the “black narcissist” away, and this is the perfect synthesis of her public image. In this context (where the singer’s identity seems nearly split), The contrast between the “white gown” she wears before the eyes of the public and the “black narcissist” she is secretly retaining within her serves to illustrate the contradictory nature of the Sad-Girl Poet. She is obligated to be pure and appealing to men, performing in a white dress, but she also must be fragile, sad and defiant: a “black narcissist” moved by hopelessness and anger that might free herself from the ties society has imposed over her. The separated rhyme between “Plath” (first chorus) and “sociopath” (second chorus) may suggest the temporal distance between Plath and Del Rey, and also how the latter emulates the former, as if she was some kind of reincarnation of Sylvia Plath wandering through the city, out in the modern world.

It is in the second verse of the song where we find some key words to correctly address this identity matter. We are presented with a young Del Rey that has “15-year dances” and “church basement romances”. These teenage years gave way to the time when she started performing and ended up becoming Lana del Rey, and in the last two lines of the stanza we can see a subtle reference to her lost identity as Lizzy Grant, when she talks to her father “from beyond the grave”, as if she was dead. This can easily be related to Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”: “Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me?”. Continuing with the lyrics, the “most famous woman [...] on the iPad” is obviously Del Rey, a public figure that appears in the media. She has become a brand, just like the iPad, and even her father must see her through a screen now. The fact that she is calling him “from beyond the grave” leads us to think that the person who is actually calling is Lizzy Grant, buried under the figure of Del Rey. The rhyme between “iPad” and “hi, dad” emphasises the contrast between the brand of Lana del Rey as a trade product and the real girl who tries to contact her roots from the world of the dead. In fact, in “hi, dad” we perceive a change in the modulation of Del Rey’s voice. It sounds more delicate and even broken, which emphasises a breaking point, a difference: she is showing us her true self.

We can now move on to the most interesting part of the song: the third chorus. “Writing in blood on my walls” turns into “writing in blood on your walls”, and this change in the possessive determiner might suggest that she is not writing about and for herself anymore, as Sylvia Plath presumably did. Now she is writing for an audience and that inevitably conditions her artistic production. More noticeably, “notepad” turns into “my pad” in this chorus, also suggesting a connection with “iPad”. The brand is left out here, so is the marketable character of Lana del Rey. All of this suggest the subtle presence of Lizzy Grant throughout this whole chorus, buried under her mediatic alter ego: “They write that I’m happy, they know that I’m not / But at best, you can see I’m not sad”. She is being watched and written about: Lizzy Grant is physically here, hidden behind Lana del Rey, but her identity is progressively vanishing as Del Rey’s persona is being created. This process, as well as the references to lenses and screens we also find in “hope is a dangerous thing” – like the iPad, or the fact that she is reading Slims Aarons, a famous photographer, at the beginning of the song –, clearly emphasize the changing identities of both women and how they may not recognise themselves when looking in the mirror: Plath does not identify herself in her baby and Del Rey is a famous stranger in her iPad.

Another example of a song by Lana del Rey which recalls Sylvia Plath’s poetry is “Video Games”. The lyrics depict a woman who has completely lost her identity to become some kind of mistress who satisfies all her man’s wishes, and this idea of automatization of oneself and becoming some kind of simulation is present all throughout the composition and even the title refers to it. Just like in “Ride”, the artwork for “Video Games” presents an extremely fabricated identity that aims to emulate Sylvia Plath’s public image as a depressed and messed up young poet (figure 7). In the music video for the song, we witness a passionate couple living a dreamy life, riding motorcycles, and wandering around Hollywood. Nevertheless, just as the title predicts, this idyllic life is only an illusion, a made-up story, and this is shown by means of the 1950s film aesthetic of the whole video and by a number of scenes showing paparazzi photographing the couple, as if their relationship was part of a mediatic fantasy.⁴¹ Even Del Rey’s lover,

⁴¹ Lana del Rey, “Video Games”, Universal Music Group, YouTube < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE6wxDqdOV0> >, 2011.

with “his strong arms, fast car and sexy patter”, seems more like a Hollywood movie character than a real human.⁴²



Figure 7: Del Rey’s “Video Games” artwork

Interestingly, the female protagonist of the music video is characterised as a Sad-Girl Poet: white, beautiful, but also unstable. Particularly worth mentioning is one scene in which she appears to be drunk and emotionally volatile while her male partner holds her and seems to be taking her home. Just like Plath, this woman is experiencing the effects of her mental problems but also the consequences of a patriarchal society that pushes young girls to look for protection in male figures who, ironically, might contribute to their distress even more.

The idea of a woman losing her entire personality in order to become a mere object whose function is to please her husband was already tackled by Plath in her poem “The Applicant”.⁴³ In this poem, we encounter an impersonal voice trying to convince a man to buy his most needed product, a woman, so that he might marry her and live up to society’s expectations. The woman is completely reified and presented as a material object that can make the man’s life easier by means of becoming his housewife. Perhaps the wedding bells that we can hear at the beginning of the “Video Games” music video are a link to this poem, but, more noticeably, both compositions are extremely connected by the artificial tone they employ. Whereas “Video Games” is presented as a sort of vintage film, “The Applicant” recalls a 1950s TV commercial, with a very enthusiastic

⁴² Jim Beviglia, “Behind The Song: Lana Del Rey, “Video Games”, *American Songwriter* (2020) <<https://americansongwriter.com/video-games-lana-del-ray-behind-the-song/>> [accessed 27th May 2021].

⁴³ Plath, “The Applicant”, *Collected Poems*, p. 221.

voice trying to sell a product or commodity. In their ultimate end, both pieces portray marriage as an artificial, illusory game created to put up with society's demands: a videogame.

As Margaret H. Freeman notes, "The Applicant" starts with the question "First, are you our sort of a person?", followed by an inventory of physical flaws that the candidate must reunite in order to be considered incomplete and, thus, worthy of a wife who might complete him.⁴⁴ The enumeration goes from the more superficial and impersonal element – a glass eye – to the private and intimate "rubber breasts" or "rubber crotch", creating a rather uncomfortable image that pairs the incommodity felt by Plath due to the society's imposition of marriage. The idea of a woman completing – and also being a part of – a man goes back to the Christian *Bible* and the story of Adam and Eve, the latter being born of one of Adam's ribs and, thus, originating the concept of marriage as a union between two people (in which the man, as the donor of the rib, will always be dominant) necessary to create the rest of the world. In Freeman's own words:

[...] considering the subsequent emergence of biblical metaphors for marriage, the reader might even account for the phrase 'stitches to show something's missing' by invoking the story of Eve being fashioned from Adam's rib.⁴⁵

This fundamental idea is recalled by Lana del Rey in "Video Games" when she says, "They say that the world was made for two". Both the possessive determiner in the first line of "The Applicant" ("our") and the personal pronoun in Del Rey's lyrics ("they") refer to the demands of society. However, whereas in Plath's poem the determiner is in the first person, including the speaker as if s/he represented society itself, in "Video Games" the third person pronoun refers to an external force of which the poetic voice is only a victim. Thus, it seems like Lana del Rey has turned into the woman-product that is being sold in "The Applicant", offering us an internal perspective of Plath's text. In fact, Plath's unconventional employment of an external perspective evidences that she was fully aware of these manipulations and orchestrations made by society, and that she knew that she was only another part of this theatrical show ("our sort of a person?"). In

⁴⁴ Margaret H. Freeman, "The poem as complex blend: conceptual mappings of metaphor in Sylvia Plath's 'The Applicant'", *Language and Literature*, Vol. 14 (SAGE Publications, 2005), pp. 25-44 (p. 32).

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 33.

contrast, the poetic voice in “Video Games” is intimate and personal and offers an internal perspective of her life as a completely alienated woman who meekly fulfils the social role that has been assigned to her.

Marriage is presented in “The Applicant” as an oppressive convention that involves no love, a practical deal in which the woman becomes a domestic worker: “To fill it and willing / To bring teacups and roll away headaches / And do whatever you tell it”. It is compared to a “suit - / Black and stiff” that is indestructible and that will only be dismantled when one of the two partners dies (evoking the wedding expression “till death do us part”):

Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

In this stanza, Plath manages to successfully suggest the anxious and suffocating feeling she – and the woman in the poem – experiences regarding marriage or, at least, the socially demanded marriage that is depicted here. She does that by means of the repetition of the sound /uf/ in the second and third line, which evokes a sensation of exhaustion or even frustration. The repetitive lines “talk, talk, talk” and “marry it, marry it, marry it” help intensify this effect, suggesting, in Jo Gill’s words, “that the subject is somehow trapped in language, that the words echoing around her form an unbreakable barrier – almost like a bell jar – which offers no way out”.⁴⁶

Throughout “The Applicant”, we see a brutal reification of the woman society is trying to sell, who is referred to as a “thing” that is “guaranteed”, a “living doll” that “works”. The poetic voice always uses the impersonal pronoun “it” to talk about her and mentions all the advantages she provides, which are all related to domestic labours and male comfort: “It can sew, it can cook”. As argued by Freeman, the woman’s identity is reduced so that her only function and personality is to serve men, in such a way that as soon as her husband dies, she will “dissolve” and become another man’s toy.⁴⁷ This

⁴⁶ Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 54.

⁴⁷ Freeman, “The poem as complex blend: conceptual mappings of metaphor in Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Applicant’”, p. 35.

recalls the second verse of “Video Games”, in which the poetic voice renounces her whole life and success in order to become a mere spectator in her boyfriend’s life:

Singing in the old bars,
swinging with the old stars
Living for the fame
Kissing in the blue dark,
playing pool and wild darts
Video games

He holds me in his big arms,
drunk, and I am seeing stars
This is all I think of
Watching all our friends fall
in and out of Old Paul's
This is my idea of fun
Playing video games

She starts the verse “singing” and “swinging with the old stars” but as soon as she encounters him, she becomes a simple observer – “drunk, and I am seeing stars” – who loses her critical abilities: “this is all I think of”. The fact that her lover’s arms are “big” and that she is drunk recalls once again the trope of the Sad-Girl Poet who is beautiful but mentally unstable and who seeks comfort in dominant and oppressive men. At the end of each fragment of the verse, there is a repetition of the phrase “video games”, emphasizing one more time the artificiality and fiction of this concept of marriage, as if they were playing a part for an audience composed by the whole society.

The significant use of pronouns and determiners in both pieces should not go unmentioned. “The Applicant” is a rather impersonal piece, with scarce use of the pronouns “you” to address the possible client, in a commercial style, “it” to refer to the reified woman, and first-person pronouns and determiners to represent society’s values. In contrast, “Video Games” makes an abusive use of these particles, especially of the personal pronoun “you” and the possessives “his” and “your”. Thus, the first person is relegated and disappears in favour of the man in the song, who plagues the whole composition and exerts his domination over the female poetic voice. “Video Games” presents from a first-person perspective the same situation we witness from the outside

in “The Applicant”, as if the singer had become the marketable wife willing to sacrifice her own identity for a repressive man.

“Video Games” can also be linked to another of Plath’s poems, “Daddy”, especially because of the excessive use both compositions make of the sound /u/. In “Daddy”, the alliteration of that sound results from the use of a huge variety of words (“you”, “do”, “shoe”, “foot”, “root”, etc.) that mainly refer to Plath’s father, whereas in “Video Games” the phenomenon is mostly achieved by the reiteration of just two words, “you” and “do”. The small range of variation in Del Rey’s composition might be accounted by the fact that an indie-pop song is supposed to be rather basic and catchy, but it also might suggest that Del Rey has less critical abilities than Plath because she is still submerged in an alienating situation Plath seems to have already escaped.

The alliteration of the /u/ sound also fulfils the function of emphasizing the presence of the addressee – the “you” – in both pieces. In Plath’s case, on the one hand, many critics argue that this addressee is her father, Otto Plath, and he haunts the reader in a rather ghostly, creepy way, as a dominant oppressor that suffocates the atmosphere of the poem.⁴⁸ In “Video Games”, on the other hand, the addressee is the singer’s lover, and he plagues the song as a sort of adored, divinised God. Nonetheless, both characters – the lover and the father – seem to be joined together in the same person, for Plath claims that in marriage she “[makes] a model” of Otto Plath, and Del Rey abandons herself to a man she adores and idolatrisés, a dynamic that recalls a father-daughter relationship. The merging of the figures of father and lover into the same person seems to be characteristic of the Sad-Girl Poet as well, who is attracted to older men representing the oppression she is incited to feel by society.

“Video Games” and “Daddy” are very similar in terms of the dynamics of power they both represent, consisting in a numb female figure repressed by an authoritarian man who does not allow her to live her own life without restraint. It is worth mentioning the fact that Plath wrote “Daddy” barely a couple of months after discovering Ted Hughes’ affair and in the middle of the separation process. She had escaped a marriage to one of the models she had made of her father, and she wrote “Daddy” employing a liberating and ironic tone, as if she had broken loose from the oppression Otto Plath, Ted Hughes,

⁴⁸ Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 62.

and society had put on her: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through”. As Jaqueline Rose points out, Plath even employs some nursery rhymes – which contrasts with the harsh and violent imagery of the composition – in order to mock the now unpowerful father, who has lost his authority and scornfully becomes the child: “I have always been scared of you, / With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo”.⁴⁹

Throughout most of Plath’s poem, we see the depiction of the powerful, fatherly figure (the synecdochic “black shoe”) opposed to the scared, powerless child, “poor and white”. This dynamic is also illustrated by means of the controversial metaphor of a Nazi father and a Jewish daughter. This is a recurrent resource in Plath’s poetry, and she was often criticized for banalizing the Jews’ suffering by comparing it to her individual pain. Moral debates aside, the truth is that this striking metaphor is really successful in portraying the sort of oppression Plath felt before the presence of her father, and also in imbuing the poem with an extremely dark, appalling atmosphere. Thus, the poem is plagued by terms referring to Nazi attributes (“mustache”, “Aryan eye”) weapons (“Panzer-man”), names (“Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen”), and even some words in German (“Ach, du”, “Ich, ich, ich, ich”). In contrast, Plath identifies herself with a Jew, a victim of her father’s intolerance: “And the language obscene / An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew” (notice the onomatopoeic sound of “chuffing”, which adds a sensation of terror and barbarity). She considers herself impure, unworthy, with a “polluted” Jewish heritage that forces her to forever be a victim of oppressive, Nazi men:

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

The repetition of plosive sounds in the fourth line slows down the reading rhythm and contributes to emphasizing the last line of the stanza, which could also be read – because of the similarity of sounds but also due to the heavy use of the pronoun “you” – as “I may be a bit of a *you*”. This would entail the loss of the woman’s personality in benefit of her father or lover, who are ultimately the same person, in the same way Lana del Rey loses

⁴⁹ Jaqueline Rose, “Daddy”, *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath—Updated Edition* (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2007) pp. 21-58 (p. 46).

her identity in order to become her man's mistress in the second verse of "Video Games".⁵⁰

The fear Sylvia Plath feels for her father is intertwined with a certain degree of awe and admiration, as can be seen in the lines "Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue [...]" He is a statue made of marble, something you can – and must – admire, containing the essence of God, an all-mighty, somehow scary figure which also inspires wonder and adoration. Lana del Rey also makes use of a religious metaphor in order to refer to her life with her lover, "Heaven is a place on Earth with you", which elevates the man to a status close to God. However, the association between Otto Plath and God is broken later in the poem "Daddy". In the last stanzas, the voice of a scared, young Plath that plagued the beginning of the poem is substituted by a more mature, powerful, angry woman who has escaped the dominion of men – "Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through" –, following what Jaqueline Rose calls a clear "narrative [...] from victimisation to revenge".⁵¹ She realizes now that the awe she felt for his father was only fear and oppression, a "swastika so black" that hid her from the rest of the universe, from a reality in which she did not need to depend on an authoritarian man in order to be a good, worthy woman.

From this point of anger and revelation, she becomes the oppressor in the poem, the vampire-killer who, accompanied by a whole village, defeats the monstrous figure who kept her captive but, also, the model of him to whom she had been married:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.
There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

⁵¹ Jaqueline Rose, "Daddy", p. 37.

Thus, she somehow escapes from patriarchal repression. Hopeful and fearless, she runs from her fate of being the Sad-Girl Poet par excellence, as she is free from any man who tried to remove her identity and personal ambitions. Lana del Rey, in the contrary, is forever trapped in her fantasy. In “Video Games” we do not find a breaking point like we do in “Daddy”, only a repetition of the chorus accompanied by more images of the passionate couple surrounded by paparazzi. She will continue to live in a videogame, isolated from a freer life and subordinated to her lover, unable to recover her personality, and destined to impersonate the Sad-Girl Poet for evermore.

3.2. Taylor Swift: a resurrected “Lady Lazarus”

Taylor Swift was catapulted to fame when she was barely 16 years old, after releasing her first country record in 2006. From that moment, she became a golden American girl, a sweet teenager who never had a bad word despite the circumstances. She reunited all the characteristics of Sad Girl-Poets: she is white, tall, and blond (undoubtedly attractive), and she composed romantic, melancholic songs about boys in the intimacy of her bedroom. Contrary to Lana del Rey, who is the “golden child gone bad” Quintana talked about, Swift represented, at this time, the innocence and purity of a golden girl who had not gone bad yet.

Throughout the course of her musical career, Swift’s public image and reputation experienced several changes and this candidness that surrounded her progressively disappeared. Her compositions became more mature and confessional but, also, in some cases, more dramatic and melancholic, the greatest exponent of an attractive and virtuous Sad-Girl Poet (figure 8). But it was not until 2017 that she completely abandoned the character of the candid, unpolluted golden girl, when she released her 7th album, *reputation*, under a much darker and violent aesthetic (figure 9). In *reputation*, we find a terribly angry Swift – the golden girl who has now gone bad – who leaves love songs behind in order to create compositions about revenge and war. This major breakthrough occurred after she was publicly dragged and criticized by many celebrities for speaking up against Kanye West, who portrayed her naked and called her “bitch” in his “Famous”

music video.⁵² As a response, Swift embraced this new role and the sweet girl from Tennessee gave way to a powerful, mad woman thirsty of revenge, similar to the newly forceful female voice we find in Plath's "Daddy" or "Lady Lazarus": she became the most violent version of the Sad-Girl Poet.



Figure 8: Swift's *Red* photoshoot (2012)



Figure 9: Swift's *reputation* photoshoot (2017)

⁵² This confrontation was only another episode in the long-lasting hostile relationship between Kanye West and Taylor Swift, which started in 2009 when West interrupted Swift's acceptance speech at the VMAs awards, claiming that she was not worthy of the prize. In "Famous", West refers to this incident, singing "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? I made that bitch famous". According to the rapper and his (now ex) wife Kim Kardashian, who leaked a manipulated phone call between West and Swift about this song, Swift had consciously approved these lyrics and she was playing the victim. She was qualified as an overdramatic, mad woman who had no reason to be upset. Years later, the original phone conversation between the two artists was disclosed and it was revealed that Swift had never been informed of the actual lyrics West was going to use (Billboard Stuff, "A Complete Timeline of Kanye West & Taylor Swift's Relationship", *Billboard*, <<https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6686064/kanye-west-taylor-swift-relationship-timeline/>> [accessed 26th May 2021]).

In fact, Swift's song "Look what you made me do" (2017) strongly recalls Plath's "Lady Lazarus", both in theme and tone. Both compositions address the topic of resurrection after a figurative death from a position of rage and vengefulness. In Plath's case, she wrote "Lady Lazarus" in October 1962, only ten days after "Daddy". The title of the poem refers to the biblical Lazarus, who was resurrected by Jesus Christ, and, by means of this allegory, Plath talks about her suicide attempts and about how, for her, death has become an art that must cause admiration and spectacle. "Look what you made me do", conversely, as a single for *reputation*, became the greatest rupture with the former innocent and sweet Taylor Swift: "a fiery, vengeful explosion, declaring 'the old Taylor dead' and the new Taylor a woman out for the kill", in Dee Lockett's words.⁵³ Thus, she kills that old version of herself and resurrects as a mad woman, a Lady Lazarus, looking for revenge. As if she was following Plath's advice, she turns this death and consequent revival into a public show, an artistic spectacle, and she even kills her old self in the song, in a recreated phone call that recalls Lana del Rey's conversation with her father "from beyond the grave" in "hope is a dangerous thing":

I'm sorry
But the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now
Why? Oh! 'cause she's dead!⁵⁴

Both "Look what you made me do" and "Lady Lazarus" present a Sad-Girl Poet gone mad (or madder), losing her innocent and attractive side and turning into a devilish, vengeful figure because society, and especially men (Kanye West in Swift's case and Ted Hughes' in Plath's case) have pushed her limits. In Bruce Bawer's words:

Manifestly, we are meant to understand here that the speaker's experience with men (or with a certain man) was responsible in some way for her suicide attempt, and that her survival of it represents a miraculous triumph over them.⁵⁵

⁵³ Dee Lockett, "Taylor Swift Declares the Old Taylor Dead on New Song, 'Look What You Made Me Do,' Teases Music Video", *Vulture* (2017), <<https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/taylor-swift-look-what-you-made-me-do.html>> [accessed 28th May 2021].

⁵⁴ Taylor Swift, "Look what you made me do", YouTube, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tmd-ClpJxA>>, 2017.

⁵⁵ Bruce Bawer, "Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession", *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath—Updated Edition* (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007) pp. 7-20 (p. 16).

Both pieces begin by portraying the artists' old self imposed by society. Thus, the second and third stanzas of "Lady Lazarus" depict a woman – allegedly, Plath herself – who has turned into everyday objects in order to serve society and play the role that was assigned to her. She presents herself terribly reified and dehumanized and she uses a highly ironical tone in order to praise (sarcastically) this social imposition ("a sort of walking miracle"):

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

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

As usual in Plath's poetry, she makes use of the Nazi-Jew allegory in order to depict herself – and women in general – as a victim of an authoritarian patriarchal system. By means of these metaphors in which her Jewish body is dismantled and turned into Nazi decoration, she imbues the poem with extremely dark tones and imagery that suggests violence and discomfort from the very beginning of it. "Look what you made me do" also begins with a portrait of Swift's previous role in the music industry – that of the sweet, "fool", American teenage girl – in an accusing, almost threatening tone (that, obviously, is far from Plath's obscure, politically charged voice):

I don't like your little games
Don't like your tilted stage
The role you made me play of the fool
No, I don't like you

Plath continues the poem by describing how terrified society (the "enemy") is when she removes the mask of a good wife and bright woman – the "napkin" – and shows her true identity as a mentally ill person. Taking into account the following stanzas, we can assume that this revelation of her real self occurs when she tries to kill herself:

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.

[...]

The enumeration of body parts that recreates a skull suggests that we are contemplating a ghastly skeleton that was hidden behind the bright appearance of a sane girl whose “sour breath” will disappear soon. However, in the next stanza the skeleton regains its flesh that had decomposed, and it becomes “a smiling woman” again. Thus, Plath refers to her multiple suicide attempts that were always unsuccessful: in all of them she became a skeleton – almost dead for a while – only to be saved afterwards, coming back to life and, inevitably, adopting the very same role in society: “the same, identical woman”.⁵⁶ This resurrected skeleton appears at the beginning of the music video for “Look what you made me do” as well. In it, we see a zombie Swift who emerges from the grave with a terrifying, deathly appearance (figure 10). She is portrayed as a mad woman without a mask who buries a virginal Swift dressed in a white dress like a pleasing bride and wife (figure 11) that represents her previous reputation (figure 12). But the singer does not reclaim the flesh Plath regained in “Lady Lazarus”, as she is renouncing to her original role in the music industry and claiming a more powerful place in society. Whereas 1950s Plath is condemned to come back to the very same character every time she resurrects, the 2010s (theoretically) more socially advanced Swift is free to give up an imposed mask and become the overpowering woman she wants to be.

⁵⁶ Harold Bloom, *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide: Sylvia Plath* (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), p. 76.



Figure 10: "Look what you made me do" music video (2017)



Figure 11: "Look what you made me do" music video (2017)



Figure 12: "Look what you made me do" music video (2017)

Plath goes on to compare herself with a cat, as she also has “nine times to die”. This comparison is quite meaningful because of the popular idea that cats have nine lives

but also, and more interestingly, because cats are often associated with mad women who never marry and might be even considered witches, the outcasts of a patriarchal society to which Plath was not willing to belong anymore. In Kiri Blakeley's words:

Women who own cats have become synonymous with old spinsters or, more recently, with romance-challenged (often career-oriented) women who can't find a man. [...] Yet cats and women have a strong historical and cultural connection--much of which has resulted in negative stereotyping, especially of single female cat owners. [...] Women, just like cats, are often branded as sneaky, slinky, mysterious, hard to read and impossible-to-please. Women are often shunted into either the Madonna or whore category, just as cats have been either revered as deities (ancient Egypt) or vilified as demons (Salem witch trials, 1692).⁵⁷

That line in "Lady Lazarus" resonates with the sentence "I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time" in "Look what you made me do", as if Swift also identified herself with a cat who can die and resurrect multiple times. Moreover, in the music video, the American singer appears portrayed as a sort of cult leader, masterminding a whole army of unrealistically perfect women – that recalls, perhaps, Plath's "Vanity Fair" – who are venerating the image of a cat in a gigantic screen (figure 13), as if they all were going to give up her irreproachable role in society to become a mad woman, a witch, just like Swift herself did.



Figure 13: "Look what you made me do" music video (2017)

⁵⁷ Kiri Blakeley, "Crazy Cat Ladies", *Forbes*, <<https://www.forbes.com/2009/10/14/crazy-cat-lady-pets-stereotype-forbes-woman-time-felines.html?sh=56e0f7a64040>> [accessed 27th March 2021].

From the eighth stanza onwards, Plath raises the trope of death as a spectacle. According to S. Bayley and T. Brain, the “million filaments” in the poem “suggest not only the intense light given off by Lady Lazarus, as if she is an electric lamp, but also the filaments in the many eyes that look upon her”, a heartlessly curious “peanut-crunching crowd.”⁵⁸ The poet successfully creates the atmosphere of a freak show that becomes a strip tease, as she is progressively undressed (“unwrapped” like a lifeless parcel) before the eyes of a morbid public who only perceives her physical attractiveness at the expense of her illness and suffering. As a response, she shows them her knees and hands – the most easily wounded parts of a body – using the meaningful possessive “my” to account for her humanity and to ask for empathy. She vindicates her right to be considered human, the “same, identical woman” even though she is a dismantled body of which all that is left is “skin and bone”, which suggests the futility of death for her – a Lady Lazarus who keeps coming back from the underworld – and, also, of the morbid mediatic phenomena that surrounded her figure.

It is in the fourteenth stanza that Plath formulates her famous quote: “Dying / is an art [...]”. For her, passing away is not a difficult thing: after all, everyone does it. What is praiseworthy is the ability to die in a spectacular way. Even those famous lines in “Lady Lazarus” fulfil the function of being theatrical, with an obligated pause between “dying” and the rest of the sentence, as if a dramatic character was giving a great monologue in a tragic play, in the “theatrical / comeback in broad day”. The enjambment in these lines in the sixteenth and seventeenth stanzas emphasizes the continuous cycle in which Plath is immersed, as if she were an actress damned to perform every night the same function, killing herself and resurrecting night after night just to entertain an amazed audience that shouts “A miracle!” In that perpetual loop, the American poet comes back every time to the “same place, the same face, the same brute”, as she is not allowed to abandon a stage created for her by a society with fixed roles. She is destined to be forever a good housewife to the eyes of the public, despite her ambitions and struggles. The epistrophe of the word “charge” in the following lines in an almost uncontrolled way accentuates the vulnerability Plath experiences before the eyes of the entertained public, as if that charge was her humanity and expectations of recovery.

⁵⁸ Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, *Representing Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 4.

Taking all of this into account, it seems as if Swift had taken Plath's advice very seriously when creating "Look what you made me do". The song is plagued with references to the theatre world, as if she were in a tragic performance in which everyone has a role. Thus, in the first verse she complains about this "role" she was forced to "play" in a "tilted stage", and in the bridge she presents herself as an "actress starring in your bad dreams", a line she repeats obsessively as she increases the volume of her voice, turning into a real character, hysterical and overdramatic in a theatre play. The second verse emphasizes the theatrical aspect of the song:

The world moves on, another day, another drama, drama
But not for me, not for me, all I think about is karma
And then the world moves on, but one thing's for sure
Maybe I got mine, but you'll all get yours

These lines are spoken rather than chanted, as Swift abandons her role as a singer in order to become a threatening villain on stage. The rhyme between "drama" and "karma" turns the focus to these two melodramatic and sensational words, which adds to the performative tone of the piece. Also, the suggestion that time is frozen for her no matter how many days go by recalls the atemporality of a dramatic play or even the timeless, perpetual cycle Plath found herself immersed in, condemned to perform her death and revival before an audience every night.

When analysing the theatricality of "Look what you made me do", it is pertinent to turn to the music video of the song in order to appreciate its aesthetic and symbolism. There is a particularly meaningful scene in Taylor Swift's video in terms of the theatricality. In it, we see a devilish Swift dressed in red (a powerful, diabolic colour), having some tea while she is sitting in a throne surrounded by snakes (figure 14). The scene *per se* is already quite theatrical and histrionic but the dramatic impact of the image increases when the camera focuses on the armrest of the throne, in which the sentence "Et tu, Brute?" is engraved, Julius Caesar's last words. However, there is no certainty that the Roman Emperor actually pronounced those words, and they are only attributed to him because those were Julius Caesar's character's last words in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Thus, by means of including this reference to an extremely famous and inevitably theatrical death in the music video, Swift manages to emphasize even more the dramatic quality of her song.



Figure 14: "Look what you made me do" music video (2017)

One difference between Taylor Swift's "Look what you made me do" and Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is found in the use of rage and anger in both pieces. Whereas in Swift's case the infuriated tone plagues the song – blaming the male oppressor for her death already in the title of the composition –, in Plath's we see a progressive emergence of an intimidating voice that reaches its peak towards the end of the poem. That increase in the harshness of the tone is – as Harold Bloom points out – linked to Plath's use of irony.⁵⁹ In the twenty-first stanza, she addresses the reader by saying "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy", using a German title of respect for men in a rather sarcastic way in order to bring the Nazi-Jew allegory back. Nevertheless, she is not passive before the oppressor anymore – as she was at the beginning of the poem, when she would let him use her skin to make lampshades - but uses the ironic tone to defy and even mock the Doktor/Enemy (who mainly stands for a patriarchal figure and, in a broader scope, for society as a whole) in a couple of stanzas that culminate with the highly sarcastic line, "Do not think I underestimate your great concern":

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

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.

⁵⁹ Bloom, *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide: Sylvia Plath*, p. 76.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Now, Plath willingly identifies herself with lifeless objects, embracing the dehumanization inflicted in her by a curious audience and ruthless society: she is an “opus”, a “valuable”, a golden girl. However, that “pure gold baby” highly appreciated by the oppressor will inevitably melt into a shriek before his eyes, as she is now stronger and braver, having lost her innocence and brightness (“baby” traits) and turned into a mad woman that loses her repressive mask and is now allowed to “shriek”.

The use of the terms “turn” and “burn” recreates a devilish scene that recalls a blazing witch – or, as Christina Britzolakis argues, a demonic figure – being burned by the villagers because they are afraid of her power.⁶⁰ The witchcraft imagery continues in the following stanzas and helps built the overpowering end of the poem:

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

These three lines appear to depict a ritualistic scene in which a group of witches stir in a cauldron while they sing a spell with a very resonating rhythm and rhyme. Taking into account the previous stanzas, we assume that the one that “poke[s] and stir[s]” is the Enemy/Doktor who tries to create an acceptable woman from the ashes that are left from Plath after she kills herself over and over again. But he does not find anything valuable in her empty body and he must add certain elements in order to make her admissible: a “cake of soap” (a reference both to cooking and cleaning, domestic labours housewives must be prepared to do), a “wedding ring” (a husband to care for and obey to), and a “gold filling” (which might refer to the sweetness wives are expected to show but also to fertility, an indispensable quality in women).

It is in the last two stanzas when the tone of the poem becomes extremely threatening and violent, depicting what Birkle calls the daughter’s “ritual of exorcism to her final liberation”.⁶¹ The potion created by the oppressor goes wrong and instead of

⁶⁰ Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 98.

⁶¹ Birkle, “Women's stories of the looking glass autobiographical reflections and self-representations in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde”, p. 62.

coming back to life as a loving housewife (like it happened the previous times), Plath emerges now as a Frankensteinian Lady Lazarus, a furious witch with red hair able to defeat “God” and “Lucifer” and to “eat men like air”, killing the patriarch and releasing herself from the oppression that repeatedly leads her to death:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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

This sort of wheel of fortune dynamic (in which the powerful goddess rises as the male god falls) is also found in the first pre-chorus of “Look what you made me do”, in a set of lines that recall the last stanza of Plath’s poem:

But I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time
Honey, I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time
I’ve got a list of names and yours is in red, underlined

Just like Plath, Swift also rises from the dead and becomes a powerful deity able to defeat God and Lucifer, becoming “smarter” and “harder”, qualities that imbue her with an unimaginable strength.

The allusion to the red colour is also meaningful, not only because it resonates with the “red hair” in “Lady Lazarus”, but also because of the importance and the symbology Swift has conferred to the scarlet colour throughout her whole career. If we go back to her 2012 album *Red*, we see how that colour is always associated with love and passion: “loving him was red”, she sings in the song “Red”.⁶² In contrast, in *reputation* she has left behind her character as a loving and romantic girl who writes songs about her boyfriends in order to become the mad woman, as I have already mentioned. Thus, as the golden girl vanishes and gives way to this powerful witch, red becomes the symbol of violence, rebelliousness, and hell. Particularly interesting is the fact that Plath’s

⁶² Taylor Swift, “Red”, *Genius*, < <https://genius.com/Taylor-swift-red-original-demo-recording-lyrics> > [accessed 30th March 2021].

figure is also associated to the colour red. If we turn to a poem about her by Ted Hughes entitled “Red”, we can appreciate a similar evolution in the symbolism of the colour in Plath’s and Swift’s work, from more romantic images and implications (the red “roses” that a young Plath paints in a pure “white” wall) to the violence and power suggested later in “Lady Lazarus”:

Red was your colour.

[...]

Everything you painted you painted white
Then splashed it with roses, defeated it,
Leaned over it, dripping roses,
Weeping roses, and more roses,
Then sometimes, among them, a little bluebird.

Swift kept this mad woman reputation in her following albums, though with a much less furious tone. Still, we can find several songs from her latest albums that feature the voice of the Sad-Girl Poet (gone mad) and that resonate with some of Plath’s poems. One of these songs is “mad woman” (an extremely suitable title for our purpose), from her eighth album *folklore* (2020), in which she embraces her character as an infuriated female who is criticised by the same patriarchal society that made her upset in the first place.⁶³ The song is imbued with rage and defiance and it recalls another of Plath’s final poems, “Lesbos”, written in October 1962, shortly after “Daddy” and before “Lady Lazarus”. “Lesbos” was composed some weeks after Plath’s separation from Ted Hughes, when she was staying with her children for a few days in some friends’ house, in a visit that went terribly wrong if we trust the bitter account offered by the poem.⁶⁴

The title of the poem is highly ironical. Lesbos is a Mediterranean island where, allegedly, the ancient Greek poet Sappho lived. Sappho, according to historical sources, loved and desired women (the words “sapphic” and “lesbian” originating from her name and island). Sylvia Plath’s “Lesbos” depicts a war scene between her and her female friend, who apparently is tormenting Plath’s daughter. Thus, there is no trace of “sapphic”

⁶³ Swift, “mad woman”, *Genius*, <<https://genius.com/Taylor-swift-mad-woman-lyrics>> [accessed 30th March 2021]

⁶⁴ Plath, “Lesbos”, *Collected Poems*, pp. 227-230.

love in this Lesbos, only female hate and defiance which cannot be abandoned in a society that forces women to fight and see each other as a threat. In this piece, Plath abandons her most typical, contained rhyme scheme (with short stanzas and lines of a similar length) to create an uncontrolled pattern of long stanzas with irregular length lines that stresses the anxiety and roughness of the poem. In Jo Gill's words:

The relentlessly end-stopped lines spit out a catalogue of anger, resentment and despair. Children, animals, husband and self – all are bitterly indicted. All are in disarray [...] to form a kind of 'domestic surreal'.⁶⁵

"Lesbos" starts abruptly in order to quickly immerse the reader in the uncomfortable atmosphere of the composition: "Viciousness in the kitchen! / The potatoes hiss". Both the exclamation in the first line and the alliteration of sibilant sounds contribute to create a mood of hostility from the very beginning. The following sentences refer to the role women play in society, forced, and imposed:

It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.

The role of the housewife is theatrical and uncomfortable, like a fluorescent light that causes migraines. It is also "windowless", for women are not able to look outside towards other versions of womanhood. They are confined – as Plath was – to one single social role, that of the wife and mother, and any other alternative is hidden from their view by "stage curtains". As if this confinement were not bad enough, it also applies to the youngest girls, who are judged and manipulated since they are babies to be acceptable women and, if they fail to be valuable, they are despised by the same society that drives them mad with its extremely high expectations and demands. This is what happens to Plath's daughter in the poem:

And I, love, am a pathological liar,
And my child look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear

⁶⁵ Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, pp. 71-72.

Why she is schizophrenic,
Her face is red and white, a panic,
You have stuck her kittens outside your window
In a sort of cement well
Where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear.
You say you can't stand her,
The bastard's a girl.

Apparently, the woman to whom the poetic voice is talking has stuck the girl's kittens in a well and that is the reason for the child's tantrum. However, that childish fit of anger is portrayed as something extremely dramatic and scary, as if the little girl was actually a grown-up mad woman (like Plath herself) who is categorized as "schizophrenic" and whose face is "down on the floor", a scene that seems more like a suicide ("kicking to disappear") than a mere tantrum. By means of these lines Plath manages to illustrate how the unrealistic and discriminatory expectations society puts on women also affect the youngest girls, for they are almost inherent to the condition of womanhood. The last two lines constitute a direct reference to the women's war calculatingly provoked by male oppressors who need to avoid any type of collaboration among them so that they can keep them helpless, deaf because of the "staticky noise" of an old radio. "The bastard's a girl", Plath says, and for that reason the female addressee of the poem cannot stand her and torments her, driving the child crazy: "She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two".

In the next lines we see the appearance of two male figures. On the one hand, there is a reference to Plath's other child. This time, and contrasting with the young girl's description (almost as an adult, with no trace of innocence or tenderness), he is actually depicted as a harmless, smiling baby boy: "a fat snail". On the other hand, the addressee's husband is mentioned, and he is portrayed as an unable, weak man: "His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl". He is alien to the battlefield in his kitchen, a scene imbued with hellish venom and hostility, because even though women are ill and plagued by "ulcers" in their ruthless war, they show themselves as beautiful Hollywood stars as they must "[act] for the thrill" of finding – and keeping – a husband:

The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites,

Our bones, our hair.
I call you Orphan, orphan. You are ill.
The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you T.B.
Once you were beautiful.
In New York, in Hollywood, the men said: "Through?
Gee baby, you are rare."
You acted, acted for the thrill.

Nonetheless, the husband – and, by extension, men – is not as alien to these women's fight in "Lesbos" as we might believe. Actually, in the next lines the addressee's husband enters the poem to innocently help himself some coffee, and it is in this moment when the peak of violence is reached:

The impotent husband slumps out for a coffee.
I try to keep him in,
An old pole for the lightning,
The acid baths, the skyfuls off of you.
He lumps it down the plastic cobbled hill,
Flogged trolley. The sparks are blue.
The blue sparks spill,
Splitting like quartz into a million bits.

The man is apparently unpowerful and harmless, he "slumps out" (an expression that almost suggests that he is a dead weight with no autonomy) as a "flogged trolley" controlled and alienated by the power of his devilish wife. But curiously, his appearance causes a sort of electric shock and the kitchen becomes full of violent sparks and lightnings, a tense and agitated atmosphere emphasized by the alliteration of the sound /sp/. He fuels the war just by means of his presence and even though at first sight he might seem innocent, he is the one to blame.

As a result of the husband's intervention in the scene, we see an intensification of the emotions of the poetic voice and of the addressee that leads to an even greater feeling of confusion and uncommunication:

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.

I do not speak.
 I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
 I am packing the babies,
 I am packing the sick cats.
 O vase of acid,
 It is love you are full of. You know who you hate.
 [...]

Your voice my ear-ring,
 Flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat.
 That is that. That is that.
 You peer from the door,
 Sad hag. "Every woman's a whore.
 I can't communicate."

The poetic voice is so blinded by hate that she compulsively collects her things in order to leave as soon as possible and she does not distinguish the potatoes from the babies or the cats, as she has lost all judgement and standards. Just like her, the addressee is confused by the war and does not even know whom she loves and whom she hates. The atmosphere is plagued by voices ("flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat[s]") that confound the women – and the reader – even more, like the "staticky noise" of the radio from the previous lines. The poetic voice leaves the house, abandoning the "sad hag" that torments her. They will never be able to speak and collaborate because, as society teaches them, "Every woman's a whore. / I can't communicate", and the only way they could love and help each other is by meeting "in another life" and "in thin air". In Plath's reality, there is no escape from the hostility and suffocation of a socially orchestrated domesticity. In Carolyn J. Seifert's words:

"[...] It is all Hollywood windowless" presages the moment in which art and life become one. Sylvia Plath's domestic sadness culminates in suicide when she literally puts her head in the oven.⁶⁶

As I have anticipated, Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos" and Taylor Swift's "mad woman" share many features. The first and most obvious one is the angry, accusative, and defiant

⁶⁶ Carolyn J. Seifert, "Images of Domestic Madness in the Art and Poetry of American Women", *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Woman's Art Inc., 1980), pp. 1-6 (p. 5).

tone. Plath constantly addressees her companion in the poem in an aggressive way, challenging and blaming her for her daughter's – and her own – suffering. She is aware that it is mainly society that provokes their agony but, still, she cannot help but fight against her old friend because that is what they have been taught to do, and they cannot escape that premise: they are buried in "the smog of cooking, the smog of hell". In "mad woman", Taylor Swift also addresses an opposing figure in a contemptuous and blaming tone. In this case, we can suppose that the addressee is a man that acts as a symbol of a patriarchal society, using women as "hunting witches" that do his "dirtiest work" for him, burdening them with the same internalized misogyny Plath experienced in "Lesbos". As a result of this defiant mood, the pronoun "you" appears multiple times in the song, as if it were a real discussion between two people in a scene, just like in Plath's poem. The sensation of domesticity we find in "Lesbos" (caused by the kitchen scenario) can also be appreciated in "mad woman" from the very first stanza, which presents a domestic suburban setting where neighbours fight:

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"?

This confrontation between neighbours might refer to the pointless women's fight provoked by oppressive males, who must prevent any manifestation of female cooperation in order to maintain their authoritarian position. As neighbours and sisters, they should help each other, but they can't because they are unable to communicate and cooperate, and they end up insulting each other: "Fuck you forever".

Compared to Sylvia Plath's poem, "mad woman" is also imbued with violence and confrontation. And just like "Lesbos", the song presents a terribly angry woman that is considered hysterical and even schizophrenic by the same society who pushed her limits until she lost her patience:

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

In order to emphasize the anger and fury women feel in these pieces, both Plath and Swift employ witch imagery in order to depict angry women just like men see them, as obsessive and devilish creatures. On the one hand, Plath's physical descriptions of women in her poem present diabolical images of sick girls among the "smog of hell" who are "red and white", with "ulcers" and "T.B." The allusion to schizophrenia might refer to those mentally ill women from previous centuries who were considered witches or possessed by the devil. On the other hand, Taylor Swift directly identifies women with witches, both by mentioning the "hunting witches" that go after her, and by presenting herself as a witch in the very same stanza, unable to escape (but also embracing) the label of mad woman that society gave her:

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 women like hunting witches too
Doing your dirtiest work for you
It's obvious that wanting me dead
Has really brought you two together

By means of these last lines, Swift succeeds in depicting how unconventional and defiant women are despised and criticised by men but also by alienated women, who are manipulated in order to preserve the patriarchal order of society: "it's obvious that wanting me dead / has really brought *you two* together".

Finally, another similarity between "mad woman" and "Lesbos" lies in the brilliant use of animal imagery in both compositions. In Plath's poem, we see an important contrast between those animals associated to men and those associated to women. The baby boy, for instance, is compared to a "fat snail", emphasizing his passivity and harmlessness. Conversely, the adult husband is accompanied by and almost identified with a dog, an apparently nice and friendly animal. However, the man's identification with the dog acquires a whole new connotation if we take into account that little girls are associated with cats, and, specifically, with screaming and suffering kittens.

Apart from the common prejudices associated with female cat-owners that I have already addressed in the comparative analysis of “Lady Lazarus” and “Look what you made me do”, this simile is important because it exemplifies how girls (cats) are haunted by apparently innocent men (dogs) since they are little through patriarchal social expectations that will always oppress and discriminate women. Thus, that corrupted society is what causes that, as these young girls grow older, they abandon their innocence to become more venomous and suffocating creatures like “bats” and “anemones”, forced to be domineering in order to survive in a world created by and for men. Swift’s use of animal imagery is not as impressive as Plath’s, but she also compares women with venomous (a “scorpion” in the first verse) and aggressive (a “bear” in the chorus) creatures that appear in the song only to defend themselves from a male oppressor that provokes them.

Moving now on to the last comparative analysis in this paper, I will be dealing with one of Taylor Swift’s most mature and innovative songs: “my tears ricochet” (2020).⁶⁷ This piece presents a funeral scene narrated by the spirit of a dead woman. According to Swift herself, the song functions as a metaphor for a divorce, in which the woman – and her marriage – was figurately murdered by the actions of the man she loved the most. In “my tears ricochet”, the angry tone that characterized other Swift’s songs diminishes and, even though we still find resentment, the tone now is mainly charged by sadness and grief for the love she has lost. This composition strongly resonates – in topic, tone, and even imagery – with Sylvia Plath’s poem “The Detective”, which employs a murder as a metaphor for a divorce. Plath wrote this poem on October 1st, 1962, right after she found out about Ted Hughes’ affair with Assia Wevill, and the tone she employs reflects a terrible grief and loneliness. “The Detective” presents an eerie scene in which the famous characters Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson try to solve a murder case without a body, as the victim is not physical, but emotional: marriage and, especially, the woman’s love for her husband (just like in Swift’s song).⁶⁸ This detective dynamic allows the poetic voice to ask questions and investigate what was the crime motive, the reasons behind the divorce, in a process of catharsis much needed for Plath at that moment, as Linda Wagner-Martin points out: she presents a blurred corpse that is “disintegrating as the female

⁶⁷ Swift, “my tears ricochet”, *Genius*, <<https://genius.com/Taylor-swift-my-tears-ricochet-lyrics>> [accessed 30th March 2021].

⁶⁸ Plath, “The Detective”, *Collected Poems*, pp. 208-209.

persona has through the years, [...] ‘There is no body in the house at all’’.⁶⁹ As was the case in “The Applicant” and Lana del Rey’s “Video Games”, Plath’s poem is much more impersonal than the song, as she presents an aseptic scene in a rather objective way, like a mere spectator of the event. She even uses a character created by another writer as a narrator in order to step back from the situation as much as possible, not even identifying herself with the poetic voice. Swift, conversely, is completely inside the funeral scene, she narrates it as a ghost in the first person and her emotions and thoughts plague the whole composition, transmitting an intimate message from beyond the grave.

A very important topic both in “The Detective” and “my tears ricochet” is the exploration of guilt. Plath’s poem begins with the poetic voice wondering who is to blame for this crime, this sinister and deathly scene:

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

Was it the woman’s fault? Was she a good wife or could she have been a better woman so that all this destruction could have been avoided? A patriarchal society will always blame a woman if she fails in keeping her husband happy and satisfied. After all, it is no casualty that the crime scene is set in a kitchen (“This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen”), the adequate place for women and where the wife should be now, fulfilling her domestic obligations. Nonetheless, the woman is not the only one blamed by the poetic voice. A few lines later, the man is referred to as a “killer”, for he is considered the active perpetrator of the crime, having “tamp[ed] a woman into a wall / a body into a pipe”. These two lines might have a double meaning. On the one hand, they may refer to a physical aggression to the man’s wife. On the other, and taking into account the phallic imagery of tamping “a body into a pipe”, they might allude to the husband’s affair with another woman. In any case, this action carried out by the man leads to the ending of his marriage and, consequently, to the emotional – and social – death of the woman. Whereas he seems unaffected by this tragedy (“and this is a man, look at his

⁶⁹ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (New York: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2003), p. 127.

smile”, a “bored hoodlum in a red room”), she is devastated and vanished from the world and from society, forever blamed for not having fulfilled her only role as a wife.

In “my tears ricochet”, on the contrary, guilt appears associated only to the man. The poetic voice employs a tone of accusation in order to blame her partner for the end of their relationship and for her death. Set in a theoretically more advanced society (in time and values), social prejudices are left behind and the woman does not take any responsibility for her husband’s affair. However, the man is not blamed by society either: he is “tossing out blame”, perceived as a “hero flying around saving face”. He is also portrayed as a killer here (“you had to kill me”), the cruel perpetrator of the crime, but society will not accuse him of this atrocity, as it is not as severely judgemental with men as it is with women.

Besides the similarities regarding the topic of guilt, both authors choose to represent the collective, figurative death of the marriage through the tangible murder of the woman, more clearly in “my tears ricochet” than in “The Detective”. Even though there is neither a corpse nor a murder weapon in Plath’s poem, it seems like there was definitely a fight: the “valley of death” of the second stanza recalls a deserted battlefield after a war, there is a “killer” man violently assaulting a woman, and the succession of weapons in the fifth stanza (“arrow”, “knife”, “poison”) suggests an atmosphere of violence and aggression. Curiously, the description of the victim in the sixth and seventh stanzas could refer both to the husband and to the wife:

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.
These were harder, two white stones.
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Apparently, the “insatiable mouth” that vaporizes in “the second year” belongs to Plath’s husband, as it is a direct reference to how he lost interest in her when he started his affair, vanishing from the poet’s life and appearing in his mistress’. Nevertheless, the next stanza clearly alludes to the wife, whose breasts change as she becomes a mother. This makes the reader question whether the previous stanza was actually referring to the man or, on the contrary, could also be relating to the woman. In any case, this vanishing corpse represents both of them and, more accurately, the collective body represented by their marriage.

In “my tears ricochet”, there are more textual references to war and fights between the lovers, and the violence is even more palpable, perhaps because the poetic voice offers an intimate and internal perspective, talking to the audience from the very coffin and expressing her intense pain and rage in a very tangible way. Thus, we find allusions to “stones” they both gather to throw or to make rings (symbolizing the contradicting emotions of love and hate lovers experience when they go through a divorce), “battleships” that “sink beneath the waves” as if they had just lost a war, or the meaningful rhyme between “blood” and “bones” in the bridge, suggesting a vivid image of wounds and corpses. All these elements of aggression lead to the death of both lovers as their marriage ends: “You had to kill me”, Swift says, “but it killed you just the same”. The title of the song itself makes reference to this collective death: “ricochet” is a verb often referring to bullets or projectiles that dangerously bounce back. By means of this simile, the wife’s tears become threatening bullets directed to the husband, the one who provoked them, something announced by her at the beginning of the song: “if I’m on fire, you’ll be made of ashes too”. The scene is thus extremely tragic and fatal, as the two lovers die: the man’s actions cause the death of the woman and the woman’s pain causes the death of the man. But the death the husband experiences is not physical (as he is attending her wife’s wake), only emotional, and the only real victim of these lover’s battle is the woman.

Thus, even though in both Plath’s poem and Swift’s song there is a mourning for a collective relationship, it seems that the two pieces depict a more tangible corpse that belongs to the female. In Swift’s case, she identifies herself with the poetic voice, being the dead woman in the coffin. In Plath’s case this female corpse is not as tangible, but it can be grasped in the line “there is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus”, which

might have symbolised, for Plath, a female embalmed corpse.⁷⁰ Also, we can assume that the man is unharmed, as he is the “killer” who stands (literally or figuratively) in the kitchen smiling. Men, then, remain physically alive in both compositions and women are, once again, the victims of a patriarchal society that pushes them towards an emotional death.

The last similitude between “The Detective” and “my tears ricochet” can be appreciated in the setting of both pieces, the latter being the woman’s wake and the former, a crime scene (a kitchen that later turns into a “red room”, suggesting violence but, also, pain and grief). Even though the scene in “The Detective” is more aseptic and impersonal than the scenario of “my tears ricochet”, both compositions present a calmly illuminated room flooded with distant voices (the “sunlight” and old “wireless” in Plath turn into the people “weeping in a sunlit room” in Swift), a rather forlorn picture. Furthermore, the two settings are plagued by ghosts. In “The Detective”, we never get to know if the “bored hoodlum” in the kitchen is actually there or if it is a spirit that comes out of the memories, the “deceits, tacked up like family photographs”. The wireless-voices also evoke an eerie feeling, as if they belonged to the vaporized bodies of the lovers (that, like vaporized water, remain in the atmosphere among the living), and the “moon” and the “crow in a tree” in the last stanza recreate a ghoulish, cemetery-like landscape.

Conversely, in “my tears ricochet” we find, in Swift’s own words, “a ghostly scene” in which she contemplates her own wake and addresses her husband like a tormenting spirit (even the initial melody of the song recreates a church choir at a funeral). Just like she says, she does not “go with grace”, but remains among the living singing to them in their sleep:

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)

⁷⁰ Traditionally, many occidental cultures have associated the Moon with womanhood and femininity. Sylvia Plath herself employed this simile in her poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree”: “The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. / Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.”

The lines in parenthesis are modulated in a strange way, recreating distant cries that recall the “train shrieks” echoes in Plath’s poem, as sung by a real ghost. And if we go a step further – and more macabre – we could even argue that Swift’s song aims to simulate Sylvia Plath’s own wake, which Ted Hughes, the perpetrator of her pain, attended and who, in that difficult moment, must have felt Plath’s tears ricocheting against him. Plath, definitely, did not “go with grace”, as a suicide is a most tortuous type of death possible, and, following this interpretation, the “stolen lullabies” reclaimed by the spirit might be the diaries Hughes destroyed in which Plath narrated her last months of life, when she found out about her husband’s affair. Thus, Sylvia Plath’s famous death is once again recreated by a woman artist that identifies herself with her, writing about the painful experience of girlhood and femininity, and contributing to the myth of the Sad-Girl Poet.

4. Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to show the impact of Sylvia Plath’s figure and work in the music and the elaborated characters of Lana del Rey and Taylor Swift, so as to throw light on the evolution of different representations of womanhood throughout the years. In the first chapter, I have offered an introductory biographical narration of Plath’s life, essential to gain a full understanding of her confessional work and bittersweet conception of femininity: she aspired to be a good, submissive housewife but also a successful writer, two incompatible roles in her 1950s America. I also commented on the mayor creative outburst she experienced in 1962, after her divorce from Ted Hughes, with the resulting increase of anger and darkness in her compositions (“Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy”).

The second chapter reunites all the factors involved in the process of her mythification and mediatization, such as the use of mythological imagery in her own compositions or the morbid biographies that were written about her after her suicide. Moreover, it addresses the importance of her figure for the emergence of the Sad-Girl Poet trope, which conflates both glamour and destruction and that is especially appealing to young girls, motivating, thus, the commercialization of such a controversial character.

Finally, the last chapter is dedicated to the comparative analysis of the work of the three artists. The main inference from my study is that both Lana del Rey and Taylor

Swift are highly influenced by Plath's persona and work in two different ways. On the one side, Lana del Rey is a perfect echo of the submissive version of Plath (who has not been deceived by Hughes yet). She is the perfect representation of a Sad-Girl Poet. In "Morning Song" and "hope is a dangerous thing", both women reflect upon their changing and confusing identities: in Del Rey's case, her mutability is caused by fame and the creation of her mediatic alter ego; in Plath's, it is provoked by the birth of her child, to whom she unconditionally must abandon herself. "Video Games" and "The Applicant" deal with the topic of marriage and the forced submission of women to their husbands. Just like in Plath's "Daddy", "Video Games" is imbued with an oppressive masculine presence that alienates the female voice and deprives her of any sort of autonomy.

On the other side, Taylor Swift reproduces a darker version of the poet that recalls Plath's behaviour after her divorce: a Sad-Girl Poet which has lost her glamorous traits. Swift is angrier and freer, as can be appreciated in "Look what you made me do", which recalls and applies the steps given by Plath in "Lady Lazarus" to achieve a theatrical death and comeback. However, Swift, unlike Plath, demands a different, more respected position in the discriminatory society that has teared her down. The angry tone continues in "mad woman", in which she blames a patriarchal community for her female anxieties and for the uncooperative relationships held among women, just like Plath does in "Lesbos" (although in a subtler way). Lastly, in "my tears ricochet" Swift lets go of her anger in order to present a gloomy funereal scene similar to that presented by Plath in "The Detective". In both pieces, the victim is a romantic relationship, but the woman is the only person who is physically dead (as a result of the man's actions). Meanwhile, the husband, the symbol of a patriarchal society, remains alive and unblamed by society.

Regardless of a few differences between Sylvia Plath, Lana del Rey, and Taylor Swift, I believe that all the pieces analysed in this dissertation present similar experiences of womanhood, induced by the suffocating oppression and high demands exercised by a male-dominated society. These three women struggle with changing identities, stifling heterosexual relationships, and an internalized misogyny that encourages them to see other women as enemies. Despite the social advances that have been achieved in the past decades, the problems accounted by musical female artists today are very similar to those narrated by Plath in the 1950s. All the same, poetry, literature, and music continue to be

excellent tools for women to express our aches and anxieties and to advocate, steadfastly and tenaciously, for a less patriarchal community for us all.

Character count: 113,524

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APPENDIX

Lana del Rey, “hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it”:

[Verse 1]

I was reading Slim Aarons and I got to thinking that I thought
Maybe I'd get less stressed if I was tested less like
All of these debutantes
Smiling for miles in pink dresses and high heels on white yachts
But I'm not, baby, I'm not
No, I'm not, that, I'm not

[Chorus]

I've been tearing around in my fucking nightgown
24/7 Sylvia Plath
Writing in blood on my walls
'Cause the ink in my pen don't work in my notepad
Don't ask if I'm happy, you know that I'm not
But at best, I can say I'm not sad
'Cause hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have
Hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have

[Verse 2]

I had 15-year dances
Church basement romances, yeah, I've cried
Spilling my guts with the Bowery Bums
Is the only love I've ever known
Except for the stage, which I also call home, when I'm not
Servin' up God in a burnt coffee pot for the triad
Hello, it's the most famous woman you know on the iPad
Calling from beyond the grave, I just wanna say, "Hi, Dad"

[Chorus]

I've been tearing up town in my fucking white gown

Like a goddamn near sociopath
Shaking my ass is the only thing that's
Got this black narcissist off my back
She couldn't care less, and I never cared more
So there's no more to say about that
Except hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have
Hope is a dangerous thing for a woman with my past

[Bridge]

There's a new revolution, a loud evolution that I saw
Born of confusion and quiet collusion of which mostly I've known
A modern day woman with a weak constitution, 'cause I've got
Monsters still under my bed that I could never fight off
A gatekeeper carelessly dropping the keys on my nights off

[Chorus]

I've been tearing around in my fucking nightgown
24/7 Sylvia Plath
Writing in blood on your walls
'Cause the ink in my pen don't look good in my pad
They write that I'm happy, they know that I'm not
But at best, you can see I'm not sad
But hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have
Hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have

[Outro]

Hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have
But I have it
Yeah, I have it
Yeah, I have it
I have

Lana del Rey, "Video Games":

[Verse 1]

Swingin' in the backyard, pull up in your fast car
Whistlin' my name
Open up a beer and you say, "Get over here"
And play a video game
I'm in his favorite sundress, watching me get undressed
Take that body downtown
I say, "You da bestest," lean in for a big kiss
Put his favorite perfume on
"Go play your video game"

[Pre-Chorus]

It's you, it's you, it's all for you
Everything I do
I tell you all the time

[Chorus]

Heaven is a place on Earth with you
Tell me all the things you wanna do
I heard that you like the bad girls, honey
Is that true?
It's better than I ever even knew
They say that the world was built for two
Only worth living if somebody is loving you
And baby, now, you do
Hmmm

[Verse 2]

Singin' in the old bars, swinging with the old stars
Livin' for the fame
Kissin' in the blue dark, playing pool and wild darts
Video games

He holds me in his big arms, drunk, and I am seeing stars
This is all I think of
Watchin' all our friends fall in and out of Old Paul's
This is my idea of fun
Playing video games

[Pre-Chorus]

It's you, it's you, it's all for you
Everything I do
I tell you all the time

[Chorus]

Heaven is a place on Earth with you
Tell me all the things you wanna do
I heard that you like the bad girls, honey
Is that true?
It's better than I ever even knew
They say that the world was built for two
Only worth living if somebody is loving you
And baby, now, you do

[Post-Chorus]

(N-now, you do, now, you do, now, you do)
(N-now, you do, now, you do, now, you do)

[Pre-Chorus]

It's you, it's you, it's all for you
Everything I do
I tell you all the time

[Chorus]

Heaven is a place on Earth with you
Tell me all the things you wanna do
I heard that you like the bad girls, honey

Is that true?

It's better than I ever even knew

They say that the world was built for two

Only worth living if somebody is loving you

And baby, now, you do

Sylvia Plath, “Morning Song”:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I’m no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind’s hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Sylvia Plath, "The Applicant":

First, are you our sort of a person?

Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,

A brace or a hook,

Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then

How can we give you a thing?

Stop crying.

Open your hand.

Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing

To bring teacups and roll away headaches

And do whatever you tell it.

Will you marry it?

It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end

And dissolve of sorrow.

We make new stock from the salt.

I notice you are stark naked.

How about this suit——

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.

Will you marry it?

It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof

Against fire and bombs through the roof.

Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.

I have the ticket for that.

Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.

Well, what do you think of that?

Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,

In fifty, gold.

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a hole, it's a poultice.

You have an eye, it's an image.

My boy, it's your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Sylvia Plath, “Daddy”:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time——
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,

I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.
If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

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.

Sylvia Plath, "Lesbos":

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.
And I, love, am a pathological liar,
And my child look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear
Why she is schizophrenic,
Her face is red and white, a panic,
You have stuck her kittens outside your window
In a sort of cement well
Where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear.
You say you can't stand her,
The bastard's a girl.
You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio
Clear of voices and history, the staticky
Noise of the new.
You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!
You say I should drown my girl.
She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.
The baby smiles, fat snail,
From the polished lozenges of orange linoleum.
You could eat him. He's a boy.
You say your husband is just no good to you.
His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl.
You have one baby, I have two.
I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.
We should meet in another life, we should meet in air,
Me and you.

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites,
Our bones, our hair.
I call you Orphan, orphan. You are ill.
The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you T.B.
Once you were beautiful.
In New York, in Hollywood, the men said: "Through?
Gee baby, you are rare."
You acted, acted for the thrill.
The impotent husband slumps out for a coffee.
I try to keep him in,
An old pole for the lightning,
The acid baths, the skyfuls off of you.
He lumps it down the plastic cobbled hill,
Flogged trolley. The sparks are blue.
The blue sparks spill,
Splitting like quartz into a million bits.

O jewel! O valuable!
That night the moon
Dragged its blood bag, sick
Animal
Up over the harbor lights.
And then grew normal,
Hard and apart and white.
The scale-sheen on the sand scared me to death.
We kept picking up handfuls, loving it,
Working it like dough, a mulatto body,
The silk grits.
A dog picked up your doggy husband. He went on.

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats.
O vase of acid,
It is love you are full of. You know who you hate.
He is hugging his ball and chain down by the gate
That opens to the sea
Where it drives in, white and black,
Then spews it back.
Every day you fill him with soul-stuff, like a pitcher.
You are so exhausted.
Your voice my ear-ring,
Flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat.
That is that. That is that.
You peer from the door,
Sad hag. "Every woman's a whore.
I can't communicate."

I see your cute decor
Close on you like the fist of a baby
Or an anemone, that sea
Sweetheart, that kleptomaniac.
I am still raw.
I say I may be back.
You know what lies are for.

Sylvia Plath, "The Detective":

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive.
In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,
Unable to face the fingers, those egotists.
The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,

A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.
This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen,
These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
And this is a man, look at his smile,
The death weapon? No one is dead.

There is no body in the house at all.
There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
Bored hoodlum in a red room
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
Which of the poisons is it?
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?
This is a case without a body.
The body does not come into it at all.

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported

In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.
These were harder, two white stones.
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Then the dry wood, the gates,
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.
We walk on air, Watson.
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes.

Taylor Swift, “Look what you made me do”:

[Verse 1]

I don't like your little games
Don't like your tilted stage
The role you made me play
Of the fool, no, I don't like you
I don't like your perfect crime
How you laugh when you lie
You said the gun was mine
Isn't cool, no, I don't like you (Oh)

[Pre-Chorus]

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

[Chorus]

Ooh, look what you made me do
Look what you made me do
Look what you just made me do
Look what you just made me—
Ooh, look what you made me do
Look what you made me do
Look what you just made me do
Look what you just made me do

[Verse 2]

I don't like your kingdom keys
They once belonged to me
You asked me for a place to sleep
Locked me out and threw a feast (What?)
The world moves on, another day, another drama, drama

But not for me, not for me, all I think about is karma
And then the world moves on, but one thing's for sure
Maybe I got mine, but you'll all get yours

[Pre-Chorus]

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

[Chorus]

Ooh, look what you made me do
Look what you made me do
Look what you just made me do
Look what you just made me—
Ooh, look what you made me do
Look what you made me do
Look what you just made me do
Look what you just made me do

[Bridge]

I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me
I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams
I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me
I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams
I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me
I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams
I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me
I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams
(Ooh, look what you made me do
Look what you made me do
Look what you just made me do
Look what you just made me—
Ooh, look what you made me do

Look what you made me do

Look what you just made me—)

"I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now

"Why? Oh, 'cause she's dead!" (Oh)

[Chorus]

Ooh, look what you made me do

Look what you made me do

Look what you just made me do

Look what you just made me—

Ooh, look what you made me do

Look what you made me do

Look what you just made me do

Look what you just made me do

Ooh, look what you made me do

Look what you made me do

Look what you just made me do

Look what you just made me—

Ooh, look what you made me do

Look what you made me do

Look what you just made me do

Look what you just made me do

Taylor Swift, “mad woman”:

[Verse 1]

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"?

[Pre-Chorus]

Every time you call me crazy, I get more crazy
What about that?
And when you say I seem angry, I get more angry

[Chorus]

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 her claws come out
And you find something to wrap your noose around
And there's nothing like a mad woman

[Verse 2]

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 women like hunting witches too
Doing your dirtiest work for you
It's obvious that wanting me dead
Has really brought you two together

[Pre-Chorus]

Every time you call me crazy, I get more crazy

What about that?

And when you say I seem angry, I get more angry

[Chorus]

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 her claws come out

And you find something to wrap your noose around

And there's nothing like a mad woman

[Bridge]

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

[Outro]

No one likes a mad woman

What a shame she went mad

You made her like that

Taylor Swift, “my tears ricochet”:

[Verse 1]

We gather here, we line up, weepin' in a sunlit room
And if I'm on fire, you'll be made of ashes, too
Even on my worst day, did I deserve, babe
All the hell you gave me?
'Cause I loved you, I swear I loved you
'Til my dying day

[Chorus]

I didn't have it in myself to go with grace
And you're the hero flying around, saving face
And if I'm dead to you, why are you at the wake?
Cursing my name, wishing I stayed
Look at how my tears ricochet

[Verse 2]

We gather stones, never knowing what they'll mean
Some to throw, some to make a diamond ring
You know I didn't want to have to haunt you
But what a ghostly scene
You wear the same jewels that I gave you
As you bury me

[Chorus]

I didn't have it in myself to go with grace
'Cause when I'd fight, you used to tell me I was brave
And if I'm dead to you, why are you at the wake?
Cursing my name, wishing I stayed
Look at how my tears ricochet

[Bridge]

And I can go anywhere I want

Anywhere I want, just not home
And you can aim for my heart, go for blood
But you would still miss me in your bones
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)

[Chorus]

I didn't have it in myself to go with grace
And so the battleships will sink beneath the waves
You had to kill me, but it killed you just the same
Cursing my name, wishing I stayed
You turned into your worst fears
And you're tossing out blame, drunk on this pain
Crossing out the good years
And you're cursing my name, wishing I stayed
Look at how my tears ricochet