

LOOK! BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S TOP 5 MOST-VIEWED MUSIC VIDEOS

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Abstract

Taylor Swift is and will be undoubtedly one of the most outstanding and influential musicians of her generation and the next generations to come. Indeed, her musical and creative impact, unquestionably, has penetrated billions of Swifties emotionally, physically, and psychologically. Conversely, by deeply looking into the moving stories she has created through her timeless lyric poems, there are certain and constant themes she has both, consciously and unconsciously, incorporated and juxtaposed which can be deemed 'a subtle attack' to obvious groups of listeners, specifically the males. Hence, this research paper will thoroughly investigate how Taylor Swift's top 10 most viewed music videos on YouTube, starting from Love story, I Don't Want to Live Forever, Never Ever Getting Back Together, Style, Wildest Dreams, You Belong With Me, Look What You Made Me Do, Bad blood, Blank Space, Shake It Off, tend to continuously challenge the masculine gender, and perhaps the feminine, mainly through the identification and deconstruction of the binaries in her songs. Also, the gray areas between the values of meaning in her poetic language will be explored and explained, and it will be established whether the result of the binary differences are either complementary or incapable of existing together in this realistically gender-biased world which never goes out of style, but must be shaken off.

Keywords: Binary Oppositions, Taylor Swift, Taylor Swift's Top 10 Most-Viewed Music Video.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, Taylor Swift is one of the most outstanding and influential musicians of her generation as Blank (2019) explains the reasons why: "Taylor Swift's illustrious career is filled with award-winning albums, top-selling singles, and incredible achievements. At just 27 years old, she has already achieved more than most musicians ever will in a lifetime." Her songs and their themes have touched and motivated billions of people including the young and the old at heart as what Pitchfork describes as "the pivotal moment of turning to be a pop superstar" as her artistry and fandom have helped her rake accolades under her huge name.

Having written top-charting songs from when she started as a country singer to being one of the most followed and looked-up-to musicians of her generation, it is undeniable that her songs have also evolved; specifically, songs of inspiration, empowerment and moving forward, aimed at women, are the most outstanding. However, Taylor Swift's songs are more than winning big in the eyes of women; her songs mean more. Her creations are encompassing that all human experiences, beautiful and ugly, are embedded in her lyrical-narrative poems --- hence, the birth of **Look! Binary Oppositions in Taylor Swift's Top 5 Most-Viewed Songs: A Study.**

By deeply looking into the moving stories she had created through her timeless lyric poems, there are certain and constant themes she creatively and consciously incorporated and juxtaposed. More importantly, binary oppositions are present in her

songs that would bring about new interpretations and shatter stereotypes embedded in five of her most-viewed songs on YouTube: You Belong With Me, Look What You Made Me Do, Bad Blood, Blank Space and Shake It Off.

The study was deemed significant for this study's emphases, binary oppositions and new thematic statements, would provide more profound interpretations that will serve as a response to the critics who only see the songs as mere response to the haters of the composer. Moreover, the results of this research could be utilised by English literature teachers for a simpler and more modernised application of Derrida's deconstruction theory, which would be more pragmatic to English literature students.

Theoretical Description

This particular section is the presentation of the theories and concepts that were necessarily applied in the study. Binary Opposition Probably the most important strategy at work in deconstruction is the tracking down of hierarchical structured oppositions. Presence opposes absence, speech opposes writing, philosophy opposes literature, the literal opposes the metaphorical, the central opposes the marginal, life opposes death, the real opposes the imaginary, and the normal opposes the pathological. Derrida shows how one of the oppositional terms is always privileged, controlling and dominating the other as he explained, "In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other

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axiologically or logically has the upper hand” (Positions, p.41).

Deconstruction

Mishra (2018) defined deconstruction as an apparent revolution against all the literary theories before itself which vouch for a unity in the literary texts. It seeks to find the differences, contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguity and disintegration in the text. Deconstruction basically aims at proving that a literary text is not certainly unified and it has a multitude of meanings if we try to find the same. Therefore, sometimes, it is also called textual harassment.

New criticism

New Criticism as emphasised by Delahoyde (2000) is explication, or "close reading," of "the work itself." The objective determination as to "how a piece works" can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through extraneous and erudite special knowledge. Also, New Criticism, incorporating Formalism, examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it. New Critics "may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence of meaning" (Biddle 100). New Criticism attempted to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary, some of which learnt in junior high school English classes. Working with patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of the text, they seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these to the self-contained work.

Feminism

Stanford (2018) specified that feminism has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term feminism to refer to a historically specific political movement in the United States and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Although the term feminism had a history in English linked with women's

activism from the late nineteenth century to the present, it was useful to distinguish feminist ideas or beliefs from feminist political movements, for even in periods where there had been no significant political activism around women's subordination, individuals had been concerned with and theorized about justice for women.

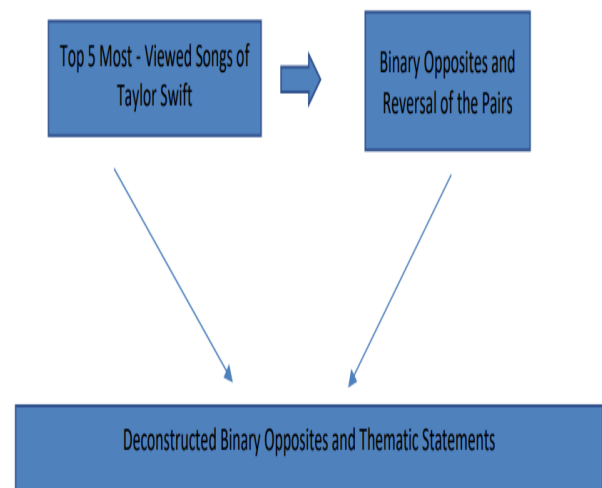
Thematic Statement

A thematic statement is a simple yet powerful message an author is trying to convey in their work.

Theoretical Framework

As reflected from the outline below, this study was mainly established from Deconstruction Theory, particularly the reversal of binary opposites to give rise to new interpretations of the most popular songs of Taylor Swift.

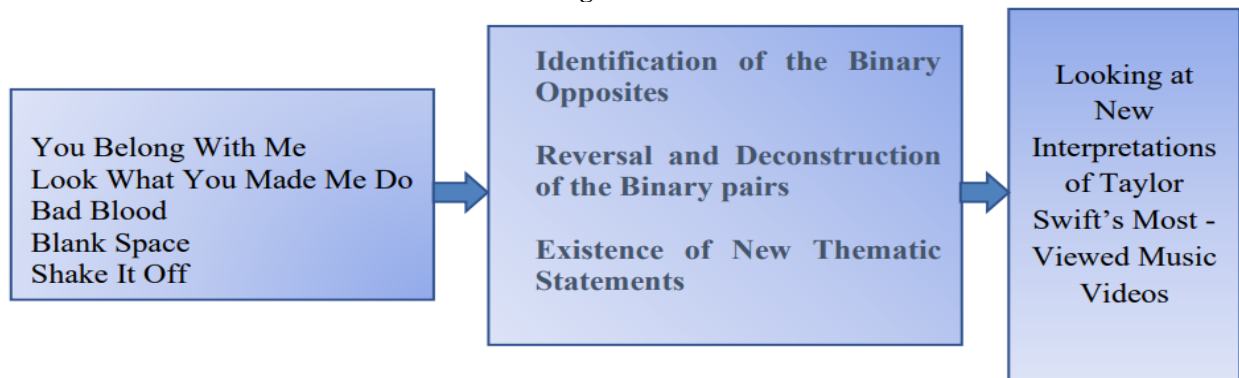
Figure 1



Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 2, the researcher was mainly guided by Derrida's Deconstruction Literary Theory.

Figure 2



Statement of the Problem

The main aim of this study, **Look! Binary Oppositions in Taylor Swift's Top 5 Most-Viewed Songs: A Study**, was to create new interpretations of her songs. Specifically, it provided answers to the following questions:

- a. What are the binary oppositions existing in Taylor Swift's songs, and how are the binary opposites reversed?
- b. What are the new thematic statements embedded from the reversed binary opposites?

Scope and Delimitation

This paper was solely focused on the top five most-viewed songs of Taylor Swift on YouTube. Binary oppositions were identified and reversed using deconstruction theory as well as new criticism and feminism in order to deduce new thematic statements.

Methodology

This qualitative research entitled, **Look! Binary Oppositions in Taylor Swift's Top 5 Most-Viewed Songs: A Study**, was written to present new interpretations of her songs and deconstructed thematic statements.

Research Design

This textual and content analysis, **Look! Binary Oppositions in Taylor Swift's Top 5 Most-Viewed Songs: A Study**, was qualitative and descriptive that revealed the existing binary opposites and presented new thematic statements in Taylor Swift's five most viewed songs on YouTube by mainly utilizing deconstruction literary theory and new criticism.

Sampling Techniques

The researcher mainly utilised the five most-viewed Taylor Swift's songs on YouTube namely You Belong With Me (1,361,044,377 views) , Look What You Made Me Do (1,364,898,332 views), Bad Blood (1,519,066,421 views), Blank Space (3,047,139,394 views) and Shake It Off (3,216,433,070views). They were purposively chosen because the mentioned songs had the most impact with the listeners. Thus, they are more worthy to be analysed compared to her other songs, despite being famous as well.

Instruments of the Study

The five most-viewed Taylor Swift's songs on YouTube namely You Belong With Me, Look What You Made Me Do, Bad Blood, Blank Space and Shake It Off were the emphases of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

To present new interpretations of the most famous songs of Taylor Swift on YouTube, the following approaches were employed in seeking answers for the two questions. The research started with the close reading of the five songs, where the identification of the binary oppositions took place. It was followed by reversing the opposites through deconstruction and other literary devices applicable. Lastly, after the reversal, new thematic statements were formulated that served as the new interpretations of the songs.

Results And Discussions

Binary Oppositions

Derrida traced the hierarchically ordered binary oppositions and he radically questioned the dominance of the privileged term by reversing the hierarchy. The opposition remains intact, but the attention shifts from the dominant term to the dominated term, from the center to the margin. Balkin (1996) explained that the deconstructor looked for the ways in which one term in the opposition had been "privileged" over the other in a particular text, argument, historical tradition or social practice. One term may be privileged because it is considered the general, normal, central case, while the other is considered special, exceptional, peripheral or derivative. Something may also be privileged because it is considered more true, more valuable, more important, or more universal than its opposite. Moreover, because things can have more than one opposite, many different types of privileges can occur simultaneously.

The binary opposition concepts are divided into three parts; difference, text, and dissemination. First is the concept of difference, which explained that one thing had many different meanings. The meaning in the text cannot be interpreted with only one particular meaning. Second is the concept of text. According to Derrida (1976), the important thing in text was everything is in the text; there is no connection outside the text, but it does not mean the text is considered as a prison text. Through Derrida's discussion above, giving the meaning of a text cannot be taken from outside the text itself. The meaning must be related and in line with the text (linking each other). The last one is the concept of dissemination. The concept of dissemination explained that in literary texts, the meaning differed but was related and cannot be connected into one meaning. According to Tyson (2006), the concept of dissemination can be understood through the following steps: (1) Find out interpretations in the text. (2) Show the interpretations are in conflict with one another. (3) Show the conflict has resulted in new interpretations. Through this concept of dissemination, readers are directed to read more critically and be able to relate one meaning and show the opposite side of the meaning of the text in order

to produce new meanings but are related to the previous meaning. (Aprilia & Aranto, 2021).

You Belong With Me: Non-admission vs. Declaration of Love

Undoubtedly, the persona in the song is someone who does not have the courage to admit to her best friend that she has romantic feelings for him. Romantic feelings are suppressed, and non-admission is dominant because the man is committed to another woman who, as perceived by the persona, values and loves the man less than the persona does, suggesting that the persona deserves the man more. Sadly, the man does not notice what the persona notices; obviously, he only treats the speaker as a friend/ best friend, which is already known and established from the very beginning; thus, resulting in the fear of declaration of her love, the dominated concept, possibly leading to rejection or end of their friendship. Despite this, the persona remains hopeful, and the feelings she has for her friend remains constant and pure, yet unspoken, which is called limerence. Gerald (2020) delineates it as pure affection for someone you may or may not be friends with, where the only concern is to seduce the person, acquire their heart and emotional commitment. This is what the persona in the song experiences. She has let it overwhelm her life and emotions, and she has reached the point of comparing herself physically and behaviorally with the real girlfriend: "But she wears short skirts I wear T-shirts She's cheer captain, and I'm on the bleachers." The lines are an indication that aside from not admitting her love, she also treats herself as the subordinate of the girlfriend, as if she is not worthy of being appreciated and loved by the man. This type of affection, according to Gerald (2020) can "lead to obsession, the anxiety of not being with them (romantically) or even painful one-sided love. Love that no one is looking for. In simple words, limerence is OCD in terms of desire for someone."

Unexpectedly, her non-admission had triggered herself to be brave enough to declare her feelings through the creation of the song. The song itself is the declaration of her love. The song is her testimony: a proof of her beautiful struggle. She is not able to resist it anymore due to the fact that the persona's painful choice of not confessing her feelings to her best friend has brought her to an emotional dilemma full of regrets and what ifs, a path she does not want to follow anymore. At the end of the song, her declaration is not a guarantee that she will be loved back. Instead, it is a full stop, representing that she is freed from not being able to express her affection. That upon declaring, she has already prepared herself to reprogram -- that she does not want to and cannot wait for him any longer which would give her peace from a distorted view of love. It has then become a rhetorical question

addressed to the young man: why can he not love her back?" If you could see that I'm the one. Who understands you Been here all along So, why can't you see? You belong with me.

Look What You Made Me Do and Bad Blood: Blaming Others vs Guilt

Having experienced a lot of misfortunes and changes, the persona in Look What You Made Me Do and Bad Blood is blaming no other than the people whom she thought have caused them. Blaming others is the more dominant term in these songs because Jacobson (2015) explained that "it is easier to blame others" than to think of the other reasons of anger and bitterness in her tone. Harris (2011) reiterated, "Blaming something or someone else when angry, criticized, or thwarted in any way is as common among humans as laughing or crying. We naturally and automatically defend ourselves when we feel attacked, but each one's perception of what amounts to an attack is up to individual interpretation. So, we blame."

The song also underlined that the persona already accepted that she had become the bad person, and that becoming bad was mainly caused by what Kelly & Heider (2009) termed as external attributes, meaning the people and environmental factors were mainly responsible for her situation. Every deed that the persona did, as reasoned out, was the effect of the unjust treatment she received from the people who had been very critical of her every move; hence, the people were at fault, as if they controlled her every move and decision.

The way she blamed her haters can be interpreted as considering herself as the only victim in her narrative, and that revenge can be justified and bad karma would come to them because, again, she was the victim. Conversation Starter also gave a modern term for this: gas lighting, which is a form of emotional abuse where a person makes you doubt yourself or question your account of an incident. The persona was evidently gas lighting as she was emphasizing on their participation in why she had become notorious and hated by a lot.

From the way the persona mentioned, "I got a list of names, and yours is in red, underlined." a lot of times, it was shown that aside from blaming them, she desired for vengeance. She was fixated with the fact that she was fully wronged, without thinking internally what she had done on her part.

All throughout the songs, the personas had been justifying the injustice they suffered from, without self-reflection that could probably lead to guilt or self-blame, the subordinating term. It was less important in the songs because the personas obviously did not want to show vulnerability that

they could not consider the personal reasons why people only showed them hate. However, by looking at what the persona “did” in *Look What You Made me Do*, and there was “already a deep cut” in *Bad Blood*, it can be just to say that the personas were aware of what they did wrong and that they did not have a choice but to hurt back the people who have hurt their ego. Their anger was intentional, but they were ashamed to feel guilt and blame themselves. There was still too much resentment and shame in the tone of the two songs that gave them difficulty to admit their impermissible behavior to the public, yet they admit it to themselves. In support, Clarke (2022) stated that “guilt can be a motivator for positive change.” In other words, when people do something wrong, then they feel guilty about it, those feelings can motivate them to change their behavior so they do not make the same mistake or negative choices. Thus, guilt is based on values, morals, and standards, all of which are necessary and important with regard to guiding people’s behavior in a positive direction.

All of the blaming in the two songs were leading the personas to feel remorse of why they ended up having so much hatred in their heart, and why everything and everyone had turned against them. The hate would be temporary that they would slowly reflect on themselves until the pain is healed, and forgiveness or forget is the only thing that was left to give.

Blank Space and Shake It Off: Dominance vs. Subordination

The two songs majorly promoted the heavier and more important theme: female dominance. *Blank Space* evidently described a woman who is in control of every short-term relationship she had. All of her relationships were termed as FLR or Female Led Relationship by Ray (2022). As the name suggests, FLR is a relationship where a woman is in the dominant position, enjoying authority over her partner, and the man is considered a submissive partner. The woman makes all or most decisions regarding the relationship, exerts more authority over her male partner, and steers the relationship forward. A woman calls all the shots in an FLR, unlike the conventional romance where a man being is the dominant figure or both of them are treated equally. In connection to the song, the persona was the dominant figure in all of her relationships because she could treat every man her “king” but she was the more dominant “queen” who molded them to how she desired them to be. Also, she had the upper hand when to start and end the relationship as she treated all her exes as a priced and prized collection. Her failed past relationships were also proofs of her being notorious, which she was definitely proud of.

In *Shake It Off* highlighted the dominance of a woman over the criticisms of the public and even of the industry she is in. The song underscored a woman who was hardly affected by what people say because she just “shook them off” and tried to find her own self without them dictating who she should be. That if she did not conform to their mold, she would get criticized, was deemed inevitable, so she just accepted how the circle she was in worked. She was given dominance as she did not chase clout nor fame; instead, she let the people choose and like to criticize her, and this is what defined her famous image. She was still significant to them. Thus, the society still held the voice to empower the persona, yet it was insignificant for the persona anymore because the more she ignored the rumors, the more the public became interested in her, and she was liking it.

On the contrary, their dominance was only a facade of their subordination. First, the persona in *Blank Space*’s way of dominance and control could be interpreted as her action, craving for a modern, real romantic relationship, and this is corroborated by Dunbar (2004): “Women saw themselves as more powerful when they viewed their partners as more dominant.” The persona, having been wealthy, famous, powerful and beautiful, was not seen to have needs as perceived by the men she loved. Also, the persona dominated and controlled her partners, owing to the fact that she also desired her partners to fulfill her wants and needs without directly telling them her romantic demands in their relationships. She had been waiting for her partner to be more intuitive, empathetic and affectionate; however, it just did not happen because she showed dominance, yet ironically expected and waited for something -- the very characteristic of a subordinate. Women, in a romantic relationship, according to Legal Aid, have their own way to reclaim a healthy relationship, and this was what the persona in *Blank Space* desired. Haplessly, her exes could not read her mind unless she told them, which she never did, that resulted in bitter break-ups.

Second, the persona in *Shake It Off* seemed to be unaffected by the public’s criticism, yet some of the lines in the song meant otherwise.

First was the repetitive use of the line, “That’s what people say,” which is a common expression if a person intends to clarify that there is misunderstanding, and it is usually followed by, “This is what happened.” To connect it to the song, the persona did not really want to ignore or shake off the rumors about her; instead, she connoted to explain herself and make people understand her side of the story. Thus, the rumors about her, may they be truths or lies, mattered to the persona. Moreover, they must have been clarified to avoid

misunderstanding; however, she could not do it because if she attempted to defend herself, she might have seemed to be affected and hurt: the very feelings of a person avoiding to be a subordinate and maintaining a strong facade of a woman who is unbothered, but she is unconsciously being one.

Another are the lines, "It's like I got this music in my mind. Sayin', 'It's gonna be alright.'" The lines strongly suggested that she was, ironically, bothered and burdened by the comments of the people around her. The verbal irony applied strengthened the idea that the comments of other people greatly mattered to her, she just did not want to recognise them because she believed if she just disregarded them, every issue would fade. The behavior of patiently waiting for everything to cool down rather than to face the issues thrown at one person, could be interpreted as being weak and subordinate, and this was exactly what the persona was doing: waiting in vain and confirming the validness of people's misconceptions about her.

New Thematic Statements

1. One way to free yourself from a possible unrequited love is to declare it.

It is now noteworthy that the song, You Belong With Me, symbolizes the courage of the persona to declare her love to her friend despite the huge possibility that she could be rejected since the man is in a relationship. Secretly hoping that the man "belongs with her" shows that the persona does not think about the relationship status of the man anymore. What is more significant is that she needs to confess to have peace of mind and to unshackle herself from constantly loving the man, who does not see her romantically. The declaration of love might be seen as a selfish and flirtatious act from the persona, yet it must be understood that is her only

way to restrict herself from any more romantic dilemma.

2. Owning up to mistakes is ego-threatening.

In spite of the bitterness in the tone of the two songs, Look What You made me Do and Bad Blood, it should be undeniable that the personas, in a way, owned up to their mistakes because they did not declare it to the world yet. This is due to their ego, which Winkler (2021) writes in Psychology today: "When a mistake interferes with self-esteem, we don't learn from it." Their unexpressed guilt reflects on their high pride; that if they fully confess their wrongdoings, it will only lead to self - destruction, which the personas are obviously aware of because they have to protect their name, reputation and ego. However, the slight feeling of guilt should be seen positively since it can result in more positive and beneficial behavior change.

3. It is normal to succumb to people's harsh criticisms.

Being fragile and bothered by people's comments should not be connected with being invalidated; instead, it should be seen as a normal response to being criticised; thus, it must be normalized. Additionally, it is a fact that no one enjoys getting criticized because it is human nature to seize being right and feel hurt when mistaken. Thus, criticism is inevitable, and the people who sometimes disagree truly help in the reflection of something, which is being intelligent emotionally. Smith (2010) discussed that "emotional intelligence involves the ability to recognize and understand your emotions, and to use that information to guide decision making. Hence, when we're on the receiving end of criticism, our goal should be to learn from the feedback, and not let emotion close our minds. The key is to be proactive, not reactive."

Table 1: Tabular Presentation of The Results

Binary Oppositions	Thematic Statement from the Reversed Binary Opposites
Non-Admission vs. Declaration of Love	One way to free yourself from a possible unrequited love is to declare it.
Blaming Others vs. Guilt	Owning up to mistakes is ego-threatening.
Dominance vs. Subordination	It is normal to succumb to people's harsh criticisms.

Conclusion

Through the identification of the binary oppositions and the application of deconstruction to reverse the binary opposites in Taylor Swift's top - five most - viewed songs on YouTube, the following were concluded:

- a. The binary opposites contained in the songs were pairs of universal struggles of women.
- b. The reversed binary pairs showed the bad and feigned side of women in coping up with broken relationships.

- c. The new thematic statements presented the beautiful and ugly, real and fake, empowering and disempowering truths of moving on.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion and conclusion of this study, the following are recommended:

- a. Analysis of other Taylor Swift's songs focusing on men empowerment embedded.
- b. Comparative analysis of the top - five songs from Taylor Swift's top - five newest songs.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest by the author in this manuscript.

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