



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

**‘Removing the Mask’. Feminist Confessional Lyricism in the
Work of Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift**

Graduanda: Julia Gómez Menéndez

Director: Noemí Pereira-Ares

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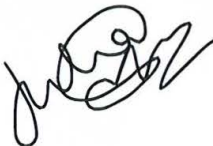

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Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

Both Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift are figures whose work is endowed with a feminist agenda. Despite their different artistic careers, it is possible to trace some parallelisms between their works such as, for instance, the intimate link between their lives and the art they produced or the confessional dimension of much of their work. Building upon these premises, this dissertation seeks to analyse the work of both artists as part of the tradition of confessional lyricism. Both artists avail themselves of this kind of writing to create an intimate form of lyricism that also reflects their feminist agenda. In order to carry out such a study, I will carry out a close reading of a selection of works by Plath and Swift, grounding my analysis in feminist theory as well as critical works dealing with confessional poetry. The structure of the dissertation will consist of two main parts. The first part will be devoted to the theoretical framework, delving into feminist criticism and confessional poetry. Subsequently, the second part will provide a close reading of a series of poems by Sylvia Plath and a set of lyrics by Taylor Swift, to trace the parallelisms that can be drawn between the lyrical work of these two figures. Thus, this comparative study aims to demonstrate how Plath and Swift utilized the confessional mode in an attempt to handle societal expectations, feminine experience, and personal concerns.

Santiago de Compostela, 19 de marzo de 2024.

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SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

DECLARACIÓN DE ORIXINALIDADE

Eu, Julia Gómez Menéndez, alumna da Facultade de Filoloxía, con DNI número 53859619J, declaro que o presente Tralaballo de Fin de Grao é orixinal e de autoría propia.

Declaro que tódalas fontes e recursos empregados están debidamente citados e referenciados conforme as normas académicas vixentes. As ideas e contidos que non son da miña propia creación foron axeitadamente atribuídos aos seus respectivos autores.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Julia Gómez Menéndez', written in a cursive style.

Asinado: Julia Gómez Menéndez

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Chapter 1. Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift in the Context of Feminism.....	4
3. Chapter 2. Sylvia Plath, Taylor Swift and Confessional Writing.....	13
4. Chapter 3. Sylvia Plath’s Poetry and Taylor Swift’s Songwriting.....	21
a. 3.1. ‘I Took the Road Less Travelled by’: On Female Creativity in a Patriarchal World.....	22
b. 3.2. ‘I Think I Made You Up Inside My Head’ – On Loving and (Not) Being Loved.....	31
c. 3.3. ‘Every Time You Call Me Crazy, I Get More Crazy’: On Madness and Resurrection.....	40
5. Conclusion.....	50
6. Bibliography.....	54

A Sylvia Plath y a Taylor Swift,
por enseñarme que no hay que tener miedo
a sentir, y mucho menos, a demostrarlo.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Taylor Swift (1989-) are two artists who, despite belonging to different generations and creative domains, share many affinities, including a remarkable ability to transform personal experiences into universally resonant art. Their lives bear comparison in various respects, and in both cases their oeuvre incorporates autobiographical underpinnings and a powerful critique of patriarchal values. Plath's poetry, characterised by intense introspection and a moving portrayal of mental anguish, revolutionised confessional poetry and, as this study argues, Swift's lyrics also align well with the confessional mode. Both artists found in their respective mediums a means through which to navigate and articulate their inner selves, creating works that connect deeply and meaningfully with their audiences through their honesty and vulnerability. While Plath's work often delves into existential themes, Swift's songs tend to balance personal strife with a sense of empowerment and resilience, which highlights the artists' different – yet related – approaches to autobiographical expression. All this considered, the main objective of this dissertation is to provide a comparative analysis of Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift, focusing on the confessional dimension of their work and the feminist agenda permeating their oeuvre. To this end, the study will offer a close reading of a selection of poems and songs by Plath and Swift, respectively, and the analysis will be grounded in gender studies, key works on confessional poetry, and existing criticism dealing with the figures of Plath and Swift.

The present dissertation is divided into two main parts, corresponding to the theoretical framework and the case study, respectively. Thus, Chapter 1, titled 'Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift in the Context of Feminism', provides an overview of the feminist movement and its different waves, contextualising the figures of Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift against the backdrop of the second wave and the so-called 'celebrity feminism', respectively. For this chapter, I will draw on works such as Chris Beasley's *What is Feminism? An Introduction to Feminist Theory* (1999), Catherine Riley and Lynne Pearce's *Feminism & Women's Writing* (2018), and Nicola Rivers' *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (2017). This will be complemented by other works which, focusing on Plath and Swift in particular, will allow me to contextualise the two artists under scrutiny and to examine how their works connect to feminism more generally: to illustrate Plath's feminist agenda, I will draw on works as

such as Jo Gill's *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (2006), Luke Ferretter's *Sylvia Plath's Fiction. A Critical Study* (2010) and Emily Miller Budick's 'The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*' (1987). In Swift's case, I will base my exposition on works such as Sue Jackson's 'A very basic view of feminism: feminist girls and meanings of (celebrity) feminism' (2021), Leonie Milder's 'Taylor Swift's "Fearless": A feminist analysis' (2023), Mary Fogarty and Gina Arnold's 'Are You Ready for It – Reevaluating Taylor Swift' (2021), and 'An Analysis of Taylor Swift's Song Lyric *The Man* using Feminist Literary Criticism Theory' (2023) by Putu Ayu Diah Damayanti, Putu Lirishati Soethama and I. Nyoman Uduyana.

Moving from the social into the literary, Chapter 2, entitled 'Sylvia Plath, Taylor Swift and Confessional Writing', engages with the origins of confessional poetry, lays bare the main characteristics of this mode of writing, and explains the importance of Sylvia Plath within this movement. The chapter then shows how Taylor Swift's work aligns with the confessional mode. Furthermore, this section analyses how this genre, grounded on heavy autobiographical and emotional content, has led to conceptualising the works of confessional writers as being inseparable from the artists' personal lives – creating room not only for admiration and inspiration but also for criticism. Plath's and Swift's careers have been underestimated to the point where they have been criticized for their way of writing, suggesting that confession is the quickest and easiest path for women to follow when aiming to become successful authors. Others have disdained their talent by paying more attention to their personal lives and choices rather than to their masterpieces. In this way, confessional poetry seems suitable for categorizing their works, as this genre is considered a 'refuge' for many artists who, like Plath and Swift, wanted to escape the reality surrounding them. To articulate this chapter, I begin with a general overview of the movement, drawing on works such as Deborah Nelson's 'Confessional Poetry' (2013). Then, to examine Sylvia Plath as a practitioner of the genre, I will rely on Jennifer Ashton's *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945* (2013), and *Sylvia Plath (Modern Critical Views)* (2007) edited by Harold Bloom. Lastly, to show how Taylor Swift's work can align with the confessional genre, I will utilize sources such as Clara Scott's 'Confessionalism and the Female Voice' (2020), Rachel Greenhaus's 'Taylor Swift: 1989's Confessional Poet' (2015) and 'The Confessional Poetics of Taylor Swift, or: Does Too Much Knowledge Ruin Art?' (2015), Sayeri Biswas's 'Taylor Swift and Sylvia Plath: The Construction Of The So-Called "Mad Woman"' (2022), Eloise

Faichney's "'Fearless": How Taylor Swift Is Owning Her Narrative' (2024), and 'Taylor Swift's "folklore" is a confessional masterpiece' (2020) by Molly Hamilton.

The second part of this dissertation – case study – occupies the whole of Chapter 3, titled 'Sylvia Plath's Poetry and Taylor Swift's Songwriting'. This chapter is, in turn, further subdivided into three sections that seek to compare Plath and Swift's work in relation to: 1) The patriarchal obstacles faced by female writers as they strive to find their place in the creative realm; 2) Narratives dealing with love experiences, and the traumas and lessons that arise after heartbreak and failed relationships; 3) The metaphor of resurrection and the issue of madness. Thus, the first section aims to shed light on the difficulties female artists face when expressing themselves and when trying to secure a place and a voice of their own in a patriarchal world. This will be accomplished through the analysis of the following texts: the poems 'Three Women' (1962) and 'The Applicant' (1963) by Sylvia Plath, and the songs 'Look What You Made Me Do' (2017) and 'The Man' (2019) by Taylor Swift. The second section is devoted to the gift that both artists share: the ability to reflect on a feeling as complex as love and giving astounding portrayals of this emotion. Drawing from personal events, they are able to create universal narratives to which their readers can relate. In this case, the main works under analysis will be 'Mad Girl's Love Song' (1953) by Plath, and 'All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version) (2021), and 'loml' (2024) by Swift. These pieces reflect the intensity and fugacity of love, as well as the heartbreak that comes as the aftermath of many relationships. Lastly, the third section of the chapter focuses on the analysis of the poem 'Lady Lazarus' (1965) by Sylvia Plath, and the song 'mad woman' (2020) by Taylor Swift, focusing on the metaphors of 'resurrection' and 'madness' – metaphors intimately intertwined with what was discussed in the first part of the chapter: the challenges faced by female artists and creators in a patriarchal society. For this section, I will rely more closely on Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985) and *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Finally, the dissertation includes a conclusive section where the main findings are summarised and future lines of research adumbrated.

Chapter 1. Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift in the Context of Feminism

Feminism is a commonly used notion in several areas of knowledge and yet it is a concept difficult to define precisely. In *What is Feminism, Anyway?* Chris Beasley (1999) states that ‘the meaning of this term has been a matter of ongoing discussion because it inconveniently defies simple explanation’ (Beasley, 1999: 9). As he goes on to declare, a precise definition of the word has proved elusive, given that, despite the growing feminist awareness worldwide, feminism as an epistemological realm is barely understood, and this gap between theory and practice, academia and society, is further exacerbated by the use of laborious forms of language in scholarly writing. Beasley (1999) agrees that, even if feminism is dealt with by many critics, writers and commentators rarely provide a precise definition of it. This is mainly because the meaning of feminism is ‘almost invariably assumed and/or evaded’ (Beasley, 1999: 11). In addition, feminists are usually not willing to define what they mean by feminism, fearing diverse dangers such as the internal policing of the field, or the troublesome situation within the movement regarding what to include in, or exclude from, the term. Consequently, Beasley concludes that his approach to the term is grounded on abstaining from arriving at a precise definition thereof given the arduous challenge it entails.

Similarly, in *Feminism & Women’s Writing*, Lynne Pearce and Catherine Riley (2018) hold the view that what defines the feminist movement, and how that movement voices its concerns, varies from decade to decade and is in a constant process of renewal. As far as the chronology of the movement is concerned, they illustrate how the history of feminism during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been grouped up into consecutive waves, whose imagery is not put down to chance. Waves constitute an exceptionally convenient symbol to represent the feminist movement precisely because, instead of linearity, waves align with the idea of flux and circularity, both of which are central to understanding the development of feminism: ‘each new wave turn[s] back and renew[s] itself in relation to previous waves’ (Pearce and Riley, 2018: 5). Building on this, Pearce and Riley (2018) warn that the start of the feminist movement does not correspond to the birth of the ‘first wave’. Its origins are usually associated with the French Revolution (1789-1799) and, most importantly, with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), who wrote about such important issues as women’s literacy and their rights inside matrimony. Among others, these questions are addressed in her

acclaimed, but controversial, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) as well as in works such as *Mary* (1788) or *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798).

Having said that, it is worth addressing now the different waves of feminism so as to situate the figures under scrutiny here – namely Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift – on a chronological map. To begin with, the so-called first wave was closely linked to the worldwide suffrage movement that started in the 1880s and lasted until the 1930s and 1940s with the achievement of women’s right to vote in democratic elections, although in some countries this came much later. Nevertheless, Pearce and Riley state that it is very important not to generalise when talking about suffrage, as it is very difficult to sum it up given the different courses suffrage has taken across the world. In some countries, women got the vote far later than in others, and there are still many women in the world who do not enjoy full democratic rights. As far as the second wave of feminism is concerned, we also find difficulties when it comes to summarising it, and this is because ‘it represents our common past, and according to some, our ongoing present’ (Pearce and Riley, 2018: 6). As Pearce and Riley go on to note, this wave originated in the modern women’s liberation movement in the U.S., which is linked with the Civil Rights movement that also took place during the 1960s, and which demanded equality for minority groups, particularly African Americans. Although its duration in time is disputed, this second wave is often believed to have extended until the 1980s.

A crucial figure within this second wave was Simone de Beauvoir and her theories on the subjugation of women to patriarchal domination in *The Second Sex* (1949). In her article for the digital exhibition and encyclopedia ‘Towards Emancipation?’, Emma Haseley explains the importance of de Beauvoir’s work in examining the impact of social and economic factors on women, factors which have cornered them through the course of history, leaving them completely reliant on men. In addition, one of de Beauvoir’s main contributions lies in denaturalizing gender. Women are not born knowing what being a woman is, they are socialized into the role of ‘woman’: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ (de Beauvoir, 2011: 330). What is more, women are always defined as females but never as human beings, where ‘human being’ stands for the male: ‘Whenever she tries to behave as a human being, she is accused of trying to emulate the male’ (de Beauvoir, 2011: 482).

The question of male-female roles and expectations is very well portrayed in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), where the author illustrates the pressure of the idealised domestic philosophy women were subjected to in the past, and particularly in the aftermath of World War II. This period was also characterized by the ascendancy towards an ideology whose main purpose was to amend conventional family principles for the upcoming Cold War. This resulted in several subjugating discourses that encouraged women to rethink their choices, as their main ambition should now be the future of their family, to become the heart of their home and the main educators of their children. This view was conveyed, for example, by figures such as Adlai Stevenson, an American politician and diplomat who gave speeches directed to women attending university at the time, where:

He urged these intelligent, hard- working, presumably ambitious young women to focus those ambitions on husband, children, and home. Women's role, he said, was to "inspire in her home a vision of the meaning of life and freedom . . . to help her husband find values that will give purpose to his specialized daily chores . . . to teach her children the uniqueness of each individual human being" (Gill, 2008: 27)

The above quotation comes from Jo Gill's *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (2008), a work that proves particularly useful to situate Sylvia Plath within the feminist discourses of the period in which she lived. In this work, Gill resorts to Ruth Schwartz Cowan's work (1983) to explain the situation of women in the post-war period, claiming that most of them struggled with the determination to find a job, given the cultural pressures against their recruitment that were escalating in the post-war period, as men returned from the front and women were therefore no longer needed. These pressures may have been key 'to a reborn feminist movement, and, from the mid-1960s, a new consciousness emerged among some women of the structural and ideological barriers against their full participation in the world' (Gill, 2008: 27), which would crystallise in the second wave of feminism.

When talking about the literary scenario in which Plath began to work as a writer, it is worth mentioning *The Ladies' Home Journal*, an American magazine that articulated morals for women of the time, and in which male figures were represented as fixed and unalterable, whereas the female character's main role was to find the right man to marry.

As Luke Ferretter explains in *Sylvia Plath's Fiction* (2010), Sylvia Plath started writing for these magazines, but some of her articles could not be published in these journals as a result of her unfitting feminist morals for the society of the 1950s. She desired to put the heroine in the centre, making the hero the one who needed to learn how to love the female protagonist in the way she wanted. Even if these magazine stories were directed at female readers, according to Plath's vision, it would be men who should relate to these stories, as they were the ones who needed to change. Initially, Plath's articles such as 'The Smoky Blue Piano' did not make the cut, even if they resembled those that were accepted and published; in this particular example, the heroine Platinum Summer shared the same dreams and desires of the women of the time such as, for instance, getting married. Still, the protagonist embodied an idea of independence that did not please the editors of the magazine. That is why the author began to use certain techniques and formulas to be able to send her message without being rejected or censored, a very common trend in feminist literature, as already evinced in the writings of the so-called 'New Women' at the end of the nineteenth century. This group comprised writers like Kate Chopin or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who aimed to destroy the preconceived image of the submissive, obedient, and sentimental Victorian woman, by fighting relentlessly to earn greater rights for their contemporaries. Similarly, Plath managed to publish 'The Laundromat Affair' and imbued it with a feminist ideology: she was able to soften her feminist ideas by putting them in the mouth of a child, and by addressing them to a man who was already the hero of the story.

Definitely, women like Sylvia Plath did not have it easy to pursue their dreams and ambitions, as Shirley Jackson (1948-1954) puts it, in a period when the exclusive channel of creativity for women in society was destroyed by the institutions of family and marriage; women found themselves on a very dreadful path where they were constantly overlooked. As noted before, this was a time when these institutions encouraged women to find a husband and to stay at home raising their children, instead of pursuing their ambitions and attending superior education. This hegemonic discourse awakened different opinions: for instance, in a 1952 article entitled 'Have College Women Let Us Down?', the critic Howard Mumford Jones reprimanded the current generation of women at university who, in his view, lacked the intellectual curiosity, political engagement, and aspirations of former generations. This academic disenchantment that reigned over women was the product of their fixation on finding a husband, which led women to lower

their ambitions and only think about working if having a job could fit in with their marital and familial duties. This article is contemporary to the period in which Plath was revealing most vehemently her impossibility of imagining a marriage that would let her express her creativity rather than drain it, in a moment when she did not find any support from the prominent discourses that surrounded her. This struggle between ambition and societal expectations is conspicuously portrayed in her novel *The Bell Jar* (1967), through Esther's struggles with the societal pressures placed upon her as a young woman in the 1950s. These pressures led women to give up their independence, personal ambitions, and success, in order to focus on their marriages, families, and domesticity. These cultural beliefs surrounding gender roles act as a burden for Esther as she tries to explore her own identity and ambitions in a society that restrains her from success. Finally, Esther's battle against societal expectations culminates in her suicide attempt, a consequence of the inability to reconcile her personal desires with societal expectations. Through Esther's story, Plath voices a very harsh critique towards the oppressive gender norms of the time, a question that resonates with Plath's own life as both Esther and Plath followed a similar lifeline: being women who tried to fit in a patriarchal society that, in return, consumed their light.

Plath also included in her only novel a latent issue that was reigning over society, and to which she reserved her mightiest critique: the gender politics of health care within the institution of psychiatry. In *The Bell Jar* Plath criticizes the patriarchal dimension underlying psychiatric practice at the time. In *Women and Madness* (1972), Phyllis Chesler explains how, in previous decades and centuries, women were diagnosed and hospitalised by essentially male professionals. This 'double standard of health separated men from women' (Broverman, cited in Ferretter, 2010: 130), as women were thought of as more mentally unstable individuals, prone to neurosis and other psychological disorders. Medical discourse supported and strengthened the existing patriarchal structures, confining women to the roles of wife and mother and discouraging them from pursuing intellectual stimuli. Along similar lines, in her article 'Sex Role Stereotypes and Clinical Judgements of Mental Health', included in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (1970), Inge K. Broverman attests that being a woman and being mentally ill were strictly related notions in the patriarchal society Plath and other women inhabited at the time. In a world where women were encouraged to leave their ambitions aside, Sylvia Plath faced the difficult challenge of trying to stand out and elbow her way

into the literary scene, all while battling against her mental problems. These were the views marking the period in which Plath's encounter with the psychiatric institution took place, an institution which sustained that women needed to be pliable, submissive, and compliant to be regarded as mentally stable. Addressing this gendered dimension of clinical practice, in *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath criticises how the psychiatric institution ineptly administered ECT treatment to Esther, the protagonist, an issue that could be linked to 'Plath's experience of the institution of psychiatry, as one in which women are controlled by and forced to conform to the norms of patriarchal society' (Ferretter, 2010: 137).

Plath found in writing an ally that helped her express her emotions and exorcise her own struggles with mental illness: 'That's where writing comes in. It is as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh' (Plath, 1951: 100). The significance that Plath gave to writing finds echo in the biographical dimension underpinning her work, especially when dealing with her turbulent mental health. According to Mary Karagkou in *Sylvia Plath: How the Famous Poet Struggled with Mental Illness*, Plath's mental health issues were aggravated in the course of 1962 and 1963 as a result of several changes in her life: her husband, Ted Hughes, asked for a divorce after being unfaithful to her and, as a consequence, Plath was stuck with their two children. Furthermore, the publication of her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, earned her complete indifference from the writing community; being unacknowledged was one of the triggers of the severe depressive episodes the poet suffered only six months before her suicide in 1963, especially because that book portrayed her own struggles with depression. The autobiographical dimension of Plath's oeuvre makes it difficult to separate life and art when dealing with Plath's literary persona. In fact, for scholars such as Alicia Ostriker (1986) or Sandra M. Gilbert (1979), it is impossible to separate Plath's work from her fatal end. Similarly, Jo Gill (2018) also acknowledges Plath's impulse to merge life and art, as well as the speaker and the poet. Interestingly for my purpose here, Gill defends that this connection between art and life is a paramount feature of 'a feminist perspective which seeks to refute arbitrary separations between life and art, experience and representation, the private (personal) and public (political)' (Gill, 2008: 121).

While Plath is a writer often associated with the second wave, the figure of Taylor Swift is far removed in time from the period of the second wave and, from here onwards,

the chapter walks the reader across the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. But before reaching the context of the new millennium, we should mention the importance of the third wave, which is directly associated with Judith Butler's works and the rise of 'queer theory', but which was also a period of resentment against second-wave feminism through the 1990s and the early 2000s. When talking about this wave, one cannot avoid referring to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she explains, in a de Beauvoirian fashion, that 'gender is not something one *is*, but something one *does*, an act ... a "doing" rather than a "being"' (Butler, 1990: 25). Butler thus collapses the distinction between sex and gender, arguing that there is no sex that is not already gender and that there is no existence that is not already social. Therefore, gender for Butler is 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame' (Butler, 1990: 33). Put differently, gender is not a free choice, as it is already determined within this frame. This idea of gender as a 'repetition of acts' is what Butler calls 'performativity'. This term illustrates how gender is the result of reiterative acts, and, therefore, it is always a doing; still, it is not a doing by a subject, which leads to confusion. This ambiguity comes from the fact that a performance cannot occur without a performer, that is when the notion of 'performativity' comes into play; as opposed to performance, which assumes a pre-existing subject, 'performativity' challenges the basic notion of the subject.

After highlighting some important aspects of the third wave, let us now delve into the significance of the fourth wave of feminism, particularly relevant for this dissertation due to its association with Taylor Swift, one of the figures under scrutiny in this chapter. This movement is widely debated, raising questions over what distinguishes this wave from those that came before. This wave hinges on the fact that women continue to be victims of denigration and abuse, despite the progress obtained regarding human rights and equality. The feminists of this generation are provided with developing forms of technology, like social media and other platforms to share their experiences, or to use them as a tool to fight against the injustices that women still face every day. Addressing this movement known as 'hashtag feminism' (Dixon, cited in Rivers, 2017: 107), Jessalyn Keller (2013) stresses that the Internet, and in particular blogging, which gives young women accessibility to feminism and its activism, can be compared and connected to previous feminist traditions, namely diary writing. Yet, Rivers (2017) declares that the Internet and its forums, like Twitter or Facebook, are not only a useful instrument for

feminist practice, but they have also proved to be ‘a hotbed of misogyny’ (Rivers, 2017: 113). On a similar note, Karla Mantilla explains how the arrival of the Internet and its bad practices has enabled new forms of sexism. In fact, the embodiment of this controversy could be Taylor Swift, the American singer who, in November 2016, had to disappear from the public eye after all the hate she received for living like any girl in their twenties. Taylor Swift, like Sylvia Plath, also suffers the consequences of the impossibility of separating her art from her life, a dilemma also used against her in her feminist implications in ‘celebrity feminism’.

As Sue Jackson explains (2021), ‘celebrity feminism’ can be defined as a movement that started in 2014, after several celebrities, like Beyoncé or Emma Watson, publicly declared themselves as feminists. Although feminist scholarship critiques celebrity feminism, this movement has proven to be very powerful, as celebrities have the potential to inform younger crowds who follow them about feminism, and by reason of their influence in society, they have the capacity to expand activism by increasing their fans’ education and interest in the movement. Still, for feminist scholars like Anthea Taylor (2014), there is still a long way ahead, as the arguments voiced by celebrities lack texture, depth, and conviction. So, even if celebrities such as Miley Cyrus or Taylor Swift appeal to young girls due to their proximity in age, all that glitters is not gold: as Leonie Milder (2023) goes on to advert in her article ‘Taylor Swift’s “Fearless”: A Feminist Analysis’, growing up and making mistakes while being a feminist as a celebrity can also be very complicated. Similarly, in their essay ‘An Analysis of Taylor Swift’s Song Lyric The Man Using Feminist Literary Criticism Theory’, Diah Damayanti, Lirishati Soethama, and Nyoman Udayana analyse Taylor Swift’s struggles with patriarchy in her song ‘The Man’, where the singer denounces the injustices she has suffered for being a woman within the music industry, and how people always deny her power moves due to her gender as society puts more trust on men than on women. This is also portrayed in her lyric ‘When everyone believes ya, what’s that like?’, where she reflects on how women must present evidence in order to be believed, whereas men’s trustworthiness is never at stake. This struggle with credibility permeates not only fourth-wave feminism, but also the #MeToo Movement and society’s general attitude toward survivors of sexual violence. Taylor Swift took part in this movement after making public her personal encounter with sexual violence in 2013, when she became one of the victims of sexual harassment, eventually winning a lawsuit in 2017.

This is not, however, the only battle that Swift has had to fight in recent years, as after a long feud related to the property of her music and problems with her discography, she decided to take matters into her own hands and start to re-record every album of hers in order to own the rights to her music. These albums are still under their original name, but the tag ‘Taylor’s Version’ sits next to their title, thereby helping fans differentiate which songs are owned by the singer. Swift has publicly encouraged other female artists to take their music rights if they do not own them yet and to fight for what they believe in. Another of Swift’s contributions to this movement known as ‘celebrity feminism’, and one that has helped her secure a respected position within twenty-first century feminism is, as Leonie Milder (2023) noted, Taylor’s acceptance speech for Woman of the Decade. In this speech, the artist voiced the obstacles and hindrances she had suffered throughout her career due to the gender inequality that is still present in the music industry: ‘Because we (women) have to grow fast. We have to work this hard; we have to prove that we deserve this [...] Women in the music industry are held at a higher, sometimes impossible-feeling standard’ (Swift, 2019). She explains the accusations and stereotypes she was a victim of as something that just happens to any woman in the music industry, especially if she attains success outside people’s comfort level. Swift also explains that, in the last decade of her musical career, she has seen women being criticized and compared to each other, but also disapproved of because of their romantic lives, their bodies, or the way they dress – a form of criticism which exclusively attacks women. Her attempts to demonstrate the existence of double standards, sexism, and hate inside the music industry have been an inspiration for millions. Her public maturation testifies to her feminist progression, which makes her a representative example of this twenty-first-century wave known as celebrity feminism.

Chapter 2. Sylvia Plath, Taylor Swift and Confessional Writing

As discussed in Chapter 1, the twentieth century was deeply marked by the bellicose scenario brought about by successive war conflicts. As the editors of *Poetry Foundation* explain in their article ‘Confessional Poetry’, the trauma and the disillusionment brought about by the warlike scenario led poets to search for a literary refuge where they could express themselves freely, and most importantly, intimately. In so doing, they paved the way for a new literary sensibility which resulted in the confessional movement. Its authors, wishing to distance themselves from the horrendous reality of the century, led a poetic revolution during the 1950s and 1960s, using poetry to address their inner struggles and, eventually, their own life experiences. As explained in ‘Confessional Poetry’, their poems dealt with very intimate issues related to their childhood or even their mental health, all while avoiding the use of metaphors; life was depicted authentically, devoid of embellishment, as it truly was. In fact, this style of writing based on self-expression blurred the line between the poets’ personal lives and their artistic creations at times in problematic ways. Following from this, in ‘Confessional Poetry’, Deborah Nelson defines the confessional poet as ‘a mentally unstable poet in an act of self-exposure’ (Nelson, 2013: 1); and amongst the most well-known confessional poets of the twentieth century, one could mention Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass and Sylvia Plath.

In ‘Confessional Poetry’, the editors of *Poetry Foundation* sustain that the term ‘confessional poetry’ was coined by the critic M.L Rosenthal in his 1959 article ‘Poetry as Confession’, where he reviewed *Life Studies* (1959), by Robert Lowell. Although in poetry the personal has always been inherent to the poetic form, for Lowell, confessional poetry ‘removes the mask’ under which the previous poets hid themselves when writing about their lives. Still, even when this genre was seen as an innovative form at the time, it certainly draws on previous literary practices, such as the autobiographical novel, the memoir or even a ‘religious tradition that dates back to Augustine’ (Nelson, 2013: 2). Nevertheless, and despite the similarities shared with the above-mentioned genres and traditions, this ‘newly personal mode of writing that popularized exploring the self’ (The Editors of *Poetry Foundation*, 2024: n.p.) was not well embraced among the poets of the time; in fact, those writers who practised it never categorised their work under this term, given the general repudiation this label was a victim of. Deborah Nelson argues that this rejection may originate from associating confessional writing with religious works that

go back to the Augustine tradition, or even with therapeutic practice. The fact that these two traditions influenced confessional poetry led authors like William DeWitt Snodgrass to reject the label, as it suggested, far from reality, that what they wrote was religious literature or even bedroom memoirs. Other authors, such as Elizabeth Bishop or Adrienne Rich, did not identify themselves with this label either because of its immense introspection: ‘We found ourselves reduced to I’ (Bishop and Rich, cited in Editors of *Poetry Foundation*, 2024: n.p.).

The influence of the memoir and of the autobiographical novel, hegemonic genres at the time, should not be overlooked when addressing confessional poetry. These genres share with confessional poetry an emphasis on the personal voice, but also the rebuke of fraudulent objectivity or even false universality. Still, what makes confessional writing stand out above these other genres is, according to Nelson, ‘the urgency and ‘rawness’ of the revelations [...] in key respects, a distinction of form, not content’ (Nelson, 2013: 2). The specific nature and context of confessional writings’ revelations can be explained through the figure of Sylvia Plath, who contributed immensely to the history of poetry, mostly because of the great strength that can be found in most of her poems. Even if her poetry was severely altered by the painful gender realities and the patriarchy governing her lifetime, it still inspired many others; the subject-matters that she dealt with in her poetry can be characterized today as ground-breaking, particularly if viewed in the context of a white middle-class, heterosexual society. This transgression represented ‘a generational swing of the pendulum from impersonality to emotionally intense revelations of shameful and mostly personal and familial dramas’ (Nelson, 2013: 3).

As Nelson asserts in her article, the poets that cultivated the genre of confessional poetry were considered ‘celebrities’, as they had to deal with media issues due to the intimate and personal content of their work. Because the movement was founded ‘in an era of extreme self-exhibitionism’ (Nelson, 2013: 3), these poets’ revelations were considered to be ‘part of a larger aesthetic and political impulse’ (Nelson, 2013: 3). This issue with public scrutiny was mainly due to the way confessional poetry was conceived: it was a tool or a lens that the audience used to get to know more about their artists and politicians. This kind of poetry inaugurated a new social and artistic purpose that aimed to disclose, confess, and reveal new, but also more intimate, versions of the self. To this end, confessional poets travelled to remote ‘kingdoms’ never explored before to address

private life experiences. In fact, these poets became the protagonists of heated debates surrounding privacy in the US during the twentieth century. At first, this type of writing was considered merely private, as in theory, confessional poetry dealt with trivial topics that had no relevance for the general warlike context. As Nelson clarifies in her article, society was not able to comprehend that this kind of writing expressed the inner conflicts of the self that arose, in part, as a result of the oppressive post-war context:

unlike the politically engaged poetry that also began to flourish in the 1960s, confessional poetry reported the conflicts internal to the family and to the self, which suggested to many readers that it had nothing to tell them about the tumultuous and rapidly changing world in which it existed (Nelson, 2013: 3).

This universality of the private experience is directly linked to autobiographical writing, and most especially to women's poetry; in the post-war era, women continued to suffer the persistent oppression reigning over the creative field, and for writers such as Plath, confessional poetry offered them a means through which to vent out their anxieties and voice the injustices to which they were still subjected. As we can observe in one of the entries of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, the author affirmed that her problems were as valid as those of any man, as they were 'universal enough to be made meaningful' (Plath, cited in Nelson, 2013: 6). Through this assertion, Plath confirmed that she had as much to say as any man. And just like that, she used confession as a means to express her emotions and experiences, but also to make visible the discrimination she suffered on a daily basis as a woman. Plath was idolatized as the heroine of confessional poetry; she was the mirror women wanted to reflect themselves onto. She was the change. Not only was she a key figure within contemporary women's movements due to the subjugation she had suffered, firstly by his father, and later by his husband, Ted Hughes, but she also embodied, according to Bruce Bower (2007), the romantic image of a sensitive genius in a brutal and indifferent world what made her the voice of those who had been perpetually silenced.

Plath's life provides the background to understand her progress within the confessional movement: her father's death when she was just eight years old led Plath to take refuge in her studies and achievements, trying to find a sense of belonging and a way of defining herself. As Bruce Bower puts it, she needed the school and college's structure

to set goals for her, as she suffered from a ‘terrifying fear of mediocrity’ (Bower, 2007: 9). This was the only way through which the author could define herself, and so, she was always trying to make an impression on people. When talking about her life, she felt she was describing someone else, she felt as if she was a ‘highly trained circus horse’ (Bower, 2007: 10). This issue of trying to make the best impression and creating a false image of oneself is an enduring problem among women. For centuries, women have had to fight unreal expectations of themselves just to feel accepted, so this is not simply a twentieth-century matter. Taylor Swift herself, in her song ‘Mirrorball’ (2020), explains how she has always tried to perform the best version of herself, by accommodating her personality to her surroundings, with the sole purpose of trying to fit in. Swift can be compared to Plath, as the latter has also been said to hide herself under a façade, mostly at the beginning of her career. In fact, according to Plath’s editor at *Mademoiselle*, the writer was ‘too polite, too well-brought-up and well-disciplined’ (Butscher, quoted in Bower, 2007: 11).

When you try to project the best version of yourself to the world, you must resort to different resources to express feelings and negative emotions, and in Sylvia Plath’s case, she was always drawn to writing. During her childhood, her mother encouraged her to write as a way of venting out her feelings; as Anne Stevenson comments, from a very early age, Plath ‘was being urged to treat negative emotion [...] with words’ (Stevenson, cited in Bower, 2007: 10). Thus, the fact that she always resorted to words to express her emotions does not come as a surprise; words sheltered her emotions and feelings in a way nothing else could. Nevertheless, writing was a two-sided weapon for Plath. Her literary life offered self-relief, but also another source of pressure. For Sylvia Plath, getting published was everything, and only if she saw her name printed on paper could she think highly of herself. It was the only way she could ever feel accepted. Her biggest mistake was to think that she could conduct her personal life just as she had conducted her creative career; in the real world, there was no editor to please or prize to win. The fact that she could not control her life as she wanted was arguably one of the main factors leading to her fatal end. Hoping to be a successful writer in a context where women were encouraged to leave their ambitions aside and focus on their familial duties was too big of a challenge. The constant problem of identity Plath had to face was directly linked to the constant duality the author found herself in. To try to succeed in a very limiting writing industry, all while attempting to be the best wife and mother, led Plath to her biggest breakdown

when she was only 31. Still, even if she died too prematurely, her legacy in confessional poetry is everlasting. In fact, she has been and still is the role model for many writers who attempt to find their place within the confines of confessional poetry. Sylvia Plath herself and the rest of the confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s ‘pioneered a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry’ (Poetry.org, 2014: n.p.). Marie Howe and Sharon Olds exemplify the everlasting impact of confessional writing. In Howe’s case, she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2018. Her writing, like Plath’s, was severely altered by the death of one of her family members, her brother; in an interview for AGNI, she commented: ‘John living and dying changed my aesthetic completely’ (*Poetry Foundation*, 2024: n.p.). This autobiographical dimension, very confessional, was captured in an elegy for her brother *What the Living Do* (1997): in this praised composition, the writer produced a collection of what is ‘a transparent, accessible documentary of loss’ (*Poetry Foundation*, 2024: n.p.). Sharon Olds is another great example of the unlimited reach the confessional genre has attained through time. Like Howe, she served as a as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2006 to 2012. According to the editors of *Poetry Foundation*, she is the author of twelve books of poetry exploring a broad range of topics and themes including gender, age, and sexual politics. Like the rest of confessional poets, she is known for writing from a very personal perspective, ‘emotionally scathing poetry which graphically depicts family life as well as global political events’ (*Poetry Foundation*, 2024: n.p.).

In the twenty-first century, this fearless exploration of the self, of personal emotions, and of human experience extends beyond the poetic realm. The work of artists such as Taylor Swift testifies to the use of the confessional mode in music. The fact that confessional poetry has been viewed as an extension of lyrical poetry allows for drawing connections between this type of writing and the lyrics of some of Taylor Swift’s songs. Lyrical poetry was considered the ideal channel for confession, for dealing with privacy and self-exposure, mainly because its speaker has no obligations or anything to explain to the world; the self is the only listener. This translates as a freedom of self-creation that transcends space and time. In fact, since the nineteenth century, the notion of “the lyric” is viewed as being tied to the idea of “self overheard speaking to itself” (Nelson, 2013: 8). As some voices have already proclaimed – for instance, Rachel Greenhaus in her article ‘The Confessional Poetics of Taylor Swift, or: Does Too Much Knowledge Ruin Art?’ (2015) or Molly Hamilton in ‘Taylor Swift’s “folklore” is a confessional

masterpiece' (2024) – Taylor Swift's work can be read under the prism of confessional writing. Like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath, she is brave enough to use words to become the owner of her life narrative, all while encouraging women to fight for their right to have a voice.

In *History of Sexuality*, theorist Michael Foucault claimed that the '[w]estern man has become a confessing animal' (Foucault, cited in Scott, 2020: n.p.); as humans, we have the inclination to confess. That is why confessional writing is an enduring mode. However, in 'Confessionalism and the female voice', Clara Scott affirms that Foucault's above-mentioned theory can be questioned, mainly because confessional art seems to have adhered itself to women, as a response to the immense oppression of patriarchal society (Scott, 2020: n.p.). Like Plath, Taylor Swift also suffered the disregard of the public towards her oeuvre, a public that appreciates the information the artists share, but still undervalues the talent and strength necessary to create these compositions. Even if nowadays the singer is considered the biggest pop star of the century, the audience used to believe that her songs were a mere representation of the diary of the songwriter; she was criticized, mostly among her haters, who believed that she wrote songs about personal experiences because it was the easiest topic to write a song about. The patriarchal lens through which the work of some confessional female writers has been examined at different points in history has resulted in these artists been the target of insidious criticism. Clara Scott states that, had they been men, we would have applauded their ability to 'turn the day-to-day into something beautiful [...] as opposed to: 'she was leaning too much on her own life' (Scott, 2020: n.p.). In the case of women, artistic creativity drawing on the personal has tended to be trivialized; women have often been said to write about their own lives only because it is the easiest subject. This focus on the autobiographical has led women writers to be seen as 'simplistic, self-obsessed and solipsistic' (Greenhaus, 2015: n.p.).

Even though we all confess in one way or another, to be able to write a confessional piece goes far beyond this. Jonni Mitchell, one of Taylor Swift's predecessors as a confessional lyricist in the music industry, affirmed that 'there are things to confess that enrich the world, and things that need not to be said' (Mitchell, quoted in Scott, 2020: n.p.). That is the key to confession. Not everything needs to be said. In fact, one of the difficulties involved in confessional writing lies in choosing what

to and what not to share. In ‘Confessionalism and the female voice’, Scott declares that this is what differentiates people like Jonni Mitchell or Taylor Swift from ‘a teenager writing in her diary’ (Scott, 2020: n.p.). To be able to choose what parts of one’s self should be shared with the world is the foundation of this movement; the act of self-censorship is the only way in which confession can become art. Still, female artists such as Taylor Swift are caught up in a paradox: although they are required to be honest and let their feelings run wild, if a female author deals with romantic or sexual experiences, the public, through a patriarchal lens, might undervalue such narratives. Still, such is the ability of these authors to portray emotion, that they have turned their personal issues into universal and relatable experiences. Early in her career, Taylor Swift’s lyrics were ridiculed, which resonates with the early reception of Plath’s oeuvre; it was not until two of her latest albums came out, *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020), that Swift’s lyrics started to be considered confessional and taken more seriously. In these, she deals with topics similar to those in her earlier albums, such as romance and traumatic breakups, but the difference lies in the mature lens through which she wrote these songs.

Taylor Swift is considered an idol, mostly among women, because she is able to encapsulate the feminine experience in her work as few have managed to do. She has become, like Sylvia Plath, an inspiration for women all around the world, even though the ‘use of life writing in her songs has earned Taylor Swift derision and admiration in equal measure’ (Faichney, 2024: n.p.). As Swift expresses in her song ‘You Are in Love’, for her, the process of creation implies trying to explain the different feelings and experiences that any woman goes through in their life: ‘I’ve spent my whole life trying to put it into words’ (Swift, 2014: n.p.). More recently, she has earned great recognition within the academic field, and universities such as NYU or Ghent University now offer courses that aim to analyze her lyrics – lyrics that deal with much more than love and breakups. In Jane Hirshfield’s words, Swift ‘uses confession to reflect on her own flaws and foibles [...] it’s not just break ups and boyfriends she writes about, either’ (Hirshfield, cited in Faichney, 2024: n.p.).

Notwithstanding, not all is praise and admiration. Critics such as Sady Doyle have described Taylor Swift as ‘the confessional female singer/songwriter of her generation’ (Doyle, cited in Greenhaus, 2015: n.p.) in a rather pejorative way. In his words, it seems difficult to believe that her songs, which delve into the most important moments of her

life, coincide with the issues mostly covered in her tabloid narrative. According to Rachel Sykes, these critiques rely on an ‘association based in the implied and often cultivated closeness between the lyric “I” and the life of the poet or singer – songwriter’ (Sykes, 2022: 378). Swift, just like Plath, has been called all sorts of names just because she is brave enough to voice the concerns and experiences women have to face every single day. But then, why do we crave for the autobiographical dimension of her songs? Amongst others, a possible answer lies in the fact that, mainly, ‘[a]t our core humans are interested in other human beings’ (Faichney, 2024: n.p.). That is why, despite all the critiques, we beg artists like Taylor Swift to continue to produce music that gets us closer to the story of their lives and, indirectly, our lives as well. Taylor Swift has ‘the skill to turn confession into moving songs’ (Scott, 2020: n.p.), and, as she admitted in her documentary *Miss Americana* (2020), she only needs ‘a sharp pen, a thin skin and an open heart’ (Swift, cited in Scott, 2020: n.p.) to create these emotional and relatable masterpieces.

Chapter 3: Sylvia Plath's Poetry and Taylor Swift's Songwriting

Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift share multiple commonalities that surpass initial perceptions. In light of this, one would expect to find more academic studies discussing the parallels between the works of both figures, given that, despite the generational gap, both of them share common concerns, struggles, and ambitions. In fact, critics question whether the pop star could be considered the offspring of the American author. On their path to success, and differences aside, both of them encountered the obstacles of a patriarchal society reluctant to take them seriously. However, contrary to what the world thought of them, they transcended social boundaries, venturing where few had previously dared to – that is, within themselves and into the most intimate parts of the inner self. They confronted their fears and emotions to later articulate them in their work. These two American artists were blessed with a gift: the ability to shape raw and unabashed emotions with their quill. Although they belong to different generations and artistic areas, both have managed to generate empathy and admiration amongst all those women who have found themselves reflected not only in their narratives, but also in their struggle.

Despite the magnitude of their work, Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift have not remained exempt from criticism. The high emotional burden their oeuvres carry, often inspired by personal experiences, makes it almost inevitable for critics and society not to link their works with their private lives. In Sylvia Plath's case, her personal life was always marked by her high expectations and demands. Since the death of her father, when she was just eight years old, she had sought refuge in academia to make sense of her life. This pursuit of success and excellence severely affected her mental stability, leading her to her first suicidal attempt, when she was only twenty-one; from then on, her life would not get any easier, as Plath ended up committing suicide only ten years later. Even if her oeuvre is sometimes autobiographical, her entire work was prejudged by the instability of her private life, initially leaving her talent condemned to oblivion. Because of Plath's link to confessional poetry, her personal life was normally conceived of as being inseparable from her work; and consequently, for a long time, she did not obtain the recognition she deserved. Something similar happens with Taylor Swift: for many years, society has judged the singer largely based on her private life. The sixteen-year-old girl with the dream of succeeding in the world of country music has been subjected, since the beginning of her career, to countless critiques due to her friendships, romantic

relationships, and even because of her musical evolution. People found it hard to accept that the artist, who was no longer a teenager, did not want to restrict herself to the confines of country music. Swift, unlike her male colleagues, had to assume, at a very early age, that people were always going to voice their opinions regarding her decisions and her private life, no matter what. It has not been long since critics have managed to re-evaluate her work without associating it with her personal life. At different points, both Swift and Plath suffered the risk of intrusion, mostly because their writing – confessional writing, as this study argues – utters what most are too afraid to: life experiences. Their talent was disdained – in Plath’s case because of her complicated mental health, and in Swift’s due to her ‘obsession’ with her Hollywood boyfriends. Unfortunately, when women are on the path to success, society tends to demonize them and devalue their work and talent. Still, despite this patriarchal burden, their perseverance has turned them into symbols of the feminist fight within the creative realm. Nowadays, they have finally attained their due recognition: Sylvia Plath is studied as the biggest icon in confessional poetry, and Taylor Swift, despite still grappling with criticism, is the biggest pop star of the moment. Furthermore, her work is starting to be valued by critics, and universities now offer courses with her lyrics as their object of study.

For these and many other reasons, this study seeks to put Plath and Swift in dialogue for, despite belonging to different eras, their work shares important features. In order to fulfil this objective, this chapter will be divided into three parts: the first one will deal with Plath’s and Swift’s struggle to find a voice, while facing the patriarchal pressures coming from within the creative realm. The second part will delve into one of the most emotional aspects of the authors’ work: the portrayal of love, specifically unrequited love. Lastly, the third section will explore the issue of madness and the metaphors of resurrection within the works of both authors.

3.1 ‘I Took the Road Less Travelled by’: On Female Creativity in a Patriarchal World

Although Sylvia Plath died before Taylor Swift was even born, both artists faced the need to carve out a place for themselves in the creative industry, even if each of them faced different obstacles and hindrances. In the case of Plath, the society she lived in and in which she developed as a writer was very different from the society we inhabit nowadays.

The author's writing career was shaped by the multiple obstacles she had to face as a female writer, obstacles that, at the end of her life, became simply unbearable for her. Although much has changed, being a woman and an artist in the twenty-first century is not exempt from challenges. Despite the progress achieved through the different waves of feminism, Taylor Swift has had to fight three times as hard to sidestep gender-based criticism and to secure a place in the music industry, even if she has now become one of the biggest popstars in history. This has a lot to do with the impossible standards often placed upon women. As we saw in previous chapters, such pressure severely aggravated Plath's mental health, who, at a very early age, ended up committing suicide. There is still a long way to go and a lot of changes to be made to obtain equality, and this is precisely what I want to examine in this first part of the chapter by analysing the figures of Plath and Swift alongside each other. Through the poems of Sylvia Plath and the songs by Taylor Swift, I will analyse how both artists commented on the patriarchal values still governing the creative realm. The main objective is to demonstrate how these authors have reflected, in their respective works, their constant battle to shine in a world that only wants to extinguish them.

The status of both Plath and Swift as female artists goes hand in hand with the objectification imposed upon them by the artistic world. Their talent was, at times, trivialized in a creative realm that mostly speaks in masculine terms. Their art and talent often took a backseat to let their personal lives, behaviours, or appearances be the protagonists. In 'The Applicant', Sylvia Plath denounces such injustices as female objectification, which was a latent issue at her time, and unfortunately, still is nowadays. In this poem, defined as a 'hymn to female independence in the form of a withering critique of marriage' (Irigaray, *Poetry Foundation*, 2024: n.p.), the woman is the object of creation of the male figure, who is personally in charge of shaping his soon-to-be wife to his liking. The title of the poem is not accidental: the future marriage is based on a sales operation, where the customer, the man, is hoping to buy a wife, and the woman is hoping to get 'married off for the highest bid' ('I Hate It Here', Taylor Swift, 2024). In the case of the woman, she hopes to sell herself to the biggest bidder, as 'the woman appears to be applying for the job of marrying some man, any man' (Wagner-Martin, 1999: 111). For the male figure, the final aim of the transaction is to have a 'living doll' that will serve him, and that will put an end to all of his problems:

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk. ('The Applicant' 2024, 33-35)

By comparing the woman with a doll, Plath presents the female figure as an object, an idea reinforced by the use of the neuter personal pronoun 'it'. In fact, in 'Portrayal of Gender Roles in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath' (2014), Tanu Gupta and Anju Bala Sharma comment on how in this poem 'the marriage system is explained in terms of conditions where all the conditions are applied only on 'it' i.e. the wife' (Gupta and Sharma, 2014: 144). Furthermore, this inanimate object that the wife represents must do whatever she might to help her husband, as it is her sole purpose in life, nothing else matters:

Here is a hand
To full it, and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it. ('The Applicant' 2024, 10-13)

The wife's existence is relegated to the needs of her husband; she was created to make someone else happy, never herself. This was a latent issue in Plath's life: during her marriage, she had to make up her mind and understand that she would always come second: first, to her husband, and then, to her children. Furthermore, she spent most of her marital years in the shadow of her husband; it was very difficult to be the foreign, also-poet wife in a marriage of authors who lived in London during the 1960s. Her husband had some advantages in his creative career: first and foremost, he was a man, an English man. Sylvia Plath had always feared the eclipse her career would suffer when becoming a wife and a mother. In fact, in *Sylvia Plath, A Literary Life* (1999), Linda Wagner-Martin compiles the experiences and thoughts that Sylvia Plath reflected in her college journal, where she confessed: 'I do not want primarily to be a mother...' (Plath, cited in Wagner-Martin, 1999: 95). Plath constantly danced in this limbo of uncertainty, as she feared her career would severely suffer the consequences of devoting herself to the growth of her family; she could not bear to think that someday she would be forced to let her career and aspirations aside to meet the needs of her offspring. Plath always fluctuated ambivalently towards marriage, motherhood, and a professional career. As stated in previous chapters, for women in the 1950s and 1960s, it was challenging to meet all the expectations that were put on them. What if, apart from being successful mothers, women also wanted to be successful professionals? Well, as society conceived it, they would have

to choose one of the two paths, and if the path chosen was not motherhood, bad stares were almost certainly guaranteed. Poems such as ‘The Applicant’ reflected, as Gupta and Sharma comment, ‘not only her [Plath’s] perception of external reality, but they project her inner reality as well’ (Gupta and Sharma, 2014: 145). This duality was the worst punishment for Plath, as she could not understand why she could not be both: a great writer and a great mother. She wondered why women had to deal with this immense burden and why they could not reconcile all their aspirations and wishes. It was a curse, and she was doomed. As Gupta and Sharma proclaim, ‘[g]enerally in many of her poems, she feels that her role as a woman is inflicted on her by society as general she does indeed seem to see it as a conspiracy, and the only means to escape from it is unconsciousness or death’ (Gupta and Sharma, 2014: 146). In ‘The Applicant’, Plath creates an ironic parody of what a perfect woman should look like in order to fit in the patriarchal society she found herself in: she should look and act like a puppet – a puppet that only exists if the man exists, and whose only purpose is to serve him. A woman should be ‘naked as a paper’ (Plath, cited in Poetry Foundation, 2024: n.p.) to please and provide everything the man needs, a man who can, in turn, shape her according to his needs – one who knows how to sew, cook, and who is an unconditional support for her husband:

Naked as paper to start
But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,
In fifty, gold. (‘The Applicant’ 2024, 30-32).

As Juliet Mitchell noted in *Women, The Longest Revolution* (1996), the status and value of women at the time Plath was writing were reduced to ‘[p]roduction, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children’ (Mitchell, cited in Gupta and Sharma, 2014: 145). The real message Plath wanted to transmit in ‘The Applicant’ is the question of how society could envision and construct women as mere ‘puppets, hollow or blank with no identities or no wills’ (Gupta and Sharma, 2014: 145), considering all that they could offer to the world, were they given the chance.

A similar message pervades Plath’s ‘Three Women’ (1962): a story about three women and their experiences with pregnancy. The three main characters are ‘Wife’, ‘Secretary’ and ‘Girl’, and their names are, once again, not accidental. In ‘Three Women – The Female Force Unlike Any Other’ (2020), Ella Gold claims that ‘the three women of Plath’s story are identified merely by societal signifiers [...] universalising their

experiences as those of womanhood, rather than individual plights' (Gold, 2020: n.p.). By creating these names and characters, Plath used this poem to denounce the objectification of women and the expectations that society imposed on them. The main topic of this poem is pregnancy, and Plath approaches it through three different lenses: motherhood, miscarriage, and adoption. This common experience will be the story's thread, from which comparisons between the characters will emerge – for instance, how women confront pregnancy, or their relationship not only with men, but also with society in general. In 'Marginalisation in Three Women by Sylvia Plath' (n.p.), Hannah Ward states that there is an 'invisible string' (Taylor Swift, 2020) that ties the female protagonists together: 'Plath presents these three women as having been marginalized due to the unrealistic expectations pushed upon them by society to achieve perfection in motherhood' (Ward, n.p.). This very limiting conception of what to expect of a woman's life during Plath's generation silenced many women who had yet much to say and to bring into the world. Despite the immense flame certain women felt for creativity, it was difficult for them to express their talents and survive the onslaught of society; those who were brave enough to attempt and pursue their dreams were almost certainly condemned and punished, as that was not the expected path to follow. Despite women being much more than a 'Wife', a 'Secretary' or a 'Girl', the heavy burden and pressure of a notably patriarchal discourse were able to dominate the course of many of them. These women ended up assuming that they would never be able to devote their lives to fulfilling their dreams; instead, they would have to devote themselves to serving others. With these poems and many others, Plath has immensely contributed to feminist thought and to the memory of all those voices that never got the chance to speak.

However, it is disheartening to think that the siege women endured in Plath's time, mainly as a consequence of unreachable standards, and despite all the progress obtained regarding women's rights, can still be observed in our contemporary society. Singers such as Taylor Swift have had to comply with absurd standards imposed by society, all in an attempt to persevere in the industry; after numerous comments about her appearance, and her private life, among many other issues, society got to Swift, and during a very vulnerable time in her life, she did what society asked of her: she lost weight to an extreme thinness that hardly allowed her to finish her shows, stopped having boyfriends and dates, and even disappeared from the public eye for a while. As Swift daringly declares in her

song 'Clara Bow' from her brand-new album *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), no matter what you do to please people, it will never be enough:

Beauty is a beast that roars
Down on all fours
Demanding 'more' ('Clara Bow' 2024, 34-36)

Taylor Swift had to do 'everything to keep you looking' (Swift, 2020: n.p.) at her. But what would have happened if Swift were a man? Would she had gone through all of this? Swift herself questions this in her song 'The Man', one of the main titles of her seventh album *Lover*, published on August 23, 2019. In this song, she wonders what the public reception of her career and private life would have looked like if she were not a woman, thus aiming to denounce the double standard used to judge men and women, not only within the creative realm but within society in general. That the song is written in the first person helps the audience understand the relevance of the autobiographical burden this piece contains. Swift reveals here how her career was severely influenced by the prejudices and the obsolete patriarchal conventions that still rule over society, and how she had to fight twice as hard as any man has ever had to, just because she is a woman. In this piece, Taylor gives voice, of course, to the problems women face within the music industry, but most importantly to the problems and injustices many women have to confront in the course of their lives. As noted in 'A Feminist Stylistic Analysis in Taylor Swift's Song "The Man"' (2023), 'Taylor Swift encapsulates what it means to be a woman in general – not just in her role' (Deameysa, Sari, Ningsih, Khofifah, Elviona, 2023: 87). 'The Man' aims to evidence the different societal expectations addressed to men and women, as, normally, women have far more expectations placed upon them than any man. As Swift proclaimed in her speech after accepting the Woman of The Decade Award, 'we are held at a higher, sometimes impossible-feeling standard' (Swift, 2019).

In the first lines of 'The Man' (2019), Swift denounces the harassment and criticism she faced for dating and having partners while being a famous pop star. She wonders, ironically, if the audience would have reacted the same way if she were a famous man dating women. Instead of accusing her by saying she 'played the field' before finding 'someone to commit to' (Swift, 2019), 'every conquest', every seduction, would make people consider her 'a boss' (Swift, 2019):

I would be complex, I would be cool
They'd say I played the field before I found someone to commit to
And that would be okay for me to do,
Every conquest I had made would make me more of a boss to you ('The Man',
2019)

In fact, being a successful man in every sense would make him a 'fearless leader, an alpha type' (Swift, 2019). At stake here is the fact that, as seen in previous chapters, unlike men's, female artists' public and professional lives are considered intertwined with their private lives. In contrast, 'society often separates a man's personality from his achievements' (Damayanti, Soethama, Udayana, 2023: 86). Swift admits she is tired of always being one or two steps behind, precisely because of something that is not under her control: being a woman. This is portrayed in the chorus of the song:

I'm so sick of running as fast as I can
Wondering if I'd get there quicker
If I was a man
And I'm so sick of them coming at me again
'Cause if I was a man
Then I'd be the man
I'd be the man
I'd be the man ('The Man', 2019)

Despite the fact that women can now count with the regard and admiration of society when achieving professional success, at times they still face critiques or comments that question their merit and right to be as successful as they are. In those cases, instead of acknowledging their hard work and talent, society attempts to disdain all the hard work by questioning how they even managed to do it in the first place. This issue was also addressed by Swift in her speech after receiving the Woman of The Decade Award in 2019:

As a female in this industry, some people will always have slight reservations about you. Whether you deserve to be there, whether your male producer or co-writer is the reason for your success, or whether it was a savvy record label. It wasn't. (Taylor Swift, 2019)

Of course, this would be unthinkable if Swift were not a woman. Her actions and moves would be widely applauded, instead of questioned. Despite the changes occurring in the last decades, there is still, on some occasions, a hidden resentment towards the acknowledgement of a woman's success. As the singer proclaimed in her speech: '[p]eople love to explain away a woman's success in the music industry' (Swift, 2019). To illustrate some of the injustices she has faced throughout her career, in 'The Man' Swift compares herself to the globally renowned actor, Leonardo DiCaprio. Both he and Swift are successful figures, with great talent and fame. Nevertheless, they have been treated differently by the public: while the actor is applauded and thought of as an alpha male for his multiple publicly known affairs and girlfriends, Swift is judged negatively every time a new love affair reaches the press. If Swift were a man, she believes 'they would toast' to celebrate her, and she would be 'just like Leo in Saint-Tropez' (Swift, 2019).

As a final remark, in the last lines of the song Swift comments on how the same behaviour is conceived differently according to one's gender; she portrays how men and women do not have to comply with the same standards:

'What's it like to brag about raking in dollars
And getting bitches and models?
And it's all good if you're bad
And it's okay if you're mad' ('The Man', 2019)

When a man is mad about something, he is respected and understood; the last thing anyone would do would be to question him or not to take him seriously. Women do not have the same luck: if a woman shows her anger, she is considered too emotional, too intense, or even an unstable person who is only seeking attention. It must feel great to have the world believe you and respect you when you speak your truth; to have everyone think you are brave, powerful, or strong, instead of branding you as too intense or too irrational. With this song, Taylor Swift, one of the most influential women in the world, manages to denounce the discrimination women suffer daily when trying to attain the same conditions and respect as men have.

In her Woman of The Decade speech, the singer admitted that, in the past, she was always trying to 'keep accommodating, over-correcting, in an effort to appease' (Swift,

2019) the world. For instance, in November 2016, after all the harassment and criticism she endured, she did what her haters wanted: she disappeared for a whole year. It was during this time that she created her sixth album *reputation*, released on November 10, 2017. This album meant the awakening of Taylor Swift's new persona, a persona that had to be reborn after all the slander and attacks she had constantly received. The huge comeback of Swift explained her new way of accepting criticism, as she proclaimed: 'I became a mirror for my detractors. Whatever they decided I couldn't do is exactly what I did' (Swift, 2019). The innocent and sweet Taylor the world had known for over a decade disappeared, as she states in 'Look What You Made Me Do' (2017): 'I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Oh! 'Cause she's dead' (Swift, 2017). This song publicly addresses the figure of Kanye West, the famous rapper who entered the stage when the young singer won the category for Best Female Video at the VMAs in 2009, to proclaim that the award did not belong to her, but to Beyoncé. After years of public harassment, and a years-long feud, Swift decided it was time to expose him and tell him she had had enough:

'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' ('Look What You Made Me Do', 2017)

'Look What You Made Me Do' gives us a glimpse of why Swift has resurrected as the caricature that those criticizing her had actually created for her, and how she came to terms with the label of 'the villain' society had previously attributed to her. As Sidney Risher states in "'Look What You Made Me Do": A Rhetorical Analysis of Taylor Swift's Persona', 'she fully accepts this new role as she metaphorically kills the past versions of herself' (Risher, 2023: 81). Building upon these premises, Risher declares the singer's new role is rare because it is not a role that was crafted by her, instead, given the circumstances, she viewed herself obliged to comply with this new role the rest of the world had created for her. This new villain-like behavior was born as a consequence of all the harassment and criticism the singer had received; it 'was reactionary and came from a place of self-defense rather than a place of cruelty' (Risher, 2023: 83).

Nevertheless, even though society thought they had annihilated Swift at last, her capacity to reinvent herself astonished her ‘hunters’, once again. Her comeback was marked by an album that screamed she had finally freed herself from all chains; she was no longer a prisoner of society’s opinion. The future tricks they tried to attempt on her also failed: for instance, her legal problems with Scooter Braun. Braun’s acquisition of Big Machine Records was not the only purchase he made. He bought Taylor Swift’s masters without her consent; because her masters were no longer hers, she decided to take the matter into her own hands, and she started to re-record her albums. Now, she is the only owner of her masters and her new label ‘Taylor’s Version’, which helps the fans differentiate which of the albums are owned by the American singer. As she declares in her brand-new song ‘Who’s Afraid of Little Old Me?’ (2024), no one could ever make her disappear again. They would only make her stronger:

‘If you wanted me dead, you should’ve just said
Nothing makes me feel more alive.’ (Who’s Afraid of Little Old Me?,
2024)

After dodging the bullets of all those who wanted to kill her before her time, Taylor Swift has managed to become, in my opinion, one of ‘The Women’ of the century, which, I believe, is far more commendable than ever becoming ‘The Man’.

3.2 ‘I Think I Made You Up Inside My Head’ – On Loving And (Not) Being Loved

Love is one of the pillars that makes up the human being and one of our most important life experiences. That is why, since humans have learned to write, we have tried to capture and immortalize on paper what constitutes this feeling and the extent to which it can affect us, from love stories that survived wars to the deep worship felt for unattainable ladies, or to heartbreaks and rejections that were thought of as unbearable battles. Thus, in this long journey that may last a lifetime, love is not always a rewarding experience. In fact, in some cases, love also brings with it pain and suffering. Accordingly, artists have recurrently used their works to express the most painful experiences to which love has dragged them.

As countless poets have affirmed throughout the course of history, love is a universal experience capable of transcending space and time. It is not surprising then that artists such as Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift have included this everlasting theme in their works. Even though the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are far removed from the eleventh century with its courtly love tradition, love is still one of the most important subjects in poetry. Nevertheless, even though love is considered a universal experience, it is most certainly a unique feeling – every person conceives of it and experiences it differently. Despite this paradox, authors such as Plath or Swift have been capable of capturing this tumultuous feeling in their lyrics. Thus, starting from personal concerns, experiences, and sensations, they have created anthems with which many people identify – these encapsulate very relatable feelings, like rejection or falling in love. Due to their magnificent capacity to build such universal lyrics, they unite people from different parts of the world, who speak different languages but share similar love experiences.

To examine how both Plath and Swift address the themes of love and heartbreak, I believe it is crucial to deal with works from their youth – their period of innocence and heartbreak, where normally the most intense love affairs take place. As already done in previous chapters, the synergies between both figures will be explored, for, despite belonging to different generations, their depiction of personal experiences is quite similar. Sylvia Plath created ‘Mad Girl’s Love Song’ in 1953, during her third year at Smith College. This is one of the most famous poems by the author, which deals with the heartbreak and the pain that comes from a romantic loss. After a failed love affair, the poetic voice wonders whether she has imagined the whole experience, whether there was anything real at all, as she is now left with nothing. Thus, she is presented as a ‘mad girl’, a girl driven to madness by her circumstances – the love, or rather its absence, has left her in this state. The absence of her lover has traumatized her in such a way that she wonders if her lover truly existed or if she merely created him in her mind.

The poem begins with the poetic voice stating how the world ceases to exist when she closes her eyes and how she is reborn when she opens them again. In this first stanza, we find for the first time the central idea of the composition, which is repeated throughout the poem: ‘(I think I made you up inside my head)’ (‘Mad Girl’s Love Song’, 1953). The parentheses produce a feeling of depth and of distancing from the main discourse: this is her own mind, her own attempt to fathom how what she thought was a love story might have been something made up inside her head. She is pondering whether the love she had

for a person – her former lover – ever truly existed or if she had imagined it all, as nothing seems to be real anymore. The fact that her lover is no longer part of her life makes her question whether she has gone mad and whether her condition might have caused her to question her perception of reality – a reality that might have been distorted by her mind, or even by her hopeless love. Now, she finds herself reminiscing, feeling the memories of her lover still lingering despite his absence. In fact, her lover appears in her dreams, as she hints at in the third stanza, admitting that she dreamed of him singing bewitched songs and kissing her:

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane
(I think I made you up inside my head) ('Mad Girl's Love Song',
1953)

This is the second time this sort of refrain is repeated: it is conceived of as a sort of reminder that she might have made him up inside her head, that the longing she feels for him might not be real, as it may have never happened. So, after these dreams and memories, the poetic voice fervently wishes he would return as he had promised so many times. Even though the pain still lingers after his departure, the poetic voice surrenders to the mercy of time, as hopefully, time may be able to erase the trace of her lover:

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name ('Mad Girl's Love Song',
1953)

After all the disappointment drawn from her failed love story, she yearns for a different outcome. All the bitterness and pain brought by loving the wrong person makes her rethink how it all even happened. Likewise, she wishes she had loved a thunderbird instead, as birds, despite leaving just like her lover did, would return to her with the spring:

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head) ('Mad Girl's Love Song',
1953)

As we can observe in the previous stanza, the reappearance of the poem's two first lines in the last stanza creates a circular structure that provides a feeling of both opening and closing, but not of resolution. After recalling her reminiscing love affair and the feeling of rejection and pain that has led her to a state of madness, the conclusion remains the same – she does not know what is real and what is not. The only thing she knows is that she exists and that the rest of the world ends when she closes her eyes. Was her lover her world? And now that she no longer sees him, does that world still exist?

This feeling of emptiness and doubt after an intense love affair can also be found in Taylor Swift's lyrics 'All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version) (From The Vault)' – a new incorporation to the *Red* album re-recorded in 2021. The artist recounts the brief, but intense, love story she shared with the famous actor Jake Gyllenhaal. The song opens by addressing the early stages of their time together, specifically when they visited Gyllenhaal's sister's house on a cold autumn day:

I walked through the door with you, the air was cold
But somethin' 'bout it felt like home somehow
And I left my scarf there at your sister's house
And you've still got it in your drawer, even now ('All Too Well', 2021)

It is in this first stanza where we find one of the most important metaphors within the song: the scarf. This motif has garnered much attention and many interpretations. While some believe it simply refers to the scarf she left at his sister's house, the scarf he never returned (we could see Jake Gyllenhaal wearing it at an event long after their breakup), others argue that the scarf is a euphemism for the loss of her innocence, her virginity, or even her broken heart.

The song initially begins as a beautiful memory of the wholesome moments they shared in their relationship, like the numerous getaways where they got lost out of the city – the song is turned into a recollection of past better times. Yet, it also serves as a reminder that not everything was as beautiful as it seemed, she understands it now that she is free from the 'love curse' and that memories are all that is left. Thus, just like Plath did in her villanelle, the poetic voice reminds herself of the fact that everything she is expressing and recounting belongs to a time that is 'long gone' (Swift, 2021):

And I know it's long gone and
That magic's not here no more
And I might be okay, but I'm not fine at all
Oh, oh, oh ('All Too Well', 2021)

The singer reflects on the complexity of human emotions, specifically those related to love and loss. Despite proclaiming she is feeling 'okay' while recounting her past love story, we can gather she is not 'fine at all' ('All Too Well', 2021). Her love loss has left her wounded and, although she wants to move on, the memories are too heavy a burden to free herself from. Accordingly, she continues listing beautiful moments shared with her lover, beautiful 'secret gardens' (Taylor Swift, 2024) to where she wishes she could escape, remaining there forever:

'Cause there we are again on that little town street
You almost ran the red 'cause you were lookin' over at me ('All Too Well',
2021)

In the following lines, we come across another of the most important ideas of the song:

Wind in my hair, I was there
I remember it all too well ('All Too Well' 2021)

Given the little importance her lover placed on their relationship, the artist feels compelled to repeat these lines throughout the song, to ensure that, indeed, what she experienced with him was real, even if he attempts to deny it. She declares that what she is recounting did happen, as she was there – unlike him, she will forever remember it 'all too well'.

After all the moments shared together, like their multiple city getaways, or his mother's narration about the actor's childhood, the poetic voice was convinced that at any time now he would utter the most desired quote: 'I love you'. Nevertheless, she was never going to hear him pronounce these words, that moment never came:

And I was thinkin' on the drive down: Any time now
He's gonna say it's love
You never called it what it was ('All Too Well', 2021)

She reproaches him for undervaluing her and their love story. She calls him a coward for not daring to call their relationship for what it was: love. Why did he return only three months after their breakup if he did not believe what they had was love? It seems he regretted it, for one does not know what they have until it is gone. Only after losing her did he realize what he had done, which is why he asked for her forgiveness and mercy, begging to get back together:

Till we were dead and gone and buried
Check the pulse and come back swearing, it's the same
After three months in the grave
And then you wondered where it went to as I reached for you
But all I felt was shame
And you held my lifeless frame ('All Too Well', 2021)

As shown in these lines, she explains how her lover aimed to revive something that was already dead and buried. After three months apart, he realized what he had done and came back, asking for forgiveness – it was too late, the love she felt for him was no longer enough. The only feeling she had for him when she saw him again was shame – shame for how badly he had treated her. No matter how much he wanted to hold her forever in his arms, their love story would never come back to life, for, with his departure, he annihilated their chances together.

Amidst these reconciliation attempts, even though the mind knows better, the heart often speaks louder. Therefore, she must remind herself of the fact that the decision she took was the right one and that loving him was not enough – he would never love her as she deserved:

And I know it's long gone and
There was nothing else I could do
And I forget about you long enough
To forget why I needed to ('All Too Well', 2021)

As she had been trying to forget him for some time, seeing him again reminded her of the true reason she was doing it for: the doubts that could still linger in her heart finally faded away. She knows she deserves much more than being kept hidden and she realizes that, perhaps, the one she held as an oath did not deserve a single minute of her prayers:

And there we are again when nobody had to know
You kept me like a secret, but I kept you like an oath
Sacred prayer and we'd swear
To remember it all too well, yeah ('All Too Well', 2021)

Nevertheless, despite knowing he was not the one, she knows the love she felt for him was real, and so she wonders what led them to this situation:

Well, maybe we got lost in translation
Maybe I asked for too much
But maybe this thing was a masterpiece till you tore it all up
Runnin' scared, I was there
I remember it all too well ('All Too Well', 2021)

There are many external factors that can contribute to a relationship not working out, and although it may be that they simply were not meant to be, she entertains the possibility that perhaps, their love story could have been one for the ages if he had not destroyed everything. She feels utterly vulnerable, like a 'crumpled-up piece of paper' (Swift, 2021) as she recalls everything he put her through. His indecision added to her feeling of existential weariness, as while she tried to forget him and all the good things they lived together, he tormented her with his return and his calls – calls in which he was 'casually cruel in the name of being honest' (Swift, 2021). Thus, despite people exclaiming 'all's well that ends well' (Swift, 2021), he and the memory of him do not allow her story to end completely, for every time she remembers him, she recalls the hell she went through – the hell caused by his excuses for leaving:

They say all's well that ends well
But I'm in a new hell every time
You double-cross my mind
You said if we had been closer in age
Maybe it would've been fine
And that made me want to die ('All Too Well', 2021)

It seems that, since his departure, time stands still, stuck in her memory; she feels she is no longer the same – he took away her best version, and she is yet trying to find it again. However, at the same time, she thinks he has not been entirely sincere: Why would he

keep her scarf, if it would only remind him of her? Why cannot he get rid of it? Perhaps because he still remembers their story ‘all too well’ (‘All Too Well’, 2021). To express the ambivalence she feels as regards the real feelings of his lover after their drift apart, she makes use of rhetorical questions: ‘And did the twin flame bruise paint you blue? / Just between us, did the love affair maim you too?’ (‘All Too Well’, 2021). The end of the song resumes a series of repetitions of several phrases, like the refrains mentioned earlier. Similarly to what happened in Plath’s poem, here repetition serves to keep the author grounded, to keep her from going insane, thinking that maybe none of this happened at all and that it was all made up in her mind. Despite what he may have wanted her to think, she knows that she ‘was there’ and that she will always ‘remember it all too well’ (Swift, 2021).

After this similar approach to teenage love, we can continue drawing parallelisms between both figures on the most personal level: their lovers. As stated in previous chapters, Sylvia Plath’s husband was Ted Hughes, a famous English poet whom she first encountered at a party celebrated at Cambridge University, where both writers studied at the time – only four months later, they got married. Their relationship was quite dramatic from its start, and it culminated with their breakup due to the unfaithfulness of Hughes to Plath, who discovered he had an affair with Assia Wevill. Like Plath, Taylor Swift also experienced a failed romantic relationship with an English artist, the famous actor Joe Alwyn. After dedicating many songs to Joe Alwyn in albums such as *reputation* (2017) or *Lover* (2019), their relationship ended in 2023 after six years together – six years that were very fruitful for her career. After countless love songs, her latest album *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024) – an album about breakup – contains some of the most complicated songs in her entire discography. In fact, one of the most turbulent songs in her latest album is ‘loml’ (2024), which I will examine in what follows. If the pun in the song’s title is overlooked, one might think that the author is here referring to the acronym that stands for ‘love of my life’; however, as the song progresses, we discover that the title does not align with this meaning, but instead, the acronym stands for ‘loss of my life’. In fact, throughout the song we find, on several occasions, the quote ‘You say I’m the love of your life’ (Swift, 2024), and yet, we never see the poetic voice uttering this affirmation – the only assertion that can be found is that he is the ‘loss of her life’.

This song is a journey of a mentality development that begins with the belief that her lover is the love of her life and that their story was ‘legendary’, to the realization that

they were simply ‘momentary’ or ‘unnecessary’ (Swift, 2024). In fact, she reproaches him for telling her countless times that she was the love of his life, and for making her believe that the only viable future he saw was one in which she was present:

You shit-talked me under the table
Talkin’ rings and talkin’ cradles
I wish I could un-recall
How we almost had it all
Dancing phantoms on the terrace
Are they second-hand embarrassed
That I can’t get out of bed
‘Cause something counterfeit’s dead? (‘lomi’, 2024)

There is a certain sense of rejection towards the fact that she believed the fantasy they had created over the years. Their future was encapsulated in ideas of marriage and children, and yet the only future waiting for them was one where they would be apart. In this way, she feels a certain resentment towards the fact that she cannot bear to forget how they ‘almost had it all’ (‘lomi’, 2024):

I wish I could un-recall
How we almost had it all (‘lomi’, 2024)

Thus, as Taylor Swift states in ‘The Black Dog’ (2024), from the same album, there are times when love possesses and curses you in such a way that one could think that the only way to overcome this possession – this love curse – is to ‘hire a priest to come and exorcise’ one’s demons, even if the outcome is to ‘die screaming’ (The Black Dog, 2024).

The end of the song is a reproval of his behaviour, of how he made her believe all his lies – she feels foolish for having been duped by his ‘braids of lies’ (‘lomi’, 2024). She cannot believe she has been stupid enough to have fallen for his promises that he would ‘never leave’ (‘lomi’, 2024). All their plans, all their ‘fields of dreams’ no longer thrive – in fact, they are ‘engulfed in fire’ (‘lomi’, 2024). The worst part of it all is that he is the one who set fire to their future – he was the executioner of their love:

Our field of dreams engulfed in fire
Your arson’s match, your somber eyes (‘lomi’, 2024)

After the fire, and despite the flames, there is one thing that she can see very clearly: the person who was supposed to be the ‘love of her life’ is instead the ‘loss of her life’.

Through these examples, I aim to demonstrate the ability of both authors to encapsulate an emotion as complex as love – or heartbreak – and, to make their audience see themselves reflected in their words. Throughout their oeuvre, Plath and Swift have shown their capacity to put into words the experiences we all share, making their works feel like anthems for their readers – and, in some cases, their public might use their works as the soundtrack of their lives.

3.3. ‘Every Time You Call Me Crazy, I Get More Crazy’: On Madness and Resurrection

As seen in the previous section, many an event can impact on a person’s life, particularly in the realm of love. In the case of Sylvia Plath, one of the most influential factors and events in her life was her marriage to Ted Hughes. After devoting herself entirely to ensuring the success of her relationship with the British poet and to taking care of their family, his betrayal led Plath to write poems such as ‘The Applicant’ (1962), already examined in Chapter 3.2., or ‘Lady Lazarus’ (1965) – the main poem analysed in this section. It was during the artist’s most productive period that she received the news that her husband was being unfaithful to her with Assia Wevill, a friend of the couple’s.

‘Lady Lazarus’ (1965) is a poem about suicide, framing Plath’s repeated attempts at suicide as both a personal act and a rebellious assertion against the forces of oppression and despair. As Linda Wagner-Martin argues (1982), this is ‘certainly a poem ‘about’ attempted suicide’, although it is ‘perhaps more centrally a poem about the forces that drove her to consider that act’ (Wagner-Martin, 1982: 51). It is essential for the analysis of the poem to understand how, under the description of the attempts that normally possess the poetic voice every ten years, there is a hidden message: the origin and causes that have driven the poetic voice to attempt to end their life.

This poem resonates in many ways with the biography of its writer, and it is precisely for this reason that the analysis of the poem has tended to be examined from an autobiographical perspective. As noted above, the poem can be read as a composition that

voices the reasons that led the artist to attempt suicide. One of the main themes in the poem is the conceptualisation of death as an art – an “art” that Plath knows too well, as she has been close to it on several occasions. The events that have driven her to attempt suicide vary considerably, ranging from her father’s death when she was still a child, to the impossible standards she always placed on herself, or the inability to achieve everything she really wanted – the reconciliation of her private and professional life being amongst them. The impossibility of succeeding in both domains of her life made Sylvia Plath’s life a hell she wanted to escape from. In this way, the poetic voice and author laments that she is unable to accomplish her escape and meet death face to face, as she expressed in a radio hearing:

The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman (Plath, cited in Curley, Ariel 1965)

These suicidal attempts are not merely an attempt to free herself from the torments she has endured and that have brought her to where she is now. In ‘Lady Lazarus: The Odyssey of a Woman from Existential Angst to Unrivalled Triumph’, Krishna Daiya argues that these attempts are ‘endeavours to break free from the patriarchy that is completely callous as well as cruel to woman’s survival needs’ (Daiya, 2013: 165). Plath finds it impossible to achieve all that she sets out to do in her life due to the obstacles imposed on her, as women were not able ‘to transform themselves in this male-dominated world’ (Parlak and Bagirlar, 2018: 106). Thus, in ‘Opposing Male Dominance in Lady Lazarus’ (2018), Erdinc Parlak and Belgin Bagirlar state that, particularly at the time Plath was writing, the only way for women to obtain freedom was by ‘embracing death’ (Parlak and Bagirlar, 2018: 106).

This poem, like ‘Daddy’ (1962), another of Plath’s most famous poems, is an attempt to rid herself of everything that has oppressed her for so long – an attempt to liberate herself from the chains that have imprisoned her throughout her life. These poems illustrate the relationship between women and men through metaphors that appropriate the lexicon of the Holocaust. The situation of the poetic voice and author is such that she compares her oppression to that suffered by the Jews – victims of the Nazis during the Holocaust era:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen ('Lady Lazarus', 1965)

Apart from the German words present throughout the poem, she uses this imagery precisely to express the experience of her own entrapment. The choice of these metaphors is completely intentional, given that one of the sources of oppression that the author had more present was his father's – a man of German origin.

Linda Wagner-Martin believes that the sense of entrapment the poem conveys is based on 'the social pressure on a woman to conform, the physical supremacy of the male, the sacrifice demanded by art (however defined), the eventual power of the strong and wily female, and the subtle or outright disrobing, dismemberment, or death of the female' (Wagner-Martin, 1982: 51). Thus, Wagner-Martin illustrates how power and gender dynamics influence women's experiences, both personally and professionally – unfortunately, in most cases, in a highly limiting way. In fact, in her *Journals* (1982), Plath declared how

Being born a woman is my awful tragedy [...] to have my whole
circle of action thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my
inescapable femininity (Plath's *Journals*, cited in Daiya, 2013: 165)

If we focus on the title 'Lady Lazarus', we can clearly see the influence of the biblical story of Lazarus. This story was of great interest to Plath: she declared that she 'had been on the other side of life like Lazarus' (Sanazaro, cited in Johnson, 2002: 234). The story of Lazarus of Bethany in the Gospel of John, as Laura Johnson explains, describes how 'Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead so that the 'people standing [t]here [...] may believe' (John 11.42, cited in Johnson, 2002: 234). The witnesses of this act of rebirth were promised eternal life in heaven. Plath uses this story as a metaphor to illustrate the 'resurrections' she experienced after her suicide attempts – this is the only thing that the poetic voice and Lazarus share, resurrection. Interestingly, Maureen Curley argues that there is not just one Lazarus present in the poem. In fact, this second Lazarus, perhaps

more hidden in its meaning, resonates more with the message Sylvia Plath wanted to convey in 'Lady Lazarus' (1965). This Lazarus is also part of the biblical tradition, being the 'beggar of Luke's gospel, who was spurned outside the rich man's gate (Luke 16.19-21, cited in Curley, 2001: 214). As Curley goes on to declare, the rich man (personified as 'Dives' or 'wealth') ignored Lazarus's needs, and, instead of helping him, only contributed to his suffering – much like the poetic voice's experience with her antagonist, 'Her Doktor'. In this poem, Plath blends 'New Testament and Holocaust wrath in a jeremiad characterizing Dives, Lazarus's foe, as a Nazi 'Doktor' her 'Enemy' (lines 65,66) (Curley, 2001: 214). In this way, the poet uses the metaphor of the 'beggar' to express the 'unappreciated sacrifice of the feminine artist' (Curley, 2001: 214).

In addition to these biblical stories, Plath draws on myths such as that of the phoenix to illustrate the evolution of the poetic voice: like the bird, she rises from the ashes after each attempt at annihilation – after each near-death experience, which she considers an art experience, she rises again from her ashes. Thus, like Lazarus, Plath rises 'out of the ash' (l.82, Daiya, 2013: 167). However, this resurrection might not be entirely benevolent. As Theresa Collins argues (1998), the act 'was not fuelled by love or mercy, but out of Jesus' desire to advertise his own power' (Collins, 1998: 156). This perspective could align more with the role of 'Herr Doktor' in the poem, as perhaps, he is not the hero nor a saviour, but someone interfering in the protagonist's artistic process:

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
'A miracle!' ('Lady Lazarus' 1965)

In this way, the doctor, whose primary obligation is to put the patient's health first, is doing the opposite: he only resurrects her so that his "opus' can be admired and his power acknowledged' (Collins, 1998: 157). With this, the poetic voice demonstrates that her resurrection is not a 'miracle', but a means to an end. She becomes a mere object used for a purpose that, unfortunately, has nothing to do with herself. This objectification to which women were subjected during Plath's time (as we demonstrated in the analysis of 'The Applicant' (1962)) is also reflected in 'Lady Lazarus' through the description the poetic voice gives of herself, stating that she is an 'opus, a 'valuable', or a 'pure gold baby' (lines 67, 68, 69) – that her existence is inevitably tied to the desires of her oppressor.

Nonetheless, the poem showcases how these ties, which initially seemed unbreakable, grow weaker with each resurrection. Every time the poetic voice rises from her ashes, she becomes stronger and more prepared to confront the submission to which she seems destined. Thus, the poetic voice warns:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air ('Lady Lazarus' 1965)

This is an open declaration that the time has come and that it is too late for her to be considered an object to be used whenever deemed convenient. After discovering the powers she possesses to confront the oppression that is practically inherent to her being, nothing can stop her anymore – no matter how much they try to bring her down, she is capable of rising from her ashes and being reborn to keep fighting. Hence, with the assertion that she can 'eat men like air', she is referring to the fact that 'she can grasp at anything and everything' (Daiya, 2013: 167), implying that there is nothing or no one that can escape her – there is no way out. Collins states that this 'revenge and immortality promised in the last two stanzas are taken out of God's [Her Doktor's] hands and attained by the speaker' (Collins, 1998: 157). The roles have been reversed, and finally, it is the poetic voice that dominates the situation, a poetic voice that has defeated her oppressors to at last be the sole master of her destiny. Despite the fact that this 'art' of dying is an arduous task, the poem ends on a triumphant note, showing that the poetic voice has finally succeeded – at last, she is free from all that bound her and made her a prisoner.

These attempts at liberation that resonate throughout Plath's poem are reminiscent of Taylor Swift's 'mad woman', where the singer exposes situations in which women have felt oppressed: with this song she seeks to obtain some form of liberation, just like Plath did. Through her music and specifically through this song, Swift attempted to raise awareness surrounding the inequality some women suffer systematically, admitting that she is sick of this injustice. 'mad woman' is one of the 17 songs that conform *folklore* (2020) – one of the two albums the artist created during quarantine. With this song, the singer portrayed the feelings that many women experience when they are not taken

seriously, or when their reactions are judged negatively mainly because of their gender. Thus, she begins the song with a rhetorical question, where the lyrical voice wonders what was expected of her after not being taken seriously:

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 ('mad woman' 2020)

The lyrical voice practically laughs at the idea that her "attackers" might have felt reassured thinking she was going to act as expected, that is, as a submissive and silenced woman. However, she states that it was impossible for her to have reacted in such way and that she is tired of acting the way people expect her to. In this way, as the critiques levelled at her increase, the only outcome is that her anger increases accordingly:

Every time you call me crazy, I get more crazy
What about that?
And when you say I seem angry, I get more angry ('mad woman' 2020)

She denounces the fact that, as addressed in previous chapters when examining her song 'The Man' (2019), different standards are applied to men and women. If, like the poetic voice, a woman explodes after holding back everything she has to say, the label 'mad' is almost certainly guaranteed – and with that, her reactions will be discredited, asserting that no one should pay attention to her because, in the end, she is just another 'mad' woman.

In relation to this, in *The Female Malady* (1985), Elaine Showalter throws light on the historical construction and relation between the female body and 'madness'. As Showalter explains, when addressing the link between women and madness, one should not forget that, historically, the rates 'of mental disorder' amongst women (Showalter, 1985: 3) were largely the result of women's social subjugation – as daughters, mothers, or wives – and their 'mistreatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynistic psychiatric profession' (Showalter, 1985: 3). In this way, the arts, just like society, have historically positioned women on the side of 'irrationality, silence, nature and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind' (Showalter, 1985: 4). Madness has been insidiously associated with women or by the female body, as 'they

stand for irrationality in general' (Showalter, 1985: 4). So, even if 'madness' is not an exclusive experience for women, when men suffer from this condition, this illness is 'metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady' (Showalter, 1985: 4).

Going back to Swift's song, the poetic voice denounces the hypocrisy with which women and their reactions are treated – hypocrisy that resonates with the gender imbalance of this 'representational tradition' (Showalter, 1985: 4). If indeed someone or something caused her anger, why does no one expect any reaction back? Why is a woman expected not to react, while a man has every right in the world to do so?

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 ('mad woman' 2020)

The chorus contains an ironic tone, following the same line as the previous stanza. Is it really surprising that, after attacking her the way they have, a reaction follows? Her opinion and reactions are discredited to such an extent that she becomes the one to blame for what happened to her, as, in the end, she is the one who has gone "insane". In this way, we return to the main metaphor of the song – the metaphor of madness. Because she decided to stand up after suffering and being slandered, she is deemed insane – she is a 'mad' woman. Connecting with the mad woman metaphor, the author references another period in history: a period when women were hanged after accusations of witchcraft and 'madness'. These women were hanged by a noose for daring to stand up for themselves and for having a voice amidst all the chaos. In this line, in *The Female Malady* (1985), Elaine Showalter compiles the voices of female authors such as Hélène Cixous or Xavière Gauthier, who argued that this 'madness' was 'the historical label applied to female protest and revolution' (Showalter, 1985: 4).

As the song unfolds, there is a sense that now it is too late to turn back – the situation is irreversible. This is evoked in one of the songs from her last album *The*

Tortured Poets Department (2024) in which Swift states: ‘I was tame, I was gentle ‘til the circus life made me mean’ (‘Who’s Afraid of Little Old Me’, 2024): they have made her angry, and they have turned her into a crazy woman – a woman who is not afraid to raise her voice anymore:

Now I breathe flames each time I talk
My cannons all firin’ at your yacht
They say: Move on; but you know I won’t (‘mad woman’ 2020)

When something breaks, sometimes it is impossible to fix it – it is unsalvageable. The situation the woman was confined within has come to an end, and now her words are no longer ruled by silence, but by the fire caused by her inner rage:

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 (‘mad woman’ 2020)

Swift devotes these verses to those women who join men in criticizing other women – these women who ‘like hunting witches too’. They systematically go against other women to gain men’s approval, by doing their ‘dirty work’. Swift is here denouncing women’s complicity with their own subjugation: despite the inequality women face every day, and despite all the fights women have fought over the course of history, some of them continue to reproduce patriarchal ideology and using it against other women. I would like to think that this part of the song intends to send a wake-up call to all those women, a message to encourage them to stop criticizing and bringing each other down – to unite for a common cause instead of trying to tear each other down:

I’m taking my time, taking my time
‘Cause you took everything from me (‘mad woman’ 2020)

In the penultimate stanza, the poetic voice declares that now her moment has arrived and that she is going to take the time to express what she feels and how she feels it because her right to speak out can no longer be stolen from her. Now that she has finally broken free from her sentence of silence, she will take the time she needs to express herself as she sees fit. We could interpret this as a claim on empowerment and liberation from all

the rules that have governed women throughout history – an attempt to give a voice to those who never had the right to own one, or who were limited by the social norms they had to live by, like Sylvia Plath herself. In addition, at this point, the song also incorporates specific details that connect with Swift’s biography: the phrase ‘you took everything from me’ could refer to the rights of her most precious creations: her albums. Despite this, behind those lyrics, we find notes of hope, for, after years of struggle, Swift is managing to reclaim her albums as her own.

Lastly, if we observe the end of the song, we can see how the last stanza perfectly summarizes the essence of the song’s message:

No one likes a mad woman
What a shame she went mad
You made her like that (‘mad woman’ 2020)

Nobody likes a ‘mad’ woman, that is, a woman who speaks for herself and stands up when necessary – someone who is prepared to fight for her ideals. These attitudes disrupt an inherited social order, as everyone prefers someone who might remain silent, someone who will not rebel. However, this woman is now mad, and with good reason – she is done with the caricature society has created for her. Now that she is ‘mad’, the rest of the world is going to discover why. After not being taken seriously, after having her reactions dismissed as mere tantrums, she is tired of not being heard. She hopes that with this declaration, this will be the last time she is not taken seriously.

With this song, Swift aims to deal with the historical relation between ‘madness’ and the female body. This issue has been problematised by many important authors and philosophers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who, in *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1797), has the objective to explain the origins of this ‘madness’ that seems to be inherent to women. The protagonist, Maria, is portrayed as the result of the ‘man-made institutions, from marriage to the law’ (Showalter, 1985: 1) that restrain women and end up with their sanity. This character cannot seem to find the strength to fight for her freedom, as she declares: ‘Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?’ (Wollstonecraft, cited in Showalter, 1985: 1). Addressing Wollstonecraft’s work, Showalter states that here the author managed to give a portrayal of the ‘misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out the partial laws and customs of society’ (Showalter, 1985: 1). This

enduring conception of the feminine condition has led to the creation of the ‘madwoman’ as a figure of study: in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that this archetype of woman that has plagued feminine literature is ‘the symbolic representation of the female author’s anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition’ (Showalter, 1985: 4). In this way, the woman would be constructed upon her anxieties and rage, just like we have seen in Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ (1965), where the author resorts to the idea of suicide as a source of freedom, resurrection, and rebirth. It is through the ‘violence of this double that the female author enacts her own raging desires to escape male houses and male texts’ (Showalter, 1985: 4). If in ‘Lady Lazarus’ Plath finds freedom in death, in ‘mad woman’ Taylor Swift illustrates the difficult path she has had to follow in order to become a successful female artist: she labels herself as a ‘mad woman’ in an empowering and subversive way. The title plays itself with the meanings of the word ‘mad’: the singer employs the adjective ‘mad’ because of its polysemy. In addition to evoking the historical figure of the ‘mad woman’ and all that it entails, Swift benefits from this adjective to express the anger she feels as a result of the double standards that stigmatise women more than men for certain behaviours and attitudes.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift are two artists who have mastered emotional expression and introspection, and who have reinvented themselves in order to evolve artistically. Through her poetry, Plath gave voice to many women who did not dare to declare how they felt fearing the potential repercussions. In turn, through her songs, Swift conveys messages that address issues and taboo topics still present in our society. Both figures, each in their respective domains, have shown that, to become successful writers or singers, women still have to overcome many obstacles. Their talent has left an indelible mark and has inspired generations to be brave enough to feel and to express themselves without fear of being judged. The comparison of their works demonstrates that artistic disciplines know no boundaries, and that art is capable of transcending space and time. Despite the distance in terms of period and artistic genre, the comparative analysis of Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift's work has shown that both figures share significant parallels, especially as regards confessional lyricism and their interest in feminist thought.

Both Plath and Swift have used their compositions as a means of personal expression but also as a tool for vindicating women's rights. Sylvia Plath is known for her harrowing depictions of the human psyche that, in her time, few women dared to speak of. Taylor Swift has also defied all sorts of barriers in the artistic field, creating songs that speak about concerns and experiences with which her audience identifies. Both artists have demonstrated great resilience, raising their voices and fighting to find the place they deserve in the artistic domain. They have faced both criticism and praise, reflecting the complexities that come with being women in a world that, by default, can judge them much more harshly than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, despite all these obstacles, both Plath and Swift have eventually gained the recognition they deserve, and their talent is now honoured with awards and scholarly studies.

As outlined in the 'Introduction' to this dissertation, the present study was divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, I have briefly outlined the development of feminism roughly from the late nineteenth century to the present. In the process, I have explored Plath's connection to second-wave feminism and contextualised Swift's personality and work within what has been termed 'celebrity feminism'— a term that highlights the participation and activism of celebrities like Swift in the feminist realm. Building on the theoretical framework that informs the analysis, Chapter 2 focused on the

origins, development, and characteristics of confessional poetry. The chapter confirmed Plath's key role in the development of confessional poetry, as she became one of its most significant figures. Furthermore, the chapter has demonstrated that, although Taylor Swift is not a conventional poet, she has created works that share multiple affinities with the confessional mode. The chapter has shown how Swift has earned a place next to important figures within the confessional genre.

For its part, Chapter 3 engages in a comparative analysis, examining a selection of works by Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift. In the first subsection, I focused, mainly, on Plath and Swift's biographies, examining the similar paths both authors have followed while struggling to become successful artists. Plath faced numerous obstacles to have her voice heard, being often overshadowed by her male contemporaries. She had to confront the censorship commonly imposed on women, by bravely creating poetry about topics – such as the negative aspects of motherhood or female objectification – women often kept hidden. Swift, in turn, although encountering fewer obstacles than Plath – mostly because of the evident progress in women's rights – has also had to overcome challenges exclusive to women aspiring to be artists: impossible expectations, intrusions in her personal life, and, obviously, countless criticism derived from the existence of double standards. To illustrate their difficult journeys, I chose to analyse 'The Applicant' (1962) and 'Three Women' (1962) by Sylvia Plath, and 'Look What You Made Me Do' (2017) and 'The Man' (2019) by Taylor Swift. Then, the second subsection explores a common theme in Plath and Swift's work: the experience of love – its intensity and its fugacity – and the pain and sense of loss that accompanies failed relationships. In Plath's case, I chose to analyse the poem 'Mad Girl's Love Song' (1953), which reflects, perfectly well, the youthful experience of love and the subsequent sense of loss and disenchantment. And this is precisely what the poem depicts: the poetic voice feels desolation over her lover's absence, to the point where she believes she is going mad. She starts questioning if what she is now missing was ever even real and if the love she had for him – now transformed into pain – was in vain. Then, to explore how Swift conveyed her adolescent love experiences, I chose 'All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version) (2021), a song that similarly deals with the loss of an intense love story at an early age. Like Plath's poem, the poetic voice seems to doubt if the love affair was real, as her ex-lover now belittles their time together. Throughout the song, she tries to convince herself that she is not imagining things and that what she lived was real, for she 'was there' (All Too Well

(10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version), 2021). Furthermore, to trace Swift's artistic evolution over the years, I included a brief analysis of a breakup song from her latest album: 'loml' (2024). In it, Swift addresses the pain and loss she faced after her six-year relationship ended. In this song, she explains not only the difficult process of having to forget someone but also having to accept that the person she thought was the love of her life, is now just another face in the crowd.

In the last subsection, I provided a close analysis of the metaphors of 'resurrection' and 'madness' present in Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus' (1965), and Swift's song 'mad woman' (2020). Although the metaphors differ in each work, I have conducted a comparative analysis of both pieces given their connections to the first subsection of the chapter – the subsection focusing on the challenges women must face when trying to be creative in a patriarchal world. These metaphors illustrate the repercussions of the impotence and anxieties plaguing women's path to success. Plath finds refuge in suicide and the idea of 'rebirth' as a way to reinvent herself: she chose the metaphor of 'resurrection' and the story of 'Lazarus' to demonstrate how she discovered her inner power, and eventually, how she freed herself from what had imprisoned her for a long time. Swift, however, employs the metaphor of the 'mad woman' to exemplify the constant pressures and backlash she faced while becoming one of the world's greatest pop stars. Drawing on Showalter's theorisations on the historically construed association between madness and womanhood and the notion of 'female malady', – a term that seeks to articulate, amongst others, how women have been constructed as mad, and the 'inherent' link of this 'madness' to the subjugation they have traditionally faced – the song protests against the label of 'mad' imposed on all women who dared to challenge unfair impositions and deviate from what is expected of them. Additionally, Swift leverages the polysemic value of the adjective 'mad' to express the anger she feels as a result of the injustices she has had to deal with over the course of her career. The song is an anthem that celebrates all women who have been labeled as mad, but also a manifesto against a society that seems unable to dismantle this insidious association.

The present dissertation has demonstrated the viability and productiveness of comparing the figures of Sylvia Plath and Taylor Swift, as both artists managed to transform their intimate experiences into powerful and relatable narratives. In addition, the study has shown that Swift's songwriting, which is deeply personal, can be seen as a modern successor to Plath's confessional poetry. Yet, due to the limited scope of a work

of this kind, there are certain aspects and points of comparison that I could not address but are worth exploring. To give just an example, I would have liked to investigate how both authors combine fantasy and realism – such as the presence of imaginary worlds – and how their work makes use of similar symbols and motifs beyond the ones explored in this dissertation.

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